SINGED SERIES
BOOK TWO



BITTER SECRETS

MIA KNIGHT

BITTER SECRETS

SINGED SERIES

BOOK TWO



MIA KNIGHT

COPYRIGHT

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, or locales is purely coincidental.

Copyright © 2023 Mia Knight
http://miaknight.com/
All rights reserved.
Cover art: https://www.coversbycombs.com/
Editor: Zainab M. www.heartfullofreads.com

Except for use in a review, no part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without permission.

CONTENTS

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18

Author’s Note
Books by Mia Knight
Acknowledgments
About the Author
Sneak Peek

DEDICATION

To my patrons who cheered me on when I was at my lowest and to the readers who never gave up on me, even after a vicious cliffhanger.
I love you guys.

CHAPTER 1



Jasmine stared out of the floor-to ceiling-windows, blind to the multimillion dollar view of New York City spread out before her. The state-of-the-art kitchen was filled with golden light, giving the impression all was well in the world, when nothing could be further from the truth. Wracked with indecision, she wrapped her arms around herself and bit her lip. She wasn't sure how she should handle this, but it couldn't be put off any longer. She had to say *something*…

She snatched up her phone, dialed, and paced around the island. She jumped when an impatient, masculine voice barked in her ear, "It's been three fucking days."

"I know, Lyle. I'm sorry." She rubbed the throbbing space between her brows. "I told you, we've been trying to sort things out."

"Are you hurt? Did he touch you?"

"Of course not," Jasmine said even as she rotated her bruised shoulder, which no longer ached.

He exhaled loudly. She could imagine her brother-in-law pinching the bridge of his nose as he prayed for patience. Under other circumstances, she would have been amused, but there was nothing funny about this, and they both knew it.

"So," he bit out. "What's the verdict?"

She opened her mouth, but no sound emerged. Her hand fluttered to her throat as panic took hold. Could she do this? Did she have a choice?

"Minnie."

Lyle's clipped tone warned her he was out of patience, not that he had much of that virtue on the best of days. He left her with Roth against his better judgment and would have returned for her if she hadn't convinced him to stay

away, so she and Roth could figure out how they would proceed in their relationship.

That was a lie.

Her father's damning letter made no difference to Roth. He was holding her to their original agreement. She drew diagrams and made lists, hoping for a solution to magically appear on the page, but no matter how she looked at her situation, there was no way out. Roth demanded recompense for the hell her father put him through. Either she would pay in the privacy of their marriage, or her family would pay publicly.

She could disappear; her family couldn't. Roth inhabited the same world they did. Their every move was observed by tens of thousands—employees, business associates, reporters, Wall Street. If Roth and her family clashed, the consequences would be devastating. Even if her sisters sold off their shares in Hennessy & Co, Roth wouldn't stop. She had no doubt he would go after her brothers-in-law. There was no limit to how far he would go in his quest for revenge.

The ease with which Roth orchestrated his takeover proved that he had been strategizing behind the scenes for years. Her father taught him a valuable lesson when he ran him out of the country. Roth spent the intervening years fortifying himself so no one could best him this time around. If she tried to back out of their deal, she could only imagine the hell he would unleash. The best way forward was to keep the charade intact and play the part of a fool in love, willing to overlook all the red flags, and give him another shot.

"We…" She swallowed hastily to coat her dry throat. "We're going to work it out."

"What the hell does that mean?"

She straightened her spine and tried to sound sure of herself as she declared, "It means I'm staying."

She paused, waiting for the explosion. His silence caught her off guard.

"Lyle?"

"Colette came clean about the bad investments."

She dropped her head back in despair and resisted the urge to throw her hands up in the air. What a time for Colette to confide in her husband. How the hell was she going to convince Lyle she wasn't being coerced after that doozy?

"That has nothing to do with my marriage," she said stoutly.

"No? You're with him because you *want* to be?"

His scathing tone made her flinch.

"After five years of no contact, you run into him by chance, and a month later, you marry him as he takes control of your family's company. I was born

during the day, *cara*, but I wasn't born yesterday. Colette and Ariana want to believe in that star-crossed lovers' crap, but I don't. I didn't need to hear Maximus was blackmailing him to know he's got skeletons in his closet. I didn't need to see the bruises he left on Thea to know I should have stopped you from marrying him. But with all that confirmed and out in the open, you think I'm going to leave you in his hands?"

Even as Jasmine inwardly cursed him for being so protective and too smart for his own, her heart flooded with love and gratitude. How the hell was she going to convince him to let their marriage play out when she secretly agreed with him? She had no idea Roth was capable of the violence he exhibited toward Thea. He could have killed her housekeeper and there'd be nothing she could do to stop him.

Trembling hands gripped the phone as she asked, "H-how is she?"

"As well as can be after being choked by that bastard. He's lucky Thea didn't want to press charges."

"I called, but she didn't answer."

"That's not a surprise. She's terrified."

"If you speak to her, tell her I'm sorry. I… I didn't mean for any of this to happen."

"It's not you who owes her an apology. It's your jackass husband."

But it was her fault that Roth was in their lives. Just like the first time, chaos ensued, and people were getting hurt. She thought she knew what she signed up for, that she could handle him this time around. What a joke. She waltzed right into his trap and now they all had to live with the consequences.

"I'll talk to Colette and Ariana about selling their shares. I won't let you sacrifice yourself for a stupid company!"

"I'm not sacrificing myself!" she said loudly, but he ignored her.

"Maximus brainwashed you and your sisters into believing that company is worth dying for. The moment Colette started to lose control, she should have come to me for help or let it go. Maximus is gone. When are you three going to realize you can't please a dead man?"

His words hit her like a punch in the gut. Maybe to him, Hennessy & Co was just a company, but it was their legacy. If his company was in trouble, he would do anything to save it, as she and her sisters would for theirs.

"Business has nothing to do with this," she said and yanked the phone away from her ear as he erupted in a barrage of scathing Italian. She knew enough of the language to know he was praying for patience… and cursing her to high heaven.

"This is *insane*," Lyle hissed, abruptly reverting back to English. "If your

father was here, none of this would be happening. He wouldn't let you make the same mistake twice. Damn it, he gave you the means to keep Roth out of your life. He has secrets he's willing to kill for. Do you understand that?"

It was all she could think of. "Yes."

"Maximus warned me Roth would show up once he was gone. It didn't take him months to make his move, Min. Roth relocated to New York just days after Maximus's death."

She opened her mouth and then hastily closed it before the scream pulsing at the base of her throat was set free.

"You realize that Maximus blackmailed Roth to sign those divorce papers, don't you?"

"Yes." Her voice sounded as hollow as she felt.

There was a pause on his end, and then, "I'm not going to let you do this."

She dropped her face into her hand. "Lyle…"

"I know you." His voice was rough with emotion. "I know you're loyal, that you have a forgiving heart, and that Maximus's death sent you spiraling. I know that even though your sisters haven't always had your back, you had theirs. I know you'd do anything for family. So does he. I'm not going to let him use you again."

Her shoulders sagged under the tremendous weight. She was so goddamn tired. Tired of being strong, fighting battles on her own, and living in fear and uncertainty. The urge to let him take control was so tempting. She wanted a way out of this nightmare. Away from Roth and his mind games and the politics of the business world, but she knew that wouldn't save her from him.

She had ceded control once before and it had gotten her nowhere. Four years ago, she asked her father to intervene, believing that would end her association with Roth. That had only postponed the inevitable. Now, the stakes were sky-high and there was no one to run to. Lyle was powerful. He wouldn't hesitate to go head-to-head with Roth, but even her father—with his considerable wealth and influence—had been forced to resort to blackmail to control him. The Roth she was dealing with today bore no resemblance to the man she had married the first time.

She'd known committing to Roth for a year wouldn't be easy, but she had no idea she would be putting her life in danger. Still, she was in it. So deep, there was no getting out. She was legally bound to him. Three hundred and sixty-two more days, and she and her family would be free of him once and for all. She could do this. She had to. For all their sakes.

"He's not using me. How could he?" she asked, stalling as she tried to come up with a better argument. "I don't have any power or influence in the business

world and he's not marrying me for my money."

"Don't kid yourself, Min. He may be worth billions, but that doesn't mean he isn't interested in what you inherited. The fact that his hands are in Hennessy & Co proves that."

Her stomach clenched. She had come to the same conclusion. Her father's warning played over and over in her mind. *He'll take what he wants from you and leave you with nothing.*

"And through you, he gets us. He doesn't even have to do business with us. People will assume we're allies because he married into the family. He's using you to polish up his image before he goes into society."

"You don't know that," she said but wasn't able to put much conviction in her voice.

"No, but the rush to get the ring on your finger, the over-the-top dress from Daiyu and the photographer? I should have stopped it when I had the chance."

"You couldn't have done anything."

"Yes, I could have." He hesitated a moment before he added, "If you trust him, you won't mind if I have my lawyer look over your prenup, right?"

A wan smile stretched her mouth as she glanced at the prenup on the kitchen island. When Roth dropped her off here three days ago, that was one of the first things she did. She pored over every page, looking for a loophole, minor clause, or vague wording that gave him an opening to tap into her fortune, but she had yet to find it.

"I trust him," she lied, "but if it makes you feel better, I'll send it over."

He grunted, "Good." More silence and then, "You're really going to go through with this?"

"Yes."

"*Why?* Give me one reason why you'd stay with him after all he's done."

This was her moment. Lyle wouldn't believe they married so quickly and under such suspicious circumstances because she was stupid enough to fall for him again, but there was another reason. It was trivial in the grand scheme of things and not grounded in logic or sound judgment, but it had been enough for her to walk away from her family's fortune seven years ago. It would have to do.

"I'm with him for the same reason I married him the first time."

"Which is?"

"Because no one has ever made me feel like he does." She pressed a hand to her churning stomach. He roused fear and passion in equal measure. She was sure a psychologist would have a field day with that.

"I thought after all the time we've been apart, he wouldn't affect me, but we picked up right where we left off." She paced around the kitchen as she tread a

fine line between truth and lies, so Lyle wouldn't be able to tell one from the other. "We can't be around each other without…"

Graphic images of what they did in Kaia's remote cabin and on their wedding night danced through her head. She clenched her teeth against the torrent of emotions that bubbled in her throat. Despite having the entire floor to herself, she felt the slap of claustrophobia and a sudden need for fresh air. She dashed out of the stifling kitchen and into the airy living room.

"There's something between us… something that's intensified instead of fading away. No matter what I do, it's always there, drawing us to one another, worse than before…" She took a deep breath and let it out. "Toxic chemistry." When Lyle said nothing, she added, "You don't believe me? Ask Daiyu what we did in her store's dressing room."

"You want to have sex with that asshole? I can't stop you," Lyle said testily. "That doesn't explain why you married him."

"People like us don't date," she said, borrowing Roth's line as she marched around the room. "And he didn't want to hide that we were seeing each other. He wanted us to give it a real go, to be what we could have been if Dad hadn't…" Her throat thickened with emotion that bled through the phone. "We never got over each other. Maybe that's why I kept writing about him. When I saw him again, it all came back. I thought we could make it this time. I… I thought he changed."

"He hasn't!"

She dropped her face into her hand. "I didn't know Dad blackmailed him."

"You don't know a lot about him."

Wasn't that the truth.

"You're playing way out of your league. You're going to get burned."

Maybe, but she had no choice.

"Did he come clean about what Maximus blackmailed him about?"

A chill raced down her spine, making her shiver. "No."

"I'm going to find out."

She stilled. "How?"

"I hired a private investigator."

"No!"

"How can you not want to know?" he demanded.

"Of course, I do," she snapped back. "But some things are better left buried."

"If Maximus uncovered his secret, don't you think others will, too?"

She'd already considered that. "Roth has many enemies. If someone uncovered what Dad did, they would be using it against him right now."

"Then it won't hurt if I have someone dig around."

“I’m not going to let you do that,” she said tersely. “You’re going to drop it.”

A charged silence greeted her declaration. No one told Lyle Caruso what he could or couldn’t do, but she couldn’t let him do this. Roth had already proved how far he would go to protect his secret, and there was no way in hell she would allow her brother-in-law to put himself in the line of fire for her.

“And why would I do that?”

Obstinate man. How could she protect him if he wouldn’t drop his vendetta against Roth?

“Don’t act like you’re squeaky clean,” she said impatiently. “Colette and Ariana aren’t saints, either. You’re all in the same cutthroat business as him. You can’t operate at that level and not get your hands dirty. If I hired someone to look into *you*, are you telling me they wouldn’t find something you’d pay to keep quiet?”

The buzzing silence on the other end gave her a surge of adrenaline. She stabbed blindly and hit.

“Is there anything you want to confess, Lyle?”

“This isn’t about me; it’s about him.”

His tone warned her she was on thin ice, but she wasn’t going to back off when she had him off-kilter and on the defensive for the first time in the conversation.

“Does Colette know?”

“What are you accusing me of?”

There was definitely something there, but he was right. This was about Roth, not him. She accomplished her goal. Time to change tactics.

“I’m not accusing you of anything. I’m pointing out we all have something to hide, things we aren’t proud of, that we’d like to keep private.”

“He nearly killed Thea.”

It went against everything she believed in to downplay Roth’s actions, but what choice did she have? “How far would you go to stop someone from revealing a secret that had been used to control you for years?”

“I can’t believe you’re defending him.”

“I’m not! It’s just…” She grasped at straws, thinking in the same convoluted way an attorney would to defend a guilty client. “Dad wasn’t satisfied when he destroyed Roth’s companies in the States. He also derailed any progress he made in Europe. Roth succeeded despite all these roadblocks, but Dad went on to blackmail and then double-cross him.”

“For you,” he pointed out.

Her hand passed over her aching chest. She didn’t know how to feel about that. “I didn’t know Dad blackmailed him, and if I had, I wouldn’t have agreed

to it.”

“Why not? You wanted out of the marriage.”

“Not enough to use something like that against him.” She shook her head and genuine bewilderment colored her tone as she said, “I’ve never seen him react to anything like that. Even when his companies crumbled and his contacts and partners turned their backs on him, he didn’t rage. He took it stoically. I’ve never seen him…”

She swallowed the scream that started to edge up again and ran a hand through her tangled hair as she tried to state her case succinctly, hyperaware that she wasn’t just fighting for her life, but her family’s as well.

“Roth paid his dues. He kept up his end of the agreement he made with Dad. Dad’s the one who betrayed his trust.” The pain she’d bottled up came through. It didn’t matter what the source was, just that it was genuine. “After what Dad put him through, I’d say he’s entitled to his secrets.”

She paused to give Lyle the opportunity to argue or agree, but he was mute. She wasn’t sure if that was a good or bad thing, but she decided to add something that may put him at ease.

“Whatever his secret is, it affects him alone. It won’t blow back on us,” she said.

“And you believe that?”

“Yes.” Roth wouldn’t allow anyone else to capitalize on the secret her father had uncovered.

“And if you’re wrong?”

“Then I’m wrong. I’m willing to take the risk.”

“It took you years to put yourself back together again.”

She swallowed the lump in her throat. “Then I’ll be able to do it quicker this time around.”

“He hurt you.”

Her voice shook as she whispered, “Many people have hurt me.”

His pause told her that he caught the implication. Colette and Ariana had hurt her continually throughout her life, and their recent desertion at their father’s funeral was still fresh in her mind.

“I want you to be happy.”

Her eyes filled with tears because she knew he meant it. “Then drop it. He wants to change, Lyle. He can’t if we don’t give him a chance.”

“You must really love that fucking bastard.”

Relief weakened her knees. Thankfully, the couch was nearby.

“Tell me you’re there of your own free will, that he isn’t abusing you, and this has nothing to do with Hennessy & Co,” he ordered.

“I’m here of my own free will. I’m not being abused, and this has nothing to do with the company,” she recited quickly.

“I can’t believe this shit,” he muttered. “Any indication that you’re lying to me, that there’s any coercion involved, and it leads back to that fucking company Colette’s obsessed with, I’ll do whatever’s necessary to get him out of our lives once and for all. You understand me, Min?”

“Yes.”

“We’ll be checking in regularly.”

She nodded because she couldn’t speak. Several seconds passed before she realized he hung up without saying goodbye. She dropped the phone and covered her face with shaking hands.

Maybe she had more of Maximus in her than she thought. She never imagined she’d be able to turn the tables on her brother-in-law. On the other hand, her threat wouldn’t have worked if Lyle didn’t have something to hide. Under other circumstances, that would have bothered the crap out of her, but she was too drained to care about Lyle’s secrets when she had Roth’s to deal with.

She climbed to her feet and walked toward the glass walls lining the grand living room. It was a beautiful day with fluffy clouds decorating the unreal blue sky. Fall was giving way to winter. The explosion of orange and yellow amidst the sea of gray was almost gone as the leaves began to fall, leaving Central Park naked and bare. That’s how she felt. Stripped, raw, and exposed to the elements.

Although she was safe from the freezing temperature, she still felt chilled. She went back to the kitchen and heated a kettle as she downed Alka-Seltzer to rid herself of a headache and sour stomach that had plagued her for days.

It was done. She convinced her family for the time being, but how was she going to endure a year of this? Growing up in the public eye, she knew how to don a polite mask in public, but she had never kept up an act longer than a couple of hours. And she was expected to keep up this act twenty-four seven? Not just in front of her family, but with Roth as well? How could she look him in the eye after what he’d done?

The way Roth went after her housekeeper—no hesitation and no care for the woman’s age or frailty, made her sick to her stomach. The way he twisted her neck, threatening to snap it… That move had been so practiced and natural for him. She broke out in a cold sweat thinking about it. In between stilted, overly polite messages where her sisters tried to act like they weren’t checking on her, they informed her that Thea had been released from the hospital with a neck brace and bad bruising. It was a miracle Thea hadn’t sustained more serious injuries. He could have killed her.

If only she had bumped into Thea when they fetched her laptop from Tuxedo

Park, her housekeeper would have been able to slip her the letter at a more opportune moment. Then, all of this could have been avoided. She pursed her lips. No. She could have avoided all of this if she had declined his offer to get coffee when she ran into him that fateful day in Philadelphia. Even now, she remembered asking herself: *What was the harm in a cup of coffee?* Now, she knew the answer. The rest of her life.

She had the insane urge to beat her fists against the glass or trash the kitchen that seemed to be put right every morning, even though she had never laid eyes on any staff. Instead, she stood there motionless. With her mind as clear as a snowy television, she couldn't sleep or eat and spent most of her time staring into space. She jumped at every little sound, expecting Roth to appear with the same vengeance that he had in Colorado. He'd driven her back to the city in the dead of night. When they'd entered the penthouse, she'd braced for a showdown. Instead, he left without a word. She hadn't seen or heard from him since. She was on pins and needles, waiting for the spotlight to be switched on and for Roth to start the next act. It was a dangerous game, where she didn't know the rules. Not knowing how to protect herself, she had never felt so vulnerable in her life. Her hand went to her throat, where invisible butterflies desperately tried to get free.

The kettle screamed for her. She swiped it from the stove and poured herself a cup and put in two peppermint tea bags. She remembered her mom always drank a cup before bed. The scent had been a source of comfort to her, but even that memory seemed to have lost its potency in the face of her current crisis.

She tucked a notebook under her arm, then she walked back into the grand living room and settled on the cushy window seat. She stared down at the maze of buildings and roads clogged with traffic, wishing she was part of the crowd, a nobody with normal problems like an irritating neighbor or bitchy boss. Everyone thought they wanted wealth and power. They had no clue how much they would have to compromise or that the mind games and politics would chip away at their soul. If she wasn't a Hennessy, Roth wouldn't have been interested in her and she wouldn't have put everyone she cared about in danger. Ripples traveled over the surface of her tea as her hands trembled.

"You don't see him again. Ever."

"I don't want to."

The echo of the promise she made to her father came back to haunt her. Why hadn't Dad told her that he blackmailed Roth to make him sign the divorce papers? Why entrust Thea with the letter and disc instead of telling her face-to-face? He created an elaborate ruse that failed because he hadn't been open and honest with her. She thought they stopped keeping secrets from one another, but

he hadn’t trusted her with this one. *Why?*

She stared straight ahead, eyes glazed with worry, as she blew on her tea. From the moment she saw Roth in Colorado, he’d been determined to find out who inherited the bulk of her father’s fortune. Was there another asset besides Hennessy & Co that he coveted, and was biding his time before claiming it? Did he offer the one hundred million dollar settlement at the end of the year to conceal his true intentions? He couldn’t do anything without her consent, but that was little comfort when he had fooled her too many times to count. Apparently, age hadn’t made her wiser where he was concerned.

She set her mug aside and flipped through her notebook, which should have been filled with ideas for her new book. Instead, the pages were filled with theories on all the ways Roth could ruin her life. She spent hours jotting down everything he said from the moment they clashed in Colorado. The problem was, everything that came out of his mouth could be interpreted in dozens of ways. How could she read between the lines when she didn't know what she was looking for? She wrote down her conversation with Kaia and the few lines from Maximus’s letter she managed to read.

It couldn’t be a coincidence that Kaia echoed her father’s sentiments. Both warned her that a life with Roth would lead her down a path of destruction and pain. Kaia hadn’t seen her son in years, yet she’d known her son was capable of coercing a woman into marriage. Had he done so in a previous relationship? She ran her fingers through her hair and hissed when they caught on a knot.

If Roth was so dangerous, why wait until her wedding day to bring up the past? Kaia had ample opportunity to speak about her son. She’d called Kaia once or twice a year even after they divorced and she hadn’t said a thing when she arrived in Colorado. It was the first time they were meeting face-to-face and she was raw from Dad’s passing, but Roth was the one thing they had in common. Kaia’s *“You don’t know?”* before Roth interrupted them was killing her. Didn’t know *what*?

Just like her calls to Thea, her calls to her reinstated mother-in-law had gone straight to voicemail. Why wasn’t Kaia answering her phone? Had Roth gone to Colorado to see his mother? He wouldn’t do anything to her, would he? Her insides felt as if they were in a vice. She considered calling the cops for a wellness check, but what reason could she give?

Kaia had been so certain Roth wouldn’t come when she had her heart attack. But he had so. What did that mean? That Kaia had misjudged her son’s level of compassion? Although he’d done it with bad grace, Roth hired a nurse to care for his mother and brought her with him to New York to recover from surgery. Whatever happened between them, Roth didn’t seem to share the same

animosity toward his mother that she did for him. How was she supposed to take that?

The fact that Kaia wanted him institutionalized meant his ruthless streak manifested in his youth. Had he been a wild, rebellious youth? Maybe he got involved with a local gang? But, if he had a record, Dad would have tossed that in her face right from the start. He wasn't a juvenile delinquent, so what was with all the secrecy? What had he done that was so horrible that his mother called him a monster and couldn't bring herself to love him?

Muttering under her breath, she flipped to a fresh page in her notebook and wrote: **REASONS FOR BLACKMAIL**.

She was so out of her depth on this topic that she had turned to the internet for help and Googled the top reasons people were blackmailed. The reasons were incredibly varied, but there were some common themes she couldn't ignore. Her fingers trembled as she went for the worst-case scenario.

- **Murder**

She stared at the ugly word, unable to believe she was contemplating such a thing, but what was she supposed to think? What secret was so terrible that he would go to such extreme lengths to keep it quiet?

There was a giant hole in that theory, though. If the disc was concrete evidence, her father would have gladly turned it over to the cops and put Roth behind the bars. So, did that mean that whatever on the disc was damning but not enough to convict him?

- **Illegal business practices**

Had Roth strong-armed someone into a deal? A rumor of bad business practices could make people avoid him like the plague, but… it wasn't like Roth had a stellar reputation to begin with. Neither did her father. Their ruthlessness was well-known and revered. As far as she knew, her father had never done anything illegal… except blackmail Roth, of course. She downed the rest of her tea and winced as it sloshed around in her tender tummy. These men were going to give her an ulcer.

She assumed Roth used his money and connections to get what he wanted, but maybe he had gone a step further and gotten physical with someone? After what she had witnessed at Tuxedo Park, that was a definite possibility.

- **Dirty association**

Maybe it wasn't how he did business, but who he did it with? Roth was a mathematical genius, but perhaps there was a reason her father hadn’t been able to take him down? Maybe he had contacts in the underworld that even her father couldn’t smother. But, again, her father would have gathered evidence and handed it over to the authorities. Maybe the disc held a confession of a man incriminating Roth, but there was nothing to back up those claims? Which led her right back to the beginning. The evidence had to be bulletproof for Roth to be blackmailed.

- **Blackmailer becomes the blackmailed?**

This was a strong possibility. Maybe her father found out Roth blackmailed someone and in turn used that against him?

She tipped her pen back and forth like a seesaw as she contemplated the number one reason why (according to Google) people were blackmailed.

- **Sex**

Even today, in an age where sex was out in the open, there were still some who paid to cover up affairs, sexual orientation, kink. Did Roth indulge in a high-profile affair? That wasn’t far-fetched, since he had one with her. The engaged daughter of a man he was eager to do business with… Roth gave no fucks. Nothing was off-limits to him. Maybe he slept with the wife of a business partner? Mob boss? Gotten on the wrong side of a dangerous woman who caught him in a compromising position? Was the disc a sex tape?

She pursed her lips. An affair seemed too tepid for his response at Tuxedo Park. What she witnessed was pure rage. Whatever Maximus had over Roth, it was personal. What could prompt a man like Roth who was so coolheaded under excruciating pressure to lose control to the point that he forgot where he was, with whom, and would do anything to keep that information from being exposed? She had no idea what could elicit such an extreme response from him.

One possibility niggled at the back of her mind. It was simple, yet brilliant. Was her father ballsy enough to guess what Roth had done and threatened to show evidence he didn’t really have? That sounded like something her father would do. However, Roth would have checked that Maximus had proof before he allowed himself to be blackmailed. Unless it was so damning that just the

possibility of it getting out was enough for him to comply with her father's demands…

Her head felt like it was going to split open from all these mental gymnastics. She thought she had a wild imagination, but Roth and her father had her beat. She had no idea what could be used to blackmail someone, or how to go about making a deal of that sort. How could they simultaneously run empires while also making time to investigate, blackmail, and destroy enemies?

Also, she was assuming Roth's secret was business related, but what if it wasn't? Was he protecting someone? A mentor? Business partner? Relative? The only problem was, in the time she had known him, he had never mentioned a connection to anyone from high school, college, a grandparent, cousin, or aunt either. No one. She hadn't thought it was strange because she, too, had a small circle, but she *did* have people. Roth? She didn't even know if he had friends.

She flipped to a fresh page with such force that it ripped. Taking a deep breath, she resisted the urge to hurl the notebook across the room to expend her pent-up frustration. There was no getting around the fact that no matter how worldly or experienced she thought she was, she was no match for him. Roth had manipulated and tricked her. *Again.* How he must have laughed at her when she surrendered to him in Colorado. She'd given in so easily.

One year as Mrs. James Roth would end this saga. She survived him once; she could do it again. If the past three days were any indicator, he planned to follow the same pattern he introduced during their first marriage. That was a good thing. The less interaction between them, the better. She had no idea how she fit into his plans, but she agreed with Lyle. He may desire her, but she wasn't a big enough incentive for him to give up his plans for revenge. It was more likely that he realized an alliance with her family would be more lucrative than going to war with them. Once again, she was just a piece in his game.

She slumped against the glass and wondered how she had made such a mess of her life in two months. She buried her father, slept with her ex-husband the first time she saw him since the divorce, bartered her body and dignity for her family company, and discovered that she knew nothing about the man she had now married twice. She had naively signed on the dotted line, believing he was telling her all, but when had he ever been honest with her? She thought she was going into this marriage of convenience with both eyes open this time around. That belief had shattered when she'd read Dad's letter. His warning from the grave turned her world upside down and rattled her doll house until every piece was wrenched from the foundation. She was in free fall. She had no anchor, no safety net, no protective gear. It was just her and her wits against a man she had once loved and now realized was a complete stranger. What did she really know

about James Roth?

Lyle was right. The only way to control Roth was to uncover his secret and use it against him, but she had no doubt he had security measures in place that would trip if any of them tread too close. She didn't want to know what he would do, then.

The hiss was so quiet, she barely registered it. She turned her head and froze as Roth stepped off the elevator, into the penthouse. He was over six feet tall and while most of his peers were stylishly lean, he was built like a wrestler. No matter how tailored his suits were, it didn't look right on a man of his size. The harsh lines of his face were more suited to a general than a business tycoon.

He paused by the couch to shrug off his coat and jacket. He took his time loosening his tie, seemingly impervious to the tension saturating the room. When he started toward her, she clutched the pen in her fist. He stopped beside her. The bright light made no impact on his eyes, which were pitch-black with no hint of brown. When he raised his hand, she stiffened, but all he did was trail the tips of his fingers down her cheek. She wasn't sure whether she was relieved or alarmed by the gentle touch. She hadn't decided how to react when two fingers dipped under her chin and tilted her face up to his.

"Kiss me," he ordered.

CHAPTER 2



If his hand wasn't on her chin, her mouth would have dropped open. Did he think she developed amnesia since he dumped her here?

He pressed a kiss, as light as a butterfly's wing, on the apple of her cheek. She jerked back, unconsciously raising her fist, which he grabbed before she could do any damage.

"You plan to stab me, Jasmine?" he asked as his lips brushed the shell of her ear.

"Do I need to?" she whispered.

"No."

He took the pen and tossed it over his shoulder as the hand on her chin slid to her nape. His blank expression should have chilled her, but the hunger in his eyes thickened her blood. His gentle caress was such a far cry from what she had expected that she didn't know how to react. He didn't take her mouth, though his eyes were fixed on it. He ran the back of his knuckles along her throat. What the hell was happening? She expected him to pillage and terrorize, not coax. As close as he was, it was impossible for her to miss his scent—fresh, spicy, alluring.

Her breath caught as his hand closed over her breast. She gripped his wrist with both hands and yanked, but she was no match for him.

"Roth." Her voice was strained as he kneaded.

"Kiss me."

His black gaze was trained on her face, cataloging everything she wanted to hide. Her fear was morphing into something else. What did that say about her that even after everything she had experienced at his hands, her body was responding to him? He marched in, no hesitation, and picked up right where he left off, as if nothing had happened.

“Your mouth, Jasmine.”

She opened her mouth to tell him to fuck off, but he squeezed her nipple, releasing a burst of heat that chased away the last of her fear. He moved in closer. With the sun shining on his face, she found herself searching for something. Maybe a spark of remorse or a glimpse of the man she had fallen in love with, but she could see nothing but his ruthless veneer. She was sure he could feel her heart thudding against her ribs. He dipped his head, his lips mere inches from hers.

“Jasmine.”

There was a demand in his voice, a yearning that made her fingernails sink into her palm. She could feel his impatience rising. She knew what he wanted, but she didn’t want to give it to him. To distract them both, she raised her hand. He tensed, but his grip on her boob eased when she touched the harsh grooves of his face. He ducked his head, giving her unlimited access as she ran her fingers through his beard and traced the hard line of his lips. His features should be familiar to her, but with all that had been revealed, she felt as if she was looking at a stranger. They had always been lovers, but they never spoke in the aftermath like partners. It was always a mad dash to the finish, and then it was all over. This tactile exploration seemed more intimate than what they did between the sheets.

Ambivalent emotions tore up her insides. Did he sense the questions she couldn’t voice in her tentative touch? Did he do all of this in the name of revenge? Was she just a pawn to him? A way to get to her family and all of their connections or did she inherit another asset he coveted? What was he hiding? What were his intentions?

All the social training she received to interact with world leaders, politicians, and businessmen—nothing prepared her for him. How could it be that this was the second time she had married him and she knew less than she had the first time? Was he lulling her into a false sense of security so he could pull the rug out from under her? How was she going to survive this?

Her voice trembled as she whispered, “Roth.”

He must have understood the hidden plea in her tone because his eyes narrowed. “No.”

Her eyes filled with tears. “I can’t.”

“You can.”

“Why are you doing this to me?”

“Because I can’t help myself.”

He tugged her to the edge of the window seat. She made a grab for her notebook that tumbled to the floor, but was distracted by him forcing her legs

apart to accommodate him.

"Kiss me."

"Why?"

"It's been three fucking days."

"That's your fault," she sassed.

The hand on her nape tightened. "Fucking kiss me, princess."

She didn't understand why he insisted she give him a kiss, but she sensed his temper was stretched to the breaking point. She didn't want to see what would happen if she pushed him over the edge. He was so close, all she had to do was tilt her head back. Her full lips pressed against the straight seam of his. She paused for a beat before she began to draw away. The hand on her nape moved to her hair and yanked. Her lips parted in surprise at the streak of pain, giving him the opening he needed to sink his tongue into her mouth. He tainted the clean taste of peppermint with something bitter and tart. Coffee and something else. He kissed her with an absorption that made her lightheaded. As he ravaged, her body primed itself for him. She pressed her hand against his stomach in a bid for space. His response was to pull her sweater over her head.

"Hey!"

She brushed her hair out of her eyes in time to see her sweater sail across the room. His expression was impassive, his eyes anything but. He hooked her under the arms and hauled her up so she was standing on the window seat. As she crossed her arms over her bare chest, he gripped her hips and kissed her stomach, right below her navel. On instinct, she backed up and hissed when her bare back hit the cold glass. He pinned her there as his mouth moved over her abdomen.

"Roth!"

He squeezed her ass before his hand slipped between her legs and rubbed the thick seam of her jeans against her pussy. She smacked his shoulders, but he kept up the rough motion as he captured her arm and pulled so she bent over. He latched on to her breast. Her toes curled in the soft cushions as she tried to stifle the treacherous heat that flooded through her.

"People will see," she said, even though they were on the ninety-fifth floor, one thousand feet above the pedestrians and taxis below.

"The glass is tinted, and even if they did, you have nothing to be ashamed of," he said as he undid her jeans and kissed her through her panties.

"That's not the point," she said raggedly.

"What is?"

When he nuzzled her, she forgot what they were talking about. Her hands fisted at her sides as she resisted the urge to mash his face where she wanted it.

He gripped her ass, tilting her hips for better access, which forced her shoulders against the glass.

He looked up the length of her. “Do you want me?”

“No,” she said through clenched teeth.

“That’s a damn shame.”

The sun highlighted the silver glints in his hair as his mouth traveled along the waistband of her underwear.

“I’ve been thinking about this all day,” he said conversationally as he kissed her inner thigh. “You getting hot and wet for me.”

“You’re dreaming,” she said weakly as he bunched her panties between her legs.

She tried not to react as he manipulated the fabric so it rubbed against her clit. She clawed the back of his hand, but he continued, pulling the material back and forth, teasing and arousing. When her control was in tatters, he tugged, letting her damp underwear drop to her ankles.

“Spread for me.”

Body and mind battled. Their eyes dueled as she stood there completely naked, fighting the urge to give him what he wanted.

“You want to come? Spread for me, and I’ll give you what we both need.”

Although she didn’t do the spreading herself, she didn’t resist when he hooked a hand under her knee. She obeyed his silent instruction to lift it. When his mouth closed over her, she tipped her head back and was blinded by the sun. She closed her eyes and moaned as he went deep. Fuck yeah. She gripped his hair and bucked her hips. Her leg trembled as it took all of her weight, but she held on. She was so close; she was right on the cusp of euphoria when the hand holding her leg disappeared. Immediately, she began to teeter, but Roth didn’t let her fall. He yanked her forward so she fell over his shoulder and strode out of the living room.

“What the fuck?” she snapped as she thumped his back.

“You’re going to come with me inside you,” he said as he set her on her feet beside the bed in the master suite.

He shucked his clothes before he climbed on the mattress and propped himself against the pillows. His hand went to his cock and stroked.

“Come here.”

She was too far gone to walk away, and he knew it. She crawled toward him. His eyes were liquid black and glazed with a dark lust that made her even wetter. As she spread her thighs obscenely wide to accommodate his massive body, his hand tightened around his cock. She paused, breasts brushing his upper thighs. He was a scary fuck, but a delectable one. No man appealed to her the way he

did. Outside the bedroom, he was a cutthroat businessman, but here, he was a man. Here, their jagged souls fused together and the reasons they shouldn't be ceased to matter.

"You're choking it," she scolded as she smacked his fist.

He released his dick so she could wrap her hand around him. She stroked gently as she played with his balls and then kissed the base, which made his thighs turn to iron beneath her.

"Suck me," he ordered.

Usually, she would take exception to his command, but she was in an accommodating mood. After days of fear and uncertainty, she needed an outlet and he was providing an effective one. She closed her mouth around him and watched his hand twist in the sheets. She deep-throated him to get him nice and wet for her, and saw his Adam's apple bob as she straightened.

When she positioned herself over him, his hands held her in place as he pushed inside her. She bit her bottom lip to stop a moan. He stretched her just right. When he was fully sheathed, his fingers bit into her skin.

"Fuck me," he said.

Muscles flickered in his defined pecs and stomach as she began to move. The sun began to set, casting his face in a warm glow. She didn't have the patience to ride him slow and look alluring and sexy. She wanted her orgasm. It was right on the cusp; she could taste it. She tipped forward and planted her hands on either side of his head. He didn't try to brush her hair away from his face as she rocked, trying to find her rhythm. He let her take the reins, a rare occurrence since he was a controlling bastard. Jasmine had ridden her fair share of men, but Roth was so broad that she wasn't able to brace herself on her knees or build up the force she needed. He watched her with an intense force, those black eyes eating her up, enjoying her attempting to fuck the hell out of him and coming up short. She experimented for several minutes and cursed when she couldn't find the right angle.

"Help me," she snapped.

A hand pushed on her lower back, forcing her to flatten and spread wide as she straddled his hips.

"Brace," he said a moment before he surged up, slamming himself deep.

She bucked forward, but his hands hooked over her shoulders and held her in place as he fucked her hard. She buried her face in the pillow and screamed.

"Right there," she gasped. "Just like that. *Yes.*"

The carnal sound of their skin slapping together as he fucked her raw made her bite his neck. He was brutal as he hurtled her toward climax. When she felt her orgasm coming, her body locked down.

“Jamie!”

As he planted himself deep, she broke. He fucked her through her orgasm, grinding and then slamming as she chanted his name over and over. She heard him curse a second before he rolled her onto her back. She thought he was going to fuck her to kingdom come. Instead, he pulled out and planted his knees on either side of her and stroked his cock over her face.

“Open,” he clipped.

Before she could comply, his hand clamped on her cheeks, forcing immediate compliance. His eyes were blind with need, every muscle in his body taut as he raced toward orgasm. She ignored the bruising grip and strained upward, feathering her tongue over him. His eyes burned as she teased, and when she took the tip in her mouth, his head jerked back in rapture. She was going to bring it home, but he had other plans. He jumped off her and stood beside the bed. She was a bit bewildered until he tipped her face toward him and began to fuck her mouth. She didn’t fight it, and when he orgasmed, the bellow he let out made her ears ring.

“Holy fuck,” he groaned as his top half collapsed on top of her.

She sucked him until he was completely spent. His fingers combed through her hair for precious seconds before he straightened and walked into the connecting bathroom. A second later, she heard the sound of running water. She wiped her face on the sheet before she flopped on her back. No, they definitely didn’t linger in the aftermath like lovers.

Twenty minutes ago, she was sick to her stomach. Now, she was high as a kite and pulsing with life. She closed her eyes and listened to her racing heart. She should be disgusted with herself for letting him use her body, for taking the coward’s way out and indulging in that mindless ecstasy he could induce. Toxic chemistry. She gave up everything for it not once, but twice. Even knowing he was holding on to secrets he would kill for wasn’t enough to eradicate her response to him. It always came back to this. It’s what caused her to indulge one last time in Colorado. Her body didn’t care what he did; it only cared that he could satisfy her dark cravings.

When a hand clamped on her wrist, she cracked one eye open and found Roth’s craggy face hovering over hers.

“What?”

He tugged. “I made a bath.”

“A what?”

He didn’t repeat himself. His arms slipped beneath her and carried her into the opulent bathroom. In front of a wall of glass that overlooked the city was an oversized oval tub. He set her on her feet beside it. She stared at the steaming

water and then at him. He nudged her, indicating she should get in. She put one leg in and instantly tried to hop out. He grabbed her arm to stop her.

"It's too hot!"

"You'll adjust."

"I'm going to get second-degree burns!"

He ignored her and flipped her other leg into the tub with a splash that made her glower. She stood there with the water lapping around her thighs. Because she couldn't hold his gaze, she leaned down to swish her hand through the water and sniffed her fingers.

"You put in oils?"

He didn't answer the obvious, but startled her by stepping in. Automatically, she stepped back and landed on the lip of the tub as Roth, showing no reaction to the hot water, settled on one end, fitting neatly into the curve that seemed to have been custom-made for him. She assumed he'd drawn the bath for her, but it made more sense that he'd drawn it for himself and included her as an afterthought. There was no way she was about to sit across from him in such close confines.

"I'll take a shower," she said coolly as she rose and prepared to step out.

He gripped her wrist and yanked. She yelped as she fell, splashing water everywhere.

"I don't *want*—"

"Quiet," he said as he turned and positioned her between his tree trunk thighs.

With both of them submerged, the water came dangerously high, but didn't go over the edge. She sat, back ramrod straight as the water settled around them. The smell of citrus wreathed her senses as her oversensitive skin prickled. Her attention was drawn to the sky awash with color as the sun began its descent.

"Relax," he ordered as he banded an arm across her chest, forcing her to recline against him.

She didn't realize she had a death grip on the lip of the tub until he grasped her hand and placed it in the water. As she lay there, partially floating, the hot water began to turn her bones to mush. She gave in and rode the steady rise and fall of his chest. Her eyelids shut against her will. The urge to sleep was overwhelming, but she kept her mind active by letting her fingers dance beneath the surface of the water, tapping rhythmically as if she were playing the piano.

For a time, she drifted, but inevitably the haze cleared. For three days, her imagination supplied countless ways for Roth to make an entrance. She was braced for his wrath after everything had gone so horribly wrong. The last thing she expected was for him to disarm her with kisses and take the time to arouse

her before handing her the reins. She was at his mercy in every single way. Why seduce when he could take?

Her eyes opened as the last rays of light leeched from the sky, making the track lights around the bathroom give off a soft glow. From her slouched position in the tub, she could see a hint of the twinkling lights of the city far below. 432 Park Avenue was the tallest residential building in the Western hemisphere. Being so high up, it was easy to feel like they were more part of the heavens than earth. Roth, who rarely stayed still long enough to brush his teeth, seemed strangely content to sit in the scented bath.

He was so different from the man she married seven years ago. Back then, he had been introspective, focused, and driven. He took everything in stride, even the fact that he would have to leave the country and start over. The only time his control splintered was in bed. That's when he became a dominant animal. She had been so sure that she knew him. She didn't see a different side of him until she surprised him in London when he treated her like a disposable nuisance. So, why marry her again? To soothe his ego because she walked out on him? As a final fuck-you to her father for his years of exile? He admitted that his takeover of Hennessy & Co was already in motion before he ran into her in Colorado. Had she always been a part of his plan, or had the events in Colorado changed things?

She gripped the arm on her chest and felt the muscles flex. She was wary of breaking the unspoken truce between them, but she had to know.

"Roth?"

"Hmm?"

He sounded drowsy. When she tried to straighten, his arm tucked beneath her chin in a loose headlock.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Keeping you where I want you," he muttered as he buried his face in her hair.

She stiffened as his lips cruised over her bruised shoulder.

"Does it hurt?"

"No." The only person she'd seen in the past three days was a medical professional who examined her arm without asking a single question. The woman instructed her to rest, ice her arm, and gave her painkillers she hadn't used before she left as quickly as she appeared.

She sank her nails into his thigh as his mouth lightly suckled and blurted, "I've been trying to call Kaia."

Plastered against him as she was, she would have felt any tension in him, but there was none.

“And?” he muttered as his free hand moved over her.

“She didn’t answer.”

“She’s fine.”

She gripped his marauding hand in both of hers. “You went to Colorado?”

“I have people watching her.”

She lost her grip on his hand, which then went to her breasts.

“You have people watching her?” she asked distractedly as he began to play with her nipple.

“It’s for her own good.”

Her stomach knotted. “What are you going to do to her?”

“Nothing.” When she remained stiff, he nipped her neck, making her jump. “If I was going to do something, I would have done it long ago.”

Before she could process that, his phone rang. She scooted forward as he rose, splashing water everywhere. She rolled her eyes as he swiped the phone from the counter. Of course he always made sure that damn thing was within easy reach, even when he was soaking in a tub.

“Gray?” he said in a clipped tone. “No, I’m in New York.” He stepped out of the tub and reached for a towel. As he wrapped it around his waist, he paused. “When?”

Something about the way he said that made her tense. Without another word, he strode out of the bathroom. She was pretty sure he was going to his office, which was on the other side of the penthouse. She stared at the empty doorway and then at the water level, which had dropped below her breasts. She took Roth’s spot and tried to mimic his pose, arms stretched out on either side of her. Her feet scrabbled for purchase as she slid down the side of the tub.

He answered her questions about Kaia. She should be relieved, right? He omitted things, but he didn’t outright lie. When Lyle asked what was going on in the library, Roth admitted that Maximus had blackmailed him. He could have come up with some crackpot excuse for his abhorrent behavior, but he hadn’t. He told the truth. But would he have been so forthcoming if he’d known she hadn’t read the full contents of her father’s letter?

She sighed as she slid down until she was chin deep in the shallow, cooling water. The post-orgasmic bliss was waning. Her eyes moved over what she could see of the opulent bathroom. This was going to be her home for the next year. It was worlds away from the apartment she had in Chelsea, which had been in a good area, but nothing that screamed wealth. Although writing provided a comfortable living, she wasn’t a millionaire and didn’t live like one. Her family were the wealthy ones, not her, and she had been resigned to the fact that Tuxedo Park would go to her sisters until the terms of Dad’s trust were revealed. How

different would things be if Dad hadn't named her sole heir for his remaining assets? Colette would have been the one to make the decision about his death, and her sisters would have taken care of the funeral. She would have left Tuxedo Park and moved back to Chelsea, and while she would have been torn up about Dad, maybe she wouldn't have felt compelled to reach out to Kaia or go to Colorado. She wouldn't have bumped into Roth, reconnected with her sisters, and even if they had confided in her about his takeover of Hennessy & Co, it wouldn't occur to her to approach him since she wouldn't have her inheritance to bargain with. Somehow, she didn't think she would be Mrs. James Roth again if she hadn't gone to Colorado, but that was immaterial now.

She gave up her soak and pulled the plug on the drain before she padded to the shower. There was no need for lights when she had the city as a nightlight. As she lathered, her mind circled back to her inheritance, which she had yet to come to terms with. And, at the end of the year, Roth would make her one hundred million dollars richer. Why? She suspected it was to appease her family. What man, no matter how wealthy, would part with one hundred million after one year of marriage? It was an outrageous sum that would convince even the most cynical in high society that Roth had honorable intentions.

Questions continued to dog her as she entered the closet. As the light flicked on, she paused, taking in the sight of her clothes across from his. Everything happened so fast that she didn't have the opportunity to process what one year of marriage would entail. They didn't have a traditional marriage the first time around and she expected even less this time around. So, why did she have the feeling that Roth was going to turn her assumptions on their head? She shook herself and dressed in oversized flannel pajamas. She wasn't going to wear lingerie to get her husband's attention or persuade him to stick around. She wanted him gone as much as possible.

The master suite was empty, as were the other rooms she passed on her way to the grand living room. She retrieved her abandoned notebook and discarded clothes before she paused in the entrance of the hallway that led to the opposite end of the penthouse. She tiptoed to his closed office door and listened for a moment, but could hear nothing. It was common for men of his stature to have soundproof offices, but what was so important about this call that he needed privacy? Was something wrong? Had Thea decided to press charges after all? Would she have to give a statement to the police?

Her stomach clenched. She turned on her heel and went to the kitchen, where she nabbed a bottle of chilled wine. She savored the buttery Chardonnay before she opened her notebook to a clean page. There was only one way she was going to get through this year, and that was by putting her blinders on and keeping her

eye on the prize. Everything that didn’t affect her or her family wasn’t her concern. Her priorities were the following:

- **Hennessy & Co**

She was here for one reason and one reason only—to regain control of her family’s business. Roth agreed to restore the shareholders’ trust in Colette and allow her sisters to buy back his shares. This company was the result of three generations of hard work. She wasn’t going to let anyone tear down their legacy if it could be salvaged.

- **One Year**

There was a time limit on this arrangement. Three hundred and sixty-two days to be exact. Every day put her one step closer to freedom. Knowing that would make all of this bearable.

- **Toxic chemistry**

As much as she wanted to deny it, what happened in the bedroom proved where he was concerned, she had no willpower. It didn’t matter what he did, chemistry overpowered her reservations every time. If he was going to use her, she was going to get her fill and work him out of her system once and for all.

- **Just business**

She underlined this twice. This was a business arrangement, nothing more. To him, she was a means to an end. Last time, she didn’t know the score. This time, she did. People entered into arrangements like this all the time for publicity, power, financial gain, career. It’s what her sisters had. It’s what she would have had with Ford if her father had his way. For some, an arrangement like this would be a foreign, abhorrent concept, but in her father's eyes, it was just good business. She was sure that Roth agreed.

She couldn’t allow herself to get emotionally involved. That would only lead to misery, confusion, and heartache. She had enough of that to last her a lifetime. How Roth conducted business and with who was none of her concern. Neither were his secrets. She drank more wine to snuff out the burn in her chest. She was

just passing through. She had to remember that.

She was halfway through her glass when Roth walked into the kitchen. He was so quiet, she didn't realize he was there until she saw movement out of the corner of her eye. She jerked, nearly spilling wine over her list. She shot him a lethal glare, which he ignored as he reached into a large envelope. She casually closed her notebook and set it aside as he set a stack of photos beside the copy of the prenup, which was covered in highlights and sticky notes.

"For the newspaper," he said as he poured himself a glass of wine.

She looked down at the top photo. Beneath a sky that looked like a bleeding water color, she and Roth faced one another, their faces close, seemingly absorbed in one another on their wedding day. She hesitated before she fanned out the pictures and paused on a photo of her family. For some reason, the photo looked like it had been taken fifty years ago. Maybe it was her sister's classic outfits, the fact that none of them were smiling, or that her niece and nephew's attention were elsewhere. The shots that had been taken in the mansion after they said their vows were unsettlingly intimate. Her family rarely took pictures since they were featured regularly in the press. Seeing these candid shots just hours before everything went to shit brought home how quickly things could change.

"What do you think?"

He watched her from across the island. He wore sweats and a long sleeve shirt that hugged his body a little too well.

"The photographer took a lot of pictures," she said quietly.

He lined up the photos she had been shuffling around like cards. She didn't want to see them in their entirety. Just the glimpse she was getting was bad enough. Tuxedo Park as a backdrop turned the photos into something magical and timeless. Between the sunset, lake, and autumn setting, everything looked dramatic and romantic. If she hadn't been there, she would have thought these photos had been digitally enhanced. The photographer had some shots in black and white. Those seemed the least offensive.

"Do we have to publish them?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

"Yes." Roth pointed to the top row. "I think it's between these three."

Two featured them, while the third included her family.

"And these," he said, pointing out three others, "will go in the magazine."

She tensed. "Magazine? I thought this was for a notice in the newspaper."

"Daiyu Wu is friends with the photographer. She saw the pictures and showed them to some magazine editor, who requested them for an article that will feature your dress."

"And you said yes?"

He nodded.

His positive acceptance of all this publicity was making her ill. “I don’t think we should include my family.”

“Why not?”

She gave him a long look before she said, “After what happened, I think we should keep them out of it.”

He jerked his chin at the photos. “Don’t worry about that. Choose the shot you want featured.”

Her hand tightened around her glass. “Lyle’s not going to go along with this.”

“He will.”

His easy dismissal of Lyle pissed her off. “You think you can control him?”

“No.”

“Then why are you so certain he won’t say something to the press, ruining your image that we’re one big, happy family?”

“I’ll leave that up to you.” When she stared at him, he toasted her. “Maximus would be proud.”

It took her less than ten seconds to put it together. She had the sensation of falling and grabbed onto the island for support.

“You…” There was excruciating pressure on her chest, which made it hard to breathe. “You tapped my phone?”

“It’s for your own good.”

“You son of a bitch!” She slammed her glass down and shot to her feet. “Who the hell do you think you are?”

“I’m your husband,” he said in a placid tone that made her vision flash red. “And I needed to know where you stand. Now, I do.”

“You can’t do that, Roth!”

“You called me Jamie a second ago.”

She jabbed her finger at him. *“Don’t.”*

It had been a slip of the tongue. He knew she called him by his nickname when her defenses were down and she retreated into the past.

“What if I hadn’t lied?” she demanded. “What if I didn’t cover for you?”

“Then I would have reacted accordingly.”

He watched her with such unruffled cool that she wanted to scream. Of course, he was monitoring her. How else would he know if she was keeping up her end of the deal? As always, he was ten steps ahead while she was playing catch up. She should have figured that out, but she had so much to worry about, she couldn’t think straight. It wasn’t a coincidence that he showed up less than thirty minutes after she hung up with Lyle. Had he kept his distance to see what she would do? Spill her guts to someone or run? She did neither, and the fact that

it played out in his favor pissed her the fuck off.

The ink in her notebook wasn't even dry, and her emotions were spiraling out of control. How could she put on a calm facade when he was using her as a human guinea pig? He was testing her loyalty when hers had never been in question. Any sane woman would have run, but not her. Roth lacked empathy, but he had an uncanny knack of accurately predicting other's behavior. He knew she would sacrifice herself to keep the family business and suspected she would keep their story intact even after her father's blackmail bombshell. He knew her better than she knew herself, which was grossly unfair since she didn't know him at all.

"Fuck you," she spat.

He didn't bat an eye. "Choose, Jasmine," he said, nodding toward the photos.

"It doesn't matter. They're all a lie anyway," she said as she drained her glass.

Everyone would gobble up those photos and buy their star-crossed lovers story. Hook, line, and sinker. There would be gossip about how he was now the majority shareholder of Hennessy & Co, but that would be swept aside once these pictures were plastered in newspapers and magazines. Even the most jaded wanted to believe in a happily ever after. She would look like a fool when he divorced her next year.

"What do you want for dinner?" he asked as he scooped up the pictures and put them back in the envelope.

He fucked her brains out and lounged with her in a scented bath, but he never wavered from his objective. He was a master at mixing business and pleasure.

"You're an asshole!"

He showed no reaction to the insult. "I'm thinking chicken."

"I'm not hungry."

He didn't argue with her, but left the kitchen with the pictures tucked securely under his arm. She muttered under her breath as she tidied up the island, which she had claimed as a makeshift office. She wrapped the cords, sorted papers, and stacked savagely. She ground her teeth when he reappeared in the doorway.

"It's necessary, Jasmine."

"I don't want my family involved in our shit."

"They're a part of it, whether they want to be or not. I met with your sisters today."

Her head snapped up. "Why?"

"Business."

Roth was keeping up his end of the deal. That's all that mattered, right? "Did

they say anything about what happened?”

“No.”

He’s a master strategist, always one step ahead of everyone else. He’ll wait years before he makes a move, and when he executes, he never makes a mistake. She was seeing the evidence of Roth’s mastery in action. What happened at Tuxedo Park should have destroyed his plan, but it was still intact. Why? Because he checkmated each of them, backing them into a corner, using their weaknesses against them. Neither Colette nor Ariana would rock the boat, and the one person who had the guts to go against Roth wouldn’t do it because she asked him not to. How had Roth known she would be able to dissuade Lyle when Colette couldn’t?

“What are you going to do to me, Roth?” She had no doubt he had plans for her. He probably started scheming the moment she walked out on him.

He raised a brow. “Do to you?”

“You know what I mean.”

His eyes moved over her thoughtfully before he said, “Nothing.”

“I don’t believe you.”

He shrugged. “You’ll see.”

If he thought that sounded reassuring, he was far off the mark. “What if Lyle hires a private investigator to look into your background anyway?”

“There’s nothing there. Don’t worry about it.”

She frowned. “If there’s nothing there, how did my dad uncover your secret?”

His eyes glinted as he polished off the last of his wine. “Luck.”

“If Dad discovered it, someone else will too.”

“Let me worry about that.” He gave her a politely inquiring look. “Any progress on your book?”

If looks could kill, he would have dropped dead at that moment. Only he would think it was possible to write through the shit storm he put her through this week. She turned her back on him and continued to organize her mess.

“I have a trip tomorrow.”

Good. She needed some peace and quiet.

“Pack a bag.”

Her stack of notebooks toppled over as she swung around. “What?”

“You travel with me now.”

“I’m busy!”

“I’ll be in meetings most of the time. You can work then.”

“Why am I going if you’re going to be busy?”

He stepped into her, so close, she could smell his shampoo. Even though he

wasn’t touching her, she felt invisible hands moving over her.

“We have one year. I’m getting my fill.”

“You want sex? You have money. Pay some bi—”

He squeezed her cheeks, stopping her from finishing her sentence.

“Why would I do that when I have you?”

Her hand hit his chest, nails digging into his skin, but he didn’t flinch.

“I’m getting your sisters back on track. I’m burying the fucking feud your dad started. I’m moving on from all of that and you’re moving on with me. Your job is to make all the bad shit fade away.” He leaned in and kissed her cheek before he whispered, “I’m going to fuck your mouth, take your ass, make you scream my name until you’re hoarse. In the end, you’ll beg me to keep you.”

“Fuhk yu,” she slurred.

“You will,” he promised as his tongue lapped at her pulse. “Every *fucking* day. No one measured up to you, just like no one can take my place.”

There was a beep, a warning that someone wanted to enter the penthouse. Roth released her and walked out of the kitchen as if nothing happened. She stared after him, a bit unnerved. The aggression he normally saved for the bedroom was now on display at all times. Had he been playing a role the first time she met him? Maybe he wasn't holding back now that he knew she couldn’t walk out? She was freaked out, pissed, and aroused. There was definitely something wrong with her.

She finished tidying up and was about to exit with her laptop and another glass of wine when Roth blocked her way. She stepped to the side as he wheeled in a cart with two trays on it. When she tried to pass him, he grabbed her arm.

“You’re going to eat,” he said.

“I told you, I’m not hungry.”

He pushed her on a stool and put a plate in front of her. She had to admit, the chicken drizzled with yellow sauce looked spectacular, but she wasn’t going to tell him that. She scowled when he took away her wine and replaced it with water. He settled beside her with an identical plate and began wolfing down his salad. When his phone flashed, he picked it up and put it to his ear.

“Go,” he ordered.

When she ignored the food and tried to open her laptop, Roth smacked it close and handed her a fork. He didn’t appreciate the intensity of her glare because he was reciting a bunch of numbers. When she tried to stand, he gripped a handful of her pajamas and said, “Hold on,” before he pressed mute and focused on her. “You’re going to feel like shit tomorrow on the flight.”

“I didn’t say I was going!”

“You are,” he said, eyes fixed on her mouth.

“Roth.”

His eyes flicked up to hers. “Eat before I feed you something else.”

Her heart slammed against her ribs. She sat and picked up her fork. He didn’t release her until she began to chew.

“I’m back. Go,” he said into the phone.

She shoveled food in her mouth. The sooner she was done, the sooner she could get away from his autocratic ass.

“Yeah.”

She glanced over and choked when she saw Roth had her notebook open, pink pen poised over one of her lists. She snatched the book from him and clutched it to her chest as she coughed. She doubted Roth could read her handwriting, which was as legible as a doctor’s, a mix of italics and cursive that even she had a hard time deciphering, but she wasn’t taking any chances. As she chugged water, she examined him, but his expression was inscrutable.

When he reached for another notebook, she tried to stop him, but realized he was going to write on her laptop if she didn’t give him something. She cringed as he ripped a page from a beautiful journal with gold edges. Heathen. She snatched the book from him and examined it to make sure he hadn’t ruined the binding.

Roth quickly jotted down what looked like twelve acronyms.

“Is that it?” he asked whoever was on the other end.

She kept the notebook with her lists well out of his reach and went back to cleaning her plate. It was no hardship since the food was delicious. She didn’t have to hurry since he went from one call to the next. When she rose, his eyes flicked from her to the plate and then he nodded. She snorted as she walked out of the kitchen.

The wine, food, and sex made her pleasantly drowsy. After days of little sleep, she could barely keep her eyes open. She paused on the threshold of the master suite and stared at Roth’s wrecked, stained bed before she walked into the guest bedroom. She put her notebook on the nightstand, flopped on the cold sheets, and sighed as she nuzzled the pillow.

CHAPTER 3



"Jasmine."

Her lip curled as a voice intruded on her dreamless slumber.

"Jasmine."

The voice was more insistent this time and accompanied by an ass grab.

"Go fuck yourself," she mumbled.

A hand wrapped around her ankle and pulled. Her face bounced on the mattress as the pillow was whisked out from under her. She flipped and kicked. A hand made of steel deflected her foot. She yelped.

"Quit playing around. You have twenty minutes."

She opened one puffy eye. Roth stood beside the bed, dressed in a suit and familiar long coat. Even in her disgruntled state, she had to admit he looked damn fuckable.

"What do you want?" she growled.

"We're leaving in twenty minutes."

"Who?"

"Us."

"Why?"

He flicked her tangled hair out of her face. "You're coming with me on my business trip, princess."

She looked around the room. Hadn't she fallen asleep in the guest room? Why was she in the master bedroom? "These sheets were dirty."

"The housekeeper changed them. Now, get ready."

Her eyes focused on the windows. "It's dark."

"It's early."

"How early?"

"Two."

“In the morning?”

He hooked her under the arms and dragged her out of bed. It took her a moment to find her balance. She thought he was being unusually patient until he pushed her toward the bathroom. She stumbled and then whirled.

“Stop pushing me around, jerk off!”

He brushed back his sleeve to look at his watch. “You have eighteen minutes.”

“Go without me!”

“You’re coming with me. I don’t care how you look in… seventeen and a half minutes.” He held up his phone and stared at the screen before he put it to his ear. “Go.”

She muttered under her breath as she staggered into the bathroom. Splashing cold water on her face did nothing to revive her. This was just too damn early. Who the hell woke up at this hour? Sadists, that’s who. She brushed her teeth and managed to pack a bag and change into jeans, boots, sweater, and coat before Roth found her in the closet.

“Good,” he clipped as he grabbed her bag and extended his hand. “Let’s go.”

“I need my laptop.”

“I got it. Shoved all your papers and shit into a bag.”

“But I—”

He grasped her wrist and towed her out of the closet.

“You didn’t tell me when to wake up,” she grumbled.

“You didn’t want to know.”

“I’d want to know if it was at this hour!”

“You used to be a morning person,” he said as they boarded the elevator.

“I was a young student,” she yawned. “Now I’m an artist who goes to sleep at the crack of dawn.”

“I’ll remember that.”

“Where’s my laptop and your stuff?”

“Mo already has it.”

“You put everybody on this awful schedule?”

He squeezed her hand to shut her up as the elevator operator grinned. She was grateful the lobby was empty, since she was in no state to deal with people. She climbed into the back of the SUV and slumped against the door. She felt like death.

“How do you do this?” she groaned.

“Practice.”

“You probably got less sleep than me.”

“Yes.”

“How many?”

“Hours?”

“Yes.”

“Three.”

“You’re going to kill yourself,” she said darkly.

His hand rested on her thigh and squeezed. “That’s where you come in.”

“What?”

“Having you with me will force me to schedule free time.”

“You never did that before.”

“I told you, things will be different this time around.”

She was too exhausted to examine what he meant by that. Mo and Johan talked in low tones as Roth messed around on his phone. She pulled up her hood and dozed off. It felt like seconds later that Roth was shaking her awake. She gave him a killing glance as she hopped out of the SUV and started toward the jet. The light was too bright and the flight attendant's chipper voices hurt her ears. This jet had a different configuration from the one they took from Colorado. This one had a long couch along one side, which she honed in on before she was blocked by a woman with a megawatt smile. She eyed Sarai, Roth’s personal assistant, with such potent menace that the woman should have leapt out of her way. Instead, Sarai grabbed her hand to inspect her ring.

“It’s *gorgeous*!” Sarai gushed.

Even at this ungodly hour, Sarai’s hair was styled in ringlets. Although she couldn’t focus properly, she noted that Sarai wore red dangly earrings and some fashionable getup that sparkled. Jasmine snatched her hand back and walked around the other woman.

“I can’t function at this hour. I need sleep.”

She flopped on the couch and let out a growl when Sarai perched on a chair across the aisle from her.

“How was the wedding?”

“Later,” she hissed.

“The photos are going to make a splash in the papers. The backdrop, that dress, your family in attendance… Everything looked picture-perfect!”

“I may kill you,” she said with her eyes closed.

Sarai laughed, making her wince and huddle deeper under her hood.

“Okay, okay, we’ll talk later. Can I get you anything?”

“No.”

She plastered her front against the back of the leather couch. There was a lot of movement going on around her. Her solitary lifestyle of taking long walks around the lake, or long, introspective train rides was at an end. Roth took over,

which meant saying goodbye to a routine, peace, and privacy. She heard the rumble of his voice as he neared. He gripped her hip briefly before he moved away. The engines revved. Even as her stomach fluttered during lift off, she drifted back to sleep.

HER PILLOW WASN'T COMFORTABLE. She shifted and prodded it. Something wasn't right. The sound of the jet engines hummed in her ears. She opened her eyes and saw the overhead lights had been dimmed and the shades drawn. She was still stretched out on the couch, but the reason her pillow felt like a rock was because her head was on Roth's muscular thigh. He was sitting up with his feet propped on the chair's footrest, sound asleep. She sat up and eyed the cabin blearily. Johan and Mo were seated at the back of the jet, also asleep. Sarai was nowhere to be found.

Rising gingerly, she crept to the bathroom and splashed her face with water and swished mouthwash, which made her feel better, but she still felt grungy and groggy. When she exited the bathroom, she came face-to-face with Sarai, who looked just as alert as she had when she boarded the jet.

"You're on something, aren't you?" she muttered.

Sarai giggled. "Are you hungry?"

"Yes, actually."

"What do you want?"

"An all-American breakfast."

"Got it."

Jasmine made her way to a seat and began to lift the shade before she realized the sun was going to blast Roth in the face and wake him.

"Coffee?"

Sarai held a cup in one hand and a pot in the other.

"Sure. Thank you."

Sarai poured and then settled across from her.

"How long was I asleep?"

"Five hours," Sarai said promptly. "Before I forget, I have your SIM card for your phone, so you won't have any hiccups. I can install it for you if you like."

She handed her phone over and watched Sarai install the SIM card and reboot her phone. She put in her passcode and, even though her cup was only half empty, refilled it with more steaming coffee. She was feeling almost human when Sarai gasped.

“What?”

Sarai turned her phone toward her, looking horrified. “You have three hundred and twenty-six unread text messages.”

She shrugged, half-heartedly. “I erase them when I can.”

“How…?” Sarai looked like she was going to be sick. “Why…?”

She took back her phone and set it face down so Sarai wouldn’t see her email inbox and pass out. “Most are condolences from when my father passed. The others are from nosy acquaintances or classmates who want to know about my inheritance or Roth if that’s started to make the rounds.”

She didn’t care for the considering look Sarai was giving her so she asked, “Do you want a cup of coffee? If you’re on Roth’s schedule, you can’t get much sleep.”

Sarai held up both hands. “No. I stay away from caffeine. The trick is to take cat naps. I just need a couple of hours here and there.”

Jasmine shook her head. “I couldn’t function like that.”

Sarai nodded sagely. “That makes sense. In your line of work, you use up every ounce of brain power. You use the left side of your brain for vocabulary, grammar, and story structure. The right side of your brain, the creative side, helps you build worlds, characters, and give them life. You soak in everything around you and funnel it into your work. Creativity burns a lot of energy. I can see the need for you to sleep more than most so you can recharge.”

She stared at Sarai for a full thirty seconds before she took another pull on her coffee. Very few knew what she did for a living, and she hadn’t come to terms with the fact that Sarai not only knew her occupation, but was a fan of her work. It was disconcerting to interact with a stranger who knew her so intimately. She wanted to avoid this, which is why she preferred the anonymity of pen names.

“I’ve never thought about it before,” she said as she set her cup down and wrapped her hands around it.

Sarai leaned forward. *“So?”*

“What?” she asked warily.

Sarai’s eyes flicked from her to Roth and then widened meaningfully.

“So, we’re married,” she said stonily.

Sarai rested her chin on her hands. “Tell me everything.”

Oh, God. This was the last thing she wanted to talk about, but it was just as imperative for Sarai to believe in the authenticity of their marriage as it was for her family. People talked. She glanced at Roth and wondered if this is why he brought her along. It would be odd for him to leave his bride behind mere days after he remarried her. Everyone would expect them to be joined at the hip. She

looked back at Sarai, who had stars in her eyes. Sarai believed she had a hand in their reconciliation. Maybe she had. She wasn't sure what Roth thought of her work as Thalia Crane, and if it played a role in her current circumstances.

She held out her ring, distracting Sarai so she could muster up an appropriate amount of enthusiasm for what everyone would assume was a fairy-tale wedding. After Sarai fawned over her ring, she launched into an account of Daiyu's dress, her childhood home, and the simple ceremony by the lake. In the midst of her stilted tale, a plate of sausage and eggs arrived with a side of pancakes. She dug in while Sarai ate berries.

When she ran out of things to gush about, she came to an awkward halt. She hoped Sarai would be satisfied and switch her attention to her laptop. Unfortunately, Sarai steered the conversation back to her writing.

Some writers couldn’t shut up about their work. She wasn’t one of them. For her, writing was intensely private because she bared it all—the good, bad, and the ugly. She could afford to let it all hang out because the readers assumed the main character wasn’t a real person. Therefore, she could be as cunning, selfish, and sexual as she wanted to be and claim it was fiction. But Sarai knew her work under Thalia Crane was almost autobiographical. She felt like a deer in the headlights.

“The readers are going to freak out in book five.” Sarai bounced excitedly in her seat. “They always wanted you two to get back together.”

“I don’t know if I'll put that in the book.”

Sarai stopped bouncing. “Why not?”

She picked up her linen napkin and dabbed at the corner of her mouth as she chose her words carefully. “The series mirrors my life, but it doesn't follow me to the tee.” When Sarai opened her mouth, probably to ask for a detailed list on what she made up, she said, “Besides, I have other plans.”

“What’s better than a wedding?” Sarai asked loudly and then clapped a hand over her mouth when Roth stirred.

She could think of a dozen things better than a wedding, but she knew none of them would pacify Sarai or her readers. They were all looking for a fairytale ending. Fuck. She should have ended the series at book four after reconciling with her father. It would have made a statement to end the series without a man by her side.

Sarai leaned forward and whispered, “People are rooting for you two!”

She knew that better than anyone. Countless emails and messages from readers told her they believed her main characters, Rex and Juliet, were meant to be together. Unfortunately, she had given Roth’s character, Rex, extensive character development that hadn't translated to his real-life counterpart. She shot

Roth a baleful look and resisted the urge to smother him with her linen napkin. He may pull the strings in real life, but she refused to let her character suffer the same fate as her. Juliet deserved a happy ending, even if Jasmine didn't get one herself.

"We'll see what happens," she said.

Sarai opened her mouth to argue and then shrugged. "I know you'll do the right thing."

She narrowed her eyes at Sarai, who peered at her flashing cell phone. What the hell did that mean? Sarai wasn't using reverse psychology on her, was she? Rex was a saint compared to the man who inspired him. She glanced at Roth, who looked menacing even when he was unconscious.

"He sleeps best in the air," Sarai whispered. "I think it's the white noise."

She looked back at his personal assistant who radiated wholesome goodness. They made quite a pair. "How long have you been with him?"

Sarai looked up at the ceiling as she calculated. "We're going on three years now."

"How did you end up working for him?"

If she wasn't paying attention, she would have missed it. The sparkle left Sarai's dark brown eyes and her smile powered down, even though it remained plastered on her face.

"He was doing business with my father in Israel," Sarai said.

Her brows shot up when Sarai didn't continue. "What did you do in Israel?"

Sarai's hand crept up to her dangly earring. "I worked in the same capacity with my father as I do for Roth."

"You were your father's personal assistant?"

Sarai nodded.

She cocked her head to the side, examining the other woman who had paled. "Are you okay?"

Sara brushed imaginary crumbs off the table and said in a stifled voice, "I guess if anyone would understand, it's you."

"Understand what?"

"My dad's a powerful man," Sarai said in a low monotone. "Traditional, strict, unyielding, proud. He mapped out my life. It didn't occur to me that I had a choice until Roth gave me one."

The bottom dropped out of her stomach. Sarai's story sounded eerily like her own. Had they…?

"My dad's not a nice man."

Sarai seemed oblivious to her sudden stillness as she played with her jewelry and tried to hold on to her smile before she finally let it go and averted her face.

“He has a terrible temper.”

Sarai’s subdued voice dragged her out of her dark reverie as her intuition pinged a warning. “Sarai, you don’t have to…”

“He had an appointment with my father,” Sarai said, the tendons in her neck standing out starkly as she tried to contain her emotions. “Roth walked in twenty minutes early and found me on the ground.”

Jasmine set her fork down, appetite gone. She never imagined that behind Sarai’s sunny countenance lay such pain.

“Roth walked me out of there. He offered me another path, so I took it.” Sarai’s hands fluttered before she clasped them on the table. “He never complains, never gets upset. He works all day, every day. I’ve never seen anything like it.” Sarai gave her a shaky smile as her eyes glistened with tears. “He deserves to be happy. You two give me hope that true love really does conquer all.”

How would Sarai view her savior if she revealed that he attacked an elderly woman? That her father blackmailed him, and she hadn’t entered into this marriage willingly? Sarai’s faith in them made her feel like a fucking fraud. Her heart twisted uncomfortably in her chest, but she swallowed her misgivings and grasped Sarai’s arm. “I’m glad you got out of there. No one deserves that.”

Sarai placed her hand over Jasmine’s and squeezed. “I didn’t have anywhere to stay so Roth got me a hotel room. He helped me get a visa and gave me a job. I can’t repay him for what he’s done for me.”

“And your father?”

She saw the answer on Sarai’s face before she spoke.

“I haven’t talked to him or anyone in my family since.” Sarai’s gaze shifted away as she whispered, “Roth refused to do business with him.”

Her voice was tinged with wonder. She glanced at Roth, unable to meld Sarai’s accounting of him with the man she knew. The first time she married him, he hadn’t been a monster, but he hadn’t been the most compassionate man in the world either. To say she was shocked by the story was an understatement. He didn’t hesitate to crush corporations, which resulted in thousands of jobs lost, yet he rescued a personal assistant and casually added another enemy to his list. Sarai said her father was a powerful man. She knew the biggest players in almost every country. She took in Sarai’s coloring, her features, and what she knew of the reclusive wives of those men and narrowed it down to three. None of them should be taken lightly, yet Roth uncovered a shameful family secret and rubbed salt in the wound by hiring Sarai and refusing to do business with her father. She was dying to know who Sarai’s father was, but she wasn’t going to ask when Sarai had studiously avoided his name.

“Roth is a good man,” Sarai said quietly. “He doesn’t want anyone to know, but you and I know different.”

She ignored that and asked, “Are you happy?”

Sarai’s expression cleared, and the sunshine came back, brighter than ever. “Happier than I believed possible.”

She couldn’t maintain her sour mood in the presence of such joy. “I’m glad.”

“I have a great job, meet interesting people.” Sarai patted her hand. “And get to visit beautiful places. I’m living the American dream!” When Roth growled in sleep, Sarai’s eyes widened playfully before she leaned forward to whisper, “Did you always know?”

“Know what?”

“That he would be who he is today.”

She retracted her hand. “No.”

She knew Roth would be successful. He had ambition and a mind for business, but so did everyone in the upper echelon. He had been on the rise when she met him, but a part of her wondered if he would be the titan he was today if her father hadn’t forced him to work harder than anyone else.

To think that when she first met him, she thought he needed help… She suppressed a snort. She was honest in Colorado when she said she hated that he was from her father’s world. Men like her father, men like Roth, they lived for work and money. She wanted more than that. She wanted a *life*. Why couldn’t she have fallen in love with a waiter or taxi driver? That would have made life simpler.

Sarai gaped at her. “You didn’t know and left Ford Baldwin for him?”

It was her turn to look away. “I didn’t care about the money. I still don’t.”

“But your father left you an inheritance, right?” Sarai held up both hands when Jasmine gave her a cutting look. “The papers mentioned…” Sarai gave her a guilty smile before she waved her hand. “I’ll just wait and read about it in the books.”

Why her inheritance should be on public record was beyond her. Thank God her inheritance wasn’t big enough to hit any Forbes lists, which were only interested in billionaires. Roth had been listed on international lists, but with his move back to the States, he would rank in the top twenty of the richest people in the country. She mentally crossed her fingers and hoped Forbes had already made their cursed list and wouldn’t include him this year. That issue always sold the most copies. Everyone wanted to know who the richest people in America were to emulate, target, and model their careers after. Lyle and Rami would be on that list, two or three spots away from each other, as they had been since they married into the family. Marriage kept business ties strong and although her

brothers-in-law were in different industries, they still had some overlap and mutual acquaintances and mirrored each other's success.

She shot a scathing look at Roth. If a magazine editor decided to include Roth, she knew they wouldn't be able to resist mentioning her name and combining their fortunes. Fuck. Interest in her and her sisters was just starting to decline after the high-profile attendance at Dad's funeral. Aside from the fact that Lyle and Rami were prominent and influential, Colette and Ariana's mothers had shown face and made quite the spectacle. Colette's mother was the heir to an oil fortune and on her third marriage, while Ariana's mother, a former supermodel that had gone into movies, had drawn the eyes of Hollywood. Roth was capitalizing on the publicity wave with their wedding announcement. He wanted to proclaim his return to New York so everyone who ever wronged him would quiver in their boots.

She looked back at Sarai, who was giving her a speculative look. "What?"

"Do you know which actress you want to play you when your books are made into a movie?"

She felt a flash of panic sear through her chest. "*No.*"

"Do you know who will play Rex?"

"I don't want my series made into a movie," she said adamantly.

Sarai blinked. "Why not?"

Because then, she would have to come out of the closet and everyone would realize that what they assumed was fiction was actually real. Her broken family life depicted on-screen along with her and Roth's sex life? Not only that, it would feature the other men she'd taken to her bed since. No, it was better for all concerned if Thalia Crane remained the author of some fictional series that sold reasonably well. She wasn't interested in shooting to the moon. What she had was more than she ever dreamed, and it was enough for her. If mainstream success had been a goal, she wouldn't have turned down the publishers who offered to put her in bookstores, airports, and newsstands. She needed everyone to believe it was just a book and not her real life.

"It's something you should think about. You're featured regularly on some prominent lists. It won't be long before someone approaches you for film rights," Sarai said, oblivious to her inner turmoil.

Jasmine glared at her. "How do you have time to watch my stats when you're the personal assistant for *him*, have flights at three in the morning, and non-stop work?"

"I'm hyper."

"No shit. Instead of focusing on me, what are we going to do about you? What's your next step?"

“What do you mean?”

“Do you want to be his personal assistant forever?”

“What else would I be?”

“Anything you fucking want.” She spread her arms. “You want to live the American dream, right? You should try to knock *him*”—she jabbed her thumb at Roth—“off his throne. Now, *that* would be the American dream. Become the rival of your old boss.”

Sarai’s mouth fell open. “That…”

“Yes?”

“That sounds awful.”

She shrugged. “I’m just saying, if you can handle him, you can do anything.”

Sarai pursed her lips. “I have dabbled in something…”

“What?”

Sarai looked a bit sheepish as she admitted, “Writing.”

She sat back. “Well, shit.” Now it all made sense.

“I’m not serious about it,” Sarai said quickly. “I just have ideas and I jot them down from time to time.” Sarai looked down at the table and scribbled an invisible message on the table with her finger before she asked, “Can I ask about your stats?”

Sarai ignored her scowl and plunged ahead.

“You make seventy percent in royalties and I imagine you sell a couple hundred copies a day. Or is it thousands? Either way, that means you’re averaging around…”

She threw her hands up. “Oh my God, you sound like my sister.”

Sarai lit up. “Which one?”

She nearly did a facepalm. “You’ve researched them too?”

“Of course.”

Sarai’s interest in her and her family was starting to unnerve her. “You have Ariana’s personality, but Colette’s brain.”

Sarai looked touched. “Aww, that’s so sweet. I’ve been following your sisters’ careers for years, even before I met Roth or read you. The year Colette took over Hennessy & Co, she did that deal with Malcolm Smith. She doubled her profit that year. My dad told us to be more like her, but…” Sarai shrugged. “We’re different people. I can’t imagine the pressure Colette feels from both parents. It’s a lot to live up to.”

“That’s an understatement.”

From what she had seen of Colette’s mother, she was just as cold, detached, and disapproving as Maximus. Colette’s mother left her with Maximus and moved onto her next marriage and never looked back. Being the heir of not one

but two massive fortunes pushed Colette to the breaking point as she tried to prove she was worthy of both legacies. Colette had a swarm of step and half siblings on her mother's side trying to sabotage or use her to get ahead. It made the Hennessys look downright civilized. When Colette's mother died, all hell would break loose.

"And you?"

She pushed away thoughts about whether Colette's mother had seen Polara and refocused on Sarai. "What about me?"

"You didn't try to meet your father's expectations."

She felt that niggle in her chest, that uncomfortable sensation of being put on the spot by someone she had let in a little too close. She learned to keep people at bay, not because she was a snob, but out of necessity. Not many could understand the unspoken rules of their world and what was required of them to keep up appearances. Sarai knew because of her background, but she was pushing her luck.

"I tried at first," she said in a quelling tone Colette would have been proud of. "But being compared to my sisters, I had no chance. I have no talent for the business world."

"You broke the mold and created your own world," Sarai agreed. "By the way, are you still going to publish under Minnie Hess? My favorite on that side is your young adult fantasy novels. I'm waiting for book three."

She relaxed. Minnie Hess was a much safer pen name to discuss. It wasn't half as popular as Thalia Crane, and was pure fiction with nothing borrowed from her personal life. She hadn't written under that name since she started writing about the affair, but she vowed that one day she would go back to it.

"I'll continue that series once I finish this one." Her brows arched. "I don't know how I'm going to accomplish that when I get woken up at three in the morning and dragged across the globe. Where are we going anyway?"

"London."

She glanced at Roth as the irony of that struck her. She hadn't visited London since she walked out on him, and now she was returning with his ring on her finger. At least this time, she already knew they were doomed to fail.

Roth opened his eyes and stared at her, aware and alert. She immediately looked away, mortified to be caught staring at him like a creeper. Oh, God. She hoped he didn't think she was mooning over him. That's the last thing she needed; him thinking she was falling for him again.

As he got to his feet and stretched, she noticed Sarai had a foolish grin on her face. She scowled back. What the hell was so funny? She was so focused on ignoring him that she didn't realize he had closed in until it was too late. She

yelped when he picked her up, took her seat, and draped her sideways on his lap. Sarai pressed her hands to her chest, clearly touched by the spectacle Roth was making of them.

“There are other chairs,” she pointed out.

Sarai’s dreamy expression vanished and her mouthed dropped open in outrage.

Roth buried his face against her. “I like this one,” he said in a sleepy tone.

“Then let me go, and I’ll give it to you.”

“I’m comfortable here,” he said and tightened his hold when she tried to slip away.

“Would you like anything to eat or drink?” Sarai asked him while she gave Jasmine an admonishing look.

“Coffee,” he said.

“Yes, sir.”

Sarai hopped up and double-timed it to the front of the jet. Jasmine stiffened as he nuzzled her chest and slipped his hand beneath her sweater.

“Want to join the mile high club?”

She sucked in a breath as his hand splayed over her stomach. *“No.”*

“Maybe on the way back.”

She had to use both hands to yank his paw off her skin. She held it at arm’s length as if it were a snake. “Maybe never,” she retorted.

“We’re joining the club,” he said lazily. “You choose when, I’ll choose how.”

Before she could come up with a retort, Sarai reappeared. She was grateful his hands left her to accept a cup from Sarai.

“We land in thirty minutes,” Sarai reported with a radiant smile.

“Good,” he said.

“I’ll wake Johan and Mo,” Sarai said and bustled to the back of the jet.

Roth drank coffee and ate some of her pancakes while she perched stiffly on his lap.

“Did Sarai tell you where we’re headed?” he asked.

“London. How long will we be there?”

“A few days, but I have business in other cities as well. If everything goes smoothly, I should be able to wrap this up in two weeks.”

“Two *weeks*? I didn’t pack for two weeks!”

“You can buy whatever you need there,” he said dismissively.

“That’s not the point!”

“You like to travel.”

It wasn’t a question. “I do, but usually, I have more than a couple of hours’ notice and know where I’m going.”

“It won’t always be like this. I left England abruptly, and now I’m playing catch up.”

“Why did you leave so suddenly?” she asked, striving for a casual tone, but her voice came out sharp and terse instead.

Roth didn’t answer. Instead, he drank coffee and studied her with a clinical air that put her on edge.

“Lyle told me you relocated to New York just days after Dad died.”

Her temper kindled to life as he maintained his silence.

“Was that part of your deal? You couldn’t step foot in the States while he was alive?”

If he wasn’t blinking, she would have doubted he was human. His face was completely expressionless, giving nothing away. She eyed his cup, which was never far from his mouth, and contemplated knocking the last of the coffee in his face. As if he could read her mind, he set the cup on the table. She was disappointed to see it was empty. Damn. She glared at him while he stared back, calm and completely at ease despite her interrogation.

She elbowed his abs. “Answer me.”

A small voice in the back of her mind warned her that she was violating her rules again, but her need for answers—*any* answers—made her reckless. She wanted to believe in the good in him like Sarai, but she couldn’t, not when there was so much evidence to the contrary.

When she shifted on his lap, he gripped her hips, but she wasn’t trying to get away. His eyes flared as she straddled him, grabbed two handfuls of his coat, and leaned in so close, she saw her silhouette in those black one-way mirrors of his.

“Give me something,” she ordered as she loomed over him.

His apathetic expression had shifted into something more animated, but she was too intent on her mission to catalog the change. She was supposed to be playing it cool, keeping it all in, but she felt like a flame, burning tall and bright. She couldn’t put it out.

“Roth.”

Her voice was half demand, half plea. She had let so many things slide. She never questioned their odd living arrangements when they were married, how he built his fortune, or if he ever loved her. There were too many unknowns. He had to give her *something*. She had proved herself by keeping their charade intact and convincing Lyle to back off. Her freaking life was in his hands. She had every reason to be suspicious, wary, and terrified, but she was trusting him to keep up his end of their pact. In return, surely, she deserved a crumb of confidence?

As seconds ticked past into a minute, her heart shriveled up in her chest.

When would she learn her fucking lesson? This wasn't a real marriage. It wasn't even a partnership. He called the shots and she complied. There was no give and take. This is what she got for ignoring her rules.

She raised her head and stiffened when she saw Mo and Sarai facing her two rows over. Sarai had a hand over her gaping mouth while Mo perched on the edge of his seat, clearly ready to intervene if necessary. So much for playing loving newlyweds. She ducked her head, hair falling forward to conceal her face, as she started to scoot off Roth's lap. He prevented her escape by wrapping his arms around her and drawing her flush against him.

"Let me go," she said in a dead monotone.

He ignored her and slid his hand over her rigid back.

Her nails sank into the leather seat on either side of his head as she strained against the arm banded around her. "You want to keep your image intact? Let me go before I hurt you."

"He didn't ban me from the States."

He spoke against the hollow of her throat, voice barely audible. She felt more than heard the words over the droning engine.

"He was a second-generation Hennessy with access to every powerful player in every major city in the country. It wasn't worth fighting him on his turf when time was on my side."

"You knew he was ill," she whispered.

His hand did another pass up her spine.

"So you rushed back the moment the coast was clear."

He lifted his head from her neck and looked up at her. He was disturbingly close. Instinctively, she tried to ease back, but the arm around her waist didn't budge.

"I waited five years. I wasn't going to waste any more time."

"Waited five years to do *what*?" she snapped.

"You know."

To begin tearing down Hennessy & Co. She gritted her teeth. "Were my sisters always part of your plan?"

"Yes."

Her heart sank like a ten-pound weight to the pit of her stomach. So her sisters had always been his targets. If Colette hadn't lost her shares in Hennessy & Co after some bad investments, Roth would have used some other misfortune… or created one. Either way, he always intended to make Colette and Ariana pay for their father's sins.

"What about me? Was I always a part of your plan, or was I an afterthought?"

Her heart thudded in her ears as his eyes moved pensively over her.

“I had special plans for you.”

His gravelly tone made her pussy clench.

“Plans that would bring you to your knees and have you begging for mercy.”

She could only imagine what plans would cause her to be that desperate, but she had bigger problems on her mind. “And now?”

One of his hands coasted over her ass and palmed the cheek before he murmured, “Now I have new plans.”

“*What* plans?” His cocky smile pissed her off. She twisted his coat in both fists and gave him a small shake. “Tell me.”

Far from being annoyed or angry by her getting physical with him, he looked delighted.

“I’d rather show you.”

She let out a disgusted sound and tried to swing off him, but his hand shot out and grabbed her by the throat. His mouth may be stretched into something that resembled a smile, but his eyes were biting cold.

“I had years to plan my revenge, but the one thing I didn’t foresee, the last thing I expected, was to see you in Colorado. Alone, stranded, grieving, ripe for the picking.”

“You—”

He didn’t allow more than that garbled word before he pulled her down so her forehead rested against his. To everyone else, it looked like they were cuddling lovers when she was seconds away from being strangled.

“Your sisters should be grateful that you let me in, that you let me taste. If you hadn’t, they would watch as I ripped their empire apart piece by piece.”

He shifted, letting her feel the hard ridge of his erection. When she tugged on his wrist, his grip tightened until her hands fell away. He hummed in approval and pressed a kiss to the corner of her mouth as she took shallow breaths.

“You spread wide for me,” he rasped. “You bent to my will, taking everything I had, and still, you wanted more. No matter how you feel about me, you crave what I give you. And I want to give it to you in spades, princess.”

With his hold on her neck, he forced her to rock against him, grinding his dick against the seam of her jeans. He stared at her with a hunger that should have made her scream bloody murder, but made her skin prickle with anticipation instead.

“I gave up my revenge for this. To have you at my beck and call for one year. I’m not going to waste it.”

It sounded like a vow.

“Don’t push me unless you’re willing to accept the consequences,” he said

and pressed a chaste kiss on her cheek before he released her.

As she gulped in a breath, he rearranged her into her original position on his lap. She rocked forward to get away from him, but a large hand splayed over her stomach kept her in place.

“Did I say you could go anywhere?”

He sounded calm, but his thighs felt like corded steel beneath her.

“I want my own seat,” she said.

“You’ll take what I give you.”

The hand on her belly drifted down to her waist and fingered the button keeping her pants fastened.

“Relax, or I’ll make you relax in whatever way I see fit.”

She turned her head toward him with a sarcastic retort on the tip of her tongue, but one glance at the dark promise in his eyes made her snap her mouth shut.

She stared straight ahead as she muttered, “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

He gripped her chin and tugged so she fell sideways into him. “You’re what’s fucking wrong with me.”

“I haven’t done anything,” she hissed and felt the scrape of his teeth on her cheek before he sucked her earlobe into his mouth and bit. “Roth!”

He lashed her ear with his tongue, then growled, “You don’t need to do anything. Now, stop giving me lip before we join the club in front of everyone. I don’t care who sees.”

He mocked her by pressing a tender kiss to her temple before he arranged her so her head rested on his shoulder and retrieved his phone from his pocket. She lay stock-still, wary of drawing his attention, as he began to thumb through his emails as if nothing had happened. What the hell was *that*? Was it just yesterday that she told Lyle that Roth was one of the most composed, coolheaded people she knew? The only time he lost control in the past was when she provoked him sexually. Now his temper was right beneath the surface, on constant simmer. Who was the real James Roth? The rational, self-controlled businessman, or the man who would commit violent acts to get his way?

Her throbbing ear seemed to be emitting a wave of heat throughout her body. He was ignoring her, but his erection hadn’t subsided. She suspected it wouldn’t take much to get him to do something about it, especially since he mentioned that fucking mile high club again. She had a streak of exhibitionism, but not around people she knew. And Mo and Johan were right in front of the bathroom. Why the hell was she even thinking about it? She shifted restlessly and stilled when Roth lowered his phone to look at her. She kept her head bowed and blew

out a breath when he shifted his attention back to his phone.

Something brushed against her knee. Half-tucked under Roth's chin as she was, she had to duck her head to see Sarai pass in the aisle with a smile a mile wide. Her boot began to bounce as she inwardly fumed. Sarai didn't hear him confess that he deliberately set out to destroy her family. What would it take to shatter Sarai's illusions of him as a white knight? Three years as his personal assistant should have cured her of any hero worship. It hadn't, which meant either Roth treated her better than anyone else (unlikely) or Sarai had created a fantasy around his character from her books. The fact that Sarai knew so much about her boss, including his sexual preferences and by default, hers... She immediately blanked that thought. She wasn't going there.

Belatedly, she realized the cabin was now filled with the aroma of coffee and breakfast. She gave the passing flight attendants a fake smile as they passed with trays. It was clear that they, too, were charmed by their lovey-dovey PDA. Roth was a little too good at this acting business.

Her eyes flicked to his phone, but she couldn't read anything on it from this angle. She watched his thumb glide over the screen as he ingested information with startling speed. She forgot how quickly he could read. Roth was like her father in so many ways. Driven, implacable, never satisfied. But she had never heard a story about her father going out of his way to help someone out of a bad situation as Roth had for Sarai. Maximus donated a respectable amount to charities, just enough to be recognized because he had to stand out in every arena. But he donated out of a sense of duty, not compassion. On the other hand, her father had never physically assaulted anyone and didn't have any dark secrets worth blackmailing him over, that she knew of.

Roth pocketed his phone as the jet began its descent and closed his eyes. She saw the flight attendants eyeing them, clearly torn on whether to tell Roth she had to buckle up or not. She silently willed them to save her, and mumbled under her breath when they chickened out. Roth's arms came around her during their landing, steadying her, before encircling her loosely as the jet taxied and then stopped. When the door opened, she prepared to stand, but his grip tightened a second before customs officials boarded. As they asked questions and inspected the jet and their belongings, she glanced at Roth, who was watching the proceedings intently. Her gut clenched. Surreptitiously, she leaned into him. Immediately, his arm curved around her back to support her.

"Do you have anything?" she murmured.

"What?"

She lowered her voice to a faint whisper. "Something illegal."

He stared at her for a moment before he looked over her shoulder at Sarai

who answered the agent's questions.

“You have nothing to worry about,” he said finally.

“You don’t do anything illegal?”

His eyes came back to hers as he said, “I have an important meeting in forty minutes. I hope there’s no traffic.”

“Roth!”

“The meeting shouldn’t take longer than three hours,” he said as he brushed his hand over her breasts.

She smacked him. “Stop trying to distract me!”

He squeezed her waist. “Settle down.”

“You fucking settle down.”

His eyes flicked over her shoulder. “They’re gone.”

She gave him a seething glare as she finally escaped. As he headed to the front of the jet, she busied herself with her bags. His refusal to answer was confirmation enough. Maybe the blackmail was a dirty associate or shady business deal gone bad.

“Mo and Johan will take care of you.”

The sound of his voice directly behind her made her momentarily freeze before she nodded. She zipped up her bag and kept her back to him.

“If you need anything, it can be delivered.”

She nodded again and fussed with the straps, willing him to walk away. What the hell was he waiting for? “You’re going to be late for your meeting.”

He smacked her ass hard enough to make her stagger into her bags. Enraged, ass stinging, she whirled with her hand raised to give him the mother of all bitch slaps. He gripped her wrist and yanked her against him, gripping her face and holding her still as he kissed her hard, tongue invading, sparking heat she didn’t want to acknowledge.

When he broke the kiss, he growled, “I’ll see you tonight,” before he strode away.

As she stood there, bewildered and aroused, Sarai mimed fainting before she hurried after her boss, who strode off the jet and into the rain.

“Jerk off,” she muttered.

Johan grabbed her bags while Mo beckoned. He handed her an umbrella before she stepped onto the wet staircase. The downpour was so strong, she had to hold on with both hands as she hurried to the waiting car. As they pulled away from the airstrip, she leaned toward the warm air blasting from the vents. It was impossible to tell what time it was from the dark sky, but her phone said it was three in the afternoon.

Despite being woken at such an ungodly hour and taken out of the country

with little warning, she couldn't help feeling a little relieved to be thousands of miles from New York. After those wedding photos went public, it would be impossible to go anywhere without being harassed by paparazzi. Here, no one cared who she was. She could glide under the radar and regroup without people watching her every move.

She looked out the window, but couldn't see anything beyond the unrelenting rain. She sat back, closed her eyes, and came to when the rain abruptly ceased as they pulled up to a building. She straightened and peered through the window. Her stomach iced over. He wouldn't…

Johan opened the door. "Mrs. Roth?"

When she didn't take his hand, he bent down to peer at her.

"Is something wrong?"

Yes. Roth was a heartless bastard. She forced herself to step out of the car. The glass and steel monstrosity towering over her was the same building Roth lived in five years ago. Her hand balled into a fist as she entered the lavish lobby of one of the most exclusive residential buildings in the world. While the lobby of 432 Park Avenue was teeming with people, this one was empty. In New York, it was all about being seen. Here, it was about privacy. The only sound in the extravagant lobby came from an eight-foot waterfall. Little details had changed, but it was just as impressive as she remembered. The seating area where she spent hours waiting for Roth to return her call was the same. She could almost see the ghost of her younger self sitting on the edge of her seat with her luggage around her while the staff debated whether to kick her out. As her gaze touched on the concierge, a man rounded the desk.

"Mrs. Roth!"

She felt a shock of recognition as the man drew near. The manager who had once mistaken her for an imposter gave her a welcoming smile.

"Mr. Roth told us you would be joining him on this trip!" he exclaimed.

The last time she spoke to this man, he helped her procure a car so she could leave her husband.

"Can we take your bags up for you?" the manager asked and extended a hand toward Johan.

"I've got it," Johan said shortly.

The manager's hands fluttered as he asked, "How was your flight? Would you like a meal? Are there any appointments I can book for you?"

"My flight was great," she said and gave him the best smile she could muster. "I'm not hungry, and I don't have any plans so far, but I'll let you know if I do. Thank you."

He inclined his head as he stepped back. "Excellent, ma'am. If we can assist

you in any way, don’t hesitate. We’re available any time.”

“Thank you,” she murmured.

Johan led the way to the elevator. She followed with her arms crossed over her chest, bracing herself as Johan typed in a code so the doors opened and then entered a longer set to make the doors close. As the elevator began to rise, she broke out in a cold sweat.

Even he wouldn’t be so cruel, would he? The doors opened, and any hope that Roth had an iota of empathy vanished. It was the same penthouse. She stepped into the elegant entry hall, boots clicking on black marble as she led the way to the main living area that faced Hyde Park. Her gaze moved around the room, which she had seen only once, but was heartbreakingly familiar. The vase of orchids had been replaced by cheery red amaryllis. Like the lobby, not much had changed since the night she walked out on him.

“Do you want me to take your bags into the master?” Johan asked.

When she didn’t answer, he looked at her.

“Mrs. Roth?”

This was the backdrop of her nightmares, the place where he broke her heart into a million pieces. He didn’t think twice about bringing her here because one of the worst nights of her life didn’t mean shit to him. “I want to go to a hotel.”

“Um, I don’t think—” He broke off as she turned on her heel and headed back to the entry hall. “Mrs. Roth!”

She stabbed the button to call the elevator, but nothing happened.

“Open it,” she ordered as Johan stopped beside her.

“Tell me what’s wrong.”

She wrapped her arms around herself so tightly, her fingers went numb. “I don’t want to be here.”

He eyed her for a moment before he held out his phone. “If he says it’s okay, I’ll take you wherever you want.”

She snatched the phone.

“Speed dial one.”

She stared at her reflection in the gold elevator doors as the phone began to ring. Roth answered before it went to voicemail.

“What is it?”

She clutched the phone in a death grip as she began to shake. “I can’t believe you brought me back here.”

A pause and then, “I just started my meeting. Let me—”

“Johan won’t let me go to a hotel without your consent. Just say I can go, and I’ll leave you alone.”

“You aren’t going anywhere,” he snapped.

“I’m not staying here!”

“Yes, you are,” he said and hung up.

She stood there for several seconds with the phone to her ear, listening to the empty silence on the other end as her insides withered. It took extreme self-discipline to hand the phone over instead of stomping it beneath her boot.

“Is there anything I can do?” Johan asked.

“No,” she whispered.

“You have my number if you need anything.”

He watched her warily as he typed in the elevator code. Her hands balled into fists as the doors closed, leaving her all alone.

Some days, I wish I never laid eyes on you.

The echo of his words seared her soul. Even five years later, the damage he inflicted that night still had the power to bring her to her knees. When her breath hitched, she clenched her teeth. No, no, *no*. She wasn’t going to let him do this to her. Even as her eyes stung with tears, she turned and strode back to the living room. The rain suited her dark mood. She gripped the back of the couch as she had all those years ago and let one of the worst nights of her life play out in vivid detail.

He'd kissed her as if he wanted to consume her and, in the next hour, brought her back to the place where he told her she meant nothing to him. He could have put her anywhere in the city, but he chose to bring her here. Why? To remind her of their past? To make her feel small, inferior, helpless? Mission accomplished. That night, he treated her like an object, a thing he could put on a shelf and retrieve only when he had need of it. He didn’t care that she’d come all that way, that he hadn’t seen her in months. He saw her as an unwelcome nuisance and dismissed her as her father had all her life. Her family couldn’t convince her that Roth was using her, but that night, he told her in no uncertain terms what mattered to him, and it wasn’t her. His ambition overshadowed everything else, and she was in the way.

“I don’t know if this is worth it.”

She dabbed at the corner of her eye before she set her shoulders back. Roth may have destroyed her that night, but he also freed her. That night forced her to step out from under her father and husband’s shadows and become her own person. She pursued her own dreams instead of trying to be part of his and constantly coming up short. Because of him, she became a writer, repaired her relationship with her father, and had those last years with him. She was no longer a lovesick girl who would blindly follow or trust him to take care of her. This time, her eyes were wide open. There were no illusions left to shatter. Absently, she rubbed her aching chest and tried to will away the pain that had never quite

faded. Although her mind accepted that everything worked out for the better, her heart wasn't so understanding.

With her hands balled into fists in her pockets, she explored. She passed several rooms prepared for guests who would never arrive. The master suite felt as impersonal as the other rooms. If it wasn't for the books in the living area, she would think this was a model home, but… She spotted a watch on the nightstand. She stared at it for a long moment, then wandered to the closet. Roth's cologne hung in the air. This closet was nearly identical to the one at Park Avenue, but unlike his monochromatic wardrobe in New York, this one had quite a few colorful and fashionable pieces she couldn't imagine him wearing. The double-breasted cashmere overcoat was divine, but not Roth. Neither were the tuxedos, three-piece Italian suits, or colorful collection of silk ties.

She glanced at the opposite side of the closet, which was empty, but… Maybe he had a live-in lover who tried to improve his wardrobe? She wouldn't be surprised. She knew better than anyone that he had a voracious appetite. What had his life been like after the divorce? Did he indulge in affairs, have serious relationships, or a fling every other weekend? Or, had he had them all along?

She stepped back as if that would stop her mind from traveling down that dangerous road, but it was no use. She fetched her bag, heels clipping smartly as she tried to keep her mind from going haywire. When she reached the master suite, she tossed her suitcase on the bed with enough force that it bounced before she headed into the bathroom. Even as she told herself she didn't care, she found herself searching for signs that a woman had occupied this space. The double vanity was as bare as the rest of the penthouse aside from a toothbrush, razor, and comb. By her estimation, Roth had lived here at least five years, maybe longer, yet he had little to no personal effects. Maybe he didn't allow live-in lovers? She was disgusted by the surge of relief and disappointment. She wasn't sure what was worse—finding evidence of another woman or being taunted by an invisible one.

She stripped and stepped into the shower, which consisted of two black, glossy walls and a solid wall of glass. There was no door. Her feet slid over black stone. As water rained down, she imagined it washing away her doubts, old hurts, and fears.

He had unlimited access to her thoughts and experiences, while she knew nothing of his life before and after her. Not only had she confessed her deepest desires to him when they were married, she had also documented her life in excruciating detail in her books after she left him. She didn't know how much of what she knew of him was real. Even after she graduated from college, he insisted they live apart. He claimed it was because he traveled so much, but she

suspected it was because he never intended for them to truly live as husband and wife. He put her in one area of his life so he could do what he wanted in another. Why wouldn't that include other women? He denied that he cheated on her when they were married, but she didn't believe him. What married man got a vasectomy without mentioning it to his wife? The cheating kind who didn't want to get his mistresses or his convenient wife pregnant.

You should have told me you were coming. I would have told you not to bother. I'm busy.

She flinched. Soon, the novelty of having her under his thumb would wane. For now, she was a toy, an interesting diversion, but he would tire of her and go back to working around the clock. Time would fly by, and that quickly, her year would be up. This time, she had money in the bank, a career, and family. She wouldn't be starting from scratch or trying to put herself back together like she had the first time.

She picked up the only shampoo in the shower, which was clearly Roth's. The teal liquid smelled pleasantly masculine. There was no conditioner. She tried to keep her mind blank, but bits of the past snuck past her defenses and speared her in the gut. Memories of her begging him to come home flashed through her mind. What a needy wife she'd been. No wonder he didn't want her around. Maybe if she went back to being co-dependent and clingy, he'd get rid of her sooner.

She snorted as she stepped out of the shower and snagged two towels. She wrapped her dripping hair, then made her way into the bedroom, absently tying the towel before she spotted a figure standing in the open doorway.

CHAPTER 4



"What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to make sure you didn't do anything stupid."

She gave Roth a plastic smile. "I'm not suicidal, just disillusioned. You can go now."

He stayed where he was. As his dark gaze moved over her, she tightened her grip on the towel.

"I'm not used to interruptions," he said quietly.

As if she didn't already know that. "Did I ask you to come here? All I wanted was *permission*." She drew out the filthy word. "To go somewhere else. You gave your answer, so I shall, *of course*"—she fluttered her eyelashes —"comply like the good wife I am."

She was pleased by his scowl. He didn't know what to make of her. Good. That made them even. She walked to her suitcase and rummaged through the clothes she hadn't bothered to fold, but had tossed in willy-nilly. She was rather pleased with the fashion choices she made on a couple of hours of sleep, but she definitely had to go shopping. After two minutes of weighted silence, she looked at him.

"I thought you had an important meeting," she said pointedly.

"I do."

"What do you think I'm going to do? It's not like I can leave when I don't have the elevator code for any building we're in. Since when is that a thing, anyway?"

"It's something I implemented after you walked out. Other buildings like 432 Park Avenue have followed suit, which is why I chose it."

She stared at him. "You added that security feature to this building because of me?"

“You and the errant children who try to leave while their nannies nap. The parents thought it was a great idea.” He shrugged. “So do those who don’t want to be bothered.”

She muttered a few Greek swear words she picked up from Thea.

“It didn’t occur to me that you would have an adverse reaction to this residence.”

She gripped a heel and resisted the urge to clobber him with it. Maybe he really was a sociopath. That was the only reason he wouldn’t think twice about bringing her back to the place where she walked out on him.

“You’re right. There’s no reason for me to be upset. Nothing happened here,” she said flippantly as she continued to sift clothes from side to side in her suitcase. She froze when he started toward her. His features gave her no clue what he was thinking, but whatever he intended, she wanted no part of.

She pointed at the door. “Leave.”

He ignored that. As he drew near, she noticed beaded rain drops on the coat he hadn’t bothered to take off when he arrived.

“Stay back!”

He kept coming at her. She retreated and found herself trapped on the far side of the bed with nowhere to run. As she prepared to leap on the mattress, he grabbed hold of her towel.

She smacked his hand. “I thought your meeting was important.”

“It is,” he said as he wound his hand in the material, slowly wrenching it from her grasp. “But I have other assets to see to as well.”

Her head jerked, making her towel turban tip precariously. “I’m a fucking asset?”

“A volatile asset that needs more attention than I anticipated.”

“*Attention?* I don’t want your fucking attention! I wish I never laid eyes on you! I wish you’d drop—”

He ripped the towel from her body with such force that the edge of it snapped against her thigh. She yelped and then let out an outraged bellow when he shoved her. She landed flat on her back with enough momentum to bounce like her suitcase. Before she could roll away, he moved in, parting her legs to plant a knee on the edge of the bed. He put a hand on her chest to keep her in place and loomed over her, fully dressed, while she was completely bare.

“This is my residence when I’m in London. It’s private, convenient, and safe. We’ll visit London often and this is where I prefer to be.”

She waited for more before she realized that was the end of his speech. “*That’s* your apology?”

His eyes narrowed. “It’s an explanation.”

Of course, he wouldn’t apologize. In his mind, he didn’t have anything to apologize for. She waved her hand. “Fine. You gave your explanation. Bye.”

He stayed where he was, his eyes trained on hers. “We’ll make new memories here.”

“Like this one?” she asked sarcastically, and knew she fucked up when his gaze detached from hers and skated over her body.

“Roth.”

She braced a hand on his shoulder and pushed, but he didn’t budge. In fact, he didn’t even seem to register her demand for space.

“I’ve never left a meeting before,” he said absently.

“No one asked you to,” she retorted as she tried to shimmy out from under that implacable palm that felt like a fifty-pound Kettlebell.

“People panicked. The seller thought I was backing out of the deal.”

When he leaned down, she averted her face. He was unfazed by her rejection and kissed the curve of her jaw.

“I told him my wife needed me. You need me, don’t you, Jasmine?”

“Need you? I’ve never needed you.” She smacked his shoulder as he lapped up water on her collarbone. “Cut it out, Roth!”

“You needed me once. You couldn’t get through more than a couple of days without hearing my voice.”

“Those days are long gone!”

“We’ll see.” His lips cruised over her damp skin to the sensitive flesh behind her ear, and licked languidly. “Five years ago, you flew here to surprise me.”

When she tried to knee him in the crotch, he blanketed her body with his.

“I learn from my mistakes.” He yanked her hand out of his hair and pinned it over her head. “I realize business can wait, and I can do whatever the fuck I want.”

Two guesses what that was. She bared her teeth. “Not without my permission.”

“Do I need to remind you of the terms of our agreement?” he asked and caught her left hand before it collided with his face and twined their fingers together before he pressed it to the mattress.

“I didn’t agree to bow down to your every whim!”

“No,” he said thoughtfully, “but we both know I can make you do what I want.”

“You egotistical *fuck—"*

She surged beneath him and froze when his erection pressed against her. If he wasn’t wearing slacks, he’d be inside her.

“If you had any self-respect, you’d find a woman who wants you!”

“You want me.”

His confidence made her see red. She renewed her struggles, but stopped when the thick seam of his pants wedged between her lips. She gritted her teeth and forced herself to be still.

“If you don’t get off me…”

“The only way you’ll get me off you is if you want to be on top,” he said as his mouth followed a tendon in her neck.

“Fuck you!”

“I’m banking on it.”

She jerked when he took her breast in his mouth. The feel of his beard scraping against her oversensitive flesh and the occasional growl that sent pleasurable vibrations through her body made her toes curl. She tried to distance herself from what he was doing by recalling past lovers. She included many memorable performances in her books, but damn if she couldn’t picture their faces… not one. All she could think of was him. What he was doing to her, how he would do it to her, and how long she could hold out. He was doing it again—turning her body against her when she was emotionally distraught. She had to stop this.

She sank her nails into the back of his hand. He retaliated by biting her nipple. Instantly, she retracted her claws. He responded in kind, nuzzling her throbbing breast before he moved to the next and continued to pay homage as if nothing had happened.

“Do you know how many times over the years I wished I’d be called out of a meeting because my wife wanted to be with me?”

His voice was muffled, but she still heard him.

“It took five years and a snow storm to get you to talk to me.”

“Do you blame me? You made it clear what my place in your life was. I wasn’t a wife. I was a whore you visited six times a year if I was lucky.”

He paused in his suckling. “You’re wrong.”

“About?”

“I never go to the same whore twice.”

“You mother*fuck*—"

She erupted beneath him. With his body stretched on top of hers and her hands pinned, he easily subdued her, but that didn’t stop her from screaming and thrashing. When she heard him chuckle, she went temporarily insane and took the only avenue open to her. She channeled her inner Pitbull and sank her teeth into his neck. She accomplished her goal when his laughter abruptly cut off, and he jackknifed off her. She sat up, still in battle mode, and found Roth kneeling beside the bed. When he pulled his hand from his neck, she was disappointed to

see she hadn’t drawn blood, but had left a dark red patch of skin and the faintest indention. Damn. She was considering relaunching another attack, but one glance at his face changed her mind. Before she could make a break for it, he grasped her arms and crisscrossed them behind her back.

“Let me go, or I swear to God, I’m going to—”

Her threat cut off as he tugged on her wrists, forcing her upper half to bow backward. In her contorted position, she had an upside-down view out of the master suite and down the long hallway.

“Do you yield?”

His blasé tone made her gnash her teeth. She fought with all she had, and he didn’t even break a sweat.

“Kiss my—”

Her breathing went shallow as he forced her body into a sharper arch. He moved into the space between her thighs, which were bent and splayed obscenely wide on either side of him.

“I warned you not to push me unless you’re willing to accept the consequences. Do you want to go there, princess?” He pressed his face against her quivering abdomen. “Do you know what it does to me to see you like this?”

His guttural tone caused a wave of icy heat to sweep over her.

“You shouldn’t challenge me. It makes me want to do things to you… Do you surrender?”

His voice was so rough, she could barely understand him. In the past, the only time he restrained her was if they were roleplaying. Now, her resistance was just as real as the force he was exerting to keep her subdued. He was restraining her out of necessity. That should have been enough to dampen her arousal, but it was having the opposite effect. What was wrong with her?

“Jasmine.”

The slight note of entreaty in his tone was at odds with the bruising grip on her wrists.

“Tell me how you want to play this.”

She desperately clung to anger even as her womb clenched.

“Suck my dick!” she bellowed.

“You always had a foul mouth for a Hennessy.”

Words were her defense mechanism, and she made sure she had a colorful and explicit arsenal. She opened her mouth to lay into him, but the wet kiss he pressed above her belly button made her breath hitch.

He chuckled. “You want me so bad, you’re shaking.”

“Because you have me twisted into a pretzel, douchebag!”

“I like my neck the way it is,” he said as his mouth continued to her lower

belly, above her pussy. “Choose, Jasmine. You want to fight? We can continue down this road. I’ll restrain you, hold you down, do you rough, give you what you refuse to admit you crave. You want it easy? You submit.” His teeth skimmed over her hip. “I don’t care which way you want it because I get you either way.”

Her muscles vibrated from the awkward position, and she was seconds away from a neck cramp, but she wasn’t about to wave the white flag. Fuck him. “Do your worst.”

She felt his smile against her skin.

“That’s my girl.”

“I’m not yours.”

The loaded silence made the hair on her nape stand up.

“Not mine?”

His voice was even, but she wasn’t fooled. His grip on her wrists was so tight, he was cutting off her circulation.

“You look like mine. A sacrifice laid out for a beast.” He lapped at the underside of her breast. “You’re wearing my mark and my ring. You carry my name. You didn’t hyphenate it like your sisters. How much more mine can you be?”

“Why would I bother hyphenating my name when this is temporary?” she puffed and bit back a curse when he tugged, making her feel like her spine was going to snap in half. She was so focused on the pain, she wasn’t prepared for the tongue that parted her slick folds.

“You taste like mine.”

Her breath whooshed out of her and her entire body relaxed as two fingers sank inside her.

“And this feels like mine.”

His fingers slid deep and curled, making her body vibrate like a plucked bow.

“I molded your sexuality to suit me. No matter how many pussies you took to your bed, you can’t stop yourself from responding to me. I made you into the woman you’ve become.”

She wasn’t sure whether it was the blood rushing to her head or the fact that her arms were starting to go numb, but she was definitely a little delirious when she sang, “Little did you know you were priming me to be the best lay for everyone who came after you.”

His fingers stilled. She let out a ragged chuckle as she closed her eyes, causing tears to leak out and slide to her temple.

“You had to go there, didn’t you?”

Roth was so close to her pussy, she felt his warm breath gust over her a second before he kissed her inner thigh. The caress was so disarming that the sharp sting caught her by surprise. She jerked and then bucked when his teeth sank even deeper.

“Roth!”

She writhed and cursed and was close to pleading for mercy when he released her. Her whole body went limp.

“I think this goes without saying, but I don’t want to hear about those fucks,” he said as his tongue moved over the bite.

The fact that he still sounded so cool and in control when her body was in turmoil made her reckless.

“So you can talk about your whores, but I can’t talk about my men?”

The sharp smack on her pussy made her jolt so badly, she nearly pulled her shoulder from its socket.

“*Your* men? You claim them, but you won’t claim me?”

“You lied to me! You *used* me! You—"

She couldn’t hold back a scream as he sank his teeth into her other thigh.

“At least they didn’t—"

He bit again… this time hard enough to make her shudder. She valiantly tried to continue her verbal assault, which was all she had left to defend herself, but eventually, she subsided into gasping sobs.

She thought she knew what pain was, but she was wrong. Between her body contortion and the deliberate bites, her body seemed to be going into some kind of meltdown.

“Jamie!”

Her cry came from her gut. Immediately, his teeth left her skin. He buried his face against her neck and released his hold on her captive wrist. She slumped on her back, shaking uncontrollably as fire raced down her arms.

“Say you’re mine, and I’ll give you what you want.”

“No.”

Her voice was a mere thread of sound. She could feel every bite pulsing as if it had a heartbeat—behind her knee, the pad of her thumb, wrist, hip, and twice on her inner thighs.

He rose above her and kissed away her tears. “You belong to me. You always have.”

“No—"

He covered her mouth with his, drank in her denial, and filled her with suffocating heat. His kiss was hard, possessive, domineering. The force of his personality beat at her, demanding her submission. She felt like a kite in a

hurricane, but she held fast. She bore his marks and wore his ring, but she wouldn't give him what he wanted. This wasn't a marriage where he demanded and she gave. If he wanted, he had to take. She just wished she didn't like it so fucking much.

He broke the kiss and stared down at her with primal needs swimming in his eyes. Her insides quivered.

"Tell me," he ordered.

She shook her head.

The flash of rage should have terrified her. Instead, she had to suppress the hysterical urge to giggle. Maybe he'd finally broken her, and she wasn't functioning properly…

"Say you're mine." He saw the denial in her eyes and reached between her legs. "You're wet for me." He held his glistening hand between them before he swiped it over her puckered breast. "Your body's aching for me."

"I can take it." She could take on anything. Discomfort was her constant companion.

"You want me to leave you like this?"

His disbelief made her want to laugh, but she was afraid that would push him over the edge.

"I can call one of your whores to—"

One hand dove into her hair and held her still for a scorching kiss as his other hand went to his pants. She clung to sanity with her fingertips and tried to list all the reasons she hated him, but when he slammed inside her, she smiled. He raised his head and looked down at her. She didn't clear her expression fast enough.

"I'll break you later," he promised as he began to move.

His eyes were alight with lust and a hunger as savage as her own. The luxurious fabric of his coat chafed her bare thighs as he fucked her, keeping her ass on the very edge of the bed as he plundered. Tears slipped from the corner of her eyes as he drove her toward that cliff where they would fall. She chanted, hands tangling in his coat as her orgasm loomed. He responded by impaling her on him and then grinding until her mind disintegrated. Language deserted her as ecstasy strangled her.

Her orgasm was so vicious that she fought back. She would have unseated him if he didn't muscle her down. He rode her through it, forcing her to take until she was a sobbing mess. Only then did he give in, gripping her hips, so she couldn't get away as he slammed himself deep. He collapsed on top of her and groaned her name into her hair.

The moment was so powerful that she forgot herself and hugged him to her

before the pins and needles in her arms reminded her how this began. She let her aching arms drop away and listened to the sound of the rain as she breathed in his scent—rain, sweat, cologne, and her. Roth could do things to her no one else could. He knew what would get her off, how far he could push her, and how to give her mind-blowing orgasms. If this was the extent of their relationship, the year with him wouldn't be a punishment, it would be bliss. If just one of the men she'd been with could have done this for her, she would have kept him around. Why did she light up for James Roth and no one else?

Roth disengaged before his breathing evened out. The sudden cold banished the pleasant lethargy. As he straightened and adjusted his coat, she felt the splatter of raindrops on her upper thighs and stomach. He left the bedroom without a word, his long strides making his coat flare out behind him as he made his exit.

No, he wasn't like her other men. Most of them, even the jerks, acted like they would call or see her again. Some even cuddled and made her breakfast in the morning. Not Roth. He didn't even bother to act like he cared. He got his rocks off and went back to work.

With great effort, she heaved herself up so her ass wasn't hanging off the edge of the mattress. Her shoulders burned, and her arms felt extremely heavy. She collapsed, arms spread on either side of her, and moaned.

"Here."

She cracked one eye open and found Roth beside the bed with a glass of water. He lost the coat and had his dress shirt untucked from his pants. When she stared at him, he held out his hand.

"Aspirin."

"I don't need anything," she mumbled.

He didn't argue with her, but pulled her into a sitting position and placed the pills in her mouth. She gave him a baleful glare as he pressed the glass to her lips. She drank because she didn't want it splashing down her front. When he was satisfied, he released her. She flopped back and closed her eyes. She was trying to figure out if she had the energy to climb under the covers when he started rearranging her on the bed.

"What the hell are you doing?" she snapped

"I'm going to give you a rubdown."

"A what?" She struck out when he tugged on her arm. "Go away!"

"Relax."

"Relax? How can I when you're…?" She sucked in a breath as he used the heel of his palm on her shoulder. "Roth, I'm fine."

"You'll feel better in a minute."

“I don’t want your help!”

“Yes, you do.”

She didn’t have the strength to fight him off. All she could do was grit her teeth as his strong fingers dug in. She fidgeted and cursed as he worked on her. It wasn’t until he flipped her on her stomach and massaged her lower back that she noticed the cramp in her shoulders had lessened to a dull ache.

“Where’d you learn this?” she muttered into the sheets.

“It’s something I picked up.”

Her antennae pricked. “From other women?”

His rotating thumbs paused. “Other women?”

“Your prostitutes or whatever.” She tried to keep her voice light, nonchalant. “Did you have to give them a rubdown if you went overboard?”

“If I got out of hand, they were compensated for it.”

What an ambiguous answer. He wasn’t confirming or denying that he had other women or if he ever lost control with them.

She tensed as he climbed onto the bed. He straddled her ass and leaned down, tucking his lips against her ear.

“There was no need to restrain any woman I fucked. They were all too willing.”

He jerked away before she could slam the back of her head against his mouth. He gripped her hair and forced her head to the side.

“You don’t know when to stop, do you?” he chided, but he didn’t sound upset. His voice was warm with approval. “You please me, princess.”

“I want you miserable,” she hissed.

“You’re doing a terrible job.”

“So if I’m nice and submissive, you’ll get bored like the last time?”

“Try it and see.”

Before she could singe his ears with some sailor talk, he bore down on her back, flattening her beneath him.

“Are you trying to suffocate me?” she wheezed.

“You’ll thank me later.”

She doubted it, but had no choice but to let his warm, calloused hands glide over her taut muscles. His weight had a drugging effect, suppressing her heightened senses. Her eyelids drooped. She tried to stay awake as he moved onto her legs. She mumbled under her breath as he parted her thighs. Was he going to do some fucked up shit? She jerked as she felt a warm, damp cloth. She wasn’t going to thank him for that, since it was his fault anyway. She pounded the mattress with her fist as his thumbs dug into her calves. She really hoped he knew what he was doing and wasn’t making things worse. If she was

incapacitated after this “rubdown,” she was going to spike his drink with diarrhea medicine.

“JASMINE.”

Jasmine opened one eye. She was facedown on the bed and there was a dark shadow looming over her. She didn’t need a light to know who it was. She didn’t know anyone else that big. Before she could do more than blink at him, he flipped her over and sat her upright on the side of the bed.

She groaned and slumped against him. “What do you have against sleep?”

“You had a couple of hours.”

“I need more.”

His fingers tunneled into her tangled hair. “I’m taking you to dinner.”

“Not hungry,” she yawned.

“We’ll leave in an hour.”

When she made no move to stand, he pulled her up. She threatened bodily harm as he ushered her into the bathroom. Apparently, he didn’t think she would make good on her promise to smother him in his sleep because he walked her right into the shower and turned on the water. Even though the initial blast was lukewarm, it might as well have been freezing cold. She sputtered and tried to leap away, but he kept her in place until she was soaking wet. She struck out at him and saw that his sleeves had been rolled up. He was always one step ahead. She was so pissed off that she didn’t realize she was cursing him in a different language.

He stood just outside the circle of water, brows raised. “What language is that?”

“It’s German, you *Depp*!”

He released her and dodged the bar of soap she hurled. “What does that mean?”

“It means douchebag,” she snarled as she looked for something else to throw. “Which is exactly what you are!”

She whirled with the bottle of shampoo, but he was already halfway out the door, answering his phone with his customary curt, “Roth.”

She glared at the empty doorway, chest heaving from adrenaline. He had no sleep etiquette whatsoever. This morning, he gave her twenty minutes to pack, and now he was giving her an hour to get ready for dinner. Would there ever be a day that he didn’t wake her with an ass grab or shower? Or better yet, why didn’t

he just leave her alone and let her sleep? She blew a raspberry before she stepped under the spray. Just because he could function on so little sleep didn't mean everyone else should. It couldn't be healthy. She scowled when she found herself wondering how long it had been since he went to the doctor. His health was none of her business.

She just finished styling her hair when she noticed the aspirin bottle and water glass on the vanity. There was a small twinge of discomfort in her shoulder blades, an ache that would have gone unnoticed if she hadn't spotted the pain reliever. Did he place this here before he woke her? She shook two pills into her palm.

She began to cake on makeup to take away the dark circles under her eyes. The rain was still pouring in sheets so there was no reason to go all out. It wasn't until she was once again rummaging through her suitcase that she realized she didn't know where he was taking her. She shrugged and pulled on Daiyu's knee-length wrap dress that buttoned along one side. With its long sleeves and a high neckline, it not only covered up Roth's marks but it also emphasized her curves and made it borderline indecent. She slipped on knee-high boots and a coat, which she belted before she grabbed her little purse and walked down the hallway.

When she entered the living area, she saw Roth standing in front of a wall of glass, talking on the phone. When he turned to face her, his eyes slid down the length of her before he shrugged back his sleeve and nodded.

"We'll be there in fifteen minutes," he said and hung up.

She frowned. "I didn't know we were meeting anyone."

"The seller I walked out on today is desperate to close the deal."

He grabbed her hand and led her to the entry hall.

"I don't feel like entertaining," she said.

He typed in the code for the elevator, which opened as if it had been waiting for them. They stepped into the gold interior.

"I'm not asking you to," he said as he pressed the last button and typed in another code. "The seller is worried I'll walk, so he lowered his price and wants me to sign before I change my mind."

"Lucky you," she muttered.

He looked down at her. "Yes, I am. I guess emergencies aren't a bad thing after all."

"It wasn't an emergency," she growled as the doors opened to reveal a well-lit underground parking garage. "No one asked you to leave your meeting."

"It was no hardship. I enjoyed it."

That wasn't the attitude he had five years ago, but she wasn't going to

comment on it. He led her past a fleet of vehicles, a car thief's treasure trove. The cheapest car here was worth a quarter of a million. It was eerily silent with only the sound of their muffled footsteps echoing around them.

"Where's the security guards?" she asked.

"The resident's opted for virtual security. We like to come and go as we please."

"I looked into this building after…" She trailed off when he glanced at her. She lifted her chin. "You didn't think I would?"

He opened the door to a white Rolls-Royce Ghost. "What did you find?"

She slipped into the passenger seat and fussed with her coat.

He hunkered down in the open doorway. "Jasmine."

She eyed him for a long moment before she said, "You know there's not much information about this building."

"But you discovered something."

"Don't we have to go to dinner?"

His hand landed on her bare knee. "Tell me what you found."

"It's one of the most expensive residential developments in the world," she quoted. "There's only one public investor listed. The others were all private, and you told me you were one of them." She surveyed him for a long moment before she said, "There are rumors about the residents."

His steady gaze compelled her to continue.

"Arms dealers, wealthy criminals, and others who want to move about without drawing attention to themselves."

He waited for a beat before he asked, "Is that all?"

Her brows shot up. "Isn't that enough?" When he shrugged, she hedged, "Is it true?"

He straightened. "Don't worry about it."

When he moved back to close the door, she gripped his coat. "What are you into, Roth?"

He trailed his finger down her cheek. "Many things, but none that you need to know about." When she didn't release him, he added, "He's waiting for us."

When her hand dropped, he stepped back and closed the door. It wasn't until he drove the Rolls-Royce into a glass and steel elevator that she realized how odd it was to see him behind the wheel.

"Where's Mo and Johan?" she asked distractedly as they traveled up to street level.

"Probably in a pub," he said as he pulled into traffic.

"We don't need them in London?"

"Not tonight."

His cryptic answers were really starting to piss her off, but what did she expect? He wasn’t going to tell her any more than she needed to know. Did he not trust her to keep her mouth shut? Her hands fisted in her lap. Well, she wasn’t supposed to care, right? She was just passing through anyway. She turned her attention from him to Central London. Her heart lightened as they passed familiar shops she had visited in her youth. She hadn’t realized how much she missed this city filled with history and quirky charm.

Roth navigated easily through the bumper-to-bumper traffic. His years in the city showed as he took backstreets and never once referred to his phone for directions. The Rolls-Royce’s soundproof interior was so complete, only the faintest hint of the downpour reached her ears. Roth didn’t turn on the radio to fill the silence. Like her father, he hated unnecessary noise, and that included music or talking. They lived in their heads. So did she. She had never noticed that similarity before. She built fictional worlds while they created in the real one, shaping everything around them to their will. When she moved in with her father, they spent most of their time in the library, working at their respective desks. They didn’t have deep, meaningful conversations. Most of their communication was unspoken, instinctive. Spending hours in the same room with someone, listening to the rhythm of their work, told her more than asking her father one hundred questions. They sensed each other’s moods and adjusted accordingly.

Sitting in silence with a stranger was uncomfortably intimate, but even when she was getting to know Roth, it had never bothered her. She adjusted to his pattern so easily, just as she had this time. Raised by a mathematical genius who didn’t encourage affection made her the perfect target for Roth. Because her father was terrible in relationships, she hadn’t found Roth’s detachment unnerving. That was all she’d known. How different things would have been if she had a friend to confide in, who could have told her what they had wasn’t normal. But, would she have listened?

She straightened as the car slowed. Valets leapt forward with umbrellas and led her into an upscale French restaurant. She shrugged off her coat as Roth gave his name to the maître d'. When he turned, his gaze coasted over her. He handed his coat over without looking away from her. As the maître d' gathered menus, he gripped her hip and drew her against him.

“Daiyu?” he murmured.

“Yes.”

“I’m developing an obsession for the clothes she makes for you,” he said as he cupped her ass before taking her hand in his.

They followed the maître d' through a restaurant filled with gentle

candlelight and fashionably dressed people. Men and women's eyes flicked to Roth before they fell on her and stayed there. Maybe she should have put more effort into her makeup. It was just her luck that their table was in the middle of the room, under a brilliant chandelier. She had eaten here once with her father, when she was a young girl. Reservations needed to be made months in advance.

As they approached the table, a man shot to his feet. Despite the excellent cut of his suit, he still looked unkempt.

"This is Guy Reed," Roth said.

As she shook Guy's hand, she sifted through her knowledge of the British Reed family. She met Samson Reed years ago at some event. He was a nice man, a rarity in their world. He made his fortune from a beer company his grandfather started and took it to the States, where business boomed.

"This is my wife," Roth said shortly.

Apparently, that was all Guy needed to know because he nodded before he turned to the maître d' to ask him a question.

"My wife?" she muttered under her breath. "That's it? I don't even have a name?"

Roth pushed her chair in, forcing her to sit as he took the seat beside her. He draped his arm over the back of her chair and leaned in, staring at her with hungry eyes. "You're mine. That's all anyone needs to know."

Fucker.

"I hope all's well," Guy said, breaking into their staring contest. "Mr. Roth left rather abruptly this afternoon."

"My wife needed me," Roth said smoothly.

She dug her nails into his thigh as Guy snapped his fingers to get the staff's attention.

"Champagne to celebrate," Guy said pompously, before he focused on Roth. "I hope you're satisfied with my new offer?"

Roth nodded. Guy stared intently at Roth, trying to decipher whether he was pleased or not. He was wasting his time. She'd known Roth for years and couldn't figure out what was going on behind that stony mug of his.

"I have the contracts," Guy said and placed two stacks on the table along with a gold fountain pen.

As the waiter uncorked champagne and began to pour, Roth grabbed the first contract and flipped through it. It had been years since she attended a business dinner with her father, but she knew her role. This is where she was supposed to make polite conversation and entertain the other party while her father took care of business. But, she had warned Roth she wasn't in the mood. She deliberately ignored her duties and sipped from her flute as she perused the menu.

“Is anything amiss?”

Guy was clearly disconcerted by the fact that Roth was carefully reading the contract instead of signing it.

“No,” Roth said without looking up.

Guy needed to work on his poker face. He had desperation written all over him. He was setting himself up as easy prey for a man like Roth. Had his father taught him nothing about negotiating?

“Are you ready to order?” the waiter asked.

“Do you know what you’d like, Mr. Roth?” Guy asked.

Roth shrugged. “Whatever you’re having.”

Guy puffed out his chest. Obviously, Roth couldn’t read French and wasn’t about to act like he did, giving Guy the opportunity to show off. Guy raised his voice as he ordered, eyes flicking to Roth throughout to see if he was impressed. His disappointment was obvious when Roth didn’t look up from the contract. She waited patiently for Guy to finish and kept her finger on the dish she wanted to order. Guy leaned over to see what she was pointing at and ordered for her.

“Thank you,” she said, striving for politeness when she wanted to tell him she could order for her damn self.

“Don’t mention it,” Guy said curtly. “I know French is a difficult language to learn.”

She couldn’t believe this was Samson Reed’s son. Guy was everything she despised in the wealthy elite. He was conceited, arrogant, and assumed everyone around him was intellectually inferior, yet he was selling a multimillion dollar company so who was the real idiot?

Guy’s phone rang, making several patrons eye him with distaste. The mood in the restaurant was quiet and languid, and here he was, disturbing the peace. Guy was oblivious to the sidelong glances or collective disapproval of the other patrons. He glanced at Roth, who was reading quietly before he answered.

“Yes, he showed up. I don’t know what happened this afternoon,” Guy said in French and glanced at her. “He walked out before he signed, so I lowered the price.” He paused and then nodded. “That’s a good plan. I’ll do that if he needs further convincing. I’ll be in touch.”

As he hung up, a waiter dropped off a bread basket. When she reached for a slice, Guy gave her a sharp look.

“Hungry?” he asked.

She broke off a piece of warm bread with relish. “Very.” He could go fuck himself.

Guy’s phone rang again. He glanced once more at Roth before he picked up.

“Amélie, I’m at a business dinner,” Guy said in exasperated French and

rolled his eyes. “I am not with another woman. You’re acting crazy. I can’t deal with you now. I will call you later.”

He hung up and drank his champagne, eyeing Roth broodingly before he seemed to remember her existence. She raised her brows in polite inquiry.

“Business,” he said dismissively. “I’m a very busy man.”

He was a lying, spoiled prick and the furthest thing from a busy man. Her sisters would put this asshole to shame. Guy couldn’t be more than five years younger than Roth, but he looked like a bratty teenager in comparison. As appetizers were served, Roth moved the contract aside to make room, but otherwise didn’t react. His ability to block out everything and focus was impressive. He didn’t cave in to pressure or allow emotion to rule when he was making a decision.

She dug in as Guy took a few more phone calls, some in French and others in English. When he wasn’t on the phone, he ignored her. She didn’t mind. She passed the time by sampling the delicious food, drinking her and Roth’s share of champagne, and admiring the fashionable crowd. Guy’s attitude wasn’t out of the ordinary. In the business world, women were seen as arm candy, nothing more. Guy was carrying on the sexist tradition of assuming a woman couldn’t conduct business on their level. How did her sisters do this? They had to work three times as hard as anyone else to keep their spot in these circles. How exhausting.

Guy didn’t touch his food, but cast troubled glances her way as she ate her fill. It had been years since she had received such critical looks. She’d forgotten that people expected her to pick and nibble rather than actually eat. But she wasn’t about to pass up the opportunity to taste everything this Michelin star restaurant had to offer because her eating offended Guy’s delicate sensibilities.

Guy straightened when Roth picked up the pen. It was so quiet that she heard the scrape of nib on paper as Roth scrawled his name on the first contract and repeated the process for the second. Guy’s worry vanished in a nanosecond. When Roth reached across the table to shake his hand, Guy looked around the restaurant to see if anyone was watching.

“To Reed & Sons,” Guy said, and handed a fresh flute of champagne to Roth.

As they clinked glasses, her heart sank. If Guy had the right to sell, it must mean Samson had passed. How would Samson feel if he knew his hard work had been sold off by an irresponsible, uncaring son? When her eyes strayed to the contract, she gave herself a mental bitch slap. This wasn’t her business, but the knowledge that Samson’s legacy was forever lost saddened her. What had once been a family business had been sold to the highest bidder.

When Roth turned his attention to his meal, Guy came to life, talking

animatedly until his phone rang.

"Sorry, I have to take this call," he said with false regret.

Roth shrugged and pulled out his phone.

"He signed," Guy announced in French. "Yes. We're free. We can do whatever we wish. No more meetings or days stuck in the office. We'll celebrate tonight. Buy out the club. I should be there in twenty minutes. Yes. It's going to be *wild*!" Guy hung up and tried to contain his excitement as he focused on Roth. "How's your meal?"

"Good."

"Excellent, excellent," Guy said as he turned in his seat, searching for their waiter. "Is there anything else you need from me?"

Roth shook his head. "We're all set."

Guy's phone rang again. "Business," he said with a patronizing smile. "Monique, I can't see you this evening," he said in French. "Business. Yes, I'm swamped. You wouldn't understand. Some other night, okay? Yes. I will see you soon. I love you." He hung up and smoothed a hand down the front of his suit. "Sorry about that. Business never ends, does it?"

When he looked around for the waiter again, she decided she'd had enough.

"Don't let us keep you," she said in French.

She had the satisfaction of watching the blood drain from Guy's face. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Roth's head turn toward her.

"You have to be at the club in what, fifteen minutes? Roth can take care of the check," she said.

His eyes bulged. "You speak French?"

She didn't bother to answer such a stupid question. Roth rested his arm along the back of her chair. She wasn't sure if he was giving her a warning or offering his support, but she took advantage of his position and leaned against him. She wanted to give the impression that Roth was overprotective and would castrate him if she was displeased. When Guy's Adam's apple bobbed, it took supreme self-control to stop herself from grinning. It was painfully obvious Guy was trying to remember everything he had said during his calls.

"You should be careful what you say around others," she said in German.

Guy looked comically stunned.

"You never know who might be listening," she added in Spanish.

"I'm sorry, what is your name?" Guy interrupted in English.

"Jasmine Roth," she said.

"Your maiden name," Guy pushed.

"Hennessy."

Guy stared at her for a pregnant moment before he turned to Roth. "How did

you manage to get your ring on her finger a second time?”

“The same way I got her the first time,” Roth murmured. “I gave her no choice.”

Guy’s fascinated gaze shifted back to her. “Your father’s fortune…?”

“Is none of your business,” she said in French.

He looked a little shell shocked by her bluntness. She suspected he had been doted on all his life and that most women kissed his ass, but she didn’t need to.

His eyes flicked to Roth before he said a little sullenly, “I guess you have no need for your father’s money.”

What century were these men living in? “I have no need for anyone’s money because I have my own.”

“I’m sure you do,” he said with such condescension that she ground her teeth.

She glanced at Roth, whose unblinking stare was fixed on Guy.

“Are we done here?” she asked pointedly.

Roth nodded. “I got the check, Reed.”

Guy didn’t argue, instead leaping to his feet. “Pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Roth.”

“Likewise,” Roth said.

She ignored Guy and turned back to her dinner, expecting him to walk away. Belatedly, she registered he was still standing there at the same moment that he leaned down to kiss her cheek. At the last second, she turned her face away. As whispers broke out around the restaurant, she realized they were being observed by the other patrons. She inwardly swore a blue streak.

“You’re a cruel woman,” Guy said in French.

“Yes, I am,” she replied in kind as she grabbed her flute and toasted him. “Congratulations. Have fun at your party.”

He slipped his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels. “You think I made a mistake?”

She blinked. “It doesn’t matter what I think.”

“My father worked himself into an early grave. So did yours.”

“So you sold the company,” she said flatly.

He shrugged. “It’s on its way down anyway.”

Likely because he mismanaged it.

“There’s more to life than work,” he added.

“We all have to pay our dues.”

He tipped an imaginary hat. “Not me.” A sly expression crossed his face as he lowered his voice and said, “If you’re ever in the city without your husband, look me up.”

“That will never happen,” she said dismissively. “Off you go.”

“I’m sure we’ll meet again.”

And she was just as sure they wouldn’t. Guy inclined his head to Roth before he strolled through the restaurant, answering another call as he walked out the door. She shook her head. He was going to regret selling Reed & Sons. Maybe not tomorrow, next month, or even a year from now, but eventually, he would remember this moment. She was so deep in thought that she didn’t realize Roth was watching her until he ran a finger down her cheek.

“What was the last thing he said to you?” he asked softly.

She swallowed the last of her champagne and resisted the urge to cough as bubbles tickled her throat. “He didn’t say anything.”

“Did he hit on you?”

She waved her hand. “No matter what you say in French, it sounds seductive.”

“Did he hit on you, Jasmine?”

When she opened her mouth to deny it, his hand covered hers on the table and squeezed.

“Don’t lie for him.”

“It doesn’t matter what he said.”

“So he did.” Roth’s eyes flicked to the door even though Guy was long gone. “He’ll pay for that.”

“Roth.”

His cold gaze shifted back to her. “You didn’t let him kiss you.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Was I supposed to?”

The hand on the table moved to her face and traced her jawline with piercing focus before he reached her chin and applied pressure to tilt her face up. She let out a startled grunt when his mouth covered hers. When she tried to pull away, he cupped her nape to hold her in place. He took his time, waiting for her acceptance, before he trailed kisses to her ear.

“If you’d let him kiss you, I would have spent the rest of the night reminding you who the fuck you belong to,” he murmured. “No one’s allowed to touch you.”

“Your check, sir,” the waiter said.

Roth gave her another kiss before he handed over his credit card. She was in a state of shock. Roth didn’t do PDA. What the fuck?

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“I wouldn’t take Guy seriously.”

“Tell me what he said, and I’ll decide whether to take it seriously.”

There was no way in hell she was going there. “He’s a spoiled brat that wants what he can’t have. He didn’t even notice me until I made a fool out of him.”

“Anything I should know?” he asked as he accepted the credit card slip from the waiter and signed.

“I assume he has an overeager, foolish business partner or sibling who’s just as eager to sell as he is. They called during dinner to see if you had signed and would have dropped the price even less, I’m sure. The other calls he received, which he claimed were business, were from his mistresses.” She grimaced. “I can’t believe he’s Samson’s son.”

Roth looked up. “You knew Samson?”

She nodded. “We met a long time ago. He was a nice man.”

He contemplated her for a moment before he said, “Sometimes I forget how much you know about the business world.”

“It’s what I was groomed for.” Her gaze moved to the contract Guy had left behind in his haste to go to the club. “I know that fifteen years ago, Samson brought Reed & Sons to the States. It was worth five hundred million then. I can’t imagine what it’s worth now.” She cocked her head to the side. “What do you care about a beer company?”

“I don’t.”

“Then, why…”

“They expanded into wine recently. I’m more interested in the lands the vineyards are on than anything else.” He collected both contracts before he rose and extended his hand. “Let’s go.”

She took his hand and tucked her purse under her arm as they made their way to the exit. She was hyper aware of the speculative stares. She expected this level of scrutiny in New York, but London? They couldn’t know who they were, could they? It wasn’t until Roth was helping her into her coat that she remembered that while New York was her home, this had been his for seven years. That was the only way he would have been able to get reservations at this restaurant on such short notice.

As they left, she wasn’t surprised to see the Rolls-Royce at the curb. They waved off the umbrellas since the downpour had slowed to a light sprinkle and ducked into the warm vehicle. As he pulled away from the restaurant, she glanced at him. Outwardly, he showed no emotion, but she sensed his coiled tension.

“Guy’s a fool,” she said as she rearranged her coat. “Whatever money he gained from this deal, he’ll spend in five years.”

“Two,” Roth predicted.

“Exactly. The status and privilege he took for granted will disappear once

he’s destitute and realizes he can’t duplicate his father’s success. That’s punishment enough.” She waited a full minute for his agreement, but when she didn’t get it, she prodded his arm. “That’s punishment enough, Roth.”

He stopped at a traffic light and glanced at her. “What do you care what happens to him?”

“I don’t. I just…” The red glow on his face was disconcerting, making him appear slightly demonic. “I know what you’re capable of.”

“You have no idea what I’m capable of.”

His soft voice made her shiver.

“You’re right. I don’t know, but the little I do know terrifies me.”

The air buzzed with tension. The urge to look away was overwhelming, but she resisted. The red haze flashed to green as the light changed. He accelerated before he broke the staring contest and looked back at the road.

“It's not your place to worry about him. He made his choices. Now, he has to live with it.”

CHAPTER 5



Jasmine opened her mouth to argue that point, but her vibrating purse distracted her. She pulled out her phone and stared at the name on display.

"Who is it?"

She hesitated long enough for the call to go to voicemail. "Lyle." Even as she tried to put the phone back in her purse, it vibrated again.

"Answer it."

The fact that Roth could hear the vibrations was a serious downside to the soundproof interior of the Rolls-Royce. She shot him a suspicious glance before she answered, leaning away from him, so he wouldn't be able to hear the conversation.

"Hello?"

"What the fuck, Minnie?"

The explosion on the other end startled her. She jerked, knocking her head against the window. "Ow! What the hell, Lyle? Why are you yelling in my ear?"

"Did you forget that we'd be checking in with you?"

She rubbed her head. "No. What does that have to do with anything?"

"Care to explain why you didn't respond to any calls or messages from Colette or Ariana today? They're ready to call the cops."

"Oh."

"Oh what?" he snapped.

"My phone was off."

"Why?"

"I was flying."

"Flying," he repeated in a flat, disbelieving tone.

"Yes, I'm in London."

“You didn’t say anything about a trip the last time we talked,” he said sharply.

“It was a last-minute thing.”

The silence didn’t bode well. She glanced at Roth to find him watching her closely.

“He’s with you, isn’t he?” Lyle guessed.

“Yes, he’s right here,” she said and forced a smile that she hoped reflected in her voice. “We just had dinner.”

“Where?”

She told him the name of the restaurant and added, “It was a business dinner with Guy Reed.”

“Samson’s son?”

“Yes, Samson’s foolish, arrogant son.”

It took two seconds for him to fill in the blanks.

“He sold Reed & Sons to Roth?”

“Yup.”

“Son of a bitch. What the hell does he want with a beer company?”

Her mouth curved. It was scary sometimes how similar they were. She glanced at Roth as she said, “Apparently, he’s more interested in the land the vineyards are on.”

“But why…?” Lyle broke off abruptly. “Never mind. I don’t want to know. When will you be back?”

“Two weeks, give or take,” she said as Roth turned off the street. “Lyle, we’re driving underground. I may lose you.”

“Answer your fucking phone,” he barked before he hung up.

She skimmed through her messages. Sure enough, her sisters’ texts filled the screen.

Checking in. How are you?

Do you want to meet?

Call me when you have a chance.

Are you okay?

Colette had even sent pictures of Polara to entice her to respond. Her brows rose when she saw that they had resorted to emails. Her sisters didn’t come right out and ask if she was in danger or hurt, but the escalation in inquiries showed how worried they were.

Roth drove into the glass and steel elevator that would take them back to the underground parking garage. A week ago, Colette was adamant about keeping Lyle in the dark about her bad investments and Hennessy & Co, and had now done a complete turnaround. Roth did more for Colette and Lyle’s relationship

than any marriage counselor could have. Even after a decade of marriage, Colette kept Lyle at arm's length, but something had changed. She wasn't sure if it was Dad's death, Polara, the incident at Tuxedo Park, or a combination that caused Colette to finally confide in her husband.

"What did he want?" Roth asked.

"To make sure I'm alive," she quipped.

"Nothing's going to happen to you."

They traveled several floors down. The only source of light came from the starlight roof of the Rolls-Royce, which gave off an eerie glow.

"Can you guarantee that?"

A pause and then a lethal, "Yes."

"Can you protect me from yourself?"

As the elevator opened into the well-lit garage, she faced forward. Her nerves coiled as he remained staring at her for a good twenty seconds before he put the car in gear and drove to his parking spot. She apologized to her sisters in their group text and explained where she was, even though she was sure Lyle had already relayed that information. Colette answered immediately. *I'm glad you're okay. Keep in touch.* She wasn't used to keeping anyone apprised of her whereabouts, but all things considered, she couldn't fault them for worrying. In their eyes, she was in love with a lying, abusive sociopath.

Roth turned off the car and braced his arm on the steering wheel as he turned toward her. "What happened at Tuxedo Park won't happen again."

"What won't happen again? You trying to break my arm or you choking Thea?"

"Both."

"How can you guarantee that?" When he didn't reply, she glanced at him. "Is that what you did after you dropped me off in New York? Put more safeguards in place, so there won't be any more hiccups?"

The only sign that hit home was a tick under his eye. If she wasn't paying attention, she might have missed it.

"How far will you go to protect your secret?" she whispered.

He stared at her from the shadows, unmoving and silent.

"Thea's the closest thing I have to a mother. She's been there for me as long as I can remember. Now, she won't even return my calls."

"I was told the damage was minimal."

When she surged forward, her seat belt locked. She undid it with such vigor that the metal end smacked against the window as it retracted. She whirled on him, one hand braced on the console while the other splayed on the sleek, wood dashboard.

“There shouldn’t have been any damage to begin with!”

Her shout ricocheted in the small space.

Her throat contracted as she tried to find the words to express the rage and horror his actions evoked. “You just went for her, Roth. You didn’t care that she was a woman, that she was elderly. How could you do that?”

“I’ll make it up to her.”

“How could you possibly—?”

“I underestimated Maximus. I kept my word and made the mistake of thinking he would keep his. I took my frustration out on the messenger. That won’t happen again.”

She didn’t realize she was rubbing her wrist until he grabbed her arm and brushed back her sleeve to examine the dark smudges.

“This doesn’t count,” he said as he took over the rubbing for her.

“It doesn’t?”

His ministrations stopped. “You liked it.”

When she tried to pull away, he let out an impatient sound and captured her chin.

“Don’t deny what’s between us. You got off on it, same as me. You wanted me to fight you for it. You’ve always provoked and teased me, and then played hard to get when I made a move.”

“You’re living in the past,” she said tartly as she jerked her chin out of his hold. She turned toward the door before she realized he still held her arm. “Let me go.”

“Why would I live in the past when my present is better than I envisioned?”

He raised her arm. She wasn’t prepared to feel his lips against her sensitive inner wrist.

“Maximus fucked up, allowing me into his inner circle. A man like me had no business having access to an innocent like you.”

He easily retained possession of her arm when she gave a vicious yank.

“That night, I watched you talk to some of the most ruthless businessmen in the country with a smile on your face.” His tongue slid over flickering tendons as her hand balled into a fist. “It was easy to track you through the crowd. You made ripples wherever you went. You had all these messy curls, and you were wearing this pink dress…” He smiled against her palm. “Princess.”

She stared through the windshield as she tried to suppress memories of the night they met.

“In a room full of powerful elite, of men vying for your attention, you chose me.”

“I didn’t choose you—”

“You did.”

“I went up to you because I didn’t know who you were, or that you’d been blacklisted!”

“But when you found out, you didn’t walk away. You offered me your hand and took me under your wing.”

“Shut up,” she rasped.

“You defied your father to help me at your own expense. You sealed your fate, then.”

One rash decision changed the course of her life for all time, and she was still paying the price for it. “I thought I was doing the right thing.”

“You saw the man I could have been. I thought if I worked hard enough, I could be, but regardless of what I do, I’ll never be a part of your world.”

Her brow furrowed. “What do you mean by that? What world?”

“Maximus was right,” he said as he cupped her nape and tugged her inexorably over the console despite her resistance. “I’m not good enough for you. You can do better, but I’m not going to give you the chance to.”

Her hand skidded over his broad chest as she tried to keep him at bay. “Don’t you dare—”

He smothered her protest with his mouth. She tasted rage simmering just beneath the surface. That mix of temper and lust triggered her own. As her body flushed with heat, she felt herself rising to meet his aggression, eager for the inevitable clash. Even as she fought him, she could feel herself sinking into his murky depths. How could something so wrong feel so right? She was betraying her father’s memory and repeating tragic habits, but there was no escape from these golden handcuffs. When she couldn’t breathe, she wrenched her mouth from his and tucked her face against his neck, panting and desperately trying to retain her sense of self when she was drowning in him.

He didn’t try to take her mouth again, but waited patiently, sifting her hair through his fingers. She was grateful for the reprieve.

“I just want to get through this in one piece,” she confessed.

“You will.”

She straightened, but wasn’t able to draw away with his hand in her hair. She mentally braced before she tilted her head back and met his searing gaze. What was he thinking? She resisted the urge to reach out and stroke his face to see if she could soften the rigid, uncompromising lines. Seeing the man he’d become, it seemed ludicrous that she pitied him the night they met.

“I want to understand,” she whispered.

Immediately, his hand fell away, and he turned from her. “You won’t.”

He exited the vehicle before she could say anything else and reached for his

contracts before he slammed the door behind him. She stared at him through the window as he shrugged his sleeve back to look at his watch. He was giving her whiplash with his mood changes, but that was nothing new. She opened her door and furtively dabbed under her eyes as a Bentley cruised past. She hoped her makeup wasn't streaming. Good thing she hadn't put on much. She followed him to the elevator and glanced at him as the car began to rise.

"Roth—"

"No."

"You don't even know what I'm going to say!"

"I do, and the answer's no."

The doors opened into his entry hall. She glared daggers at his back as she followed him into the grand living room. It wasn't until she tossed her purse down that she realized she missed what he typed into the keypad.

"I need the code," she said, and turned in time to see him disappear down the hallway with the contracts tucked under his arm. *"Really?"*

She stood there for a moment before she slipped off her coat and plopped on the oversized couch, hands folded over her full stomach as she stared at the ceiling. Champagne fizzled in her veins as her overactive mind flitted over the events of the evening. He kept tabs on Thea. Had he done so to make sure he hadn't caused permanent damage, or was he monitoring her in case Thea reported his assault to the cops? She smothered her inner pessimist and listened to the optimistic one. He said he would try to make it up to her. That was something—more than she imagined, actually. What would he think was just compensation for strangling a woman? She passed a hand over her face as she willed away that horrific morning.

Thea was a woman with simple wants, the single mother of two children who were grown and had moved out of state. Although her children wanted their mother to move closer to them, Thea insisted on continuing her job as cook and housekeeper. Thea had been employed at Tuxedo Park since before she was born and was such an excellent employee that even Maximus had taken notice and paid for her children's education, ensuring Thea's eternal loyalty.

Her brow furrowed. If she had needed something done, she would have approached Thea, just as Maximus had. Thea didn't ask questions and carried out any task without fail. And for that, she had almost paid with her life.

She reached over her head for her purse and retrieved her phone. She found Thea's number in her contacts and sat up as the phone began to ring. She needed to hear her voice and apologize. When the call went to voicemail, she bowed her head in disappointment.

"Hey, Thea, it's me." Jasmine paused as she struggled to find the right

words. “I hope you’re okay. I…” She swallowed hard. “I’m so sorry. If there’s anything I can do… *anything*, I’ll do it. If you want to leave, I won’t blame you.” She smacked her thigh as she floundered. “I want to hear from you, to make sure you’re all right. Call me anytime.”

She hung up and dialed the other number she had called so often over the past three days that she now knew it by heart. She calculated the time in Colorado as the phone rang once and went to voicemail. She called again with the same results. After a minute of debate, she got to her feet and strode in the direction Roth had gone. She stopped in the doorway of an office, which looked more lived in than the rest of the penthouse. Crowded bookshelves lined the walls, while Roth sat behind a majestic oak desk that dominated the room. A machine in the corner flashed as it scanned page after page of the hefty contract.

Roth looked up from the computer. “What is it?”

She stopped on the other side of his desk. “I can’t get in touch with your mom. It isn’t like her not to return my calls.” When he didn’t comment, she said, “You have people watching her, right?”

He didn’t respond; he just waited.

“Can you have someone check on her?”

“She’s fine.”

“I want to hear it from her.”

As seconds ticked past, her heart began to pound. Had he…? He reached into his drawer and pulled out his phone. When he jerked his chin at her, she rounded the desk. He dialed and put the phone on speaker before he held it out to her.

“Stay here while you speak to her,” he ordered.

Too relieved to care that he wanted to eavesdrop, she nodded as she took the phone. Two rings, and then she heard a wary voice on the other end.

“Hello?”

The surge of relief made her lightheaded. “Kaia, it’s me.”

“Jasmine? Are you all right?”

“Of course. And you? Are you okay?”

“Yes. A-are you married?”

She stared at the massive ring on her left hand and then at the man who had put it there. “Yes.”

“Oh, honey…” Kaia said sympathetically.

Roth's expression darkened.

She turned from him and took a few steps away as she said, “I’ve been calling you. Did you get my messages?”

“No…” A pause and then, “Do you have my new number?”

“New number? You changed it?”

The silence on the other end made her glance at Roth, who sat with his hands steepled in front of him.

"He gave you a different phone," she guessed and shot him a withering look.

"Yes."

"He didn't tell me."

"I'm not surprised."

"Mom."

"Come see me some time," Kaia said hastily when she heard her son's growl.

"I will," she said and jogged backward as Roth came at her, looking like the human embodiment of a thundercloud. "I just wanted to check in and make sure you're all right."

"I'm well. Thank you, Jasmine. You take care of yourself."

"You too," she said, and hung up a second before he snatched the phone from her. She halted and slammed her hands against his chest. "You lied to me!"

"How?"

"*How?* By not telling me the number I've been calling isn't hers anymore, jackass."

"You never asked me why she wasn't answering her phone."

"You're guilty by omission!"

He shrugged as he pocketed the phone and headed back to his desk. "Your worry is unfounded. I told you, she's fine. You heard that for yourself."

He settled in his chair and squinted at the computer screen, clearly ready to dive back into work now that the phone call with Kaia was concluded.

"You changed her number, so I couldn't talk to her."

"Yes," he admitted without an ounce of shame.

"Because you don't want her to tell me the rest…"

Her voice dried up as his head swiveled from the computer to her.

"The rest of what?"

When she didn't answer, he turned his chair so he was facing her and gave her his full attention.

"I only caught the tail end of what she said that day." He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees, hands open to indicate she had the floor. "What did she say?"

"That's between us."

His eyes narrowed. "The only us is you and me. She doesn't factor into this."

She crossed her arms defensively across her chest. "Why does it matter what she said? I still married you. Her warning made no difference."

"No difference."

Something about the way he said that made her tense.

“You asked your sisters to leave the room because you were going to make a run for it.”

“Do you blame me?”

“What did she say, Jasmine?”

She jutted out her chin. “Why should I answer your questions when you won’t answer mine?”

“I might.”

“You might,” she mimicked and wasn’t pleased when the glitter in his eyes died down. “This isn’t funny.”

His brow went up. “I’m not laughing.”

“Of course not. You don’t know how to,” she grouched, her irritation expressing itself in the rapid tapping of her boot. “So you *might* answer some questions?”

“Maybe.”

Always so fucking cautious. He never agreed to anything blindly… unlike her. There was so much she didn’t know. What did she have to lose by sharing Kaia’s allegations? Perhaps Kaia had stretched the truth a bit, and Roth could allay some of her fears. Even if he didn’t confirm anything, a reaction could be just as valuable, if not more so, than an actual answer.

“She said you’re a master strategist who will wait years to make a move.”

Her eyes flicked to his tidy desk, which was a far cry from the organized mess she made when she was working. She liked knickknacks—pretty paperweights, ceramic figurines, and something that moved like a Newton’s cradle or dancing flower. The only decorative thing on his desk was a fancy fountain pen beside a blank notepad. Everything was Spartan and orderly.

“I’ve seen the evidence of that for myself. Your takeover of Hennessy & Co was quick and efficient. My sisters didn’t know you were quietly acquiring shares until it was too late. You checkmated me into a convenient marriage within a month of seeing me in Colorado. And those are the things I know about.” She paused before she said, “I assume you purchased your office space some time ago. Even with your resources, real estate in that location is sought-after and extremely limited.”

He made no comment, but waited with his fingers loosely intertwined. His gaze never wavered from hers.

“You never let on that you had an issue with your mother.”

“I don’t.” At her look of patent disbelief, he amended, “I don’t bear any ill will for her.”

“But she doesn’t feel the same way about you,” she said slowly.

“No.” When she eyed him expectantly, he elaborated, “I thought the years we

spent apart and her recovery in New York would alter her opinion of me. Apparently not."

"What is her opinion of you?"

He sat back in his chair. "Why don't you tell me?"

His calm delivery would deceive most into believing he felt nothing, but one look into his black marble eyes told her she was staring at a seething inferno dressed in a fine suit. This was her chance to get the answers she so desperately wanted, but a small voice in the back of her mind warned her to proceed with caution.

"You've seen your mother twice in a decade. She doesn't know the man you've become, yet the first thing she asked was if I was being forced to marry you." Her hands balled into fists in the crook of her arms to stop herself from pacing. "How could she know you were capable of such a thing? Have you done this before?"

His expression didn't alter in the slightest.

"Is that it?"

Violent fantasies danced through her mind as she eyed him balefully. "Why is your mother afraid of you?"

"Why are you afraid of me?"

Her spine cracked as she stiffened. "I'm not."

"No?"

A chill ran down her spine. Just a simple note in his voice could change the mood and trigger her flight instinct. It took considerable effort to stop herself from looking at the open doorway and freedom.

"You're not afraid of me? Come here."

"I'm fine where I am."

He didn't push. He didn't have to. He knew her pride would compel her to go to him. She inwardly swore a blue streak as she crossed the room and stopped just out of reach.

"I'm not afraid," she said defiantly and hissed when he gripped her hips.

"You are," he said as he pulled her between his spread thighs. "But I promised I wouldn't hurt you, and I won't."

When she maintained her rigid stance, his hands moved down her sides, shaping her body.

"What else did she say, princess?"

"Why didn't you tell me you were estranged?" she burst out. "You let me call her to introduce myself before we got married at the courthouse, and you didn't say a thing when I reached out to her during the holidays."

"You were desperate for family after Maximus disowned you. She was civil

during the calls, so I didn't interfere. I thought she'd changed."

"Changed from *what*?"

There were so many secrets in that bottomless obsidian.

"Does this have anything to do with your dad?" she ventured.

His response was instantaneous. His hands dropped from her, and he turned toward his computer, clearly done with the conversation, but she didn't let him retreat. She stepped into him and clasped his face between her palms. His stillness warned her she was crossing an invisible line, but she didn't back off.

"Talk to me," she begged.

His eyes blazed with some emotion she couldn't identify, but she didn't care what it was because something was better than nothing.

"Roth?"

"I've said more to you than any person on the planet."

Why that sent a pinprick of pain through her heart, she wasn't sure.

"Did you ever trust me?"

"I did."

Past tense. He didn't trust her anymore. She ignored the urge to lash out and defend herself and rested her forehead on his. "Please, give me something."

She wanted to push, demand, plead for answers. She was a writer, a researcher, a student of human nature. Why hadn't she ever wondered what motivated him? His iron will wasn't forged through war with her father—it started before that in a little town in Colorado. Something drove him to claw his way up to her father's circles. He arrived confident, ambitious, defiant from the get go. Where did his work ethic, dogged determination, and thirst for vengeance come from? She had accepted him as he was without wondering what made him tick.

When he tugged her hands from his face, she bowed her head, so he wouldn't see the pain his rejection caused. What had she expected? Even when he trusted her, he hadn't shared, so why would he now when they were… what? Enemies? Fuck buddies? Uneasy allies?

She turned away to leave him to his work and set her aside as he had so many times before. She wasn't prepared for him to haul her onto his lap. Her dress rode up as her knees sank onto the plush seat on either side of him.

"What are you…"

Her voice died out as he wrapped his arms around her and buried his face against her chest. She stared at the far wall as her heart fluttered.

He was a self-proclaimed monster. A ruthless, vindictive asshole that everyone warned her would turn on her, but… there was another side of him she had meticulously scrubbed from her memory that came flooding back. She

pictured him stretched out on her queen-sized bed in her tiny apartment, reading her Minnie Hess books as she studied. How many times had she come back from class to find that he had dinner waiting? *How did I get so lucky to have a husband like you?* Her eyes shut on a rush of bittersweet tears.

She didn't know what to believe. Roth could be heartless, but he allowed her to call Kaia to give her peace of mind. Wouldn't a monster get rid of a weakness like a mother who threatened to expose him? Despite Kaia's obvious misgivings about her son, Roth didn't return her animosity, which is why she had never questioned their distant relationship. What terrible son would travel to Colorado and hire a nurse to care for his mother after an open-heart surgery?

There was nothing to suggest anything was amiss with Kaia. Then again, she hadn't seen any red flags with Roth either. Like mother, like son? The only thing that truly struck her as odd about Kaia was her preference for living in extreme solitude and the fact that she didn't have anyone to help her while she was recovering from heart surgery. Kaia had lived in that town for almost forty years, yet had no friends? What was the point of living there if she had no connection with the locals?

Should she believe Kaia or trust her gut, which had steered her wrong one too many times? She bit back a groan when she realized she was looking for a reason to discredit Kaia, despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary. The fact that she wanted to justify his behavior revealed how badly she was tangled in his web. Less than a week in, she was trying to make excuses for him. Part of it was her own pride and ego—she didn't want to believe that she had been wrong about him. If she found a hole in Kaia's story, then maybe Roth wasn't crazy and there was a motive behind his despicable behavior.

She should be pressing her advantage to get answers, but she couldn't bring herself to shatter the peace. Was it just yesterday that she'd been scared out of her wits when he came into the penthouse, and twenty-four hours later, she was cradling him to her breast? Scratch that. Less than four hours ago, she'd been promising bodily harm and now…

This was dangerous. A slippery slope she had been down before, but she couldn't stop herself. How far was she willing to bend to believe Roth was the man she wanted him to be?

"What else did she say about me?" he murmured.

Her stomach soured. "Does it matter?"

He sat back, which forced her to perch on his thighs with her hands linked behind his neck. They regarded one another warily before he squeezed her waist, a demand to spill the rest of Kaia's warnings about him. She hesitated. Why did she have the feeling if they continued down this road, it wouldn't end well?

“Finish,” he ordered.

She thrust away her misgivings and took the plunge.

“She said you’ve always been cold, even as a child,” she said softly, as if that would make it easier for him to hear what his mother thought about him.

He didn’t react.

“I-Is it because you lost your dad when you were so young?”

His expression was so remote, his body so still. She massaged his neck, soothing and encouraging him to give her something.

“It’s ironic that my mother fears me when she made me into what I am.”

The hand on his neck froze. “What are you talking about?”

“Even before he died, life was hard. We were poor and lived off the land. She relied on him so much, she couldn’t function without him. After he died, she became catatonic. Most days, she didn’t get out of bed. I had to take on his role. She didn’t approve of the way I handled things.”

“What did you do? Steal? Join a gang? Deal drugs? Were you a teenage hitman?”

He stared at her for a moment before he shook his head. “Jasmine.”

His chiding tone made her bristle.

“What the hell am I supposed to think?”

“Your imagination’s running wild.”

“Did you…” She licked her lips and fidgeted when he focused on her. “Did you do something to her?”

His expression hardened. “Did she say I did?”

“You attacked Thea.”

His mouth tightened. “I thought she was withholding information.”

“So you threatened to break her neck? Where would you even learn to do something like that? Have you…?”

His hand splayed on her lower back, forcing her to settle as she shifted restlessly. “I spent most of my time hunting our food. Some things, you only need to learn once.”

Her thumb brushed over the collar of his ridiculously expensive jacket. It was hard to imagine the man before her as a boy who grew up in the Colorado wilderness, but she’d seen the cabin he grew up in, and now that she thought back to his outfit the night they met… Her mouth quirked in a sad smile. Back then, he’d been determined not to conform, but he learned to compromise and adapted to his environment. Now, he was an unstoppable force.

One hand slipped beneath her dress and cupped her ass. “Jasmine.”

She ran her finger along the sharp edge of his hairline as she tried to think of a tactful way to broach the next topic.

“You said your father died in an accident. I always assumed it was in a car like my mom…” She paused when Roth shook his head. “What kind of accident did he have?”

“He was shot.”

She jolted before she surged up on her knees and gripped his shoulders. “*Shot?* By who? Where? What happened?”

“It was ruled as an accident, but…”

Something about the way he said that chilled her blood. “Was it… Did he…?” Her heart went into free fall at the look in his eyes. “*Roth.* Did he commit suicide?”

His eyelashes lowered to shield his eyes. “My mom’s never been the same.”

“Oh my God.” Her eyes watered with shock and empathy. “But… Why does she feel the way she does about you? Why isn’t she proud of your accomplishments? For taking care of her? Why does she think you’re…”

“Think I’m what?”

Fuck. She wished she could take it back, but she was in too deep. “Why does she think you’re a monster?”

“Because I am.”

His neutral tone was at odds with the aggression pulsing in the air around him.

“I’m not like her. I didn’t stop when he did. I didn’t want that to define me. I wanted out and away from everyone who knew…” He reached out and fingered the golden buttons on her dress. “She never forgave me for moving on and trying to forget. If she has the opportunity to sabotage something in my life, she will. She doesn't think I deserve what I have.”

Jasmine didn’t move, she barely even breathed. She didn’t want anything to distract him from describing a childhood that had clearly left its mark and shaped him into the man he’d become.

“I never had a childhood. My first coherent thought was of survival. Warmth, food, shelter. I saw how her feelings ruled her life. I didn’t want to be like her, so I set mine aside and did what had to be done. She thought I was lacking, that something was wrong with me because I don’t allow anything to get in my way.”

His words sank into her like weighted darts. “Am I included in that?” She stared at a spot just beyond his left ear. “Did you target me because you thought it was the quickest way to get to the next level?”

“What do you think?”

Her stomach iced over at his quick comeback. He wasn’t thrown by the question and didn’t try to change the subject.

“You know what I believe.” She forced herself to look at him. “Prove me

wrong.”

He eyed her coolly and seemed in no hurry to pick up the gauntlet she threw down. The only sound in the office came from the insistent tap of rain on glass and the hum of the scanner that happily ate up the contract.

She slammed her hands against his chest. “Say something!”

“I knew right from the start that you didn’t fit into your father’s world. You didn’t measure up to your sisters and were unhappy, neglected, lonely.”

His brutal summation of her felt like a punch in the gut.

“I played my hand. I wanted to see how far you would let me in. I didn’t expect you to be so accommodating.”

Rage obliterated all rational thought. *“You son of a bitch!”*

She went for his face. He grabbed her wrist, but not quick enough. She scored a hit on his cheek before he crushed her fingers in his. She screeched and tried to smash his balls, but he shifted to protect himself, unbalancing her, so she toppled off his lap. She fell on her ass, but was on her feet before him. She managed to kick his shin before he whirled her around and bear-hugged her from behind. When she tried to stomp his foot, he bent her over the desk. Her arms swept out, sending stacks of paper, fountain pen, phone, and keyboard flying. She assumed he would release her to save his precious paperwork, but he stayed put behind her.

“You were so trusting, so responsive,” he taunted.

She thrashed, but it got her nowhere. She might as well be battling an immovable boulder. “Shut the fuck up!”

“So pure and ready to give yourself to someone. Your father was a fool for leaving you unprotected and vulnerable to a man like me. He should have known I wouldn’t be able to resist the temptation to taste something so fucking sweet.”

She shoved his computer off the desk. The ominous crash and flare of sparks should have worried her, but she was too enraged to care about fires or personal injury. She slammed her fist on the desk so hard, it went numb. “Get off me!”

She felt a gust of cold air as he lifted her dress.

“You touch me, I swear to God I’ll—”

He smacked her ass hard enough to knock the wind out of her. She erupted beneath him, kicking and screaming, popping buttons off her dress and bruising her thighs on the desk drawers as she kicked, all to no avail. She fought with all she had, but it wasn’t enough. When she slumped over the desk, sweating and panting, he wrapped her hair around his hand to hold her still as he kissed her cheek.

“You let me claim what I shouldn’t have had access to in the first place. You should know not to feed a poor man. He’ll never leave you alone.”

A tear splashed on the gleaming desk.

“The poor man’s become a rich man. Now he can afford to gorge, but nothing measures up.” He rocked against her stinging ass. “There’s an empty well inside him that nothing can fill. He’ll topple companies, destroy relationships, pay millions to reclaim what he once got for free.” He buried his face in her hair. “He didn’t realize that he was still starving.”

A heavy hand on her back applied pressure, ready to pin her if necessary, but there was no need. She had nothing left. There was a rasp of a zipper, and then he was fitting himself to her. She was ashamed that she was wet enough to take him. He raised her knee and placed it on the edge of the desk, opening her wide for him. She rested the side of her face against the wood grains as he began to move, trying to insulate herself from what was happening and his brutal confession. She managed to mentally distance herself until the end, when he fucked her hard enough that her nails scrabbled over the sleek surface. He bit her shoulder as he came, battering her against the desk until he was empty.

The moment he disengaged, she straightened and brushed her dress down. She kept her back to him as she skirted around the desk and headed for the door. She was halfway across the room before he blocked her way. She stared at his throat, unable to look him in the eye.

“Get out of my way,” she said in a dead monotone.

He picked her up. She prepared to fight, but what was the use? She wouldn’t win against him. When had she ever? Instead, she shut her eyes and let her arms and legs hang limply as he carried her out of the office. Her face rode his shoulder as he walked. He settled her on the bed in the master suite and began to undress her. She lay like a lifeless doll as he pulled off her boots and discarded her clothes.

She closed her eyes and willed him to leave. She started when he cupped her cheek. She turned in the opposite direction and got her lips captured by his. She clawed at him, but he didn’t back away or allow her to break the kiss. His tongue glided over hers, coaxing her to respond when all she had for him was rage and hopeless despair. When a hand slid between her legs, she recoiled, but he didn’t back off.

He swallowed her protests. Despite her struggles, his touch remained gentle. It was worlds away from what he did to her in his office. That was pure domination, him completely stripped of all civility. That was the beast she’d always baited but had never seen completely unleashed. And this… this, she didn't understand.

It went on forever. She begged him to stop, but he didn’t take his hand away until the sheets beneath her were bunched up and damp. When he slid inside her

again, she grunted in surprise. How the hell could he be hard again? He brushed kisses over her wet cheeks as he rocked against her.

“You never should have come up to me that night,” he murmured against her ear. “You should have kept your distance like your sisters, not that that would have saved you. I noticed you before you approached me. Your laugh carried across the room.”

When she let out a choked sob, he hummed in the back of his throat and nuzzled her while he continued to fuck her.

“You wanted me to be the white knight you wrote about in your stories as Minnie Hess. For a time, I thought I could be. Now, I know better. I’ve fooled many people, but Mom always saw me for what I am, and now you see it too.”

Swollen eyelids lifted to take him in as he rose above her. Lights from Knightsbridge illuminated half of his face. When she would have turned away, he rested his forehead against hers, forcing her to acknowledge him. She was overwhelmed by him. The scent of his musk in her nostrils, his taste on her tongue, and his body claiming what he had no right to.

“It’s going to be different this time around. This time, I’m not holding back. You’re getting the real me, and you'll take what I give you.”

The way he fucked her nice and slow was completely at odds with his threats.

“I never relinquished my claim. If I found you in that year before you went to your father, I would've chained you to this bed and fucked you until you begged for forgiveness. You don’t run to anyone. This stays between me and you.”

“No.”

Her broken whisper made him pause.

“No? No what, princess?”

She bared her teeth as he planted himself to the hilt and ground his hips against her.

“You… you manipulated me,” she gasped and slapped his shoulders as he kissed the curve of her jaw.

“You were looking for an out and jumped when I gave you one. Your family never appreciated you. They tolerated you. They would have crushed you until there was nothing left. Was what I did so bad?”

“I thought you loved me,” she sobbed.

“Shh.” He lifted her leg, so he could go an inch deeper, and let out a guttural groan that made her pussy pulse. “I can't focus when you're around. All I can think about is this heat.” He pulled out and slid back in. “You distract me and I can't afford to make mistakes, but I'm willing to take the chance to have you with

me.” He clasped her throat as he began to move again. “Any man who makes a play for you, I’ll destroy. Guy will ruin himself in time, but that isn’t enough for me. I’m going to speed up the process.”

“Roth—” Her breath cut off when he applied pressure to her clit.

“You call me Jamie when I’m inside you. That’s the only time I can be the man who gives you what you want. Outside our bed, I’m the man I have to be.”

Tears slipped out of the corner of her eyes. “I-I don’t understand.”

“You don’t need to. Come for me.”

She shook her head as she tried to resist him, but his steady, unrelenting pace was as unstoppable as the sunrise. As her body took over, her legs wrapped around his waist. He bared his teeth in a wolfish smile as he nudged her into an orgasm that made her shudder like a junkie. He slumped on top of her as he gave himself up to his second orgasm and buried his face in her damp, tangled hair.

She was physically and emotionally destroyed, but she fought the tide. “Ro—” The hand still at her throat flexed. “Jamie, I can’t—"

“Sleep,” he said gruffly against her swollen lips.

“No,” she mumbled, even as she felt herself losing consciousness. Her hand blindly searched for an anchor and landed in his hair, which she gripped as she trembled with exhaustion. She mumbled incoherently as he ghosted kisses over her tear-streaked face, and everything faded to black.

CHAPTER 6



SEVEN YEARS AGO

Jasmine scribbled feverishly in the back seat with her tiny notebook balanced on her knee and every overhead light on in the car. She was sure the driver wasn't happy about waiting in front of her building or the fact that the bright interior was probably messing with his visibility, but he didn't complain. She was over an hour late for the party Dad was hosting. She'd never been late to an event in her life. Usually, she arrived early and followed Colette and Ariana around, taking notes as her sisters double-checked every detail, but she was in the grip of a creative storm that made it hard to focus on anything but the words on the page. Part of her knew she should be worried about Dad's wrath if he noticed her absence, but she was having too much fun to worry about the consequences. She felt as if she was high—not that she had any experience with illicit drugs—but she assumed this is what it felt like. The real world and all the problems that came with it disappeared. She didn't need sleep or food or anything else to sustain her. She was deep in another world that seemed more real than everything around her.

Two days ago, a vivid dream overrode her recurring nightmare about failing her MBA or having Ford cancel their engagement. In the dream, she stood on a hilltop looking down on a kingdom she had never laid eyes on, but intuitively recognized because she created it. A majestic castle towered over a white city surrounded by purple mountains. In this land, magic thrived. She willed her feet to move, so she could explore, but her body wasn't hers to command. She couldn't even turn her head to examine her surroundings. All she could do was gaze upon the beautiful kingdom with the warmth of the sun on her face. She wasn't aware of another's presence until a man began to speak.

She couldn't turn to see him, but she sensed him come up behind her as he warned her of a coming war and other things her cloudy mind wasn't able to understand. She couldn't see his face, but his rough tone that softened once he stood just behind her right shoulder made her heart race. He said he could help her and that it didn't have to be this way. Be *what* way? She opened her mouth to ask questions, but apparently her voice wasn't hers as well. She heard herself rebuff his offer to help and told him she would handle what was coming on her own. He said her stubbornness would get her and her people killed. When her body finally decided to move to get away from him, a hand gripped her arm and

swung her around. She got a glimpse of a large figure in a cloak before she awoke.

She was reaching for her notebook before her eyes opened. She was so afraid she would forget the dream that she didn't bother to turn to a fresh page. At the bottom of her notes on macroeconomics, she jotted down every detail of the dream she could remember.

Writing had been sporadic throughout college, but once she enrolled in grad school, those urges vanished completely. She assumed her bachelor's degree in economics would suffice, since that's what her sisters had. She was taken aback when Dad told her to continue her education and get her MBA. He said the extra education would do her *good*. It was clear he didn't think she was ready to work at Hennessy & Co, which stung, but she didn't complain. She got into the graduate program at Wharton's and vowed she would prove that she was just as capable as her sisters.

She dedicated every waking moment to her studies. Despite being raised in the business world, she didn't have an advantage over her peers. Her family tended to treat her more like a secretary than an equal. The perplexed looks she received from her professors and classmates when she asked questions they assumed she should know the answers to were mortifying, but she would rather ask it in school than in a boardroom. Wharton's was her family's alma mater, but it was clear to everyone that she didn't come from the same stock as her sisters. Even though she worked twice as hard as everyone else, she would never catch up to Colette, who was promoted to Executive Vice President of Development and Acquisitions at her age. Business came naturally to her sisters who grew up in their father's shadow, did their homework in his offices, and regularly attended dinners with his colleagues. They lived and breathed it, while she had grown up in the country where her imagination ran rampant.

Dad predicted that daydreaming was a phase she would grow out of when she was an adult. She thought that day had finally come. Between grad school and her engagement to Ford, she thought writing was a thing of the past, until that dream kick-started her stagnant creativity. She didn't quash it—she grabbed hold of the vision with both hands and ran with it. The moment she set pen to paper, that addicting thrill she experienced only when she was in a writing thrall made everything else fade away.

She returned to a world she knew more intimately than Tuxedo Park. The fantasy world she abandoned three years ago was alive and thriving. Her characters welcomed her with open arms and were eager to tell her what had happened in her absence. It was like entering the magical world of Narnia. Time passed at a different pace for them than it did for her. Any time she wanted to

visit, all she had to do was open that door in her mind, and she would be immersed in it.

She sat at her kitchen table, writing like a madman. One scene expanded into another, and before she knew it, she had ten pages of notes. If it wasn't for her alarm, she would have forgotten she had class. She forced herself to attend, but she didn't hear a damn thing. How could she when her characters were whispering in her ears about the stirrings of dark magic in the north, rumors of war, and a prophecy of a man with murky origins who would save their kingdom, and be her downfall. She knew instinctively that the man the prophecy spoke of was the one she met on the hill. It seemed the other characters had no knowledge of their meeting. She didn't tell them that their plans to keep him at bay wouldn't work. He was already in their midst.

Management communication, corporate finance, and regression analysis didn't hold a candle to the story unfolding in her mind like an endless origami with so many facets that she struggled to capture it all as details flowed through her hands like water. The other world was a siren's call she was powerless to resist, and even if she could break free, she didn't want to.

She tried to rush out of class, but she was waylaid by classmates who wanted to get together over the weekend. Thankfully, she had Dad's party as an excuse. That should have been the end of that, but as always, when it came to anything centered around her family, they were keen to know more. Unfortunately, she wasn't privy to more. Ariana emailed her the guest list two weeks ago, so she could memorize it. Based on the number of venture capitalists and the fact that her sisters sent a detailed itinerary along with an outfit that had matching shoes, clutch, and jewelry, she knew something big was going down. The event had actually been causing her quite a bit of anxiety, since she would be attending without Ford. It was astonishing how quickly she had grown accustomed to being on his arm. People seemed to respect her more now that she was engaged. She wished he wasn't out of the country.

She didn't dare tell her classmates who was on the guest list, or she never would have been able to get away. Those in attendance would be a budding entrepreneur's wet dream. She brushed shoulders with some of the wealthiest and most brilliant minds in the world. That was nothing new, but she wished she had no knowledge of the men behind the companies they studied in class. The fact that her father and his cronies held positions for the most coveted internships and jobs every year was hard for her to stomach.

When she finally made it back to her apartment, she let herself be swept away. She didn't realize night had fallen until she could no longer see her notebook. She didn't stop writing until her fingers cramped. Drained, she

collapsed in bed, but with a smile on her face.

The next morning, she was ecstatic to discover the characters were still present. The connection wasn't as strong. It was faint, like listening to people talking in the next room. She had to concentrate to hear them clearly, but what little she could make out was enough to continue right where she left off. Leery of cutting that precious connection, she canceled her hair appointment. Why waste time at the hairdresser when she could style it in a fraction of time?

Jasmine hissed as they hit a pothole, causing her pen to slash across the page. She glared at the back of the driver's head. Was he doing it deliberately? He hadn't said one word since she climbed into the car, which was a blessing. The last thing she wanted was a chatty driver for the two-hour drive from Philadelphia to New York, but if he kept this up, her notes wouldn't be legible. Before she could make up her mind whether to lecture her driver or not, his phone rang.

"Yes?" the driver said, and then his voice deepened. "Yes, ma'am."

Her pen paused.

"Yes, I have her," the man said and then, "We ran into some traffic. We'll be there in fifteen minutes. Yes, I understand. Will do."

She waited for a report, but when she didn't get one, she prompted, "Anyone I know?"

"Mrs. Khan. She wanted to know why we're running late."

There was no recrimination in his voice. Maybe he wasn't running over potholes to mess with her. "Thanks."

He shrugged. "I get paid by the hour."

She nodded, then refocused on her notebook. If Ariana noticed she was missing, that meant Colette knew as well. And, unless something catastrophic happened, Dad would be told. Two days ago, this would have made her break out in a cold sweat, but today, it was a minor irritation.

"What are you writing?" the driver asked.

"An essay for school," she lied as she finished her sentence.

"Must be some essay."

His dry tone clearly said he wasn't buying it, but she didn't try to convince him otherwise.

"Mrs. Khan said she tried your cell phone," the driver continued.

"I couldn't find it," she said absently.

He grunted. "Thought people your age don't go anywhere without them."

"I'm not like most people."

"I noticed."

She looked up at that before she brushed off the comment and returned to her

Oz. She wasn’t sure what people expected, but it seemed no matter what she did, she never met anyone’s expectations, even her father’s driver.

“Heads up.”

She looked up as the car began to slow. When had they entered the city? She stuffed her notebook into her clutch as the door was opened by staff of Hennessy Tower.

“Thank you!” she called to the driver before she took the hand extended to her and stepped out of the vehicle.

“Ms. Hennessy,” the man murmured. “We’ve been waiting for your arrival.”

“No need to let them know I’m here,” she said with a smile and glanced around, a habit she developed after being published one too many times in trashy magazines. The last one titled, “High-Strung Heiress,” got her banished from the city for two months and a lecture to practice maintaining a neutral, but pleasant expression in public.

There was quite a bit of activity in front of Hennessy Tower, but thankfully, no camera flashes from paparazzi who lurked in the hopes of catching a photo of one of the celebrities who owned apartments in the building. Apparently, the high-profile dinner had been kept under wraps. Another win for Colette and Ariana.

As she approached the entrance, the doormen inclined their heads.

“Ms. Hennessy.”

She passed through the revolving doors and crossed the lobby. She took note of her father’s men lounging around, proof positive that the security had been increased for tonight’s party. The elevator opened, revealing an operator she’d known since she was a little girl.

“You’re late, miss,” Terry muttered, so the cameras couldn’t pick up what he was saying.

“Everyone’s allowed to be fashionably late once in their lives,” she said gaily as she stepped in beside him.

He shot her a disbelieving look that made her giggle.

“I’ve worked for your father thirty-eight years,” he said as he swiped his badge and selected one of the top floors of the building. “He’s turned away senators for being five minutes late.”

“He has many guests to occupy him. Hopefully, he won’t notice I’m a little late.”

“Your father misses nothing.”

No, he didn’t, but she could hope. Maybe she would be excluded from the next party. That suited her just fine, so she could fit more writing in between her classes.

“I’ll be all right, Terry.”

He eyed her thoughtfully. “Something’s different.”

Yes. For the first time, she wasn’t fretting about forgetting someone’s name or committing any number of unforgivable faux pas. She may be in Manhattan, but her mind was on more pressing matters, like the name of the mysterious stranger she met on that hilltop. Should he have a recognizable name like Landon or Cain, or should she come up with something exotic and fantastical?

“Jasmine?”

She shook away her wandering thoughts and beamed at a very concerned Terry. “It’s going to be a great night!”

Before he could respond, the doors opened to reveal a handful of security guards and Colette’s assistants, who leapt forward.

“Ms. Hennessy! Did something…?”

“Traffic,” she said airily as she swept forward.

“Dinner will be served in twenty-eight minutes,” one of the assistants reported as they walked on either side of her.

“I made it just in time,” she said.

The other assistant made a choking sound that was quelled when the other shot her a killing look.

“Here.”

She looked over as the lead assistant handed her a glass. She gave it a cursory glance.

“Is this…?” she began, but the assistant was already nodding.

“Yes. Non-alcoholic champagne. The servers will keep an eye on you, Mrs. Caruso, and Mrs. Khan if you need a refill.”

The assistants fell back as she approached the ballroom. She took a hefty gulp of her drink as she crossed the threshold and took in the milling crowd. Servers wove in between the guests with trays of appetizers and glasses of champagne, while a harp and cello played some sweet melody.

“You’re in trouble.”

She turned and saw Lyle strolling toward her, hand in pocket, champagne in the other. She held up her half-empty flute.

“I’ve been here the whole time.”

He grinned. “That’s a good one. Too bad they called to let us know you arrived.”

“I told them not to.” She sighed.

“Orders from the top aren’t to be ignored.” He kissed her cheek and straightened. “What’s going on?”

She widened her eyes innocently. “What do you mean?”

He gave her a steady look as he sipped his drink. “Give.”

“Give what?”

He looked impressed. “Latent rebellious streak? Did Ford put you up to this?”

“What? No, of course not!” If she attended with Ford, he would never allow them to be late.

Lyle’s lip curled. “Figures.”

“What does that mean?”

“He’s too soft.”

“He isn’t soft!”

“He is. His dad and brother walk all over him, and so will Maximus.”

“He isn’t soft,” she hissed as she waved at Magdalene, the wife of a prominent Swiss businessman. “He’s in Europe taking care of—"

“The Whittaker deal,” Lyle finished. “Second time he’s had to take care of something because his brother dropped the ball.” Lyle toasted someone with his glass, but made no move toward them. “Parker favors Tucker, which means he doesn’t try as hard. Ford is more knowledgeable and experienced, but he doesn’t stick up for himself. If he doesn’t put a stop to it now, his life will be miserable.” Lyle gave her a hard look. “And so will yours.”

“I’m sure we’ll be fine.”

He looked as if he wanted to argue, but something over her head caught his attention. “So, if you aren’t thumbing your nose at Maximus, what’s your excuse for being late?”

“Um…”

His eyes cut back to her. “You don’t even have a good excuse prepared?”

She ran her fingers through her hair before belatedly remembering her half-hearted attempt at curls. Shit. “The traffic was…”

He captured her hand and held it between them. They both stared at her black stained fingers. Her beloved rollerball pen just ratted her out. Damn.

“You’re writing again?”

She gave him a guilty smile. “No?”

He grinned. “You know you don’t have to hide that from me. I think you should pursue it. It’s a gift. You shouldn’t have to hide it.”

She took back her incriminating hand. “If only they felt the same way you do.”

“You don’t need their approval. It’s your life.”

“Easy for you to say.”

Lyle shook his head. “Maximus did a number on you three. When I have kids —"

“What’s the story?”

She turned to face her second brother-in-law. “Rami! You look great.”

“Ariana insisted on this.” Rami ran a hand over his immaculate tux. “I feel ridiculous.”

“You don’t look it,” she said, and belatedly remembered his odd greeting. “What story are you talking about?”

“The reason you’re unforgivably late.”

He said that with such a straight face that her smile faded.

“If we have to endure this torture, you have to suffer with us,” he finished.

She burst out laughing and fell into him, wrapping her arms around him as she tried to get a hold of herself. Rami had been reserved when she first met him, but in the two years that he’d been married to Ariana, she’d definitely come to appreciate his dry sense of humor. He detested these events with a passion and would much rather be holed up in his office surrounded by computer screens.

“Incoming,” Lyle muttered.

She looked up and saw her sisters bearing down on them. Colette wore a white gown that made her look like a goddess, while Ariana wore jet black. Her sisters towered over most of those present. Even though she had known them all her life, she still found herself wondering how it was possible that they looked so similar when they had different mothers. They had the same smile, same shade of glacial blue eyes, and same sensual walk. She wondered if Ariana’s supermodel mother taught them, or if they came by it honestly.

Two feet from their small circle, Colette stopped dead in her tracks. “What happened?”

She straightened. “What do you mean?”

Colette came forward, eyes sweeping her from head to toe. “Was it raining in Philadelphia?”

She blinked. “No. Why?”

“You look disheveled and your hair…”

She resisted the urge to fix her curls. “What about it?”

“It looks like you did it yourself.”

“Well…”

“Didn’t you get a clutch with your outfit?” Ariana butted in.

“Yes.”

“Then, why aren’t you using it?”

Because her notebook wouldn’t fit in it, but she wasn’t about to tell them that. “I like this one better.”

“It’s black,” Ariana said, as if she’d paired her blush-colored gown with a neon clutch.

“I don’t think it looks bad,” Rami said, which got him a quelling look from his wife.

“Why are you late?” Colette asked.

“She was studying for a test and lost track of time,” Lyle said blithely.

When Colette tossed him a disbelieving look, he shrugged.

“You’ve never been to grad school. The courses are brutal. They’re running her ragged.”

Colette’s mouth tightened in disapproval, but when someone caught her eye, her expression smoothed into a polite mask.

“Other people handle the coursework just fine,” Colette said through her teeth. “Minnie, I suggest you try to make yourself presentable before dinner and hope Dad doesn’t see you before then.” She shot a challenging look at her husband. “Maybe you should be there to continue to make excuses for her and see if Dad buys that story.”

“He doesn’t need to buy anything,” Lyle countered. “If she was here instead of two hours away in Philadelphia, this wouldn’t have happened.”

“We’re not doing this,” Colette said, smile radiant, but her tone was icy. “Jasmine has to tidy up, and we all have duties to attend to.”

Ariana looped her arm through Rami’s and led him away, while Lyle went after his wife, who had already joined a small group. That didn’t dissuade Lyle, who made a space for himself beside Colette and wrapped an arm around her waist. Colette stiffened, but didn’t pull away. She couldn’t in this setting, which is why Lyle was pushing it. Jasmine wasn’t sure what Lyle got out of provoking her sister. Colette wasn’t the teasing type. She was an ice queen, but Lyle was unfazed by the chill she emitted, even after four years. They had a strange relationship.

She skirted the crowd and tried not to make eye contact with anyone. She thought she was home free until a man stepped into her path. Her heart stuttered before she realized it was Ford’s father and not her own.

“Mr. Baldwin!”

“I was told you were running late,” Parker Baldwin said repressively.

“Yes, sir, I’m sorry about that. I was studying and time got away from me.”

He looked slightly mollified. “I assume you’re at the top of your class?”

When she hesitated, his brows came together.

“That’s my goal,” she said earnestly, but wasn’t sure he heard, since he was scanning her with the same thoroughness that Colette had. He didn’t look like he liked what he saw.

“This won’t happen again,” she said hastily.

“See that it doesn’t. In the future, I expect you to be on time. We have an

image to preserve, you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

He frowned. “What’s that?”

“What?”

He grabbed the same hand Lyle had. “What is this?”

"I was studying for finals."

He sighed and released her. “You're very different from your sisters.”

Her mood dipped as she heard the disappointment in his tone. “I’m going to be the best daughter-in-law, you'll see.”

“We’ll see. I guess it’s a good thing this will be a long engagement.”

Before she could figure out what he meant by that, he continued.

“Ford has many trips planned in the coming months. We’ll resume our monthly dinners once he’s back in the States.”

She nodded.

His eyes flicked down to her hands. “See that you take care of that. You only have one shot to make a good impression. Make sure it’s the right one.”

He walked off without another word. That was downright kind compared to her father’s reprimands.

She entered the bathroom and hurried to the sink to wash her hands. She bit back a curse when the ink didn’t fade. Oh, boy. She examined herself in the mirror. She didn’t look horrible, but she did look a bit… windswept? Most of her curls had unraveled. Not a surprise since she had done them so quickly.

A white towel entered her vision as the bathroom attendant offered one to dry her hands. Her eyes flicked to the pile of goodies she had.

“Do you have something for…?” She gestured to her hair.

The woman’s eyes lit. “Yes, yes. Sit.”

Relieved to let someone else take over, she sat on a bench and drummed her fingers on her knee as she let the film play out in her mind and drown out everything around her. She winced as the woman stuck bobby pins in her hair.

“There!”

She came out of her stupor and stared at her reflection. The attendant managed to twist her hair into an elegant updo, with the curls intact and framing her face.

“You’re a lifesaver! Thank you.”

She handed over a tip before she adjusted the fitted bodice of her gown and ran a hand over the flared skirt, then touched up her lips. She couldn’t resist locking herself in a stall to write another page in her notebook before she dashed out and blew a kiss to the attendant on her way out.

She joined the last stragglers filtering into the dining room and took in the

long, elaborately decorated table. She knew Colette and Ariana meticulously arranged seating, so every guest could take advantage of not only who was on either side of them but across as well. Nothing was left to chance. Servers helped locate name cards. She found her seat in the middle of the table, between two wives her sisters wanted her to entertain, so the men could discuss business. Dad sat at the head of the table, flanked by Colette and Ariana. They made a striking trio. All fair-haired, tall, and stylish—they were not only attractive, but intelligent and lethal in business. It was no wonder they graced the covers of countless magazines. It wasn't common knowledge that Maximus had another daughter. A part of her suspected that he didn't want her ruining their symmetry with her dark hair and shorter stature. She didn't try to capture his attention, even though it had been two months since she'd seen him. He had more important things on his mind and wouldn't appreciate the distraction. Although she contributed nothing to the party, he still insisted on her presence for appearance's sake. All that was required of her was to smile, look pretty, and not offend anyone. When she was younger, she assumed one day she would be up there with them, but now realized it would never happen. She hoped the Baldwins would include her when they hosted in the future. That was the only way she would be anywhere near the head of the table. It would never happen in her family.

As the first course was served, she introduced herself to the women on either side of her. It quickly became obvious why Colette had placed her between them. The older woman on her right was the wife of a French real estate investor and spoke very little English. Her relief was obvious when Jasmine uttered her tongue. The woman on her left was twenty years old and married to a man old enough to be her father. It was obvious she wasn't from their world and had no idea what she was doing. Jasmine guided the young bride through the meal and kept up a steady stream of conversation with her French companion. Between the two, she didn't have time to engage with those across from them, but realized Colette had taken care of that as well. A group of fashionistas weren't interested in conversing with anyone who hadn't attended the latest fashion shows.

As soon as people started to drift back to the ballroom, she tried to make her escape, but was brought up short by the young bride, Kimie, who latched on to her with both hands.

"Where are you going?"

She gave her a reassuring smile. "I have to powder my nose."

"But…" The girl cast a wary glance at her table companions. "I don't know how to do this!"

She glanced at Kimie's husband, who was oblivious to his bride's

insecurities, and ducked her head to whisper in her ear, “Just copy what everyone else is doing.”

“But if I make a mistake…”

She lifted her head and grinned at her. “Who cares?”

Kimie blinked. “What?”

“Joe loves you, right?”

Kimie blinked again and then gave her a tentative smile. “Yes.”

“That’s all that matters. Just stick to him, and you’ll be fine.” As color returned to Kimie’s cheeks, she patted her hand. “I’ll check on you in the ballroom.”

“Thank you,” Kimie said fervently before she released her.

She made a beeline to the bathroom, where she locked herself in a stall and wrote amidst gossip and minor emergencies that the bathroom attendant efficiently dealt with. Her pen raced across the page as the mysterious man on the hilltop continued his campaign. When the heroine ignored his requests to meet, he resorted to haunting her dreams.

There was a delicate knock on the door.

“Miss?”

“Yes?” she asked without looking up from the notebook.

“Is something wrong? You’ve been in there for forty minutes.”

She sprang up from the toilet and opened the door to find the red-cheeked attendant standing there. She was giddy with discovery, high on the story that continued to unravel in her mind. She hugged the attendant with an exuberance that made the woman squeak.

“Thank you!” Jasmine said with heartfelt sincerity before she hurried into the ballroom.

A server appeared at her side and handed her another flute. A sip confirmed it was non-alcoholic champagne. This was a good thing since she was already lightheaded. There was a smattering of couples swaying lazily on the dance floor, while others strolled on the terrace. She didn’t make a mark before she entered the crowd, as she had been taught to do. She dove and found herself drawn into a familiar group of men.

“Look who it is! It’s the future Mrs. Baldwin!”

She struck a demure pose before she offered her cheek to Matthew. “And what about you? When are you going to get married?”

“Now that Ford snapped you up, I don’t know if it’s ever going to happen.”

She snickered. “As if your mom would let you marry me.”

He grinned. “Ever since she caught me playing the groom for you and Daiyu, she labeled you two off-limits.” He turned to the other guys and bobbed his

brows. “My first threesome.”

As the guys chuckled, she scowled for show before she moved onto Lincoln. “How are you doing at Harvard?”

He shrugged. “I’m getting by.”

“He’s lying,” Julius announced. “He’s a nerd and coasting through his courses. It’s sickening.”

She raised her brows. “Yeah? Maybe you can give me some pointers.”

Lincoln gave her a once-over before he drawled, “I don’t think Ford would approve.”

As they ribbed one another, she resisted the urge to roll her eyes. They didn’t sound like the sons of the most powerful men in New York. As she aged and had become aware of the importance of alliances, she wondered if she would marry one of them. It always left her feeling unsettled and slightly ill because she knew them too well. She secretly hoped for a foreigner like Ariana. She had been stunned when Ford offered for her and Dad accepted. Ford was Ariana’s age, so she hadn’t grown up with him. She was grateful for a mature husband who was already established and ready to settle down, unlike her childhood playmates.

Although she could have spent the whole night with the guys, she caught sight of Colette, who jerked her chin, a signal for her to circulate. She excused herself and moved onto the next group, which had Kimie in it. As the men talked, she gave Kimie pointers about some of the more approachable wives who might take her under their wing before she got the signal to move on once again. She wondered idly if Colette had a timer in her pocket that vibrated every fifteen minutes.

It was easy to jump from one clique to the next, since she knew seventy percent of the guests. Dad’s circle didn’t change much. He only did business with people that had longevity. In this business, people fell from grace with shocking regularity. Some of these men, she’d known all her life. The only thing that changed with any frequency was the women on their arms. It was the same people, same jokes, and same look of derision from those who knew her origins. Most were polite, but there were some snide remarks about how grateful she should be that Ford had lowered himself to taking on the defective Hennessy. She let the negativity slide off her and sifted through names for her mystery man as she answered questions about her studies and accepted congratulations on her engagement.

When her energy flagged, she retired once more to the bathroom like a smoker in desperate need of a hit. The bathroom attendant’s brows rose, but she made no comment as she locked herself in a stall again.

Ten minutes later, she was fortified enough to face the masses. This time, she

hung back and examined the clusters of people who naturally gravitated toward one another. Dad was nowhere in sight. So far, she managed to avoid him, and if she had her way, she could get through the night without facing him. She'd made decent headway through the guest list. Was there anyone she hadn't…

Through a break in the crowd, she saw a lone figure standing on the opposite end of the ballroom. Several women passed in front of her, blocking her view, so she sidestepped to see if her eyes were playing tricks on her. No, it hadn't been a figment of her imagination. In a room filled with black tuxedos and muted colors, this man wore a navy sports jacket and jeans. A server wearing a suit passed in front of him, highlighting that even the hired help was dressed better than him. Was he someone's plus one who forgot to mention that this was a formal event? She was surprised he'd been allowed into the party. The fact that he hadn't left to change once he realized he wasn't dressed properly said a lot about his character. As much as people wanted to believe they wanted to stand out, it was actually the opposite. The need to fit in was a compulsion they couldn't control. Case in point, every man present was dressed in unrelieved black… except for the stranger, who seemed cool and composed even though he looked like a fish out of water.

He made no move to speak to anyone, and no one detached themselves from the crowd to go to him. Was he an invited guest? She crossed paths with everyone on the list Colette had given her two weeks ago, which meant he was a last-minute addition. An intriguing one. He was a large man. She could tell that even from this distance. His features were dark and exotic. Was he foreign? Maybe he didn't speak enough English to converse easily?

"Daydreaming?"

She jolted and glanced at Dad's crony, Warren, who she had deliberately avoided. How he managed to creep up on her was a mystery when he was huffing and puffing and dabbing sweat from his forehead.

"Uncle Warren," she said brightly, knowing he hated being addressed so. "I'm just making sure I haven't missed anyone. Have you made your rounds?"

"Course I have. You think I'd waste an opportunity like this?"

"Where's Angelica and Felicity?"

"At home where they belong."

His tone made it clear that he didn't believe his daughters had any business being here. At least Dad didn't have that sexist view of women. He expected his daughters to do better than their male counterparts.

"I think they'd surprise you if you gave them a chance," she said mildly.

"This is no place for women."

She didn't reply to that ridiculous statement, she just stared pointedly at

Colette, who was surrounded by a group of men who hung on to her every word. Warren followed her gaze and grunted.

"Maximus got lucky with Colette. She's one in a million."

She blinked. A compliment from Warren was as rare as seeing a man wearing jeans at Dad's events.

"My girls show no aptitude for business. You either got it or you don't." A pause and then, "I told Maximus he's wasting his time sending you to Wharton's. He lucked out with Colette and Ariana. Isn't that enough?"

She ignored the insult, having had enough experience with him to know he was just getting started. Warren was one of those guests that everyone avoided like the plague. He was crass and as subtle as a jack hammer, but everyone tolerated him because he was so good at making money. Warren was the epitome of rich and miserable. He complained about everyone and everything. She had never heard him say a kind word aside from that shocking compliment he'd just paid Colette, and she knew without a doubt he would never say it to her sister's face.

"Heard Ford offered for you," Warren continued.

She beamed. "Yes."

"He could have done better."

"Yes, he could have," she agreed, refusing to show that he was getting to her. And he wasn't. She was still riding high on her story. Even Warren couldn't put a damper on her excitement. And there was still the matter of the informally dressed man. Everyone was giving him a wide berth. It was Colette and Ariana's job as hostesses to make sure no one was excluded from the festivities. She tried to catch Colette's eye, but her sister was deep in conversation with Parker Baldwin, and she wasn't about to interrupt.

"Ford should have snapped up Ariana when he had the chance," Warren said darkly. "Don't know why he chose you."

"Maybe you should ask him," she said sweetly.

"I did."

"You did? What did he say?"

His watery, bloodshot eyes narrowed. "He said you suited him better."

Her heart swelled impossibly large. If Ford were here, she would have hugged him. Maybe he couldn't stand up to his brother, but he didn't take flak from Warren. Ford defended her and wouldn't be dissuaded from his choice, despite his father's and others' attempts to change his mind. "He's a sweetheart."

Warren scowled. "There's no room for that garbage in our world."

"Maybe there is," she said dreamily.

"Doesn't seem like he's getting much out of the deal." When she didn't take

the bait, he asked, “When’s the wedding?”

“After I graduate from Wharton’s.”

“Two years is a long engagement. Do you think that’s wise? Giving him that much time to change his mind?”

“Getting my degree is important to me, and he respects that.”

“You don’t need a master’s degree to pop out heirs.”

She gave him a brilliant smile that made his leer turn into a scowl.

“What's wrong with you, girl?” Warren demanded.

She shrugged. “I’m happy.”

"Why?"

She suspected that emotion wasn’t felt by many when in his presence.

“I don’t know,” she lied.

He leaned in. “You on something?”

“Nope.”

His lip curled. “Has Maximus ever gotten your head checked?”

She bit her lip to hold back her laughter. “Not yet.”

“I think you’re overdue. It’s not like you come from good stock, either.”

The taunt bounced off her, as had everything else that normally would have ruined her night. She felt invincible and indestructible. Nothing could penetrate the invisible armor her fantasy world constructed around her. Her eyes slid beyond Warren and locked gazes with the man at the other end of the room. She nodded and waved as if he beckoned to her. She looked back at Warren with a regretful smile.

“Looks like I missed some people and Dad’s telling me to circulate,” she lied.

“For all the good that's going to do you,” Warren grumbled before he waved her away. “Off with you.”

She rarely dropped her dad’s name, but when she did, she always got instant results. No one, not even Warren, would stand in the way of a direct order from Maximus. Even the rich and influential tread lightly around her father.

She left Warren and made her way toward the stranger who was still watching her. Her curiosity mounted with each step. He was racially ambiguous, with beautiful dark skin and hair. Usually, she was quite good at pegging someone’s ethnicity, but she was totally at sea. He had strong features like the Greeks, but was dark like an Italian or Brazilian. She sensed the force of his personality from across the room, yet his stillness and distance from everyone seemed to contradict the confidence emanating from him. She ratcheted up her smile as she neared, expecting him to exhibit some of the social cues she was used to, and got nothing. His impassive expression didn’t ease into a look of

welcome, but neither did he look away, meet her halfway, or extend his hand as she stopped in front of him. With her family being so tall, she was used to having people tower over her, but this guy was built like a bodybuilder—a far cry from the waif-like men and women in the room.

Up close, his features were even more striking… and distracting. He had the darkest eyes she'd ever seen, and facial scars that made her writer's mind race. He had a scar on his jaw and an intriguing one on his upper lip that she was trying not to stare at. A lesser woman might have been intimidated by his piercing stare, but she had grown up under a tyrant. If she could withstand her father and men like Warren, then she could take on anyone, including this… warrior? Her mind wandered to the mysterious stranger she had yet to unmask in her book. *He should have scars*, she decided on the spot. And maybe fathomless black eyes as well. Who knew such eyes could be so beautiful.

As the music stalled between songs, she realized she had been standing there for… she had no idea how long. She shook herself out of her reverie and extended her hand, even as a hot flush crept up her neck.

"I'm Jasmine," she said.

When he didn't take her hand, her brows shot up. Maybe he really didn't speak English. As her hand fell away, her mind blitzed through all the cultures that didn't do handshakes, but he didn't seem to fit any of them. Maybe he had been raised in an adopted country? She didn't speak Arabic or Thai, but perhaps he was used to customs where it wasn't common for the opposite sex to touch.

"Are you…?" she began in English before she finished in Russian. "Are you from Russia?"

His expression didn't change.

"Spanish?" She tried out a few words, but when he didn't react, she resorted to her limited Portuguese and received much of the same. "Italian?" Again, nothing. She moved onto French, German, and out of sheer desperation, Mandarin.

"I'm running out of languages here," she said ruefully.

"How many languages do you speak?"

His deep voice, so unexpected, made her jump.

Her mouth dropped. "You speak English?"

"How many languages?"

Her hands started to go to her hips before she realized how that would look and dropped them back to her sides. "Why didn't you answer me?"

"I wanted to see what you were going to do."

She'd dealt with her fair share of arrogant and elitist men, but even they played nice at these affairs because offending the wrong person could have dire

consequences. This guy… Apparently, he didn't give a shit.

"Where are you from?" she demanded.

"Colorado."

The jeans suddenly made sense, but if he was American, he should know better. Her eyes drifted over him and rested on his boots for a moment before she traveled up to his face, which revealed nothing of what he was thinking. She was used to temperamental men and had become adept at handling them, but this man…

Even now that the ice was broken, he had yet to crack a smile or introduce himself. It was hard to determine his age with that stony face. She couldn't tell if he was in his twenties or thirties. His size didn't help. She was unable to think of a classmate or even her childhood playmates who had half this guy's bulk. Who the hell was he?

"How many languages, Jasmine?"

At the sound of her name said in that dark rumble, her stomach did an odd flip.

"Five."

The silence that fell between them made her skin prickle.

"That must come in handy," he said finally.

She gave him an arch look. "It does, but usually, I don't have to go through every language I know to get someone to talk to me."

"Talking isn't my thing."

"It isn't mine either, but I rise to the occasion during these events." She paused deliberately, but when he gave her nothing, she waved her hand. "This is usually the point in the conversation where you'd give your name."

"Roth."

She perked up. "*James* Roth?"

His reaction was immediate. He tensed, that big body of his straightening to its full height. For the first time, his expression shifted, but not in the direction she'd hoped. Those eyes she'd thought so placid and beautiful began to glitter as a storm brewed. Her writer's mind immediately listed adjectives to describe the force of his personality that beat at her overstimulated senses. How fascinating.

"How do you know my name?"

"I overheard a conversation about you."

She tried to adjust the image in her mind with the man before her. She assumed a mathematical genius with a photographic memory would be dorky with a sweater vest and black framed glasses, not a brawny wrestler. His long list of accomplishments led her to believe he was in his late forties. She was sure he wasn't *that* old, and his odd personality quirks suddenly made more sense.

“You weren’t on the guest list.” When his eyes narrowed, she waved her hand. “The original one, I mean. The one I got two weeks ago.”

“Why would you have the guest list?”

“So I’d know who was attending.”

“Why?

She stared at him for a beat before she said, “This is my father’s party.”

There was a long pause and then, “Maximus Hennessy is your father?”

“Yes.”

His eyes traveled over her and paused on her hands, which she belatedly remembered were stained. Instinctively, they began to curl.

“I didn’t know he had another daughter.”

She kept the smile fixed on her face and ignored the pang in her chest. “I’m not as involved with the company as my sisters. I’m still in school.”

“You have a different mother than your sisters?”

That wasn’t a polite question, but she had a feeling he had no idea what normal, civil conversation consisted of. She also didn’t want to explain that Colette and Ariana had different mothers as well, so she nodded.

“What did you hear about me?” he asked brusquely.

“You graduated from high school at sixteen and got a scholarship to Stanford, where you studied mathematics and economics before you transferred to Columbia Business School. You’ve been playing the stock market since you were eighteen and…” She trailed off when she sensed she’d gone too far. “Sorry, James.”

“Roth.”

“Pardon?”

“I prefer to be called by my last name,” he said, coking his head. “And you know all this how?”

“I overheard my dad telling Colette about you. He was really impressed about what you’ve done.”

“Is that so?”

His flat tone made her frown.

“He invited you here tonight, didn’t he?”

He nodded.

She waited a beat, then two, before she blurted, “Then, why are you standing here by yourself?”

He stared at her for so long that she thought he wouldn’t answer. Just when she was about to give up, he spoke.

“I crossed paths with Maximus a month ago. He told me he was putting an investment pool together and that if I wanted in, I would have to attend some

gathering and get to know the other partners." He slipped his hand into his pocket, jaw flexing, as he finished, "But from the moment I arrived, neither he nor anyone here would acknowledge me." His eyes roved over her face. "Until you."

Her heart sank.

"You can understand my skepticism when you approached." He eyed her coolly. "I assume I'm being hazed?"

She couldn't meet his steady gaze. If she'd seen the final guest list, she was sure she would have seen a red asterisk next to his name. It meant not to engage. She was never given a reason why Dad singled out and isolated an unlucky guest, but Roth was quick on the uptake and hadn't crumbled under the pressure, made a scene, or walked out. He withstood the humiliation of being deliberately excluded and decided to wait it out.

"He wants me to see his connections and know I can't reach any of them without him, right?"

She was stunned by his calm, accepting manner.

"Unusual method, but effective."

She searched his face. "You're taking this really well."

"I got my foot in the door. That's enough for now."

Behind her, she could hear people talking. They were less than fifteen feet away, but for Roth, it might as well be miles. He watched the crowd intently, but made no move to engage. How many times had he been rebuffed before he got the message and retired to the sidelines? Once more, she took in his casual clothes. Had Dad lied to him about the dress code or not told him on purpose? The fact that he brazened it out spoke volumes. His confidence and poise were astounding. She remembered Dad's amazement that Roth had come so far with so little resources and connections. *Sheer grit*, Dad said, yet he invited Roth here with the sole purpose of humbling him. Dad and his friends were a bunch of bullies and liked to watch newbies flounder on their turf. He wanted to show Roth what his life could be like and the privileges that came with being part of his inner circle, but it came at a cost. He wanted Roth to grovel. How many hoops would Roth have to jump through before Dad deigned to throw him a bone? She couldn't imagine this man bowing down to her father, as so many others had. And why should he?

A strange burn sputtered to life in her belly. She had been born into this world and didn't feel like she belonged, but here was a man who made it on his own, and they were still treating him like an outsider. It wasn't right. He deserved their respect, not their disdain.

She whirled and eyed the crowd. It took her less than a minute to notice that

Dad and a handful of venture capitalists were missing. They were off discussing the deal that Dad teased Roth about and would never let him be a part of.

“Who did you speak to?” she asked sharply.

When Roth didn’t answer, she glanced back at him.

“Who did you approach before?”

Those eyes raked over her face before he rattled off the names of the most prominent venture capitalists. Dad must have warned them about Roth, but that didn’t mean everyone got the memo.

She scanned the crowd and was pleased to see her sisters were also absent. A strange recklessness stole through her.

She held out her hand. “Come.”

When no hand landed in hers, she clucked her tongue.

“What’s with you? Are you a germaphobe or—?”

A large hand engulfed hers. She blinked. His hands were rough and calloused. Most of the men in this room got regular manicures, and the others she interacted with didn’t have the types of jobs or hobbies that would cause their hands to feel like sandpaper. Is that why he hadn’t taken her hand when she offered hers the first time? She pushed away the theories that crowded her mind and stepped forward.

“Where are we going?”

“To make the most of a crappy night,” she said as she linked her arm through his and led him to the masses.

She saw people’s heads turn as they approached, and noted the narrowed eyes and sudden cold shoulders. Most had probably taken note of the investors' reactions to Roth, and were copying the behavior instead of finding out who he was and why he hadn’t been escorted out if he truly didn’t belong here.

There were some who would allow an introduction, but there was a group in here that would appreciate the full scope of Roth’s accomplishments if they would give him a chance. Befriending key venture capitalists would be ideal, but since that option wasn’t available, the next best thing would be for Roth to make a connection with someone else. All he needed was one person here to believe in him, and It didn’t have to be her father.

Matthew was the first to notice their approach. He elbowed Lincoln, who turned to see what caught his eye. Their grins faded, but she didn’t let that stop her. Julius and Preston instinctively backed up, creating a natural space in their circle that she and Roth fit into nicely.

“I wanted to introduce you to James Roth,” she said with a winning smile. “He was invited tonight by my father.”

“Was he?” Lincoln said dubiously.

“I thought he came to the wrong party,” Julius said snidely.

“No, he’s right where he should be,” she said brightly and hoped Julius read the threat behind her smile. “You know how selective Dad is about his guest list.”

Julius didn’t look impressed, but Matthew and Lincoln were no longer looking at Roth’s clothes and were eyeing him thoughtfully. When she made introductions, Matthew was the first to extend his hand. The look of surprise on his face when he shook Roth’s leathery hand confirmed her suspicions about why Roth avoided handshakes. The other guys grudgingly followed Matthew’s lead, except Julius who excused himself and joined another group. She hoped he wasn’t planning to follow in his father’s footsteps. No governor would go far if he was so prejudiced. She was tempted to bash him with her clutch, but she restrained herself and focused on the open-minded ones who remained and were waiting for more.

“What does Maximus want with you?” Lincoln asked.

“Dad’s been following his career,” she interjected before Roth could speak. “He started at Stanford and then graduated from Columbia.” She turned to Carlton. “That’s where you want to go, right?”

Carlton grunted and beckoned a server to order a drink.

“Roth invested in three companies that hit the Fortune 500.” As brows shot up, she allowed a dramatic pause before she added nonchalantly, “And that was before he graduated from Columbia, which was…” She turned to Roth. “How many years ago?”

When their eyes connected and held, she felt an odd flutter in her stomach.

“Six,” he said finally.

“Six what?”

For the first time, his lips twitched, drawing her gaze to the scar and his full lower lip.

“It’s been six years since I graduated.”

She jerked and turned back to their audience. She felt a blush creeping up her neck and couldn’t figure out why. She felt jittery and a little hot all of a sudden. She dropped her glass on a passing server’s tray. Maybe it wasn’t non-alcoholic champagne after all.

“Right. Six years,” she said. “And since then, he’s—”

“What were the startups?” Lincoln demanded.

She opened her mouth to list the two she remembered, but was relieved when Roth spoke up for himself.

She was pleased by the stunned silence Roth’s announcement left in his wake.

“I’m sure you all have those apps on your phone, don’t you?” she said airily and sensed the tide had just turned. “You know Dad keeps his eye on the competition.”

Matthew stepped forward. “What have you done since you graduated from Columbia?”

“I’ve invested in…”

The men moved in to tighten the circle, unconsciously blocking access to Roth until they were finished with him. If there was anything men like her father wanted above all else, it was to be the first to get in on an opportunity. If what she overheard about Roth was true, this guy was a whiz. That was the only reason Dad invited him in the first place. He didn’t bother with the ordinary. Only exceptional talent would pique his interest.

She slipped her hand from Roth’s arm and gripped her clutch in front of her. He glanced at her briefly, but she kept her gaze straight ahead and caught sight of Lyle, who was ten feet away in another group. He frowned at her. She gave him a puzzled look as if she had no idea what he was upset about before she deliberately looked away and spotted Rami, who also had his eye on her. He shook his head. She tipped her nose in the air. All she did was make some introductions. That wasn’t a crime. And if Dad questioned her, she could say she had no idea who Roth was. The conversation she overheard between her father and Colette occurred months ago.

She kept an eye on the doors and wondered how much time they had before Dad and his cronies returned. She tuned back into the conversation and was pleased that Roth had taken center stage. His deep voice carried without trying. People in other circles were sending curious looks their way. She wasn’t sure whether it was Roth’s voice or what he was talking about that was drawing attention, but she had to look down to hide her delight. Maybe she didn’t have an affinity for business like her sisters, but left to her own devices at events such as this, she entertained herself by discovering the connections between those assembled. She had a great memory and a knack for faces that made her a natural networker. Her sisters were privy to industry secrets and trends, but she knew whose wife was expecting, a recent loss, or who was thinking of selling a private island. Once in a while, small, personal details she picked up gave them the edge.

Looking down as she was, she focused on her feet and wriggled her toes. If her sisters saw her unpainted toes, the lecture would never end. She needed to get out of here before they returned. Her eyes flicked to the five pairs of shiny shoes pointed in her direction before she focused on Roth’s boots. She suppressed a grin. Dad must have had a heart attack when he saw him. She

wished she had the balls to do such a thing. What was Roth's story? She knew the footnotes of his life and wanted to know more, but doubted she would get it. He wasn't the sharing type, although now that he was talking about business, he certainly had a lot to say. Despite his appearance, he was articulate, educated, confident. A glance around told her he had a captive audience. James Roth would go far, with or without Dad's help.

She zoned out as they began to discuss market trends. The notebook in her clutch called to her. She now had a face for the mysterious stranger. She tried to remember the sound of his voice, but all she could hear was Roth's deep rumble. She needed a name. Something bold, unique, not easily forgotten…

Roth.

What kind of name was that? It was unusual, but it suited him. It wasn't one people would easily forget, and that was the point. It was better to be memorable rather than so achingly polite that no one remembered you. Roth made an impression with his casual clothes. Most would write him off, but those who bothered to give him five minutes realized quickly that they were meeting someone who was going places.

Less than ten minutes in, Matthew turned and called out, "Hey, Don!"

It took great effort to keep the proud smile off her face as Don Langdon made his way over to them. Don was in his mid-forties and deep in his career, unlike her friends, most of whom were still in school or under the rule of their families. Don was in a different league and exactly what she'd been hoping for.

As Matthew started introductions, she let out a satisfied sigh. Her work here was done. She took a step back and froze when a hand closed over her wrist. She had no doubt who that rough hand belonged to. She glanced at Roth, who was deep in conversation with Don. She gave an experimental tug and received a slight squeeze in return. What the…

Don focused on her. "Jasmine."

His tone indicated that he thought she should move on, so they could talk business.

"Don," she acknowledged and tugged again.

"Jasmine's provided valuable insight this evening. Maximus's influence, no doubt," Roth said.

Don gave her a considering look. "I heard you're going for your master's degree."

She inclined her head.

"Colette didn't go to graduate school, did she?"

"Um, no, she didn't. Neither did Ariana."

"Impressive," Don murmured and smiled. "You want to show up your sisters,

don’t you?”

Her eyes rounded. “N-no. It’s not that at all—"

He held up a hand. “I get it. I have four siblings myself.”

“But I…”

Don turned back to Roth. “What do you think of the current market?”

She subsided into stunned silence as they continued their discussion. Here she was, thinking everyone would know that Dad was sending her to grad school because she needed the extra pointers, while others thought she was in competition with her sisters. As if! She tugged on her hand again and received another gentle squeeze. What the hell? Roth was in. He didn’t need her hanging around. Matthew and Lincoln were no longer listening to the conversation, but focused on the hold Roth had on her. A little panicked, she took her place beside him again and was relieved when his hand dropped away. Apparently, he wanted her beside him. She wasn’t sure what to think of that.

Matthew and Lincoln excused themselves when Don called on Simon Vogt, a partner of his. Simon had heard of Roth, but had never met him before. When he clasped Roth’s hand, she knew before the handshake was over that Roth was categorically in. Don and Simon took over the conversation. She tensed when Roth disagreed, but both men seemed delighted by his answers, which was strange. Simon called on two more men to join their group. Roth didn’t bat an eye when he was introduced to Len Weinberg, a real-estate mogul and one of the richest men in the city. She held her breath as Len shook Roth’s hand.

“This one’s not afraid of hard work,” Len said approvingly.

“No, I’m not,” Roth agreed.

Len glanced at her. “Jasmine.”

She inclined her head. “Mr. Weinberg.”

The urge to disappear was overwhelming, but she wouldn’t risk having Roth grab her in front of these men. Her palms began to sweat as the business talk continued. There were subtle probes into his background, which Roth answered with the same straightforward honesty that he’d shown thus far. He was an only child and raised by a single mother. Even more impressive. She would have assumed he grew up under a hard-working father who instilled the values he needed to make it in the business world.

Activity near the ballroom doors made her heart sink. Dad and his venture capitalists reentered the room. They weren’t going to do the deal here and now; this was just the first step. They would gather at a later date without everyone present to nail down the specifics. Women gravitated to their men. This was the beginning of the end of the party, a time when she could make her getaway, but she was stuck.

As Dad scanned the room and paused on their group, she felt the sharp bite of panic. All feelings of invincibility, joy, and rebellion crumbled as Dad's eyes narrowed. Colette appeared at his side and immediately zeroed in on them. Even as her eyes flared, Dad started forward. Colette stayed where she was, but reached up to touch her pearls in a nervous gesture she didn't exhibit often.

Jasmine's palms began to sweat as Dad bore down on them, cutting through the crowd, who gave way to their angry host. He was dressed in a black suit with his signature red silk tie. He looked dignified, arrogant, intimidating. When she was younger, she was convinced there had been some mistake, and she had another father out there. One who was normal, worked a nine to five, and actually liked her. She'd given up that dream, but it flared to life again as he neared. Maximus should have stopped at one daughter. Colette completed him.

Her temples throbbed with anxiety as he stopped behind Len, who must have felt the heat emanating from him because he turned.

"Maximus!" Len said jovially and clapped her father on the shoulder. "I was just meeting Roth, the young man you invited. Very impressive work he's done. It's nice to hear some people still have that hunger that you and I did, huh?"

Maximus didn't acknowledge Roth or what Len said. Instead, he looked down his nose at his friend. "I need to speak to Jasmine."

Used to her father's dark moods, Len teased, "Catering emergency?"

When Maximus glared at him, Len glanced at her. "You better go, missy."

As all eyes focused on her, Jasmine felt the blood drain from her face. Making a scene was her worst nightmare, and this was ten times worse than she imagined. She gave the men an apologetic smile before she looked up at Roth.

"It was a pleasure meeting you," she said and inclined her head before she backed away.

There was an awkward silence as she rounded the group and followed Dad across the ballroom. He cut through the dance floor, interrupting his guests and uncaring who witnessed his fury. Jasmine scurried on the outskirts as Dad exited the ballroom. She passed Colette, who didn't meet her eyes. He passed the security guards in front of the elevators and started down a hallway. She was relieved until he halted too close to their audience for comfort.

"You wanted my attention, Jasmine? Now you have it."

"I didn't—"

"You were an hour late."

"Yes, I—"

"You would think someone who attends Wharton's would know how to tell time."

She flushed. "I can tell time."

“Then I guess you don’t think this party was important enough for you to fit into your schedule.”

“No, that’s not—"

“Don’t give me excuses. You know I don’t believe in them.”

A server walked past with an empty tray. The woman’s eyes were fixed straight ahead, but Jasmine knew she heard every word. He didn’t bother taking her to a room to lecture her. No, he did it out in the open. That was part of her punishment, to be publicly humiliated. She assumed as she aged that would change, but he still lectured her like she was eight years old, and she felt just as flustered and helpless as she always did. No one stepped in to save her because they would be treated just as severely. It was the reason no one messed with her dad. He was quick to shoot down anyone who got in his way, and that applied to Warren, Parker Baldwin, or her.

“If it was up to me, I would have left you in Philadelphia, but Parker requested your presence. He already sees you as Baldwin and was under the impression that you could arrive on time, be presentable, and make everyone believe Ford wasn’t making a huge mistake.” Glacial blue eyes slid over her. “You failed on every account.”

She looked down. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t say that stupid word,” he barked, making her and three passing servers jump. “People apologize and think that’s going to make everything better. It doesn’t. It’s just an excuse to continue doing stupid things. You want to prove you’re sorry? Don’t do anything that would give you a reason to say it in the first place. How about that?”

She held up her hand in wordless defense as his words battered her. She wasn’t prepared for him to grasp her hand and hold it up to the light.

“What the hell is this?”

She shut her eyes, so she wouldn’t have to witness the rage she could hear in his voice.

“You couldn’t even clean yourself to come to my party or—"

The clutch she had under her arm was ripped away. Her eyes flew open in horror, and she even leapt forward to snatch it back, but one look at his face made her freeze in her tracks. He unfastened the clutch, reached in, and withdrew the notebook she’d been frantically writing in all night. He held it up like a damning piece of evidence. A muscle ticked in his jaw.

“What is this?”

“It’s nothing,” she whispered.

“Oh, yeah?”

Her heart stopped as he flipped it open and began to skim the pages. She

hoped her sloppy handwriting was too illegible for him to read. She died a thousand deaths as she stood there, every fiber of her being screaming at her to grab that notebook and protect it. When he spoke, the invisible shield that had protected her vanished.

“A girl inherits powers from the mother she’s never met,” he quoted. “This enables her to see things before they happen and gives her the gifts she needs to save her kingdom.”

She couldn’t meet his scathing glare.

“I thought you outgrew this.”

She flinched.

“You weave fantasies around your mother when I’ve told you how disloyal she was, how selfish. Is that who you emulate?”

“No, I…”

“There was nothing exceptional about her. Do you want to follow the path of someone ordinary? Someone easily forgotten and erased from history as if they’d never been? Is that what you want?”

She resisted the urge to shrink back. He had never hit her, but then again, he didn’t have to. His words struck harder and left more damage than a blow.

“You live a privileged life. Do you know how many people would give anything to have a fraction of the opportunities you were born into? You take so much for granted. You have no idea what kind of life you could have had if your mother got her way.”

“Got her way?” she echoed and met his eyes for a split second before she went back to staring at a painting over his left shoulder.

“Your mother was an opportunist, a spoiled brat. She didn’t know when to stop.”

Questions buzzed in her head, but she didn’t dare utter them. The angrier he was, the quieter he became, and nothing instantly pissed him off like her mother. Dad didn’t sit Jasmine on his knee and read her fairytales like most fathers. No. He didn’t allow life lessons to be screened behind tales of dragons, spells, and heroism. He was too pragmatic for that. He told her stories about the mistakes and failures of everyone around them, especially her mother.

“With all the money I spend on your education, this is the best you can do? Write fantasies? Where the hell is that going to take you? You and your sisters are already at a disadvantage being female. You have to work three times as hard as a man to be accepted, respected. Do you understand that?”

“Yes.”

“No, you don’t.”

He stopped a passing server and tossed her notebook onto a tray laden with

dirty dishes.

“Get rid of that.”

Jasmine’s eyes filled with tears.

“Sir?” the server said tentatively.

“Now.”

Dad didn’t raise his voice, but then again, he didn’t need to. His soft command was infused with the promise of dismissal. The server immediately turned on her heel and left the room.

She pressed her trembling lips together.

“I went too easy on you,” he said quietly. “You’re lazy, complacent, ungrateful.”

She shook her head. “I’m not—"

“You don’t tell me what you are. *I* tell *you* what you are,” he hissed. “You need to grow up and stop romanticizing life and see it for what it is. It’s war. If I wasn’t your father, who would you be?”

He didn’t say it, but she heard what he wanted to say. If she wasn’t a Hennessy, she would be nothing.

“I thought your path was set when Ford offered for you, but after a night like this, you think Parker still has a favorable view of you? Late, dirty, and flinging my orders in my face?” He slipped his hands into his pockets. “Did you memorize the guest list or not?”

“N-not the most recent list.”

If she wasn’t his daughter, she would have been fired on the spot.

“Did you know who he was when you went up to him?”

She shook her head.

“And after?”

She thought about lying, but knew he could read her like a book. “I overheard you and Colette talking…”

A muscle ticked in his cheek. “Why did you do it?”

She opened her mouth, closed it, and then took a step back, shaking her head.

“You felt sorry for him?” He cocked his head. “You think I should welcome him in when it’s taken us generations to be where we are today? You think we got here by being *nice*? Through playing patty cake with the guy next to us who wants the same things we do? You think it’s cruel to make him work for his spot? No one appreciates what comes easy. You’re proof of that.”

His words were an invisible lash that scored so deeply, she wasn’t sure it would heal.

“Your grandfather lay a foundation of grueling work and sacrifice so you and your sisters could thrive. It’s easy to be generous when you aren’t the one who

spent years sowing seeds of trust with that contact. If he's meant to be a part of our world, he'll come in where he belongs—at the bottom. If he really wants to be here, he'll take whatever we throw at him. You need perseverance and tenacity to survive in this world. Got it?"

She nodded.

"You'll never get it," he said harshly. "You've done enough damage for one night. You're dismissed."

She turned and saw there were quite a few people congregated in front of the elevators, studiously ignoring them. Even as shame sank its teeth in, she raised her chin and started forward.

"Jasmine."

She halted and reluctantly turned. "Yes?"

"How did you get their attention?"

She had no doubt what he was referring to and knew the answer was going to bury her even deeper, but there was no use lying. "I used the stats you gave Colette."

A muscle ticked in his jaw. "Leave."

CHAPTER 7



Jasmine awoke suddenly. She forced herself to lay still as flashes of what happened last night played behind closed eyelids. Her ears strained for any hint of sound. Even though she sensed she was alone, she waited several minutes before she cracked one eye open and peered around the room. The bedroom door was closed, cutting her off from the rest of the penthouse, and the curtains were drawn, leaving her in near darkness. The only illumination came from the bathroom, where the door had been left ajar.

Her body felt leaden and achy. She would have lain there indefinitely if the overwhelming need for cleanliness didn't take over. She rolled out of bed and made her way to the bathroom. Gray light streamed through the large bathroom window, showing another dreary day, but at least the rain had stopped.

She stepped in the shower and spent an inordinate amount of time adjusting the taps. The mundane task kept her focused on the here and now instead of the memories beating at her, demanding acknowledgment. Part of her wanted to analyze the crap out of everything he had revealed, but a greater part of her knew she wasn't strong enough. She may be on her feet, but her insides had been ripped to shreds by his verbal shrapnel. Like a soldier in enemy territory, she didn't have time to process what happened. She had to keep moving. Any moment now, she could be ambushed. She banished their skirmish to the far recesses of her mind and relished her solitude. She had a sneaking suspicion that moments like this would be few and far between.

She focused on the little things like the stone beneath her feet, the steam wafting around her, and the draft at her back before she stepped under the heated waterfall. She meticulously scrubbed and lathered until her hair was a pyramid of bubbles. She paused several times to clear the misty glass to make sure she was alone. When she was squeaky clean, she left the shower.

Before she reentered the bedroom, she pressed her ear to the door and listened before she poked her head in. She was relieved to find the room still dark and empty. The invisible band around her chest loosened ever so slightly. She opened the curtains and searched for her suitcase. After looking under the bed, her eyes flicked to the closet. She approached cautiously and braced herself before she flipped on the lights. The sight of her meager belongings hanging across from his caused that tight band to snap. She snatched her jeans from the hanger with such force that it clattered to the ground, then swiped her makeup bag from the shelf and stalked into the bathroom, slamming the door in her wake.

She avoided eye contact with herself as she styled her hair and didn't bother with the eyeliner since her hands had a fine tremor she couldn't control. Even after she was dressed, she dallied in the bathroom, consumed with dread over what lay beyond that closed bedroom door. It was only after she got a glimpse of herself in the mirror that she realized how pathetic she looked. She hadn't chewed her nails in years. Squaring her shoulders back, she strode out of the bathroom and through the master. As her hand closed over the doorknob, she had a fleeting thought that he might have locked her in, but it turned easily in her grasp. The empty hallway was anti-climactic. She wasn't sure what she was expecting, but the eerie silence wasn't it. She fully expected him to press his advantage and continue his attack until she was defeated and on her knees, begging for mercy.

Even though she was inwardly quaking, she charged forward with her head held high. The sharp clip of her boots, announcing her presence long before she reached her destination made her cringe, but it couldn't be helped. Although her strut would have made Daiyu proud, her palms were perspiring by the time she reached the living room. The sight of another empty room didn't make her feel better. What game was he playing?

She eyed the hallway that led to his office. Even though everything in her rebelled at the thought of going to the scene of the crime, retreat wasn't an option with a man like him, and she had to be certain. She stopped in the open doorway of his office and stared, uncomprehending, at the unoccupied desk. She wasn't in any shape to withstand further trauma, but for him to go about his business as if nothing happened… Her distressed gaze scanned his office. If it wasn't for the aches, she may have been convinced that her lurid memories were a figment of an overactive imagination that had finally lost touch with reality. A shiny new computer was in place of the one she broke. Everything was as neat and tidy as it had been before he… She took a step back and paused when a light glinted off an object on his desk. She looked left and right before she dashed in

to retrieve her phone and left just as quickly.

She detoured to a formal dining area with seating for ten as she swiped through her notifications. No message or missed calls from Roth. He retreated. Why? To let her lick her wounds? No. More likely, what had utterly devastated her didn't even rank on his conscience. He'd gone about his business as usual and had already dismissed what happened as adventurous bed play. She took a shaky breath and dropped her face into her hands as she tried to keep her shit together. Less than a week into this marriage and she was a mere shadow of herself already. She didn't know how to feel about him, his actions, or the greater implications of his harsh truths.

She raised her head and eyed the flower arrangement in the middle of the table as her mind raced. She needed a safe place where she could regroup. That wasn't here. It seemed as if the walls had absorbed her pain and were amplifying it back at her tenfold. Were these the new memories Roth wanted to make here? Her stomach churned as she left the dining room and made her way back to the living room where she paced as she dialed Johan, who answered halfway through the first ring.

"Mrs. Roth," he acknowledged.

She cut through the niceties. "I need to get out of here."

"When would you like to leave?"

She had her finger raised, ready to argue, but his response caught her off guard. "What?"

"We're ready when you are."

She wasn't going to question her first stroke of good luck. "I want to go now."

"I'll ask Mo to get the car. I'll be up in a few minutes. Does that work?"

"Yes," she said as she rushed down the hallway back to the master suite. "Thank you."

She fetched her work bag from the bedroom closet. By the time she returned, Johan was waiting for her. If she wasn't paying attention, she would have missed the faint narrowing of his eyes as they flicked over her.

"What?"

His expression immediately blanked. "I'm sorry?"

"Is something wrong?"

"No," he said quickly and stepped to the side and inclined his head. "After you."

She folded her arms over her chest. "If something doesn't look right, just say so."

His neck flushed a dull red. "I apologize." Then he held out a hand. "May I

take your bag for you?”

“I got it,” she said as she strode ahead of him.

She stood before the elevator and examined herself. The doors were so shiny, they served as a full-length mirror. She may be wounded, but at least she didn’t look it. She was dressed down in jeans, boots, and trench coat. Even with makeup, she still looked a bit too pale. The area around her eyes was a little puffy, but only someone who knew her well would be able to detect it.

Johan tapped the keypad to call the elevator. Her fingers twitched in the pockets of her coat as she counted the passing seconds. What was taking so long? Gale-force winds tore through her insides as her patience stretched to the breaking point. She had to get out of here.

As the doors opened, her control snapped. She lurched forward, even turning sideways to fit through the narrow opening, and hit the button for the lobby before remembering another code was needed. She stared straight ahead as Johan boarded and calmly typed in the second set of numbers. Her hands balled into fists as they traveled down. He didn’t look at her, but she knew he was cataloging everything about her. Mo and Johan were nothing like her father’s security, who were curt, usually ex-military, and looked right through her. They saw her as a job and hadn’t paid close enough attention to her, which is why she was able to ditch them and run off to Colorado. Mo and Johan wouldn’t be easily fooled. They treated her like a flight risk right from the start when they blocked her exit in that hospital waiting room. She never went anywhere unescorted and the only time she was left to her own devices was in Roth’s domain where there was no escape.

When they reached the lobby, she stopped herself from bolting and making a spectacle of herself. Nonetheless, her speed walk forced Johan to quicken his pace to stay by her side. She held up her hand to acknowledge the staff standing at attention at the front desk before they walked outside. Mo was at the curb. She didn’t allow Johan to open her door, but did it herself and plopped down in the back seat.

“Mrs. Roth,” Mo acknowledged.

“Drive,” she ordered.

“Where to?”

“Anywhere. Just…” She waved her hand as Johan ducked into the front passenger seat. “Away.”

The moment Johan was buckled in, they pulled away from the building. The invisible weight on her chest lifted. She needed a place to write. There were hundreds of coffee shops in this city, but she needed to find the right one. As she started her search, she was interrupted by an incoming call from Angelica Hart.

She sent the call to voicemail and fell down a rabbit hole of social media reviews, images, and menus as Mo cruised through traffic.

She leaned between the front seats and held out her phone. “Doesn’t this look good?”

Mo and Johan looked at the picture of fancy latte art before they gave identical shrugs.

“Their food is highly rated,” she added as an afterthought.

That seemed to be enough for Mo because he asked, “What’s the address?”

As she rattled it off, Mo nodded. “We’re not far from Notting Hill.”

She sat back as Angelica called again. She didn’t have to answer to know what her classmate that she hadn’t talked to in six years wanted. Ever since Dad died, she had been bombarded by calls from people who assumed she was looking for a cause or idea to invest in. Dad gave her a gift by bestowing riches upon her, but he also painted a target on her back. She assumed she would live the quiet life of a writer, but Dad forced her back into the spotlight with her inheritance. Colette could have expanded Hennessy & Co or made remarkable deals with this money. Why had he given everything to the daughter who had never participated in the business world?

Her fingers restlessly tapped against the door handle. Maybe the upcoming marriage announcement wasn’t such a bad thing after all. Roth’s reputation preceded him. Everyone would back off once they found out they were married. Everyone would assume her husband would take over her inheritance or at least have a say in what to do with it. No one would interfere for fear of incurring his wrath. The monster fending off other predators. How fitting.

“I’ve fooled many people, but Mom always saw me for what I am, and now you see it too.”

She lurched forward. “How much further?”

“About ten minutes.” Mo eyed her in the rearview mirror. “Is something wrong?”

She shook her head as she fingered her throat, which felt like it was closing. “No.”

She couldn’t stay still, not when her insides were writhing. Her legs bounced as she tried to expend energy. There was a storm raging inside her. She needed an outlet, or she was going to combust. Writing was her preferred coping mechanism, but if she were home, she would have gone for a run around the lake to take the edge off. Instead, she had to sit in the back of this fucking car and pray that she wouldn’t lose it before they made it to the coffee shop.

Desperate for a distraction, she turned to her phone and logged onto social media. Maybe someone had posted a hilarious meme or a video of puppies

frolicking in a meadow. She logged off less than five minutes later. She didn't think it was possible to feel worse than she already did, but she was wrong. Social media was a form of Russian Roulette, and today she got blasted. Readers were upset that there was no word on book five. A few messaged to tell her they were giving up on her. Another person tagged her in a one-star review, while another ranted on her public page. *You're sick. Your books aren't romance. This is toxic and a poor example of what a good, healthy relationship should be. I've reported your book to…* She passed a hand over burning eyes. Today wasn't her day. She had a feeling tomorrow wouldn't be either.

She stared out the window, but couldn't see a damn thing through the tears. It was a struggle to get through the day in one piece. How could she write when her world was crumbling around her?

She was relieved when they pulled up to the café. She and Johan went inside while Mo parked the car. The dim lighting, comfy furniture, oversized coffee cups, and relaxed ambiance was everything she could have hoped for.

She and Johan were still perusing the menu when Mo joined them. As she stepped up to the counter, she realized they had the worker's undivided attention. Even though Mo and Johan had dressed down from their normal suits to slacks and coats, they were still drawing quite a few curious looks. She suspected it had more to do with their striking contrasts than anything else. Mo was dark-skinned with curly black hair, a full beard, and dark brown eyes, while Johan was bald with alabaster skin and blue eyes.

She placed her order and turned to her guards. "My treat."

She stepped off to the side as they asked questions about the menu. She looked over the patrons and focused on a pair of two women in their seventies. One was dressed in shades of purple, while the other dressed in sunshine yellow. They were giggling like schoolgirls and seemed to be having the best time. Her lips twitched, but she was incapable of making them curve into an actual smile. She wished she could sit at their table and get lost in their lives, so she wouldn't have to think about her own. Had she ever been that happy? She was so lost in her thoughts that when she looked back at the counter, it was to see Johan pocketing a black credit card. One guess who that belonged to.

"I told you, I was going to get it," she snapped.

"He pays your way," Johan said mildly.

"*I* pay my way."

Johan didn't argue with her, but shuffled her to the side as a group of students came in. She turned on her heel and saw that Mo had snagged a corner table in the back. She scooted onto the bench seat and tuned into the conversations around her as she pulled out her notebook. Two tables down, a

woman complained to her friend about her nightmare of a mother-in-law. Jasmine's pen raced over the page as she tried to capture the woman's gestures and colorful slang. She had to stop by the concierge desk later, so they could help her decode these phrases later.

After their drinks were delivered, she glanced up in time to see Mo grimace after taking a sip from his cup.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing," Mo grunted.

"He's particular about his tea," Johan explained and took a long drag from his cup. "My coffee's phenomenal."

"You can try one of mine if you like," she said.

Mo curled his lip at her matcha latte and chai. "I'll pass."

She took pictures of the latte art before she went back to her notebook. It didn't matter what she wrote. All that mattered was that words flowed from the tip of her pen. She rode the cadence and rhythm of the surrounding conversations. It was comforting to know that regardless of what anyone's financial status, background, or country, they all had similar problems.

She filled the page with observations and details, no matter how trivial. Even as Roth's voice beat at her consciousness, she dedicated a whole paragraph to describing a woman's neon yellow hair, even pulling up her thesaurus on her phone to find a better word to replace the word 'vibrant.' She was neck-deep in avoidance mode. Roth blasted a hole in her boat. Instead of patching up the hole, she was tossing buckets of water overboard. If she didn't deal with the hole soon, she'd go under, but she couldn't bring herself to deal with it yet.

"Excuse me."

She glanced at the woman at the next table, who was staring transfixed at her ostentatious wedding ring. The diamond reflected the meager light and glittered like the million-dollar jewel it was.

"Is that real?" the woman asked in hushed tones.

Jasmine gave her a pained smile. "I wish," she lied.

The woman's disappointment was obvious. She sighed and gave a philosophical shrug. "We can dream, right?"

"Right."

As the woman finished her drink and left, Jasmine dropped her hand onto her lap. When her bare hand emerged, Mo frowned, but he didn't voice his opinion. She was here to blend in, not draw attention to herself, which she was doing despite herself. Maybe it was the fact that they were sitting together and not talking that made people stare.

"Talk," she said.

“Pardon?”

She waved her hand. “Act normal. Talk to each other. Don’t look like bodyguards.”

For a full minute, neither spoke, and then Mo said, “What shall we talk about?”

“Did you ever see *John Wick*?” Johan asked.

As their deep rumbles became part of the white noise, her mind unspooled. Normally, she wouldn’t be able to concentrate in a noisy environment, but in this case, the hectic environment canceled out her own mental chaos. The more she wrote, the better she felt. With a pen, she could build herself a portal to an alternate universe where she could forget her reality. She ignored the food when it arrived and focused on alleviating the crushing weight on her chest.

At some point, her observations switched to memories. She found herself recounting her time in London as a child. She spent most of her time observing the city from a hotel room as her sisters and Dad took care of business. She had been thrilled to attend the odd business dinner, but for the most part, she was largely ignored. That was nothing new. It was odd to think back on how grateful she had been to be included in any capacity, even if the only time she saw her family was during the plane ride.

I knew right from the start that you didn’t fit into your father’s world. You didn’t measure up to your sisters and were unhappy, neglected, lonely…

The pen halted as his words slipped through her flimsy armor and seeped into her like poison.

I didn’t expect you to be so accommodating.

She closed her eyes as black spots flickered on the edges of her vision.

“Mrs. Roth?”

She gripped the table with both hands as panic grabbed her by the throat and threatened to make her heart burst. She panted, tears slipping down her cheeks as she tried to seize control of her body that was going through a meltdown she couldn’t stop.

“Jasmine.”

One of them had slipped up and called her by her first name. If she wasn’t having a heart attack, she would have teased them about it. She panted for breath, taking great gulps of air before a hand clamped on her nape and forced her head down.

“Call 999,” Mo barked.

She grabbed hold of his shirt and tugged as she took a shuddering breath before her airway opened enough for her to breathe.

“N-no.”

“We should have a doctor look her over,” Johan said.

Again, she shook her head and tried to speak, but her mouth was bone dry.

Mo released her nape and crouched beside her. “Tell me what you need.”

She clasped her hands between her thighs and tried to control the compulsion to rock back and forth. Therapists called it self-soothing. Dad called it weakness.

“Mrs. Roth?”

She cowered in the bottom of the boat in knee-deep water and willed it all to go away.

A firm grip on her knee forced her into the present.

Mo searched her eyes for less than five seconds before his gaze cut to Johan. “Call him.”

“No!”

Desperate to stop him, she reached for her guard and knocked a plate off the table. Only Mo’s quick reflexes stopped the plate from crashing to the floor.

“I…” She struggled to get her thoughts together when her body was being wracked by painful tremors. “Don’t.”

Her voice was husky with strain as she battled the tide. She thought being around others would stop her from having a breakdown, but she only managed to put if off for an hour and cause a scene in public.

Johan frowned at her, clearly unsure what to do, while Mo placed a glass of water in front of her.

“Drink.”

She obeyed, lifting the glass and spilling it a bit before he steadied it for her.

“Eat,” Mo clipped.

“I-I don’t think I can.”

Mo jerked his chin at Johan. “Make the call.”

She swore and reached for the sandwich. She bit into the bacon, lettuce, tomatoes, and guacamole. Johan retook his seat while Mo stood beside her, arms crossed over her chest as she struggled to eat. He didn’t take his seat until she took three bites.

When she tried to put her sandwich down, Mo clucked his tongue. She glared at him, but when he stuck his hand into his pocket, silently threatening to call Roth, she forced herself to eat.

They didn’t ask what that episode was about or what was going on with her. They didn’t have to. Her refusal to let them call her husband told them all they needed to know. Being Roth’s security for four years meant they knew him better than most. What secrets were they privy to? She had a feeling they knew what Roth was capable of and wouldn’t be surprised by anything she said. She was pathetically grateful they didn’t ask questions, but their intense scrutiny was

getting on her nerves.

"Tell me something," she said gruffly.

"What?"

"Anything. Distract me."

"I have nine brothers," Mo said.

She stopped, mid-chew. "What?"

"I have nine brothers," he repeated. "I'm the oldest."

He began to list their names, spouses, and children. Slowly, the sound of that howling wind faded and the cold that had encased her heart began to thaw.

"How many nieces and nephews do you have?"

"Forty-two."

She dropped her sandwich. "How do you remember their birthdays?"

"My calendar is very full."

Her gaze moved to Johan. "And you?"

"I don't have family."

"Oh."

His eyes lit with humor. "I help Mo with his, so I guess it evens out."

"Neither of you are married?" They shook their heads. "Kids?" Another shake. "Do you take vacation?" Another shake. "Why not?"

"Compared to what I was doing, this *is* vacation," Mo said.

She opened her mouth to ask what the hell that meant, but his steely gaze dissuaded her.

"I've been everywhere I wanted to be," Johan said. "I'm set."

"Finish your sandwich," Mo said.

She gave him a dirty look, but obeyed his order. He continued to distract her with the tales of his family, and went into great detail about how to brew a proper cup of Turkish tea. She managed to remember five of his brothers' names before his phone rang. Even though his expression didn't change, she knew who it was.

"Don't answer!" She tried to swipe the phone from his hand, but he got to his feet as he answered. "Sir."

He listened, nodded, and then hung up.

"Another coffee?" he asked Johan, who nodded.

Without another word, he went to the counter to put in another order. She glanced at Johan who shrugged. She grabbed her pen and jotted down as much as she could remember about Mo's family, and didn't look up when he placed a steaming cup in front of her.

"He has business in Paris. He'll be back this evening."

She didn't give any indication that she heard him, but inside, the last of her

panic drained away. Reflexively, she reached for the cup and drank without looking to see what it was. Chamomile. Was his choice of herbal tea deliberate or a coincidence? Either way, she was grateful.

When her hand cramped, she reached for her laptop. Writing longhand was her version of an artist's sketch before setting paint to canvas or stretching before a run. It was a mental exercise to prepare her for the real work. As her computer booted up, she watched a man and woman make their way to a nearby table. The woman's smile lit up the room while her eyes shined like brand-new pennies. Based on their body language and the single white rose she held, Jasmine assumed they were on a first date. The woman hung on to every word he uttered. Is that how she used to look at Roth?

You don't have a nickname?

She heard the ghost of her younger self as clearly as if she sat at the next table. It seemed like a lifetime ago that she sat across from Roth in a coffee shop and gave him the name he made her scream last night.

Nobody's ever called you Jamie? I think it suits you.

She locked the memories away and wished she could delete them permanently. It was all a lie. She was so gullible, so fucking *stupid* to believe that a man like him didn't have an ulterior motive for inviting her to coffee. He pegged her right. She was so lonely that she leapt at the chance to spend time with him and blabbered the whole time, reinforcing what easy prey she really was. She'd been awed by him. Just remembering how flattered she'd been to have his attention made her ill.

Her standards were so low that he didn't even have to court her. There were no roses, no strolls in the moonlight… They went from acquaintances to fuck buddies. Sex was all their relationship was based on. Nothing had changed.

She ground her teeth as she accessed her manuscript and opened a fresh sheet. She didn't waste time wondering about a good first sentence or how this scene was going to fit into the plot of the story. She just started typing.

Juliet stared at Rex. "It was all a lie?"

Her eyes burned, but she didn't let the tears take over. She blinked them away and plunged ahead. The only way she could deal with what happened last night was to have their characters act out a version of it on screen. Unlike her and Roth, Juliet and Rex had moved past their failed marriage. But, in a moment of striking honesty, Rex ruins everything by bringing up the past.

She sped through the conversation, not allowing herself to dwell on Roth's confessions, but focused more on Juliet's reaction—the shock, confusion, and disillusionment she felt.

"Why tell me this now?" Juliet shouted. "What's the point?"

“I want you to see the real me,” Rex said.

She flinched. She saw him, all right, in all his gory glory. Last night, she pushed, expecting Roth to stonewall, but she got more than she bargained for when he told the truth, shattering the last of her illusions. A part of her wished he lied. Although everything pointed to his ulterior motives, there was still the minute possibility that he felt something genuine for her, and it wasn’t all motivated by money. Last night, he obliterated that hope. He admitted that he cataloged her weaknesses and used them against her. He knew she was lonely and vulnerable, an outsider like him, and used that to isolate, seduce, and set himself up as the white knight. He read her work as Minnie Hess, not because he was interested in the story but because he wanted to glean everything he could about the person who wrote it to manipulate her. She had been such an easy mark. How was she supposed to look him in the eye, knowing that he’d seen her as a means to an end from the very start?

Her fingers stumbled over the keys. She drank the rest of her chamomile tea to eradicate the bitter taste on her tongue. She was dimly aware of people coming and going and time passing as light shifted across the table, but she was completely immersed in the story.

A hand gripped the top of her screen. She jolted and stared at Johan.

“I think they’re getting ready to close.”

She looked around and saw that most of the patrons had cleared out and the workers were giving them pointed looks. She looked back at the scene. Rex and Juliet had concluded their fight the same way she and Roth had. In bed. That wasn’t supposed to happen. When she started to erase what she’d written, Mo grabbed her laptop. She snatched it from him and put it into her bag. She would have to rewrite it later. She rose, biting back a groan, and resisted the urge to rub her numb butt.

Before they left, she gave the baristas a generous tip that improved their mood and had them cheerily telling her to come back again. She hunched her shoulders against the cold as they exited and saw the sun was just beginning to set.

“Can we walk for a while?”

Johan took her work bag and went to the car while she and Mo strolled. He walked a little behind her so as not to intrude, which was a good thing since her mind was consumed with her story. There was no way she would allow Juliet ending up with Rex. They weren’t going to fall for Roth/Rex’s shit. Rex was hellbent on coming clean about things that should have stayed buried, starting a landslide that turned Juliet’s world upside down. He provoked Juliet and used her emotional vulnerability to make his move and reclaim something Juliet never

intended to offer.

He'll topple companies, destroy relationships, pay millions to reclaim what he once got for free.

She quickened her pace. What did Roth want from her? To hurt her? Break her? Repay her for leaving him and having her father dig into his past? What would assuage his need for revenge?

She didn't realize how far she walked until Johan pulled up beside them. She ducked into the back seat and stared out the window as they made their way back to Roth's building.

Mo escorted her through the empty lobby to the elevator. She leaned against the wall and stared at Mo's broad back. Even though the moment had passed, she knew her breakdown was on his mind, as it was still on hers. When the doors opened, he stepped aside to let her pass. She stepped into the entry hall and turned to face him.

"What do you report to him?"

"Everything."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "What are you going to tell him about today?"

He eyed her intently. "What time we collected you, where we went, how you behaved."

Her nails sank into her arm. "Behaved?"

"Your well-being is our primary duty."

"Isn't that his job, not yours?"

"When he's not in attendance, it's part of our duties," he said smoothly.

She looked away as she asked, "And what are you going to report about my behavior today?"

"You were tense, stressed, a bit manic." When her head snapped back to him, he added, "You had a panic attack."

"It wasn't."

"What was it, then?"

In a distant part of her mind, she was amazed that the elevator doors hadn't closed. He stood in the middle of the elevator, hands clasped behind him, as if he had all the time in the world.

"I have asthma," she lied.

"You don't."

"How do you know?" she snapped belligerently.

"We've been briefed on your medical history in case of an emergency. Blood type, allergies, and bones you've broken in the past. You don't have asthma."

Her eyes narrowed into slits. "I didn't consent to allow anyone to review my

medical history."

"You'll have to take that up with your husband."

She looked away. Asking for a favor went against everything she believed in, but she didn't want Roth to know how much damage he inflicted last night. He swore he would break her on their wedding night. She was so confident she could take him on. Less than a week later, she had her first panic attack in years. She wasn't as strong as she hoped, but he didn't need to know that.

"I'll pay you," she whispered.

It took him a second, and then understanding lit his eyes. She felt a burst of relief before he shook his head. He looked a tad sympathetic, but she didn't want his pity.

"What has he done to earn such loyalty?" she asked in a strained voice.

"Maybe one day I'll tell you," he said and inclined his head as the doors closed, leaving her staring at her reflection.

She faced the long entry hall lined with abstract photos and two gleaming bench seats. It was so quiet, she could hear her heart beating. She mentally girded herself before she entered the main living area, which was just as she had left it. She listened, but didn't hear movement or the murmur of his voice on the phone. Hopefully, he was still in Paris. She was exhausted and in no mood for his shit. If he wanted to fight, she might go back on her word and wave the white flag. She channeled everything she had into her writing and had nothing left.

She showered again. When she reached for shampoo, she was surprised to find several bottles on the shelf. She peered at the selection before she selected her favorite. The familiar scent was a little slice of home that served as a lifebuoy she could hold on to as she was tossed to and fro on the choppy waters of life. It really was the small things…

She didn't have pajamas, so she wrapped herself in a robe and padded back into the master and saw the sheets had been changed. She grabbed her laptop and climbed into bed, propping herself against the pillows as she pulled up the manuscript, intending to chop up the scene so Rex and Juliet wouldn't end up in bed. She would use Rex's confession to kick him out of Juliet's life once and for all. She was sure the readers would agree once they found out about the vasectomy.

Two hours later, she snapped the laptop shut. "Motherfucker."

Rex had taken over, much like his real-life counterpart. She wasn't strong enough to fight him, and neither was Juliet. The effort left her with a raging headache. She left the room and wandered around until she found the sleek, unused kitchen. She searched through cabinets until she found what she was looking for. She downed aspirin and looked in the fridge, which was stacked

with fresh meals. She grabbed a container of mixed green salad with pecans, cheese, red bell pepper, and a side of balsamic vinaigrette. She leaned against the counter and ate while glaring moodily out the window.

She intended to edit what she wrote in the coffee shop, but found herself adding to the scene rather than taking away. Rex was just as commanding and uncompromising as Roth. She felt the rumble of his voice in her bones, and even worse, she could feel his emotions—the anger, frustration, and earnestness as he spoke to Juliet, willing her to understand that while things started a certain way, everything changed once they got together. She savagely bit into a pecan. Roth was nothing like Rex, who took responsibility for his shortcomings and wanted to be a better man. Roth didn't.

Her headache had lessened considerably by the time she trudged back to the master suite. Against her will, she found herself picking up the laptop again. Rex whispered in her ear, pleading for understanding. Grudgingly, she documented what he wanted her to say, all the while willing Juliet to stand her ground. They would get through this. They'd survived him once.

When her eyelids drooped, she went into the bathroom to brush her teeth, and glanced at her phone. It was one in the morning and there was no word from Roth. Not a text, call, email. He was doing what he did best—absenting himself and making money. She should be relieved that she was alone, but the fact that he just went about his normal, everyday life after last night, showed just how much it impacted him. Not at all.

Chest aching, she stretched beneath the covers and rubbed her face against her pillow. She let out a shuddering breath and closed her eyes. Juliet brushed up against her. She got impressions of Juliet's yearning, sorrow, and burgeoning hope. She shook her head. Rex had an agenda that had nothing to do with what was best for Juliet. How many times would he hurt her before she learned her lesson?

CHAPTER 8



SEVEN YEARS AGO

Jasmine trudged back to her apartment. The Teamwork and Leadership class was a breeze for most people, but hell on earth for her. The highly interactive class felt more like drama, since they were forced to act out their roles as future leaders and make executive decisions off the top of their head. Most of her peers volunteered to play CEO, and she was happy to let them while she took notes. She could already pick out who would be listed alongside other famous alumni such as Elon Musk, Yotaro Kobayashi, Ron Perelman, Peter Lynch, Sundar Pichai, and so many more. Attending the best schools meant she had always been surrounded by the most talented, ambitious, and intelligent. She had never been at the top or bottom of her class, but somewhere in the middle. She always managed to get by, but graduate school had widened the gap significantly, and she wasn't the only one who noticed. Today, her professor gave her a host of CEO problems to solve. As she stumbled through her thought process for each decision, she got a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach when whispers spread throughout the classroom. Her professor let her finish before she began to illustrate in great detail why every one of her decisions was a good example of what *not* to do. Being ridiculed was humiliating enough, but her professor hadn't stopped there.

"There are leaders and there are followers, Ms. Hennessy. If you intend to be the former, you have a lot of work to do."

Thankfully, her professor didn't prolong her torture, but matter-of-factly called on her next victim. Britta gave her a consoling pat on the shoulder when she retook her seat, which only made her feel worse. She didn't hear one thing that was said for the rest of the class, and was the first one out the door when it ended.

All she wanted to do was get to her apartment, close the curtains, and crawl into bed. It was clear her professor thought she wasn't trying hard enough when the opposite was true. She poured over her books and signed up for every study group, but… What if her best wasn't good enough? Her heart sank to the pit of her stomach. Did Dad have her attend graduate school because he knew she would fail? Why subject her to learning in a classroom instead of at Hennessy & Co like her sisters? She would learn quicker through real-world application versus broad, theoretical problems that didn't apply to them. Why subject her to

this embarrassment?

If I wasn't your father, who would you be?

She tipped her face up to the sun and took a deep breath as his cruel words rained down on her. If she wasn't a Hennessy, she would be nothing. On the other hand, if she hadn't been born a Hennessy, she could have been anything. What would it be like to have a clean slate? To be whoever she wanted to be? The sky was the limit for her classmates. Her mountains had already been chosen for her. Everyone expected her to be exceptional, to mold her life into something others would marvel at, but what if she couldn't? What if that wasn't in her? The path she was supposed to take had already been traveled by those much more experienced and talented than her. She would never surpass her father's high expectations; only disappoint him.

She pulled out her phone. Even though she knew what she would find, she checked to see if there was a message, voicemail, or missed call waiting for her. There was nothing. She hadn't heard from her family in over a month… Well, except Lyle, who said he would take her out to dinner after he came back from Australia. He dismissed what happened at the party as a minor blip, but they both knew it wasn't. Though she was clearly in the wrong, Lyle still argued in her defense. She could only imagine Colette's response if he tried to make a case for her. From the start, Lyle positioned himself between her and her family. He thought they were too critical and controlling. Her family wasn't happy that Rami had adopted a similar stance, deflecting the conversation whenever Dad or her sisters started in on her. Rami hadn't called to discuss the debacle like Lyle. That wasn't his way. Instead, he sent her memes to cheer her up.

It took her a week to muster up the courage to call Dad and apologize. She examined her actions and knew he was right. She was complacent and lazy. If she wasn't those things, she would be further along in her career. She led a privileged life—attending an Ivy League school and socializing with the crème de la crème of society, yet she chose to take refuge in a dream world that would do nothing for her in the long run. It was time to grow up and let go of her childish fantasies.

She rehearsed what she would say for three days before she called his cell, which promptly went to voicemail. Hellbent on making her apology, she called his office and was told by his secretary that he wouldn't take calls from her. Dad never failed to cover his bases. The fact that he'd known she would eventually call his office and even prepared his secretary with a brutal rejection stung, but it was nothing new.

Although Dad made it clear he didn't want to hear from her, she composed an email. That, too, was ignored. Knowing Dad, he blocked her from his contact

list, and it had been sent to spam. She'd known there would be consequences and accepted them, but she underestimated Dad's wrath and her response to it. She assumed she would be able to handle Dad better at twenty-three than she had at eighteen. Wrong. No matter how old she was, he still managed to make her feel small and worthless. His words played over and over in her mind, wreaking havoc on her sleep, concentration, and performance in class.

She glanced into a shop window as she passed and focused on her reflection. Automatically, her eyes slid down to the glint of gold on her finger. She raised her hand and examined the modest sapphire, which sparkled in the sunlight. It was Ford's grandmother's ring. It was an antique and, if the rumors were true, had been rejected by Tucker's wife, who insisted on a ten-carat diamond minimum. Jasmine didn't mind the modest ring, but it was a reminder of what was so easily forgotten—that she was engaged. She hadn't heard from Ford. Lyle mentioned that he was still in Europe, fixing more of Tucker's mistakes.

She wanted to break through the wall of formality between them. Thus far, Ford had only contacted her when they had to attend a business function or have dinner with his family. She assumed they would spend their engagement getting to know one another. So far, that hadn't happened. Many of her friends were already married. Happily, it seemed. She wanted that, but she didn't know how to go about getting it. She wished she could ask her sisters for advice, but cringed just imagining how they would react to her crossing the line into personal territory.

One of them had to make the first move. She calculated the time before she dialed Ford's cell and willed him to pick up as she crossed the street. When the call switched to voicemail, she hung up without leaving a message, and marched down the sidewalk.

He was probably busy unless… Would Dad call Ford and order him to give her the cold shoulder to teach her a lesson? No. Ford was an adult with his own mind. She frowned. Colette and Ariana were a decade older than her and married, but they were still under Dad's thumb. She shoved her phone into her bag as Lyle's warning replayed in her mind. She thought marrying Ford was a ticket to freedom, but was it possible that Dad would still have a say about her life even after she married? She quickened her pace, hoping to outdistance the depressing thoughts that clouded her mind. Ford wouldn't let that happen. Out of all the eligible women he could marry, he chose her. That had to mean something. He wouldn't allow their fathers to intrude on their relationship, would he?

She rounded the corner and collided with what felt like a brick wall. She stumbled back and would have fallen on her ass if two hands didn't grab hold of

her. She squinted against the sun as a large figure loomed over her.

“Jasmine?”

She blinked rapidly as her eyes tried to confirm what her ears had already identified. There was no mistaking that distinctive rumble. She stared up at James Roth, who was dressed much the same as he had been at her father’s party. She thought of him frequently over the past few weeks. So much so, that she was afraid she was hallucinating.

“James Roth?”

"Just Roth,” he said in that curt way of his as he steadied her on her feet. “Are you all right?”

She nodded and stared at him, still not convinced he was really here. “What are you doing in Philadelphia?”

“I came here for a meeting, but it got delayed. I was searching for a place to get coffee. What are you doing here?”

“I go to Wharton’s.” She gestured vaguely behind her. “I just finished class.”

“Do you know where to get coffee?”

“Um, sure. Just go down this sidewalk and take a left and—"

“Why don’t you show me?”

She blinked. “Pardon?”

“Have coffee with me. I have some time to kill.”

When she didn’t respond, he raised a brow.

“You said you just finished class.”

“Well, yes, but…” Her mind was alarmingly blank.

He tilted his head to the side as he regarded her for a moment. “If you would rather not spend time with me, you don’t have to. Let me buy you something, and you can be on your way.”

Her eyes rounded. “No! It’s not that. I just…” She shook her head. “Never mind. Come, follow me.”

She continued down the sidewalk, nerves jangling, as James Roth fell into step beside her. Although that ugly scene with her father dominated her memories of that night, she couldn’t help wondering how Roth fared after she left. She resigned herself to never knowing if he took advantage of the small window of opportunity he had, and now here he was.

She snuck a furtive glance at him. Although he was dressed casually, he seemed as out of place on this treelined street as he had been in her father’s ballroom. There was something almost otherworldly about him. His unusually large size paired with those rough-hewn features made him look more like an ancient warrior rather than a twenty-first century businessman. The fantasy story she banished to the far recesses of her mind sputtered to life. James Roth was the

mysterious stranger in the flesh, and here she was, walking beside him as if it were the most natural thing in the world. She wasn't sure what strange twist of fate caused their paths to cross again, but she was grateful for the distraction. Her shitty month was forgotten as her imagination went into overdrive.

When they reached the café, she opened the door, ready to be assaulted with the smell of fresh coffee. Her ritual was interrupted by Roth, who grabbed the door above her head and held it, so she could go on ahead of him. Startled by the move, she hesitated a second too long and then had to stay put as a parade of people exited. They took their sweet-ass time leaving, ribbing one another and laughing as they went. Trapped between him and the door, she couldn't help but notice he wasn't wearing cologne. That was so unusual that she lingered a second longer than was necessary to make sure.

"Jasmine?"

"You're gonna *love* this place." She dodged through patrons waiting for drinks, took her place in line, and pointed at the menu. "They have the best baked goods. What kind of coffee do you want?"

"Black."

That wasn't a surprise. She hadn't met a man who liked the fancy blended drinks women sucked down like water. The place was so packed, he had to stand behind her. She surveyed the menu and belatedly tried to step out of someone's way and stepped on Roth's foot. She apologized and tried to side step, but stilled when two large hands settled on her shoulders and squeezed. A wave of heat engulfed her, making her scalp tingle, before the hands dropped away and Roth stepped up beside her.

"Are you getting anything to eat?" she asked as she stared straight ahead.

"No." He shrugged back his sleeve to glance at his watch. "I won't have time for more than a cup of coffee."

"Oh." She nixed her plans for a burrito. "What happened with your meeting?"

"The person I was supposed to meet got stuck at another meeting."

"Somewhere near here?"

"No, in Baltimore, but he's making his way here now."

She stared at him. "How…?"

"Helicopter."

"Oh. Of course." Why do a two-hour drive when one could fly in a fraction of the time?

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I'll get a dirty chai."

She glanced at him in time to see his eyes narrow into slits.

“A dirty what?”

His suspicious tone made her throw her head back and laugh. It was amazing how even the most stern demeanor crumbled when certain words were tossed around, however innocently.

“Don’t get excited,” she advised as she patted his arm. “It’s just a shot of espresso mixed into tea.”

When he looked down at her hand on his arm, she let it fall away. It was a good reminder that although she was delighted to see him again, she knew next to nothing about him. He wasn’t some random dude on the street, but he also wasn’t one of her childhood playmates.

“Grab a table.”

She blinked at the gruff order until she saw the wisdom in that. The tables were being claimed faster than they could be wiped down. She managed to snag a table by the door. It was the highest traffic area—not an ideal place for conversation. But, if their interaction at the party was any indication, Roth wasn’t a talker anyway, which begged the question… why had he asked her to get coffee with him?

She hooked her bag over the back of her chair, and turned to watch as he stepped up to the front counter. The barista took a step back before she got a hold of herself and came back to the register, so she could take his order.

Her leg bounced. She resisted the urge to look around to see if she recognized anyone. There was no basis for the guilt simmering in her gut. She wasn’t doing anything wrong. Roth had time to kill before a meeting and offered to buy her coffee. Nothing could be more innocent. They would say their pleasantries, maybe engage in some mundane chitchat, then he would rush off to his meeting, and she would never see him again. Even as she tried to rationalize, she knew Dad would shit a brick if he knew what she was doing. She lifted her chin. But he didn’t, did he? He didn’t want to hear from her, and didn’t want anyone else contacting her either. Besides, what was the harm in a cup of coffee?

As Roth joined those waiting for drinks, she noticed even the men edged away from him. Roth seemed oblivious to this, pulling out his phone and scrolling like any university student, but there was no way he would be mistaken for one with his massive bulk, which was clearly that of a full-grown man. He had more in common with Dad who didn’t make time for frivolous things like getting coffee unless it was intertwined with business, and despite her family connections, she was just a college student and not worth the time of someone like him. Then again, Roth wasn’t like the men she had grown up around. He was a self-made man, which made him a foreign entity. Roth was one of the rare few who managed to break through that glass ceiling. It was easier to maintain

wealth by passing it from generation to generation, rather than amass it in one lifetime, as Roth was doing. So many things had to fall in line for that to happen, but the stars aligned for him. The elite didn't take kindly to someone entering their realm without their consent, especially if they didn't follow their rules.

Roth scowled at his phone. Bad news? Had his colleague arrived earlier than anticipated, or had his meeting been cancelled? Nothing pissed Dad off more than a last-minute rescheduling. Roth looked up when his name was called. He picked up their drinks and made his way to her. When he paused on the opposite side of the table, she waited for him to make some terse apology and walk out the door. She watched, a tad bemused, as he laid down a napkin in front of her and placed her drink on top of it.

"Thank you," she said as he sat across from her, dwarfing the small round table and chair. She picked up her drink and popped the lid, so it could cool.

"I should be saying that to you."

She stopped, mid-blow. "Sorry?"

He speared her with those striking black eyes that made her stomach do somersaults.

"Langdon offered me a deal," he said.

It took her a second to process that, and then she straightened, nearly spilling her drink.

"That's fantastic! I was hoping you would connect with someone." She waved her hand. "It would have been ideal if you could get in with Dad or Warren, but there were other powerhouses in the room and Don's doing amazing things."

"Why'd you do it?"

The smile froze on her face. "Pardon?"

When he leaned forward, she drew back. Pressed up against the wall as she was, she felt cornered, a little freaked, but strangely exhilarated.

"Your father blacklisted me. Why put yourself on the line for me?"

She jutted out her chin. "Because I felt like it."

His ire was the last thing she expected. It wasn't enough that Dad lectured and humiliated her, the man she put herself out on a limb for was complaining? Men and their stupid egos…

"You got in trouble for helping me."

Her cheeks burned with shame. It sounded like she was twelve instead of twenty-three.

"Don't worry about it. I'm always in trouble," she said with a nonchalance she didn't feel.

"In trouble for what?"

Her stomach began to tumble again, this time with irritation and embarrassment. This was the last thing she wanted to talk about, but she had a feeling Roth wouldn't allow her to steer the conversation into more socially acceptable waters. And what was the use? If Roth managed to hold his place in her father's circles, he would find out soon enough that she was the black sheep of the Hennessy clan and not taken seriously in society.

"I'm a huge disappointment to my father," she said flatly, hoping he would catch the hint and change the subject.

His eyes flicked over her. She wasn't sure what he saw, but when he met her eyes again, the black fire in his gaze had lessened.

"You're attending Wharton's?"

She frowned. "Yes."

"And Langdon mentioned you're in graduate school. How can you be a disappointment when you're attending one of the best business schools in the country?"

She took a sip of her drink and let the combination of sweet and dark flavors wash down the hurt that flared back to life. A man paused beside their table, making her eyes flick up briefly. He winked at her, which got him a wan smile. When she refocused on Roth, she saw he was watching the man walk out the door.

"I'm far from perfect," she confided, bringing that disconcerting gaze back to her. "My father has high standards and expects perfection from everyone around him. That includes anyone he does business with and, of course, his daughters. I barely meet the minimum requirements to be a Hennessy." Her mouth pulled up in a self-deprecating smile he didn't return. "After you fought so hard to be where you are, you deserved a fair shot."

"I would have gotten one eventually."

"But on whose terms?"

His eyes narrowed. "Meaning?"

She rotated her cup, debating how much she should tell him. She had already crossed the line by interfering at the party. This could get her disowned. Her lips quirked in a sad smile. That would be a relief.

"Jasmine."

She eyed him thoughtfully. She wasn't sure why she felt compelled to warn him about her father and the world he was entering into. Obviously, he was doing just fine on his own, but how long would that last if he didn't know the rules of the game? Roth made a bold statement by dressing the way he had and taking the hazing with a grain of salt, but he didn't know the half of it.

"Dad is highly selective about his guest list. These parties are planned weeks,

if not months, in advance. The fact that you were a last-minute addition shows how valuable you are." She grinned when his eyebrow shot up. "I know, he has a funny way of showing it. He was impressed by your swift rise. He actually made inquiries about you. I've never seen him take a personal interest in anyone. It's hard to impress my father, but you managed to… and that's not a good thing."

He didn't move, but she sensed the coiled tension in him.

"Explain."

She pursed her lips, debating how much she should say, but the ball was already rolling, so she might as well finish it.

"Everyone at the party took notice of the treatment you were getting. No one would do business with you without my father's say so. With one event, Dad ensured you couldn't advance without him. Eventually, you would have accepted a deal on his terms, which would have heavily favored him, of course." She shifted restlessly, conscience pricking at the countless careers her father had destroyed using this method. "We had a small window to change their perception of you. I knew if just one person saw what Dad did, it would make it that much harder for him to control your future."

For a second, he didn't react, and then he sat back. He didn't look pissed, even though he had every right to be. He thought he was attending this party for a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Little did he know Dad was trying to hobble him and manipulate his career.

"I'll be damned," he said quietly.

Far from being offended by her father's plans to ruin him, his tone was admiring and, if she wasn't mistaken, a tad amused. She wasn't sure how to take that.

"I've heard about his methods, but even I didn't see that coming."

"No one does. Dad's…" She realized there was no good way to end that, so she asked, "Did he say anything to you after he returned to the ballroom?"

"No, he didn't even look at me."

She was pleased on his behalf, but anxious over what further punishments she would receive when her father learned that Roth managed to snag a deal with Don Langdon. Her fingers drummed the table restlessly as she sipped her chai and allowed her eyes to sweep around the bustling café for a moment before she looked back at her table companion. Her heart slammed against her ribs.

"What?"

"If you're a disappointment, I'd hate to find out what you're capable of if you meet his expectations."

For a second, she was stunned speechless, and then she threw her head back and laughed.

“That’s the best compliment I’ve gotten all month,” she wheezed as she wiped at her streaming eyes. “But Dad’s not the only who thinks I’m hopeless. My professor told me I have a lot to work on.”

“He’s wrong.”

“She,” she corrected with a grin.

“She’s wrong,” he parroted.

“I wish that were true,” she said as she slumped in her seat.

“Tell me why she said that.”

She cringed. “You don’t want to hear about that.”

“I have time.”

“Your meeting…”

He patted his pocket. “He’ll call me when he’s here. Talk.”

It went against everything she’d been taught to discuss her weaknesses, but for some reason, she found herself spilling about not just her terrible day, but her whole graduate school experience. She had no idea she had so much bottled up inside her.

He didn’t nod or smile as she talked; he just watched her with an unwavering intensity that made her nervous, yet elated. She wasn’t sure why. It was a strange experience to have someone focus on her to the exclusion of all else. People always looked through her. Their interest was briefly captured when they learned who her father was, but once they realized she didn't possess the charisma or abilities as her family, their attention wandered. Roth’s didn't. He didn’t look at the student who claimed the table beside them, or the constant stream of people who passed through the door behind her. She should have felt foolish for confiding in him, but the longer she sat with him, the more at ease she became.

Even though she was rambling, she couldn’t stop. It was only when his mouth quirked that she stumbled to an awkward halt.

“I’m sorry,” she groaned as she buried her face in her hands.

“There’s nothing to be sorry for.”

She lowered her hands to stare at him. “I just talked your ear off about school.”

“I like listening to you talk.”

She wondered if her cheeks were as bright as they felt. He couldn't be flirting with her, could he? No. He was just indulging her like a sister… or a little kid.

She shook herself and propped her chin on her hands. “Ignore everything I just said. Tell me about your deal with Langdon.”

“If your interest isn’t business, what is it?”

She stiffened. “What makes you think it isn’t?”

His smile deepened, bringing her attention to the scar on his lip. Her

fingertips tingled with the need to trace it. What the hell was happening to her?

“You had no interest in what was going on in that ballroom. Million-dollar deals were being made right in front of you. Your mind was somewhere else.”

“I was thinking about school.”

“No, you weren’t.”

“How do you know?” Was she that transparent?

“No one’s that excited about school.”

“I was focused on being a good hostess. I’m not involved in the family business yet.”

“Anyone who wanted in wouldn't wait for an invitation. They’d dive in.”

Even as she opened her mouth to argue, she recognized the truth in his words. If she really wanted to show Dad that she wanted to be a part of the family business, she could have leveraged the powerhouses she introduced Roth to and made her own deals to prove she was ready. She hadn’t. She didn’t arrive early, memorize the guest list, or ask what the purpose of the dinner was. She accepted what they deemed to tell her and didn’t push for more. No wonder Dad didn’t think she was ready.

“Jasmine?” Roth frowned at her. “What is it?”

“Nothing.” She straightened and tried to focus on their conversation. “What were we talking about?”

“Your interests.”

She flinched, just imagining how he would react to finding out that she wrote. In Dad’s opinion, it was a useless pastime, and she wasn’t sure Roth would disagree. It would kill her to have him share her father’s opinion on that. Better to keep that to herself. She hadn’t written since the party. Even though the dreams continued, she didn’t jot it down, knowing once she started, she couldn’t stop. She cried herself to sleep more than once, mourning the loss of a fictional world and people who understood her better than anyone in this world.

“I don’t have other interests aside from finishing graduate school and starting at Hennessy & Co.” When he narrowed his eyes, she focused on his untouched coffee. “Are you going to drink that?”

He looked at his coffee in front of him as if he’d forgotten it was there. As he raised the cup to take his first sip, she winced. It was definitely lukewarm by now and probably wouldn’t taste half as good as it did when it was hot. Roth settled the cup on the table, but when his eyes dropped to his coffee, she smiled.

“It’s good, isn’t it?”

He didn’t answer, but took another drink. He was a man of few words, which meant she had to rely on his body language or minute changes in his expression. Dad was a great negotiator, not just because he was intelligent and did his

research—it was his ability to accurately read his opponent through nonverbal cues that made him so lethal. He was forever barking out that she needed to control her posture, movements, and expressions. She spent most of her time observing rather than participating. This would serve her well where Roth was concerned.

She watched him down half of his cup before she blurted, “Did Dad tell you it was going to be a formal dinner?”

“Yes.”

Her mouth dropped. “You dressed that way on purpose?”

His shoulders shifted beneath his sports jacket for a moment before he said, “The way I dress shouldn’t have any bearing on business.”

“No…” she drawled.

When he raised one brow, she grimaced.

“It shouldn’t, but it does,” she said quickly, waving her chai as she hastened to explain. “These people are shallow, materialistic. They work hard, so they can have the best of the best. You can dress however you want, but it’s going to take more effort for you to make connections with them because you don’t fit their image of success.”

“I’m not going to dress differently just so they can feel comfortable. My work should speak for itself.”

“And it does, but that will only take you so far.” Sensing his distaste, she tilted her head to the side. “Most people fake it before they make it, right? Well, you changing your image isn’t conforming to anything. You *have* made it. Your life will change. Your look will change. That’s inevitable. And you want it to, right? That’s why you’ve worked so hard.”

She couldn’t interpret the way he was looking at her, but her body reacted. Her palms dampened with sweat and her heart thudded in her ears. Part of her had the insane urge to leap out of her seat and run out the door, while the other half wanted to lean across the table to get closer to him.

“You may have a point there,” he said eventually.

“Speaking of working hard,” she said delicately and dropped her gaze to his hands. “What were you doing before you entered the business world?”

Skin stretched tight over prominent veins and bone as he fisted one large hand. “Construction, mostly, but I’ve put in time ranching, working in a butcher shop and carpentry.”

She double blinked. “But you got a scholarship and once you were old enough to play the stock market, you immediately started to turn a profit. There was no need for you to work those jobs, was there?”

He stared at her for a long moment before he said, “Physical work has a way

of putting things into perspective and clarifying things for me. It clears my head in a way that sitting in a dorm, classroom, or office never could. If people did real, grueling work, they wouldn't complain about putting in hours in front of a computer in air-conditioned comfort."

She propped her chin on her hand as she took in the intriguing puzzle that was James Roth. He was a mathematical genius millionaire who chose to work blue-collar jobs to clear his head instead of going to the gym? She had never heard of anything so outlandish, but she absolutely loved it. No wonder Dad had been so determined to bring him to heel. Roth was a different breed of man, one who wouldn't let anything get in his way.

"Why do you go by Roth?" she asked absently.

"I had two classmates with the same first name as me." He shrugged. "I volunteered to go by my last name."

"You don't have a nickname?"

He shook his head.

"Not at all?"

"Like what?"

"My sisters call me Minnie." She grimaced. "But I prefer Jas if people don't want to say my full name. Nobody's ever called you…?" Her lips twitched. "Jamie?"

"No."

She tried to keep a straight face as she said, "I think it suits you."

He raised his coffee as he said in a cool tone, "You think so?"

She couldn't hold back her grin. The nickname didn't match him at all, but the fact that he wasn't vehemently protesting showed how secure he was in his masculinity. Roth suited him. It was blunt and to the point—just like the man. But everyone should have a nickname, even James Roth. She wondered if the women he dated ever called him honey or sweetie, but couldn't imagine it.

"Jamie," she murmured.

She didn't look down as his fingers flexed around his cup. She wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing, but she was distracted by his eyes. Sunlight streamed through the window, gilding his harsh features and revealing that his eyes were a true liquid black with no hint of brown.

"What ethnicity are you?" she asked.

Again, the hand flex, but his expression remained neutral.

"American Indian, German, and Danish."

Her eyes rounded. "Wow."

"Wow?" he echoed in a dangerous tone.

"What a fascinating mix," she mused as she took in his coloring and features.

“I couldn’t figure out what you were. I never would have guessed… I was thinking Greek or Brazilian.” She leaned forward. “Do you speak the language of your people?”

“No.”

“Oh.” When he didn’t elaborate, she raised her brows. “Because your parents don’t speak it?”

“My mother does, but she didn’t pass it onto me.”

“That’s a pity.”

“Did Maximus teach you all the languages you know?”

Her expression went blank. Her father’s name was an unpleasant reminder that Roth was part of her father’s world, which meant that the next time they met in society, he would probably act like he didn’t know her. He would change. He had to. And so did she.

“No, he didn’t teach us. We had tutors.”

“What does he speak?”

“Just English.”

His brows shot up. “Yet you and your sisters speak…?”

“Ariana speaks the most languages. I believe Colette and I are tied.” When he stared at her, she shrugged. “He wanted us to have the advantages he didn’t have.”

“Yet he claims you’re a disappointment.”

“I am. I lack the qualities that make my dad and sisters exceptional.” She gave him a brave smile. “But I’m working on it.”

He looked like he wanted to say something, but was distracted by his vibrating phone. He pulled it out and stared at the screen for a moment.

“I have to go,” he said abruptly.

She nodded and reached for her bag as she got to her feet. As they passed through the doors and emerged back on the sidewalk, she was filled with an overwhelming sense of loss. The spell was broken, and it was time to go back to the real world.

“It was really nice talking to you,” she said as she fussed with her bag, so she didn’t have to look at him. She wasn’t sure what happened in that café, but she felt as if they were in there for hours instead of twenty minutes. She couldn’t remember the last time she had such a frank conversation with anyone. The therapy session she desperately needed had been fulfilled by the most unlikely source. She felt as if a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. Why did she feel more comfortable with Roth, a man she barely knew, rather than her own fiancé?

“Are you available for dinner tomorrow?”

Her head snapped up. “Dinner?”

He held up his phone. “If this goes well, I should be back tomorrow evening.”

“And if it doesn’t go well?”

He shrugged. “New York’s two hours away.”

She thought she made a fool of herself, and he wanted to spend more time with her? He was a man on the rise. Men like him had no time to waste, yet he passed the time listening to her complain about school, and now wanted to take her to dinner? She tilted her head to the side as she surveyed him. Was he lonely? Her heart went out to him. They were two misfits that needed to stick together, but…

“You know I'm engaged, right?” she asked in a rush and ignored the heat crawling up her neck to her face. “To Ford Baldwin?”

Roth didn’t even blink.

“So?”

She grinned. What could have been really awkward, he took in stride. "What time do you want to meet?”

CHAPTER 9



"Rex."

The sound of her own voice, ragged with need, woke her.

The warmth of the sun, the roar of distant waves, and the fine sand beneath her hands and knees disappeared, along with the fat cock that had been hammering inside her. Her pussy clenched as her eyes flew open, banishing the sex dream. She was facedown on the mattress with a pillow bunched between her legs, which she had been humping like…

She let out a low growl as she rolled off the pillow into empty air. She landed with a whoof, flat on her back beside the bed, and glared at the ceiling as she tried to get her randy body under control.

She hadn't closed the curtains, so the room was filled with light. She was in London, not on some tropical beach, getting deliciously fucked with Mai Tai's nearby. She had vague memories of lying prone on a beach as a man rubbed sunscreen on her before he pulled her bottoms to the side. The man whispered filthy things to get her wet and primed before he began making good on his promises.

I've been waiting five years for you to give me another shot. I'm not going to waste it.

She bared her teeth as she surged to her feet and stalked into the bathroom. Fucking Rex. She woke a sleeping giant yesterday by initiating that scene. Her way of processing was to write, and who better to act it out than Rex and Juliet? She didn't intend for it to be a part of their story, but Rex had leapt at the chance to make a move and was running with it.

She got ready for the day and refused to give in to the need to finish herself as Rex and Juliet's sex scene continued in her mind. She muttered under her breath as she brushed her teeth. Apparently, Rex took Juliet on a romantic

getaway and was promising that this time around, things would be different. Where had she heard that before? Juliet and Rex had done the impossible and became friends after they divorced. Why ruin it for sex? She made a face at herself in the mirror. Okay, yes, she jumped Roth in Colorado, but it was supposed to be a one-night stand. And now… Now, she was his sex/chew toy for a year to save her family from ruin. Juliet had no such incentive, yet she was still falling for Rex's promises of a happily ever after.

Her mind was flooded with story—a story she didn't endorse and didn't want to transcribe, but that sex scene was so hot, her body was still throbbing. Maybe she could use it for another book in future… or use it for a different partner for Juliet to get her rocks off.

She dried her hair, wishing that would drown out the sound of Rex's voice, but he was in her head.

"Does it really matter how we began?" Rex asked.

"Yes!" Jasmine bellowed and tossed down the blow-dryer.

It mattered because the basic foundation of their relationship (that he pursued her for *her*) was false. Every word, every action had been deliberate and calculated. She could have been anyone… and probably was that to Roth. He didn't care that he acquired her under false pretenses; he just saw her as his, a possession he wouldn't relinquish until he was finished with her. She planted her hands on the vanity and fought the burn in her chest and eyes. She'd been expertly conned. It made her want to howl. Instead, she rocked back and forth on her heels, self-soothing until the agony lessened enough for her to finish getting ready for the day.

Rex continued to whisper reassurances in her ear, weighing down her heart as she applied enough makeup to be presentable in public. She cursed her vivid imagination as she felt invisible hands moving over her. She even paused while buttoning her top to brush at the rough palm she could feel splayed over her stomach.

She was so focused on Rex that it didn't occur to her to worry about his real-life counterpart until she saw the bed. Although the covers were completely wrecked on both sides, she instinctively knew he hadn't slept here last night. He hadn't concluded his business in Paris. Good. She hoped he stayed there for the rest of the week. The last thing she needed was for him to walk in and see her masturbating like she was sexually deprived. If he dared touch her after…

She left that thought unfinished and stalked to the nightstand and saw her phone flashing. She leaned over and stared at the name on the display. She didn't want to answer, but she hadn't checked in yesterday, and if she only responded through text messages, they might get suspicious. That's all she needed, another

lecture from Lyle. She picked up on the last ring. “Hey.”

“It’s Ari and me,” Colette said.

“Hey,” she said again as she scanned the room for her boots.

“How are you doing?” Ariana asked.

She fixed a smile on her face as she said, “Fine,” and hoped she sounded convincing.

“I don’t think she knows,” Ariana muttered.

Her heart skipped a beat. “Know what?”

“The notice is in the paper,” Colette said.

“Notice?” she echoed, and then it hit her. “Oh.”

“I’ve gotten a dozen calls this morning, mostly from reporters wanting a statement,” Colette said.

She glanced out the window and saw that it was a beautiful day without a cloud in sight. “What did you say?”

“That we were honored to be part of the ceremony this time around and that we support you both in your endeavors,” Colette said.

“Very proper,” she noted.

“The photos are beautiful,” Ariana said.

“Yes, they were.”

Even as she wondered which photos Roth had chosen, Colette said, “I sent you the announcement and got a copy of the paper in case you want to save it for a keepsake.”

“Thanks.”

“I also forwarded some articles in case you wanted to review them.”

Her sisters attempt to be supportive even though they knew something was terribly wrong made her shoulders slump. She needed a confidant more than ever, but Roth erected an invisible barrier between her and the rest of the world, isolating her and making her realize she had no one.

She swept her ambivalent emotions aside as she said, “Apparently, we’re going to be featured in a magazine as well, so you’ll probably get calls about that too. Daiyu wanted to feature her dress.”

“You mean *your* dress.”

She ignored that and asked, “How’s Polara?”

Colette’s businesslike tone softened significantly. “She’s been staying up for longer periods of time. Her smile is just…” Colette sighed. “I love her too much.”

Ariana chuckled. “There’s no such thing as too much love.”

“I’ll get her something from London,” Jasmine said. She had to go shopping anyway, and she would find the most adorable outfits here.

“How long are you going to be away?” Ariana asked.

“He said two weeks.” Into the awkward silence, she said, “I guess it’s a good thing I’m not in New York, or I’d be hounded by reporters.”

“That’s true,” Colette said a little too enthusiastically and then, “Penelope heard about the announcement and called me to get your number. When I told her you were in London, she demanded to see you. Are you able to meet with her?”

“Penelope Davies?”

“Yes.”

She put her sisters on speaker, so she could look at her missed calls. After asking Colette to recite Penelope’s number, she saw that her friend had called six times in the past two hours, along with seventy-nine other people.

“Give her a call,” Ariana urged. “She wants to catch up with you.”

Was this her sisters’ way of having someone do a visual check to make sure she was okay? She shrugged. It didn’t matter. Even if she had plans, she would have canceled them for Penelope.

“I will.” When her phone beeped, she glanced at the screen and said, “She’s calling again.”

“Okay. Have fun. Keep us posted,” Colette said.

She switched calls. “Penny?”

“You have a lot of explaining to do, missy!”

She grinned at the sound of her friend’s crisp, British accent. “Do I?”

“Yes, you do. Meet me at Remy’s Castle in twenty minutes. It’s an espresso bar.”

“What if I have something to do?” she teased.

“Don’t make me hunt you down.”

“I’ll see you there,” she said and hung up before she texted Johan and Mo, who responded immediately.

As she packed her purse, she glanced at her computer. Rex would have to wait. Real life was calling, and maybe that was a good thing. It would give the characters time to reconsider the path they were on and hopefully change the trajectory of the story.

As she made her way out of the bedroom and down the hallway, she checked her email and wasn’t pleased to see that she had requests for interviews from the press. Fuck. How did they get a hold of the email address she made in college? Hell. She glanced at the alarming number of notifications for her personal social media and logged off. She wasn’t about to put her hand in that bear trap. Her voicemails were out of control, but she decided to listen to the one Daiyu had left an hour ago.

“Girl, you look gorgeous wearing my dress, if I do say so myself. The pictures were too stunning not to submit to Vogue. You know I'm friends with the editor. Don’t be mad at me. You’ll thank me later. By the way, I want to hear details about the wedding! But before that, I need to ask you for a favor. Don’t even think of saying no. I have a spot in New York Fashion Week and I want you to be in it. I already have your measurements and I know exactly what I want you to wear. You’re gonna look *fab*! Thanks to you, my bridal line is a go. Call me.”

“Hell no,” she muttered.

“Mrs. Roth.”

She blinked at Johan, who seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. “How did you get here so fast?”

“We have staff quarters in the building.”

Of course, they did.

“Another café?” Johan asked as they entered the elevator.

“Yes.”

“You don’t have your computer.”

“No.”

He glanced at her as he entered the code to get the car moving. “You aren’t going to write?”

“No, I’m meeting a friend.”

He reached into his jacket. “I should inform—”

She grasped his wrist. “Penny’s not a threat.”

“Nevertheless.”

“He’s busy. He stayed in Paris last night.”

“No, he didn’t. I saw him this morning.”

Her hand fell away. “You did?”

The doors opened, and it took her a second to follow him out when her mind was stuck on whether Roth took an early flight or got a room somewhere instead of coming back to the penthouse. She was halfway across the lobby before she remembered the concierge. They were standing at attention and waved in sync. When she responded in kind, she got beaming smiles in return. When they pushed through the doors, she saw Mo at the curb.

“Mrs. Roth.”

“Jasmine,” she corrected automatically.

“Where to?”

She read off the address Penny had sent and eyed his strong profile. Had he given his report to Roth last night or told him in person this morning? Was everything relayed verbally or in writing? She fretted about this until she

realized Roth had already received the report, and it hadn't made a difference to him. And why should it when he was out making deals worth half a billion dollars?

She switched her attention to the articles Colette forwarded to her. There were over two dozen from various media outlets. Colette made it her business to be notified any time their names were mentioned in the press. Today, there was an alarming number of alerts due to their wedding announcement. Seeing her and Roth's names in headlines gave her nasty flashbacks to their past scandal.

Would the masses accept Roth's publicity stunt? In most cases, public perception didn't factor into a marriage like theirs, but due to Roth's history with her family and his long absence from this particular arena, it was crucial that he returned on the right note. Roth couldn't have planned a better comeback than to have her on his arm and backing from the family who once denounced him. But she doubted everyone would be so easily convinced, considering he recently became majority shareholder of Hennessy & Co. And would no one think it was odd that he moved back to the States only after her father died?

She opened the first article, blinked, frowned, and moved on to the next. And the next. She was on the fourth when her mouth dropped open in disbelief. The results were in, and she couldn't fucking believe it. They were being labeled as a love story for the ages. Their scandalous past—the affair, her broken engagement, the estrangement from her family, and their reunion was being hailed as a modern-day fairytale. Her life had been told through the lens of some wannabe romance authors masquerading as reporters and bloggers. She thought most would find it distasteful how quickly they married after her father passed. That had been blatantly ignored, her legendary father a mere footnote in their story, aside from rampant speculation about his role in their divorce and reunion. Most assumed family pressure caused their initial split, with Maximus being the bad guy and Roth the patient, loyal Prince Charming, waiting in the wings for a second chance. If she had a physical copy of the paper, she would have ripped it into confetti.

Roth's rags-to-riches story was front and center, often accompanied by a long list of his accomplishments that overshadowed details like his recent acquirement of Hennessy & Co. For the handful of articles that did mention this fact, it was accompanied by a statement from Colette about how they were grateful for his input and how well they worked together. Her lip curled. Roth's Colorado upbringing was briefly mentioned, along with how he had been raised by a single mother. No one mentioned his father or his accident. Were they being respectful or avoiding it for fear of being sued or the backlash that could come from mentioning such a touchy, taboo subject? Roth had invited the media

scrutiny and clearly wasn't worried about reporters digging into his background and past. Whatever safeguards he put in place must be bulletproof if he wasn't worried about anyone stumbling onto his secret.

Most articles chose to feature the image of her and Roth tangled in her veil on their wedding day. How the photographer managed to capture a moment when they hadn't been glaring daggers at each other, she would never know. Both Daiyu and the photographer went into great detail about their parts in the hush-hush wedding. When she couldn't take anymore, she tossed her phone into her purse and stared out the window as her stomach churned.

Roth kept winning. The odds weren't stacked in his favor, but that didn't stop him from trying. It was almost as if fate was so impressed with his boldness that it decided to reward him for it. The stars still aligned for him. Her hand balled into a fist. The fact that women all over the world were fawning over photos of them and giving them hashtags like #couplegoals, #HEA, #loveneverquits, #onlyonewomanforthisbillionaire, and comments like, *The way he* looks *at her. OMG*, made her insides wither.

The easily bamboozled masses irked her. Everyone had been dazzled by the designer gown, dreamy setting, and eye-popping ring… just as Roth intended. She should be relieved that people were buying their bullshit romance—it meant Roth wouldn't have to embark on another scheme to quell the gossip, but… Couldn't anyone see past the glitz and glamor to how calculated it all was? How premeditated? She thought her father was a scheming, master puppeteer, but he had nothing on Roth. Her father used humiliation, intimidation, and one's own ambitions against them, but Roth used far more dangerous emotions—fear, love, and hope to get what he wanted.

She bowed her head as the painful contractions began in her chest. She fought the nausea and lightheadedness, forcing herself to breathe, and gripping her knees for dear life until the awful sensations passed. When she straightened, she didn't look into the rearview mirror to see if Mo had picked up on her mini freakout. It didn't matter anyway.

She rubbed her damp palms on her thighs and found herself staring at her naked left hand as the car slowed and they reached their destination. She reached into her purse for the ring and slipped it on as Johan opened the door for her to step out. Showtime.

She strode in with Johan a pace behind her. Remy's Castle was a unique mix of café and pub, with high stools around the bartenders who served coffee infused liquor behind a U-shaped bar. As she glanced around the crowded room, a woman leapt to her feet and hurried over. Penelope had waist-length ruby hair, freckles on the bridge of her nose, and hazel eyes. Despite the relaxed setting,

Penelope wore a plum-colored skirt suit with black tights and heels.

“Jas!” Penelope gave her an exuberant hug. “I can’t believe you’re here! Shame on you for not letting me know you were in town.” Penelope grabbed her hand. “Come, I ordered you an espresso martini. They’re phenomenal!”

Jasmine glanced at Johan, who fell back before Penelope realized they were together. She followed the much shorter woman to a table and eyed the brown foam in the martini glass skeptically before she picked it up and sipped.

“Eh?”

She looked up and found Penelope watching her avidly. “It’s good.”

“Good? That’s all you can say? This is revolutionary. You’ll understand once you’re on your second. Drink up.”

She obliged and took another sip. “This is going to knock me on my ass, isn't it?”

“Most definitely.”

“Perfect.” She set the glass down and looked around. “I haven’t eaten anything yet. What do they have?”

“They’ll serve us in a bit.” Penelope grasped her hand in both of hers. “Jasmine, I’m sorry about your father.”

Grief had taken a back seat since Roth forced his way into her life, but hearing the genuine sympathy in Penelope’s voice made her throat thicken. She looked away before she lost it. “Thank you.”

“I was in the hospital, so I didn’t—"

“Hospital? Why? What happened?”

Penelope’s expression melted. “I finally got my baby girl.”

She eyed Penelope’s slim form with a frown. “You just had a baby?”

Penelope dove for her phone. “She’s the most adorable thing you’ve ever seen. You have to stop by before you leave.”

As Penelope swiped through pictures, a cheese tray arrived along with toasted pita bread, hummus, and salads. She immediately reached for the pita bread and took a bite as Penelope held up her phone. Two red-haired boys with missing teeth grinned at the camera in their school uniforms.

“They’re so cute. Are they twins?”

“Just a year apart. Teddy and Zach. Mariah’s my third.” Penelope swiped to the next photo, which showed a baby with dark eyes and hair. “She takes after her father. Isn’t she beautiful?” Penelope didn’t give her time to answer, but clasped her chest dramatically. “I’m trying to persuade Frederick into having one more. Two boys, two girls would be ideal, don’t you think?”

“Uh, sure.”

Penelope’s smile faded. “Look at me, talking about whether to have another

baby while you've been through so much."

When Penelope grasped her arm again, she was forcefully reminded how tactile her friend had always been. How long had it been since someone held her hand while they talked to her? She downed more of her drink to deaden her insides.

"I can't imagine how hard it's been dealing with your father's passing and now this… It's a bittersweet time, isn't it?"

She averted her face. "Don't do this, Penny. I'm hanging on by a thread."

Penelope didn't listen to her and gave her a firm side hug.

"Me and the girls tried to call, but none of us could get through. We know how chaotic it must have been during that time, and none of us could make it for one reason or another. If I wasn't so far along in my pregnancy, I would have come to the funeral. I know you've never been close to your sisters and that crowd…" Penelope tightened her hold. "I wish I could have been there for you."

She blinked rapidly. "I'm okay."

Penelope pressed her cheek to hers. "Yes, you are. You've always been so strong."

She let out a ragged laugh. "I don't know about that."

"Your dad knew it. It's why he was so hard on you. He scared me to death, but you stood up to him even when Colette and Ariana never dared. You've always been a rebel."

Her brows rose as she tapped the corners of her eyes, so her makeup wouldn't run. "Rebel? *Me?*"

"You always had your own mind. Look at the things you've done!" Penelope gave her a mischievous wink. "You were the rebel, and I was the sweet one. That's why Daddy wouldn't let us go to the same boarding school." Penelope paused before she ventured, "Daddy says you and Maximus made up before the end."

She nodded.

"I'm glad." Penelope rubbed her back in a motherly fashion for a minute to give her time to compose herself before she said, "Shelly, Kira, and Clara called me this morning."

"Why? What happened?"

Penelope gaped at her. "You're not serious, are you?"

"What?"

Penelope put her hands on hips. "You think you can marry James Roth *again* and no one will hear about it?"

"Well, the announcement ran in the New York papers and some bloggers picked up the story and ran with it. Daiyu made the dress, which is why *Vogue*

wants to do a spread…”

Penelope held up both hands. “No, Jas, *everyone* is talking about it, not just in New York and some American blogs. It’s headline news in Singapore, Tokyo, Dubai, Zurich, Frankfurt, Shanghai, Moscow…” Penelope threw up her hands. “Most of our husbands knew about it before us!”

“Frederick knew?” she asked, bewildered. “But why…?”

“You know, we always take notice of anyone marrying into our circle, but the fact that it’s you and him *again* is mind-boggling. You’re a Hennessy, and he’s become one of the most influential businessmen of his time.” Penelope gave her a considering look. “I never pictured you with the strong, silent type. He’s… intimidating, to say the least.”

“You’ve met him?”

Penelope smacked her arm. “Of course. He works with Frederick. I’ve met him on several occasions. I never brought up that we knew one another, of course, but now…” Penelope’s eyes bugged out playfully. “I’m sure we’ll be seeing a lot more of each other. Yippee!”

Roth worked with Frederick Baldacci? The Davies and Baldaccis came from old money and had spotless reputations. They weren’t snobs, but they did business with a selected few. Her and Penny’s grandfathers had been friends, which carried onto their fathers, and now her and Penny. How did Roth breach years of tradition and start doing business with an affluent family that had such close ties to her father?

“Jas?”

She focused on Penelope. “Sorry. What were you saying?”

“You two need to come to Abby’s wedding.”

She found herself copying Penelope by widening her eyes.

“Little Abby’s getting married? To whom?” she asked, grateful for the change in subject as she dug into a spinach salad with almonds and chicken.

“My sister isn’t so little anymore. She towers over me. Her fiancé’s name is Jin. He’s from Hong Kong. A distant relation to Daiyu.”

“You’re going to be related to Dai? Good luck.”

Penelope laughed. “I love her.”

“So do I,” she muttered.

“Abby saw your dress and called Dai immediately.”

Her attention wandered as a server dropped off an assortment of pastries. She immediately forked up a piece of chocolate cake as Penelope talked about her sister’s upcoming wedding, which was going to be an extravagant affair.

“We were going to invite Roth since he’s a partner of Frederick’s,” Penelope rattled on, “but he always declines. It would be a giant coup to have him attend.

You too, of course."

"You know I'm not one for public—"

"You grew up in it, Jas. You can do this in your sleep," Penelope chided.

"But I don't want to." She sounded childish, but she didn't care. Penelope had no idea what it was like to be on the receiving end of the overwhelming censure and condemnation she received after the scandal broke all those years ago. Roth's rise in status made their union more respectable this time around, but that didn't change their past. She was sure there would still be snide remarks and whispers. She'd had enough of that to last her a lifetime. The less they were seen together, the better. Attending Abby's high-profile wedding was a recipe for disaster. Once their year was up, that's all anyone would ask her about—the man she divorced twice.

"You know how important these gatherings are to build rapport between colleagues." Penelope giggled as Jasmine made a face. "You haven't changed."

"Do you blame me?"

"No, but no one would dare slight you with him at your side."

She ate as Penelope tried to persuade her to commit to a list of upcoming events she wanted no part of. She kept her mouth full, so she wouldn't have to answer, but when pressed, she lobbed the ball in Roth's court.

"No one can make him do anything he doesn't want to," she said.

"But he's in love with you. He'll do anything you…" Penelope clapped her on the back. "Jas? Are you okay?"

"That went down the wrong pipe," she wheezed as she reached for a glass of water.

Even her friends who should know better were buying into the romantic fanfare in the press. Not only did Penelope know Roth, she also knew how common marriages of convenience were in their circles, yet even she had been fooled into thinking this was a love match. And why wouldn't she? Roth had gone above and beyond to broadcast their union and fool everyone into thinking he was on good terms with her family. No one would believe he was using their marriage as a front to punish everyone who had wronged him, including her.

She ate as Penelope launched into an accounting of mutual friends she had lost touch with. As Penelope listed marriages, divorces, bankruptcies, business mergers, and deaths, Jasmine updated the massive network in her mind.

As she took in Penelope's animated face and exaggerated hand movements, a trait she retained from childhood, she tried to remember the last time they crossed paths. It was shortly after she got engaged to Ford. That was before Roth, before her family turned their backs on her, and before she became a divorcee. Penelope had been newly married, and they sat at a table, planned to

have kids around the same age that could grow up together like they had. She tossed back the last of her drink, which dulled her clamoring senses, but not enough. She'd been so hopeful for the future, so bright and shiny, with no idea that in a few months, her life would change for all time.

As she started on a fresh martini espresso, she found herself wondering what her life would have been like if she stayed with Ford. He'd been so teeth-achingly polite, but over time, they would have gotten to know each other and grown closer, right? And even if they hadn't, she would have kids out of their union, which could make up for almost anything. She would never have that with Roth. She shifted in her chair, briefly looking away from Penelope to give herself a moment, and used the opportunity to wave down the server for another drink and caught Johan's frown.

"I can't believe it's been seven, almost eight years since we saw each other. Can you believe how far we've come?"

She hadn't gone anywhere, but, "You got the family you always wanted."

Penelope's expression softened. "I did. I couldn't be happier."

When they were kids, Penelope would beg her to play groom to escort her down the aisle while she smiled graciously at imaginary spectators. Her friend wanted nothing more than to get married and have children, and got her wish. Frederick was perfect for her. Maybe Ford wouldn't have ticked all her boxes, but if she possessed even a fraction of the contentment Penelope had, it would have been worth it. Instead, she had thrown it away for a man who saw her as a means to an end. Her stomach churned from one too many martini espressos, but that didn't stop her from reaching for another.

Everything Roth did was systematic and deliberate. It was no coincidence that he was doing business with Frederick Baldacci. And, by default, the Davies since the families were intrinsically linked. She had known Penelope since they were five years old. There were countless prominent figures Roth could choose in London, so why infiltrate such a close family friend?

Her fingers restlessly tapped her thigh as she tried to focus, but Penelope's rapid topic changes made it difficult, and her friend wasn't asking for much input so… Why had Roth insisted on such heavy media coverage to announce their marriage? Did the announcement give him some type of leverage in a deal, or was he going to use it to control, punish, and humiliate her in the future?

As Penelope's phone chimed, she peered at the screen and beamed. "Guess who Frederick is with."

"No idea."

Penelope giggled and smacked her shoulder. "You're hilarious. He's with your husband, silly, at a business luncheon. Should we crash it?"

“No.”

Penelope dropped cash on the table and tugged Jasmine off her chair. “You have to see Frederick, and I’m sure your husband’s dying to see you. It’s been a couple of hours, after all.” Penelope elbowed her side. “I would have insisted on a month-long honeymoon and not allowed Freddy to do any business, but…” Penelope gave her a thoughtful look and nodded. “Maybe you two really are meant for each other. You allow him to be who he is, and you’ve always liked your alone time, so I guess it works out, doesn’t it?”

“I…” Her thoughts scrambled as Penelope ushered her to the door. Jasmine planted her feet and hauled back on Penelope’s surprisingly firm grip.

“Mrs. Roth?” Mo asked as he and Johan rose from a nearby table, gaining Penelope’s attention.

“Jasmine,” she snapped irritably.

Penelope stared at the men and whispered, “You have bodyguards?”

“Yes.”

“You Americans and your security,” Penelope muttered before she gave Mo and Johan a brilliant smile. “Can you give us a lift?” Penelope didn’t wait for their agreement, but hooked her arm through Jasmine’s and led her toward the exit. “I have to call the nanny to let her know I won’t be back in time to pick up the boys from school.”

“No, I really think you need to be there for them,” she said earnestly, but Penelope ignored her.

When they were in the car, Penelope paused long enough to give Mo an address before she called the nanny. Jasmine took the opportunity to check her phone, which had no messages or missed calls from Roth.

When Penelope finished her call, she said, “I don’t think we should disturb their meeting.”

“Don’t be silly. Men are always happy to have business interrupted by beautiful women.”

She blinked. They may have grown up in similar circles, but they had grown up in different worlds. Her father would have lost his mind if she showed up uninvited to a business luncheon, but Penelope was secure in the fact that she was always welcome. What did that feel like? Her father taught her to stay out of the way, and Roth was no different. Now that he had her under his thumb, he was back to ignoring her, which is what she knew would happen all along. He tended to her during their courtship, but once they married, he moved away, and she was lucky to see him once every other month. Maybe he came clean about manipulating her so that he didn’t have to act this time around. The last thing he wanted was her showing up when he was conducting business. In that respect, he

and her father were identical. They didn't like surprises or distractions.

She opened her mouth, but Penelope held up a finger when her phone rang. She answered with, "You will not *believe* who I'm with!"

Jasmine dragged her finger across her neck, which made Penelope snicker.

"I'm with the newlywed right now," Penelope announced and held out the phone.

Jasmine leaned away from her and mouthed, *Who is it?*

Penelope put the caller on speakerphone. "Here she is."

"I can't believe I had to find out with the rest of the world."

The sulky Russian tone made her straighten. "Kira?"

"Oh, so you do remember me," Kira said sarcastically. "I told Igor it couldn't be you, that it must be another Jasmine because there's no way my best friend would get married without telling me."

They hadn't talked in five years, but she wasn't going to argue with her. "It happened very fast."

"And you couldn't shoot us a text?" Kira countered. "I called Penny, knowing if anyone knew, she would. She had to call your *sisters* for confirmation. This is unacceptable."

"I…" She glared at Penelope, who nodded in agreement.

"If you wanted to make a splash, you succeeded," Kira continued in a clipped tone. "My phone has been ringing off the hook. Of course, everyone called me to find out how this came about because I should know these things. Do you know how embarrassing this is for me?"

She didn't give Jasmine a chance to respond.

"We were thick as thieves." Kira's accent thickened as she grew more impassioned. "The princesses who were going to rule the world, remember?"

She, along with Penelope, Kira, Daiyu, and a few others, were part of a small club of billionaires' daughters who grew up together. They saw one another once or twice a year at important events and became each other's confidants. They attempted to visit when they were in each other's country, but they drifted apart once they graduated. Many of them got married right away, while the others went off to college. They led entirely different lives, but they understood things about each other that no one else would.

Maximus had been quite fond of Kira's father, a self-made Russian billionaire, who made his fortune in oil, banking, and telecommunications. Kira went against her father's wishes to invite Jasmine to her wedding, despite the scandal. She had politely declined, but she had never forgotten Kira's moment of loyalty, standing by her when even her sisters had shunned her.

"Did those pinky promises mean nothing to you?" Kira demanded.

She couldn’t stop the grin that spread across her face as Penelope giggled. “I’m sorry.”

“As you should be,” Kira snapped. “Roth met with Igor last month, but he didn’t mention you were together! What is with you two being so secretive about everything? The first time *and* this time. I mean, at least you told us then, but this… This isn’t right, especially considering who he’s become… You know we’re thrilled for you. We always were because he made you happy.”

When she walked away from her family, she left these people behind, too. It was easy to believe they didn’t care because she was no longer part of their world, but Kira and Penelope were proving her wrong. Her smile faded. Was it a coincidence that Roth was doing business with another close friend of her father’s?

“That dress…” Kira took a deep breath. “I couldn’t believe Daiyu made it.” Her voice soured. “I knew she was good, but I didn’t know she was *that* good. I called her, and she said I had to schedule an appointment. *Me*! Can you believe that? She’s always been a gloating bit—”

“I’m glad you two talked,” Penelope cut in before Kira could finish her curse. “You two haven’t spoken in ages.”

Kira made a sound like a hissing cat. “She hit on Igor.”

“She hit on Roth, too,” Jasmine said with a shrug.

“That little—” Kira began.

“This is so lovely, all of us reconnecting again,” Penelope said brightly to stop Kira from going on a rant.

“Anyway,” Kira said in frigid tones. “We can see each other in February. I’m coming to New York to support you, not her. I want to believe that wedding dress was a fluke, and she’s going to embarrass herself.”

It took Jasmine a second to realize that the comment had been directed at her. “Support me for what?”

“Daiyu said you’re walking in her show.”

Jasmine’s mouth dropped. “What? I didn’t say I would do it! That bit—”

Penelope patted her knee to stop her from swearing. “That’s a wonderful opportunity, Jas! You didn’t tell me that!”

“I’m not doing it,” she said through clenched teeth.

“You shouldn’t,” Kira agreed. “She’s using your press to hype up her fashion line. What a way to reclaim your spot in society—by snapping up the most eligible bachelor for the second time. All eyes are on you. Anything you want is yours—invitations to the most exclusive parties, the cover of any magazine you want, interviews… I’m a little jealous, to be honest.”

“I didn’t do this to come back into society.”

“Of course you didn’t, but if the world is at your fingertips, why not take advantage?”

Penelope gave her puppy dog eyes. “I really think you should walk in Daiyu’s show. She’s our friend, and really, Jas, that dress was divine.”

“She hit on my husband!” Kira bellowed.

“I’m sure Daiyu will compensate Jas in some way,” Penelope said in dulcet tones as she turned down her phone’s volume. “A new wardrobe or something fabulous she can wear to—”

“Which reminds me,” Kira cut in. “I assume you’re having a late reception. When is it? Spring? I’ve always loved coming to America during that time of the year. Or maybe you could do it in summer?”

“I’m not—”

“Perhaps something tropical?” Penelope added. “Bahamas? Hawaii?”

“We just bought a resort in Kenya! We can have the reception there,” Kira said.

“I don’t—"

“Or you can use the yacht,” Kira continued. “Extravagant and exclusive, so everyone will die for an invitation. Igor and I will be included, of course. If people need to be cut from the guest list, we can start with Daiyu.”

She listened in stupefied silence as Kira and Penelope planned the venue for her non-existent reception. This morning, all she had to contend with was Rex, and now her life was spiraling out of control. She couldn’t get a word in edgewise. She was so frazzled that when the car slowed, she felt a burst of relief until she remembered where they were. One glance at the familiar building, and it all came flooding back.

“Kira, we have to go. We’ll catch up later,” Penelope said.

“No more surprises!” Kira snapped. “And let me know if she wants to use the yacht or the properties I mentioned.”

“Will do,” Penelope said as a valet opened her door.

“Penny, I…” Jasmine began and ground her teeth when her friend slammed her door and rounded the car.

As her door opened and a man extended his hand to help her out, she shook her head. “No, I’m not going to…” Her voice faded when she saw Mo and Johan standing on the curb. “What are you doing?”

As a man slipped behind the wheel to take the car, the valet holding her door open asked, “Miss?”

Penelope nudged him aside and stared at her. “Well, come on, then.”

Everyone was waiting on her. This was a fucking nightmare. She had no choice but to take Penelope’s hand and let her lead the way into her family’s

hotel.

“Mrs. Baldacci,” a bellman said as he inclined his head at her friend.

Penelope entered the world-renowned restaurant just off the lobby and hailed the maître d' before she led the way to a private room. Penelope opened the double doors with a flourish, revealing ten businessmen sitting around a long table, sipping liquor and smoking cigars. Their heads turned in unison. As Penelope posed dramatically in the doorway, Jasmine resisted the urge to retreat. Roth sat at the head of the table beside Penelope’s father. Even though she didn’t look directly at him, she felt the weight of his stare.

“Sorry, gentlemen, I hope you don’t mind, but I met with a longtime friend that Frederick and my father have to see,” Penelope announced as she tugged Jasmine into the room.

Frederick was the first to rise. “Jasmine, it’s been too long.”

She relaxed a little when he gave her a hug. “It’s good to see you, Freddy.”

“Congratulations on your marriage,” Frederick said with a glance in Roth’s direction.

“Thank you,” she murmured politely and shifted her attention to another familiar face. “McKee.”

The investment banker kissed her cheek. “I haven’t seen you since you took off your braces.”

She smiled. “That would be around the time that you pierced your ear and your father freaked out.”

He grinned and whispered loud enough for everyone to hear, “You should have seen what he did after I got a tattoo.”

Knowing his father, she could only imagine that all hell broke loose. “I wish I could have been there. Hey, Charon.” She accepted a peck on both cheeks from the Greek billionaire, whose family made their fortune by founding a grocery store chain and real estate.

“Lyle told me you were here.”

Something about the way he said that gave her pause. She searched his face, wondering if Lyle had expanded on that, but Charon was too cultured to show it.

She gave him a chagrined smile. “He wanted me to have a proper honeymoon, but some business can’t wait, can it?”

“I guess not,” he murmured.

She didn’t know how to take that, so she moved onto the other assembled men and only had to be introduced to two of them, which showed how little things had changed over the years. The fact that Roth was sitting among these men as an equal, considering how little time he had been a part of their world, was nothing short of astounding.

When she reached Penelope's father, William, he spread his arms wide as if she were a long-lost daughter.

"Sweet Jasmine!"

After he wrapped his arms around her, he rocked her from side to side as if she were still a little girl. She buried her face against his suit, taking in his familiar scent. Again, not much had changed.

He pulled back and chucked her under the chin. "How are you doing, love?"

Her eyes pricked with tears, but she gave him a bright smile. "Better than the last time you saw me."

William made it to the funeral. It took everything she had not to break down when he whispered in her ear that day.

He slid an arm over her shoulders and angled her toward Roth. "I told you there were good things in your future, didn't I?"

She kept her eyes trained on him. "Yes, you did."

"And I was right, wasn't I?" He gave her a sly look. "You've decided to make an honest man of him, hmm? You have your hands full."

"I certainly do."

He pushed her toward Roth. "Give him a kiss, love. He's done good work here today."

She stood beside his chair, unable to bring herself to meet his gaze. *I didn't expect you to be so accommodating*. Her hands fisted at her sides as mortification and anger pumped through her. She couldn't bring herself to look higher than his chest. He wasn't wearing a tie. Why that bothered her, she had no idea. He just sat there, waiting. He was always fucking waiting for her to make a move, so he could counter it. Everyone expected her to rush into his arms like the newlyweds they were supposed to be playing, but she couldn't do it. Even if he married the same woman twice, what sane person would expect Roth to morph into an affectionate husband?

She turned away from him with a fixed smile on her face, ready to crack some joke, when a hand grasped the back of her coat and gave a firm yank. She yelped as she staggered back and fell across his lap. As her arms windmilled to regain her balance, an arm braced against her back and a large hand cupped her face. She had a split second of warning before his head descended. She braced for a peck to appease their audience. The last thing she expected was his tongue to invade. She let out a distressed gasp, which he took full advantage of. She clutched handfuls of his suit to anchor herself as she was engulfed in prickling heat.

It was the cheers, clapping, and hollers from the normally staid businessmen that reminded her where they were and with whom. She was stretched across his

lap like a fainting heroine, and he, of course, looked like the conquering hero. That image gave her the strength to wrest her mouth from his. She buried her hot face against his shoulder and slowly became aware of William's boisterous voice.

"Janis has to see this," William said. "You two should come to dinner tonight."

"I don't—" she began and started to lift her head, but his hand sank into her hair, keeping her in place as he said, "We'll be there."

"Excellent, excellent."

As William's booming voice drifted away, she waited for Roth's hand to fall away. Thirty seconds passed before she realized he had no intention of doing so.

"Let me go."

"You taste like coffee and chocolate."

Her hand fisted on his shoulder. "What the hell was that?"

"What's expected."

"Since when do you care to meet anyone's expectations?"

"I don't."

"Then, why put on that show?"

"Because I wanted to."

She tried to ease away, but his grip kept her in place. "You're an asshole."

"Because I kissed my wife?"

She stiffened. "Don't call me that."

His fingers, which had been sifting through her hair, paused. "That's what you are."

"No."

"What are you?"

"A pawn."

"We're all pawns."

She didn't believe that for one second. He wasn't a fucking pawn. He was the chess master. "Why did you accept that dinner invitation?"

"Would you rather we stay in?" He pressed his lips against her temple as he murmured, "I can cancel and spend my time in you instead."

She sank her nails into his neck and hissed, "Go fuck yourself."

"Why should I when I have you?"

Her head snapped up. Molten hazel collided with fathomless black.

"This time, I'm not going to be so *accommodating*."

"You know I love a challenge."

"You *mother*—"

"Sorry to interrupt," Penelope said gaily as she appeared beside them.

“Daddy said you two are coming to dinner?”

She swallowed the nasty things she wanted to say and tried to look like a woman in love, but… what the hell did that even look like? It was hard to think straight when he was baiting her.

“Yes, we are, and I need an outfit,” she said, eyes spitting fire at Roth, who was completely unaffected by her temper.

“Shopping?” Penelope sounded thrilled. “There are some great places around here. I can show you.”

“Perfect.”

She retracted her nails from Roth’s neck and gave him a lethal look as she rose. She didn’t realize he still had a hold of her wrist until she tried to walk away and came to an abrupt halt. She looked pointedly down at his paw.

“I have things to do,” she said pointedly.

When he reeled her in, she gritted her teeth. He gripped her nape and dragged her down. When he kissed her, both of them kept their eyes open, gauging to see if the other was going to break.

“Know whatever you buy, I’m fucking you in it after,” he said against her lips.

She cupped his cheek to shield her face, which contorted with rage. “You touch me, I’ll kill you.”

He patted her ass. “You can try.”

She whirled away and came face-to-face with Penelope, whose mouth hung open. She hooked her arm through her friend’s and strode to the exit, but was waylaid by Roth’s peers, who extended invitations to more social gatherings she had no intention of attending.

She marched through the restaurant and would have gone even faster, but was forced to slow down, so Penelope could keep up. When they emerged onto the sidewalk, she sucked in the chilly air.

“You two are combustible,” Penelope squealed as she led her down the street. “I felt hot just watching you. Is he always like that with you?”

“No.”

Penelope gave her a sidelong glance. “Are you two fighting?”

“Always.”

“I know some couples like that. It’s their version of foreplay.”

She scowled. “It has nothing to do with foreplay. It’s because he’s an ass.”

“But you *love* him,” Penelope sang, reminding her so much of their childhood that her rancor began to fade.

“He’s not an easy man to love.”

“If you can’t love him, then no one can.” Penelope tapped her arm and

pointed at a store sign up ahead. “You have to see this place! You’re going to find everything you need.”

As Penelope pulled her along and Mo and Johan followed in their wake, her friend’s words knocked around in her head, along with something Roth had said on their wedding night.

You gave me what no one else has. You accepted me for who I am. You chose me when no one else did.

She accepted him because he allowed her to believe he was someone he wasn’t. He didn’t show her what was beneath that veneer of cool control until she surprised him in London. That night, he gave her a taste of his true nature, which was enough to snap her out of her delusions and walk away from a marriage that had always been a pretense anyway.

She listened with half an ear as Penelope spoke to the salesclerk, who looked her up and down before nodding decisively and leading them across the store.

Roth didn’t want her love and had never acted like he did. He didn’t lie in that respect. It was Jasmine who had deluded herself into imagining something that had never been there to begin with. He never once said the word. Maybe Kaia was right and he wasn’t capable. Whatever he saw in his childhood scarred him so badly that he shut down his emotions and permanently stunted them… Or, he really had antisocial personality disorder and there hadn’t been anything to develop in the first place.

Roth saw people as things to manipulate for his gain. She was a useful tool and plaything that had escaped before she turned a profit for him. This time, he was going to get his money’s worth, and then he would move on. To view him as anything but an unprincipled, devious enemy would be emotional suicide. He would use any vulnerability against her. All he wanted was her lust and obedience. She couldn’t help the first, although she was going to do her best to expunge his effect on her, but there was no way in hell she would do the second if she could help it.

CHAPTER 10



She stepped back from the mirror to take in her new outfit. She wore a burgundy turtleneck sweater tucked into a mid-length black leather skirt and thigh high open-toe boots. Apparently, Daiyu wasn't the only one who knew what looked better on her than she did. It was simple, but dressy enough for a dinner with the Davies and Baldacci clan.

She and Penelope had so much fun shopping that they lost track of time, and now she was running late. She came back to the penthouse, expecting to run into Roth, but he was nowhere to be found. She fluffed her loose curls, grabbed the new designer clutch Penelope talked her into buying, and hurried down the hallway. Johan was waiting patiently, hands clasped in front of him. Neither said a word as they made their way to the elevator. It wasn't until they were crossing the lobby that she broke the silence.

"Where is he?"

"He had to take care of some things. He'll meet you there," Johan said.

She ducked into the back seat and folded her hands on her lap as she tried to control her nerves. Having dinner with the Davies would have been a pleasure under other circumstances, but Roth's presence changed everything. Why had he accepted William's invitation? According to Penelope, Roth declined every personal invitation, so why attend this gathering? There had to be an ulterior motive. Maybe Roth wanted additional information from William and Frederick that he couldn't get with others around? He wouldn't befriend her father's friends just to ruin them, would he?

Her leg bounced as Mo navigated the congested streets. She didn't know what to expect. The bastard kept pulling the rug out from under her. He shocked the hell out of her at the restaurant with that over-the-top kiss. His gall knew no bounds. Clearly, he expected to carry on as if his revelation that he used her was

inconsequential.

She shifted restlessly as her temper spiked, suffusing her with stifling heat. She wanted to fight, but she knew how that would end. He, the victor, and she, the wounded loser. Part of her wanted to know exactly what he had orchestrated and how deep his manipulation ran, while the other part of her wasn't sure she could handle it. It happened years ago. It shouldn't matter…but it did.

She was relieved when the car stopped in front of William Davies' luxurious townhouse. She emerged from the car and was grateful for the slap of cold that cooled her temper. She paused on the sidewalk and took in Chapel Street, which was a stone's throw from Buckingham Palace. Not much had changed. She had come here a handful of times. William had convinced her father to let her sleep over on two separate occasions. Penelope had featured in some of her best childhood memories, and today, they fell into a rhythm that years apart couldn't destroy. For a few precious hours, she forgot about the mess that was her life and played dress up and shopped with a friend like they were teenagers instead of adults with a tremendous amount of responsibility on their shoulders.

Even though there was no chance of her being mugged on this street, Johan escorted her to the townhouse steps and waited at the bottom as she rang the doorbell. When the door opened, it took her a moment to realize the imposing man filling the entrance was the butler.

"Oh, hi, I'm Jasmine," she began, but there was no need for further explanation since the butler was swept aside by William.

"There you are!" he boomed with an unlit cigar tucked into the corner of his mouth. "Come in!"

She walked into the entrance hall and was immediately engulfed in warmth. The smells wafting from the kitchen below made her mouth water. The entrance hall hadn't changed. The oval mirror she coveted as a little girl was still hanging, but… Her eyes flicked up to the ornaments suspended overhead.

"You know we're big on Christmas around here," William said as he took her coat. "If Janis had her way, the house would be decorated all year round."

She walked forward and stopped in the entrance of the drawing room, which had a massive Christmas tree with presents already stacked beneath the lowest branches. People lounged in front of a black marble fireplace decorated with garlands and stockings. She barely had time to register that none of the adults' presents were the size of a football player before something slammed into her middle. She staggered back and looked down at a little boy who couldn't be older than five. The red hair was a dead giveaway.

"Well, hello there," she said.

The boy's eyes flared comically wide. "You talk funny!"

“Teddy, that’s not polite.” William tried to sound severe, but failed miserably.

She ruffled his hair. “That’s okay. I do talk funny. It’s called an accent.”

“Accent,” he repeated and tilted his head. “Where are you from?”

“America.”

His mouth formed an O before he said, “Have you ever tried a Pop-tart?”

She grinned. “I have.”

“I *love* Pop-tarts!”

She crouched to his eye level. “When I go back to America, I’ll send you a box of every flavor I can find.”

He turned on his heel and ran to the couches screaming, “Zach, I’m getting *Pop-tarts* from *America*!”

“Now you’ve done it,” William said as she straightened.

“What are friends from other countries for?” As he chuckled, she muttered, “I wish a Pop-tart could make me that happy.”

“So true.”

“Jas!” Penelope hurried toward her with a little bundle in the crook of her arm. “You look lovely. I knew that outfit would suit you.” Penelope angled herself so Jasmine could see the angelic face of her daughter. “Meet Mariah Baldacci.”

She leaned down and cooed, “Hi, honey, I’ll send you some Pop-tarts too.”

Penelope snickered before she shifted to reveal her oldest son who was hiding behind her back. “And this is Zach.”

“Hi, Zach.”

Zach glanced up at his mom before he said, “I like Twinkies.”

“For God’s sake!” Penelope exclaimed while Jasmine threw her head back and laughed.

Penelope’s mother, Janis, came forward to give her a hug. “It’s wonderful to see you, dear.”

“You too.”

Janis looked behind her. “Where’s your husband?”

She waved her hand. “He had some things to see to.” She hoped he didn’t make it at all.

“Oh.” Janis frowned. “Should we delay dinner?”

“No, he wouldn’t want that,” she said airily before she caught sight of another familiar face. “Abby?”

Penelope’s sister threw her arms around her. “Jas! I’m so happy for you!”

Abby introduced her fiancé, Jin, before they ushered her to a seat in front of the fire. In short order, she had a glass of autumn spiced tonic in hand and Teddy pressed against her side, whispering about more American sweets while Abby

and Janis asked about her recent nuptials. When the baby awoke with an angry howl, Penelope excused herself and Frederick wandered into the room with a distracted frown.

As he leaned down to kiss her cheek, he muttered, “Your husband doesn’t know when to quit.”

The smile froze on her face. “I’m sorry?”

He poured himself a drink before he took the seat beside her. “Does he ever sleep?”

“Rarely. Why?”

“Charon voiced some concerns at the meeting today. Roth said he would take care of it. We didn’t take him seriously.”

William chuckled as he chewed on his cigar. “Figured it out, did he?”

“Apparently.” Frederick eyed his father-in-law grimly as he said, “Charon just got off the phone with the Prime Minister.”

Teddy stopped tugging on her arm and looked around as the room fell silent. “Dad?”

She patted his leg. “Everything’s all right. What other sweets do you want to try?”

She tried to keep her attention on Teddy, but William’s wry, “It’s a good thing he’s on our side,” made her mind race.

She understood business and politics went hand in hand. Her father always made a point to befriend powerful politicians who could pave the way for him when he needed it. Maximus was aware of changing laws and regulations well before they went into effect so he could adjust his business practices. Her father took great pride in his vast network of connections. It was something Roth underestimated until banks called in his loans and business partners started backing out of his projects. Apparently, Roth had learned his lesson and created his own network. How had a boy raised in the wilds of Colorado surpassed those who had been groomed to excel in this environment? From William and Frederick’s reactions, it was clear they hadn’t been aware of his connection to the Prime Minister. What else didn’t she know about him?

Shortly after Penelope rejoined them, dinner was served in the formal dining room. Teddy, her new pal, stuck to her like glue. Janis asked about her sisters, while Abby showed the inspiration for her upcoming wedding. Despite the formal setting, there was no talk of business. The men discussed sports and upcoming trips while the women caught her up on mutual acquaintances. Dinner passed in a pleasurable haze of laughter and engaging conversation. Dishes came and went as the staff quickly and efficiently served and cleared plates.

They were on the fourth of five courses when Roth entered the room. The

three assembled men straightened, unconsciously puffing out their chests in response to an alpha male intruding on their territory.

It was Teddy who broke the silence, peering at Roth over the back of his chair as he blurted out, “Do you play rugby?”

“Teddy!” Penelope admonished.

Jasmine buried her face against Teddy’s back to smother her laughter.

Roth looked down at the boy for a long moment before he said, “I’ve never played rugby.”

“You should! You’d be brilliant.”

“Maybe I will,” he murmured and reached out to grip Jasmine’s nape.

She swiped at her tears and looked up. She had a smile on her face. She couldn’t wipe it off if she tried. Teddy’s incessant talk of candy and his uncensored observations dissolved her anger, shame, and resentment, and left her feeling carefree and hopeful. Although she tensed when he bent down, she didn’t pull away as he pressed his lips against hers. The light kiss was an appropriate greeting compared to what he’d done at the restaurant. Maybe the presence of women and children forced him to scale back his Neanderthal behavior. She would have to remember that in the future.

“You’re late,” she murmured.

“Business,” he said shortly.

She waited for more, but realized that was all she was going to get. Was the call with the Prime Minister so commonplace that he thought it wasn’t worth mentioning, or did he not want to discuss why it was necessary to call such a high government official in the first place? She ignored the clamoring questions and pointed across the table to the only empty seat, which was between a beaming Abby and Janis. Roth gave her nape a firm squeeze before he rounded the table. She bit her lip as he settled between the women who fussed over him. Janis had all four courses delivered at once so he could catch up and poured him a full glass of wine, even though he declined. She listened with half an ear to Teddy who was explaining all the reasons why he loved chocolate as Janis tried to engage Roth in conversation.

“I’m so pleased you accepted our dinner invitation. You know you’re always welcome,” Janis said.

Roth nodded.

“Now that you’re married, I hope we’ll be seeing more of you. You know we’re very fond of Jasmine.”

He started to nod again before realizing that may come off as rude.

“Yes,” he said.

“You chose well.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Janis pat Roth's arm, just as Penelope had done to her earlier in the day.

"She's such a sweet girl. You couldn't have picked a better partner."

When Roth made no reply, she peeked at him and saw his eyes were on her. He knew she was listening to every word. She batted her lashes and raised her brows expectantly.

"No, I couldn't have," he said quietly. "That's why I had to marry her twice."

Abby and Janis clutched their chests as if that were a romantic line, but she knew better. This time, he would reap all the benefits he hadn't gotten the first time around. She resisted the urge to hurl her bread roll at him and turned to Teddy, but her pal was distracted by something on Jin's phone. She turned to Penelope instead and leaned in when she saw Mariah was awake.

"She's precious," she whispered.

"I know." Penelope sighed. "Kids are the best thing that's ever happened to me."

"Hey!" Frederick protested.

"Kids *and* my husband," Penelope amended and kissed his cheek.

After dessert, they retired to the drawing room. As Penelope and Frederick carried their sleeping boys upstairs to the rooms their grandparents kept for them, Jasmine took custody of Mariah and curled up in the corner of the couch with the baby in her arms. She watched Mariah's eyes dart around as she reacted to the multitude of voices. Holding the baby made her feel strangely calm… or was that just the result of excellent food, company, and alcohol? As Mariah's gripped her finger, she marveled at the strength in those tiny fingers.

She heard a phone ring and looked up in time to see Roth, who had been standing in the open doorway. A second later, the front door closed as he stepped outside. She shook her head and returned her attention to the baby.

"So?" Penelope said as she settled beside her.

She glanced at her friend. "What?"

"Kids?"

"Whose?"

Penelope elbowed her. "Yours, of course."

"Maybe someday," she lied.

Even when she was looking for someone, she hadn't found anyone worth dating seriously. They were flings and hookups. Temporarily entertaining, but no one lasted longer than a few months. And after this, she couldn't imagine wanting to get married again. Twice was enough. She didn't trust her judgment where men were concerned, and with a fortune confusing the mix, how could she trust that anyone wanted her for herself?

“I can tell when someone has baby fever,” Penelope said with a knowing smile.

Roth chose that moment to walk back into the room. Their eyes met for a brief second before she switched her attention back to Penelope.

“He doesn’t want kids.”

Penelope’s face fell. “*What?* I thought he’d want to go all in immediately with all the time you’ve been apart.”

“He’s not a family man.” That was an understatement.

“All guys are like that in the beginning,” Penelope consoled. “He’ll change his mind.”

“Maybe,” she said, even though she knew he wouldn’t. And for the first time, she was glad he’d drawn that line in the sand. Bringing a baby into this mess of a relationship would be catastrophic. He did the vasectomy for himself, but in the process, he saved her too.

As he settled in the single armchair beside her, Abby said, “You two are coming to my wedding, right?”

“When is it?” she asked.

“Next January.”

She didn’t look at Roth, though she knew he was watching her. Their silence gained everyone’s attention. She could see Abby’s excitement switching to hurt, but before it could take root, she smiled.

“We’ll be there.”

Instantly, Abby’s face cleared. “Brilliant!”

By the time Jin and Abby’s wedding rolled around, she would be a two-time divorcee. Hopefully by that time, interest in them would have died down. She wasn’t sure what her mental state would be at that time, but she knew she would be in dire need of a vacation. After Abby’s wedding, she would go somewhere remote and tropical to recover from her year with Roth.

She glanced at him as he leaned toward soft-spoken Jin. He hadn’t contradicted her when she said she would attend the wedding, but he hadn’t agreed either. He wouldn’t be there, but she would. Did he realize how frequently invitations like this would arise? The more they socialized, the more people would include them in future plans. People would begin to expect things from them that they couldn’t deliver.

When tea was served, she gave Mariah to her father, who paced around the room to calm the fussy baby. She wrapped her hands around the cup and listened to Penelope, Janis, and Abby talk. Mother and daughters were so in sync that they finished each other’s sentences. They understood each other perfectly, while everyone else was left in the dark. She didn’t mind. She was content observing

their animated faces. Her eyes followed Frederick as he paused by the Christmas tree and let the twinkling lights entertain his daughter.

The Davies and Baldaccis were from her father's sphere, but they couldn't be more different from Maximus and Roth. Inviting her and Roth for dinner wasn't a calculated move on their part. The way William smiled at Roth was genuine, and although Frederick seemed a tad suspicious, even he moseyed closer to hear Roth's replies. Frederick's incredulous admiration was easy to read as he shook his head over something Roth said. She could relate. Roth dared things others wouldn't even contemplate.

The festive decorations, the stack of board games in the corner… This townhouse was a home, not an expensive prop to impress others. She smiled as Janis teased Jin, her future son-in-law. It was clear there were no arranged marriages here. Penelope and Abby were free to choose their paths, and it seemed they had followed their parents' example and found good men who would fit right in. Her heart ached with longing. When she was a girl, she wished she could be part of the Davies. Decades later, she still had the same wish. Their family was unblemished by scandals, illegitimate children, or blackmail, and they were happy. Why couldn't she have that?

She set aside her empty cup and resisted the urge to stretch out on the sofa. The heat from the fire made her eyelids droop. She valiantly tried to stay awake and propped her cheek on her fist as she listened to multiple conversations. She didn't want the night to end. Hopefully, no one would realize her eyes were closed.

SHE AWOKE as she was lifted into the air.

"I'm awake," she slurred.

"No, you're not," Roth said over the sound of everyone's laughter.

"I'm just resting my eyes," she mumbled into his shoulder as he carried her into the entrance hall.

"You're exhausted."

"I wonder why that is," she said sarcastically and thumped his shoulder as he reached for the doorknob. "Roth, wait."

"What?"

"We have to say goodbye." She tried to wriggle out of his hold, but she wasn't going anywhere without his permission. She gave him a put-upon look and pointed over his shoulder.

He turned and seemed surprised to find that everyone had followed them. When he released her, she threw her arms around Penelope.

“I’ve missed you. If you walk in Daiyu’s show, Kira and I will come to New York. I’m sure the others will come, too. Wouldn’t that be fun?”

“It would be,” she said as she gave her friend a tight hug.

She found herself making reckless promises even though she had no idea what tomorrow held. The urge to cling was strong, but knowing she would see her friend in the near future made it possible for her to let go.

She turned in time to see William hug Roth. It was such an odd sight that she paused. Roth didn’t return the hug or copy the fond clap on the back William gave him. When William pulled back, Roth’s piercing stare told her this was the first time William had ever done such a thing. Frederick and Jin accurately read Roth’s mood and extended their hands for brief handshakes instead.

As they settled in the back of the car, she peered out the window and saw the family crowded in the doorway. When she waved, they waved back. Just a few hours with them restored her faith in humanity. Her eyes pricked with tears as they drove away.

“What’s this about you walking in Daiyu’s show?” Roth asked.

“I’m not,” she said as she slumped in her seat and closed her eyes.

“But Penelope said…”

“Daiyu asked, but I’m not doing it.”

“Why not?”

She glared at him, even though it wasn’t effective in the dark. “I don’t want to walk in a fashion show.”

“It’s a rare opportunity.”

“You mean, it would be good publicity.”

“I’m not going to force you to do it.”

“Good, because you can’t,” she snapped.

She jolted as a hand landed on her thigh and squeezed.

“Did you have a good time?”

She swatted at his hand, but it stayed where it was. “You know I did.”

“Good.”

She leaned away from him and settled against the door and used her arm as a makeshift pillow and willed Mo to drive faster because she needed her bed.

SHE GROANED as she was dragged across the seat and set on her feet in what felt

like arctic temperatures. The combination of wind and a deafening roar made her clap her hands over her ears.

“What’s that noise?”

“The jet,” Roth said as he picked her up.

She buried her face on his shoulder to escape the chill. “What jet?”

“Our jet.”

She frowned. “I don’t have a jet.”

“You do now.”

A distant part of her knew she should be alarmed that they were going somewhere, but she was too tired to care. The awful noise faded once they entered the cabin. Her legs bounced against the chairs as he walked down the aisle. He was so warm that she groaned when he settled her in the cold leather seat. She stared around, bleary-eyed, as he buckled her in. Johan and Mo were already seated along with Sarai who wore the same white parka she had on when they met in Colorado. When Sarai grinned at her, she scowled. As Roth settled into the seat beside her, the jet began to move.

“Where are we going?” she mumbled as her eyelids fluttered shut.

“Denmark.”

That piqued her interest, but not enough for her to open her eyes. She felt her eyebrows lift. That was all she could manage. “But…” She struggled to think straight. “What about my stuff?”

“All here. Sarai’s been waiting with the jet for hours.”

“Hours? Why didn’t you say anything?”

The engine powered up, so she couldn’t hear his response. She leaned toward him and accidentally rested her head on his shoulder. She was too tired to straighten.

“You were having a good time,” he rumbled.

Her brows pinched together. Something about that wasn’t right, but she didn’t have the energy to figure out what. The jet shot forward. Even as her stomach fluttered during the takeoff, she was already slipping back into a much-needed sleep with his musk clouding her senses.

CHAPTER 11



Jasmine opened her eyes and stared up at a shadowed ceiling. A soft, artificial glow lit the room. There was no sound apart from her groan as she extended her feet in a delicious stretch. She tugged the thick covers up to her chin and sighed. Her mind was completely blank. She didn't know where she was, when she was, or with whom. Nothing mattered when she was warm and lying on what felt like a cloud.

She closed her eyes and hummed a happy tune that came to mind as her limbs swished beneath the covers. It wasn't until she realized she was clad in only underwear that she stilled. The pleasant emptiness she had been floating in immediately began to drain away as fragments of her world began to piece themselves together.

She wasn't on vacation with Dad or on a retreat of her choosing. Dad was gone and she…

Slowly, she turned her head and looked at the space beside her. There was an indention on the pillow, indicating someone had slept beside her at some point. She closed her eyes as more memories filtered in, destroying her peace of mind and replacing it with trepidation and dread.

They ate dinner with the Davies and Baldaccis last night, and then she fell asleep on the jet. She had a vague recollection of being roused and then hustled into a car. Had Roth carried her into a hotel, or was that part of a random dream she had? The fact that she couldn't remember him undressing her was unnerving. She rubbed her thighs together, checking… No, he hadn't taken advantage while she was unconscious.

She sat up and scanned the room, eyes flicking up to the dimly lit chandelier before halting on her clothes, which had been draped over a nearby chair. Although she preferred not to sleep in a bra, she didn't like that he'd taken it off,

but what was the point in being miffed?

Her feet sank into the lush carpet as she slipped out of bed and put on her coat. She paused before the closed French doors and listened. Silence. She pulled one door open and stuck her head through. A stately living room lined with windows that let in unfiltered sunlight greeted her. She ignored the bucket of melted ice that held two bottles of champagne, the beautiful flower arrangements on every available surface, and took in the stunning view.

The hotel was across the street from a bustling city square decorated as if they were at the height of the Christmas season. She was so intent on getting a better view of the towering Christmas tree, banners, and booths that she pulled open the door that led onto the terrace before she registered the frigid temperature and remembered she was practically naked.

She shut the door, turned on her heel, and raced back to the master suite. Although she wasn't pleased with Roth dragging her all over creation, she couldn't deny she was thrilled at the opportunity to explore a new city. She had never been to Denmark, and knowing how Roth conducted business, she didn't have a moment to waste.

At another time, she might have paused to appreciate the regal bathroom, but now that she got a glimpse of what lay beyond this room, all she wanted was to make use of the facilities and get out of here. As she scrubbed off last night's makeup, she wondered what caused their abrupt departure from London. In three days, he acquired Reed & Sons, spoke to the prime minister, and attended a luncheon with international powerhouses, most of whom had a connection in one way or another with her father. It was clear that Charon didn't like or trust him, yet Roth used his connections to take care of something for him. Was it because Charon was a friend of Lyle's and Roth wanted to turn him into an ally, or was it a demonstration of his power and influence?

She stepped into the shower and turned on the water. Throughout the years, she saw Roth's face on magazines. She knew he was amassing his wealth and gaining power, but nothing prepared her for this. Roth may have surrendered the States to her father, but he made a point to stake his claim on the rest of the world. His international staff spoke for itself. Kira's casual mention of Roth doing business with her Russian husband sent a chill down her spine. Come to think of it, Roth had dinner with Daiyu's father in New York. Why did she have the feeling that he had left no part of the globe untouched?

As she stepped out of the shower and wrapped herself in a towel, she glanced at her reflection in the gilded mirror. Her brow was furrowed and for good reason. Clearly, Roth could have challenged her father for territory, so why hadn't he? She turned away as she came to the inevitable conclusion. It wasn't

money or power that kept Roth at bay, but that dark secret that he would do anything to keep buried. It always came back to that.

She strode out of the bathroom and found two new pieces of luggage that held everything she bought in London. She hastily tugged on layers of winter clothes while she tried to keep her mind from tumbling down that rabbit hole again. There was no use trying to put the pieces together. Her only hope of figuring it out was her father's letter, and that had been incinerated. There was no sense in dwelling on him or his secrets. Her time would be put to better use ignoring his existence and making the most of the opportunities that came with his hectic work schedule.

She pinned her phone between her shoulder and ear as she sat on the edge of the bed to pull on socks.

"Mrs. Roth," Johan said.

"Jasmine," she corrected automatically. "Where are we?"

"Copenhagen."

"Is this where you're from?"

"Yes."

"Can you give me a tour of the city?"

"I'm ready when you are."

She ran to the bathroom to dry her hair. "I'll be ready in ten."

"I'll be at your door."

Johan was a man of his word. When she opened the door, she found him standing with his back to her, watching the empty hallway, as if he was expecting an attack at any moment. As she stepped up beside him, he spoke in a foreign language that she belatedly identified as Danish.

"Say that again," she said.

She listened carefully as he repeated himself. When she copied him, he smiled.

"Not bad."

"What did I say?"

"Welcome to Copenhagen," he said as he led her down the hallway.

"Will you teach me Danish?"

"If you like."

She nodded. "Where's Mo?"

"Waiting in the lobby."

"Is there anything you need to do?"

He gave her a sidelong glance as they walked down the grand staircase. "What do you mean?"

"This is where you're from. Is there anyone you want to see? Something you

need to do today?”

“No.”

She frowned and opened her mouth to ask another question, but was distracted by the massive Christmas tree filling the grand lobby.

“Am I missing something? Do they celebrate Christmas a month early?” she asked.

“We have Christmas markets that open in November and bring in people from all over the world.”

“Is that what’s going on in the square?”

He nodded. “That’s just one of many.”

“I want to see them all,” she said.

“That will take time.”

“Perfect.” She wanted to avoid being idle.

Mo waited at the bottom of the steps. Like Johan, he was on alert, eyeing the tourists with such suspicion that some of them looked a tad nervous. He fell into step beside her as she strode through the doors and out onto the street. She paused to take in the garlands strung over the busy streets and ornaments hanging from trees lining the sidewalks. It seemed the premature Christmas she experienced at the Davies’ townhouse had expanded to a whole city.

“What’s the plan?” Mo asked.

She turned to Johan. “I want the ultimate Copenhagen experience. Tell me what to eat, drink, how the Danes do life. Do you know how many days…?” When they shook their heads, she spread her hands. “Then we need to fit in as much as we can before he decides to leave.”

Johan cocked his head. “You’re a writer, right?”

She gave him a deadpan stare that made his lips twitch.

“I only ask because of Hans.”

“Who?”

“You’ve heard of Hans Christian Andersen?”

“The author of *The Little Mermaid*? Of course. What about him?”

“He’s from here. There are some statues of him in the city and some tours that—"

“Yes, let’s do that too.”

She couldn’t resist visiting the old haunts of renowned writers. She had visited quite a few estates, hotels, and bars, where writers penned famous works, hoping that some of their genius would rub off on her. Walking in their shoes, even if it was centuries later, made her feel as if she were one step closer to achieving something great. She looked around her at the stunning, historic buildings, and wondered how Hans’ environment and culture shaped him into

the writer who penned one of the most tragic fairytales.

"Where shall we start?" she asked Johan.

"Coffee?"

She linked her arm through his and ignored how he stiffened in alarm. "I like the Danes already," she said gaily and tugged him along the sidewalk, while Mo followed a step behind, shaking his head.

SHE HAD NEVER PUT much stock in the holidays, but it was impossible to resist being drawn in by the twinkling lights, Christmas music playing over the speakers, and festive decorations everywhere she turned. She moved through the crowd, grinning from ear to ear. Strangers smiled back, filled with the same sense of giddy delight. Copenhagen awakened her inner child, who desperately wanted to believe in Christmas miracles.

Around every corner was a Christmas market, some piece of history to explore, or an eatery that needed to be investigated. Johan was a patient, indulgent, and informative guide that clearly had great love for his country. There was so much to see, and she wanted to avoid wasting a moment, but Johan forced her to take breaks, ushering her into cafés and restaurants to rest. When she protested, he reminded her that she wanted to live like the Danes. He introduced her to Hygge, which loosely translated into the English word for cozy, but it went a bit deeper than curling up in front of a fire. According to Johan, it was about slowing down to enjoy life's simple pleasures in a relaxing atmosphere. He pointed out the heated kissing bench in Tivoli Gardens, the boardgames at a café, and the blankets restaurants offered if they wanted to sit outside and people watch beneath heated lamps. The more Johan told her about his culture, the more she wondered why he left it to follow Roth around the world.

She took his advice to heart and made a conscious effort to slow down and live in the moment. They took a boat tour where the cheerful skipper pointed out buildings and landmarks and regaled them with Copenhagen's history. They biked through the city, visited the Black Diamond Library, and toured the Christiansborg and Amalienborg Palace along with Copenhagen Opera House and King William IV's pleasure palace, Rosenborg Slot. Before she collapsed in bed the past two nights, she jotted down notes of everywhere she'd visited and details she wanted to use for future stories. Copenhagen was a treasure trove of inspiration.

She tipped her head back to look up at a cloudy sky, backlit by a silver moon. There was a damp chill in the air, but she was comfortable, thanks to the knitwear she picked up at the markets and a steady stream of hot beverages Johan provided to keep her warm. He was constantly appearing at her side; a hot chocolate in hand with a dash of whiskey, Irish coffee, tea, or Gløgg, a mulled wine served with almonds and raisins. She glanced around the busy square and spotted her guards, who had been infected by the holidays spirit as well. They were grinning as they drank their coffees and took in the festivities.

A family of five posed in front of a towering Christmas tree. They were all beaming, arms around each other. She pretended to take a photo of the tree, but she wanted to capture their rosy cheeks, the joy shining in their eyes, and a closeness that sent a pang of longing through her. Normally, she preferred empty landscapes, streets, and architecture, but in Copenhagen, she found herself focusing on the people. There was a quiet contentment to them that fascinated her. From quiet boardgames to standing around fire pits, chatting amicably as they warmed themselves, and the fact that there were more bicycles than cars, there was a simplicity to this city that she wholeheartedly embraced. Copenhagen felt like an alternate universe untouched by the complications of modern life. She found herself trying to mimic the locals by slowing her march to a stroll and enjoying the moment instead of trying to predict the future.

She signaled to Mo and Johan before she ambled into the Christmas market. Unlike New York, she didn't have to battle the crowd. People made space for her at crowded booths, so she could purchase fudge, handmade wool ornaments from Nepal, a knit blanket for Polara, and other knickknacks. She enjoyed the clash of foreign languages and followed her nose to investigate tempting smells.

When she caught sight of snow globes, she made a beeline for the booth. She had picked up several during her travels and was always eager to add more to her collection. There were the expected holiday themed globes—snowmen, Christmas trees, and kids on sleighs, but it was the ones that were unique to Copenhagen that captured her attention. There was a miniature of Nyhavn, Copenhagen's iconic waterfront, castles that looked straight out of a storybook, a Yule heart perched at the top of a mountain, and a replica of the Little Mermaid statue she had visited earlier in the day.

She picked up the glass sphere and examined the lonely, dejected figure perched on a rock, and felt an odd kinship with her. She knew firsthand how a one-sided love could destroy you. She shook the globe, engulfing the mermaid in glitter and swirling white. The snow should have softened the scene, but it only seemed to enhance the mermaid's despondent, unhappy fate.

She ran her thumb over the glass, wishing she could reach the girl trapped

inside, but she was forever beyond her reach. Was her life any different? Roth put her in a glass cage. People could talk to her through the invisible barrier, but she had no voice. She couldn't confide in anyone or ask for help. From the outside looking in, everything looked glamorous and romantic, but no one knew that inside, she was just as lonely and devastated as the mermaid who had sacrificed everything for a man who had chosen another.

"Mrs. Roth?"

She jumped at the sound of Mo's voice right behind her. She had been staring at the globe for so long that it was once again crystal clear, without a speck of snow.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

She cleared her throat. "No, uh…"

She sniffled and put the mermaid back on the table and glanced to her left to see Johan. "Are these local castles?" she asked, picking up two snow globes.

He nodded. "That's Frederiksborg and Kronborg."

She stared at him for a beat before she said, "And you weren't going to take me to see these wonders?"

"I planned to take you to Kronborg, since it's where Shakespeare based Hamlet." His lips twitched when she gasped. "It's an hour away, so if we're here tomorrow, that was going to be our excursion. We can stop at Frederiksborg on the way back."

Satisfied, she pursed her lips and selected one for each of her nieces. She didn't believe in fairytales, but that didn't mean they couldn't. The castles sparked ideas of writing her own spin on Beauty and the Beast, but that would have to wait. She picked up one of the colorful Nyhavn globes and smiled at the vendor, who was thrilled over selling so many to one customer. As Johan helped her count out her money, her eyes strayed to the rows of dejected mermaids. She wasn't surprised they weren't selling as well as the snowmen or Christmas trees. Snow globes were supposed to be whimsical, not depressing, but she couldn't bring herself to leave her behind. She waved off Johan and Mo's offer to take the mermaid and tucked it under her arm, as if by holding on to it, she could comfort the girl. As she resumed her stroll, she vowed she was going to put the mermaid next to her computer, which would serve as a reminder to write happy shit for all the brokenhearted women out there who needed some fucking hope.

In desperate need of some levity, she paused to examine some Christmas gnomes with long beards and pointy hats pulled over their eyes, and thought of Kye and Bailey. Instead of looking around for Johan, she approached the vendor to see if she could communicate using what she had learned. Most of the locals spoke English, but she was eager to try out the Danish that Johan had been

teaching her.

The man’s eyes lit up as she spoke. He was extremely patient as she tried to describe what she wanted. He nodded, pointing at the gnomes she wanted to look at, and then dug beneath the counter to grab a wool reindeer ornament she wanted for Polara. He continued the conversation as he bagged her purchases, asked where she was from, and taught her some words when she came up short. He even helped her count out the Danish kroner and smiled kindly as he handed her a bill back.

She protested when he slipped one of the ornaments she had been deciding between into the bag. When she tried to give him more money, he stepped back with his hands up. He said something too rapidly for her to catch, but she got the gist. She finally gave up and blew him a kiss before she turned and walked into someone.

“I’m sor—" she began and then her smile vanished. “What are you doing here?”

Roth’s cold gaze flicked from her to the seller. She placed a hand on his chest and pushed. When he didn’t move, she slipped her arm through his and bumped his hip with hers to get him to move.

“Leave him alone. He hasn’t done anything,” she hissed.

“What was that about?”

“He was being nice. Maybe you should try it!” When his expression didn’t change, she reached into her bag and pulled out one of her gnomes. “You really think a man who sells something this cute has wicked intentions?”

Roth looked at the gnome and frowned. “What is it?”

“A present for the kids,” she said impatiently and then raised her brows. “Maybe we should get one for your office.”

When he tugged on the hat, she slapped his hand. “What the hell are you doing?”

“It doesn’t have eyes?”

She stared at him for a long moment before she shook herself. “Seriously, what are you doing here?”

“Sarai moved my meeting to tomorrow morning.”

She waited for more, and when she didn’t get any, she pried, *“And?”*

“She blocked off time for us.”

Fucking Sarai. Roth had made himself scarce for the past two days, which allowed her to indulge in this winter wonderland without reality intruding. The only sign that he shared the room with her was the damp towel she discovered hanging beside hers and his cologne that lingered in the air. That was Roth, drifting in and out of her life like a ghost, yet irrevocably changing everything in

his wake. Invisible is how she preferred him. She was going to wring Sarai's neck. "That's unnecessary. I'm perfectly happy on my own."

His eyes moved over her face before flicking around the market as if he had never seen such a place before. And he probably hadn't.

"How many times have you come to Copenhagen?" she asked.

"Over a dozen times in the past three years. Why?"

"Have you ever come during winter?"

"Yes."

She waved her hand at the festivities. "And you didn't notice all of this?"

"I have," he said. "And I avoid it."

She stalked off and knew he was on her heels because everyone backed away hastily. When she picked up a cup of Gløgg, she grudgingly got him one, shoving it in his hand without a word of explanation before she walked off. When she caught sight of Mo and Johan, she was surprised to see they were keeping their distance. She glared at them, but they only grinned in response and toasted her with whatever they were drinking.

As she stood in line for grilled meat on a stick, she saw Roth had finished the drink and was spooning up the raisins and almonds at the bottom of his empty cup. She didn't ask him to pay for the four meat sticks, but he did. It would be childish not to give him his share. He didn't decline the two she offered before she tried to lose him in the crowd.

Two minutes later, he reappeared at her side, but the meat sticks were gone. She rolled her eyes and bought aebleskiver, Danish pancakes, that looked like donut holes, but were much more delicious. When she offered the package of Danish pastries, he didn't hesitate, but stuck his hand in and ate one. He hadn't finished the first when he reached for another.

She tried to ignore him as she continued to shop, but he was too bloody big for that. Several times, he pulled out his phone. She tried to slip away while he was preoccupied, but he always managed to track her through the crowd.

She continued to practice her Danish with the locals as she purchased more trinkets and was turning away with another bag when Roth filched it from her.

"I didn't know you speak Danish."

"I don't," she said shortly and would have turned away, but he grabbed the back of her jacket, holding her in place.

She whirled to face him. *"What?"*

His eyes probed hers. "You're still angry."

She knocked his hand away and stilled when she noticed her aggressive action had gained some attention. She smiled through gritted teeth. "I'm going to be angry for eternity."

“Staying angry requires too much energy.”

“You would know,” she snapped.

He reached out, nabbing her nape and dragging her against him. “I do know,” he murmured. “And you don’t have what it takes.”

When he leaned down, she averted her face. The hand he used to cup her cheek made her jump.

“You’re freezing!” She grasped his bare hand in both of hers, and realized she hadn’t felt the hand on her nape because of her coat and scarf. “You don’t have gloves?”

It was then she realized that he wore a suit beneath his coat, leaving his neck exposed. His outfit was suitable for London, since the most time he spent in the cold was the distance from his car to his office. It wasn’t built to withstand hours strolling in these temperatures.

“Come.”

She dragged him to a booth with leather gloves, and asked the vendor for his largest pair, before she revisited the friendly knitwear saleswoman that she bought her scarf from. She selected a light gray one for Roth and wrapped it around his neck.

“How does that feel?” she asked.

“You’re overreacting,” he growled. “I’ve been in colder weather than this, remember?”

As their eyes collided, a flash of heat burst in her stomach and traveled up to her neck. *Warm me up, princess.* Before that heat could go any further, it was doused by another memory, one more powerful and potent. He wanted her to remember how she warmed him after he walked in the snow in Colorado. She remembered that interlude, but she also remembered how it ended. *I got a vasectomy.*

She whirled away before she lost control and slapped him. He thought he was a tough guy. She should leave him to it and let him catch pneumonia or, at the very least, a nasty cold, but she couldn’t do it. When she turned to him with a beanie, his brows bunched together.

“Lean over,” she ordered.

At first, she thought he wasn’t going to do it, but he leaned over just enough for her to put it on him. She tried three before she settled on one that fit. She stepped back to take him in. The beanie and chunky scarf changed his outfit from straitlaced businessman to modern and fashionable. The knitwear should have brought him down a few notches and made him more approachable and inviting, but it only emphasized his strong features and the contrast between those cutting eyes and the soft material enveloping him.

She tugged the beanie over his ears and adjusted the scarf, since he hadn't touched it yet. "How do you feel?"

He considered for a moment before he said, "Warm."

Against her better judgment, she started digging through the stacks. Fifteen minutes later, she emerged from the crowd with two large bags. She was feeling quite smug about her purchase until she saw Roth's frown. She stopped in her tracks. What the hell was she doing? He wouldn't be caught dead wearing this in New York. Years after her father retired to Tuxedo Park, he still dressed like he was going into the office every day, and Roth was no different.

When Roth moved to London, he changed. He'd been forced to conform to succeed and had worn suits ever since. She was half convinced if he wore a knit sweater occasionally, he wouldn't be such an asshole, but that was just wishful thinking on her part. Even as she turned back to the seller to give the clothing back and tell her to keep the money as a gift, she found her way blocked by Sarai.

Sarai drew quite a few admiring glances, dressed in the same white parka Jasmine had seen her wear in Colorado. The fur-lined hood was up, framing her pretty face and large smile.

"Isn't this place *magical*?" Sarai gushed as she waved a half-eaten churro. "I just came from Tivoli Gardens! Have you been?"

"Yes, yesterday."

"Did you ride…?"

Sarai's voice died out when she spotted Roth. As her dark brown eyes bulged, Jasmine silently willed her not to say anything.

"You look…?" Sarai was apparently at a loss for words. She turned to Jasmine. "Did you…?" Her eyes fell on the bags she was holding. "There's more? Let me see!"

She hid the bags behind her back. "No."

"Christmas presents?"

She hesitated before she gave a reluctant, "Yes."

She yelped when Mo snatched the bags from behind her.

"Wait! I'm not sure if—" she began, but Sarai linked their arms together and tugged her in the opposite direction.

"I never thought I'd see Roth in knit. I have to say, it suits him."

"He wasn't dressed appropriately," she muttered.

"I offered to pick something up for him earlier, but he refused. It's so cute that he let you dress him."

Inwardly squirming, she glared at her. "He said you moved a meeting to tomorrow morning."

Sarai patted her hand. “You’re welcome.”

She stopped and turned to face her. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Johan and Roth following in their wake. Johan spoke rapidly. When he gestured toward her, she switched her attention back to Sarai.

“You shouldn’t have done that.”

“Someone has to. You’re not getting divorced again, not on my watch.”

Her hand balled into a fist. “You can’t keep us together, Sarai.”

“I can try.”

“If I was a priority, he would make the time himself,” she hissed.

Sarai grasped her shoulder. “He’s been in one mode for so long, he doesn’t know anything else. He’s not used to making time for anything, not even himself. He just needs a little nudge here and there to remind him that he has other responsibilities now.”

“That’s not your place,” she said stiffly.

Sarai shrugged. “Maybe, but he could have reprimanded me or moved the meeting back to this evening. He didn’t. He just called Mo to find out where you were and left.” Sarai’s expression softened. “You two need this time together.”

She rejected that thought vehemently and looked away to hide her reaction. Unfortunately, her eyes fell on Roth, who was watching her.

“Give him time,” Sarai coached. “It’s going to take time for you to adjust to being together again. The more time he spends with you, the more he’ll realize that he doesn’t need to fill every waking hour with work, and he’ll start doing it himself. You’ll see.”

Sarai sounded so sure of herself… “And you know this from experience?”

Sarai blushed. “Well, no, but…” She gave Jasmine a sheepish smile. “It makes sense, right?”

“Real life doesn’t make sense, and it’s not a romance novel. Things don’t always work out for the greater good.”

She took a few paces away, assuming she had stumped Sarai. She was wrong.

“How can you say that when you made peace with your father?”

She stopped in her tracks.

“And, against all the odds, you made it in writing.” Sarai prodded her with the hand that still held the churro and dusted the sugar off her coat as she continued. “What are the odds of you two meeting in Colorado after all this time?”

Sarai’s expression was equal parts indignant and tragically hopeful.

“I know life isn’t like how it’s portrayed in books, but you’re the closest thing I know to a true fairytale.” Sarai held up her hand when Jasmine opened

her mouth. “I know it’s not perfect. I don’t expect that, but I have to believe that if you’re willing to fight for what you want, you can have it.” Sarai’s gaze touched on something behind her before she said, “I know you still have things to sort out, but you can’t do that if you avoid each other.”

Jasmine looked away as her eyes pricked with tears. “Some things are better left alone.”

Sarai slipped her arm over her shoulders. “We’ll get there.”

“We?”

“I’m your fairy godmother.” Sarai waved her churro like a wand. “You need me to block off time in his schedule, you just let me know, and I’ll make it happen.”

“That will never happen,” she muttered.

“Never say never. Oh! Look at these heart ornaments!”

“Julehjerter.” At Sarai’s blank look, she explained, “A Yule heart. I picked up a few myself.”

Although she had been fine shopping by herself, she couldn’t deny how much more enjoyable it was to have Sarai along. Nothing escaped Sarai’s notice, and she consumed everything in her path. Before, she glided through the crowd unnoticed, observing everyone else. With Sarai at her side, they were the center of attention. It wasn’t just her exotic good looks that drew eyes, but Sarai’s over the top enthusiasm as she marveled at the most mundane things. It was strange watching Sarai’s childlike enthusiasm disappear the moment her phone rang. She became all business then. Apparently, she knew Roth’s schedule like the back of her hand because she didn’t write anything down.

After eating too much and downing two more cups of Gløgg, Jasmine was pleasantly lightheaded. They strolled to Nyhavn, Copenhagen’s iconic, picturesque waterfront. She saw it during the day, but she found it even more beautiful at night, with the colorful houses and lights reflected in the calm waters of the canal. She took out her phone to take a few shots, but none of the images did Nyhavn justice.

When Roth stepped up beside her, she said, “Why did you let her do it?”

“What?”

“Why did you let Sarai rearrange your schedule?” When he didn’t answer immediately, she added, “She thinks it’s her responsibility to keep us together. Now, she may do it all the time.”

“I trust her to use her power sparingly.”

She felt a stab of envy. “You trust her that much?”

“She’s proven her loyalty many times over.”

“And I haven’t?”

She didn’t expect an answer and didn’t get one.

“Does she know?” she whispered.

“No.”

She wasn’t sure why that made her feel better, but it did. “Mo and Johan?”

“No.”

“No one?”

“No.”

She let out a long breath and wished she was as still as the canal waters, but those simple questions were bringing it all up again.

“I’m going to turn in,” Sarai said around a yawn. “I have a lot to prepare for tomorrow’s meeting.”

“I think I’m shopped out,” Jasmine agreed.

“There’s a spa in the hotel,” Sarai said as they started back the way they’d come. “I can book an appointment for you.”

“I’m good. I’ll probably crash when we get back.”

Sarai lowered her voice. “Do you want champagne or…” Her eyes bugged out when Jasmine let out a hissing sound. “What?”

“Leave it be,” she growled.

“For now.” Jasmine would have argued, but her, “Did you read Johanna Ledger’s latest novel?” distracted her.

“It’s out?”

Sarai pranced in excitement. “It’s so *good*, oh my God. I’ve been sneaking peeks at my phone when I can. I have to go back to the hotel to work, but I also need to finish this chapter.”

“What is it?”

“A second chance, forced proximity, enemies-to-lovers’ triangle with slow burn and angst.”

“Ooh.”

“There’s some non-con too, but…” Sarai raised a brow and nudged her playfully. “You don’t mind that, do you?”

Mortified color suffused her cheeks, but before she could respond, Roth growled, “What the hell does that mean?”

They jumped, neither realizing how close he was behind them.

“They’re romance tropes,” Sarai explained as she linked arms with Jasmine.

“Tropes.”

Roth repeated the word, but from the way he said it, it was clear he had no idea what that meant. Thank God.

Sarai gave her a mischievous wink. “Have you DNF’d anything lately?”

By the time they reached the hotel, her jaw was aching from the effort it took

not to laugh. It was clear Sarai was well-versed in the shorthand, abbreviated language that romance readers used online. Even she got lost at times, but it didn't matter because she was too busy listening to Roth, Mo, and Johan's commentary as they tried to figure out what reverse harem meant.

It wasn't until Sarai stepped off the elevator on her floor that she realized this would be the first time she and Roth had been alone since that night in his London penthouse. Amusement at Sarai's antics faded as the elevator rose. When the doors opened on their floor, she didn't move. All of them preceded her. It was Mo who looked back and had to slap his hand on the doors to stop them from closing on her.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Roth turned to look at her. She balled her hand into a fist as she walked off the elevator.

"Nothing."

They shuffled into the penthouse. Mo and Johan placed the last of her bags near a small pile of what he had delivered throughout the day before they inclined their heads and left. She heard Roth slide the deadbolt and felt a surge of dread. She moved into the middle of the stately living room, heart pounding, as she waited for the next battle to begin.

Roth didn't even look at her. He crossed to the opposite end of the suite, walked through an open door, and flicked on a light. Over the sound of her heartbeat, she heard the light tap of computer keys and then his quiet, "Roth." Pause. "Yes, I have the figures."

Her shoulders sagged. She turned on her heel and retreated to the bathroom, where she locked the door and rested her forehead on it as she let out a long breath. She was embarrassed how relieved she was by the reprieve. There was so much unsettled between them, but addressing the past would only dredge up more bitterness and anger, and she had enough of that to last a lifetime.

She stripped and stepped into the shower. She kept looking at the door, waiting for a knock or the sound of his voice in the bedroom, but there was nothing. When she finished, she wrapped herself in the oversized hotel robe and put her ear to the door before she opened it. Empty. Quickly, she selected pajamas and slipped them on. When she finished, she looked around for her notebook before remembering she left it in the living room. She left the bedroom, only to find that Roth was still in his makeshift office. She retrieved her notebook and then eyed the blazing fire the invisible maids started every night before she came back to the suite. She hesitated, eyeing the open doorway to his office before she settled on one end of the couch and combed her fingers through her wet hair before she flipped to a fresh page in her notebook. The

blanket of heat loosened tense, achy muscles, and her eyelids began to droop. She valiantly tried to stay awake, but she found herself melting into the cushy armrest. She just needed to rest her eyes for a minute, and then she'd crawl into bed. She sighed contentedly as she listened to the familiar crackle and pop of the fire.

Her mind drifted to another night she spent in front of a fire.

I want one last night to work you out of my system and not feel guilty about it.

She tried to think of something else, but that night in the cabin played behind closed eyelids. As the wind howled in her ears, she shifted restlessly, toes curling, as her body reacted to the potent memories… and countless others she had documented in her books. Her fingernails bit into her skin. The way he consumed her as if he couldn't get enough of her was a lie. She could have been any rich man's daughter, and he would have reacted that way to make her believe he was in love with her.

How did I get so lucky to have a husband like you? A man who fulfills my every desire, even the ones I never knew I had?

She flinched as the echo of her words whispered in that adoring tone sent a shaft of pain through her. She tried to switch the channel in her mind back to sex, but far more devastating memories crowded in. She tried to suppress them, but now that she cracked the door, the scene unfurled like a blooming flower and filled the edges of her mind until there was nothing else. A tear slipped out of the corner of her eye as she surrendered to a past she couldn't erase and would never forgive him for.

CHAPTER 12



SIX YEARS AGO

It was a beautiful day, with the sun beaming down on the thousands that had gathered for the commencement ceremony for the University of Pennsylvania. Even though she knew better, she searched the stands for a familiar face. *Any* familiar face. Lyle called yesterday to tell her he wouldn't make it back from Germany in time, but there was always the slim possibility that one of her family members might attend. It wasn't every day that she graduated from college. In fact, this would happen only once, and she had done it all on her own. That counted for something, didn't it?

The graduates erupted into cheers and applause for the man who had just given an epic, inspirational speech she hadn't heard a word of. She clapped along and tried to focus on what was happening on stage and not on who wasn't there. It shouldn't matter that there was no one in the stands for her. She finished her degree to prove to herself that she could do it, and she had. She was sure there were other graduates who didn't have family support on their big day. It was no big deal. She swallowed the lump in her throat.

She told Roth about her commencement ceremony two months ago and casually brought up the date on two other occasions, but she wasn't sure he heard. The first time, the connection was bad, and the second time, he had to get off the phone to go through customs. During the third time, he had to take another call. It didn't matter that Roth couldn't attend. He had done more than enough. He supported her through her last year of college. He paid her sixty thousand dollar tuition, housing, and everything else she needed without complaint while he worked around the clock. When guilt got the best of her, she told him she would quit, but he told her not to worry about the money and encouraged her to finish her degree. What husband would take on such a burden? He was the best thing that had ever happened to her. Even though he hadn't been able to pick up the phone this morning, she knew he was proud of her. That was enough. Or, she thought it would be, since Lyle was supposed to be here.

To say she was disappointed was an understatement. It must have come through in her voice because Lyle stayed on the line, telling her he would talk to Colette, but they both knew how that would go. He promised to make it up to her somehow. But he couldn't. There was no do over for this day. She scanned the

stands again and pressed her lips together when they began to tremble. After she hung up with Lyle, she called Roth, desperate to hear his voice, but when his phone went straight to voicemail, she broke down. She chalked it up to the fact that she hadn't seen him in three months, the aftermath of finals, and the foolish hope that she would have patched up things with her family by now.

She took a deep, fortifying breath as another speaker approached the podium. Soon, this would all be over. Their long-distance relationship would be a thing of the past. She could finally leave the States and her family behind. The fact that her family was less than a two-hour drive away and chose to ignore this day was just another layer of hurt on top of everything else she had endured this year. Their disdain goaded her to complete her studies and prove them wrong. She adjusted the dark, oversized sunglasses she wore that concealed her puffy eyes. She accomplished her goal, but she didn't feel any triumph or joy. All she felt was pain. Why couldn't her family see what she saw? If Roth was using her for her name, he would have left her the moment Dad went after his company. He risked everything for her, but it made no difference to her family. All they cared about was her broken engagement that ruined Dad's relationship with the Baldwins, and for that, they would never forgive her. Maybe there would never be a reconciliation. Maybe this is what her life was going to be like from now on. It was just her and Roth against the world.

She was so deep in thought, she didn't realize the ceremony was over until everyone around her shot to their feet and tossed their caps. The audience cheered and began to descend onto the field as the graduates turned to one another to say their farewells and take pictures. She accepted hugs from a few teary-eyed strangers before she followed the crowd onto campus. She averted her face from the school videographer and made her way to her friend.

"Anika."

"Jasmine!" Anika threw her arms around her. "Can you believe it's over?"

"Yes," she said, and then, "Is your invitation to that party still open?"

Anika blinked and swiped at her smeared mascara. "Of course. Did something happen?"

She waved her hand. "Some plans fell through, so I thought I'd hang with you."

Anika was appalled. "Your husband didn't come?"

"He couldn't make it."

"I thought your brother-in-law—"

"He couldn't make it either." She shrugged. "Business, you know…"

"Jasmine…"

"I'm fine. "

Anika clucked her tongue before she beckoned to a couple who had to be her parents. “This is Jasmine Hennessy.”

“Nice to meet you,” she said as she shook their hands.

As Anika’s father’s brow furrowed, she corrected her friend. “It’s Jasmine Roth, actually. I got married a year ago.”

“And I have yet to meet him,” Anika said. “He works overseas, right?”

“Right. The UK, mostly.”

“There they are.” Anika flagged down the other girls in their group. “Jasmine’s coming with us. Her family didn’t show.”

As the girls turned to her with crestfallen expressions, she held up her hands to stop the sympathy train. “I’m fine.” And she would be as long as she kept moving.

“Let’s take pictures,” Anika’s mother said.

Grateful for something to do, she lined up with the girls and posed beneath the trees. People passed by in a steady stream as Anika’s parents juggled everyone’s phones to take individual photos. When a man broke away from the crowd, she didn’t look at him. It took all her effort to hold her smile as they took snap after snap. The man halted ten feet to the left of Anika’s parents. She was sure it was one of the girls’ boyfriends until her friends began to whisper to one another.

“Who is that?”

“They’re almost done. Two more phones,” she said out of the corner of her mouth.

“I’ve never seen him before,” Anika muttered.

“Eyes over here!” Anika’s dad hollered.

“He’s just standing there. Who is he looking at?”

Curiosity got the better of her and her eyes cut to the stranger. It took her a second to process what she was seeing. Roth stood beside a tree in a black suit, hands in pockets, waiting patiently as if his appearance was nothing out of the ordinary. She was so stunned that she staggered into her friends as she went lightheaded.

“Jasmine? Are you okay?” Anika asked.

She didn’t answer. She started running toward him, tears streaming down her face, and launched herself at him. When he caught her up in his arms, she wrapped her arms and legs around him as tight as she could.

“You didn’t think I would miss your big day, did you?” he murmured.

She sobbed into his chest. He patted her back and then stroked her hair. When that made her wail even louder, he muttered, “I think you’re scaring people.”

She let out a choked laugh before she raised her head and covered his face in kisses. The pain disappeared as if it had never been there. He was all she needed. She was so deliriously happy that it took her a while to realize she was making a spectacle of them. Roth wasn't one for PDA. She examined his expression. He didn't seem offended or embarrassed, but rather bemused. She grinned as she scrubbed the lipstick from his face.

"That's what you get when you surprise me," she admonished before she gave him a proper kiss.

"I should do it more often," he said before he set her down. His eyes went to something behind her. "Hello."

Jasmine turned and found Anika standing a few feet away.

"*This* is your husband?"

"Yes." She placed her hand on Roth's chest as she fitted herself against his side. "You finally get to meet—"

"Him?" Anika looked almost offended.

She frowned. "What's wrong?"

"I thought he would be someone like…" Anika flapped her hand in the direction of some of their classmates.

Her brows shot up. "You thought he was a pretty boy?"

Anika finally seemed to realize how she was coming off and held up both hands. "Totally not what I was expecting, but happy to finally meet you. I'm Anika."

He took her hand. "Roth."

Anika didn't release his hand, but took the opportunity to examine it. Jasmine glanced at Roth's shuttered expression and then at Anika, who smoothed her hand over his rough palm.

"She's an artist," Jasmine explained.

"With a political science degree," Anika's mom interjected and forcefully yanked her daughter away from Roth. "She's always been highly inquisitive."

"You have beautiful hands," Anika said.

Roth glanced at Jasmine before he shrugged.

She leaned into him and wrapped her arms around his middle as she said, "He just flew in from the UK. I think we're gonna…"

Anika beamed. "Yes, you two need to catch up and celebrate! Roth, if you're interested in posing for me, please let me know. You have great lines and your eyes…" Anika tried to take a step forward, but was held back by her cringing mother. Anika waved her hand. "Jasmine has my number."

As she blew kisses to the girls, Roth picked up a bag she hadn't noticed and slung it over his shoulder.

“You came straight from the airport?” When he nodded, she smacked his hard stomach. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I wasn’t sure I was going to make it. I should have arrived last night, but I got delayed.” He looked back the way they had come. “Interesting friend.”

She grinned. “She’s the reason Dad didn’t want me to dorm. She was my roommate during my first year. He didn’t like that he couldn’t control who I interacted with, so he got me the apartment instead, so I wouldn’t be distracted.”

She was sorry she mentioned it when his expression hardened.

“He didn’t come?”

“No.”

“Did you want him to?”

She looked away. “I didn’t expect him to show.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

As they left the festivities behind, she slowed and rested her head against his chest. “He had another stroke.”

“I heard.”

She swallowed hard. “I went to the hospital.”

She felt him tense, but he didn’t speak.

“He gave orders so I wouldn’t be admitted to his room.” Her chest tightened, but she ignored that and focused on him. She had Roth. He was all that mattered. “I thought earning my master’s would make a difference. It was his dream, not mine, but…” She let out a strained laugh. “I guess that was naive on my part, right?”

“Your father’s a bastard.”

She ignored that and asked, “Did you get any sleep on the flight?”

He shook his head.

“We’ll go home and order take out.”

He frowned. “That’s not much of a celebration. I was going to take you to a fancy dinner.”

Even as that warmed her heart, she shook her head. “You’re all the celebration I need.”

He stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and clasped her face in both hands before he kissed her. She bathed in the flames of the heat he ignited so easily. One kiss. That’s all it took for her to become an addict. She gambled everything on him, and he hadn’t let her down. One year and they were still going strong. The passion between them was as potent as ever. Stronger, even. She fit herself into the hard lines of his body and smiled when she felt his erection.

He nipped her lip. “You think this is funny?”

“You’re the one who stayed away for three months.” She ran her hand down

his chest as she purred, “Do you know how many nights I touched myself, thinking of all the things I want you to do to me?”

Most women would have been intimidated by his fixed stare, but she eased even closer. The heat made her reckless, as it had from the moment she brushed against it. There was something wild and untamed about him, something that made most people instinctively shy away, even though they couldn’t pinpoint what it was about him that made them so uneasy. He was control personified, but she knew how to set his beast free. He had given it free rein several times. The memories made her pussy clench. She had been a good girl for too long. She was tired of being the responsible, dutiful daughter. Even though it put strain on their relationship, she followed through with her schooling. Roth slaved and so had she, and for what? It made no difference to her father. Nothing would, so why was she fighting it? It was time to be the woman her father accused her of being —naive, wanton, and *his*. Roth’s eyes were dark and hungry. She could see it wouldn’t take much to push him over the edge. It had been too long for both of them.

Her hand slid down his chest and slipped even lower. They were in broad daylight, in public, just around the corner from where the main festivities were taking place. This kind of thing wasn’t done here. Presidents attended these ceremonies, along with other prestigious and prominent figures, but she couldn’t find the will to care as her fingers traced the outline of his dick. She’d risk further scandal and the school invalidating the degree she just earned to have him. She had never been a rule breaker or risk-taker, but when she was around him, she couldn’t help herself. Something about him made her want to rebel, provoke, and roll the dice. She loved watching his icy composure crack, revealing the wolf dressed in civilized clothing.

A muscle flexed in his jaw as her hand dipped between his legs and cupped him firmly. “I need you.”

As his eyes blinded with lust, he grabbed her arm, and hauled her down the sidewalk.

“You’re walking too fast,” she complained and playfully tugged on her arm to slow him down.

She wasn’t prepared for him to whirl, stoop, and toss her over his shoulder.

She laughed hysterically, delighted that she could do this to him. “I was kidding. I can walk.” When he didn’t stop, she tapped him. “Baby? I can walk.”

No answer.

“You can’t carry me back to the apartment. It’s too far.”

“We’ll get there faster if you stop moving.”

“Roth!”

He smacked her ass. “I need to work it off, or I’ll fuck you right here. I don’t give a fuck who sees.”

She buried her face against his back and giggled as he turned onto the street. She should be mortified that strangers were seeing her like this, but she didn’t care. The only thing that mattered was that he was here and, this time, she wouldn’t have to say goodbye. She could leave with him.

“Hey!”

Roth paused and turned. She couldn’t see anything since she was draped over his back.

“Everything okay?”

“We need a ride,” Roth said curtly. “You’re free?”

A pause and then, “Is the lady okay?”

“She will be,” Roth muttered before he raised his voice and said, “Yes.”

He walked forward and set her on her feet. She stared as Roth ducked into the back seat of a blue hatchback that had pulled off the road. She spotted the Uber sticker on the window before Roth grabbed her wrist and yanked her in. She adjusted her graduation gown and eyed the driver, who turned in his seat with a concerned frown on his face until he saw her smile. Automatically, he smiled back. He couldn’t be more than five years older than her.

“Where can I take you?” he asked.

Roth placed his hand on her thigh. The man glanced down at that proprietary hand before he faced forward. She gave her address and shot Roth an arch look as they pulled into traffic.

“Just graduated?” the driver asked as he turned down the radio.

“Yup.” Their eyes met in the rearview mirror. “Thanks for pulling over.”

“No problem,” he said easily. “Uh, why was he carrying you?”

Roth smoothed up her black gown and dress. She clamped her thighs together and gripped his wrist as she tried to focus on the driver.

“M-my feet,” she got out.

“Heels?” the driver guessed as Roth’s fingers dipped between her legs.

“Yup.” She bowed her head so the driver couldn’t see her face and glared at Roth. She mouthed, *Not here.*

His fingers hooked into the gusset of her underwear, and with a sharp tug, the fabric snapped. Her eyes bugged as he used both hands to pry her legs apart. She stared at the driver, who was two feet away. Oh, God. If the driver turned around…

She went dizzy with panic as Roth rubbed her clit.

“What’s your degree?” the driver asked.

She blinked like crazy as she tried to keep her wits together. “Biz…” she

wheezed and had to use both hands to yank Roth's away so she could get out, *"Business!"*

"Business, huh? Maybe you can help me," the driver said wryly as he took a turn.

"Help you?"

She tried to pull down her gown, but Roth flipped it back up and tossed her hand as he continued to play with her.

"I'm bad with money," the driver said cheerfully. "I'm doing this as a side gig."

She tried to look attentive instead of petrified as he glanced in the rearview mirror again. She had an exhibitionist streak, but they'd never done anything like this. This isn't what she had in mind when she teased him. The back of a car where some guy was talking to her about his wife and kid and the fact that he was expecting triplets in a couple of months and asking for business advice while Roth was…

Her head jerked back as a streak of pleasure ripped through her panic.

"I make forty-five thousand and my wife can't work now. She's on bedrest," the driver continued as he stopped at a red light. "She liked her job, but I thought her boss worked her too hard."

"Yeah?" she asked on a strangled gasp and glanced out the windows.

People strolled along the sidewalk just a few feet away while Roth did wicked things to her. She couldn't tell whether the windows were tinted or not. She fucking hoped so because… Roth sank two fingers inside her. She held her breath as he explored with a thoroughness that made her breath fracture, before he slowly began to withdraw. She gripped his thigh as he played with her clit, drenching it in her, before sliding back for more.

She was so focused on what Roth was doing to her, she didn't flinch when the car rang. The driver looked in the rearview mirror again.

"Sorry, it's the wife."

"Answer it," she said with a deranged smile.

"Hey, baby," the driver said.

"Hey, honey," a bright, cheery voice said from the car speakers. "Are you coming home for lunch?"

"I don't think so. U Penn's graduating today, and I believe I'll make a bundle chauffeuring them around." He winked at Jasmine. "No offense."

"Huh?"

"Sorry, babe, I have people in my car right now."

"Oh, sorry."

"No, they're cool. I'm getting business advice from one of the graduates

right now.”

“Any advice would be appreciated.” The woman sighed. “You know we need it.”

“That’s what I said.”

Her eyes rolled as Roth massaged the walls of her pussy. The driver made small talk with his wife before he made some kissy sounds and hung up.

“I love my wife,” he said as he smiled at her in the mirror.

“She sounds…” She bared her teeth. “Lovely.”

“She is. We met in fourth grade and have been inseparable ever since.”

As he chattered about his childhood sweetheart, she reached over and twisted her hand in Roth’s dress shirt. As the light turned green, they shot forward. She squirmed as Roth tortured her.

“My wife is remarkable,” the driver continued. “She’s so calm. I’m the worrier. I said just one more kid, and we end up with three. Twins and triplets don’t run in either of our families. What’s the chances?”

She turned toward Roth, too far gone to care now. She hooked her leg over his, giving him permission to finish her. She wrapped her hand in the seat belt and heard it lock as her orgasm built. She leaned to the right, ducking behind the head rest and out of sight from the rearview mirror as the driver explained his poor finances. As lightning struck, she let out a vicious moan, which Roth covered by asking the driver to turn up the radio because he liked the song. The driver complied immediately, turning it up so the door she was braced against vibrated as much as she did when she orgasmed.

When she regained her strength, she unhooked her leg from his and brushed her gown down before she slumped against Roth. When their driver stopped in front of her building, Roth helped her from the car and propped her against the building before he went back to their driver and leaned into the passenger window. She didn’t realize how much time passed until he came back to her, and she realized the afterglow was starting to wear off.

“What was that about?” she asked as he grabbed her hand and strode into the building.

“He wanted advice.”

She stared at him. “The driver?”

He nodded. When he said nothing more, she squeezed his hand.

“And?”

“I gave him some.”

“Aww.” She wrapped her arms around him as they got into the elevator. “You’re such a softy.”

“I’m not.”

She patted his chest. “No, you’re not, but sometimes you can be sweet.”

“He needs help,” he said shortly.

She hoped the driver took his advice, whatever it was. Roth looked around as the elevator opened onto her floor.

“What is it?” she asked.

He frowned. “This is where you’ve been living?”

She stiffened. “The lease was up on the other apartment. This one was cheaper.”

His brows came together. “I told you not to worry about the money.”

“I know.” She led the way to her door and pulled out her key. “I like this place.”

“The other place was nicer.”

She walked into her apartment and spread her arms wide. “But look at all this light! And my neighbors are nice. There’s nothing wrong with this building.”

“You shouldn’t be in a place like this.”

She frowned. “What does that mean?”

“You deserve better.”

“It’s fine,” she said as she whipped her gown over her head and tossed it over the second hand chair she found at a local thrift shop. “Besides, this place has served its purpose.”

“What?” he said absently as he set his bag down, still looking around with a disapproving frown.

To distract him from the apartment, she wrapped her arms around him. “I’m done with school.”

He grunted.

“Which means I get to come with you.”

“What are you talking about?”

She cocked her head at his sharp tone. “I stayed here for school. Now that I’m done, I can move to London. We don’t need to live apart anymore.”

“You’re staying here.”

“What?”

“I work around the clock.”

“I know that.”

“I don’t think you do.”

She took a step back, one hand creeping up to her neck to fiddle with her mother’s necklace she had worn today. “I grew up with Maximus as a father. I know what it takes to run an empire.” When his expression hardened, she wished she’d bitten her tongue.

“Things aren’t good in London.”

She felt the blood leave her face. “Is he…?”

“Yes.”

When she would have retreated even more, he grabbed her arm and drew her to him. She was stiff as he gathered her in his arms.

“Every block I build, he tries to tear down. I don’t have time to sleep, much less call my wife.” When she opened her mouth, he tugged on her hair to silence her. “I know you want to be with me, but my life right now… It’s not a life. I want you to stay here.”

“But…” Her eyes stung with tears of desperation as her dreams of leaving this all behind began to crumble. “Seeing you once every three months… It’s killing me.”

“Jasmine.”

“No!” She grabbed handfuls of his shirt and tried to shake him. “I can help! I just got my degree. I can help you regain your losses.”

He braced his hands on her shoulders. “You’re not working.”

“What?”

“You proved your point by getting your business degree. Now you’re going to focus on what you should have all along.” When she stared at him, bewildered, he gave her a small shake. “Writing.”

“Writing?”

“Yes,” he growled. “Writing. Your dream.”

“I want to help you.”

“You are helping me.”

She threw up her hands. “How? You paid my tuition for a degree I can’t even use here.”

She slipped away from him and paced to the fridge, where she grabbed a carton of juice.

“I tried to get a job,” she said with her back to him.

“Jasmine…”

“I was referred by a CEO I apprenticed for. I thought I could make some money and get hands-on experience before I left. My interview was great. They asked me to start the next day.” She chased away the bitter taste in her mouth with mango and pineapple juice. “When I came in, everything had changed. The woman who hired me told me something had come up in my profile, and they were going to have to pass. I was so confused. That happened three more times before I realized Dad was behind it.”

“He’s a bastard,” he said again.

She didn’t agree, but she didn’t argue with him either. “I can’t do anything

here. He has too much influence."

"All the more reason for you to write."

She slashed her hand through the air. "Writing isn't going to pay any bills!"

"It doesn't need to."

"How can I write when I know you're working your ass off? That's not fair __"

When he started toward her, she stupidly held out her glass as if that would ward him off. He snatched the glass from her hand, boosted her up on the counter, and planted his hands on either side of her.

"Fair?" He leaned in so their faces were inches from each other. "You did a good makeup job, princess, but you can't hide that even before you saw me today, you were crying."

When she would have looked away, he gripped her jaw and forced her to meet his seething eyes.

"You think I don't know what you gave up for me? How different today could have been for you? Your whole family in attendance." A muscle ticked near his bloodshot eye. "And the Baldwins too. That would have brought in reporters who would make sure to get some shots for the papers. Your father would throw a party in your honor, and you would be on that fuck's arm, planning your engagement party." His fingers flexed on her hips. "I robbed you of a good life."

She linked her hands behind his neck and pulled until his forehead rested against hers. "I don't regret my choice."

He didn't respond, but he didn't have to. His rabid energy beat at her, teeming with volatile emotions. She wrapped her legs around him, drawing him as close as possible. She pressed her cheek to his and ran her hand through his hair, raking her mind for a way to reassure and soothe him.

"This has been one of the worst years of my life." She held him in place when he tried to step back and kissed his cheek, willing him to let her finish. "But it's also been the best year of my life because of you. You give me more than anyone else ever has. Having my whole family show up today couldn't replace you." Her eyes brimmed with tears. "I didn't have much of a life to give up. A father who only saw me as a way to improve business ties? A fiancé who chose me from a list of brides his parents gave him? Ford didn't want *me*; he wanted a Hennessy. You?" Her voice broke. "You lost everything, and you're still struggling to survive because of me." She tucked her face against his neck. "Please let me help you."

"You are helping me."

His hand went between them. She didn't know what he was doing until he

tugged her to the edge and his dick slipped between her thighs.

“You’re giving me something to fight for—a home.” He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her tight against him. “You’re giving me everything I never thought I could have. You’re helping me by being here, waiting for me.”

“But—"

He kissed her, stealing her words and her protests. It took less than two minutes for him to realize he didn’t like the height of the counters and pick her up. He kept her anchored to him as he carried her to the bedroom. He fucked her on the edge of the bed and tugged her dress down so her breasts were free. He grasped one as he thrust, eyes moving greedily over her.

She reached for him, and he obliged, moving down to meet her lips. She ran her hands over every inch of him she could reach, still not quite believing he was here.

“I love you,” she said against his lips.

His pace quickened, and she let out a wanton laugh as she gloried in his taking. When he slumped over her, she held him for a time before she coaxed him onto his back and undressed him. After she dropped his clothes in a pile, she turned and took in the sight of him dominating her pink, queen-sized bed. It still stunned her to see him there, as it had the first time he’d sprawled naked on her bed after he took her virginity. She hadn’t upgraded to a larger bed since he wasn’t around often enough. She assumed she would be saying goodbye to all of this, but he had other plans…

When she climbed on the bed, he tried to rise, but she muscled him down, knowing she only accomplished that feat because he allowed it. She listened to his breathing even out. Even though his body was relaxed, she knew his mind was racing. It always was. He didn’t know how to relax.

“I want to go,” she whispered.

“Jasmine.”

She sat up and looked down at him. “I know you work around the clock. I don’t expect you to take days off to take me shopping. I know you have to work. I get it.”

His eyes narrowed. “What if you move there and you see me even less than you do now?”

She frowned. “I don’t understand. How could that be?”

He propped himself against the headboard. She was distracted by his flexing muscles, but tried to pay attention to what he was saying.

“These visits force me to schedule breaks and wrap up my business so I can come here for a week or two at a time. If you lived in London, I would always be working.”

“That’s fine.”

He shook his head as his eyes moved over her. “I can’t focus when you’re around.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m not going to get in the way.”

“Knowing you’re in the same city, not thousands of miles away, is distracting as hell.”

“Roth.”

He pulled her onto his lap. “This isn’t a good time for you to come. I need to be focused on these projects. You say you’ll be fine, but you’re going to resent me eventually.” When she would have argued, he brushed a kiss over her mouth. “Give me more time. I’ll send for you when things are more stable.”

Her lip trembled. “How long?”

“I don’t know.”

“Another year?” She shook her head. “I don’t know if I can do that.” She thumped his chest. “Don’t you want me with you?”

When he took too long to answer, she began to scoot off him, but he wrapped his arm around her waist to keep her in place.

She shoved at his shoulders. “Let me go!”

“Never knew you had a temper when I met you,” he murmured as he stroked himself.

“If you think we’re having sex again, you’re crazy! You better jerk off in the sink because this pussy is closed!”

“Didn’t think you knew any cuss words either,” he mumbled into her breasts.

She smacked his shoulders. “You don’t want me with you, huh?”

“I told you,” he growled. “You’re distracting.”

“I’m not even doing anything!”

“You don’t have to. I can’t think straight when you’re around.” He raised his face from her chest and looked up. “I want you to be happy. Right now, I can’t give that to you, do you understand?”

Something about the way he said that got her attention. As she searched his face, she realized he was actually worried.

“You think we’ll break up if I go with you,” she surmised.

“No breakup,” he said as he eased into her.

She sucked in a breath as he filled her. “You want me to stay here and write?”

“Yes.”

“But… how am I going to repay you?”

“I’m your husband. There's nothing to repay.”

This man couldn’t be real. He didn’t want her to work and insisted she

follow a dream she had given up on. She clasped his face between her palms as she kissed him.

"Do you know how much I love you?" she whispered.

"Show me."

She braced her hands on the headboard as she gave him a preview of the skills she'd been practicing. He gripped her hips.

"Where'd you learn this?"

"All those nights where I had to keep myself occupied because my husband wasn't here," she purred as she pressed her breasts in his face and was rewarded when he took one in his mouth. "Ever since you, my taste in books changed. I've been reading some dirty stuff and waiting for you to come home so I can experiment on you."

As she undulated her hips, he groaned and bit her breast. "You're not coming to London."

"Fine. I'll just make sure you remember to come see me more often." She panted against his ear as she whispered, "How did I get so lucky to have a husband like you? A man who fulfills my every desire, even the ones I never knew I had?"

CHAPTER 13



Jasmine groaned as she stretched, limbs swishing beneath the covers. Her body felt heavy and a bit achy, but that wasn't surprising, considering the level of activity she participated in the past three days. Something urgent niggled at the back of her mind, but a strange afterglow overpowered her worries. She basked in the moment. Copenhagen was having a remarkable effect on her. She felt great.

It wasn't until she was sitting on the side of the bed and felt a draft that she realized she was naked. She fell asleep on the couch, not in bed, and she put on pajamas…

She whipped around and peered at *his* side of the bed. It was empty, of course. She couldn't tell whether he slept there or not. She pressed a hand on her lower abdomen as her womb clenched. He wouldn't…

She shook her head as she got to her feet and put a hand out for balance because she felt a little woozy. She would lay off the Gløgg today and stick with cocoa or tea. She walked into the bathroom and shielded her eyes from the blast of light before she padded to the shower. Her eyes touched on the mirror before she reached for the shower door and froze. She swung around, rushed forward, and went on tiptoe to get as close to the mirror as possible. She rubbed at two dark smudges, one on her throat, the other on her breast. Hickeys? That strange afterglow made sense now. She wasn't lethargic from overindulging in last night's festivities; she was feeling the aftereffects of being thoroughly used without her knowledge.

She stepped into the shower and savagely turned the dial to make the water as hot as possible. Did he try to wake her first, or was her consent unnecessary since he thought he owned her? Apparently, her lying comatose in front of the fire had been too good an opportunity to pass up. Fucker. She said, "I do,"

knowing what he wanted from her—use of her body in return for saving Hennessy & Co. That was the deal, so why did she feel so violated?

Her nails sliced into her thigh as she scrubbed herself. She didn't expect champagne and roses, but she also didn't expect him to be so underhanded. It was a good thing he wasn't here. She wouldn't have been able to stop herself from attacking him. Even as she indulged in some violent fantasies, she knew he wouldn't allow her to get in a good shot. To him, he was just taking what he saw as his—bought and paid for. Her feelings didn't matter. She cursed as the bar of soap slipped out of her grasp. She had flings that were strictly about sex. She used her partners as selfishly as Roth did her, and she had no regrets. Why couldn't she view Roth that way? Why couldn't she turn off her emotions where he was concerned?

As she blow-dried her hair, she glared at her reflection. He'd never given her a hickey before. Why now? To taunt her? Her stomach churned. Maybe it was best that she slept through the encounter. Even as she tried to convince herself of that, she knew being left in the dark was worse. It didn't matter how ugly reality was. She chose truth over ignorance. Burying her head in the sand had cost her too much in the past, and she wanted to avoid repeating past mistakes.

As she ran her hands through her hair, she brushed her finger over her flushed cheek. There was no need for blush, and it wasn't because of the hot shower. Although her inner Colette was outraged, her inner hussy was well-pleased with whatever transpired in the wee hours of the morning. Her body was humming with life, while her mind was a jumbled mess.

She stalked into the bedroom and ignored the stack of knit sweaters she bought from the market, even though she needed all the comfort she could get. Instead, she pulled on jeans, a cream-colored turtleneck, and a tweed alpaca frock coat with a dashing standing collar. The coat would keep her warm no matter the temperature, and the severe menswear-inspired coat gave the impression that she knew what she was doing even though she didn't know a goddamn thing.

When she emerged from the master suite, she didn't have to look around to know she was alone. He never lingered. Her eyes drifted to her workbag. Her fingers itched to pour everything she was feeling into a journal so she wouldn't carry this around all day, but Johan said he would take her to see castles… She reached for her phone and hoped Copenhagen could cure her dour mood and make her believe in Christmas miracles.

SHE WALKED around Frederiksborg Castle in a daze. When she caught her first glimpse of the castle in the middle of a lake, her heart stopped. She got a preview of the castle in the snow globe, but the reality didn't come close. This place was straight out of her childhood fantasies.

They visited Kronborg Castle first, which was breathtaking. She could see why it inspired Shakespeare. It was a massive castle with pointy turrets that overlooked the Sound that separated Denmark from Sweden. She would have been satisfied with that, but Frederiksborg Castle topped it in every way.

She explored the castle in reverent silence. Each room was more magnificent than the last. The chapel was so majestic that it brought tears to her eyes. Mo and Johan stood off to the side, gossiping about her like old women. She ignored them and continued on. The moment she entered the Grand Knight Hall, stories began to dance through her mind. She took as many photos as she could to capture its beauty. She felt as if she was walking through the halls of a place she'd been dreaming about her whole life.

She settled on a bench overlooking the Baroque Gardens, with Frederiksborg Castle in the background. It looked like an illustration straight out of a storybook. She wasn't sure how long she'd been sitting there, dreaming with her eyes open, when Mo appeared at her side.

"I can see why Hans wrote so many fairy tales," she murmured. "With this backdrop, what else would you write?"

"Jasmine."

She glanced at him. "What?"

He pulled her to her feet. "We have to go."

"What? Why?"

"He's having the jet prepared. We have to get back to Copenhagen."

Bliss replaced panic. "What about my stuff at the hotel?"

"It's being transported to the jet."

"What's the rush?"

He shrugged. "I assume his business wrapped up sooner than anticipated."

She dug in her heels. "I'm not done! I need more time!"

He reached into his pocket and offered his phone to call Roth. When she recoiled, he grabbed her wrist, and tugged her along the winding path. She looked over her shoulder at Frederiksborg Castle with wistful longing. She could have spent days here, getting lost in such a beautiful setting. Next year, when she was free to do what she wished, she would return and explore to her heart's content.

She spent the hour and a half ride to the airport scribbling in one of the notebooks she picked up at a bookstore. She tried to capture her experience in as

much detail as possible, as the joy and wonder Denmark evoked began to evaporate. She didn't want to see him. Was she supposed to ignore what he'd done or confront him? Did it matter?

Her writing became sloppier as her emotions took hold. By the time they reached the airport, her stomach was tied up in knots. As Johan helped her out of the car, she tossed her hair and marched up the steps. She would take her cue from him. If he wanted to fight, they would have the mother of all… She halted in the aisle when she saw the other seats were empty.

She glanced at Mo, who was already making the call.

"Yes," he said, then nodded and hung up. When she raised her brows at him, he said, "He's on his way."

She wasn't sure how he got all that without asking a question, but that didn't matter. She spotted her work bag waiting on one of the seats and pounced on it to make sure everything was accounted for. In short order, she had her laptop open and was typing as fast as she could to get her ideas down. She was on pins and needles, waiting for Roth's arrival, but as ten minutes passed and then twenty, she began to hope they wouldn't be leaving at all. Or better yet, maybe he would send her ahead of him, and she'd have more time to herself before they came face to face.

When her phone vibrated in her pocket, she considered ignoring it, but it could be her sisters… She pulled it out, glanced at the name on the screen, and shot to her feet. A second later, she charged down the aisle to get to the exit.

"Jasmine!"

She ignored Mo and Johan as she raced down the stairs, skipping the last three with a leap that surprised even her as she landed on the runway and answered the call on the last ring. "Thea?"

"Miss."

The raspy voice on the other end was almost unrecognizable.

"Thea? Is that you?"

"I'm sorry, miss, I wanted to return your call, but…" Thea let out a horrible, wracking cough before she finished with, "I lost my voice."

The last remnants of good cheer she'd been desperately clinging to vanished. She turned her back on Mo and Johan, who were halfway down the stairs. They stopped once they realized she wasn't making a run for it.

"Thea, I'm so sorry. I don't know where to start. I…" She struggled to come up with an explanation or apology that would make up for Roth's actions, but there was nothing that could justify what he'd done. "What can I do? How can I make this up to you?"

"I want to keep my job," Thea wheezed.

“Keep your…? You don’t need to work. I’ll give you severance pay and—"

“*No!* I…”

Whatever Thea was going to say was lost as she went into a coughing fit.

“Are you okay? Should I call a doctor?”

Thea came back on with a weak, “I’m fine, miss.”

“You’re not fine.” Her voice shook. “He could have killed you.”

“I’m right as rain.”

Thea’s attempt to make light of the situation was an epic fail since she started gagging.

“Don’t talk. You’re making it worse,” she fretted as she paced. “The last thing you need to worry about is your job. You should have retired years ago, and after what he did… I can’t imagine you’d want to return.”

“That’s exactly what I want to do.”

“I’ll give you a pension you can live on. You don’t have to—"

“I don’t want anything, miss, but my job.”

“Why?” Jasmine had nightmares about what happened at Tuxedo Park, but it seemed the person who had every reason to be traumatized was acting like nothing had happened. “Thea, what he did was…”

“I knew the risks.”

She stopped dead in her tracks. “What are you talking about?”

Thea sighed. “I’ve been employed by your father over thirty years. I’ve carried out many tasks for him. Things I shouldn’t have, but your father’s a dangerous man if crossed. Your husband is no different. I knew the time to hand you that package had passed, but I did it anyway.”

Thea let out a horrible cough. Jasmine heard her gulp something down before she continued.

“I didn’t know what was in that envelope, but I suspected… Your father never learned how to let you and your sisters make your own decisions. He meddled in something he shouldn’t have, and I paid the price for it.”

“What else did he ask you to do?” Her hand tightened on the phone when she didn’t answer. *“Thea?”*

“It’s done.”

“No, it’s not. I’m living with it.” She looked around to make sure Mo and Johan were out of earshot. “Roth asked you if Dad gave you anything else. Did he?”

“All he left me were those letters.”

“Letters?” she echoed sharply and then made the connection. “*You* sent those letters to Colette and Ariana?”

“Yes, miss.”

“Why… Why didn’t you tell me?”

“He gave strict instructions. Their letters weren’t to be sent unless there were signs of a rift between you and your sisters. When I saw you three at the funeral, I did as he asked and drove out of state to send them.”

She dropped her face into her hand. “Thea…”

“It worked,” Thea croaked. “Ariana’s family came to Tuxedo Park to spend time with you, and I heard you speaking to Colette on the phone. He achieved in death what he couldn’t in life, and that was good. I thought all was well and there would be no need for me to give you that package until you showed up on your wedding day.”

Thea’s voice was laced with latent panic.

“I greeted his mother when she arrived.”

She sensed Thea’s hesitation through the phone and pressed, “And?”

“She’s an odd woman.”

Her brow furrowed. Thea never had a bad thing to say about anyone, and that included Roth, who she didn’t blame for her current state. Thea’s opinion of Kaia was unusually blunt for her housekeeper.

“What do you mean?”

“I only spent a couple of minutes with her, but there was something about her that I…” Thea hesitated. “I sensed there was more going on, that you might be in trouble. I thought it was worth the risk to follow through on one of the last tasks Maximus appointed to me.”

She tensed. “*One* of the last? There’s more?”

“Just one.”

Her heart beat double time. “What?”

“I’m supposed to watch over you,” Thea rasped. “But he didn’t need to order me to do that.”

She swallowed hard.

“You’re a good girl. You got dealt a bad hand and that’s not your fault.”

She blinked rapidly as her eyes filled with tears.

“Don’t you worry about me. I’m a tough old bird.”

“Thea,” she said raggedly.

“I’m not going anywhere, miss. Someone needs to keep an eye on you.”

Thea’s steadfast loyalty made her want to drop to her knees. She assumed she would have to say goodbye to another person Roth alienated. Thea saw Roth at his worst, yet she refused to be run off or intimidated. Jasmine was in awe. Neither of them was a match for Roth, but knowing she had Thea in her corner made her feel as if she had an army behind her.

“I love you,” she whispered.

“And I love you. I always have.”

She sniffled. “D-do you need anything? A nurse to help you get back on your feet? Money?”

“No, I’m fine, dear. Rest is all I need. Don’t worry about me. You have enough on your plate.”

Thea’s voice was becoming fainter by the minute. Clearly, the talk was taking its toll. There were so many things she wanted to ask, but there was one that was paramount to all the others.

“Did he leave me just one letter?”

“Yes.”

“Nothing else?” she pressed.

“No, miss.”

In the letters he left for Colette and Ariana, he explained why he named her sole heir, about her being a closet author, and other reasons compelling enough to make her sisters extend an olive branch. But when it came to her, his only message was a warning about Roth. Why didn’t he tell *her* why he changed his mind and left his fortune to her? Did he really think there was nothing left to say between them? Why deprive her of a final goodbye that would give her the closure she needed? Questions that would never be answered cluttered her mind, but she banked them for the moment.

“Thank you, Thea. I don’t deserve you.”

There was a weak chuckle on the other end. “Your father compensated me well. You, even more so. I’ve always considered it a great honor to serve your family.”

She swiped at her eyes. “Get some rest. I’ll be in touch.”

Thea said goodbye on a broken whisper. She hung up and stared out over the runway as her mind raced with implications. She assumed the lawyers, a personal assistant, or some other automated service had sent the letters to her sisters, but Dad needed someone to monitor them to see if his prediction came to pass. Who better than a housekeeper who saw her every day? He anticipated her sisters’ reactions… and Roth’s. Her father planned as meticulously as the son-in-law he never accepted. Had he planned for multiple outcomes, or was he so sure of himself that he planned for just the one?

“Mrs. Roth?”

She turned and saw that Mo and Johan had given up on waiting and were standing a few feet away.

“Is something wrong?” Johan asked.

“No,” she said and hunched her shoulders against the strong wind.

As they followed her back to the jet, she felt their eyes on her, but they didn’t

ask questions, for which she was grateful. She locked herself in the bathroom at the back of the jet and checked her reflection to make sure her mascara wasn't running.

As with so many things nowadays, she didn't know how to feel. Even though she was relieved that Thea was on the mend and insisted on staying by her side, she worried that Thea's loyalty would put her in even more danger. There was so much she didn't know. Her full attention had been on Roth and the evil deeds he was trying to keep buried, but her talk with Thea swung her attention in the opposite direction. What other tasks had her father appointed to his housekeeper over the years? She had firsthand experience on how cold and callous her father could be, but that paled in comparison to what he did to Roth. He dismantled Roth's companies and ground them into dust, so there was no chance to rebuild. She had no illusions about her father. He was no saint, but she also didn't want to discover he was a monster too. Was blackmailing Roth the only illegal thing her father did, or was there another side to him she didn't know about?

She ran her hand through her windblown hair and took in her pale cheeks and turbulent hazel eyes. Why was it that these two men she loved more than anyone else kept so much from her? Neither of them had been completely honest with her. The fact that Thea didn't blame Roth indicated that she knew Maximus had crossed the line, and Roth was justified in his reaction. How was she supposed to take that?

When she walked back into the cabin, she wasn't pleased to find Roth had arrived. She planned to take a seat as far from him as possible, but Sarai nabbed a two-seater at the front of the jet and piled the seat across from her with luggage. Jasmine had no choice but to take the seat across from Roth in the cluster of four in the back of the plane.

He was talking on the phone and writing something in one of those flip notebooks that old school reporters used to carry around. He didn't look up as she sat, but tapped the pen as he listened to whoever was on the other end. Why was it that he was never the one talking? Wasn't he the boss? Shouldn't he be issuing orders? Why was it that he was always receiving information instead of giving it?

When his eyes flicked up, she shut her laptop and slipped it into her workbag as the plane began to move. Roth sat back-to-back with Sarai, who was on her phone and typing madly on her laptop as she spoke in Arabic. Mo and Johan sat across the aisle from Sarai. Mo was already nodding off while Johan sipped from a steaming cup. She switched her attention to the window and the other planes jockeying for position. As Roth finished his call, she tried to keep her expression serene, but knew she wasn't pulling it off successfully. When she was in his

proximity, the last thing she felt was peaceful.

She waited for him to say something and set the tone for the flight. Beneath the table, her hand balled into a fist. If he brought up their midnight fuck, she might take a swing at him. She felt the heavy weight of his stare, but he didn't speak. That irked her. She wanted to release some of her pent-up frustration, and there was no one better to take it out on than the reason she was in this mess to begin with.

The plane left the runway. It seemed to take ages for them to climb and then level off. Even as she gathered herself to make the opening volley, Sarai left her seat and squatted beside Roth. He leaned toward his personal assistant so he could hear her, but his gaze was on Jasmine. She resolutely ignored him and took in Sarai's black on black look—black skinny jeans, boots, a ribbed knit poncho, and an oversized scarf. How Sarai managed to make a poncho elegant, she would never know.

When Roth nodded, Sarai rose and focused on Jasmine, her concerned expression clearing to be replaced with warmth. "Did you get to see the castles today?"

"Yes."

"The verdict?"

It galled her to say it with Roth listening, but she didn't want to lie. "Phenomenal. Better than I imagined. It was inspiring."

Sarai beamed. "Inspired you for book five?" She laughed when Jasmine glared. "You know I can't help myself."

"Actually, you can," she said testily.

Sarai gave her a wan smile. "Yes, but I don't want to. I wish I could have gone with you. Next time, I will."

For the first time, she noticed Sarai's eyes were glassy from lack of sleep. "What happened?"

"Too much." Sarai sighed. "But it's over. I'm going to put on my headphones and eye mask and call it a day. When we land in Bulgaria, you can tell me about your adventure."

When Sarai turned away, she met Roth's steady gaze. "What happened?"

"Complications."

"What kind of complications?"

"It's done now," he said dismissively.

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Bulgaria?"

"You don't like Bulgaria?"

She didn't have any feeling about it one way or the other, since she had never been there before. "Can't you give us more warning than what you did today?"

“The sooner I take care of all of this, the sooner we can get back to New York.”

Her eyes flicked beyond him as Sarai laid a blanket across her seat and put on her headphones before she sat. She wished Roth would go to sleep and leave her alone with her thoughts. To avoid engaging him in further conversation, she looked out the window and took in her last glimpse of Denmark. She would be back. Next time, she wouldn’t leave until she’d thoroughly explored everything Denmark had to offer. Maybe she’d try her hand at writing a fairytale… A dirty one.

“It’s fortunate.”

She waited for him to finish his sentence. The long pause was designed to get her attention. She resolutely ignored him and kept her eyes on the view. Whatever he said next, she wouldn’t react to it.

“I wasn’t convinced Thea told the truth at Tuxedo Park.”

She went rigid.

“It’s convenient that you cleared that up for me. Let’s hope she told the truth and Maximus didn’t leave you any other presents.”

Her throat constricted as rage consumed her. “*You…*”

“Loyalty is a foreign concept to most,” he said quietly. “Of course, Maximus manages to find the one employee willing to risk it all to do his dirty work for him.”

“You have no grounds to talk when you’re neck-deep in your own sins.”

“That may be, but the difference between your father and me is that I don’t use innocents to carry out my bidding. I see to everything personally.”

“Am I supposed to be impressed by that?” she asked scathingly.

“Just pointing out the differences between your father and me.”

He was trying to paint her father in a negative light, so he wouldn’t look so terrible, but she wasn’t going to lose faith. Not yet. Her father was the only stronghold she had. If she lost that, where did that leave her?

“I hired a medical team to tend to Thea. She refused to let anyone stay with her, so they stop by daily to bring her whatever she needs. I already offered her compensation, which she refused.”

“You tried to pay her off.”

“There were no strings attached to the money. If Lyle had convinced her to go to the police, I wouldn’t have interfered.”

“Because you’d pay to have the charges dropped,” she hissed.

He didn’t shrug, but he didn’t need to. He could buy his way out of anything. His impassive expression made her want to launch herself across the table and throttle him. How could he maintain his composure when discussing such

matters? Did he really feel nothing? The need to get a reaction from him made her reckless.

She tapped her nails nonchalantly on the table as she said, “I don’t think Dad would have given Thea the only copy he had. I think there’s another.”

She wasn’t sure what she was expecting, but his placid, “I agree,” made her mouth run dry.

“Y-you think there’s a duplicate?”

“As dependable and cautious as Thea is, I don’t think he would impart something that important to her without having a backup.”

Hope mixed with adrenaline and crushing fear. If Dad left another copy, where would he leave it? The lawyers gave her a notebook detailing everything she inherited. She vaguely remembered a set of keys to several safety deposit boxes, but her father was notoriously distrustful of institutions. He would have made his own arrangements. A personal safe? There were two at Tuxedo Park. One in the library and one in the wine cellar. She had been in both to retrieve papers, and she hadn’t seen anything out of the ordinary… not that she had been looking for anything at the time.

“Did you ever wonder why Maximus left that disc with the housekeeper instead of your sisters?”

She looked up, frowning.

“Seems like he didn’t trust them.”

“Of course he did,” she snapped.

“Yet he made you power of attorney instead of Colette and left you his fortune when they desperately needed that money to regain control of the company. Why?”

She glanced around the cabin for a distraction. Most of the shades had been drawn as the sun began its early descent, and everyone was oblivious to the brewing shitstorm. Sarai had her back to them with her headphones on, and from the way she was listing to the right, Jasmine knew she was gone. Mo was facing them, but fast asleep. She could see Johan’s profile, but couldn’t tell whether he was conscious or not. She considered calling to him to see if he wanted to play cards, but Roth’s next words made her freeze.

“Maximus gave you that inheritance so you could save yourself in case his safeguards failed. He knew your sisters would leave you out in the cold like they always have.”

His words stabbed into her with such force that she stopped breathing.

“Same with the disc. If your sisters had to choose between you or the company, they’d choose Hennessy & Co in a heartbeat.”

She searched his face for a sign that he was intentionally trying to hurt her,

but his stoic expression gave nothing away. His indifferent tone made it sound like he was stating facts, not decimating the only familial bond she had left.

“The only reason they’re checking in with you now is to make sure you keep me happy so I can save their asses.”

If there was anything on the table, she would have hurled it in his face.

“Fuck. You,” she said distinctly and precisely as she gripped the armrest in a death grip. "I trust my sisters."

“That would be unwise. When have they ever been there for you when you needed them?”

“Shut up!” Her voice was embarrassingly unsteady.

“If they saw you as an equal, why haven’t they offered you a share of Hennessy & Co?”

She blinked. “I don't want a share.”

“Yet you were willing to give up your inheritance to save something you have no stake in.”

The bottom dropped out of her stomach, but she ignored the sensation as she slashed her hand through the air. “I didn't do this for them! I did it so my grandfather and father's hard work wouldn't be for nothing, and it could be passed down to my nieces and nephew.”

“Your sisters’ children have legacies from their fathers. Even without Hennessy & Co, your sisters’ net worth will be in the one percent.” They flew through a cloud, softening the light on his otherwise brutal face. “They did exactly what your father predicted and sacrificed you to salvage their pride and ego.”

There was a high-pitched ringing in her ears. “You don’t know that,” she said, but there was no heat or conviction in her words.

“I’ve been studying your family for close to a decade. I know them better than you ever will because I’m not blinded by love or loyalty.”

No, he wouldn’t be because he felt nothing. What would it be like to go through life without feeling obligation, guilt, and shame? She lowered burning eyes to the glossy table.

“You should be wary of their motives.”

“And I shouldn’t be wary of yours?” She rubbed at a smudge on the table. “You’re trying to manipulate me.”

“Am I?”

“You don’t say or do anything without an ulterior motive.”

“I’m stating the obvious.”

The urge to leap to her feet and storm out was so strong, her legs knocked against the chair in preparation to rise, but she forced herself to stay seated.

There was nowhere to run, and the last thing she wanted to show is how much his words were getting to her. She wanted a fight. Apparently, he was willing to accommodate her. She just wished the topic wasn't the fragile bond she was trying to nurture with her sisters. Did they apologize to lay the groundwork for her to sacrifice herself when they told her who had taken control of Hennessy & Co? She shut that train of thought down before it could take root. She couldn't entertain thoughts like that around someone who preyed on weakness. She would handle that later when she was alone and safe.

"You pointing out that my saving Hennessy & Co is pointless hurts your case, doesn't it?" Her voice was even. She was proud of that when her insides were quaking. "I could walk."

"No, you couldn't."

His tone was just as soft as hers, but there was an underlying steely tone that grabbed her attention.

"We made a deal. Just because you decide it's no longer worth it, doesn't mean the deal's off."

She leaned toward him, embracing hostility and aggression instead of the betrayal and crushing uncertainty knocking insistently, demanding entry. "What will you do if I walk?"

He didn't show any reaction to her threat. Instead, he let a minute pass, eyeing her dispassionately before he gave a one-shoulder shrug.

"If you renege, I'll do what I vowed not to. I'd destroy Hennessy & Co, but I wouldn't stop there. Those legacies your nieces and nephews would get from their fathers, I'd take that too and make sure those kids start from the bottom like me. You think they're up for the challenge?"

She gripped the table as they hit a pocket of turbulence. It took her a few seconds to realize she was shaking, not the plane. "When I find out what your secret is, I'm going to ruin you!"

His lips curved, but there wasn't a trace of amusement in his dark eyes. "I know you would, which is why I monitor every call, every message, every breath you take."

"And when we're done and I have all the time in the world to search, what are you going to do?" she snarled.

"By then, it won't matter."

There was a fucking time limit on his blackmail? What the fuck? She should be pressing for more information, but she was too rattled to spar. She yanked at her seat belt and lunged to her feet, banging into the table in her haste to get away from him.

"Jasmine."

She hadn’t taken more than three steps toward the back of the plane when a hand clamped on her arm and swung her around.

“What the fuck do you want from me?” she shouted, her voice lost in the deafening drone of the jet engines.

“I’m not telling you this to disappoint you.”

Her mouth sagged open. *Disappoint?* Hearing that her sisters might have emotionally conned her into saving their company wasn’t *disappointing*; it was fucking devastating and brought back feelings of inadequacy, humiliation, rejection, and loneliness. It was like he didn’t understand how human beings functioned.

“You can’t trust your sisters.”

“And I can trust *you*?”

Something passed over his face too quickly for her to identify before his face smoothed back into its familiar stoic lines.

“Yes.”

“You actually said that with a straight face,” she marveled.

He dipped his head to look her straight in the eyes. “I won’t let your sisters take advantage of you.”

“But it’s okay for you to?” She shoved him with both hands and was enraged when he rocked backward, but stood his ground. “You *used* me!”

“I was honest in what I wanted from you this time around.”

He brushed his hand over her chest, unerringly locating his brand beneath layers of clothing, which burned white-hot at his touch. She slapped his hand away.

“Speaking of that, next time you feel like having sex, make sure I’m conscious first,” she said, voice dripping in disgust.

His eyes narrowed as she jabbed him in the chest.

“Better yet, if you like your women unaware and lifeless, there’s these silicone dolls that would be perfect for—"

He gripped her arm hard enough to make her flinch. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about *you*…” She tried to shove him and got nowhere. “Taking advantage of me!”

“I didn’t take advantage of you.”

She indicated her hickeys, which seemed to come to life now that they were talking about them, and throbbed as if he was creating them. She could actually feel a slight tug on her flesh as if he were sucking… She shivered and covered up her reaction by running her hands through her hair. “I must have dreamed this up, then.”

"You initiated it."

“Initiated…?” she sputtered. “Are you high? How could I initiate anything when I was *unconscious*?”

The emotionless veneer cracked as his hand flexed on her. “Last night, I was working beside you. You pushed my laptop aside, grabbed my hand, and put it between your legs.”

She searched his eyes for a sign that he was joking, but of course, there was nothing there. “I don’t believe you.”

He ripped at his shirt, sending buttons flying. She tried to back away, but he held her in place as he tugged his collar aside. She strained away from him, but when she caught sight of the mark on his neck, she stilled.

“What the hell is that?”

“You tell me.” His thumb brushed over his fresh hickey; eyes boring into hers. “You put it there.”

Her mind went haywire. She couldn’t have done that, could she? She would remember climbing onto his lap and sucking on his neck, right? But it was there, plain as day. If she hadn’t, then who…? She ripped out of his hold. “You’re a sick son of a bitch.”

He cocked his head to the side as he examined her. “What’s going on in that head of yours?”

She stared at his chest and wished she knew karate, so she could give him the beating he so desperately deserved. When he crowded her, she lifted burning eyes to his. He really was the most conniving man she’d ever met. He would do anything to make her believe what he wanted, even make up the fact that she seduced him in her sleep. It was ridiculous.

“How much did you pay her, Roth?”

For a second, he didn’t react, and then his features began to contort. A glint of the madness she saw at Tuxedo Park invaded his expression. She took a step back, but that was as far as she got before he whirled her around, picked her up, and clapped a hand over her mouth before she thought to scream. He hustled her to the back of the plane.

As he entered the bathroom, she grabbed the doorjamb, but that didn’t stop him. He kept walking. It was either dislocate her shoulder or let go. He released her to shut the door. Even as she opened her mouth to call for help, he slammed the door.

When he turned to face her, her heart lodged in her throat. The calm veneer was gone. A glance around the bathroom reminded her there was nowhere to run. The shower took up one corner of the room, with the vanity and toilet taking up the rest. There was one large window directly across from the shower. As

they passed through more cloud cover, it smothered the afternoon light, making the obsidian bathroom appear sinister despite the fabulous lighting and gleaming surfaces.

She held up her hands as she backed into the vanity. “Roth.”

He gripped her hips and brought her flush with his hard body. “You’re so determined to deny what’s between us, you’d rather believe I'm cheating on you than admit you want me?”

"I *don't* want you!”

“No?” he crooned mockingly. “I must have dreamed up the woman who put her mark on me.”

“That wasn’t—"

He gripped her face in a biting hold to stop her from finishing her sentence. “You want to believe a person like you couldn’t want someone like me, but you crave me.” He used one hand to lift her and then lower her slowly so she scraped over the hard ridge in his pants on her way down. “In sleep, your primal instincts took over, and you took what you wanted, just like you used to.”

Her nails scrabbled over his chest. He didn’t try to stop her, but kept her locked to him as he rocked against her with savage intent.

“You held my hand where you wanted it and fucked my fingers as you told me what you wanted me to do to you.”

Against her will, her womb clenched. The straight seam of his lips curved at the corner as if he sensed the change in her treacherous body, though his eyes remained empty and lifeless.

“You may not know what you want, princess, but your body does. She wants the man who made her into a woman. The only man who can satisfy her.”

His hand tightened on her face when she tried to shake her head. She felt his hand at her waist a second before he tore at her jeans, sending the top button flying.

“Roth!”

His hand slid into her pants, forcing the zipper to part to accommodate him. Even as she grabbed his arm, his fingers found her clit with such accuracy that she jolted.

“You’re already fucking wet for me,” he growled, hand on her ass, angling her for better penetration. “Who’s the fucking liar now?”

“I hate you,” she said and stifled a shriek as his fingers scissored inside her. She bore down on his wrist, trying to get that fucking hand out of her, but he didn’t let up. Her body scrambled to catch up, flooding his fingers to ease his brutal intrusion.

“I’ll take hate if it comes with this fire,” he said as his fingers dragged

against her walls. “I thought I’d finally overworked to the point where I was hallucinating.”

Her breath stalled as his finger speared her.

“Most beautiful thing I’ve seen,” he murmured as her head dropped forward like a wilting flower. “You riding me in front of that fire. I’m not going to let you take that away from me.”

“I…” Even as her mind screamed at her to stop, she rocked against his hand.

“Even after I fucked you, you wanted more. You rode my face until you screamed.”

As fragments of a dream came together in her mind, she stiffened.

“I’m not going to let you retreat into your fantasy world. You want this. You want *me*. Stop lying to yourself.”

As pleasure and despair clashed inside her, a tear slid out of the corner of her eye. He captured her tear on the tip of his tongue before it could slide down her cheek. He hummed as if the salty taste was as delectable as chocolate.

“You remember, don’t you?” he whispered.

She didn’t answer.

He worked her until she was trembling and then yanked her jeans down to her knees before he unbuckled his belt and dropped his pants. She expected him to boost her up on the vanity so he could fuck her, but he yanked her against him and slid his cock between her slick thighs, brushing against her pussy, but not entering.

“In the beginning, you were so eager to learn, to match me. I didn’t know I was creating my equal.”

Her eyes watered as she held his feral gaze.

“Why would I go to another woman when the one who’s haunted me is in my grasp? When she gives me everything?” He leaned in and pressed his lips against hers, not kissing, but forcing her to inhale his words as he growled, “I see right through people. I don’t like pretense. With you, it’s right there. I’ll take your hate. I’ll take your lust. I’ll take anything that’s real.”

One hand left her ass to grip her throat.

“You feel that slick?” he hissed as he was bathed in even more of it. “That’s your body begging me to take you. Do you deny it?”

Mind and body bloodied each other as they battled for supremacy, leaving her mute and quivering as he fucked her thighs. The bathroom brightened as they cleared the clouds, creating a bright halo around him, a sex god here to claim his prize.

“Take me,” he ordered.

Automatically, her legs tried to spread, but were hindered by her jeans before

her fevered brain realized the implications. He wanted her to take that final step, to surrender, as she had in sleep. It wasn't going to fucking happen.

He must have read her denial in her expression because his hand tangled in her hair as he pinned her against the vanity, forcing her to meet his savage gaze as he thrust. The hand on her ass raised her so she was on her tiptoes. It took every ounce of control she had not to tilt her hips and put him where she was throbbing. He groaned, hot breath wafting across her face as his seed dribbled down the back of her legs. He rested his forehead against hers, fingers digging into her ass as he spent himself, cataloging every emotion that crossed her face as she struggled to keep herself in check.

He straightened and splashed more of himself across the front of her thighs —a statement that made her grind her teeth. She was still as a statue as he moved to the sink and washed up. She closed her eyes to stop herself from dropping to her knees to get him hard again so he could drain her dry. She didn't hear a sound, so she jumped when he cupped her cheek. She opened her eyes as he gave her a sexless peck on the mouth.

"I'll see you in your dreams, princess."

With that, he opened the door, exposing her completely. She couldn't move even if she wanted to. Roth took his time closing the door behind him, leaving her weak-kneed and shaking. She turned toward the mirror and saw her eyes were alight with a familiar fever. As she looked around the bathroom, graphic options of how to seek relief passed through her mind, but her need to prove him wrong was stronger than her body's needs. She grabbed a cloth and wet it with cold water. She cleaned up the mess he left behind… and hers. Her eyes slid to the shower and the detachable shower head, but she had a nasty feeling he would be expecting that. In the end, she zipped up her pants and returned to the cabin. Roth was stretched out on the couch, coat and jacket off, clad in only his shirt and trousers. The top half of his shirt gaped, showing off that fucking hickey and the angry scratches she left behind.

More of that murky dream came back to her as she reclined in her seat. She huddled beneath the alpaca coat and closed her eyes, trying to block it all out, but she could feel his dick sliding between her thighs and his tongue lashing her as she rode his face. Her control shattered. She slid her hands into her gaping jeans. Her fingers were just about to sink into her pussy when her eyes flashed open.

Roth was still on the couch, but his eyes were open and on her. There was a coiled tension about him. He'd known she couldn't resist for long and was waiting for his moment to pounce. It nearly killed her to do it, but she retracted her shaking hands and deliberately folded them on top of her jacket. She closed

her eyes and tried to ignore her quaking limbs. God, she was so close. All it would take was a few minutes and this awful tension would be gone, and she would have sweet relief. Instead, she lay there in an invisible straitjacket as minutes that felt like an eternity ticked by. She watched orange shadows dance over the ceiling. Why did they look like fornicating figures? It was a relief when night took over, obliterating everything but the dim lights throughout the cabin.

SHE MANAGED to fall asleep twenty minutes before they landed. Roth shook her awake and forced her out of her seat. She eyed him blearily as everyone gathered their things. Roth looked disgustingly well rested and had taken a shower at some point. When he spotted her glare, he gave her a rare smile.

"Tell me what I want to hear," he murmured as he ran his hand over her breasts, giving a firm squeeze before she clawed the back of his hand. "And I'll give you sweet dreams."

"The only dreams you give me are nightmares," she retorted.

He pressed his lips to her temple as his hand slipped beneath her coat and pressed her against him. "We both know that's a lie."

She shoved him away, grabbed her work bag, and stalked off the plane.

CHAPTER 14



A loud bang woke Jasmine from a sound sleep. She jolted and then growled into the bedsheets. If that was a maid, she was going to… She registered the sound of heavy, deliberate footsteps making their way through the suite. Not a maid. It was the motherfucker who kept dragging her all over the globe without giving her time to acclimate or settle into a routine.

Three countries in five days. Even her father had never set such a brutal pace. She was so jet-lagged, she could barely function. The excitement of traveling to new places was starting to wear thin. This wasn't about exploration and leisure; it was strictly business. Roth didn't keep regular hours, often waking her in the middle of the night to hustle her to the jet and hop through multiple time zones. How he could function on such a hectic schedule with so little sleep, she would never know.

The first time they were together, she noticed he didn't sleep much, but that wasn't out of the ordinary for a businessman just getting his start. But even all these years later, nothing had changed. He seemed incapable of sleeping more than three hours at a stretch. Roth showed no signs of discomfort or fatigue, and neither did his employees. She did the least and was showing the most wear and tear. It was bad for her self-esteem and brought home how ill-equipped she was for this lifestyle. She knew what busy was. She had grown up watching Maximus's insane work ethic that her sisters emulated. Rami and Lyle were no slouches either. She grew up around overachievers, but Roth was something else.

No matter how much she slept, she still felt like shit. The short days and long, winter nights weren't helping. Although tasting foods from different regions was a perk, she was starting to unravel. She needed an anchor, a small shred of normal to keep her grounded. Unfortunately, Roth was the least likely person to inspire feelings of comfort and home.

Another slam had her flipping onto her back and glaring at the bane of her existence, who kicked the door in with such force that it hit the wall and shuddered. She opened her mouth to ask him what his problem was, but the way he yanked at his tie and tossed it to the floor made her freeze. He stared at her as he impatiently, savagely ripped at his clothes and tossed them carelessly to the ground, as if they had somehow offended him. What the hell?

When he was naked, he stepped up to the foot of the bed. Belatedly, she realized she should have made her escape during his temperamental disrobing, but shock and confusion made her slow and stupid. He grabbed her ankles and yanked her toward him, bunching her nightgown around her waist. Even as she tried to figure out what in the ever-loving fuck was going on, he parted her legs, placed his knee on the bed, and gripped his cock.

He wasn't going to…

He fucking was.

She used her elbows to scoot up the bed a precious few inches, just enough to avoid being penetrated. He gave her a seething glare and tried to tug her back into position, but was distracted by the foot she placed on his chest to keep him at bay.

"What the hell are you doing?" she snapped.

"What the fuck does it look like?"

"I'm not one of your whores! You can't just come in here and fuck me like I'm—"

When he bent his head, clearly ready to eat her out, she placed her second foot on his chest.

"No."

Hot eyes bored into hers. "I'm through waiting for you."

She didn't play dumb. It would have been pointless to. Ever since that mile-high fuck, he had been doing his damndest to keep her in a constant state of arousal, to force her to take the same initiative that she had in her sleep. So far, she managed to hold out, but just barely.

Several nights ago, she had awoken to find her cheek on his thigh and her hand fisted around his cock. He has been sitting up in bed, light on, laptop on the side table as he waited to see what she would do next. The fact that she was acting out in sleep was horrifying. To her knowledge, she hadn't done this with anyone else, so why him? Roth encouraged her bad behavior by wearing nothing to bed.

This morning, she woke with his hand on her mound. Half asleep and a little horny, she had placed his fingers where she wanted them and was immediately rewarded when they got to work. By the time she'd realized it wasn't a

hallucination and actually happening, her self-control was in tatters. The strength it had taken to roll away and ignore the alluring scent of his musk left her shaking. Roth didn't feel the need to deny himself. She was forced to listen to the sound of him beating off before he wrapped himself around her. He'd whispered filthy things in her ear as he lifted her thigh and rubbed his cock over her slit, pushing her to the brink. She'd bitten her pillow to stop herself from begging him to take her. Thankfully, he broke before she surrendered.

"You haven't been denying yourself," she pointed out.

He gripped her calf before sliding the back of his hand behind her knee and lower before she kicked, forcing him back, so he stood at the foot of the bed.

"It's not the same." His eyes focused on the space between her legs as he began to stroke himself. "What do you need?"

She ignored the flush that spread across her chest and traveled up her neck. "You said you wouldn't take me unless I begged."

"I underestimated your stubbornness," he growled as he climbed onto the bed.

When she started to scoot back, his hand flashed out. He gripped her thigh hard enough to immobilize her as he prowled over her.

"I thought you had more self-control than this," she mocked as he pinned one of her thighs wide.

"I have you for a year. I'm not going to waste a day on self-control."

She braced her hands on his chest as he pressed himself against her. "I'm not ready!"

"You didn't want my mouth on you. We'll let your body prepare itself."

"What are you—?"

She sucked in a breath as he pushed, stretching her until he couldn't go any deeper before retreating. He painstakingly worked himself inside her. Her body, out of self-defense, secreted, easing his passage. When he was halfway in, he braced himself on his elbows and arduously rocked until he was sheathed to the hilt.

Her hands fluttered at his sides before they dropped to the bed and wrapped in the sheets. She didn't want to touch him more than was necessary, which was why her legs were splayed wide and not holding him to her. He didn't move. He was long and hard inside her. She swore precum helped ease his passage, so what the hell was he waiting for?

His eyes tracked over her face before landing on her lips, making her realize he hadn't even kissed her. He hadn't done a damn thing to prime her, yet her body accepted his. She needed to see a therapist about her masochist issues.

His eyes came back to hers. What the hell was he looking for? As one minute

passed and then another, she looked away, unable to bear the intimacy. Sex was one thing. Staring into each other's eyes while their bodies were intertwined, feeling each other's breath and flickering muscles as both of them fought an internal war against the other was another. He didn't have to say a word to take her over. His animal magnetism drew her like a moth to a flame, and he knew it. Fucker.

She felt a tug on her hair as he sifted through the strands. She resisted the urge to order him to get this over with. The only thing that stopped her was the knowledge that it would only incite him to be even more perverse. What was he playing at? She let out a breath of relief when he rocked against her, but ground her teeth when he stopped again. She took her frustrations out on the bedsheets by clawing at them. He was such a dick.

He toyed with her, rubbing his beard against the oversensitive skin of her cheek and neck, as he rocked against her in shallow thrusts that weren't doing a thing for her. She wanted to scream. When she couldn't take anymore, she raked her nails down his back. He pinned her hands above her head and ignored her threats as he slowly drove her over the edge. When she was bucking savagely, impaling herself on him, he finally gave in. He sat up and slid his thighs beneath her ass, clasping her thighs to his chest. He fucked her brutally, banishing days of cheap orgasms and filling her with vivid, violent delight.

A hand collared her throat and pulled her up, so she was straddling him. She was still locked in her high. She wrapped her arms around his neck and rode him hard as she chased mindless delirium.

"Look at me."

She obeyed his order and saw his pupils dilate and mouth open on a guttural groan as he came. He forced her to take all of him, wrapping his arms around her waist to keep her where he wanted her until he was completely spent. The whole time, his eyes stayed on hers. They were trembling, skin sticking as sweat sealed them together.

When he leaned toward her, she turned her face away. She wasn't prepared for him to grip her chin and force her to look at him.

"You want to go another round?" he asked darkly.

"No," she panted.

This time, she didn't move when he pressed a kiss to her lips. It was that sexless peck she didn't know what to do with. His hands moved over her as he kissed the curve of her jaw and then her collarbone. *Was* he going to go another round? She might not survive it. She was relieved when he eased her off him. She flopped on the bed and snarled when he tugged at her.

"What the hell do you want now?"

“Shower and then dinner,” he said as he dragged her off the bed and toted her to the bathroom.

“I’m not hungry,” she grumbled and shrieked when she got a blast of cold water before it began to warm. “You’re a sadist! What the hell is wrong with you?”

He didn’t respond to her barrage of insults, but shoved her under the hot spray and washed her. She didn’t bother fighting back. She was too goddamn tired.

He finished with her first. She staggered to a stool in front of the vanity and tried to get her equilibrium back as she toweled her hair dry. Her eyes repeatedly flicked to the dark figure in the steamy glass shower. It was times like this that she wondered if she had fallen into some alternate universe. This couldn’t be real life. *He* couldn’t be real. But he was. Her body could attest to that.

She went through the motions of blow-drying her hair, mind in a snowy daze. She was vaguely aware of Roth stepping out of the shower and briskly toweling himself off on his way out the door. She hadn’t finished drying one half of her head when he reappeared in slacks and a fresh white dress shirt. He stopped beside her to grab his comb and, with less than ten swipes, had his hair styled. Life wasn’t fair.

He leaned into her, so he could be heard over the roaring dryer. “I’ll be waiting.”

With that, he strode out with the scent of his cologne hovering in the air. She stared after him, perplexed by his behavior. If his goal was to keep her unbalanced, he was succeeding. She didn’t know what he was going to do next.

She shook her head and finished her hair. Despite his heavy hand, she was now starving. As she dug through her luggage, she paused. Was this a business dinner? Most likely. He didn’t take her out otherwise. She grimaced as she dug through her limited wardrobe and settled on black jeans, a cream-colored button-up blouse, and a blazer. It would have to do.

When she walked into the sitting room, she found Roth on the phone. Large windows framed by gauzy white curtains let in golden afternoon light. Double doors led out onto a narrow balcony, just wide enough for a café table and two chairs. Beyond that was a sea of terracotta rooftops and a shimmering blue waterfront. Lisbon, Portugal. Another country she had never visited, but had heard great things about. Her eyes moved around the room as if she had never seen it before, and she hadn’t. She’d been in a complete fog, uninterested in everything but the bed when they arrived. She’d blacked out the bedroom and was asleep before Roth changed into a fresh suit for his meeting.

“Yes.”

She glanced at Roth as he spoke his first word since she entered the room. He jerked his head at the door, and she followed him down the hallway to an elevator. When the doors opened, revealing two other couples inside, she hesitated, but Roth stepped in and placed her directly in front of him. She sucked in her belly as the doors closed.

“Yes,” Roth said into the awkward silence.

When the doors opened into the lobby, she rushed forward and was brought up short when he gripped her hip and ushered her to the side. She looked up and saw he was scanning the lobby in a way that made her tense. He squeezed her hip and nodded to someone before his hand fell away. She turned and saw Mo and Johann dressed casually in jeans and button-up shirts. It was at this moment that she realized Roth hadn’t put on a jacket and was still sporting his white dress shirt with the top button undone. A glance around the lobby confirmed that she had overdressed. Before she could suggest changing, Roth had a hold of her hand and was leading her out of the hotel, followed closely by Mo and Johan.

She registered the temperature immediately. It was downright balmy compared to the cold and wet she experienced in Bulgaria and Switzerland. It didn’t feel like winter here. Maybe the end of spring, edging into autumn. They walked along narrow sidewalks made of handcrafted limestone. As Roth navigated her along the congested pathway, she was struck by the warm colors. Red and orange were abundant with pops of bright pinks, blues, and yellows.

Roth ended his call with a, “Yeah, later,” before he turned her into the lobby of another hotel.

She looked around, but didn’t really have the chance to take it in, since Roth was on a mission. He led her to another elevator, forcing the other occupants to shuffle around to make room for them before selecting the top floor. When they stepped out onto a rooftop restaurant, she realized why it was so crowded. As they followed their host to their table, she grasped Roth’s hand with both of hers, excitement overpowering her reservations. A glass barrier didn’t detract from the breathtaking view of Lisbon’s skyline and the Tagus River. One long bench seat ran along one side of the terrace. She sat, shifting pillows aside with a grin as Roth settled across the table from her. She accepted the menu and tried to listen to the server who ran down a list of specials for the evening, but was distracted by the view and hustle and bustle around her. Roth ordered her Port, a Portuguese brandy for himself, and a cheese board to start. She turned to watch the sun set, and leapt on the cheese board the moment it landed on the table. She sipped wine as she poured over the menu and settled on Pica-Pau, traditional Portuguese beef strips in a pickle sauce, while Roth chose seared tuna.

As night fell, servers lit a candle at every table. Warm, relaxed, and content,

she rested against the cushions and focused on Roth, who was on his phone. Her smile faded. Not even thirty minutes ago, he refused to let her break eye contact, but now that they were back in the real world, he reverted to his absent, distant self. Typical.

"Is Sarai coming?" she asked.

He looked up with a frown. "No. Why would she?"

She jerked her chin at Mo and Johan, who were sitting at the bar.

"They're working."

"Do they ever get time off?"

"They're compensated not to have personal lives." He frowned at his phone. "We'll get more security once we're back in the States."

"More? Is that necessary?"

His eyes flicked from his screen to her. "Lyle and your father aren't the only ones who threatened to end my life."

Her stomach iced over. She set her glass down hard enough that the wine rocked from side to side. "They wouldn't."

He didn't answer her, but set his phone face down and sipped his brandy.

"Roth, has anyone…?"

"I've made many enemies."

She leaned across the table, voice low. "Shouldn't Mo and Johan be shadowing you? Why do you have them on me?"

"I can take care of myself."

She eyed his casual attire. "You have knives strapped to your calves or something?"

"I'm armed most of the time in one way or another."

She blinked. "What? How? I've never even seen you with a gun."

"You're not comfortable, so I don't leave them out in the open."

"I'm not uncomfortable. I grew up in the country, but…" She waved her hand before she picked up her Port and sipped. "I'm cautious. I've never held one before."

"We can go shooting."

Her brows shot up. "We can?"

"It can't hurt for you to know your way around a weapon. You never know when it'll come in handy."

That sounded ominous. She wanted to ask if there had been attempts on his life, but when he turned and scanned the restaurant, she was reminded of her earlier assumption that this was a business dinner.

"Are you expecting company?"

He turned back to her. "What kind of company?"

“The only kind you deal with.” She arched her brows. “Business.”

“No. I’ll deal with that in the morning.”

She ran through her mental files of the businessmen with ties to Portugal. If Roth had continued his pattern of conducting business with her father’s contacts, it had to be, “Are you meeting Lourenco Silva?”

He showed no reaction to the query, but slowly rotated his glass of brandy as he studied her.

“Or is it his son, Tiago, that’s taken over?”

“Tiago.”

She nodded and selected a cracker as she asked, “How many of my father’s contacts have you managed to collect?”

“Enough.”

Her hand fisted in her lap as the server appeared with their meals. She didn’t take her eyes off Roth as she thanked the server and reassured him that everything so far had been perfect. The moment the server walked away, she hissed, “How did you get them to do business with you?”

“Eat.”

“I don’t want—"

“Eat.”

His steely undertone told her the topic wasn’t up for discussion. She looked out over the city as she tried to rein in her temper. She wanted to know just how deeply Roth had infiltrated her territory, but did it really matter? It was done. There was nothing she could do about it, and she wasn’t supposed to care about his business practices and contacts. She was supposed to mind her own business and stay in her lane. With effort, she realigned her thoughts and reached for her fork. The delicious meal, second glass of wine, and tiramisu helped mellow her considerably. She slouched against the cushions and enjoyed distant music that carried in the still night. She eyed Roth, who was back on his phone, completely immune to the relaxed atmosphere and beautiful setting.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket.

Colette: *Are you still in Switzerland?*

Before, she’d been comforted by her sisters’ daily check-ins, but Roth’s twisted spin on her sisters had her measuring every word and interaction she had with them since she returned from Colorado. Her sisters knew Roth moved back to New York and hadn’t shared it with her. And it wasn’t until the paparazzi snapped pictures of them that her sisters extended that olive branch… To soften her up, so she would feel obliged to talk to Roth if they couldn’t buy back their shares? Were Colette’s frequent messages motivated by guilt that she forced her little sister back into an abusive relationship to save her company?

She shoved her suspicions aside and sent the pictures she took of the sunset and one of their empty plates on the table.

Colette: *Lisbon?*

Jasmine: *Yes.*

Colette: *Great city. Roth's meeting with Lourenco Silva?*

She shot Roth a furtive glance, but he was engrossed with what was on his screen. Colette had come to the same conclusion she had. Her sister's inquiry was innocent, a natural assumption, but she wasn't sure how Roth would interpret it. She wished she could warn her sisters that her phone was being monitored, but that would open a whole new can of worms. Did Colette have any concept just how much Roth had infiltrated their network?

Jasmine: *Tiago's taken over.*

Colette: *Of course. Give them our regards. It's been too long since we've connected with the Silvas. Enjoy your time in Lisbon and eat some Pastéis de Nata for me.*

Colette followed her message with a few pictures of Polara that warmed her heart. She zoomed in on Polara's bright eyes and toothless smile before she set her phone aside. Her sisters had been dicks in the past. They'd been cold and heartless. That was the way Maximus trained them to be, but they were trying. If Colette hadn't cared, she wouldn't have come clean to Lyle about the state of the company, right? She wouldn't allow Roth to poison their relationship if there was a chance that it could be salvaged. They were innocent until proven guilty.

"You're wrong about my sisters," she said.

He looked up from his phone. He didn't contradict her, he just waited, which irked her more than if he argued.

"It's not just about Hennessy & Co. They care about me."

"And you're a good judge of character."

It was said without derision or sarcasm, merely as a casual observation, but the words sliced through her gut before she went numb.

"You're right. I'm a terrible judge of character," she deadpanned, before she turned blind eyes to the server who asked how their meal was. She tried to muster up an appropriate amount of enthusiasm for what had truly been a five-star experience, but her subdued monotone made the server frown in puzzlement.

"Would you like coffee or—?"

"We're done. The check, please," she said as politely as she could.

The server cast an assessing glance at Roth before he inclined his head. "I'll be right back."

She dropped her gaze to the candle flame, which became a shapeless blob as

her vision unfocused. She was dimly aware of Roth taking care of the check. When he rose, so did she. She moved like an automaton, trailing after him as he navigated through the restaurant. She stood behind him, Mo, and Johan, as they talked in low tones in the elevator. Roth took her hand when they reached the lobby. She didn't pull away, but he tightened his grip when her hand lay lax in his. They didn't speak as they made their way back to their hotel, and when he unlocked the door to their suite, she headed to the bedroom. She shucked her clothes, tossing them on the ground in a heap before she slipped into pajamas. She did her nighttime routine and kept her eyes averted from her reflection when she brushed her teeth. Once in the bedroom, she pulled back the curtains to let in soft moonlight and slid beneath the covers, which had been changed in their absence. She closed her eyes, willing sleep to drag her into its empty void, but her mind refused to shut down.

She was a bad judge of character. Roth managed to fool her countless times. So had her father. Why wouldn't her sisters cash in on her naïveté? When she possessed nothing of value, her sisters ignored her existence. Now that she was worth a quarter of one billion dollars and the ex-wife of the man who wanted to take over their company, they suddenly wanted to repair their relationship? What were the chances? Was she so desperate to be loved that she would discard three decades of evidence for two changed months?

Cake and wine churned in her stomach. No one wanted her for who and what she was. Everyone was playing an angle and had an agenda. It was why she walked away from this world. She would rather be alone than be a pawn in their game, but Dad brought her back into the arena. He gave her money, but he didn't give her a map to navigate these treacherous waters or backup. She couldn't trust anyone, not even herself.

She buried her face in the pillow, knees tucking up, as she was swamped with feelings of worthlessness and loneliness. She refused to give in to the urge to curl into the fetal position. The worst part of her divorce wasn't realizing that Roth used her, it was losing trust in her own judgment. She was afraid to trust her instincts, afraid of making another catastrophic mistake, afraid of falling for another man she would give up everything for, only to discover it had all been a game to him. It was why she kept her relationships at surface level. She wasn't looking for another relationship to lose herself in. She was just starting to trust herself again when Roth knocked her back to square one.

She closed her eyes when he came into the bedroom and let out a shaky breath when he went into the bathroom. She heard the water run, doors close, and then the bed dipped. She expected him to flick on the bedside lamp, so he could work in bed as he so often did, but the room stayed dark.

“I could be wrong,” he said into the silence.

She said nothing.

“But it’s better to be cautious and realistic. Most people don’t change.”

Her face screwed up in pain. She knew that all too well.

Neither of them spoke. He didn’t try to touch her, for which she was grateful. She lay with her back to him, staring at the moon, as mind and heart battled.

An hour passed. She assumed he was asleep, so when a hand landed on her shoulder, she let out a startled yelp.

“You think too much,” he said as he tipped her onto her back and dragged her under him.

“Look who’s talking,” she wheezed and slapped his shoulder when he gave her his weight. “Are you trying to suffocate me? If so, do it fast and classy and strangle me. This is torture.”

Was that a fucking *laugh*?

“I saw your weighted blanket at Tuxedo Park.”

She stiffened. “You know what that is?”

“I’ve always had a hard time sleeping. Mind won’t shut off. One of those psychologists suggested a weighted blanket, but it didn’t work for me. I exercise instead.”

She hesitated and then, “You exercise to exhaustion?”

“Seems healthier than most addictions.”

“That’s why you’ve always been so muscular,” she murmured. “And why you choose to do such hard physical labor jobs.”

He grunted. “Go to sleep.”

“You don’t still do construction, do you?”

A long silence and then, “No, but I still like to hunt.”

“When do you—"

He pressed his lips to her temple. “Sleep.”

She shifted and so did he, redistributing his weight, so she could breathe easier. When they settled, his weight began to have an immediate effect, suppressing overactive senses. Tension eased out of her and her eyelids drooped. She fought back, gripping his bicep as she tried to stay conscious. She shouldn’t be taking comfort from her enemy, the man who admitted to using her and marrying her twice to further his own plans, but she fell even deeper when he cupped the back of her skull and massaged gently.

“I don’t understand you,” she whispered.

He didn’t answer, but brushed his thumb over the apple of her cheek. Why that made her eyes sting with tears, she didn’t know. Her hand slid from his bicep to his ribs.

“You believe they’re using me.”

He didn’t need clarification.

“Yes.”

“So why say you could be wrong?”

He didn’t answer immediately, but continued his massage until her breathing deepened. She was beginning to float off when he spoke.

“You wanting to believe there’s good in them is dangerous when you’re willing to sacrifice everything to protect them from their mistakes.” He paused, making her eyelashes flutter as she tried to stay awake. “But I always allow a margin of error and I know you need to believe in them, even if the odds aren’t in their favor.”

“They’re all I have,” she murmured sadly before her hand fell away from him.

“No.”

She didn’t understand his response, but was too weary to carry on the conversation. She succumbed to the feel of his lips brushing over her closed eyelids.

CHAPTER 15



"Guys, I'm not having a reception!"

She had to raise her voice to be heard over her friends, who had been ignoring her for ten minutes.

"Why not?" Kira demanded.

"We don't need a reception."

"No one *needs* a reception, but this is the second time you haven't allowed anyone to celebrate your union. It's unacceptable."

"Roth isn't that kind of guy."

"No man is that kind of guy," Kira retorted. "You have to tell him you want a party."

"I *don't* want a party."

"And this is where I inform you that you have no choice," Kira said crisply.

"It's going to be embarrassing if you go through all this trouble of planning a reception at your resort, and we don't show."

"This will be fun, Jasmine," Penelope said over the sound of Kira cursing. "Everyone who loves and supports you all in one place?"

She made a face. She could fit those who loved and supported her in a public bathroom stall. There was no need to rent a yacht or resort.

"The girls and I have compiled a list of venues for you to choose from. You can have the wedding of your dreams."

She felt a trill of alarm. "Wedding? I thought this was a reception."

"Some couples like to renew their vows before the reception."

When she said nothing, Kira made an impatient sound. "I'll have Igor call Roth."

"You do that."

There was no way Roth would agree to this. People believed their story.

There was no reason to invest more time and effort into making their relationship seem more authentic.

As Kira and Penelope continued to brainstorm, she lifted her face to the bright morning sun. The call from her friends had been a pleasant surprise, until she found out they wanted to nail down details for the reception she had no intention of having. Apparently, news of her marriage caused their small billionaire daughters' club to reconnect. Unfortunately, they planned to use her reception as a reunion and expected her to go along with it. Everyone was eager to host her reception in their country and offered up their considerable resources —yachts, resorts, islands, palaces, and towns. If this was a reception for anyone else, she would have been eager to help, but as it was for her fake relationship… No.

"You're as stubborn as ever," Kira complained.

"And you're still sweet and submissive," she drawled.

Kira snickered. "You don't want to be disappointed in case your husband says no, right?"

No, but if it would get her friend off her back… "Yes."

"Igor will take care of Roth, and then we can proceed with our plans."

She seized the opportunity to redirect the conversation to Kira's personal life and was stunned to hear her friend had four daughters and wasn't going to stop until she got her boy. Kira and Penelope updated her on friends she had lost touch with and listed those who had tentative plans to meet in New York for Fashion Week. She reminded them that she wasn't going to walk in Daiyu's show, which cheered Kira and sent Penelope into a ten-minute lecture about how they needed to support each other.

When the call ended, she shook her head, exasperated and amused. Some things never changed. After so much time apart, she thought it would be awkward speaking to her childhood friends, but they picked up as if the decade in between never happened. Although she wasn't happy that the reception seemed to be their sole focus, she was excited to see them in February. She wasn't walking in any show and had ignored the voicemails that Daiyu started to leave with annoying regularity.

She nibbled the ham, cheese, and bread that had been delivered for breakfast and took in the view from her balcony. It was a beautiful day without a cloud in sight. She basked in the sun's rays and idly wondered if she packed any short-sleeved blouses. Her laptop was open, ready for her to get to work, but she couldn't bring herself to look at the screen.

She had woken up, feeling more rested than she had in a week. Roth's weight did the trick. She slept like a baby. She wasn't sure why he did it and wasn't

going to waste time trying to interpret his actions. He was an enigma and constantly changing the script on her. She didn't know what was genuine or not, and she was tired of trying to make sense of it.

Her notebook lay beside her empty coffee cup, inviting her to sort out her thoughts, make more resolutions, and list possible locations where her father may have hid a second letter, but she didn't pick up the pen. What good would it do to comb through the same information over and over in the hopes that she would see something new? If there was a second letter, she suspected it was at Tuxedo Park, but she was also certain she would have run across it since his death, which left her with no leads.

As for figuring out her sisters' motives, only time would tell. The only way they could prove their loyalty was if they were put in a position where they had to choose between the company or her. If her arrangement with Roth held, that predicament would never come to pass, but life was a fickle thing. She had a feeling her sisters' true intentions would reveal itself sooner rather than later. Until then, she would have to keep her guard up. As Roth pointed out, she couldn't trust her judgment where family was concerned.

Same with him.

She pondered their last words and his allusion that her sisters weren't the only family she had. This was the second time he had made such a claim. This was the same man who freely admitted that he used her and taunted her with the fact that she had been such easy prey. After pointing out that she had poor judgment, he had the audacity to suggest she trust him. How stupid did he think she was? She made the mistake of believing the man she married the first time was a real person when Roth had been playing a role as the dream man from her Minnie Hess novels. The man she remarried was a completely different beast, complete with a troubled past and sins and secrets she would never know.

She was tired of looking for deeper meaning where he was concerned. She was going to take her own advice and lock up her emotions, accept the good that came with their arrangement, and turn a blind eye to everything else. She would take the mind-blowing sex, catching up with old acquaintances, and travel. But she wouldn't expect anything from him. That would only lead to disappointment. She would endure. Every day, she was one step closer to fulfilling their agreement. That was all that mattered.

She rose and leaned on the iron railing and watched the people mosey along below. It was early enough that the sidewalks were mostly empty. Normally, Roth did business in congested metropolis', but here, all was quiet. Johan made Copenhagen come alive for her. If only she had a local guide to show her the ropes…

She straightened and eyed her phone. There was a high probability that she knew someone in Lisbon. She had acquaintances all over the world, but had let them go when she left society. But, as Penelope demonstrated, those ties were still there, just waiting for her to reach out. She logged into her personal social media account, ignoring the friend requests and ridiculous number of messages, and did a search of everyone's location.

"Ahh!"

Her excited shout startled a flock of pigeons. Johnny was the youngest son of Rey Salazar, a real estate magnate in the Philippines. Rumor had it that he had been cast out of the family fold when he came out of the closet. She hadn't talked to him in, what? Twelve years? He was closer to Ariana's age, but she had fond memories of him trying to lighten up stale business functions. A week ago, it wouldn't have occurred to her to reach out, but her chat with Penelope and Kira gave her a boost of optimism. She messaged him that she was in town and would like to get together if he was available, before she texted Mo and Johan that she wanted to go sightseeing.

She ran her hand through her hair and hissed when it caught on her wedding ring. She eyed the massive diamond for a moment before she slipped it off her finger. The ring attracted too much attention. She headed to the closet where every hotel put their safe and paused when she saw the safe was already in use. She frowned. Six numbers. She put in Roth's birthday and five other combinations, but nothing worked. She had no idea what date or numbers were significant enough for him to use. What the hell was in there anyway? Contracts? Guns? Knives? Before her mind could run rampant, she strode through the bedroom and then the sitting room, looking for a good hiding spot. She wanted to avoid putting the ring in a place where a maid could accidentally stumble upon it while cleaning. Just the thought of it being sucked up in a vacuum or tossed in a washer with towels and bedsheets made her blood run cold. She may not care for the expensive prop, but even she wouldn't be careless with it out of spite.

There were quite a few interesting statues, pots, and sculptures throughout the suite. She paused beside a cobalt sculpture and peered through the glass at the thick base. She placed the ring at the bottom and made sure to turn the diamond away from the light, so it wouldn't catch anyone's attention. For some reason, getting rid of the ring made her feel ten pounds lighter. She left the room in jeans, boots, and a thin long sleeve with a jacket wrapped around her waist. Mo and Johan were waiting outside her door.

"Destination?" Mo asked.

"I don't have one," she said cheerfully as she led the way to the elevator.

She didn’t have to look back to know they were giving each other sidelong glances.

“Car?” Johan asked.

“No, let’s go on foot. Have either of you been here before?”

“Many times, but we didn't do touristy things,” Mo said.

“What did you do?”

“Surveillance and eat.”

That sounded about right.

At this hour, the streets were relatively empty, giving her the opportunity to take photos. When she detoured off the main streets, she felt as if she had stepped back in time.

They were hiking downhill when her phone emitted an odd ring from her back pocket. Johnny was calling her through the social media app, since he didn’t have her number. Did he hit the call button accidentally? She shrugged and accepted the call. Instantly, she was rewarded with the sight of a man with slick black hair and Ray Ban’s.

“Johnny!”

“Jasmine Hennessy.”

The sound of a male voice made Mo and Johan swing around as if they heard gunfire. She ignored them and beamed at Johnny, who pulled down his sunglasses to examine her.

“All grown up. I can’t believe it. What are you doing in Lisbon?”

“I’m here on a short trip. When I saw you lived here, I decided to reach out.”

He pushed his sunglasses back into place with his middle finger. “You made the right call. What are your plans?”

“I don’t have any.”

“Where are you?”

She blinked. “In Lisbon.”

“I know that, bebe. *Where* in Lisbon?”

“Uh…” She turned the camera around, so he could see the stores lining the street.

He snapped his fingers. “I know where you are. I’ll be there in ten.”

“Ten?” she echoed, but the screen had already gone blank. She looked up and found she was the focus of two disgruntled, disapproving males. “What?”

“You’re talking to a man,” Mo said darkly.

“He’s a friend.”

“Roth isn’t going to like this.”

“He wouldn’t allow it,” Johan muttered, and Mo nodded in agreement.

“Johnny’s gay.” When their expressions didn’t change, she put a hand on her

hip. “Seriously?”

“Roth needs to be informed,” Johan said and pulled out his phone to tattle on her.

“I’ll call him.”

She ignored their stunned expressions as she dialed. She gritted her teeth when Mo checked to make sure it really was Roth she was calling. She understood their skepticism since she normally avoided him at all costs, but she wasn’t going to let him ruin her day.

Roth picked up on the second ring. “Jasmine.”

“I’m meeting a friend of mine, Johnny Salazar,” she said in a rush. “He—"

“Rey Salazar’s son?”

Of course, he knew Rey Salazar.

“Yes,” she said tightly.

“I’ve never heard of a Jonathan.”

“He was disowned a long time ago. They don’t talk about him. Anyway, he lives in Lisbon, and he’s going to show me around.”

He didn’t respond.

She rolled her eyes. “He’s gay. That’s why he was disowned. Mo and Johan said I had to call so—"

“I’ll see you tonight.”

She wasn’t offended by his curt tone or that he hung up on her. She bounced on her toes and pointed at Mo and Johan. “Hah!”

“Better to be safe than sorry,” Johan said.

She looked up and down the street and made a shooing motion. “Can you guys give me some space?”

They crossed their arms over their chests.

“I want to avoid explaining why I have security.”

“You should tell him you’re married,” Johan said.

“Didn’t you hear what I said? He’s gay.”

“So?”

“Where’s your ring?” Mo asked sharply.

“In the room where it’s safe.”

“I don’t like this,” Johan muttered.

“I just want to be normal today,” she said, pleading for understanding. “I want to avoid answering more questions than I have to.”

Mo and Johan glanced at one another before Mo shrugged.

“Roth gave permission. We’ll hang back.”

Johan didn’t look happy, but he didn’t argue. They went to either end of the street and waited. Five minutes later, she heard a shout and saw a man in capris,

a blue pin striped long sleeve, and Ray-Bans waving from below. She hurried down to him and grinned when he kissed her on both cheeks.

“Look at you!” he exclaimed and gave her a twirl. “You look like you’re living your best life!”

He put an arm around her shoulders and led her downhill.

“I hope you’re hungry. I’m famished. I had to wake up at the crack of dawn for this shoot in Sintra, but it was worth it.”

“Shoot?”

“Photo shoot. I’m a photographer now. I’ll show you my studio. My partner, Aleixo, is working today. Do you have plans tomorrow?”

“I don’t think so.”

He nodded. “You’ll meet him then. He has the car. We can see the countryside, vineyards, Porto, whatever you want.”

“Oh, I…”

He turned her into a café. “I’ve been thinking about this avocado smoothie all morning.” He touched her arm before she could make a face. “It sounds disgusting, but once you try it, you’ll start to crave it, I promise you. Come, let’s sit here. So, what have you seen so far?”

A little dazed by his rapid-fire chatter, she shook her head before saying, “Uh, nothing yet. I got in yesterday and have been wandering around.”

“I’ll show you the best of Lisbon. I hope you don’t mind, I have one more shoot this afternoon, but it shouldn’t take long.”

She held up both hands. “I have no schedule. I’m just… here.”

He grinned fondly at her for a moment before he reached out and grasped her chin. Her eyes widened at the move. He took his time examining her features. She giggled nervously as he turned her face to one side and then the other.

“Jasmine Hennessy,” he said before he shook his head and released her.

“Yes?” she burbled.

“You were such a cute kid.”

She found herself pouting playfully. “And now?”

“You know you’re a knockout,” he said dismissively, but when he noticed the strange look on her face, he raised a brow. “What?”

“You’re sweet.”

He cocked his head to the side. “You don’t think you’re a knockout?”

She let out a strained laugh. “You’ve met my sisters, right?”

“And they never held a candle to you.”

Her smile faltered. She was stunned and more than a little bewildered by the unexpected turn their conversation had taken. She was tempted to pull out her phone to show him recent photos of her sisters, but had a feeling he wouldn’t

even look at them. The word *knockout* had never been used to describe her. She had always thought she was passably pretty and nothing special, but the way he was looking at her, as if he was just as confused as she was, made her uncomfortable.

"I…" she began, desperately raking her mind for another topic, but his next words made the words die in her throat.

"What's life done to you, bebe?"

His gentle tone unraveled her. She held on to her smile as she blinked rapidly to hold back the tears. If she opened her mouth, she was going to lose it. He seemed to understand and grabbed her hands and gave them a light squeeze.

"You came to the right place. Lisbon will heal you," he declared.

She let out a wet chuckle. "Is that so?"

"Yes, it is. That's why I came here, and look what it's done for me."

He spread his arms wide, so she could take a good look at him.

"You look fabulous," she said gravely.

"Of course I do. I live in one of the best countries in the world. I have a career and a man that I love. What else do I need?"

Her heart ached. "Absolutely nothing."

"Life's hard, and we were born into families who made life even harder." He picked up her hand and pressed a kiss to her palm. "But we aren't going to let that get us down, are we?"

She shook her head. He nodded and gave her hand another kiss and then rubbed it between both of his as if he were trying to warm her.

"After I show you what Lisbon has to offer, I'm going to help you see what I see. Once your eyes are opened, no one will be able to take that away from you."

"IT'S NOT FUNNY," Mo growled as they entered the lobby.

She bit her lip, but one glance at Mo's disgruntled expression made her burst into laughter again.

"He's a nightmare to shadow."

Wasn't that the truth. Johnny was just as chaotic, endearing, and hilarious as she remembered. He was a rambling monologue of information and observations and had been completely oblivious to Mo and Johan trailing them from place to place. Johnny's impulsive, split-second decisions to hop on trams, slip in and out of stores, or grab a bite to eat kept Mo and Johan on their toes all day. Johnny managed to lose them without even trying. Watching her guards struggle to keep

up with Johnny kept her entertained.

She slumped against the wall as they rode the elevator up to her suite. A day with Johnny is exactly what she needed. He didn't ask about her life or even what she was doing in Portugal. He included her in his day as if it had been pre-planned, taking her around the city until they went by his studio for his photo shoot. They ended the day watching the sunset on the beach and doing an impromptu shoot with her as the reluctant model, but his wild antics soon had her frolicking on the beach and doing twirls and leaps that weren't half as graceful as his and had them both in stitches.

She didn't want the day to end. Only the knowledge that she would see him tomorrow allowed her to part ways with him without crying. Johnny made her feel more herself than she had in years. He didn't expect anything of her; he was just grateful for her company. He was so accepting of everyone. He treated the server and people they passed in the streets with the same friendly warmth that he did her. She aspired to be as free-spirited and comfortable in her own skin as he was.

Jasmine was in love with Lisbon. She wasn't sure if it was the food, laidback vibe, grand architecture, or seeing everything through his eyes, but she felt as if she'd come home. How that was possible, she had no idea. After her year was up, should she live abroad? She had nothing tying her to the States. She was so paranoid about the narrative Roth was building and the future consequences, but if she moved to another country, all her worries would cease to exist. The idea had such merit that she skipped into the suite. She was thinking of soaking in the tub, but the sight of their suitcases lined up by the door stopped her in her tracks.

"Roth?" she called.

He appeared in the open doorway leading to the bedroom with his phone in hand. "I was about to call Johan. Where were you?"

"With Johnny."

He glanced at the dark windows. "All this time?"

"Yes." She gestured to the suitcases. "What's going on?"

He typed something on his phone as he said, "We're flying out."

"What?"

Her tone brought his gaze to her for a moment before he said, "There's been a delay, so we'll have to come back."

When his phone flashed, he glared at the screen before he pocketed it.

"Come, the jet's waiting."

"I want to stay."

He didn't even look at her as he shouldered his workbag. "No."

The smile she'd worn all day evaporated, but he didn't notice. Roth cursed as

he pulled his phone out again. He read whatever was on the screen before he started toward her.

"Roth."

He didn't even acknowledge her as he grabbed her arm and pulled her toward the door.

"Roth, *wait!*"

She dug her heels in, but that didn't slow him one bit.

"I can't leave! I made plans!"

"They're canceled."

Her eyes stung with tears of desperation. She needed more time with Johnny. He was helping her mold a vision for her future that would sustain her when her strength faltered. Her mind raced as he reached for the door handle. She didn't know what else to do, so she wrapped arms around him from behind. Instantly, he stilled.

"Please let me stay," she begged.

When he said nothing, she buried her face against his spine.

"I need more time."

When he turned to face her, her arms fell away. She tried to step back, but he grabbed her to keep her before him.

"Why do you want to stay?"

"There's something about this city. It's…" She waved her hand as she tried to find the words to describe what she experienced. "There's something here. Something special. Something I need to explore."

She couldn't tell what he was thinking, but as the silence stretched, her cheeks began to burn. Men like him didn't let fanciful emotions get in their way. He wouldn't care that this city felt more like home to her than Manhattan ever had, or understand the appeal of the simple life Johnny led. She spent most of her life being buffeted on the stormy seas of life, feeling trapped, unworthy, and lost. Johnny gave her a glimpse of what lay beyond the world she knew and offered a gateway to happiness she needed to believe in because this couldn't be all life had to offer. She couldn't be doomed to wonder if the only man she'd ever loved had ever felt anything genuine for her. Johnny showed her a life stripped of riches, politics, and greed. It was so fulfilling and beautiful and… She needed a reprieve from her relentless reality, even if it was only for one more day.

When Roth showed no sign of softening, she switched tactics. There was only one way to deal with Roth, and it wasn't sympathy. She had to go with logic.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

“*We* are going to Berlin.”

Even as her heart sank, she asked, “How many days will you be there?”

The narrowing of his eyes told her he’d caught her deliberate slip of the tongue.

“It’s hard to say.”

“Which means you’ll be there for a day or two and then be on the go again. All this hopping from place to place is exhausting. Let me stay in Lisbon.”

She stared up at him, willing him to grant her request. She needed a moment to regroup and be herself. She couldn’t do that around him.

“You don’t have to come back for me. I’ll meet you wherever. You won’t even notice I’m missing.”

She sensed his answer in the stark silence. As her insides withered, she bowed her head to hide her face. Did she really think she could change his mind? She was a possession. Her wants didn’t come into this. He just wanted her to do what she was told and not interfere with his schedule. Crushing disappointment made her eyes fill with tears. She stepped back, but forgot that he still had hold of her.

“I need to grab my things,” she whispered.

“Look at me.”

She kept her face averted. He may call the shots, but she didn’t have to obey them all. “Isn’t the jet waiting?”

He gripped her face and forcibly turned it, so she was looking at him. She glared at him as a tear slid down her cheek.

His eyes followed the tear before he growled, “What will you give me if I let you stay?”

Her mouth parted. “Y-you’ll let…?”

“What will you give me?” he snapped.

“I…” She shook her head. “I have nothing else to give you.”

The hand on her face drifted to her throat and gripped. “You have much to give me.”

When he kissed her, she didn’t fight him. She poured her frustration and need into the kiss, to make him understand. She heard a thud as his bag hit the ground, a second before he picked her up. She wrapped her legs around him and grunted as her back hit the wall. He pressed against her, hard and hot and hungry.

The knock on the door made her jolt. He shot a killing look down the short hall before he focused on her.

“What are you willing to sacrifice if I allow you to stay?” he demanded harshly.

“I…” She swallowed. “I’ll sleep with you.”

“You’ll fuck me regardless,” he said with such confidence that her legs fell away.

“Let me go.”

“You can’t let emotion interfere when you negotiate,” he chided.

His words were an echo of her father’s. She willed away her clamoring needs and met his glittering eyes. He may be aroused, but he was still thinking clearly. Too clearly. Envy over his self-control helped her focus.

“What do you want?” she asked.

His thumb brushed over her racing pulse.

“I let you stay, you give me another month.”

“A *month*? You can’t be serious!”

“How many times do I have to remind you, I don’t have a sense of humor?”

“A couple of days in Lisbon for another month of you controlling my life? You’re insane!”

“I guess staying here isn’t that important to you.”

She tried to think past the haze. Negotiate. She raised her chin. “Whatever days I spend here, I’ll make up later.”

His thumb paused for a beat before resuming its stroking. She could see he was considering it. Did he feel her heartbeat pick up as hope took hold?

“For every day I give you, you give me a week,” he murmured.

He was cunning, but what did she expect from a ruthless businessman?

“For every day you give me, I give you three,” she countered.

He tilted his head as he considered her. The knock came again, but he didn’t move. He wasn’t going to be rushed into this decision. Her heart thudded in her ears as she waited.

“Don’t get used to being left behind,” he warned.

She broke her rules and let out a happy shriek as she wrapped her arms around his neck. “Thank you!”

He set her down and glared at her. Undaunted, she beamed as she picked up his workbag and slipped it back on his shoulder. When he didn’t move, she gave his arm a pat, which made him scowl.

“Give me a fucking kiss,” he ordered.

She grinned as she did what she was told, going up on tiptoes and clasping his face between her hands, before she demonstrated her gratitude by kissing him slow and sweet. He let out an impatient sound before his tongue slid into her mouth. She gladly let him plunder until the knock came again. He tore his mouth from hers and tipped her head up, so he could put his mouth on her leaping pulse. He sucked it hard enough to make her hiss before he raised his head.

“If you think I wouldn’t notice you missing, you’re wrong,” he said through

clenched teeth before he strode to the door and yanked it open, revealing Mo and Johan, who had their suitcases at their sides.

“She’s staying,” Roth said curtly. “And so are you.”

The door closed on their astonished faces. She heard the murmur of voices outside the door, the gradual fade as they moved away, and then silence. She waited a full minute to make sure he wasn’t going to change his mind before she let out a whoop and ran to the bed, where she belly flopped on it and let out a girlish giggle. It was a reckless deal, maybe even a stupid one, but she was too high on victory to care.

She won. Well, not completely. She owed him something for her time in Lisbon, but he didn’t have to let her stay. She pursed her lips. She had a feeling this was going to be the first of many negotiations with Roth. She had to brush up on the skills Dad taught her that had gone unused for too long. When she went back to New York, she’d ask her sisters and Lyle for some pointers. She was going to need all the help she could get to handle Roth.

As she wheeled her luggage past the cobalt glass sculpture, she paused. If Roth hauled her out the door, how long would it take for her to remember she hid her ring? She retrieved it and searched for another hiding spot on her way to the closet, only to see the safe was open and its contents emptied. Roth never missed a thing. Did he use every safe, even if they were only staying one or two nights? Why had she never noticed this before? What was so important that he didn’t want lying around?

She shrugged off the questions and placed the ring in the safe before she eyed the keypad. Dates were easier to remember than a random string of numbers. The first one that came to mind was her recent wedding, but that was something any stranger who saw their viral announcement would know. Another date came to mind, one that was significant to her and no one else. As she typed in the numbers, she wore a smug smile, knowing no one, not even Roth would be able to crack her code.

CHAPTER 16



"This shoot shouldn't take long," Aleixo said as he slipped an arm over her shoulders. "Then we can be on our way."

"I'm not in a hurry."

"You're learning the Portuguese way," he said approvingly. "When are you moving here?"

Jasmine groaned and tipped her head back to look up at Johnny's partner. "You two are terrible."

"You would do well in Lisbon. What is so good about New York, anyway? Do you see views like this?"

Aleixo's wave encompassed the beautiful Tagus River, the backdrop for Johnny's client, an American entrepreneur who was moving her base to Lisbon. Jasmine kept her distance. She wasn't sure how well-versed this woman was in America's business world, but she didn't want to take the chance that her name would be recognized.

"New York's nothing like this," she murmured as the sailboats glided behind Johnny's client, who did a power pose, hair and dress blowing in the breeze.

"So, you'll move here," Aleixo said, as if the matter was settled.

She wished she could. She comforted herself with the thought that a year from now, Hennessy & Co would be restored, and she would be free to finance any dream she chose. Three days with Johnny and Aleixo gave her a new lease on life. They lived simply—Johnny taking whatever gigs he could get and Aleixo working on a local vineyard his father managed. At first, she'd been a little wary of Johnny's quiet other half and, a bit mortified too, when Johnny told Aleixo to look after her while he worked. She told Aleixo he didn't have to entertain her.

"The city does the entertaining. The only thing we have to do is take it in,"

he said.

Everything that came out of his mouth sounded so romantic and poetic. She couldn't get enough. The French had nothing on the Portuguese. Aleixo was the perfect partner for Johnny—laidback and steadfast, while Johnny was always in the midst of some creative frenzy.

Like Johnny, Aleixo didn't ask what she was doing here or when she was leaving. He just accepted her as part of their pack, including her in meals, showing her the highlights of his beloved city, and treating her with the same familiarity that Johnny did even though he'd known her mere days.

"You came here looking for something," Aleixo said. "We can help you find it."

When she gave him a side hug, he kissed the top of her head as if she were a child, even though they were the same age.

"A few days in Lisbon and you've come alive. You ran the first time Johnny wanted you to dance with him in the street. Today, you did it, no hesitation. You're living. Whatever caused that sadness in your eyes, it's done. Move here and start over."

She rested her head on his chest to hide her face. Aleixo was too perceptive for his own good.

"Is there anything holding you in New York?" Aleixo asked.

Just a big, hulking billionaire. How could she explain the deal she struck with Roth to a man who wasn't motivated by money and felt no need to uphold a world-renowned family dynasty? The more time she spent away from home, the more ludicrous it all seemed. Did the benefits outweigh the cost?

"Jasmine?"

She looked up. "Hmm?"

"*Is* there something holding you in New York?" When she hesitated, his brows came together. "What is it?"

She swallowed hard. "Well, I, uh…"

Aleixo's chocolate brown eyes focused on something behind her and flared. She felt him stiffen a moment before he swung her to the side. She staggered forward and pivoted in time to see him slip a punch from…

"Roth!"

Mo bear-hugged Roth from behind to stop him from going after Aleixo, who backpedaled with his fists raised. As Mo tried to haul him back, Roth jabbed the heel of his boot into his shin before stomping his foot with a savageness that made Mo crumple to his knees. Johan stepped in front of Aleixo and backed him up while he spoke to Roth, clearly trying to talk sense into the psycho stalking them.

She leapt in front of Roth and slammed her hands against his chest. *“What the hell are you doing?”*

He grabbed her by the throat and yanked her against him.

“You beg me to stay to find yourself a lover?”

His voice was so guttural, she could barely understand him.

“You—” Her voice died out as he applied pressure, cutting off her airflow.

He leaned in so close, his sunglasses pressed into her skin. “I warned you what I would do if I caught you with another man. Now I have to kill him.”

She glared at him, refusing to be cowed, and clawed at his hand to ease his suffocating grip. “He’s…” She took a shallow breath and finished in a hoarse rasp, “Johnny’s partner.”

It took a few seconds for that to penetrate. She realized it had when she was able to haul in a breath. She couldn’t see his eyes because of his sunglasses, but she suspected they were incensed. So were hers. Three days of peace shattered by this fucking violent psycho. He was still breathing hard, and there was the slightest tremor in the hand on her throat that told her he wasn’t quite in control, but she was too infuriated to care.

“No, you don’t understand. He’s her husband,” she heard Johan say somewhere off to their left.

“You’re married?”

Johnny’s shout brought her back to her surroundings. He must have sprinted to reach them so fast. Her heart sank. When she pushed against Roth, he wrapped his arm around her waist, plastering her against him.

“She doesn’t even have a ring,” Johnny protested.

Whatever tension had eased out of Roth’s body came back tenfold. She didn’t take her eyes from his dark lenses as his hand skated down her arm and brushed over her bare finger.

“Hiding that you belong to me, princess?”

She ignored his deceptively gentle tone and leaned back to address Johnny and Aleixo, who looked stunned by this unexpected turn of events.

“I was afraid I would lose the ring, so I left it in the hotel safe,” she said. It was a weak excuse, but it was all she had.

“But…” Johnny waved his hands at Roth, who was holding her captive. “Where did he come from? Why did he swing at Aleixo?”

“Roth left me in Lisbon while he took care of business in Berlin. I didn’t know when he was coming back and…” She shot Roth a seething glare. “He misjudged what he saw.”

“It’s easy to misjudge when my wife tells me so little.”

“You’re a busy man,” she said with a steely smile. “And I expect you to

think before you strike.”

“When it comes to you, I don’t think clearly. You know that.”

He trailed a possessive hand down her spine. When it rested on her ass, she stiffened in rejection, but she didn’t fight back. He was silently daring her to push him so he had reason to punish her further in front of everyone.

“They just remarried and are still working out some things,” Mo said blandly as he extended his hand toward Aleixo. “You fared better than me. You train?”

Aleixo accepted the handshake. “I have four brothers.”

“Enough said. I have nine.”

“Nine? Where are…”

Aleixo was interrupted by Johnny, who had both hands up. “Hang on. Who are you two?”

“They’re escorts,” she said without looking away from Roth, who was preternaturally still. She sensed Johnny and Aleixo’s confusion and sighed as she added, “Bodyguards.”

“Because…?” Johnny’s bewildered tone had her risking Roth’s wrath to look at him. Johnny was examining Roth through round, tortoise shell glasses before he gave her an arch look. “You left some things out, hmm?”

She hadn’t said a damn thing. It had been liberating to hang out with people who didn’t care about her family, Roth, or anything else connected to high society. Johnny and Aleixo hadn’t even asked her if she had a job. Roth ruined everything, as usual.

“Is everything all right?”

Johnny beckoned to his client, who was hurrying toward them. “Don’t worry. He isn’t crazy. He’s my friend’s jealous husband. This is Jasmine and—"

“James Roth,” the woman breathed. “You just relocated to New York, didn’t you?” When he grunted, the woman’s eyes hit Jasmine and went comically wide. “I saw your wedding announcement circulating online. Your dress was spectacular.”

When the woman offered her hand to Roth, he stared at it for a moment before he loosened his hold. Jasmine took the opportunity to put space between them. She made her way to Johnny as his client launched into a business pitch.

“Bebe, I thought you walked away from all of that.” Johnny flapped his hand at Roth and his client.

“He dragged me back in.”

“And you’re second-guessing your decision?” He didn’t wait for an answer, but clucked his tongue sympathetically. “No wonder you didn’t want to talk about it.”

She turned to him. “I’m sorry he swung at Aleixo. He—"

“Aleixo can handle himself. Did you see the way he moved?” Johnny shivered. “I love when he goes all alpha. Gets me all hot and bothered. I’m not surprised your husband was jealous of my Aleixo. Do you see that body?”

“But—"

They were interrupted by Johnny’s client, who gripped her arm.

“Congratulations on your marriage! I can’t believe I ran into you two!”

She concealed her irritation with a fake smile.

The woman turned to Johnny. “Can we get a few more shots in?”

“Of course.” Johnny rubbed Jasmine’s back. “I won’t be long.”

The woman wriggled her fingers at Roth before Johnny led her away. Aleixo, Johan, and Mo were talking in a huddle. These men couldn’t be from more different backgrounds and walks of life, yet they were talking like old friends… or maybe that was the effect Aleixo had on people. Her alternate reality was colliding with the world she was trying to escape. She didn’t like the crossover.

Her attention swung to Roth, who hadn’t moved. For the first time, she took in his outfit—jeans, a nondescript black hat, and jacket. If it wasn’t for his size, he would blend in anywhere. She crossed her arms over her chest before she made her way back to him. He looked relaxed, but she didn’t trust his body language… or his face. She could still feel his fingers digging into her throat. Apparently, he had a fondness for choking people. She stopped before him, just out of reach.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“You’re here.”

Her brows came together. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Everything.”

She tensed as he closed the distance between them. He didn’t stop until he loomed over her.

“I was in a meeting, listening to proposals in Berlin, but all I could think about was the fact that my wife hadn’t called me in three days.”

“When have I ever called you?”

He ignored that as he ran his knuckles down the line of her throat. “I found myself wondering what was so special about Lisbon that you would beg to stay.” He gripped the base of her throat lightly. “And I track you here and find you with your arms around a man.”

“A *friend*.”

A muscle ticked near his mouth. “You make friends too easily.”

“And you make too few,” she retorted. “You could have hurt him!”

“I didn’t.”

“Because he dodged that punch, and we got in your way! What were you

thinking, attacking him like that?”

“He was touching you.”

“And it didn’t cross your mind that it was innocent? You think I’m stupid enough to hook up in front of Mo and Johan—?”

He gripped her cheeks to stop her from finishing her sentence.

“If they allowed such a thing on their watch, their lives would be forfeited.”

She couldn’t see his eyes, but she didn’t need to. The aggression he’d neatly stuffed away began to permeate the air, making her eyes water.

“It seems I need to be more specific in my orders when it comes to you.” He crowded her, pressing his hard body along the soft curves of hers. “I don’t want any man touching you. I don’t care if he’s gay, related, married, old. No one’s allowed to touch you, and I don’t want you touching anyone, either.”

She yanked on his hand so she could say, “You can’t make conditions like that!”

“I just did.”

“Hey!”

Johnny interrupted their argument with a guileless smile.

“Are we still going to Sintra or have your plans changed?” he asked.

“No, we’re still going.” She stepped back from Roth to cool off. “He’s leaving.”

“He is?” Johnny eyed Roth. “We have room for one more in our car.”

“He’s busy,” she blurted at the same time that Roth said, “Okay.”

“Excellent.” Johnny ignored Jasmine’s angry hiss. “Have you ever been out of Lisbon?” When Roth shook his head, Johnny winked. “You’re in for a treat. I’ll give your security directions, and we can hit the road.”

As Johnny jogged over to Mo and Johan, she bristled.

“You’re not coming with us,” she said through clenched teeth.

“I got an invitation.”

“I’m rescinding it.”

“Not your call.”

“Don’t you have to work?”

“No.”

She eyed him skeptically. “You thought about me at a meeting and decided to fly back? Why not call Mo or Johan? You didn’t have to come—”

He hauled her against him and covered her mouth with his, hand tangling in her hair to hold her still when she fought him. She hated the warmth that pooled low. How could her body want him when he was such a *dick*?

“I hoped to catch you in bed so I could make you scream my name,” he said against her lips.

“You flew here to have *sex*?” she asked scathingly.

“Is there a better reason?”

She gave him a disgusted look. “You’re wasting your time. You aren’t getting laid, so you should go back to work. We’re going sightseeing in the country.” When he didn’t react, she added, “I doubt there’s cell service out there. What are you going to do when you can’t play on your phone?”

“I’ll manage.”

She looked over her shoulder to make sure no one was within earshot before she hissed, “Johnny and Aleixo are my friends. I’m not going to let you intimidate or bully them. They’re good people.”

“I’ll behave.”

“Do you even know what that means? You were going to strangle me in broad daylight!” She glowered. “Next time you see me with a man—"

“That isn’t going to happen.”

“Next time,” she said loudly. “You can rest assured it’s innocent. If I wanted to get back at you, that’s not the way I would do it.”

He cocked his head. “What would you do?”

She lifted her chin. “You know.”

He considered her for a moment before he asked, “Figured out where the second letter is?”

He didn’t sound worried, merely curious.

She ignored his question and jabbed him in the chest. “I’m not going to tell them they can’t touch me because you have a complex. They’re affectionate. That’s not a crime. You should try it sometime—"

He kissed her again. Gently, this time, with both hands clasping her face. She struggled, but he kept it up until her eyes were closed and her head was swimming.

“Stop doing that,” she said faintly.

“Affection. That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

She came to her senses and yanked away. “I want *genuine* affection; not your calculated, manipulative brand of affection!”

“You think that wasn’t genuine?”

She pivoted when he tried to grab her. “What’s gotten into you?”

“All set?”

Johnny didn’t wait for an answer, but took her by the arm and led her to Aleixo’s car.

“This will be so much *fun*! The more, the merrier, I always say. Why didn’t you tell me you have security? Poor things, they’ve been having to duck into doorways and stuff. They’re good. I didn’t even notice them. You should have

told them to eat with us. They could have tried my avocado smoothie."

She looked back and saw Aleixo walking beside Roth, hands weaving through the air as he talked. Apparently, all was forgiven. Everyone was acting as if Roth's violent outburst was normal, understandable even.

Johnny climbed into the back seat with her, so Roth could ride shotgun. If she wasn't in such a foul mood, she would have recorded Roth's awkward attempt to fit in Aleixo's tiny, old car. He didn't have an inch of room to spare.

"Sintra's magical," Johnny said as they pulled into traffic. "You can't visit Sintra and not be amazed that such a place exists. I've traveled all over the world and never come across anything like it."

"I can't wait to see," she said.

Johnny had been building up this excursion, but Roth's presence put a damper on her day. She glared at his broad back. He was so massive, his shoulder reached over the console and touched Aleixo's. She couldn't see past him, so she had to settle for the tiny side windows.

She clutched her seat belt as the car picked up speed. Aleixo was a different person behind the wheel—aggressive, impatient, and a tad reckless. She hoped Roth got motion sickness, or better yet, got bored, stiff, and asked Mo or Johan to take him back to Lisbon. She couldn't believe he accepted Johnny's invitation. Miss a day of work to go sightseeing in the country? And why had he expected her to call him? Had he really ditched his meetings and flown to Lisbon to spend time with her?

She was so deep in thought, it took her a while to register that the terrain had changed. Shit. She pulled out her phone to take pictures of the gorgeous view and castigated herself for harping on Roth. She wasn't going to let him ruin her time with her friends. She was going to ignore his ass.

"He's photogenic, isn't he?"

She fumbled with her phone, nearly dropping it when Johnny popped up unexpectedly at her side. "Who?"

Johnny gave her one of those long, assessing glances that made her want to fidget like a little girl. "He's your husband. If anyone can take photos of him, it's you."

She flushed. "I was taking pictures of the castle."

"Bebe," Johnny drawled and raised his camera to take a few shots of his own.

Roth stood on the wall of Castelo dos Mouros, a sprawling castle perched on a hilltop. He looked like an ancient conqueror despite his modern clothing.

“There’s something about him,” Johnny said thoughtfully. “He’s not classically handsome, but he doesn’t need that when he has such presence. I can see how he was able to tempt you back to his world. You really didn’t have a choice, did you?”

“No.”

“I think he’s enjoying himself,” Johnny said with great satisfaction before he started toward him.

She watched Johnny touch Roth’s back, alerting him of his presence, before he stepped up beside him. There was a slight stiffening on Roth’s part at the unexpected contact, but otherwise, he didn’t react. It wasn’t the first time Johnny had made such a move throughout the day. She was sure that Johnny noticed Roth’s discomfort, but that didn’t dissuade him. Touch was a natural extension of his personality, and she could see Roth had come to terms with it.

Her friends treated Roth with the same casual affection they did her. Throughout the day, she caught Roth wearing the same inscrutable expression he gave William Davies when he hugged him. It was clear that Roth was trying to find an ulterior motive for their friendly generosity, but she was confident he wouldn’t find one. Johnny and Aleixo wanted nothing more than to have a good time with friends and show off their beautiful country.

Johnny pointed at something in the distance. Roth looked in the direction he indicated and said something that made Johnny grin and bump his shoulder against Roth’s bicep before he leaned against the wall beside him. Roth inclined his head toward her friend, clearly listening to Johnny’s nonstop chatter. Roth showed no hint of restlessness or irritation. Against her will, her heart warmed.

At first, she monitored Roth’s interactions with her friends, ready to pounce if Roth treated them like trash, but he shocked the hell out of her. Roth was a man who made time for no one, but today, he demonstrated a level of patience she didn’t even know he possessed. Not once had she seen him with his phone in hand, and he hadn’t voiced one complaint as they hopped from one location to the next. She had never seen him so engaged and present. He actually listened to Johnny and Aleixo and responded in full sentences, not his curt, one-word answers. He explored each attraction the way he did everything—thoroughly. It amazed her that no matter what setting he inhabited, whether it was a lavish palace, a haunting monastery, or a medieval castle, he looked as if he belonged there. It just brought home to her that no matter what time Roth landed in, history would have made room for a man like him.

She found her own spot on the castle walls where she could take in the

panoramic views. Sintra was everything Johnny claimed it would be and more. The dramatic landscape that lovingly cradled historic sites bursting with color, romance, and intricate detail was so achingly beautiful that she had to be dragged from one location to the next.

Just as Copenhagen made her think of fairytales, Sintra rekindled ideas for the fantasy series she abandoned for the morally gray and carnal world of dark romance. Seeing Roth at Castelo dos Mouros gave her an odd sense of déjà vu, as her dream of the hooded figure she had just days before they met came full circle in this ancient ruin. She couldn't resist taking photos of him in this setting for future character inspiration. She hadn't thought of that story in years, but now her hands itched for pen and paper. She resorted to typing on her phone while trying to imprint as much of the environment on her consciousness as possible.

"Jas!"

She looked up and saw Johnny beckoning to her with Roth, Mo, Johan, and Aleixo standing around him. Hastily, she made her way toward them.

"Sorry, are we done here?" she asked.

"Are you?"

"Yes, I think I got enough photos."

"Excellent."

Johnny caught her off guard when he gave her a little push. She gasped and wheeled her arms as she stumbled back into a human wall that wrapped her close.

"Pictures first, and then we'll hit the road!" Johnny said gleefully.

She tried not to glower as Johnny positioned them so he could get the watch tower and the incredible view in the shot. The fact that Mo and Johan were grinning like fools made her want to hurl rocks at them, but it was Aleixo who stopped Johnny to rearrange them so she and Roth were more intimately intertwined. She wanted to die.

"Smile, Jasmine!" Johnny hollered.

"Yes, smile, Jasmine," Roth murmured.

Her nails dug into his side. "Are you smiling?" she asked without moving her lips.

"I don't smile."

"Then I shouldn't have to either," she sniped.

He palmed her spine. "You want me to give you a reason to smile?"

She was relieved when Johnny lowered his camera, obviously satisfied with the shot. She stepped forward, eager to get away from Roth, but was pulled up short by the arm that banded across her upper chest. She bared her teeth as he

dragged her back against him.

"What?" she snapped.

"Does this place remind you of something?"

Her heart skipped a beat. "No."

"Liar." He turned her to face the view once more and braced his hands on the wall on either side of her as he butted his face against the side of hers. "They met on a hilltop similar to this, didn't they?"

She clenched her teeth.

"You stepped into your own as Thalia, but I have a fondness for your work as Minnie."

"Because I was so naive?"

His hands flexed on the wall before coming to her and splaying over her stomach.

"Because it was authentically you. Unjaded, hopeful. You believed good would conquer all, despite Maximus's attempts to teach you otherwise."

Her eyes unfocused, blurring the landscape into a green sea. "You taught me what my father couldn't."

"I never wanted you to change. Why do you think I insisted you stay in Philadelphia?"

They weren't going to fucking go there. "Let me go."

He leaned heavily into her, making her head bow forward as he wrapped her up tight. "Did that prophecy ever come true? Was he her downfall?"

"Johnny!"

"Yes, bebe?"

She was relieved when Roth's hold loosened. Johnny came over with a skip in his step. She untangled herself from Roth and latched on to her human shield.

"This place is so romantic, isn't it?" Johnny sighed as he patted her hand.

"Sure," she said distractedly as she made a beeline for the exit.

She was rattled and more than a little unnerved that Roth had recognized the same magic at Castelo dos Mouros that she had and linked it back to her story. She was stunned that he remembered so much from the book, but why wouldn't he? After she admitted that he inspired a character, he read the first in her fantasy series and urged her to write the second when his character made his grand entrance. She spent two weeks trying to write everything that had been lost in the notebook Dad threw away, and cried when her words didn't have the same oomph the original had. Roth encouraged her to continue anyway. It hadn't been hard to do when the hero had materialized in real life. That was the last book she published as Minnie Hess during their whirlwind affair.

When they got into the car, she tried to get the rest of her ideas down on her

phone before they evaporated.

“Who are you texting?” Johnny demanded, stopping in the middle of his rundown of Palácio de Monserrate.

“I’m taking notes about the site,” she lied and jerked against her seat belt as Aleixo took a sharp turn.

“You’re not taking notes. People who type that fast are talking to a booty call. Let me see.”

“She’s writing,” Roth said from the front seat.

“Writing?”

“Shut it, Roth,” she growled as she finished her sentence and pocketed the phone.

“What does he mean, writing?”

“He doesn’t mean anything,” she said repressively.

“She writes fiction under Minnie Hess and Thalia Crane.”

“Roth!” She kneed the back of his seat.

“What are you embarrassed about?” Aleixo asked, turning to look at her in the back seat.

“Watch the road!” she shouted before she crossed her arms defensively across her chest. “I’m not embarrassed. I just…”

“You just what?” Johnny pressed.

“I like my privacy.” She glared at Roth’s back. “Especially since I have so little of it.”

Johnny pursed his lips. “That’s understandable, I guess. You don’t want the public to know all your secrets.”

“Exactly!”

“But there’s no need to keep it from us. We’re not going to blab. What do you write about?”

“She writes fantasy and romance,” Roth answered for her.

She relaxed a little. That didn’t sound so bad—

“She wrote about our affair, which is why she’s so reticent about telling anyone,” Roth finished, making her look around for something to wrap around his throat and choke him from behind.

Johnny eyed Roth’s profile thoughtfully. “You don’t care if it got out?”

“No.”

She could see Johnny approved of his answer. He looked at her with a strange fire in his eyes.

“Bebe, don’t hide who you are because you’re afraid you won’t be accepted. That isn’t a life. Take it from someone who knows.”

The flicker of pain in his eyes had her reaching over and gripping his hand.

“You’re right.” But that didn’t mean she wanted to broadcast her profession if she didn’t have to.

Johnny leaned into her and whispered, “It’s easy to see your man loves you. Nothing else matters. Who cares what other people think?”

She gave him her best smile before she looked out the window.

WATCHING the sunset on the cliffs of Cabo da Roca, the westernmost point of continental Europe, was the perfect end to a perfect day. The view was so breathtaking, it brought tears to her eyes. She had the ridiculous urge to spread her arms and lean into the strong wind to see if it could take her weight. Although it would have been amusing to see how Roth, Mo, and Johan would react, she huddled into her jacket instead and smiled through chattering teeth.

The splash of colors across the sky was unreal. The waves crashing against the cliffs caused a light mist to hover in the air. Others scattered along the cape tried to capture the magnificent sunset with cell phones and cameras, while those like her took in the spectacle in reverent silence. She had no idea who these people were or where they came from, but at this moment, they were all in one accord. The world wasn’t perfect, but this was. Life didn’t have to be complicated. Why did they make it so?

Two halves of a jacket wrapped around her from behind and drew her back against a broad chest. As she was engulfed in Roth’s body heat, her body flooded with endorphins. She tried to tamp down his effect on her, as she had been doing throughout the day, with little success. She kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, for him to switch back to the nasty asshole she knew he could be, but as the day passed with no further incidents, a kernel of hope took root.

Roth was true to his word and behaved himself. He was attentive and indulged Johnny, who wanted them to pose for pictures everywhere they went. The only argument that broke out was when they stopped for lunch and Johnny insisted on paying the check. Roth protested, even raising his voice in exasperation, but Johnny wasn’t daunted. The only reason Johnny won was because he was great at making a scene.

When her face went numb from the cold, she turned and buried her face against Roth’s chest. She inhaled, taking in the scent of his cologne mixed with the fresh baked bread he toted around as they shopped. Johnny sent her several puzzled looks throughout the day. She knew he was wondering what was wrong between them, but as Johnny had with everything else, he didn’t pry. The more

time she spent with her friend, the stronger the urge became to confide in him. What would Johnny think of their marriage of convenience? Would he be horrified, sad, or give her a grin and tell her to enjoy herself? If there was anyone who would understand the responsibilities and expectations their families put on them, it would be him. But he had also shirked that way of thinking and walked away to live his life. Why hadn't she looked him up years ago? Her life would have turned out differently if she had this kind of support system.

She peeked at Roth. The golden light softened the brutal cut of his features while the wind played with his hair, tousling it so he looked carefree and ruggedly appealing.

Sensing her stare, he looked down.

"Thank you for being kind to my friends," she said.

"They're good people."

She slipped her arms around his waist and hugged him as she tried to absorb his warmth. "I saw you and Johnny arm in arm," she teased.

He raised one brow. "You want me to be nice, don't you?"

"You like them. Admit it."

"They're likable," he said with a shrug.

"They're one in a million."

His eyes slid to the left, where she knew Johnny and Aleixo were. "They make this place come to life."

Her heart flooded with joy. "You understand why I needed more time here?"

He grunted.

"So…" She hesitated, which brought his gaze back to her. "Our deal shouldn't apply."

She wasn't sure what she was expecting, but the humorless quirk of his lips wasn't it.

"I wondered what tact you would take to get out of our agreement."

She didn't like that he had been expecting her to renege, but with each passing day, knowing she had recklessly agreed to more time caused her to toss and turn at night. "I shouldn't have to bargain with you to spend time with my friends."

"You agreed to be mine for a year. That means every hour of every day. I don't have to share you if I don't want to."

"What does nine days matter to you? All you do is work."

"I told you it's not always going to be like this. I'm tying up loose ends so I won't have to travel so much and can run things from New York. That's almost at an end. Once my schedule's clear, things will be different."

Her heart jumped. "Different how?"

“We scratched the surface the first time around. This time, I’m going to indulge to the hilt.”

His choice of words, paired with the look in his eye, caused an unwelcome spurt of heat in her gut.

“This is a business arrangement,” she reminded him.

“Call it whatever you want.”

She lifted her chin. “I want to renegotiate.”

“No.”

“Roth—"

“You offered a deal. I accepted. Case closed. You owe me nine more days.”

“You’re heartless!”

The setting sun reflected off his eyes, giving them an eerie orange glow.

“You start off by thanking me for being nice and follow it up by saying I’m heartless. Which is it?”

“Both! God, you make me crazy. I never know which direction you’re going to shove me in next.”

“I’m not shoving you anywhere.”

She slumped against him. “There must be something else I can give you.” Time was just too high a price to pay.

She shuddered as an icy hand clasped her nape and kneaded. He buried his face in her hair and murmured, “Am I so terrible?”

“Yes!”

“Today, you were happy.”

“That never lasts,” she whispered sadly. “Sometimes you’re considerate and decent, and other times, you’re Mr. Hyde. You switch on a dime. I never know who I’m dealing with.”

There was a suspicious hitch in her voice that made her close her eyes on a grimace. The hand on her nape moved up to her hair and gripped, tipping her head back. She didn’t fight him, but she kept her eyes closed. She wasn’t prepared for the kiss, light as a butterfly’s wing at the corner of her mouth.

“Stop,” she whispered, hands twisting in his shirt.

When his lips continued to cruise over her face, she ducked her head in defense of his tender onslaught.

“I’m not playing your game,” she said raggedly.

“Who else am I going to play with?”

The teasing note in his voice made her eyes prick with tears. She hadn’t seen this side of him since the earliest days of their affair. She didn’t like it. It made her feel things she shouldn’t, things she vowed she would never believe in again.

She opened her eyes and searched his face. For the second time that day, she

murmured, “What’s gotten into you?”

He captured her mouth in a kiss that was commanding and all-consuming. When she was younger, she mistook chemistry for love. Now, she wasn’t so naive, but she was as helpless against the rush as she had been back then. Like the sunset, this was perfect. It always had been. People who didn’t believe in chemistry had never experienced its exhilarating madness. It changed her forever. Nothing measured up to this painful ecstasy. She gave up everything for it and was still impaling herself on its tip even though she knew it would ruin her. She was addicted to it, which is why she didn’t allow herself to see him after she walked out. She wasn’t sure she could resist him, even knowing how he felt about her. It was sick. She assumed she would find another man she was compatible with, but no one came close to the unadulterated madness Roth provoked with so little effort. It scared her—what they could become. It had been too much for her then. Would she fare better now?

He growled into her mouth, demanding more, and she gave it to him. She had no choice. What he wanted, she had in abundance… and what he had, she wanted more than she wanted her next breath. She hated and loved it with the same fervor. As if he sensed her clamoring needs, his fingers tightened in her hair, pulling deliciously, piling on more sensation so she felt dizzy. How could he be so attuned to her body and so oblivious to everything else? Her desires had evolved into something more twisted and dark as she explored her sexuality in her books, but she hadn’t found a man willing to indulge her kink in real life. Roth would, but at what cost? Would he use her desires against her? Of course, he would.

As the kiss intensified, she gripped his hair. If he was going to take his fill, why shouldn’t she? Why deny herself the chance to fulfill her desires before she went back to her fruitless search to find someone who was a pale imitation of him? There would be consequences, but it would be worth it.

“I’m hungry, princess,” he panted against her lips. “*Starving*. I have plans to explore those fetishes you write about and see if you can take it in real life.”

“Roth.”

Her voice trembled with need.

“I’m going to wipe every man from your memory.”

He already had. She couldn’t remember a single one.

His eyes flicked over her shoulder for a moment before a wolfish smile curved his mouth. She started to turn to see what he was looking at, but the grip in her hair kept her still as he bent his head again. This time, that hard edge was missing. He took his time, wiping her mind clean as he made love to her mouth.

It was easy to keep him at bay when he was being a dick, but how did she

defend herself against this sweet affection that made her heart swell so big in her chest, she couldn't breathe. This was the kiss fairytales were made of, that moment when heroines kicked up their foot or slid into a dead faint. He was resurrecting foolish dreams she swore she would never place on him again. Their chemistry burned too hot for foreplay. She'd always been grateful for that, but now, as he kissed her as if he had all the time in the world, she felt as if she was drowning. Sex was easy. This wasn't.

When he pulled away, he watched the progress of a tear slide down her cheek.

"Why did you do that?" she whispered hoarsely.

"It seemed fitting." He kissed her forehead. "We have company."

She sniffled. "Who?"

When he jerked his chin, she turned. A man in a suit stood on the dirt path, hands in pockets, as he watched them. Her spirits soared.

"Lyle?"

She broke away from Roth and stumbled in her haste to get to her brother-in-law.

"Watch your fucking feet," Roth snapped from behind her.

Apparently, Lyle was worried too because he came forward with his hand outstretched. When he was close enough, she threw herself at him. As his arms closed around her, her tenuous hold on her emotions shattered, and she burst into tears. Two weeks traveling in foreign countries with no constant besides Mo, Johan, and Roth made her feel like she hadn't seen him in six months. To see him in Portugal, of all places, sent her into a state of giddy shock. She pulled back with a big smile as tears streamed down her face.

"What are you doing here?"

His eyes fixed on something over her shoulder before they flicked down to her. "Why are you crying?"

"I'm…" She let out a slightly hysterical laugh as he mopped up her face with his handkerchief. "I'm so happy to see you. Is Colette and Polara here too?"

"No, they're home. I had some business in Morocco. When Colette told me you were here, I decided to pop in and see how you were doing." His eyes raked over her face. "All's well?"

"Yes. We spent the day exploring Sintra and then came here to watch the sunset. I wish you told me you were coming. You could have come with us."

"*You* went sightseeing?"

Lyle stared at a point over her head.

"Roth took the day off and came with us," she answered for him.

Lyle refocused on her. "Us?"

She turned and pointed as Johnny and Aleixo approached. “You remember Johnny Salazar?”

Lyle’s scowl faded. “I’ll be damned,” he said quietly before he stepped forward. “Johnny, I didn’t know you lived in Portugal.”

“Been here a couple of years. I’m happy that Jasmine reached out to me.” Johnny shook Lyle’s hand. “I haven’t seen you in, what, nine years?”

“Around there.”

“This is my partner, Aleixo. Aleixo, this is Lyle Caruso, Jasmine’s brother-in-law and one of the best hedge fund managers there is.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Can you join us for dinner?” Johnny rubbed his hands together in an attempt to keep them warm. “There’s a great seafood restaurant not far from here. Our treat.”

Lyle shot Jasmine a veiled look she couldn’t read. “I think I will.”

She glanced at the darkening sky. “We should get off the path while we can still see.”

When they reached the parking lot, she wasn’t surprised to see Lyle had a car waiting. His driver looked vaguely familiar.

“Where’s this restaurant?” Lyle asked.

“It’s a five-minute drive from here. Just follow us.”

Lyle slid an arm over her shoulders. “Jasmine will ride with me so we can catch up.”

“Lyle,” she began, but he gave her a squeeze to silence her.

Lyle gave Roth a challenging look. “You can bear to be parted from your wife for five minutes, can’t you?”

His insolent tone made her pinch his side. Johnny and Aleixo looked on with wide eyes, clearly picking up on Lyle’s poorly concealed hostility. She wanted to stomp his foot. Roth arrived on the scene with his fists swinging, and now Lyle was trying to start a fight. They were giving Americans a bad name. Couldn’t she get through one day without drama? Mo and Johan didn’t take their eyes off Lyle’s driver, who wandered over, clearly ready to engage if necessary.

She rolled her eyes and defused the tension by blowing a kiss at Roth. “I’ll see you there, baby.”

The silence they left in their wake made her cringe, but that was quickly eclipsed by excitement over Lyle’s presence. The driver held the door as they ducked into the back of the BMW. She peered between the front seats and saw Roth hadn’t moved. Johan was speaking to him while Mo stood a few feet away. Apparently, it was Johan’s turn to take the blow if Roth lashed out. She felt like Roth was trying to communicate something to her, but the frequency was off.

She was relieved when he finally gave in and stalked to Aleixo's car.

"He thinks I'm going to steal you away from him," Lyle said quietly.

"That's absurd," she said impatiently.

He sat back. "I should."

"Stop it." She smacked his chest lightly as she belted herself in. "I can't believe you're here."

"Of course I'm here," he said testily. "Now, cut the crap. What's going on?"

She blinked. "What?"

He leaned forward, but was forced back in his seat as his driver slammed on the gas to catch up with Aleixo.

"He takes you out of the country, away from family, and is jumping from place to place like he's on the run."

"He's tying up loose ends."

"*What* loose ends?"

She waved her hand. "I don't know. Stuff so he can run everything from New York. I don't get into his business."

A car passed, briefly illuminating Lyle's perplexed expression.

"You're telling me you're fine," he said in a disbelieving tone.

"Yes." She raised her eyebrows. "Did you think otherwise?"

His silence answered for him.

"You thought I needed to be rescued?"

He cursed under his breath.

"Aww." She reached out, found his cheek in the dark, and gave it a pat. "You're the best brother-in-law."

He jerked away. "You're a pain in the ass. I came here, thinking he was keeping you hostage, and find you two making out on a cliff, watching the sunset like a real couple. I'm not buying it."

The initial burst of joy at seeing him began to wane. He wasn't here to see her; he was trying to catch her in her lie. He may have agreed not to hire a private investigator, but he wasn't giving up. Anxiety bloomed, making her hands go damp with sweat.

"I don't understand," she said slowly. "I've been checking in regularly. I didn't say I was in danger."

"As if you would," he snorted. "You think text messages and infrequent calls are going to stop us from worrying? If I thought I could get away with it, I'd shove him off that cliff and claim it was an accident."

"That's not funny."

"I don't think any of this is funny. When the hell did you become such an accomplished actress? I didn't think you had it in you. He told you I was

coming, didn’t he?”

“No. How could he know that?”

“I don’t know how, but that bastard is always two steps ahead of me. That’s the only explanation for the show you two were putting on. He’s really going all in this time, isn’t he?”

“Lyle, that wasn’t an act.”

There was a dangerous pause, and then, “You can’t actually believe he has feelings for you.”

Even though she had thought the same thing countless times, hearing it aloud cut her to the quick. “Is it so impossible to believe someone cares for me?”

“Of course not, but this is James Roth we’re talking about. He’s as ruthless and cunning as they come. I doubt the man even has feelings, much less the romantic kind. Come on, Minnie, you know that firsthand. What are the chances that he took the day off to go sightseeing on the same day I chose to visit? It’s too convenient.”

“That’s the only reason he would spend time with me or kiss me? For your benefit?”

He ran his hand through his hair. “You know what I mean. He's using you just like last time. You can’t honestly tell me you’re happy with the bastard.”

“I am happy,” she said with a poise Colette would have been proud of. Her voice was strong and sure, so much so that Lyle threw up his hands.

“You’ve lost your mind.”

“People change, Lyle,” she said as they slowed and turned into the parking lot of a brightly lit restaurant.

“No, they don’t. I can’t believe after everything he’s done to you and the warning your dad left, you’re protecting him and this sham of a marriage. For what? *Sex?* What the hell is wrong with you?”

She drew back as if he slapped her. Lyle had always been blunt, but never cruel. She expected this from her father, not him. Her brother-in-law had always been on her side, but this about-face left her feeling bereft. She was grateful for the darkness so she had a moment to compose herself, but it wasn’t long enough. The driver exited the vehicle, causing the overhead light to come on and expose her eyes shimmering with unshed tears.

“Minnie.”

She yanked away before he could touch her and shoved the door open. She hopped out and collided with a large mass. She didn’t need to look up to see who it was. For a moment, she rested her face against his chest.

He cupped the back of her head. “What happened?”

“Nothing.” She straightened and gave him a bright smile. “Are you hungry?

I’m starved.”

She took his hand and strode toward the restaurant. She waved at Johnny and Aleixo and didn’t look back to see if Lyle followed. She didn’t care if he did. He could go back to New York and give his report to her sisters. She didn’t care what they made of it.

“It smells awesome,” she gushed as she reached her friends. “What do you recommend?”

Although her tone was cheerful, she wasn’t sure her face was pulling it off because Johnny looked concerned. Nevertheless, he didn’t comment and lifted his arm. She fit herself against his side and leaned into him, desperately trying to hang on to the magic of the day as they entered the restaurant. The warmth, smells, and lively conversation distracted her, but couldn’t remove the feel of the invisible dagger sticking out of her back. There was no one like family to bring her back to cold, hard reality. It took Lyle less than ten minutes to eliminate three days of hard-won peace.

As she and Roth sat at one end of the table, she was grateful that Lyle settled on the opposite end. She didn’t want to argue, and she wasn’t in the mood to convince him that he was wrong about her marriage. Whatever he wanted to think, he could, and there was nothing she could do about it. Even though she was pissed at him, she was glad that Johnny sat across from him so he would have someone to talk to. Was it a coincidence that Mo and Johan flanked her brother-in-law? Probably not.

As Johnny and Aleixo translated the menu, she tried to focus, but Lyle’s disgust was far too reminiscent of the way her father looked at her all those years ago. All that wonderful heat she felt on the cliffs had been reduced to cold ash. Lyle didn’t understand how she could feel anything for Roth. She didn’t either, which is why she fought so hard to keep him at arm’s length. No matter what Roth did, she was disgustingly susceptible. Lyle witnessed her folly and gave her a verbal slap to wake her up.

Maybe there was something wrong with her. Only someone with no sense of self-preservation would agree to such high stakes. Roth was dangerous, bitter, secretive, violent, and so much more, but… he was the only person in the world who brought her to life. He challenged, horrified, sated, and comforted her. No one made her feel the way he did. He could make the rest of the world cease to exist for her. She didn't understand why she had this connection with him, or why it had stayed intact all these years. It shouldn’t have, and she wished to God it hadn’t, but the tie hadn’t been severed by distance, time, or their tumultuous history. She wasn’t sure what would cause that final break, but it would come. It was inevitable, but Lyle couldn’t force it to happen. She wasn’t the helpless girl

he protected from her father and even his wife all those years ago.

It was hard enough dealing with Roth, she didn't need her family interfering or casting more doubt when she had enough for all of them. It was ironic that everyone they came into contact with—Penelope, Sarai, Johnny—accepted her and Roth's marriage without question, but the people she desperately needed to believe, wouldn't. Lyle tracked her to Portugal to catch them unaware so he could prove she was lying about her marriage. What did he think he would find? Her beaten black and blue? A collar around her neck? Who was he to judge her relationship? It wasn't like he and Colette were a model couple. Far from it. Why couldn't he leave it be?

She looked up and saw Roth watching her. She pointed to a picture on the menu in front of him.

"This looks good, doesn't it?"

"What did he say to you?"

"What you'd expect." She gave a one-shoulder shrug. "It doesn't matter."

"He hurt you."

She compressed her lips as she struggled to keep her expression neutral. "Many people have hurt me."

She wasn't prepared for him to cup her chin and raise her face to his.

"No one's allowed to hurt you."

"You hurt me," she pointed out gently.

His thumb brushed over her cheek, a soft caress that made her blink rapidly to hold back tears.

"I can't always protect you from myself, but the rest of the world isn't allowed to touch you."

She didn't second-guess herself. She wrapped her hand in his shirt and tugged. When he leaned forward, she kissed him. It wasn't passionate, but soft and filled with gratitude. He didn't try to take over, but took what she offered.

Aleixo leaned into her back. "What are you lovers ordering?"

Thankfully, a server passed at that moment with a plate that tempted her nose. When she pointed to it, Aleixo nodded and asked Roth if he needed help with the menu. She excused herself and felt Roth's gaze on her as she walked away. The bathroom was tiny, but clean and decorated with star fish, glass bobbles, and soft lighting. She paused in front of the oval mirror and fingered her lips as she took in her windblown hair, ruddy cheeks, and bloodshot hazel eyes.

Lyle meant well. He thought she was being held captive. She was, but she was a willing one… kind of. She washed her hands and tried to smooth her hair the best that she could. Roth forced her into this arrangement, but she wouldn't

have agreed if she didn't feel something for him. They were two broken pieces that somehow felt a little more whole when they were together. They weren't perfect, nowhere close, but maybe that was as close to perfect as fucked up people like them could be.

She ignored the tight knot in her stomach as she exited the bathroom. She was pleased to see wine had been poured. She took her seat as the appetizers arrived. There was a towering octopus salad, blue crab tempura with Thai salad, breaded shrimp, and several other plates circulating.

"Johnny and I come here for special occasions," Aleixo said.

"I can see why."

His eyes twinkled. "If you move here…"

"Don't tempt me," she said as she bit into a shrimp.

"I think you both would benefit from our lifestyle. He's a different man than the one who tried to punch me this morning," Aleixo said under his breath. "He's uncertain of you, which is why he's so territorial."

She glanced at him as he speared octopus and salad onto his fork and ate with relish. Aleixo washed it down with wine and continued as he reached for the crab.

"Control is crucial to him. He suppresses his instincts so he doesn't reveal too much of himself, but as he got more comfortable throughout the day, he opened up to the point that he went to you on the cape. If you moved here, whatever's pulling you two apart would go away, I guarantee it."

Part of her wanted to scoff at that, but another part suspected he was right. If Roth removed himself from the business world, could he be a different man? She glanced at him and saw he was watching a family of five celebrating a birthday. Dressed as he was, he could be mistaken for a regular man instead of one who wielded more power than high-ranking politicians. Once again, he didn't look out of place in this seafood restaurant, filled with tourists and locals. Without his phone in hand and brow creased as he pondered some problem, she saw the shadow of the man she'd known, the one she thought would be her escape from her father's world.

His eyes cut to her. She wasn't sure what he read on her face, but when he reached out and twined his fingers with hers, her heart turned over.

"See, Portugal has done him good," Aleixo murmured.

She threw her head back and laughed.

Aleixo nudged her. "Show him the effect Portugal has had on you."

From what she had seen, the Portuguese were expressive and unselfconscious. The women wore little to no makeup, people danced in the streets, and they were friendly and warm. She wasn't sure what compelled her

more—the need to thumb her nose at Lyle or catch Roth off guard. Wine gave her the courage to perch on his lap. Roth didn't miss a beat. He wrapped an arm around her and pulled her close.

"Aleixo thinks Portugal is doing you good," she confided as her fingers trailed through his beard. "Changing you into a different man."

He said nothing, but stared at her with stormy black eyes that told her nothing. She traced his jaw and then fingered the scar that ran down the length of his neck.

"You told me you got this from a hunting accident. Is that true?" When he nodded, she prompted, "How old were you?"

"Ten."

She jerked. "You were hunting that young?"

"Been hunting since I was seven, princess. My first toy was a pocketknife."

She was aghast. "Kaia let you play with a *knife* as a toddler?"

He ignored her outrage and squeezed her thigh. "You called me baby."

Her hand dropped from his face. "A slip of the tongue."

"That's what you used to call me."

She looked around the restaurant for their server. "That was a long time ago."

"I still call you princess."

"I wish you wouldn't."

"Why?"

"You know I'm not."

"You can't change what you are."

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of their entrées. Her plate of pasta and oysters made her mouth water, but Roth's fish drizzled with sauce made her reconsider her choice. She slipped off his lap and dug in. Aleixo and Johnny insisted she try their dishes and sampled hers. She forgot her manners and actually stole a piece from Roth's plate without thinking. It wasn't until she swallowed that she realized what she'd done. She glanced at Roth to see how he was taking her faux pas, but he didn't notice, since he was talking to Mo, who was crouched beside his chair.

When she couldn't eat anymore, she sat back and listened to Johnny and Lyle talk. They had many mutual acquaintances and Lyle was very familiar with Johnny's family. The look on Johnny's face when Lyle told him about two nieces he didn't know about broke her heart. Why was family so cruel? She shouldn't be surprised. She, out of all people, knew blood could be your worst enemy.

Lyle tried to lighten the mood. "I just had a daughter."

Johnny covered up his pain by clapping. “Pictures!”

“This is the first time I’ve been away from her,” Lyle said as he reached into his jacket and pulled out his phone. “I’m going to cut back on traveling and send someone else in the future.” He handed the phone over. “She has her mother’s eyes.”

Jasmine hovered behind Johnny’s chair as he swiped through photos of Polara. Colette sent her a steady stream of photos, but she had never seen these. The sight of Lyle doing selfies with his daughter sleeping on his shoulder was priceless. There were quite a few candid shots of Colette and Polara. Her sister would freak if she knew Lyle was showing these to people. She looked up, grinning, and saw Lyle watching her with a speculative look on his face. She severed their eye contact and retook her seat. The most difficult part about being part of her nieces’ and nephews’ lives was dealing with their parents.

“Desserts?” Johnny asked.

Even though they all declined, he beckoned their server and ordered one of everything.

She was mid-yawn when Roth grasped her hand. She glanced at him and saw he was on the phone.

“What’s the combination for the safe?” he asked.

She jolted. “What? Why?”

“Sarai’s packing your things.”

“We’re leaving?”

“Yes. Tonight. What’s the combination?”

“I…” Her heart began to speed up as she remembered the numbers she’d chosen. Would he recognize the significance of them? She didn’t want to find out. She held out her hand for the phone. “I can tell her.”

“Tell me.”

She stared at him for ten seconds before she realized he wasn’t going to relent. She rapped out the numbers quickly, hoping he wouldn’t put two and two together, but the long pause before he relayed the numbers to Sarai told her he recognized them. He didn’t miss a damn thing. She tugged on her hand, but he didn’t release her.

“Yes,” he said into the phone. “We’ll meet you there.”

He hung up and focused on her.

“I’m not ready to leave,” she said hastily.

“We’ll come back.”

“Soon?”

He nodded.

“Can we stay longer next time?”

“You used the date we met as the combination.”

“The hotel in Lisbon was nice, but it would be great if we could stay in a house or villa,” she said quickly. “Maybe a place here in Sintra and you could take a few days off?” When he frowned, she waved a hand. “You don’t have to come with me. I know you’re busy. Maybe I can—"

“You thought I wouldn’t remember?”

She stared at the couple at the next table as mortification engulfed her. She could have used anything. Why oh why had she used that fucking date? And it was just her luck that he forced her to tell him because someone else was packing for her. Her life freaking sucked. Using that date as a combination was clearly a sentimental gesture that she would have paid money to avoid him discovering. She felt as if she had lost valuable ground. He had her body, but she didn’t want him to know he had her heart. This was a clear indication that even when he wasn’t with her, he was on her mind.

“Why is Sarai packing my things? She’s your personal assistant, not a maid,” she griped.

The thought of Sarai gathering her dirty laundry on the floor outside the shower made her grimace. Why couldn’t some impersonal hotel staff do all this instead of Sarai?

“She does whatever’s necessary, and I wouldn’t trust anyone to handle your ring.” His thumb brushed over her bare finger. “Why did you take it off?”

She raised her brows. “You think I can hop on trams and go sightseeing around the city without getting mugged?”

“That’s why you have Mo and Johan.”

“I have security for my ring?”

“You have security because you’re my wife.” His thumb brushed over her naked finger. “One look at your ring and no one would dare touch you. Any man who spends that much money on a ring for his wife is a dangerous man.”

“I don’t understand.”

He regarded her silently as his thumb continued its distracting stroke over her fingers. She was dimly aware of the servers rushing around, the constant movement of patrons coming and going, and then a burst of laughter from the others at their table, but she couldn’t move her gaze from his. He was so close, she could see her silhouette reflected in his midnight eyes.

“A man who can afford to spend that much on a ring could invest that money in other things besides warning others off.”

He leaned forward and gave her a long, slow kiss.

“Don’t take off your ring,” he said before he sat back and picked up his wine.

She was staring at him when Aleixo pushed a dish in front of her.

“You have to taste this lemon ice cream. It’ll make your dreams come true.”

Even though she didn’t have room for dessert, she couldn’t resist. She was pleased to see Roth give in to Johnny’s pleas to try a chocolate mousse concoction on a wafer drizzled with condensed milk. They cleaned every plate. She was finishing off the last of the ice cream when Johnny let out an outraged screech.

“This was *my* treat!”

He glared down the table at Roth, who wasn’t fazed by his outburst.

“You picked up the tab for lunch,” Roth said mildly.

“We’re the hosts, we’re supposed to—"

“I’ll let you pick up the next one,” Roth said genially.

Lyle looked back and forth between the two of them, clearly confused as fuck. She bowed her head to hide her grin. Johnny and Roth were oil and water, two men on opposite ends of the spectrum. They shouldn’t live in the same universe, much less be friends, but Roth seemed to know how to defuse Johnny’s dramatic tendencies with an ease that neither she nor Aleixo could.

“Fine,” Johnny said petulantly as he crossed his arms. “I’ll get the next one.”

They took their last sips of wine before they rose. She was pleasantly drowsy as they made their way to the door. She stiffened when Lyle slipped an arm over her shoulders. When she tried to shrug him off, he tightened his hold. She kept her head down as they passed through the front doors. He led her away from everyone else and faced her under a yellow streetlight.

“I’m not going to lie. I don’t like this, and I don’t believe you one hundred percent, but…” He ran a hand through his hair. “You can’t fake that shit.” He shook his head. “Never thought I’d see the day Roth made friends with Johnny Salazar. What’s the world coming to?”

He waited for a response, but when he didn’t get one, he sighed.

“I’m sorry.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “I can take care of myself.”

He eyed her thoughtfully. “Maybe you can, but old habits die hard.”

When she narrowed her eyes, he spread his arms wide.

“Can you blame me for being suspicious?”

She glared at him. “I’m not an idiot.”

“You’re too soft,” he muttered as he hugged her. “Come on, Min,” he complained when she didn’t return his embrace. “I said I was sorry.”

“You really think something’s wrong with me?” she whispered.

He opened his mouth to respond, but whatever he was going to say was lost when Roth interrupted.

“Caruso.”

Lyle stiffened. “Roth,” he said curtly as he released her.

When Roth held out his hand to her, she went on tiptoes to kiss Lyle’s cheek before she went to Roth, who tucked her into his side.

Lyle looked like he wanted to say something, but shook his head, and slipped his hands into his pockets instead. “Where are you two headed?”

“Berlin,” Roth said.

“And after that?”

“If nothing comes up, back to London, and then New York.”

“Thanksgiving’s coming up,” Lyle said stiffly.

“We should be back in time.”

Lyle nodded and focused on her as he said, “I’ll see you then.”

When she nodded, he went to Johnny and Aleixo to say goodbye.

She looked up at Roth. “We’re going to Berlin?”

He nodded. “Unfinished business.”

As Lyle took his leave, they went over to Johnny and Aleixo to say their farewells. Johnny had a fit when he found out she was leaving. Only when Roth promised to bring her back within five months did he calm down. Johnny and Aleixo looked a little stunned when Roth offered to let them use the jet to visit them in New York.

“That was generous,” she told him as they settled in the back seat of the car Mo was driving.

“It’s not a big deal,” he said.

But it was. She patted his thigh before she leaned against the window and took in her last glimpse of Portugal. She wished she had more time here, but seeing how much Polara had grown made her a little homesick. She propped her chin on her fist. What would Lyle report to her family? She hoped he was satisfied. If he challenged Roth, it would undermine her deal with him and make things more complicated than they already were. Did her sisters know Lyle was going to ambush her? She had been sending them pictures throughout the day. Is that how he tracked her down?

She glanced at Roth. His face was illuminated by his phone, which she hadn’t seen all day. She felt a twinge of disappointment, but knew he couldn’t stay unplugged forever. At least they had today. Seeing Roth interact with her friends gave her hope. He proved that he could compromise. He could bend his strict time constraints and rules, and even his stance on no one touching her. Today, he relaxed his guard and went with the flow instead of trying to control everything. Even though her day had been plagued with drama, it stilled ended on a high note.

Roth raised the phone to his ear. “Yeah?”

She held her breath so she could hear who was on the other end, but there was nothing but a distant buzz. They were flying to Berlin, where she had been a handful of times. It was a great city, but no match for Lisbon. Roth grunted and then rattled off a string of numbers that made no sense to her. How the hell did he remember a sequence that long? Did this have something to do with his unfinished business in Berlin or one of his other holdings?

She shook her head. If Lyle discovered she was alone in Lisbon while he was in Berlin, there would have been hell to pay. She straightened as an echo of Lyle's words came back to her. *It's too convenient.* Her heart thudded in her ears. What were the chances that Roth arrived hours before Lyle did? It had to be a coincidence… But when it came to Roth, there was no such thing.

Even as she tried to slam the brakes on her overactive imagination, she turned the day over in her mind. It wasn't like Roth to leave a meeting, much less fly to another location when there were deals on the table. Why had he gone along with their agenda and allowed her to spend time with Johnny and Aleixo if he wanted to get laid?

Roth didn't hang up, but switched to the next call. He was back in business mode, as if the man who explored Sintra with her had vanished into thin air. Her stomach iced over.

By the time they stopped on the runway, the seafood she consumed was pitching and rolling in her stomach. She blocked Roth, who was still on the phone, and glanced over her shoulder as Mo and Johan boarded. When Roth jerked his chin at the jet, she shook her head and pointed at his phone, telling him to hang up.

"Grayson, we have to pick this up later. I'm about to take off. Yeah. Soon." He hung up and eyed her. "What is it?"

His impatience was a palpable force, which only confirmed her suspicions.

"Why did you leave Berlin today?"

He frowned. "I told you."

"You said you left your meeting because you were thinking about me."

She waited for him to confirm that, but all he said was, "Where's this going?"

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Lyle thinks you staged that scene on the cliff."

She searched his face for any sign of discomfort, but she couldn't read him at the best of times. There was no change in his expression. He didn't look away, shift his weight, or twitch.

"You didn't seem surprised to see him," she said quietly.

"What's your point?"

“Did you know he was coming to Portugal to check on me?” When he didn’t respond, she prodded his chest. “Is that why you really left Berlin?”

“Yes.”

Even though she braced for it, his answer left her inwardly reeling. Her buoyant spirits plummeted, and a biting cold began to spread.

“You staged that kiss?” she whispered.

His eyes narrowed. “I didn’t stage anything. I wanted to kiss you, so I did.”

Her hopes and dreams dissolved, leaving nothing but a yawning emptiness she wished she could fall into. Lyle was right. Roth was always two steps ahead of him… and her. He played the loving and concerned husband, so Lyle could report back to her family that they were acting like a real married couple. Acting being the operative word. She hadn’t been, but he was. How could she have been so gullible to believe he would take a day off to spend time together? When had he ever? He always had an ulterior motive. He pulled the strings and she began to dance. When would she learn?

She turned and saw Mo and Johan standing in the opening of the jet, watching them. They cleared the way as she hurried up the steps. Sarai was already slumped against the window, fast asleep. She took the seat beside his personal assistant and fussed with her purse as Roth paused in the aisle beside her. She willed him to leave her alone. If he touched her, she might shatter.

“It was necessary,” he said finally. “To make things easier.”

“I understand,” she said.

And she did. She wanted her family to believe in their marriage as much as he did. If he had told her there was a chance that Lyle would appear, she would have played along. But he didn’t do that. He hadn’t said a goddamn thing about her brother-in-law. Instead, he chose to con her from the moment he saw her this morning, plying her with kisses and sweet talk. He even played nice with her friends and went along with their excursion to make their marriage more believable. Did he think she wasn’t capable of acting around Lyle? Did he not trust her to play her part?

As Roth made his way to the back of the jet, she slumped in her seat and closed her eyes. She was relieved that the engine covered the sound of her ragged breathing. Everything he did was to keep their image intact, so he could follow through with his plans without any interference from her family. And she helped by sitting on his lap and kissing him like a lovesick fool. She pressed the back of her hand against her mouth as she tasted bile in her mouth. He was a master manipulator, and she kept stepping into his trap.

As the jet raced down the runway, she clutched the arm rests and wished fate would have some fucking mercy on her and stop using her as its favorite toy. Her

stuffing was leaking out of the massive rips and tears from being torn in different directions. She was in dire need of repair, but there was no one to sew up wounds or replace what she'd lost. All she could do was slip what was left of her back in and hope she stayed intact before Roth damaged her so severely, she would never be able to put herself back together again.

As they soared into the sky and the cabin lights went out, she closed her eyes and let the tears fall.

CHAPTER 17



They were back in London, and once again, it was raining. It wasn't a light sprinkle, but a downpour. She took her time slipping into her trench coat and hoped everyone would go ahead of her, so she'd have a moment to herself.

When she turned, she wasn't pleased to see Roth waiting beside the open door. He was still playing the role of a diligent husband. She wasn't sure why he bothered. Sarai was the first one off the plane, since Roth's first meeting of the day was in less than six hours. Their only audience were the flight attendants, who gave Roth wary, sidelong glances as they waited for them to disembark.

She ignored the umbrella Roth held out for her and used her bag instead. It was foolish and maybe a bit childish, but she didn't want anything from him, not even a fucking umbrella. The rain wasn't going to kill her. She bit back a gasp as freezing water cascaded off her purse and slipped down the back of her coat. So, maybe she'd get sick. She could handle that. She double timed it to the car and dove into the back seat.

As she mopped up her face, Roth made his way to the opposite side and, with a poise that set her teeth on edge, slipped into the back seat beside her. Johan grabbed his dripping umbrella and stashed it in the trunk before hopping into the front passenger seat.

She was soaked through, but damn if she was going to complain about it. She adjusted the vents and placed her hands over the stream of hot air as they left the airport. No one spoke. Even with the rain pelting down, the silence was deafening. They never played the radio since Roth took frequent phone calls. She glanced at him as she slicked back her wet hair. It was odd to see him without his phone in hand. Even more disturbing was the fact that he was staring pensively out the window. Scheming, most likely. Well, he could have at it. She

was done.

Lisbon was the wake-up call she needed. She finally got it. This wasn't about her. It wasn't even about them. It was about business, as it had been from the first, she just hadn't realized it. This was a transaction, an exchange of benefits, nothing more. This is what Dad prepared her for, an arranged marriage where love and affection weren't required. She made the mistake of thinking their past made a difference to him, that *she* made a difference. Now, she was wiser.

By the time they landed in Berlin, the tears were gone. So were all traces of any other emotion. Roth accomplished the impossible—he turned her into the daughter Maximus always wanted. Even though they arrived at the hotel in the wee hours of the morning, the moment she entered their suite, she claimed the executive desk and set up a makeshift office. Thanks to Roth's insistence that she stay in the States, her life never revolved around a man, and she wasn't about to start now. She may be at the mercy of Roth's work schedule, but that didn't mean he was the center of her world. He may control the tide, but she was the boat that rode the waves, not the swimmer caught in the undertow. She had shit to do, same as him, and it was time she got to it.

So far, she had been a piss-poor steward of the fortune her father had entrusted to her. She had been stuck on the why and now realized that didn't matter. She assumed her sisters were better equipped to handle her inheritance, but if there was any chance that Roth was right and her sisters didn't have her best interests at heart, she had to protect herself, and that meant taking control.

She reached out to her board of advisors—tax and estate planning attorneys, CPAs, business managers, financial advisors, and more. As most of them had been handpicked by her father, she knew they were the best of the best and in high demand. She called to request appointments and was stunned when she received immediate callbacks. Having never been associated with Hennessy & Co like her sisters, she was used to a certain amount of dismissal, even condescension from other professionals. She was surprised not only by their eagerness to speak with her, but how frank they were. More than one of them reminded her that this inheritance had been left to her and therefore, it should be she who decided how the funds were managed, not her sisters'. Part of the problem was, she had no idea what to do with it. Thankfully for her, that's where her advisors came in.

It was a good thing she needed a distraction because her board of advisors gave her so much to think about that her issues with Roth faded into the background. They asked if she wanted to start her own foundation or change the investments her sisters had selected. Her advisors encouraged her to stick to her interests and spend, donate—anything but leave the money in the bank when it

could be used for so much good.

Every board member brought up Roth at some point in the conversation. It was understandable since their union changed things, but she assured them their finances were separate, and they had an ironclad prenup. She hoped that would be the end of their inquiries concerning Roth. It wasn't. She was taken aback when they asked if she wanted to put aside money for future heirs or if Roth should be added to a trust. That would be a hell to the fucking no. As a single woman who wasn't in a serious relationship and had never been close to having children, she never planned beyond her next book project, and now she had to name an heir to inherit her considerable fortune when she died. The sheer number of things to consider boggled her mind.

They stayed in Berlin for three days. She didn't leave the suite and spent every waking moment on the phone, getting her affairs in order. She may not have control over her life or her writing, since that was heavily influenced by her emotions, which were a jangled mess. But this… This she could deal with. There was no emotional commitment required. It was straightforward—figures, options… All she had to do was choose what she wanted, and it would be done.

She grew up believing that one day she would be third in command of Hennessy & Co. She let go of that dream years ago, only to find herself CEO of her own empire. Was this Dad's way of forcing her to accept the role she had forfeited? She wouldn't secure the future of Hennessy & Co, only to allow Dad's remaining assets to languish. Personally, she had no need for the money. She had Tuxedo Park, and aside from a place in Portugal or maybe a private island to recover from her second fucked up marriage, she didn't need anything. She decided to take her board's advice and donate to causes near and dear to her heart. Maybe she could restore dying libraries in small towns or create youth centers with good counselors, so kids had a safe place to go after school and speak to someone. She wanted to keep creative programs in schools, grant scholarships to hard-working students, and offer assistance to kids of single parents. She had been to countless charity events over the years. She didn't want to take on the responsibility of creating her own foundation, but she would gladly contribute to worthy, established missions already in progress.

And, though it came with a lot of risk, she wanted to invest a portion of her inheritance. She had something to prove. She wasn't sure whether it was to herself, sisters, or Roth, but she wanted to increase what her father had given her. This is what she'd been groomed for. She had been out of the business world for some time, but as Roth pointed out that fateful night in London, she had all the connections she would need before she graduated from high school. She reached out to friends she hadn't talked to since graduation and was once again stunned

by the enthusiastic welcome. A jaded part of her wondered if they'd seen her wedding announcement, but it didn't matter. Business was business, and wherever factors tipped the scales in her favor, she'd take.

The more people she spoke to, the more her mind expanded to accommodate the opportunities available to her. This was a different kind of thrill than the one writing gave her. She'd always been timid in business, despite her master's degree. Roth and her family didn't think she had what it took to make it in their arena. Well, today was a new day, and she would never know if she didn't try. Besides, she had millions at her disposal. She could afford to lose a little, though she had no intention of letting that happen.

She pulled out her phone to purchase Johanna Ledger's latest book, the one that Sarai had been pouring over throughout the trip and had finally finished. They spent the flight from Berlin discussing their love of books, but most especially Johanna Ledger, who both of them had been reading since they were teenagers. She was anxious to dive into Johanna's new release, but some new messages distracted her. She was pleased to see that her business manager, CPA, and attorney had responded to her inquiries. Despite the late hour, she decided to return her attorney's call and was pleased when he picked up. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Roth's head turn in her direction. She knew very well he was listening to her calls with her board. Instead of feeling anxious, she silently dared him to mess with her. If there was another asset he was after, he had to make a move now before she got everything under control.

His knowledge of Lyle's whereabouts revealed just how thoroughly he had infiltrated her family's privacy and security. He had been planning this for years, while she had been completely oblivious to the storm gathering on the horizon. In less than three months, she lost her father, freedom, and control of her life. She felt as if she was tethered to a lightning rod. His return to New York was as ominous as rolling thunder, a sure sign that all hell was about to break loose. She couldn't best him, but she could withstand the storm. And when it was over, she would rebuild and start again.

She survived three days of sharing a suite with him in Berlin. When Roth returned at the end of the day, it was she who was on the phone, taking one call after the next. He didn't interfere. When he asked her a question, she responded and looked him in the fucking eye, even though it nearly killed her to do it. He didn't push for sex. She wasn't sure what she would have done if he had, but was relieved she hadn't been tested. When he boarded the flight bound for London, she accepted his kiss without batting an eye. He thought she couldn't act? He was going to get front-row seats to a Jasmine he had never seen before. Even Sarai's sensitive radar didn't pick up on any tension, but the long glances

Mo and Johan exchanged told her they weren't fooled. She ignored them. Their boss had nothing to be mad about. Everything was going his way. He was getting his revenge while simultaneously increasing his net worth. Everything was on track for him.

She shivered in her damp clothes. The moment they got to the penthouse, she was taking a hot shower and calling it a night. The end of this fake honeymoon was near. Once they were back in New York, she would be on solid ground. She was going to create a routine that didn't include him and busy herself with family, friends, and work.

She made the mistake of checking her social media and was greeted with disgruntled comments from readers who weren't happy that the book wasn't finished. There was no way she could deal with Juliet and Rex in her current state. To write that book, she would have to deal with Dad's passing and the new development between Rex and Juliet, which mirrored the change in her and Roth's relationship that never should have happened in a million years. Since she was dealing with it in real life, she couldn't in fiction. Not yet. She could buy time by explaining that she recently remarried. But on the heels of her announcing the death of a family member, it would sound like a made-up fabrication, and she couldn't answer the questions that would crop up anyway. So, she took the flak from her audience, apologized for the delay, and promised she would have news soon. She hoped she was telling the truth.

When the car slowed, she peered through the window at a familiar lobby. The memory of the last night they spent here together flickered at the edges of her consciousness, but she ignored it. It was just one more incident in a long line that would never be discussed or resolved.

She took Johan's hand as she stepped out of the car and crossed her arms over her chest as she hurried to the building to get out of the cold and wet. Somehow, Roth managed to reach the entrance before her. She paused when he opened the door for her. As she slipped past, she caught a whiff of him. His cologne was dampened by the smell of rain and something that was uniquely him. She was relieved when his phone rang, and he answered with a curt, "Roth." She preferred him occupied with business rather than quietly brooding. He crossed the lobby by her side and paused when she did, beside a majestic Christmas tree the building's residents would never see.

The tree was decorated as grand as any that graced her father's lobby's. Although Maximus didn't care for the holidays, he understood that people swarmed to New York at that time of year. He hired the best decorators to turn his properties into must-see winter wonderlands. Would that tradition continue this year? Grief bloomed, unexpected and so sharp that, for a second, she

couldn’t breathe. To distract herself, she brushed her finger over branches dusted with fake snow and focused on one of the ornaments, which was as large as a grapefruit.

She stepped back, using the guise of admiring the tree to buy more time. She prepared to turn away when something caught her eye. She ducked her head and came back to the tree, parting the branches to expose an owl that had been placed at a child’s height. She glanced around the deserted lobby. What child would walk through these doors and have the joy of actually finding it?

Holidays had been largely ignored by her family, who never stopped working. Presents came in the form of stocks or a donation to a charity, so they could write it off on their taxes. It was very impersonal. Dad took a stab at making something of the holidays in his last years by having everyone come to Tuxedo Park, but it had been extremely awkward. Kye and Bailey’s presence stopped the get-togethers from being a total flop.

Roth was still on the phone, but hadn’t said a word for several minutes. Had he forgotten he was holding it to his ear? Even as she straightened, he grunted.

“No.”

He didn’t offer further explanation to the person on the other end of the line. He just stood there, watching her. She bit back a sigh and continued across the lobby.

“No,” Roth said again.

That seemed to be the only word that came out of his mouth lately. She hoped it meant things weren’t going in his favor.

“And?”

She wasn’t sure how he managed to make that word sound so menacing, but he did. Something definitely wasn’t going his way, which pleased her. Movement out of the corner of her eye made her turn her head. She held up a hand in acknowledgment of the concierge, who were bright-eyed and alert despite the hour. Her gaze moved to the lone figure occupying the seating area. He sat with his back to her, staring straight ahead with his hands steepled in front of him, seemingly deep in thought. He wasn’t fiddling with his phone or looking around. It was clear he was waiting for someone. The suit suggested it was business related, but who had meetings at this hour? Maybe he was having an affair with a resident whose husband was out of town? As her writer’s mind churned up scandalous scenarios, he turned his head. Once she got a look at his face, she stopped in her tracks.

She wasn’t one to be bowled over by looks. Being raised with two gorgeous sisters and in the presence of people who could afford the best trainers, nutritionists, and plastic surgeons, one became immune to perfection. But this

man’s striking looks were almost otherworldly. Even across the distance, she could see he had stunning gold eyes framed by dark golden brows and perfectly styled, wavy blond hair. As he got to his feet with an innate grace she secretly envied, she saw that he wore a gray tweed three-piece suit with no tie and a silver handkerchief in the pocket.

“Fuck.”

Roth’s curse made her jolt. Under other circumstances, she would have looked at him to see what his problem was, but she didn’t want to take her eyes off the man candy heading their way. He really was spectacular. If Daiyu ever laid eyes on this man, she wouldn’t bother trying to hit on him, she’d just leap on him and get down to business.

“Roth,” the man said in a luscious British accent.

“I’ll talk to you later,” Roth said into the phone before he addressed the stranger. “I thought we were meeting in the morning.”

The man didn’t seem perturbed by Roth’s brusque tone. On the contrary, he smiled as if Roth had welcomed him with open arms.

“It is morning,” the stranger pointed out. “And I knew you wouldn’t introduce me, so I had to take matters into my own hands.”

As he and Roth faced off, she saw that they were eye to eye. The man was just as tall, and while he wasn’t as large as Roth, he didn’t have the ultra-lean build of most businessmen either. She couldn’t peg his age. She kept edging upward until she realized she wanted to give him more years because of his poise. It was only when the stranger looked directly at her that she realized he was around her age, maybe even younger.

“We didn’t get to meet the first time around,” the man said. “And I have a feeling this would be my only opportunity.”

“Gray.”

The beautiful man ignored Roth’s snarl and extended his hand. “Grayson.”

She clasped his hand and stilled as the name clicked. She’d heard Roth utter that name quite a few times over the past weeks when he was on the phone.

“Pardon the intrusion,” Grayson murmured as his sharp gaze roved over her face. “But I couldn’t resist the chance to meet his downfall.”

She stiffened.

“You’re the reason he was run out of America,” Grayson said blandly. “If it wasn’t for you, I never would have met him.”

She snatched her hand back and gave him a steely smile. “Lucky you.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “Lucky me.”

She was used to this type of verbal sparring at high society parties, but she hadn’t expected it at this hour from a stranger. She tried to sift through the odd

undertones in the air, but she had no context for this man's place in Roth's life. "How do you two know each other?"

"We're partners," Grayson said blithely at the same time Roth bit out, "Colleagues."

Grayson gave a nonchalant shrug. "He insists on keeping everything separate, even though we work in tandem. He has a hard time trusting people." He tilted his head to the side as he considered her with disconcerting directness. "I wonder why that is."

Even as her nails cut into her palm, she widened her eyes innocently. "I haven't the faintest idea. He's such an honest, trustworthy guy."

Even as Grayson's smile widened, Roth growled, "That's enough."

She wasn't sure whether he was talking to her or Grayson, but it was his partner who answered.

"I had to satisfy my curiosity. You can't make all these changes and expect me to fall in line without question."

"How many times have I warned you, there are consequences for satisfying your curiosity?" Roth growled.

"It was worth it."

Grayson's perfect smile never wavered, but it was completely at odds with his lifeless golden eyes. Initially, she had been blinded by his masculine beauty, but as she looked closer, she felt a chill of unease when she realized something was missing. She eased back and bumped into Roth. Before she could sidestep, he banded an arm across her chest. She wasn't sure whether it was a protective or possessive gesture, but she decided not to fight it.

Grayson examined them for a moment before he shrugged, as if answering a question that hadn't been voiced. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Jasmine. I hope we'll meet again."

With that, he turned on his heel and strode across the lobby. He walked outside, straight into the rain, and strolled down the sidewalk as if he didn't have a care in the world.

Knowing firsthand how cold that rain was, she started after him. "Roth."

"He's fine," he said dismissively as he grabbed her arm and led her in the opposite direction.

He punched in the code to call the elevator and didn't release her until the doors closed behind them. They stood side by side in complete silence as the elevator rose so fast that the numbers couldn't keep up. When the doors opened to reveal his entry hall, he strode forward.

She followed in his wake, arms folded across her chest. He stripped off his coat and tossed it carelessly over a chest that had to cost a fortune before he

entered the formal living room. As he headed for the wet bar, she hesitated. If she wanted to maintain their status quo, she shouldn't engage. She should make her escape and be sound asleep before he came to bed, but her need for answers overrode self-preservation.

"Who is he?" she asked.

"Grayson Ward."

The surname sounded vaguely familiar, but she couldn't place it. "Is he a criminal?"

He turned with a fancy bottle of Scotch in one hand. "You think he looks like a criminal?"

"I don't believe criminals have a certain *look*." She gave him an insulting perusal. "They come in all shapes and sizes, don't they?"

"I wouldn't know." He turned away from her. "What makes you think he's a criminal?"

She heard the clink of glasses and then the sound of a generous pour.

"Aside from his association with you?" she asked sweetly.

"Yes, aside from that," he said with imperturbable cool as he turned back to her with a drink in hand.

"Not many businessmen keep these hours and there was something about him…" When she hesitated, he raised his brows. She tried to put into words that unsettled feeling he gave her. "He smiled, but there was nothing there. His eyes were empty."

She waited for him to laugh or scoff at her impression of Grayson. He did neither.

"I don't think anyone's picked up on his true nature that quick," he murmured.

She tensed. "True nature?"

"He has his share of demons. Occasionally, he has trouble controlling them, but that isn't a crime. I have that problem myself."

Her stomach flipped. Was that a warning or admission of past sins? The distance between them should have made her feel safe, but she knew how quickly things could turn in his presence. The sensible part of her piped up again, reminding her she still had time to make a dignified exit, but she stayed put. Her emotions stirred, but she ruthlessly squelched them and plowed ahead.

"If he isn't a criminal, then what is he?"

"Seventeenth in line to the throne."

"What?"

"Most people can't see past his status, wealth, and looks to what's beneath. He gets away with murder."

Her eyes narrowed into slits. He dismissed her suspicion that Grayson was a criminal, only to bring up murder. Was he messing with her, or was that just a poor choice of words on his part?

"How did you meet?"

"By chance."

She gave him a few seconds to fill in the blanks. When he didn't, she raised her brows. "You aren't going to tell me?"

"No."

"Why? Because it's illegal?"

"No."

He stood before the floor-to-ceiling windows obliterated by rain, relaxed and totally at ease, while she balanced on a knife's edge of anger, doubt, and uncertainty. He was so good at keeping her off-balance. What would it take to shatter his composure?

She put her shoulders back, rounded the couch, and started toward him. She was pleased when he lost the relaxed pose. He wasn't the only one who could pull strings. Although every fiber of her being said she should retreat, she walked toward the edge of the cliff. If she wanted answers, she had to play the game and use every weapon at her disposal.

She allowed her eyelids to lower and mouth to soften seductively. Although his expression remained inscrutable, she sensed his energy shift as she neared. When she was five feet from him, he tensed. When she was so close that she could smell rain on him, she made a sharp turn toward the wet bar. With her back to him, she allowed herself a smug smile and reveled in the seething silence. She selected a heavy tumbler and poured herself a drink. Although she preferred Scotch on the rocks, she wasn't in the mood to make the five-minute trek to the kitchen.

"You should take off your clothes."

She froze with the glass halfway to her lips and turned. He was right behind her. All she had to do was reach out to touch him.

"Excuse me?"

Midnight eyes raked over her face. "Your clothes are wet. You should get out of them."

"That's what I have this for."

She toasted him before she sipped. She wasn't sure whether it was the Scotch or his unwavering focus that made her want to cough, but that worry disappeared as her taste buds registered the flavor. Her eyelids fluttered and almost closed completely before she got a hold of herself.

"This was my father's favorite drink," she said.

“I know.”

When she shivered, he picked up a remote and pointed it at the wall. Seconds later, a line of flames appeared. She gave Roth a sidelong glance as he undid the top button of his shirt. She walked toward the linear fireplace and watched the flames dance over obsidian glass and birchwood.

As she was suffused with comforting heat, she had the sudden urge to stretch out on the couch and smoke a cigar, but a glance at Roth killed that desire. While the Scotch mellowed her out, it seemed to have the opposite effect on him. There was no trace of fatigue on his face, not even the hint of a bloodshot eye to prove he was human. He was a machine, hardwired for battle. He never let his guard down, which meant she couldn’t either.

“You’ve never mentioned Grayson before,” she said.

“Why would I?”

She cocked her hip. “Hmm, I don’t know. You were working with him the first time we were married. It would have been an interesting tidbit to mention that you befriended a royal.”

“We’re not friends.”

She blinked. “You have other colleagues who’d wait in the lobby at this time of night to meet your wife?”

It took great effort not to roll her eyes at his perplexed expression. He was beyond clueless.

“It seems,” she drawled, “that despite your best efforts, you managed to make a friend and powerful ally.”

Roth frowned at the flames as he nursed his drink.

“You work closely enough that whatever changes you’re making are affecting him too.” She sipped her drink and was rewarded with another wave of warmth. “What changes, Roth?”

“You already know.”

She raised her brows in polite inquiry.

“I’m making adjustments, so I don’t have to travel as much.”

“How does that affect Grayson?”

He hesitated, weighing his words before he said, “If he wants to maintain his gains, he’s going to have to be more involved than he’s been in the past.”

“You managed things for him?”

Roth was no saint. He didn’t do favors for anyone, yet he had taken on a massive responsibility for Grayson. Why?

“Maximus used every contact he had to make it impossible for me to gain any traction here. He let it be known that anyone who worked with me would be considered an enemy.” He tipped his tumbler, rocking the amber liquid back and

forth. “But he overlooked young Grayson, who just inherited his fortune.”

Her stomach clenched. She tried to loosen the knots by taking a healthy gulp of Scotch.

“Grayson had no interest in business, but he allowed me to invest his money.” His eyes flicked from her to the penthouse. “We struck gold. By the time Maximus found out, it was too late. He threatened Grayson and tried to make things difficult for him, but he found out the hard way that Grayson’s lineage trumped his connections.” His lips quirked into a sardonic smile. “Maximus wasn’t too happy about that.”

Which explained the ice behind Grayson’s angelic smile. “And I’m included in his disdain for my dad?”

Roth considered her for a moment, eyes moving over her face before resting on her hair. She resisted the urge to smooth it down.

“No,” he said finally.

Her fingers tightened around her glass. “He called me your downfall.”

If she was hoping to get a reaction from him, she would have been disappointed, but she was past expecting anything from him. Irritation tangled with the alcohol running through her veins. She felt as if she was burning up. She parted her coat and barely stopped herself from baring her teeth when his gaze skated down her body.

“It sounds like he heard a convoluted version of what happened,” she said.

“You think so?”

The edges of her vision blurred as her temper kicked up a notch. The hefty tumbler in her hand could knock him unconscious if she got him on the temple… But if she missed, he would retaliate and this would end the way they always ended things. That was the opening he was waiting for. Was he deliberately trying to goad her, so she would do something stupid?

“My father was your downfall, not me.”

“I went to war for you.”

Her mouth dropped. “For *me*?”

His expression hardened. “I went to war to keep you.”

Her temper tore at the seams. “You didn’t have to fight for me! You had me. This war was about you and my father—your egos and empires. It was about *this*.” She swung her arm to encompass the palatial room and didn’t feel an ounce of remorse when she spilled her drink on his expensive rug. “This is what you fought for. And you got it.” Her eyes burned as she toasted him. “Congratulations. Everything you wanted is at your fingertips.”

“Not everything.”

“Right.” She spun on her heel and headed to the wet bar for a refill. “You

want payback for everyone who's ever wronged you. You want them at your feet, begging for mercy."

"I don't care for begging unless it's coming from you."

She couldn't control the way her body jerked in reaction to his words. She silently cursed him in every language she could think of as she shot him a scathing glare.

"I hope you hold your breath waiting for that to happen," she said sweetly.

"Is that a challenge?"

Touch me and die. The words were on the tip of her tongue, but that would be tantamount to waving a red flag at a bull. She splashed more Scotch into her glass before she took a turn around the room. No one could piss her off like Roth. He didn't have to do much to make her fly off the handle. How could it be that the first time they were married, the only fight they had was the day of her graduation when he insisted she stay in Philadelphia?

She paused when she heard liquid being poured. Roth was getting a refill. The fact that he moved without her noticing jolted her out of her reverie. She took a deep breath and refocused on her original topic.

"Why didn't you want me to meet Grayson?"

He turned to face her. They were both in their original positions—her behind the couch (a comforting obstacle), while he posed in front of Knightsbridge, which was an unrecognizable blob in the downpour.

"There was no reason for you to meet."

"We would have eventually," she said with studied nonchalance.

"How do you figure that?"

"We have a lot in common."

His eyes narrowed. "You have nothing in common."

"We know the Davies," she said as she trailed her hand along the back of the couch. "That's how you got into their good graces, right? You needed someone to vouch for you, and there's no higher recommendation than a royal. Grayson got you in the door. It was only a matter of time before you met Charon, Igor, and the others."

His silence was damning.

"Grayson's been a valuable asset. Not many can call on the Prime Minister for a favor."

The furrow in his brow was the only sign that she'd caught him off guard.

As she reached the end of the couch, her hand curled into a fist. She forced her fingers to unfurl and swing by her side as she headed toward the high table displaying a festive arrangement of ruby amaryllis and berry sprigs.

"And you know Daiyu's father as well." She belied her inner tension by

hopping onto a high chair and crossing her legs. “What a coincidence that we have so many mutual acquaintances.”

She fixed a smile on her face as she waited for him to address her veiled accusations. He stood there with his drink in hand and that poker-face that made her want to throw something to get a reaction from him. She drank enough Scotch to make her chest feel like it was on fire. When she exhaled, she was surprised smoke didn’t come out of her mouth. As one minute passed and then two, she betrayed herself by rapping her fingernails on the table before she caught herself. Clearly, he wouldn’t be pressured into an explanation, but she had to know… She dropped the smile and asked the question that plagued her ever since she reconnected with Penelope.

“You made a point to acquire as many of my father's contacts as possible, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

Even though she already knew the answer, his confirmation made her heart skip. “Why would you do that?”

He sipped his drink instead of answering, stretching her nerves to the breaking point.

“You wanted to prove that you could take them from my father? Or, are you giving them a false sense of security, so you can fuck them over later?”

“Why would I do that?”

“You want to destroy anyone associated with my father.” When he didn’t contradict her, she leaned forward. “Roth, I’ve known these people all my life. They’re my extended family. These aren’t strangers you’re playing with, these are my childhood friends.”

“It’s just business.”

“Just business,” she echoed. “That’s all this is to you?”

She stared at him as memories of the dinner they shared with the Davies slipped through her mind. She thought of baby Mariah, the townhouse filled with laughter and love, and William embracing Roth before they took their leave. None of that made a difference to him. His deadpan expression made her heart sink to her toes.

“Right. I forgot who I was talking to for a second.” She downed the last of her Scotch to drown out the foul taste in her mouth. “That’s what it always comes down to with you. That’s why you married me twice. Just business.”

Ice spread through her chest, making it hard to breathe. She focused on the cheerful red amaryllis and tried to find a pocket of calm as everything in her went into mad revolt. London seemed to be their chosen backdrop to battle, so it was only right that she continued their tradition.

“Next time we need to put on a show, I’d appreciate you letting me in on it. You don’t have to con me anymore. You were upfront this time around. I get it. I’m a prop. Don’t waste time feeding me lines. Just tell me who you’re trying to convince, and I’ll do it. That’s what I agreed to. You should trust me that much, at least.”

Her insides shriveled up to protect itself from this conversation, but what was a little more pain? She was a glutton for punishment. That was why she remarried him, right? She was so rigid, her back didn’t touch the chair back.

“I didn’t walk away when Kaia told me I should. I kept our story intact even after you attacked Thea and admitted you deliberately targeted me. I agreed to this, knowing you got a vasectomy without telling me!”

She surged off the chair. She couldn’t sit still when her insides were roiling. Her skin felt tight and hot, and she was a little lightheaded. She wasn’t sure whether that was from the Scotch, lack of sleep, or the fact that she was mercilessly cutting into raw wounds that hadn’t even begun to heal. A little voice in the back of her mind told her to stop and get away while she still had an ounce of dignity, but her mouth had other ideas.

“You’ve manipulated me, stole my freedom, exploited my weaknesses… You realized I was, what was it you said? Neglected and lonely?” She let out a harsh laugh as she ran both hands through her hair and resisted the urge to pull as her control slipped away. “You were spot-on. The one time you were truthful with me was the first time I came here—when you made it abundantly clear I had no place in your life. Leaving you was the best thing I ever did for myself. If I hadn’t, you would have thrown me out, and I’d have nothing.”

His stoic expression fanned her ire. Nothing touched him. She could cry and rage, and he wouldn’t feel a thing. So, why should she expend so much energy to contain herself? Since he shackled her to him, he could deal with her ugly, emotional outbursts. Maybe he would tire of her nagging and leave her behind on his next business trip. Or better yet, get rid of her altogether. On that optimistic thought, she started for him.

“I didn’t know you were such a good actor. You had Johnny and Aleixo eating out of the palm of your hand.”

And me.

The wave of shame made her queasy. She paused to lean against a chair for a moment. She examined him as he stood there with his glass in hand. So proud. So unmoved.

“No one could convince me that you didn’t have my best interests at heart. Even when you left me behind and called once a week for just a few minutes, I was so pathetically grateful.” Her mouth stretched into a shaky, self-deprecating

smile. “You didn’t even have to say you loved me. I just assumed…” She shook her head. “Such a cliché. Sad little rich girl with daddy issues. A perfect set-up for a man like you.”

The window behind him lit up as lightning split the sky. The sound of the rain intensified and was punctuated by rolling thunder. It took everything she had to hold his gaze, but she was a fucking Hennessy. All those years of verbal and emotional abuse prepared her for James Roth. She would get through this.

“You put thousands of jobs at risk to get revenge on a dead man. Paid millions for a staged wedding to ensure society believes we’re star-crossed lovers, so you could set your plans in motion.” She tilted her head. “When does it end, Roth? How many people have to suffer before you’re satisfied?” Her hands balled into fists at her sides. “How long are you going to punish me?”

CHAPTER 18



He didn’t move or speak. What did she expect? She bowed her head and gathered her strength to walk away. A heavy clack made her lift her head in time to see him set his tumbler on a glass table before he started toward her. Every fiber of her being screamed a warning, but she held her ground. What else could he do to her?

When he loomed over her, she searched his eyes, hoping to see guilt or remorse for the trauma he caused, but there was nothing. Not a flicker of emotion in those black pools that cataloged her every move.

“If business meant as much to me as you think, I would have cut you loose when I lost the Langdon deal.”

She blinked and drew back as she considered his words. “You thought Dad would give in eventually, and you’d be welcomed in his inner circle—"

“If I wanted to marry into a rich, influential family, I could have. I had fathers offer their daughters, but I had no intention of sacrificing my freedom to climb a few rungs on a ladder when hard work would suffice.”

Slowly, she shook her head. “That doesn’t make sense. Then, why…?”

“Think, princess.” He reached out and fingered the ends of her damp hair. “Think real hard.”

She stared at him for a moment before she lashed out, smacking his hand with more force than was necessary before she stepped back. “Didn’t I just tell you to stop feeding me lines? They’re unnecessary! Just give it to me straight!”

“You want it straight.”

The hair on her nape stood up at the silky purr in his voice. He slipped his hands into his pockets, making his shirt gape at the throat.

“I had plans before I met you. Plans to be great, to go further than anyone believed possible for me. I thought that invite from your father was the pinnacle

of my career, the gateway to the top, only to discover he wanted me to jump through hoops before I was allowed entry into his exclusive club. I knew it was a test of some kind and I intended to do what was required to gain entry." Something stark and frightening moved in his eyes. "Then I met you and everything changed."

Her heart thudded in her ears as her mind filled with static.

"Your laugh caught my attention. It did for many. I watched you move through the room. I hoped I would hear your name, so I could understand your place and who you belonged to. Then, you came up to me. You smiled at me and the same feeling I had when I heard you laugh—"

When she turned away, he wrapped his arms around her from behind, pinning her arms to her sides.

"Fuck off, Roth!" she snarled.

"That was the first time you fed me."

She stilled.

"I felt nothing for anyone or anything. There was no reason to alter any goal I set for myself, no reason to change course, but that night…" He buried his face in her hair. "I got a taste of something intangible and so elusive, I knew I would do whatever it took to possess it."

She shook her head in denial because her throat locked.

"I would have made it into your father's good graces. I could have become his right-hand man, I just had to keep my hands off his daughter."

He tightened his hold on her.

"That wasn't going to happen. The small taste I had of you was worth more than anything your father could offer me. I knew you were engaged. I knew I was ruining my chances with your father. I knew what he was capable of. I didn't expect his retribution to be so swift and absolute, but I didn't care because I had what I wanted."

Hope bloomed without her permission, soothing raw wounds and calming her inner turbulence. Could he…? Even as her mind dared to form the words, she vehemently rejected it. Anger scoured everything in its path, including that tiny seed of hope that wanted to take root. She wrenched away from him. The only reason she succeeded was because he wasn't expecting such a violent reaction.

"You're trying to manipulate me!" she bellowed as she backed away from him.

His face smoothed into the stoic lines she knew and loathed so much.

"Am I?"

His cool tone only reinforced her suspicions.

“*Yes*! You’re doing what you always do—making me think you give a shit about me and then…” She punched her fist into her palm hard enough to make her hand ache. “You pull the rug out from under me. In Colorado, I thought we finally had closure, and weeks later, I find out you’re trying to ruin my sisters. You’ve threatened me, called me a whore, let me believe that you were struggling when you had this…” She waved her hand to encompass the penthouse. “And you want me to believe that I was more important to you than your empire? You *left* me…”

She wasn’t aware she clawed at her chest as she unraveled. Luckily, she was still wearing her coat, or she would have left her skin bloody.

“You always have an ulterior motive, some angle you’re working that I never find out about until it’s too late. In Lisbon, you played me for a fool. No more.”

She put a stopper on her rage before it turned into a torrent of tears that would accomplish nothing. She forced herself to focus on more practical matters.

“How did you know Lyle was coming to Lisbon?”

He ambled back to the table to retrieve his drink. “You know the answer to that.”

“You have people watching him.” That was the only explanation, but… “How is that possible? His staff wouldn’t provide that information.”

“Nothing’s impossible when you offer enough money.”

Her nails cut into her palms. “Who else are you monitoring?” When he didn’t answer, she tensed. “My whole family?”

“Everyone has something to hide.”

“My family isn’t hiding anything!”

“Then what’s the harm in surveillance?”

She looked around for something to hit him with before she closed her eyes to rein in her temper. She wouldn’t get anywhere if she let her emotions take over. He was a master at evasion. If he was answering questions, she needed to take advantage and get as much information as possible so she would be prepared in the future. She took a fortifying breath and squared her shoulders.

It went against everything she believed, but she had to ask. “Did you find anything?”

“I thought you said they weren’t hiding anything.”

“What,” she stressed through clenched teeth. “Do. You. Have?”

“Colette lost control of Hennessy & Co two years ago, but refused to admit it until I bought a controlling share.”

The screaming tension in her shoulders lessened slightly. She already knew that. “That’s it?”

“Ariana has a drug addiction.”

Dumbfounded, she stood there, mouth agape. “You’re insane.”

“She’s been abusing prescription drugs for years. She’s been trying to kick her habit, but she relapsed half a dozen times this year.”

There was a buzzing sound in her ears. “I don’t…”

“She schedules her meetings with her counselor and therapist when Rami’s out of town, so I doubt he’s aware.” He paused for a moment before he finished, “And if Colette knew, she would have fired Ariana when it started.”

“You’re lying,” she whispered.

He didn’t try to convince her that he was telling the truth. He just waited. She felt as if she was standing on a rocking boat before she realized she was swaying. She widened her stance and braced before she said, “You can’t have anything on Rami.”

“Rumor has it that he bankrupted his business partner to force him to sign over his share of the company they founded together. When that didn’t work, he blackmailed him.”

“Rami?”

He was unfazed by her incredulous shout and continued, “Those rumors could be discounted if it wasn’t for the money trail he left behind, paying off reporters who investigated his ties to the underworld.”

Her mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water before she whispered, “Rami’s the nicest guy I know. He couldn’t have…”

“Maybe he’s changed,” Roth said in a tone that suggested he didn’t care one way or another. “All I know is, when they call in his debt, your whole family will pay the price.”

It took her exhausted mind a full minute to process what he was saying. “How do you know he hasn’t paid up?”

“I’d know. So would you. He won’t be able to keep this quiet.”

She rubbed her throbbing temples. “Why would he do something so foolish?”

“His ambition overrode common sense. It happens.”

She felt as if he detonated a bomb in her face. He stripped her family to their bare bones and had the nerve to look bored. This couldn’t be true. Ariana addicted to prescription drugs? How could Rami and Colette miss something like that? And Rami… She’d known him for nine years. Her geeky brother-in-law who wore sweater vests with disturbing regularity had ties to the underworld? He was a considerate, thoughtful man who listened to everyone speak before he gave his opinion. It couldn’t be. But, Roth had known about Colette’s troubles long before Dad’s death, which allowed him to gain control of

Hennessy & Co so swiftly. Had he been tracking Ariana's addiction for two years? Why would he…? She pivoted and found he hadn't moved a muscle. As always, she was ten steps behind and in his trap before she realized there was one.

"That's why you weren't worried about my family accepting our marriage. You would have blackmailed them if you had to."

He inclined his head. "I preferred their cooperation, but I had insurance if they decided to fight me."

He didn't gloat, but he should have. He had them by the balls. He had been collecting data on them for years. Had he started this once he was banished from the States, or did he start after she left him? Her heart careened into her throat.

"What do you have on me?"

She didn't know how to interpret his long pause.

"Not as much as I'd like," he said finally.

"What does that mean?"

"It means…" He set his glass down very deliberately on the table before he started toward her. "That after you landed in New York, you disappeared into thin air. Ran to Daddy, did you?"

She crossed her arms over her chest. "I didn't go to him until you refused to sign the divorce papers."

"The private investigators couldn't track you. The only explanation is that your father was covering for you."

"Maybe I'm just damn good at staying hidden when I don't want to be found."

A muscle ticked under his eye. "Where did you go, princess?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"I would."

He stopped before her. Every primitive instinct she possessed warned her to run, but she held her ground. No more running. There was no point in it. If she wanted to get through this year, she had to face him head-on.

"You have your secrets, I'm entitled to mine," she taunted.

"Then you won't have access to the elevator codes or go anywhere without an escort."

He always had a fucking comeback for everything. Well, she had one of her own.

"The only thing you could hold against me are my sex tapes. Did you find any of those?"

Her skin prickled as the air around him went electric.

"Come again?"

She ignored his chilling tone and tossed her hair. “You read the books. You already know about the wild sexcapades that I—"

He grabbed her cheeks, forcing her mouth wide. He ignored the hand that twisted in his shirt, popping off two buttons.

“If your father hadn’t interfered, there would have been no divorce and no other men. It’s a good thing I never discovered where you were. I don’t know what I would have done if I caught you with someone.” Pitiless black eyes raked over her face. “If there is a sex tape, you’ll pay.”

She yanked his hand down. She was too pissed to realize she only accomplished that feat because he allowed it.

“Don’t be stupid.”

“Let’s hope you weren’t,” he murmured. “That fucker’s life will be worth less than nothing if he dared—"

“There *is* no sex tape!” She flexed her jaw and shot him a baleful look as she tipped her nose in the air. “Well, not that I know of, anyway.”

She didn’t notice his hand flexing at his side as she put distance between them. The room seemed smaller now that he was in the middle of it. When she felt she had put enough space between them, she turned to face him.

“What would you have blackmailed me with if I didn’t agree to your sordid deal?”

“Nothing.”

She blinked. “Excuse me?”

“I didn’t have anything on you. If it wasn’t for Sarai giving me your Thalia Crane book, I wouldn’t know what you’ve been up to since you walked out on me.” He gave her a sardonic look. “It seems that I’m your dirty little secret.”

Wasn’t that the fucking truth. “Do you have anything on Kye and Bailey?” she asked sarcastically.

He didn’t skip a beat.

“They run a scam on their tutor. Kye cries so Bailey can grab candy. They split their winnings fifty-fifty.”

A hysterical laugh bubbled up in her throat, but she didn’t let it out because if she started, she wouldn’t stop. “And Lyle?”

His hesitation made her heart beat double time.

“Roth?”

“You can’t handle that one.”

She took a step toward him before she stopped herself. “What the hell are you talking about? I’m handling you, aren’t I? Why would you protect Lyle?”

“It’s not him I’m protecting.”

For a second, she was totally at sea, and then her mouth dropped. “You’re

trying to protect *me*?”

“I always did.”

Something popped in her chest with the same force as a cork from a bottle as her temper erupted. “You have *never* protected me! Not once! You weren’t there when I was shunned by my family. You left me on my own to face society and the day to day without you.” She jabbed her finger at him. “You can’t even protect me from *yourself*!”

“I had to become someone else to get where I am today. I didn’t want you to see that side of me. I gave you the best of me when I visited. You caught me off guard when you came to London. If you hadn’t left so quickly, I would have caught you. I came back within the hour.”

She stared at him for a full minute before she spun away. It didn’t matter that he came back. His confession was five years too late. She shook her head as she paced. He was turning her inside out, but that was nothing new. If he caught her before she left London, could he have convinced her to give him another shot?

She was so in her head, she didn’t realize he moved until she bumped into him. She opened her mouth to let him have it, but resorted to baser instincts and took her frustrations out on him by beating her fists against his chest as everything she was trying to hold in boiled over.

“You’re the worst thing that ever happened to me! I wish I never met you. You ruined my life—and my family’s! If it wasn’t for you, I—”

He grasped her shoulders and gave her a shake to jolt her out of her hysteria. “If it wasn’t for me, your sisters would have lost Hennessy & Co to someone else.”

“You don’t know that! Everything could be different.”

“Or the same. You could still be estranged from your family if you chose yourself and left Ford to become a writer. Same results, but you never would have made up with your father, and you wouldn’t be worth three hundred million.”

“Stop twisting this around! Maybe I would have been happy as his wife.”

“You wouldn’t be.”

Deep down, she knew he was right, but her life wasn’t better for selecting her own path instead of her father’s. She was fucking miserable. As if he could hear her thoughts, his fingers flexed on her.

“There’s no sense debating what could have been. We made our choices. This is where we are now.”

Despair made her voice crack. “But I didn’t know…”

“You did.”

“What?”

“What you identified in Grayson, you saw in me too. You were naive, but you knew what you were doing. You could have turned me down. You didn’t. You wanted me to ruin you, to take what should have been Ford’s. You wanted it dirty and rough, and that’s what I gave you.”

For a moment, she was stunned speechless, and then she stomped his foot with her boot. His face contorted and he staggered back. She tried to put distance between them, but he held on, which got him three kicks to his shin.

“You egotistical, conniving, cold-blooded fuck face—*Oof*.”

Her rant ended on a grunt as he tossed her over his shoulder and strode out of the room.

“You think that if I had an inkling of where this would lead, I would have gone up to you that night? If I had the radar I have now, I would have run in the opposite direction!”

“I never forced you. You could have put a stop to it at any time.”

That truth made her thrash so wildly that he staggered.

“I didn’t know you were a psychopath! You only showed me what you wanted me to see! You had no right to rip my world apart and tear my life to shreds—”

She screamed as he tipped her off his shoulder. She fell through empty air and landed on her back with enough force that she lay there, stunned, for a few seconds.

“Your life wasn’t the only one that was destroyed,” he said as he undid what was left of his shirt buttons. “A decade of work destroyed in a matter of weeks. I had plans—"

“Did I ask you to change your precious plans?” she spat as she sat up in bed. “You should have stayed away from me!”

“No fucking way.”

It wasn’t until he reached for his belt that she registered where they were and what he intended.

“If you think I’m going to let you…”

She didn’t finish. She’d never moved so fast, but it wasn’t enough to evade him. He grabbed her leg and hauled her to the edge of the bed, where he flipped her with the same ease that he would a piece of luggage. Over his manhandling, she reared up to blast him and found her face clasped between two rough palms before his mouth crashed down on hers. She fought him, nails digging into his bare stomach, teeth trying to bite, but he made sure to control her jaw so she couldn’t hurt him and took what he wanted from her.

“Roth!”

Her scream was laced with fury. He raised his head and examined her

flushed face. Bizarrely, he smiled.

“You son of a—"

He stole her curse with another rough kiss before he tipped her head back so she couldn’t avoid his fevered gaze.

“I’ve imagined this for five years.”

His voice reverberated with some emotion she couldn’t define.

“I never knew how or when; I just knew it would have to, by any means necessary.”

“You—"

“Don’t,” he said against her lips. “Let me get this out.”

Dizzy, lips throbbing, and freaked out, she eyed him warily as he straightened. The sides of his shirt flapped open, showing off his abdomen. His belt was undone. So was the top button of his slacks. If she leaned forward…

He cupped her chin, forcing her to meet his unblinking gaze.

“I thought I knew what I wanted out of life, but you changed everything.”

She looked away, but another kiss, this one so tender that her eyes brimmed with tears, forced her gaze back to his.

“You reached out to me, a man who thought he was beyond help. My accomplishments were impressive, but nowhere near your family’s standards. You were brave, artless, and desperate for acceptance. You should have been locked up for safekeeping. Lucky for me, Maximus was careless and arrogant. He thought no one would dare cross him.” He captured a stray tear with his tongue. “Your father wanted you to prove your worth to him, while I would have given all I had to have you as you are. And I did.”

She braced her hand against his stomach and pushed. He didn’t move, but she felt his muscles contract.

“I tried to convince myself it was all in my head, that you couldn’t be as good as I remember, and then I fucked you in Colorado. Nothing compares. Why is that?”

“Stop,” she said as his lips traveled down the line of her throat.

“Stop what?”

She punched his shoulder. “This fucking with my head! I’m not buying it.”

“I was never good with words,” he said philosophically, before he pulled her to her feet. He switched positions with her, sitting on the edge of the bed, and used his grip on her coat to force her to straddle him. “I always thought talking was a waste of time. I prefer action.”

She gasped as he fell back with her on top of him. She tried to roll away, but his hand slid into her hair and held her still as his mouth came back to hers. She tried to wriggle away, but that stinging grip in her hair kept her captive. She

thought about biting the tongue that invaded, but a hand clutched her ass in warning.

"Don't," he said against her lips. "Or I'll make you drink my blood."

He chuckled when she grimaced. She lay on top of him, tense and waiting for him to start undressing her, but he seemed content with their current state. Slowly, the grip in her hair loosened and the hand on her ass began to knead. He kissed her with an absorption that wiped her mind clean. His heartfelt groan made her pussy pulse. Horrified, knowing where this was going, she threw herself to the side in a last-ditch effort to escape, but all it did was make him roll on top of her, so she was truly trapped.

"Roth!"

He slanted his head for a better angle. Despite her hands scrabbling down his sides or the painful yank in his hair, he didn't budge. His kisses remained so drugging that it took significant effort for her to think of anything but him. She had always wanted this from him, but it was too late. He'd gone too far and hurt her too deeply. Did he think stroking her hair or running his fingers down her throat would make a difference? When he sucked her pulse, she stared at the ceiling, willing this to be over so she could be alone, but he was far from done. He grabbed her fist and forced her hand to unfurl so he could twine their fingers together.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"What I want," he said before he continued his assault on her mouth.

His tongue teased. She lay unresponsive, but that didn't deter him. His hands shaped her body through layers of clothing. She hadn't taken off her coat or shoes. Her heel tangled in the sheets as she shifted restlessly beneath him.

"Need something?" he murmured.

She stilled instantly.

He buried his face in her hair, fanned over bedsheets. "I want you."

"I don't want you," she said through clenched teeth.

"No?" He pushed her coat aside to sweep a hand over her breasts and zeroed in on her hard nipple. "What about this?"

She slapped his hand. "I'm cold."

He rocked against her. "And this?"

"Doing just fine," she said through clenched teeth.

"Yeah? I'll have to do something about that."

She heard the warning too late. "No!"

As he moved down her body, she tried to claw her way across the bed. He grabbed hold of her boot and yanked off one and then the other before he launched himself at her. They tussled. She was out for blood. He used her wild

swings to slide her coat off. When she tried to scoot away, he peeled her out of her jeans. Knowing what was coming next, she did a backflip that only true desperation made possible. She tumbled off the bed and hopped to her feet, only to have him grab the back of her sweater and yank her onto his lap. His arms wrapped around her middle before he buried his face against the top of her spine. He shifted, wedging his dick between her ass cheeks. His hands slid beneath her sweater and gripped her breasts. She stared straight ahead as he rocked her on top of him.

"Jasmine."

His voice was thick. She hated her body's response—the rush of liquid between her legs that she was worried he would feel through the thin barrier of her underwear.

One hand dropped between her legs and burrowed, seeking. She tried to keep her thighs together, but when he spread his, hers opened, allowing his hand to bypass her underwear. She gripped his thick wrist as his finger slid deep. Her eyes shut in humiliation as he coated his fingers with her. He rubbed her clit as his other hand gripped her nipple and then released, engulfing her in a wave of heat.

"Let me have you."

She gritted her teeth and hung her head, hands braced on his knees as she fought the tide.

"I'll give it to you any way you want it."

"I *don't* want it," she hissed.

He smeared her over her inner thighs, making a mockery of her denial.

"You say you hate me, but your body, she sings to me."

"She's *sang* for many men," she said bitterly.

His thighs flexed beneath her. His hand, the same one that had been between her legs, came up to her throat, clogging her nostrils with the smell of her own desire.

"I warned you about bringing up other men," he said in a voice so quiet, she stopped breathing to hear him. "Are you trying to piss me off so I'll lose control and take? Is that it?"

"I want you to leave me alone!"

"I've given you space, as much as I can, but you knew this was going to happen. I can't be around you and not have you. Now, how do you want it?"

She tried to keep her breathing even, but that was impossible. Between the grip on her throat, her hormones, and the body poised beneath her that she knew could bring her to mindless ecstasy, she was nearly panting.

"You have ten seconds," he said against her skin.

She made one last ditch effort to escape the inevitable. “I don’t want this!”

“Six seconds.”

Her mind raced through possibilities before she blurted, “Like this.”

His lips skimmed her shoulder. “What do you mean?”

She stared straight ahead. “In this position. Me on your lap.” Facing away from him so she wouldn’t have to look at him.

He was silent for a moment, and then he gripped her sides. “Stand, baby.”

She did as she was told. She kept her back to him as he got to his feet. She heard his zipper and then the swish of fabric as he dropped his slacks. Her heart thudded in her ears as he sat. She couldn’t bring herself to take her place on his lap. He had to gently tug her back until she stood between his spread thighs. His fingers hooked into the waistband of her underwear and dragged them down. She stared straight ahead as he brushed up her sweater and stared at her ass. Goosebumps rose as she waited for whatever came next. He stroked her cheek, gripped deliciously, and then she felt his teeth. Her toes curled at the flash of pain and the soothing lick that followed. It was so fucking quiet. It seemed that even the storm paused to see what he was going to do.

He explored her with a patience that frazzled her nerves. Even when he took her virginity, he hadn’t done this. He lost control and attacked her, not that she minded. She’d reveled in it, but as she stood here now with his hand working her and his mouth doing wicked things, she found herself wishing he would break. Well, she knew how to do that.

She bumped his face away with her ass. When he straightened, she sat. She wasn’t surprised that he gripped her hips, slowing her down so he could guide himself inside her. She paused when she took the head of his dick, but he applied pressure until he was fully sheathed. He let out a long exhale, but made no other moves. He seemed content just to be inside her. She wasn’t. She wanted this over and done with. She swiveled her hips and wasn’t prepared for the arm that snapped around her waist, nearly crushing her.

“Hold on.”

His tone made it clear he was hanging on by a thread. He wouldn’t let her move, but she could do other things. She kept up with her Kegel exercises and if she milked him just right…

He jerked as if he’d been struck by lightning and shot to his feet, gripping her waist as he bent her over and thrust three times before he stopped.

She let out a shriek when he tossed her on the bed. She tried to scramble away, but he pinned her on her back.

“What game are you playing?”

“I’m not playing a game! I want this over with!”

His eyes went glacial. “You don’t always get what you want in life.”

“I never get what I want,” she whispered as he slid back inside her.

“You will.”

She shook her head and jerked as he shifted his position. He wasn’t rushing to climax, but she refused to let him draw this out. She bucked beneath him. He growled in displeasure and told her to knock it off, but it wasn’t long before he was thrusting, control shattered. She spurred him on, watching all gentleness leech from his face as he planted himself so deep that she raked her nails down his back. She hated that even in the throes, he paused to grind against her clit, enticing her to come with him. She clung to despair to dampen her body’s reaction to his, but minute by minute, ecstasy began to beat it back. Her legs hooked around his waist, eyes starting to roll as her body prepared for take off, but he broke first. She took his weight as he came, her name on his lips as he gave himself over to his orgasm.

She stared at the ceiling, covered in sweat, fingers twitching at her sides as she tried to get control of her body. Roth slid to the side so she could breathe easier. She lay there, trembling and in hell. Did he notice that she didn’t come?

“I need to go to the bathroom,” she said.

He didn’t say anything, but when she rolled away, he didn’t stop her. She walked into the bathroom, locked the door, and didn’t bother with the lights since there was a soft glow around the vanity mirrors. She walked into the shower and went on all fours. Her hands went between her legs and sank into her slick pussy. She was sticky and dripping, and that should have been a turn-off, but she got off on it. She wished she didn’t.

Jasmine tried to find some relief, but her narrow fingers weren’t doing it for her. She needed her vibrator. Shit. She surged to her feet and grabbed the shower head with clumsy hands, dropping it before her slippery fingers found purchase. She turned on the water and played with the settings before she found the concentrated blast she needed. With her back against the wall, she squatted in the corner and spread her legs. She grunted as she adjusted the water pressure. She didn’t want to blast her clit off. Shit. She adjusted the shower head and closed her eyes. She wished she didn’t have to work so hard for an orgasm. Men could just whip it out and come in minutes. Women needed the right combination of things… unless it was her magical vibrator that latched on to her clit like a mouth and sent her into orbit in record time. It was at Tuxedo Park. She needed to order another one so she was topped up and she wouldn’t respond to that asshole.

She was so focused on her body that she didn’t hear him come in. When the shower head was ripped from her hands, it startled her into losing her balance

and falling on her ass. She got doused with water before it cut off. She swiped at her face and glared at the hulking mountain who replaced the shower head in its holder.

“I locked the door,” she panted.

“You think I’d let you have locks I can’t override?”

She bared her teeth at him. “What do you want?”

“Is this your new strategy? Deny yourself so you don’t feel guilty about the fact that you want me just as much as I want you?”

She blinked. For a sociopath, he understood her actions better than she did. It had been an instinctive reaction to seize control and make him come quickly. She hadn’t pondered why, but he’d jumped to the correct assumption immediately. Making him lose control and not giving in to her own needs should have made what happened in the room feel like a victory, but once again, Roth turned a win into another loss. Of course, he wouldn’t allow her to claim an orgasm for herself in peace. Anger, shame, and lust tumbled through her as she climbed to her feet. Her soaking sweater hung awkwardly on her. She wasn’t sure why she was still wearing it, but she was grateful since it gave her a modicum of dignity even though he hadn’t turned on the lights.

“If you’re done analyzing me,” she said in frigid tones, “I want to take care of something—"

She was looking at his shadowed face when she should have been watching his hand, which slid between her legs. She leapt back into the corner and realized her mistake when he boxed her in. Blindly, she fought, but froze when he hooked two fingers inside her. Her eyelids fluttered as he filled her the way she desperately needed. He dipped his head, butting his cheek against hers. She turned her face away so she could concentrate on her orgasm and not him, but he wasn’t having it. He gripped her face and took her lips at the same time that he began finger fucking her with such force that her ass bounced against the wall. She groaned into his mouth and spread her legs to give him more access.

When she couldn’t breathe, she tore her mouth from his, and wrapped her arms around his neck as she prepared to succumb to her release.

“Finish me,” she breathed.

He stilled.

“Roth.”

He trailed kisses over her shoulder and then up her neck to her earlobe. She sank her hand into his hair and yanked viciously, forcing his head up.

“Make me come.”

“Say you want me,” he countered.

She used the wall as a springboard and used every ounce of strength she

possessed to shove him. He rocked back just enough for her to slip past. She stalked to the exit, body ablaze with a heady cocktail of raging need and fury. Fuck the orgasm and fuck him. She wasn't going to beg. If this is how it was going to be…

Two hands gripped her waist and hauled her back, knocking her off balance. She thrust her hands out to break her fall, but a bruising grip on her hips didn't let her touch the floor. Bent over, unbalanced, she reached back.

"Let me go, you manipulative cock—"

Her voice died as he entered her from behind with such force that a wheezing sound erupted from her mouth. She would have been embarrassed if she was in her right mind, but Roth didn't allow her to think. He gave her no quarter as he took control, hauling her back with every thrust. Garbled words and broken phrases erupted from her mouth. She was completely helpless and at his mercy. She begged him to stop. He didn't, and deep down where she was honest with herself, she reveled in his possession. *This* was the right recipe for her, a perfect storm. When she started rippling around him, he forced her onto her belly and plowed her into an orgasm so vicious that she tried to get away, fingers and feet scrabbling over slick stone. He kept up the brutal pace until she was sobbing.

When she was limp as a rag doll, he flipped her onto her back. She sprawled in a cold puddle that took her breath away. He spread her trembling thighs and slid inside her again. He felt like a living furnace. She reached for him, desperate for his body warmth so she wouldn't freeze. He blanketed her with his body and tucked his face against hers. He whispered filthy things to her, things they'd done in the past and things he planned for the future. The hard slap of their flesh meeting was punctuated by the swish of water he was fucking her in.

"Roth."

She wasn't sure what she was asking for, but he slowed and nuzzled her.

"I have a lot of sins to answer for, but not this." He lifted her leg so he could sink even deeper. They both moaned in reaction. "This has always been perfect. I thought I had myself under control when I took you for the first time, but that went out the window when you lit up for me. I thought I fucked it up, but you asked for more…" He rocked against her, making her mewl and arch. "I tried to be noble for once in my life and wait a few days, but you wouldn't let me. You couldn't walk the next day, but you didn't regret it. You matched me from the very first. You never backed away, never folded."

He swiveled his hips, making her cry out and mark him with her nails. He hummed in approval.

"I'm not going to let you take this away from us. This…" He kissed the corner of her mouth as she panted. "This fucking gift I didn't deserve and took

for my own before anyone else could. I'm keeping it, keeping you."

He braced his hands on either side of her head as he began to move again. Gently, but with the unforgiving surface beneath her, each thrust hit uncomfortably deep, making her squirm. She saw the flash of white from his smile and knew he was aware of what he was doing. Fucker.

"You want to war, we'll war. You want it to be like before, then that's what you'll get, but I'm done with you denying me my place. I'm your husband, not some fucker you locked eyes with on the dance floor or some sailor looking for a good time."

Two hookups she mentioned in the Thalia Crane series…

"You're mine. Divorcing me doesn't change that. Neither does leaving me or marrying someone else."

He bit her shoulder hard enough to make her thrash.

"If you ever married…" he said harshly, but didn't finish as he pinned her thigh wide and withdrew before he thrust home again with such savagery that she screamed. "Just be glad you didn't."

"Roth, please. I can't…"

His hand went to her clit and rubbed. "Come for me again."

"No! I'm done. Let me—" She reared up as lightning struck. "Roth, *stop*!"

But he didn't stop. She shook her head wildly and felt her hair dragging in the water as he forced her into another orgasm. Her heel skidded over the back of his thigh before she planted her foot on stone and thrust up. He spurred her on until he finally surrendered, flooding her with more come.

She stared up at the shadowy ceiling and listened to the sound of their tortured, ragged breathing. She felt like she had been shipwrecked—drenched, cold, battered, and drowning in less than an inch of water. As the hot rush began to fade, a painful chill took its place. When she began to shiver, Roth reacted immediately. He picked her up and hustled her under the shower. He stripped off her sodden sweater and steadied her with an arm around her waist when her legs gave out. She gasped in protest when he turned the water temperature to scalding. He held her in place, hands moving over her skin to help her circulation.

"It's not too hot. It's just the shock. It'll pass," he said.

She shook her head. It had been nearly two months since she ran from him in that Colorado hospital, and she still hadn't gotten over the shock of having him back in her life. Would she ever find her feet in this relationship, or would she always feel as if he were holding her over the edge of a cliff?

Even after several minutes under the hot water, she couldn't stop shaking. Her body was heating up, but inside, she was in the middle of an arctic storm.

When her teeth began to chatter, he carried her out of the shower. He wrapped her in a black robe, sat her in front of the vanity, and awkwardly tried to dry her hair. It was obvious he had never touched a blow-dryer in his life. She let out a choked laugh, which turned into a hiccupping sob. She wasn't sure whether it was a reaction to their raw union, emotional overload, or despair that pushed her to the breaking point.

Roth tossed the blow-dryer on the vanity and cupped her cheek. "Did I hurt you?"

How could she tell him that he devastated her so badly that she would never be the same? Tears slid down her cheeks before she slumped against him and burst into tears. So much for her being a great actress. Apparently, she could only act for so long before she had a break in character.

Roth muttered something before he picked her up. She didn't care where he was taking her or what else he planned for her. She was so done.

He placed her in bed. She reached for a pillow to smother the pathetic sounds she was making, but wasn't prepared for him to slip in beside her and gather her against him. She pushed against him as she babbled through the tears, but he ignored her bid for space and forced her face against his throat. The sobbing got louder.

She wasn't sure if fifteen minutes passed or an hour, but slowly, the trembling passed and the tears dried up. She was drained and so empty, she felt nothing. She floated on dark waters and tried to block out the man wrapped around her. She was physically and emotionally bound to a man she didn't trust, and who, she suspected, didn't have the emotional capacity to comprehend what he was doing to her. She was in the throes of a despair so deep, she wasn't sure she would ever come out of it. He was right. He matched her in a way no other man could. What did that say about her that she had this connection with a ruthless, cunning man like him?

He tied her to him with bonds of the flesh, knowing she was too inexperienced to hold back and protect herself. How different would her life be if she hadn't known this euphoric rapture existed? If she'd never drank even one sip? She couldn't yearn for something she didn't know. She would have been a good, obedient wife and made her dad proud as a Baldwin. Instead, she was this… She let out a low moan of self-loathing, causing his arms to tighten around her.

"I'm going to make it up to you," he murmured.

His lips brushed her temple when she shook her head.

"I took you, knowing I couldn't give you normal. I thought I could make up for that by being the best." His hand glided down her quivering back. "I wanted

to show Maximus, show you, that I could be at your level. I had one last acquisition before I collected you from Philadelphia to show you what I accomplished."

When she tried to get away, he tipped her onto her back and settled his weight on top of her. She was forced to breathe in his musk and felt his vocal cords ripple against her lips as he spoke.

"The night you arrived, I learned your dad not only stole the acquisition, he undermined three other deals. Every time I came close to reaching my goals, he set me back. I realized it would always be an uphill battle and he would never allow me to get where I wanted to be. Then I find you where you shouldn't be. I'd planned to pick you up in my jet and unveil the penthouse and other properties, but it was all wrong. I let my emotions get the better of me that night. I couldn't snuff out that rage, even for you."

When she didn't speak, he lifted his head.

"Look at me."

When she didn't obey, his hand bunched in her hair and tugged until raw, swollen eyelids lifted. Even though she felt nothing, her eyes watered when she looked at him. He searched her eyes. What he was looking for, she had no clue. She had nothing left to give him.

"Do you believe me?"

She didn't bother to mince words. "No."

His thumb brushed over her sticky cheek. "I'll show you."

"You shouldn't make promises you can't keep," she rasped as her eyelids drooped. "Tomorrow, you'll be back to yourself. Fortified, distant, the perfect tycoon. You'll remember you don't need anyone, you hold all the cards, and you don't bow to anyone."

"You sound certain."

"Experience." Her lips quirked into a humorless smile. "Maybe I'm finally learning."

She heard the rumble of his voice and was distantly aware of his calloused caress, but she was in too much pain to take comfort in either. What he said didn't matter. Tonight, he felt a tad remorseful, but tomorrow, he would revert back to the self-confident man who felt justified in his actions. He would go about his day, making deals, and having Mo and Johan shuffle her from place to place, only remembering her when he wanted sex.

Tonight, he proved just how far he would go to manipulate her. He said things she longed to hear, things that would make most women forgive a man's worst transgressions… but not her. Tonight, he weaseled his way past her guards and burned her defenses to the ground. Tomorrow, she would rebuild. And the

day after that. Every day that she was with him, she would do whatever it took to protect herself. This time, she wouldn’t let him break her into little pieces. Eventually, he would tire of this game, their time would run out, and she would be free.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I hope you enjoyed this portion of Roth and Jasmine's story. I had to break their year of marriage into two parts because documenting just one month of their lives resulted in the longest book I've written thus far! Book 3, tentatively titled, Bitter Confessions, will pick up where this one leaves off. At the moment, I'm committed to publishing the books I've already written, which is why I'll be switching back to the Crime Lord Series and closing Carmen's arc before coming back to the Singed Series and finishing book 3.

This couple… I don't know what to say about Roth and Jasmine. They made my heart race, made me bawl my eyes out, and want to scream at the top of my lungs. They left me so emotionally drained. I don't know how many times I stopped writing and buried my face in my hands, completely overwhelmed by their emotions. I felt like I was writing a human chess match and their ongoing battles had me waving the white flag, begging for intermission.

This book challenged me on every level. The temptation to force the story into a certain avenue for a desired outcome was something I constantly had to suppress. I've mentioned before that the arranged marriage trope is one of my favorites, but no book has managed to capture (to my satisfaction) the emotional and psychological toll that such an arrangement would have on a person who had to play this role day in and day out for an extended period. Of course, I had to up the ante by adding Roth, who is no Prince Charming.

The Singed Series (currently) is a quartet. I'm praying I can contain 11 months into book 3 because I have major plans for book 4. All four books will be from Jasmine's POV. I'm planning to do an extra book from Roth's perspective, a book 5 that won't be necessary for closure from the series. There are a lot of things discussed in the books that, I think, would benefit from his perspective after all is said and done. I actually spent a lot of time bouncing

between his book and Bitter Secrets because I didn't understand his motives. He's so closed off that I have to apply considerable pressure for him to divulge anything. Sigh. He's so… IDK. I've never met another character like him. He gives me high blood pressure.

I'll be documenting my writing progress on my blog, so you can check that out. Also, for an excerpt of book 3, join my email list (https://www.subscribepage.com/bk3excerpt) for access to the link!

I wanted to thank you for your patience and support and for taking a chance on my stories! I can't wait to show you what else is in store for these two.

Sincerely,

Mia

Consider checking out Crime Lord's Captive, book 1 in my mafia romance series. Sneak peek at the back of this book!

BOOKS BY MIA KNIGHT

Crime Lord Series:

Crime Lord's Captive

Recaptured by the Crime Lord

Once A Crime Lord

Awakened by Sin

Crime Lord's Paradise

Singed Series:

Bitter Heat

Bitter Secrets

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wanted to give a shout out to my Super Baddies from Patreon that made this book possible! Special thanks to:

- Amber
- Artemisia
- Bibiana
- Carrie Cross
- Diana C. Cohen
- Hannah
- Jdowns
- MassDeb
- Michelle Stillwell
- Regina Taylor

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mia Knight is the author of the Crime Lord and Singed Series. She writes dark, contemporary romances that make you question your beliefs and leave you feeling drained and emotionally bereft. If you like your men dark with questionable morals and a possessive edge, you may have come to the right place.

When Mia isn't writing, she's on the road in her RV. She loves coffee, daydreaming, road trips to nowhere, and the sound of rain storms. She is constantly shadowed by her dogs who don't judge her when she laughs and cries with the voices in her head. Mia's also a notorious hermit so please be patient if she doesn't get back to you promptly.

Website: https://miaknight.com/
Newsletter: https://www.subscribepage.com/MKNewReleases



SNEAK PEEK

CRIME LORD'S CAPTIVE, BOOK 1

"Do you have to go?" Morgan asked her boyfriend.

Jonathan grinned as he wrapped his arms around her. "Gonna miss me?"

"Yes." She couldn't shake the ball of dread in her stomach.

"I have to travel for work," he said as he stroked her back. "I haven't gone anywhere since you moved in, but I can't put it off any longer. Three months is a long time."

"I know."

He brushed a kiss over her mouth. "I love that you want me here, but I have to go. If we moved to the West Coast, I wouldn't need to travel as much."

Morgan's stomach jittered. "I like it here in Maine."

"Then we'll stay here."

He leaned down and gave her a deep kiss. She clutched handfuls of his jacket to prolong the moment. She didn't realize how much she depended on him until he announced his trip. It was just her luck that her boyfriend was an IT consultant who had to travel for work.

He pulled back, eyes warm. "At least I know you'll be here waiting for me."

She gave him a weak smile. "Yes, I'll be here. Hurry back to me."

He shouldered a laptop bag and pulled up the handle of his small suitcase. He opened the door and paused to look back at her. "You're going to be okay, right?"

He doesn't need this, she thought and felt guilty for making him worry about her. "Yes," she said and tried to sound confident.

He blew her a kiss before he walked out of the apartment. She stared at the closed door for a long minute before she forced herself to get a move on. She could survive a week on her own. She was alone for two years before Jonathan entered her life. Travel was a necessity for him, so she had to learn to deal with

his long absences.

Morgan went through her morning routine as the world slowly began to light up outside her window. She styled her long honey blond hair into a French twist and smoothed a hand over her conservative black skirt and white blouse. She surveyed herself in the mirror and was satisfied with her image. She looked competent and boring and did everything in her power not to draw attention to herself.

Her phone chimed, signaling it was time to leave for work. She grabbed her bag and gave the tidy apartment a cursory glance as she walked out the door. She walked two blocks to the bus stop just in time to see it pull up to the curb. She claimed the seat she always did and scanned the faces on the bus out of habit.

She tried to shake off her unease as she entered the bank and was greeted by her co-workers. *Just another day*, she reassured herself. She put her things in the break room and began her daily routine of setting up her desk and counting her money.

It was an uneventful day, which reassured her that she was overreacting. She was restless and on edge, but a call from Jonathan on her lunch break made her feel better. She had become so attached to him since they started dating a year ago. His easygoing personality was a balm to her uptight one. He made her feel safe and secure. She couldn't wait for him to come home. Before Jonathan entered her life, she had been a nervous wreck. Now, she felt a little more like her old self.

She left the bank at the end of the day, walking briskly as the sun set. She reached the bus stop precisely on time and leaped up the steps with a nod to the driver. Her normal seat was already taken so she settled for an aisle seat and tried to settle her nerves, which were taut now that night had fallen. Jonathan would be back in six days. No big deal.

She hopped off the bus and approached her building, climbing two flights before she reached her apartment. She knew her neighbors by sight but none by name, and that's the way she liked it. She glanced both ways as she unlocked her door and swiftly entered. She knocked the main light switch with her elbow, set her keys and purse on the stand beside the door, and froze.

A man sat on a stool in her kitchen. As she took a step back and slammed into the door, her mouth opened to shout, but the man shook his head in warning. The small gesture made the scream die in her throat. She stared at the man in the black business suit with an awful sense of doom growing in the pit of her stomach. He had merciless black eyes and a scar through his left brow.

"Lyla, come away from the door," Blade said.

Lyla. She hadn't heard that name for three years. Panic grabbed her by the

throat. Her past couldn't be sitting in the apartment she shared with Jonathan.

"It's a good thing your boyfriend is away. I had orders to kill him," Blade said calmly.

She took two unsteady steps forward. "Jonathan has nothing to do with this."

Blade cocked his head to the side. "You think not?"

"I've been gone three years," she rasped. She thought she was safe.

"Yet here I am." He withdrew a phone from his pocket. He swiped his finger over the screen and jerked his head at her. "Come, Lyla, say hi to Gavin."

Nausea churned in her stomach as she watched Blade dial. She was torn between running or snatching the phone to break it into pieces. She did neither. Instead, she watched helplessly with her heart slamming against her ribs. Even though she knew running would be pointless, she reached for the door handle.

Blade's eyes narrowed into slits. "Don't, Lyla."

The threat in his voice made her freeze. She was well acquainted with Blade, Gavin's personal bodyguard. Blade was unflinchingly loyal to Gavin and would carry out any task, legal or illegal.

"Blade, please," she whispered.

He gave her an unreadable look before he focused on the phone in his hand.

"She's here. Come, Lyla, Gavin wants to talk to you," Blade said pleasantly.

Blade turned the phone toward her. Gavin Pyre looked back at her from the screen. He hadn't changed. He wore a deep V-neck shirt that showed off his defined chest. He was otherworldly handsome with shoulder-length black hair and stunning amber eyes. The boyish charm he used to fool everyone into believing he wasn't dangerous was alarmingly absent.

"Lyla."

Her name rolled off his tongue. The sound of that deep voice, the one that haunted her dreams, made her take a step back in self-defense.

"You're more beautiful than I remember," he said softly.

She shook her head wildly. "Please, don't."

"Why, Lyla?"

She shuddered and whispered, "What do you want?" Gavin wouldn't send Blade to track her to Maine after three years for a friendly chat.

"*Why*, Lyla?"

She didn't answer. She couldn't. Three years did nothing to lessen the impact of his presence. She didn't realize she was moving until she hit the kitchen counter.

Blade followed her with the phone. She turned her face to the side to avoid eye contact with Gavin.

"Come back to me, Lyla."

“No,” she choked and glanced at the screen in time to witness Gavin’s expression smooth into unyielding lines. Dread morphed into full-blown terror as she witnessed the change. She knew how ruthless he could be.

“You might find this interesting,” Gavin said coolly as he disappeared off the screen.

Against her will, she eased forward to get a better look while her mind tried to process what she was seeing. A man sat bound to a chair. His face was so swollen and disfigured that she wouldn’t have been able to guess his identity, but she recognized the bloody crucifix around his neck. She clutched the countertop for balance as her head swam.

“What have you done to my father?” she whispered.

“He’s been stealing from me,” Gavin said as he strolled back into her line of sight.

He pulled a gun out of his waistband and pressed it to her father’s temple. Her father came alive, bucking at the ropes, eyes rolling madly. She felt her world tilt sideways as she listened to her father’s stifled screams through the gag.

“Gavin, no!” she cried as she took the phone from Blade who let it go easily enough. She held the phone between shaking hands as she tried to stop him from pulling the trigger with her thoughts.

Gavin raised one brow. “You care if he lives, Lyla?”

“I have money,” she said and tried to keep the phone steady as her hands shook like crazy.

“You have half a million?”

The bottom dropped out of her stomach. “Half a million?” Her father was a fool. She didn’t have more than five thousand in her bank account, and that was because Jonathan didn’t let her pay rent. Maybe she could get a loan—

“Your father knows the consequences of stealing from us,” Gavin said.

Everyone knew not to fuck with the Pyres. The Pyre men weren’t known for being merciful. They were hard, cruel, and calculating.

“What are you willing to do for him?” Gavin asked.

She broke out in a cold sweat. He knew what she would say. “I’ll do anything,” she whispered.

“Blade will bring you to me,” he said.

“Gavin, I can’t—”

“You want your father to live?”

She couldn’t speak, so she nodded.

He lowered the gun and walked toward whoever held his phone. His face filled the screen. Her breath seized. The force of his personality reached through the phone and grabbed her by the throat.

“Didn’t you miss me even a little bit, Lyla?”

Crime Lord’s Captive is permafree on all retailers!