

THE  
ACCIDENTALLY  
SMITTEN  
SERIES

RAILING



THE  
BILLIONAIRE

KEIRA BLACKWOOD

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# RAILING THE BILLIONAIRE

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ACCIDENTALLY  
SMITTEN BOOK 2

KEIRA BLACKWOOD

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Edited by Liza Street

# ONE

LAYANA

Slouched across my new-to-me sofa, I topped my fingers with a fresh round of Bugle hats. With my leg bent just right and my phone perched on my thigh, I could enjoy the latest video of my friend Juno—a.k.a. Glitter Galore—hands-free, while optimally savoring my pre-work snack.

The key to relaxation was ignoring nonsense like *responsibilities*, and also breathing through my mouth, because no matter how many bottles of Febreze I dumped on my Craigslist furniture find, the sofa stank like it had previously belonged to a perpetually wet dog with a penchant for chain smoking.

Try as I might to brainlessly veg out, annoying thoughts kept intruding anyway.

I should have uploaded a new blog post today, or yesterday, or even last week. But I hadn't. I hadn't even started writing one yet.

The post didn't even need to be about anything in particular. Random musings were perfect. I called my blog *Confessions of a Serial Mood Killer* after all. But the longer I went without writing, and the more followers I collected, the harder it was to produce a single word.

Since my short stint on TV, fans were flocking.

Yet the words dried up, or died, or floated away to some unreachable height.

The lack of words felt less like a block in the way people usually described this kind of “writer’s block” thing, and more like slowly being dragged into a dark abyss that devoured all semblance of creative thought.

In contrast to my brain, Juno glided across the kitchen on screen like the culinary goddess that she was. Her powder pink hair swooshed behind her as she unveiled the final product that had been hidden just off camera—a three-foot-tall sparkling heart sculpture made of macarons.

“Ta-da!” Juno flashed a well-practiced smile at the camera. “Post *your* Valentine’s macarons in the comments.”

The gold-leaf sugar cookie in the center of the heart had been my idea. I only wished I’d been there when she’d baked and filmed the final products. I’d helped her dye her hair from white-blond to pastel pink, which was the exact same shade as the fancy cookies. At the same time, she’d dyed the tips of my black hair the color of a mermaid’s tail. I’d also been behind the camera on the first take of the macaron baking, but I hadn’t made the second take.

I’d been at work. Like a chump.

I chomped a Bugle from my pinky finger and checked the clock in the corner of my phone screen. Eight seventeen p.m.

“Hustle, Juno,” I said, as if the recording could hear me.

I only had a few minutes before I had to leave for work and I still wanted to support my girl and participate in the live chat after the video ended. I tapped my shoe-clad feet on the stinky cushion to dispel my eager energy. It didn’t work.

“Now for finishing touches, you can let your creativity run wild.” The camera zoomed in as Juno piped perfect little roses with icing. She meticulously formed every leaf, bud, and bloom. It was stunning, agonizingly slow work.

A *bang* ripped my attention from the video.

Startled, I blinked. Someone in the building had slammed a door.



It was probably the Carlsons downstairs having a spat again, which would be totally fine and not at all alarming. My apartment's walls were so thin, it was impossible not to hear everything that happened in the building's common spaces. Some private spaces, too.

Booming footsteps echoed down the hall—the telltale clomp of doom.

It wasn't the Carlsons.

My stomach dropped.

*He was coming.*

I clicked the lock button on the side of my phone and held my breath. Unease rippled beneath my skin. If this were a fantasy novel, this would be the part where all the villagers ran and hid in their homes as the people-chomping monster descended from his mountain lair in search of his next meal.

*Please let him be someone else's problem this time.*

The stomping grew louder.

No such luck. Maxim Loughy was coming for me, and the absolute worst thing I could do was to let him know I was here.

I dove from the sofa and leapt across the room for the light switch by the door. With a flick, my apartment went black. Somewhere in between, the Bugles had flown from my fingertips. Where they'd landed was impossible to tell.

Shallow breaths left my chest feeling hollow.

*Don't move. Don't make a peep. Maybe he'll think you're not here.*

As silently as possible, I inched my face toward the peep hole.

*Don't do it.*

*Whatever you do, don't look.*

It was an undeniable compulsion. I didn't want a glimpse of the man I knew had to be on the other side of the door, but

for some self-destructive reason, I couldn't stop myself from checking anyway.

Sure enough, my eyeball met the middle-aged fire hydrant of a man I'd expected. Maxim's graying bowl cut partially obscured his squinted eyes. His furry pelt of body pubes protruded from his pits, his shoulders, and the neck of his thin white tank top.

A shiver raced up my spine at the sight of him. Bile crept up my throat.

No one beyond the age of ten was supposed to wear their hair like that. No one of any age was supposed to wear a tank top in the winter. It was almost like he presented himself in the worst way possible because he knew how horrifying a spectacle he was to behold.

Maxim must be a perverse emotional vampire who fed off people's revulsion. It was the only possible explanation.

"Lanana, I know you're in there." Getting my name wrong, *again*, Maxim pounded his meaty fist on the door. His heavy New England accent made every word he ever said sound tinged with anger. "I can hear you breathing."

"No you can't," I whispered under my breath.

"I can hear that, too."

*Frack.*

"You can't keep hidin' from me forever," he said. "Pay up or I'm gonna pawn ya TV."

Joke was on him. I didn't have a TV or anything else worth pawning. Well, I did have a laptop and phone, but I kept those safely attached to me at all times and both were so battered and decrepit that no one would buy them anyway.

With a phlegmy cough, and the clear sound of spitting, Maxim continued, "If that don't cover it, Imma change the locks and throw ya junk out da window."

Okay, *that* would be a problem for me. My shoebox apartment might not have been fit for inhabitants beyond the

mystery creature that chewed its way through the walls at night, but it was *mine*.

“I know you gotta go to work sometime, sweetcheeks,” Maxim said, using the pet name that made me vomit in my mouth a little every time he uttered it. “As soon as you come outta this door, we’re having words and you’re payin’ me what you owe.”

This one-sided conversation was giving me whiplash. But this time, haha, it was me who was coming out on top. I was never going to step through that door. Maxim would be left waiting forever. Eventually he’d move on to torment some other poor soul, or eat some orphan babies, or whatever.

Maxim was right about one thing though. It was time for me to go to work, and I could *not* afford to lose another job.

Fortunately, I’d had the forethought to put on my uniform, my coat, and my shoes before sitting down to watch Juno’s video. If I hadn’t, there was no way I’d be able to find my things in the dark.

I pulled away from the door and crept silently across the tiny apartment toward my only possible way of escape—the window between the mini fridge and the stink sofa. Fortunately for me, I was on the second floor, and only the first-story windows had bars on them.

*Crunch.*

I cringed at the sound of a Bugle smashing under my shoe.

Maxim pounded on the door. “I heard that.”

Of course he did.

I hurried the rest of the way across the room and pried open the window. I snatched my messenger bag from atop the mini fridge as I climbed out onto the ittiest bittiest metal awning.

Icy winter air bit at my skin. I filled my lungs and coated my tongue with it. It tasted like victory. And a little like metal and the garbage-filled dumpster parked on the ground right beside the fire escape ladder.

With a bittersweet laugh and an already cold nose, I zipped up my coat and descended the ladder to face my next trial.

# TWO

LAYANA

Above the café's dangling plastic cloud decorations, fluorescent lights buzzed. Across the room, giant percolators hummed as they brewed fresh batches of coffee. Along the wall behind me, cooling dispensers full of fruity sweet teas babbled as slowly churning blades stirred.

It was a symphony of white noise engineered to ease people into a level of tired contentment that primed them to purchase another dose of caffeine.

When I'd first started working the overnight shift at Eterni-Tea, I'd expected that I'd be paid to tend an empty shop. Those quiet hours would be the perfect opportunity to write.

Instead, on any given night, a surprising number of people came by to enjoy a late-night fix. It turned out that there weren't really fewer customers, just weirder ones. Worse, working overnight had been hell on my social life, and no matter how Herculean my effort, I still couldn't produce a freaking blog post.

A little after midnight, after three hours dealing with a steady stream of customers, I finally got my first lull. I slipped my laptop from my messenger bag and waited for the beast to start up. She clonked and sputtered.

"You can do it," I assured the old girl.

The laptop whirred. The screen lit up.

I gave her a gentle pat and laid my fingers over the keyboard. The smooth surface of the keys felt comforting and

right. I stared at the empty screen, willing the words to flow.

*You can do this. Write something. Anything.*

I tried to let my thoughts flow into inspiration land. When I closed my eyes, the only image I could manage was an unpleasant one.

I saw Maxim standing in the hall, scowling at my door. A growl burst through my lips. My fingers crushed the keys.

Pleased I'd summoned actual words, I leaned forward and read the only sentence on my screen.

Maxim is poop.

UGH. I deflated. What an eloquent, evocative sentiment.

Abandoning my pathetic attempt, I leaned against the back cabinets and opened up my phone. I typed out my reply to Juno's macaron video since I'd missed the live chat and still wanted to show her my support.

Gorgeous! Can't wait to try that raspberry  
vanilla goodness!

I WOULD NOT BE ATTEMPTING to make a heart sculpture of fancy cookies myself, but I'd happily help her eat the cookies she'd made.

With my comment sent, I set my phone on the counter and leaned my head back. The oscillating machine gently pressed into me with a rhythmic thump. The sound and vibration numbed my skull and neck, and with any luck it'd do the same to my brain.

Six months ago, I'd have wanted nothing more than to be living Juno's life. My dream had been to make it onto reality TV, which I'd managed. But even more so, it had been to win the competition. I had thought all I'd have to do was get accepted onto a show, any show, and I'd have the skills and charisma to assure my victory.

But once I was actually cast on *What the What?*, the experience was nothing like I'd expected. Ferocious drive wasn't enough.

Juno won.

Now that it was over, I'd lost the drive that had shot me from the tiny town of Cricket Falls like a jetpack of purpose, dragging my best friend Morgan with me. That sureness that I was exactly where I needed to be, doing exactly what I needed to do, was gone. I could try for another show, but I didn't even want to anymore.

I envied the contentment Juno felt in finding her calling as a food influencer. I also envied the prize money she won on the show. But mostly I envied the fact that she knew exactly what she wanted from life, and she was living it. My best friend Morgan was the same—achieving her dream of becoming a costume designer for the theater big leagues. They were both living their best lives.

As my friends soared to their own personal greatness, they left me behind in this...percolating purgatory.

The door opened.

I mindlessly recited the required script, "Welcome to Eterni-Tea, home to day 'n' night delights. What can I—"

A small, shapeless figure appeared in the doorway wearing pajama pants, socks with sandals, and a hoodie. She pulled the hood's drawstrings so tightly that only her nose and mouth stuck out of the head hole, while also gripping a stack of papers in her hands.

I sighed. Dani—Eterni-Tea's most irregular of regulars—knew the spiel already, so I let it drop and said instead, "It's only you."

"Hi, Layana." Dani loosened the grip on her drawstrings enough that I could see her eyes. "It's me, Dani."

"I know. You're in here all the time."

"I am, yes," she said. "I wasn't sure if you'd recognize me in my red hoodie. Usually I wear my black one."

“You’re...recognizable,” I said. “You want your usual?”

“Oh good.” She hunched her shoulders and shuffled toward the counter, clutching her papers to her chest. “Yes, please.”

I filled a plastic cup with half lemon raspberry sweet tea, half peach basil, and a squirt of goat’s milk. That’s how she asked for it, down to the word *squirt*. I’d replicated her order once to try it myself, and it wasn’t as gross as it sounded, though I wouldn’t drink it again on purpose, either.

I popped on the lid, set a straw on top, and placed the cup on the counter.

Dani assessed me with wide eyes, as if she was expecting something further from me.

“What?” I asked.

“Aren’t you going to write my name on it?”

“Seriously?” I gestured to the empty seating all around us. “It’s just you in here.”

She stared at me, clearly wanting exactly that.

I grabbed a marker, scrawled her name on the cup, nice and big, then cupped my hands together like a megaphone and called out. “Dani? Is there a Dani here?”

She smiled, laid down the cash, and pulled the cup to the edge of the counter. She put the straw through the lid, but she didn’t pick up the cup. Instead, she slid her pile of papers between us. “Even though you haven’t posted anything in a while, you’re still *the best* blogger.”

“If I’m being generous, my most recent posts have been adequate and uninspired.” Plus there was the fact that I hadn’t actually written anything in forever.

“*The Best.*” She sharpened her gaze at me. “Since you’re basically my idol, and you don’t have any other customers, I was hoping you could look at mine.”

“Your what?”

“My blog.” She tapped the papers and took a sip of her tea.



I glanced down. It appeared she had printed out her digital posts.

The word *idol* repeated in my brain, pinging around like my head was a pinball machine. Each ding and bounce struck both a new cord of guilt and acted as a warning. She'd mentioned her blog before, and I'd made the mistake of humoring her and asking a single follow-up question. She'd talked for hours after about model trains, and even tried to follow me home.

After that, I'd made up a brand spanking new life policy and laid it out plainly for her—I never mixed my work life with my outside of work life.

“I can't read this,” I said.

“Of course you can. You have to. *Please?*”

Something about the way her face lined with concern paired with her unsettling half-smile made my conviction waver.

“One page.” I narrowed my eyes at her and sternly said, “Then you go take a table and we go about our separate nights, like strangers, with ne'er a word spoken between us again.”

She nodded emphatically. “Yes. Deal.”

---

*From Sunny to Gordon*

*Choo choo, trainiacs! It's The Conductor of Chaos, jumping tracks with another tale of modeling madness. Today, we'll derail from the usual and take a ludicrously lengthy ride!*

*After reading your letters begging for details, I promised a deeper look at my journey to turn my HO collection into the lively cast of characters from Sodor Island.*

---

“FAN MAIL,” I said. “Sounds like you already have plenty of readers interested in your writing exactly the way it is. You don't need my—”

“Lies.”

“Pardon?”

“It's a lie. No one sends me fan mail or letters of any kind.” Dani pulled her hoodie strings, hiding her face. “Keep

reading.”

---

*I can hear you asking, “Chaos, why the devil would anyone want to do that? The idea blows the steam out of my chimney.” But, why not?*

*Trains are all about imagination.*

*You don’t have to understand. You don’t need a big brain, because you have me, the Conductor of Chaos, to do the thinking for you.*

*In today’s post, I’ll be giving you all the deets on my Southern Pacific GS-4 Daylight 4-8-4 (Sunny)’s transformation into Gordon from Thomas the Tank Engine.*

*Put on your conductor hats!*

*The first thing to know about Sunny is that she’s a powerhouse. She’s red and orange with silver accents, and she’s as majestic as model trains come. Her 4-8-4 configuration makes her the most worthy of any HO scaled model on the market to represent Gordon, the top engine on the Island of Sodor.*

*Making this happen took more than slapping on a layer of paint and a 3D-printed face and calling it a day. No, it was a process that required time, patience, and a healthy dose of chaos. Ready to break it down step-by-step?*

---

LUCKY FOR ME, due to all the pictures, that was the end of the first page.

“So?” Dani asked, one eye peeking from the squished hole in her hoodie. “What do you think?”

Oh I had thoughts. Buzzing, snarky thoughts. I settled on, “Like I told you before, I don’t know anything about trains.”

“You don’t have to know trains to know writing. How is it as a blog piece?”

“There are some tense issues,” I said. “You’re writing after you’ve already changed the train’s name and—”

“Name. Shape. Paint. Form. Personality.”

“Okay...after the entire transformation,” I said. “But you talk about Sunny in the present as if the train’s name is still Sunny. *Is* instead of *was*.”

“Fair.”

“Also,” I said, getting on a roll, “Don’t insult your reader.”

“Insult? No one takes offense to being called a trainiac unless they’re a maniac.” Dani snorted.

“I was talking about...” I pointed to the section in question. “Needing to do the thinking for them. It implies the reader isn’t capable.”

“Oh.” Her voice fell.

“In good news, the train words probably play well with your audience, like when you used *derail*. And as I said, I’m not your target audience.”

“Harsh but fair.” She nodded. “Thank you, stranger. We will exchange no more words.”

She took her things and went to one of the tables. A small part of me wanted to say something else to encourage her, but she seemed perfectly fine and I didn’t want to get trapped into reading or discussing more, so I kept my mouth shut.

Eventually Dani left, and the hours ticked by until my shift ended at five a.m. Exhausted, I was ready to crash. I handed off the keys to Eduardo and gathered up stale baked goods for the weekly donation.

My eyelids were nearly as heavy as the overstuffed load in my arms. I’d been working the night shift at Eterni-Tea for over two months, and my body still hadn’t completely adjusted to the backwards schedule. Every night around two or three a.m. I was struck with a mild case of sleepy delirium.

The winter air would perk me up. If it didn’t, I’d probably wake up face first on the sidewalk somewhere, with pigeons making a nest out of my hair. The squirrels would come and then all the city’s forest creatures would feast on the asphalt-textured bran muffins no human would purposefully consume.

Actually, that didn’t sound all that bad.

I mean, what harm would it do if I lay down right outside the building and took a nap? Just a quick one for a boost of energy that would carry me home? Feeding the wildlife would be a service to the people who would otherwise chip a tooth on those muffins. Taking a sidewalk nap would make me a hero.

I shuffled on wobbly legs toward the door. It was impossible to see over or around the oversized load in my arms.

“Edwardo,” I called. “Can you help me with the door?”

He didn’t respond.

“Edwardo?”

I couldn’t hear him doing anything at all, certainly not coming to my aid. He was probably taking a nap on the toilet at this very moment, lucky duck.

There was only one way I was getting this door open.

I lifted a leg and kicked it Leonidas-style. “Ya!”

“Ungh.” A deep and deeply pained voice responded to my war cry.

I rushed forward through what I knew was a quickly closing door, and I was right, the cold air did perk me up.

As did the startling sight of a seething, snarling man.

The first thing I noticed about him was the murderous look contorting his face. The second was that he was significantly taller than me, which didn’t happen all that often since I was five ten. Third, he was wearing a skin-tight bodysuit that flaunted an action star physique.

I knew him—ish.

I’d seen him before, every night or morning or whatever you call the ungodly hour of five a.m., running down the sidewalk in his yellow and gray spandex. The get-up showed off his ridiculously fit body, and the weirdness of wearing the exact same outfit every day made him seem more like a cartoon character than a real person.

Not to mention the fact that he was out here the same exact time every single day. Sleet could be pummeling down from the sky, and he was here. I’d bet my left shoe that if there was a flaming sharknado barreling down the street, Running Man would be here at five a.m. in yellow and gray spandex, with Olympic-level athletic dedication.

I’d never really gotten a good look at his face before, though I’d definitely appreciated his butt from afar. Up close, aside from the vicious expression on his face, he was

surprisingly hot—like a late-twenties Justin Theroux with that dark beard and wild, bad-boy hair.

My arms were going numb, so I tried to adjust the towering boxes of muffins I was holding. It didn't really help.

Why were we standing here like this when I could be home sleeping? And why was there blood dripping from his nose?

“What's wrong with you?” Running Man gritted out.

“What's wrong with *you*? You're the one with blood on your face.”

“I'm injured because instead of behaving like a rational human, you kicked a door into me.”

Oh. Why hadn't I realized that sooner? Probably the whole sleep zombie thing I had going. I hadn't meant to hurt him, so I felt a little bad about that. Still, getting accidentally bumped with a door wasn't a good enough reason to snarl at someone.

“Well.” I licked my lips. “*You* should have been watching where you're going.”

His eyes went wide.

I should have been angry that he was looking at me like that. Instead, excitement thrummed through my veins. It was definitely the sleep deprivation making my nervous system go haywire.

My shoulders ached and I'd lost all feeling in my hands from clutching the boxes so tight. The smart move would be to apologize and go. But that just wasn't my style.

I said, “If you hadn't been flying down the sidewalk like a freight train in the dead of night—”

He interrupted me through gritted teeth. “It's morning.”

“—bulldozing your way through darkness, *endangering the rest of us*, it would be safe to open doors at a reasonable speed and—”

“You saw me coming, decided you didn't approve of my pace, and *purposefully* kicked the door into me?”

He thought *I* was the psychopath? Fine, let him.

“If I did, it was a public service.” With that, I twisted on my heel and stalked off, my whole body buzzing with the thrill of what had just happened. I could feel him seething behind me, feel his hatred searing into my back as he watched me walk away.

This was what I’d been missing—fire, *feeling*.

I *hated* Running Man.

This was the passion I’d been searching for, the ignition I needed to spark my creativity. I dropped off the muffins and raced home. Finally, the words flowed.

# THREE

GABRIEL

The tranquil white light and gentle technological hum of my private lab's equipment centered me. Here, the world and all of its little annoyances faded away. I was currently twenty-two days into the latest trial, and had refined the trial's tasks into the optimal routine.

I carefully extracted a sample of pale green fluid from a flask and pipetted a droplet onto the slide. I added the coverslip and positioned the slide under the microscope.

A sharp ringing cut through the quiet—my phone.

Only two numbers were left unsilenced once I entered the lab, and both Oma and Esme knew better than to call during work hours.

It had to be an emergency.

As quickly as possible, I removed my gloves, scrubbed to my elbows, and answered, catching that it was my baby sister's name on the screen as I lifted the phone to my ear.

"Esme." My throat tightened, making it hard to speak. "What's the matter?"

"Hey, Gabe," she said over a cacophony of rambunctious voices roaring in the background. "Why does something have to be the matter for me to check in on my favorite big bro?"

There was no panic in her voice, no urgency. She wasn't in any immediate danger. A touch of relief loosened the knot in my chest. "Favorite brother? I'm your only brother."

“Doesn’t make it any less true. How are you?”

*I’m uncharacteristically agitated, and have been all morning.*

“Everything here is fine,” I said. “Oma is well.”

Esme had left the states a few months ago to “spread her wings in sunshine,” which had apparently meant traipsing across the Caribbean with no plans in place. Her departure had been sudden, and she hadn’t returned for the holidays, which had disappointed our grandmother, Oma. I worried Esme’s free-spirited nature would lead her into trouble now, as it had so many times before.

“Why are you calling?” I asked. “Do you need money?”

“Psh, what? Why am I calling? I *told you* I wanted to see how you are.”

“If that were the only reason, you wouldn’t have called me during work hours.”

She made a hissing sound. “I forgot the time difference. Sorry.”

Depending on where she was in the Caribbean, there was either one hour time difference, or none at all. Either way, she knew I’d be at work.

“But for the record, it’s always work hours for you,” she said. “If I waited until you were done, I’d be eighty.”

A small pinching sensation formed in the center of my forehead. I waited a moment before repeating my question. “Do you need money?”

“No. I’m good. I just...I really wanted to hear your voice.”

Something was definitely bothering her.

“I can have a car wherever you are shortly,” I said. “Take you to the airport, have you on a flight home within hours.”

“Gabe, I’m fine. Really. Try not to work too hard, all right? I gotta go.”

“Take care of yo—”



“Byeeeeee.” She hung up.

As per usual after speaking with my sister, I felt like a piñata at the end of a child’s birthday party. My jaw ached, my head pounded, and a faint ringing sounded in my ears.

I tried not to worry about whatever it was Esme had gotten herself into. She was a grown woman, if only barely. She could take care of herself. I hoped.

The pulsing of my head returned my thoughts to the woman from this morning, to the way she’d unapologetically admitted to hitting me with a door on purpose. What kind of person could possibly believe that was acceptable behavior? A terrible one. She’d acted as if *I* was the one in the wrong.

I found my knuckles white, clenching my phone.

Notifications of missed texts from my friend Jasper filled the screen. Whatever he wanted could wait until my day concluded.

I took a breath, listened to the hum of the centrifuge and sonicator, and composed myself. I put on my gloves and returned to my task.

Through the microscope lens, I scanned the indistinct matter until I found the outline of cells. The sample appeared much the same as it had yesterday, stubbornly inert.

I turned to my notebook and flipped through the most recent pages. The nitrogen levels were more than adequate, and I’d already adjusted pH to maximize enzyme function. What was I missing?

I lost myself in thought and testing as I tried to unravel the solution that remained just outside my reach.

Eventually, my internal clock alerted me to the time a moment before the alarm on my watch went off. I scrubbed my hands and arms to my elbows, then clicked the silence button on the side of the watch and exited my lab.

I pulled a reusable water bottle and my metal lunch box from the mini fridge. On my desk, I arranged a fork atop a

folded napkin to the right of the box and the water bottle two inches to the left and two back.

With everything in place, I lifted the lid.

Inside the box each chef-crafted item waited perfectly in its own compartment—salmon and smashed avocado on multigrain bread, sweet potato and butternut squash salad with roasted tomatoes, and raspberries.

I ate each item in order, just as I did every day—sandwich, vegetables, fruit.

Before I could clean up, a short and decisive knock came from my office door.

I clenched my jaw and checked my watch. Pamela was seven minutes early to our meeting.

I ignored her knocking until I had finished clearing my desk.

Still five minutes before she was supposed to arrive, I said, “Enter.”

Pamela shut the door behind her and strode straight toward my desk. She took the seat across from me without waiting for me to offer.

Her thirty-year record of successful consulting in corporate mergers like the one I was currently pursuing was why I’d reached out for an interview. Her balance of dignified professionalism and unflinching forthrightness was why I’d hired her.

“You’re early,” I said.

Her gaze snapped to my swollen nose and she clenched her jaw in disapproval. “Were you involved in a physical altercation?”

“Of course not.”

“I wasn’t under the impression that you were the type to be involved in fist fights. If that’s the case—”

“I was not involved in a fight.”

She raised a brow.

“It was an accident,” I said, though I wasn’t convinced that was true. The barista who’d assaulted me was positively rabid.

“You *accidentally* walked into someone’s fist?”

A twinge of pain formed between my eyes. Its echo pulsed through my temples. “A woman hit me with a door. It’s nothing.”

Except it wasn’t nothing. The woman had disrupted my routine and left me rattled. As a result, my concentration throughout the morning had been suboptimal. My research required better.

The tension in Pamela’s expression eased, though the stiffness in her posture remained. She always looked like that. “I hope you’ve spoken to legal. Filed a report.”

“It’s nothing,” I repeated, with a bite of sharp finality.

She waited a moment but pressed no further. “As to why I’m here, my preliminary research is complete, and the results are not ideal. Biotabloom Dynamics is excited about the algae you’re creating. But they’re likely to have concerns.”

“Calling the complex microorganism I’m engineering an ‘algae’ is a gross oversimplification.”

The look she gave me made it clear my point was detracting from the one she was attempting to make.

I readjusted my narrative. “Potential hesitation on Biotabloom Dynamics’s part is why I hired you. Determine any potential issues before they arise and remedy them.”

“One major issue is readily apparent.” She turned her iPad screen so I could see. “It’s you.”

She flipped through article after article. Every headline was a variation of the same—I was an unfeeling recluse, a robot or alien failing at my attempts to pass as human.

“The work we’re doing here at Terraroot Labs is revolutionary,” I said. “The last eukaryotic organism we engineered reduced the waste volume stored outside of

Epiphany by eighteen-point-seven percent.” I could do better. I was working on a more efficient model.

“No one is questioning that, but it’ll take more than good products to make certain this merger happens. Being proactive is our best option.”

“Then do more. Make the company more human—whatever that means. There are other humans in the building to focus your efforts on besides me.”

“*You are* Terraroot Labs. You need to convince the world you’re not a robot. That you care.”

Her words were a dagger stabbed and twisted into the gut. I cared more than I could succinctly express. It was my mission to clear the excess waste not only in our city, but to reach a larger swath of the country. Doing so meant everything to me.

I tried to swallow the lump in my throat. “How do you expect me to do that?”

“Our meeting is set for February fourteenth. Before then, it’s going to take a lot of work. But you need to be open to it.”

“I already work late into the night, often six or seven days a week.”

“That’s part of the problem. You’re hiding in your lab too much. You need to work on yourself. On appearances.”

I wasn’t hiding. I was working.

It was my policy to always cover every angle. *I* was the angle I had missed.

A palpable sense of foreboding hung in the air as I waited for what Pamela would say next.

“Paparazzi could capture pictures of you out on a date,” she suggested.

Invisible weight pressed down on my chest. “I don’t have time to date.”

“The relationship only has to appear real. Actors and musicians stage connections all the time for publicity. It’s

common practice. Consider it a business meeting, and therefore a critical function of your job.”

Her suggestion felt like a targeted and personal assault, plucked straight out of my nightmares. A crowd of photographers flashing lights in my face as I feigned a romantic connection with a complete stranger—I couldn’t do it.

Pamela sucked in a sharp breath. “Think about it.”

Until a resolution was reached, I doubted I’d be able to think about anything else.

# FOUR

## LAYANA

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*The moment the calendar declared Thanksgiving as done as Grandma's burnt turkey carcass, Mother Nature went on a rampage that completely upended autumn tranquility. She set the wind to howling, the clouds to churning, and the temperature to ten below whatever temperature gives yetis hypothermia.*

*Maybe she got fed up with the South's typically mild winters. Maybe someone chucked that turkey carcass at her head instead of the trash can. Either way, she's Mother-plucking Nature, and it's her right to torture the world with a dystopian arctic hellscape.*

*Bundled safe from the elements in my fortress of blankets and hot cocoa, I tip my hat to her and apply another layer of thermal underwear. But that refuge is only an illusion.*

*Enter Maximum Disgust.*

*He lurks in the coldest corners, hidden in shadow, arms bare to the elements. Come hail, sleet, or frozen tundra, Maximum Disgust throws sanity into the frosty gale and sweaters into the garbage. The mere sight of him is enough to make Jack Frost, the yeti, and your grandma shudder.*

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An unabashed cackle bubbled through my torso and up into my shoulders.

I'd struggled to sleep after my altercation with Running Man. It probably had nothing to do with him—because why would I still be thinking about that jerk anyway—and everything to do with the fact that rest was near impossible to achieve with the stink sofa doubling as my bed.

But the insomnia was doing things to me—making me wilder and more reckless than usual, at least in my writing. I'd never blogged about something so personal before.

During tonight's pleasantly uneventful shift behind the counter at Eterni-Tea, I'd written a solid four paragraphs—more words than I'd managed in the past five weeks total. It was an ode—no, not ode. It was a scathing dismantling of my greatest foe Maxim Loughy.

Sure, there was some unintentional repetition in there—grandmas and garbage. Plus, I started with a mention of Thanksgiving, which hadn't been a smart starting point for months. *But I'd written words.*

I smeared the last of my gross bran muffin in the puddle of syrup on my plate and popped the “food” into my mouth. Edwardo had only made bran muffins yesterday, no cinnamon or fruit-filled goodness, no danishes or cookies.

As he walked through the door signaling it was my time for quits, I asked, “Are you trying to kill me?”

He spared me a glance and headed into the back.

“Edwardo,” I called after him, adding a flare of sternness. “Are. You. Trying. *To. Kill. Me?*”

“What are you on about?”

“You know the bran muffins are basically suet bricks fit only for squirrels, right?”

He tilted his chin and sniffed at me. “You seem to like them okay.”

Did he...was he smelling the bran on me?

I snapped, “No I don't. And don't smell people. It's gross.”

“I didn't have to smell you. There are crumbs on your collar.”

So he was smelling me for fun. *Weirdo.* I wiped my collar without looking down to check. “Make something good today or I'll be forced to take drastic measures.”

I didn't have any particular retribution in mind at the moment, but I was sure I could think of something.

“Bran muffins *are* good,” he said.

A yawn erupted from my face. The awake-at-night sleep fog was starting to hit, later than usual which was nice. But I really needed to crash.

“No. Bran muffins are the opposite of good.” I did the my-eyes-to-glaring-and-pointing-at-him gesture to make sure he knew I was serious. Then I cleaned up my dish, grabbed my belongings, handed the keys off to Edwardo, and stepped outside into the dark and quiet morning.

My skin prickled in a wave up my neck like I was being watched. I glanced in the direction Running Man always came, but he wasn't there. No one was. Good. It was probably just the cold.

I headed down the sidewalk. I made it half a block before I heard footsteps. My heartbeat picked up. I checked the reflection in the next window to see if I was being followed.

I was.

“Holy Funyuns, are you Layana from that show?” an enthusiastic voice said from behind me.

I smiled my friendliest smile, pretended I wasn't absolutely exhausted to the point of hallucination, and turned around. “Yes, hi.”

I found a short woman standing there with globe eyes and the kind of smile that made my own smile turn genuine. She squealed and shook her hands in front of her, before diving at me and squeezing me.

I'd stopped being startled by uninvited physical contact from random strangers about a month after *What the What?* had ended. I gave her a pat on the shoulder and pulled away.

“You were my favorite,” she said. “*Are* my favorite. You should have won the whole thing. Glitter Galore was so fake.”

I'd heard this a billion times, too. “Actually, Glitter's a lovely person, and a good friend. I'm over the moon for her.”

“Oh.”

I nodded.



“Well, I still think you should have won,” she said.

“Thank you.”

She stared at me, visibly trembling with excitement, and clearly at a loss for words.

“Would you like a selfie?” I asked.

“Of you? *Yes.*” She fumbled to pull her phone from her pocket, and aimed the camera at me.

I sidled up next to her, tilting my hips and chin for a good angle.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” she said as the flash blinded us both.

“It’s nice to meet you...” I waited for her to offer her name.

“Sarah.”

“Sarah,” I repeated. “Tag me on Socialface when you post, all right?”

She nodded emphatically.

I gave her a small wave and turned to go. As I did, I caught a streak of gray and yellow from the corner of my eye. I centered my attention fully on Running Man as he zoomed past under the street lamps, using the sidewalk on the other side of the street.

It seemed he didn’t want a repeat of our last encounter, either. Perfect. That’s exactly how I wanted it. Detesting him as a person didn’t stop me from taking a moment to appreciate his toned calves, his thick thighs, or the delectable shape of his tight butt before continuing on my way.

Back at my apartment building, I slipped into the alley and around back. With a massive yawn and a roll of my shoulders, I flipped on my phone flashlight. I stopped beneath the awning outside my second-story window.

My tired brain wasn’t moving at top speed, but it was working well enough to realize something was off. It still took me a full two minutes to figure out what that something was.

Duh. The fixed metal ladder wasn't where it was supposed to be. Had it...broken? It wasn't even all that rusty.

I scanned the area in case it had somehow fallen.

It wasn't on the ground. It wasn't anywhere. It was simply gone.

The only thing in the alley beside a couple of crumpled boxes and a spilled bag of trash was the dumpster. Could the ladder be in there? I was ninety percent sure it was too big for that. For the extra ten percent of certainty, I took a quick peek inside. I found a gag-worthy stench, but no ladder.

Confusion sharpened into anger.

*Maxim* had removed the ladder to thwart me.

I wouldn't let him win. No, I would thwart his thwarting.

There was only one course of action to take. I held my breath and climbed onto the lid of the dumpster. I reached for the awning, careful not to lose my footing.

I was about five feet off the ground, but the metal awning outside my window was still almost another me in height from my head, at least three feet from my grasp.

I whispered an angry curse in *Maxim's* name, and debated the pros and cons of jumping for it.

Best case scenario—I reached the edge of the awning, was able to get a good grip on it, and somehow managed the Herculean arm strength required to pull myself all the way up. Worst case scenario—I missed completely, fell to the ground, and broke my face. Most likely, what would actually happen was somewhere in between.

I was tired of thinking about it, and also just tired.

So, without further ado, I slipped my phone into my pocket, bent my knees for maximum spring action, and went for it.

An ear-smacking *crack* echoed across the alley as I lifted off the dumpster's thick plastic lid and bounded into the air. I couldn't focus on the lid I'd probably just broken, or the fact

that I couldn't see much without my flashlight. I could only focus on reaching the awning, on grabbing tight, and on making it into my apartment.

My fingers never met metal.

They only found air.

And then I was falling.

Dread struck, hard and fast.

My feet hit awkwardly on the broken dumpster lid, and my legs split in different directions. I flailed my arms for something to grab onto, as I fell lopsidedly down into crunchy bags of trash.

The stink was a billion times worse inside the dumpster than it had been outside of it. The sour tang of curdled milk danced with a dense fog of decomposition, took a twirl with Pepé Le Pew, and ended on a rancid kiss of mold-aged meat.

My arm caught on something sharp, and my side felt cold with sticky wetness. Everything hurt, so I wasn't sure if any of it was serious. I held my breath and tried to pretend I had the situation under control.

Even so, worry crept its way in.

Had I gotten impaled in the ribs? That would really suck. I couldn't exactly afford a trip to the ER for stitches.

I wrangled my phone from my pocket and shined the light on my maybe-wound. My white coat had a large hole and was soaked with red. My shirt beneath it was also red. That was always a bad sign. I slowly lifted the fabric...and found my skin completely unscathed.

*Whew.*

I shimmied my way out of the trash, and seriously debated going through the front door of the building. I was so close to my apartment I could almost feel the rough cushions of my stink sofa on my face and the warm embrace of my fuzzy blanket.

But I couldn't give Maxim the satisfaction of seeing me like this.

I couldn't let him catch me.

I refused to lose.

So, I ambled my way, sore and stiff, toward the subway entrance with another plan in mind. I'd come back better prepared next time. I'd come back with a ladder of my own, one he couldn't steal while I was at work, a secret ladder for ultimate victory.

I hobbled down the steps, into the harsh light of the station, and waited for the train.

It didn't take too long before it arrived.

The train car was busy with normal people in their normal suits on their normal schedule of going to work in the morning. I found a spot and sank down on the seat. I received more than a few concerned and skeptical glances. I didn't care. I closed my eyes and waited for the train to take me to the swankier end of the city.

Soon, I'd make it to my best friend Morgan's and borrow a shower, some fresh clothes, and a place to sleep. Then, after I woke up refreshed and stink-free, we'd figure this thing out together.

Knowing this, I felt better already.

"Layana," a familiar voice said.

My heart sank.

I'd been wrong about the worst case scenario of the whole dumpster jump—it wasn't breaking my head on concrete. It was this—riding the subway while looking like one of the cannibals from *The Hills Have Eyes*, and worst of all, running into Dani.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, as she moved from her seat across the aisle and sat beside me.

"I'm taking a ride on the metro," she said, drawing the strings of her black hoodie so hard she made the face hole of

her hoodie look like a butthole.

Why did I even bother speaking to her? I should have pretended I had headphones in and couldn't hear her.

"What are *you* doing here?" she asked. "Shouldn't you be at home sleeping?"

"I should. I should be sleeping right now on my stink sofa with my soft blanket and dreaming of sugarplums, but *Maxim freaking Loughty* ruined it. Now I'm an overtired dumpster gremlin and I'm here. With you."

We were gathering attention, blatant stares. I was too tired to care.

"You have ketchup on your coat."

"Thank you for pointing that out, Dani," I snapped.

She licked her lips. "Are you a fan of classic cinema?"

"If you're telling me I belong in *Psycho*, I already know," I said. "I don't need to look in the mirror to know I look—and smell—disturbingly deranged."

"No. I'm suggesting a little criss-cross."

"You do your cross-stitch, and I'll do my own thing."

She loosened the hole in her hoodie so I could see only her mouth, with the weirdest smile filling the space.

"There's no motive, and plenty of chances for an alibi with a little criss-cross," she said. "No one can trace it. Wouldn't it be nice if this Maxim fellow was off your back?"

"It'd be nice if he flew into the sun and exploded," I said. "But wishes don't make reality."

"What if they did?"

I blinked at her. "You don't secretly work for a dark web version of NASA, do you, Dani? Because if so, you've been holding out on me. And for the record, *I don't actually condone murder.*"

"Of course not."

I didn't know what part she was talking about—of course she didn't work for dark web NASA or of course she knew I wasn't cool with murder—but the doors to the train opened. My tired brain was starting to hurt, which was a common occurrence when I was around Dani.

“This is me,” I said, rising to my feet. “And this has been weird. Peace.”

“Gabriel Stryker,” she called after me, but I was already done listening to her nonsense.

I walked to Morgan's place.

When she saw me, she let me right in, set me up with a shower and a place to sleep without question, and I crashed.

# FIVE

GABRIEL

As I stepped across the threshold from my personal lab into my office, the lunch alarm on my watch went off. I silenced it and proceeded to pull a reusable bottle of water and my metal lunch box from the mini fridge.

Ever since yesterday's post-lunch meeting, I'd been distracted. I didn't care if people thought I was a robot. It had been a common refrain ever since I was a child, and preferable to the alternate pejoratives thrown at me.

If anything, metallic thick skin was a boon I'd crafted for myself. First it was an illusion, and then that illusion became reality.

Yet, Pamela's warnings had taken up far more of my mental energy than I'd have liked. Business was meant to happen during business hours. Lab time was meant for actual work. The carryover left me uncharacteristically bothered.

It wasn't only the threat to the merger that had me off kilter, either. That woman, Layana, according to the fan who'd assailed her this morning, slowly gnawed a hole in my equilibrium. Her fiery cobalt eyes burned white-hot through my thoughts. Her defiance distracted me as thoroughly as the turquoise ends of her raven-black hair.

The more I attempted to put her out of my mind, the more deeply she set root, and the more space she consumed. I still couldn't fathom what possibly could have compelled her to assault me and claim it was a public service.

My jaw was clenched so tightly it made my entire head throb.

Routine maintained order amidst chaos. Following my routine would sooth my irritation.

My phone dinged. The text had to be from Esme, since Oma refused to participate in that particular flavor of technology. I forced a slow, even breath, and slipped the phone from my pocket.

There were several unanswered messages, including one from Esme—a photograph of a sunset over the water. I debated the appropriate response to a photograph of scenery, and settled on a thumbs up.

With that done, I switched my attention to the texts I had intended to read but failed to acknowledge yesterday. Jasper would understand. After fifteen years of friendship, he had more patience with me than most people did.

Jasper: What are the chances you're free this weekend?

ZERO.

Jasper: A friend of mine is lending me his beach house Friday night. You should come. We can get back Sunday morning, plenty of time to rest up before your early morning on Monday.

I PLANNED to work on Friday night. Saturday as well.

Jasper: It's been forever. Would be good to see you.

I FROWNED DOWN at my phone. It had been a long time, so long I wasn't sure when we'd last socialized. As a rule, I tried to socialize as little as possible.

Me: I can't. But if you're back in Epiphany on Sunday, I'll be completing odd jobs at Oma's.



Me: Would be good to see you, too.

I RETURNED my attention to the task at hand—my midday meal. Everything in my lunch had its place as well—fork on napkin to the right, water bottle to the left.

I reached for the box's lid.

A rapping came from my door. No one was supposed to be here during my lunch break. If the cause wasn't a catastrophic emergency, the interrupter deserved to be fired.

I folded my hands at the edge of the desk. "Enter."

Pamela stepped into the room and shut the door behind her. Her pinstripe blazer and severe bun matched both the sharpness of her umber gaze and my mood. Whatever news she intended to deliver was sure to further agitate me.

Upon crossing the room, she didn't bother to sit this time, instead choosing to linger behind the chair opposite mine with her iPad clutched to her chest.

"Pertinent intelligence has come to light," she said.

She might as well have said nothing at all, given the lack of information in her words.

"Get on with it," I said.

"Biotabloom Dynamics is considering pulling out *before* the meeting."

I was supposed to have until February fourteenth to win them over. The potential hiccups for this deal were supposed to remain potential.

"What changed?" I asked.

"Unclear."

"They didn't offer a reason?" My pulse picked up. I *needed* this merger to happen. Biotabloom Dynamics had contracts with international governments. They were my best chance of getting my carbon-reducing eukaryotic organisms into landfills around the globe. I took a breath. "They're taking this from me and offering nothing in explanation?"

“It’s in discussion. The decision has not been finalized.”

*In discussion*—as in Biotabloom Dynamics was considering this course of action privately amongst themselves and Pamela had somehow intercepted that intelligence.

“So there’s still time to act,” I said, only half in question.

“Yes. The marketing team is already working on the company image through a campaign about the Terraroot Labs’ human factor. As I mentioned yesterday though, the problem is you. We need to create the false impression that you’re personable and approachable, a trustworthy face for the planet’s savior. Stat. I’ve done the preliminary work to set up interviews, but we’ll need a coach.”

I wasn’t interested in being the face of anything. That was a part of why this merger was so important. But Pamela’s method was wrong.

“No interviews.” I’d done them before, with extensive coaching. Interviews were the fuel that had flamed the robot narrative across the internet. “Send someone personable to them. Face-to-face reassurance is key.”

“Sure,” she said. “But we need another element. Interviews can....”

Inspiration struck, and I knew exactly what I needed. “We’re going to follow the marketing team’s lead.”

“How so?”

“I’m going to hire a beloved social media personality to convince the internet that I am not a robot.”

“You’ve decided to try my dating suggestion?”

“No.” A shiver carried up my spine at her reminder. “Nothing romantic.”

Pamela furrowed her brows ever so slightly. “That could work...*if* we find the right person. Without an established relationship, it’ll be difficult to make a connection, and more importantly, know who to trust.”

We needed someone close by. Someone with an unforgettable presence.

“I’ll handle it,” I said. “You’re dismissed.”

Pamela shot me one final look of concern before leaving me to my thoughts, and to my lunch.

I ate my sandwich, vegetables, then fruit, while scrolling through the internet to find *her*—the woman from the tea shop whose path I crossed every morning on my four-mile run, the one people stopped in the street to take photos with, the one who could flip her demeanor like a flick of a switch when she needed to.

I found her easily.

Layana Hartley—reality show sweetheart, night shift barista, unstable menace to society. That last bit was my opinion alone. I skimmed article after article proving no matter how atrocious her behavior, public perception remained positive.

Our first interaction had been a train wreck. We’d spoken very few words to each other, none of them kind. But I knew in my gut, she was perfect for this. When I felt this certain about anything, I was never wrong.

# SIX

LAYANA

The key to being a badass was restorative sleep. Give me a solid seven hours. Without that sleep, I was just a bad ass. Two words. Given Morgan's guest room was sorely lacking blackout curtains, the clock on the nightstand said two p.m., and I felt like I hadn't slept a wink, I was very likely going to spend the next twenty-four hours as the latter version of myself.

Warm, roasty scents filled the air—someone was brewing coffee, and that seductive aroma called to me like a siren's song. Also, I'd had to pee for at least two hours. It was becoming abundantly clear the Sandman wasn't magically coming to whisk me off to dreamland any time soon. So, I finally relented and sat up.

A wave of dizziness rushed through my head from the motion. My eyelids blinked out of unison, and the world took on a swirly, dreamy quality.

Slow and steady.

I dragged my sleep-deprived feet in a zombie shuffle toward the bathroom. A rat's nest of hair pulled at my scalp. Cold, wet slobber lingered on my cheek. Given the slobber, I must have drifted off for a little while at some point, even if I didn't feel like I had.

The sight of my reflection in the mirror would be enough to make grown men weep in fear. Perfect. Let the outside reflect the inside.

After a relieving pee, and a fresh scrub of my hands and face in the sink, I followed the unignorable allure of freshly brewing coffee down the hall. I spotted my coat hanging from a closet door on the way, cleaner than it had been since it was new. The hole was sewn up so perfectly I could hardly tell it had been damaged.

My bestie was too good to me. I kept shuffling toward the kitchen.

“Good afternoon,” Morgan said from the sofa where she was curled up with a book and a steamy cup of comfort. Her cable-knit sweater, leggings, and fluffy socks made her look particularly cozy.

I grunted.

“There’s a fresh pot if you want some coffee,” she said.

I helped myself and returned to the living room to sit with her on the sofa. Her sofa didn’t stink like wet dogs and cigarettes or have a rough, crusty exterior. It was soft and smelled like fresh linen. Ah, Morgan really was living the life.

Her copper hair caught the natural light coming in from the expansive windows, making the strands sparkle like they were truly metallic. She set down her book—some kind of theater thing based on the red curtains on the cover—and the mug on a coaster on the coffee table. She leaned toward me and waited patiently with rapt attention while I gulped down my searing liquid energy.

When the fuzz in my brain cleared enough for me to explain my five-thirty in the morning appearance on her doorstep, I said, “Maxim.”

She kept staring, waiting for more words perhaps. But I was pretty sure the one word summed my whole problem up nicely.

“You’re having landlord troubles again?” she asked.

I grunted and nodded.

“Why don’t I get you a second cup? Then we can talk with entire sentences instead of caveman jargon.”

I grunted my approval.

She took the cup, returned with more sweet nectar of alertness, and said, “I love your hair, by the way. That blue is perfect with your eyes.”

I made a contented sound of thanks and gulped more coffee.

Finally, after devouring another six or so ounces, I said, “Thank you for fixing my coat.”

“Any time. Was the damage landlord related?”

“Yes-ish. Maxim attempted an ambush and failed. So he’s resorted to extraordinarily evil means to thwart me.”

Morgan chewed her bottom lip. “He’s watching your apartment door, waiting to confront you in the hall and demand rent money. And after he realized you’d been using the fire escape to avoid him, he removed the ladder.”

“*Exactly.*” She was a freaking mind reader. Thank goodness. It was our lifelong bestie connection at work is what it was, and I was grateful for it. The fact that I’d grumbled out a few words like “ladder” and “dumpster” before showering and crashing had probably helped, too.

“First, that’s got to be illegal. Fire escapes are there for emergencies, and taking yours is definitely going to be a violation that could cost him big. You can mention legal action to help get the ladder reinstalled.”

I snorted. “I don’t have money for rent. He’s going to know I don’t have money for a lawyer.”

“But *I* do. I could help you with—”

I waved a hand in her face. “Nope. No. Don’t even.”

“For the record, you can stay with me and Oscar as long as you want,” Morgan said. “And I’m sure Juno would welcome you back if you wanted to room with her again. *Not that I’m pushing.* Your...plan is perfectly valid, and I’m all for supporting you in it.” Morgan offered me a warm smile.

We both knew I had no plan.

I nodded my acknowledgement of her words. “It’s too hard to be at Juno’s place with her schedule and mine clashing. It’s too noisy with her filming while I need to sleep. Plus the rent is bananas. And not the tasty kind.”

Morgan chewed on her lip instead of saying whatever it was she wanted to say. Eventually, she said it anyway. “What good is having everything work out for me if I can’t use my good fortune to help my best friend?”

Which was kinda fair. She’d landed her dream job. She was marrying a billionaire. The pittance I needed for my rent was nothing to her.

It wasn’t nothing to me.

“When I hit rock bottom, and my pride is broken, and I’m willing to accept help from anyone, you know you’ll be my first call,” I said. “But that’s not where I am. Plus, if I pay Maxim now, he wins. What kind of lesson does that teach him? That his nasty behavior gets the results he wants? No. I’m in this to win this. My way. And Maxim Loughty is going down.”

Morgan’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “Tell me how I can help.”

“Drive me to the hardware store,” I said.

She popped up from the sofa and grabbed her keys. “On it. But you might want to get dressed first. And brush your hair. And your teeth. I love you but your mouth smells like hot garbage.”

I grunted my agreement.

# SEVEN

GABRIEL

After hours of frustratingly unfruitful work in the lab, I shifted gears and followed an avenue of research I had never personally tried before—watching reality television. I analyzed every clip of Layana Hartley from *What the What?* I could find, and acquired enough data to know everything I needed to know about her, including the situation I was walking into.

Or at least, I thought I did as I walked down Papaya Street toward the address I'd found online for her at six-thirty that evening. But then I noticed the bars on the windows, the intense stares cast in my direction, and most strangely—the maniacal laughter.

I followed the sound of laughter around the apartment building where Layana supposedly lived.

And then I saw her sitting on a second-story fire escape looking like a marshmallow in a puffy white coat. She wore her long hair pulled up in a ponytail, blue ends hanging over her shoulder. It was then I realized that watching videos of her did nothing to prepare me for the gut reaction I felt to seeing her in person. My chest clenched. She was a splash of orange juice on freshly brushed teeth.

She was doing something with her hands...and laughing like a hyena with a grudge.

Perhaps Layana had an unhinged twin, and this twin would direct me to the perfectly sane reality television star I was searching for. Unfortunately, the thought was utterly



ridiculous. A lump formed in my throat. For the first time since settling on this course of action, my conviction wavered.

Swallowing past the lump in my throat, I said, “Layana Hartley?”

She snapped her attention to me. Her eyes appeared sunken in dark circles, giving her balanced face a haunted quality. Not an ounce of the enthusiastic woman from television remained in the feral beast before me.

“Running Man?” she asked. “It *is* you. Your yellow and gray spandex get-up makes you look like an aging bumblebee.”

Why insult the running gear I wasn’t currently wearing? I gritted my teeth. “Bees don’t lose color with age. Only the *Andrena cineraria*, or Danubian miners, have gray coloring instead of black.”

She just blinked at me. “What do you want, Bee Man?”

Apparently I’d been demoted from Running Man to Bee Man.

“Did I not hit you hard enough the last time?” she asked. “Need your nose broken instead of bruised?”

She wasn’t orange juice on a minty tongue. She was lemon squeezed into an open wound. And she hadn’t only bruised my nose. She’d made it bleed as well.

“I come with a proposal,” I said.

She snorted. “You want to *marry* me? I swear, nothing good comes from being on TV. First it was the unsolicited dick pics, now this?”

Her words struck like a slap. “I would never send photographs—”

“Not *your* dick. Other dicks.”

Where was this coming from? “I would never send you photographs of other men’s genitalia, either.”

“Good to know. For the record, I meant other men sent me pictures. While you upped the creep factor and *followed me*

*home.*”

What sort of alternate reality was this woman living in? “I didn’t follow you. I acquired your address from the internet so I could speak with you, and I did *not* intend a marriage proposal.”

“Cool story, bro. I’m busy. You should go.”

My jaw clenched harder, stabbing a sharp pain through my temples. Perhaps I should have waited to contact her at her place of business instead of at her home.

I was here because I was desperate. But it was clearly a mistake to come, and it was a greater mistake to believe there was even a chance that she could be the answer to my problems.

She was impossible. There was no way this was going to work. How could I have believed such a horrible, hostile person could possibly help me in any way?

She shot up to her feet and lifted a wrench victoriously in her fist. A rope ladder unfurled from the ledge, the end reaching the ground.

The temporary ladder wasn’t to code. It wasn’t adequate.

“A permanent ladder is legally required on buildings such as this,” I said. “For safety.”

“Tell that to that squash head, Maxim.” She started down the ladder. “He thinks he can mess with me and I’ll fold. But I won’t. Not ever.”

I shouldn’t allow myself to be drawn into her drama. I should stay focused on my proposition. Yet...I couldn’t help but wonder, “Who is Maxim?”

She didn’t answer. When she reached the bottom of the ladder, she peered up at her handiwork with a glimmer of satisfaction in her eye. Then she grabbed the ladder and threw it toward the platform above. It didn’t reach, not by a long shot, and fell back down.

“Would you like some assistance?” I asked.

“Ha. *No.*”

She pulled what appeared to be a metal tube with a plastic shark’s head on it from the messenger bag that crossed her puffy coat. She pushed a button, and the shark’s jaw opened and chomped down on the rope. She pulled on the shark, extending the metal cylinder into a fifteen-foot-long pole. Then she used the extended grabber to place the end of the rope on the second-story platform.

With a satisfied grin, she said, “Take that, *Maxim.*”

Again I wondered who this Maxim person was, but more importantly, what could possibly be going through Layana’s head. I would never claim to be good at reading people, but this woman was so far from the realm of my understanding I couldn’t fathom the distance.

She released the rope and retracted her pole so it was only a foot in length.

“Don’t come back. This is a definitive rejection. I will never marry you. Understand and vamoose.” She made the little shark head snap an inch from my nose to punctuate her point. Then she strode past me and walked away.

Mildly infuriated and utterly flummoxed, I yelled after her, “It was meant to be *a job proposal.*”

# EIGHT

LAYANA

The ice-cold metal slats of the park's bench dug into my tailbone, but I didn't care. The streetlamp above me combatted the quickly disappearing sunlight. I still had almost an hour before I had to walk the rest of the way to work, and words were flowing.

I picked up right where I'd left off on the blog post that was going to set my life back on track. My fingers delightfully clacked across my shoddy keyboard.

---

*Wearing frostbite as a badge of honor, he shouts, "Layers are for lasagnas!"*

*Perhaps the curly black hair coating his skin like moldy moss protects him well enough from the elements. More likely, he's about to wish he'd stocked up on vitamin C instead of sleeveless undershirts.*

*That's right, proudly sporting goosebumps as if they're this season's hottest trend, Maximum Disgust wears tank tops no matter the weather.*

*As a general sentiment, I'm all for defiance of norms.*

*Defy expectations.*

*You do you.*

*Go forth and transform yourself into a human popsicle. But if you're going to refuse manscaping, actual clothing, and common sense, don't expect the rest of us to willingly make eye contact.*

---

I LEANED BACK and stared at my work. I'd done it. I'd actually completed a blog post for the first time in what felt like forever.

I put together some accompanying photos, ran through a few edits, and clicked post.

Satisfaction washed over me.

This was the moment everything turned around for me. This was when my sense of purpose renewed, and I was certain I'd write every day from this moment forward.

---

THREE DAYS of the usual routine ensued, with Morgan calling to check in on me.

Three days of enthusiastic comments poured in.

Three days passed without me writing a single word.

What was wrong with me? Had my Tragic Tank Topper blog post siphoned every ounce of creativity out of me and left me abandoned in the desolate wasteland of writer's block? I felt hollow. Uninspired.

Gripping fear crept up the back of my throat. *What if I could never write again?*

"Here we go." Chester slid a tray of shots onto our usual small standing table.

Pulled from my thoughts, I smiled my thanks and threw back a shot.

After moving to Epiphany with my bestie, we'd met Juno and Chester on *What the What?* Our friendship was forged in fire, and no matter what path we each took from here, we'd be forever bonded.

Six months ago, we'd hung out every day. Now, waiting three weeks for a night out at Pour Decisions had felt like an eternity. The floor was sticky, the speakers cracked with too-loud music, and the beer was cheap. Basically, it was perfect. And being here with Morgan, Juno, and Chester felt awesome.

I needed to stay focused on the present, or else I'd miss out.

"Are we filming tomorrow, Glitter?" Chester asked.

"Don't call me that when we're here," she whisper-yelled.

"Are we filming tomorrow, *Juno?*" Chester asked.

A pleased smile crossed Juno's face. "Yes."

Chester very well knew she didn't like to be called Glitter in the real world, only when she was filming in her influencer groove. She still added a lot of glitter to her face though, no matter the occasion.

Sometimes I couldn't tell with Chester if this kind of slip-up was an accident or if he was hoping someone at the bar would recognize her, and by association, him. The way he was glancing around the crowd with a hopeful smile suggested the latter.

Morgan ignored the shots and took a sip of the beer she'd been nursing. "How is the social thing going, Juno?"

"She's a *food influencer*," Chester said.

Morgan shot him the side-eye, as she so often did.

"It's good but exhausting," Juno said. "There's this pressure to always be creating and posting. I'm working on trying out longer videos so I don't have to post every day."

"*Every day?*" Morgan asked.

Juno nodded. "If you're not fresh in people's minds, it's like you don't exist at all."

Morgan crinkled her face. "That sucks."

It did suck. It sucked hard. And not in the good way, either.

If I couldn't write, at some point people would stop checking in on my blog to see if I'd written a new post. At some point Eterni-Tea would become my eternity.

Sourness swirled in my gut.

The sound of a text dinged on my phone. I checked, and it was from a number I didn't recognize. That was usually not good. Still, curious, I checked it.

???: Send feet pics.

I BLOCKED the number and put it out of my head. That certainly wasn't the worst of what I'd been sent. Every one of

my crew had received weird “gifts,” messages, and calls. It was best to ignore them. Or, if you were Chester, collect them.

“What about you, Layana?” Juno asked. “Do you get a lot of downtime working night shifts?”

“Sometimes,” I said. “The time switch is still disorienting. My body just does not want to sleep during the day.”

She nodded. “Makes sense. But you’re getting in some writing time now, right? I saw your blog the other day. The one on the yeti man. It was hilarious. I loved it!”

I loved it. Based on the blog comments, everyone and their momma loved it. *And every one of them couldn’t wait until I posted again.*

I told Juno, “Thanks.”

My phone rang in my pocket. I pulled it out to check and see who was calling.

It was Eterni-Tea.

A small flash of panic struck me. Did I get my schedule wrong? Was I actually supposed to work tonight? I ignored the call and checked my calendar app just to be sure.

No, this was my night off, and Edwardo had no reason to call.

Except instead of leaving me alone, he called again.

And again.

Conversations carried, but I lost the threads. Eventually, Chester pulled Juno to the dance floor.

I threw back another shot.

Voicemails came in and finally texts.

“Everything okay?” Morgan asked.

“Mmhmm,” I said.

She narrowed her golden-brown eyes in that way that told me she didn’t believe me.

“You mentioned you installed your ladder without issue, right?” she asked.

“I did. And it’s perfection.”

“Did something else happen with Maxim that you haven’t told me?”

I shook my head.

“Then what’s wrong?”

“Just your everyday existential quarter-life crisis,” I said. It was a mistake to admit that out loud, though, so I quickly changed the subject. “Running Man showed up at my apartment and it’s got me all bothered.”

“Running Man as in the guy who runs by Eterni-Tea every day before the sun comes up?”

“Yep.”

“How does he know where you live?”

“I don’t know. He’s probably a stalker. He asked me to marry him.”

“*What?*”

“Or if I wanted a job or something. But that part could definitely be a lie, just to cover his tracks after I rejected him.”

“You’re not making any sense. Start at the beginning. When did he show up on your doorstep? What exactly did he say?”

A text dinged in my pocket.

Then another.

And another.

I ignored them and focused on Morgan.

Hmm. What exactly *had* Running Man said? “He didn’t come to my doorstep. He caught me in the alley, installing my new ladder.”

“Wasn’t this like—” She wrinkled up her face and glanced to the side for a moment as she calculated the time. “Three



days ago?”

“Yep.”

Her brows shot up to her hairline. “Why am I only hearing about this now?”

“It’s not important, so I practically forgot about the whole thing.” Except I hadn’t forgotten. Running Man had taken over far more of my brain space than he deserved.

Morgan flattened her lips into a line. “You didn’t forget.”

“Eh,” I said. My best friend knew me too well. “Anyway, he assailed me in the alley by saying something about an indecent proposal. I don’t know.”

“So it *was* a sex thing?”

I shrugged. “Maybe? But then that makes the whole job side of it even more offensive.”

*“He thinks you’re a prostitute?”*

“Maybe he wants to Pretty Woman me. Or murder me. I don’t know. I left.”

Morgan looked full-on panicked. I hadn’t meant to scare her. I was basically talking myself through it and processing as I went. It would help a lot if I had a filter, but we both knew I didn’t.

“I’m not telling this right. It’s fine, I promise,” I said. “He’s not a murderer. And he won’t come back.”

“How can you know that?”

I shrugged. “He’s not scary, just...infuriating.”

She hummed, a soft, almost inaudible sound of skepticism.

“Really, he didn’t seem to get that it would be inappropriate to show up where I live to talk to me. Like when I told him he was being creepy, he looked genuinely confused and maybe even remorseful? I don’t know. When I see him I just want to smack him in the face, so it’s hard to analyze these things with a level head.”

“You want to hit him in the face...like when you kicked the door into him.”

Why was I saying all of this so wrong? I sighed. “I didn’t *mean* to hit him. How was I supposed to know he was there? And then he goes and acts like I would do that on purpose. Ugh. He’s the worst, Morgan.”

“You *call me* if he shows up at your place again.”

“He won’t. I haven’t seen him in days. I’m worried he might have changed his running route because of me.”

“How would that be a *bad* thing?”

“Because I can’t imagine smacking that tight butt as he runs by,” I said with a forced chuckle. *And I’m starting to worry that bickering with him lit a fire in me, that it inspired me to write, and now if I don’t see him again, it could be gone.*

I kept that part to myself.

I couldn’t say it. I didn’t even want to *think* it.

My phone rang again. This time I answered. “*What?*”

Morgan sipped her beer and watched me with concerned interest.

“Layana, you have to come in tonight.” Edwardo said. “Brandon called out.”

“No.”

“Are you sick, too?”

“No, I’m out living my life. On my day off where I’m not interested in thinking about tea or coffee or dirt muffins.”

“You’re not sick. You need to do it,” Edwardo said with a finality that flamed the frustrated fire inside of me.

“Or what?”

A tiny spark of delight formed in my chest. This was exactly what I needed. Let him make his threats, let him see what happens.

Morgan started shaking her head and widened her eyes at me. She mouthed *no* over and over again.

“Or I hire someone else who will appreciate the opportunity,” Edwardo said. “Someone who will be grateful for—”

“Here’s what you do....” I started. The best feeling in the world was doing exactly what I wanted, exactly when I wanted to do it. It was a total thrill. This was the feeling I got when I was around Running Man, and I could replicate it right now without being anywhere near him. This was how I’d get my writing mojo back.

“Hang up,” Morgan said through gritted teeth. “Don’t do it. *Layana, do not quit your job.*”

I calmly told Edwardo, “Take your threats, write them down on a napkin, crumple them up and shove them up your nose,” I said. And it felt amazing. “I qu—.”

Morgan snatched the phone right out of my hands and hung up.

My words hung in the air, unfinished. The moment was lost.

My jaw dropped. “Hey.”

“You almost quit your job.” Morgan shook my shoulders. “What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking that I’d get another drink and bask in the glow of freedom. But *you* stole my phone and ruined my plan.”

She kept holding onto me, her expression morphing from concern to a full-out grimace. “You said you’re having a crisis.”

Right, that. I’d hoped she’d missed that bit.

If there was one person in the whole world I could share my damage with, it was Morgan. I needed to suck it up and spill.

I said, “I’m afraid I won’t be able to write anymore. And I don’t want to be a reality TV person. And I’ve...I’ve lost my way.”

The concern on her face transformed to something akin to pity. I realized then that this, right here, was why I'd held back.

"You'll be able to write." She pulled me into a hug. "You are the most amazing person, Lay. You're going to figure it out. And you just tell me what you need from me and I'm here."

I liked the hug. I liked when we were celebrating better though. I didn't want to wallow.

"This is nice," I told her. "I need another drink."

Morgan gave me one last squeeze, then abandoned her beer and took a shot. After another drink and a lap around the dance floor, I felt a little better.

Many drinks and a few hours later, I'd forgotten what worries were. When it was time to go, I didn't want the night to end.

I took a rideshare home.

Climbing a rope ladder under the influence of too much alcohol was maybe not my smartest move ever, but I made it up and into my apartment without falling, so I called that a win.

In the dark, I crossed toward the door to flip on the lights when I heard a noise—a crinkle.

Was it my drunken imagination?

Another crinkle.

*It was real.*

Panic sucked the air from my lungs like a vacuum cleaner.

Someone else was here, in my apartment, lurking in the darkness. Maybe I'd been wrong about Running Man leaving me alone. Or maybe this intruder was someone altogether new, a fanatic who imagined a relationship after seeing me on TV.

My pulse took off like a Red Bull-fueled hummingbird.

I slowly reached into my pocket and threaded my keys through my knuckles. My fingers were trembling. But, if the intruder was planning on touching me, they'd get their eyes stabbed out.

“Money. Now.”

My heart just about jumped out of my throat.

I recognized that voice. It belonged to Maxim freaking Loughy.

He wasn't waiting for me in the hall. He was waiting for me here, in my personal space.

He flipped on the little lamp by the stink sofa, where he was making himself at home with his feet on my pillow and his hand shoved deep into my bag of Bugles. This couldn't be happening.

“What are you doing inside my apartment?” My rough voice sounded strange in my ears, like it belonged to someone else.

“Waiting for my money.” He rose to his feet and stalked toward me.

The room seemed to both sharpen and blur. I needed to get out, to hurry back through the window to freedom. Instead, my whole body felt as slow and heavy as if it were filled with lead.

Head spinning, I backed into the mini fridge, dug my hand through my pocket, and pulled what little cash I had in my wallet and held it out.

Whatever strength I'd felt in the way I'd handled the Maxim situation, whatever bravery I'd summoned, it was gone on an exhale.

Maxim snatched the cash and headed for the door. He left me with an empty wallet, a pounding heart, and a gross feeling of violation. No way would I be able to sleep tonight.

# NINE

LAYANA

I woke on the floor with my right arm numb, my neck craned, and my brain flush with fuzzy regret. At some point after I'd barricaded the door with my dresser, I must have dozed off. Fortunately, I'd had the forethought to bring a pillow with me. Unfortunately, I'd apparently kicked it away while I was sleeping.

I'd purposefully left the blackout curtains open for nature to act as my alarm clock. Bright, afternoon-level sunlight poured in through the window, suggesting I'd been asleep for a good while. Retribution required rest, so yay for small victories.

I rolled my shoulders and lifted myself to my feet.

I never should have given Maxim my cash. What kind of monster invaded the private, safe space of a single woman living alone? Waiting in the dark, in what was essentially my bed, eating my Bugles?

Bile rose up my throat.

I didn't even know how much money I'd given him. Was it enough for my rent? Too much?

There was nothing but my dresser to stop him from trying this stunt again. And I wasn't sure if the dresser was heavy enough to do the job. Maxim was a big guy.

I quickly showered and dressed, then grabbed an old bran muffin and a Mountain Dew from the fridge. Not even the harsh chemical goodness of my favorite pee-colored soda

could make the muffin taste like anything but dirt on my tongue. Still, a girl couldn't properly reap her revenge on an empty stomach.

I pushed the stink sofa across the small space, wedging it against the dresser, thoroughly blockading the door. Then I checked the alley for creepers before heading out. The last thing I needed was to run into Maxim again before I was ready.

My first stop had to be the hardware store, with home security being my number one priority. I called Morgan on the way. If I didn't share the implied physical threat I'd faced last night, she'd kill me.

"Heya, bestie," she answered on the first ring. "How are you feeling after last night? Not too hungover I hope."

"Hungover? No," I said. I'd never felt more sober.

"What's wrong?" Concern raised her voice an octave. "You sound...more murderous than usual."

"Don't freak out, but when I got home last night, someone was in my apartment."

"*Running Man* came back? Are you all right? Why didn't you call me right away? You should have come over. You should—"

"No, no. Not him. Like I told you last night, *Running Man* isn't a creeper. It was Maxim."

"Your landlord broke into your apartment?"

*Broke* was probably not the right word, since the dude had keys. "He was waiting for me where I sleep. Eating my Bugles."

"Eww. You really should go to the cops, Lay. And stay with me and Oscar. I can probably sneak out of work early and—"

"No. You stay. I'm good. I'm going to the hardware store for extra precautions. I'm going to *Home Alone* the bananas out of my place, and if he even steps foot in my apartment again, he's going to regret it."

The voices in the background on Morgan's end grew louder. Someone called her name. She was at the theater, and had other duties to deal with besides being my bestie.

"I don't like this," she said.

"Well, I love it. I *will* win. You're busy. You should get back to work."

"There's no winning and losing, Lay. And if there was, I'd say going to the police would assure Maxim loses."

Maybe she was right about the last bit, and I'd still consider it, but for now I had something else in mind.

"Promise me you'll be safe," Morgan said.

"I'll be just fine," I said. "I promise."

She seemed somewhat mollified as we said our goodbyes and we both got back to work.

I picked up my supplies at the local hardware store using my credit card, confident they were worth every borrowed penny. Then I returned to my apartment. There was a gift bag outside my door. Chances were good that it was something weird and inappropriate from a game show fan. I peeked inside and found a lock of hair. That immediately went in the trash.

Then I installed my new home security system—several types of locks including chains and hooks and a bolt thingy to the front door, thumbtacks on the floor, and one of those old school bars that were supposed to stop people from stealing cars on the window.

For personal protection, I had a brand-new canister of bear spray tucked away in my messenger bag. The best defense was a solid, eye-searing offense.

Content that my maximum level security would thwart any further invasions from Maxim freaking Loughty, I got to work on stage two of my plan to right my life—acquire writing inspiration.

If Running Man could hunt me down via internet search, maybe I could do the same to him. I stared at my screen and



debated what to search.

*Runner in Epiphany, NC.*

I found a bunch of marathon images, and some ads for booty shorts, but no pictures of the dude I was searching for. Next, I tried variations of the same search including *running man* and *bee man*.

*Bee man* produced some pretty bizarre results. There was a middle-aged guy in a furry black and yellow costume, including headband antennae and a frilly tutu. He winked at the camera with his butt straight up in the air, in a downward facing dog pose. Scrawled across the wall behind him were the words *Bee Yourself Yoga*. Another dude wore a beard of bees, and nothing else. And then, I found a picture of my *What the What?* buddy Chester wearing head-to-toe body paint and yellow underpants, while flashing a furious expression and holding a sign that read *Honey is Murder*.

I would never be able to unsee that, no matter how hard I scrubbed my eyeballs. And also, I was pretty sure that producing honey did not kill bees.

Pretending I hadn't been scarred for life, I moved on. I tried *most frustrating man in Epiphany* next, and I was starting to think I didn't know enough—basically anything—about Running Man to succeed.

Then, thumbs hovering over my phone screen, I debated trying something different, a long shot for sure.

*Sexiest man in Epiphany.*

Aesthetically, objectively, Running Man was physically attractive. But *sexiest man*? It felt ridiculous to type the words given the dude's personality eclipsed any positive qualities.

Amongst a page of scorching hotties, my eyeballs magnetically snapped to a photo of a man in a swanky suit. *Him*.

Apparently Running Man owned more than the one outfit I'd seen him wear. As frustrating as it was, he rocked formal wear as well as he rocked spandex.

It was impossible not to appreciate his bone structure. It was impossible not to appreciate that lush head of chestnut-brown hair and the delicious way his suit formed over his athletic physique. He was stunning, even with his expression completely blank.

But there was something off about him in every single pic.

Not a single image captured him in a meaningful way. I wasn't sure how else to explain it. He was physically, beautifully framed in every single picture, but his dark eyes looked dead and flat.

It was as if he'd been cloned, and this soulless copy was going through the motions of his life without feeling.

When I switched from images to articles, the headlines were worse.

*Is this Billionaire Genius a Robot? Or is he Simply the Most Boring Person on the Planet?* First, Running Man was definitely not boring. Infuriating, self-deluded, puffed-up snarl-a-saurus? Sure. Boring? Never. And second, *billionaire?* I kept flipping through article after article.

*This Billionaire Scientist Proves Money Can't Buy Emotional Intelligence.*

*Is Dullness Contagious? Our Exclusive Interview with the World's Least Interesting Billionaire.*

I was offended on his behalf, and I loathed the man.

*Scientist Discovers Secret to Invisibility. He Still Can't Find a Personality.*

I clicked on the last article and scanned the text. It turned out Running Man's name was Gabriel Stryker, which sounded vaguely familiar to me for some reason. And sadly, he had *not* actually discovered the secret to invisibility. Instead, his work involved science stuff with moss or something. It was incredibly difficult to read through his responses to softball questions. If speech could be dense, Gabriel's words were slabs of granite.

I closed the incomprehensible article and kept scrolling.

Ooh, a video.

The camera panned over a pretty woman in a red dress sitting across from Gabriel, who wore an expensive looking suit. His hair was perfectly in place and his face had a lifeless quality, similar to the pics. He sat so straight, he could have had a metal pole for a spine.

“So I know we’re here to discuss your work on—” The interviewer furrowed her brows as she looked at the cue card in her hand. “*Algae?*”

“Eukaryotic organisms,” he said in a completely flat tone.

“Sure.” The woman smiled tightly. Then she leaned closer to him. “But first, you’re gorgeous and rich, and we’re all dying to know if there’s a woman in your life.”

Given her assumptions, I couldn’t blame her for asking. She hadn’t seen his dark side yet.

Gabriel didn’t respond to her question, not with words or body language or any anything. I don’t know what I expected—a hint of a smile, a self-depreciating chuckle? He didn’t flinch or speak or breathe.

Silence.

The interviewer uncomfortably adjusted in her seat.

Finally, Gabriel said in an unaffected tone, “There is nothing about my personal life on the approved question list.”

Ouch. That was pretty much the worst non-answer possible. He wasn’t giving the interviewer anything to work with.

I watched a few more moments of awkwardness before scrolling down to the comments. There were lots of “does not compute” and variations of “sad such hotness is wasted on a robot.” The most eloquent said, “A beautiful android with no free will, only his programming to guide his decisions. What a pity.”

The pity wasn’t that Gabriel was a robot. It was a pity the world saw him that way.

He was probably just bad at interviews. Maybe he was actually camera shy and that's what gave everyone the impression that he had no personality.

He had plenty of fire. And that's exactly what I needed from him—a fight that would catch me in the flames and leave me roaring with inspiration to write.

Maybe this situation wasn't a pity at all. Maybe it was an opportunity that I could somehow seize, even if I didn't know how yet. The starter beans of a beautiful scheme were already brewing in my head.

I closed the video and looked for where I could find him.

I couldn't find a home address. If I had and then subsequently showed up on his doorstep, I would be doing exactly the same thing I'd called him out for. I happily took his business address and maintained my moral superiority. It was Saturday, yes, but he was definitely the type to work weekends.

Then I locked up my window with the steering wheel bar and hunted down my muse.

# TEN

GABRIEL

Kenneth clicked through the slides on his laptop, controlling the large screen at the other end of the conference room. The slew of men and women he highlighted all appeared to have the same aesthetic—modern white spaces, blinding smiles, and enough filters to make it impossible to tell one from the next.

When I made no response, he nervously clicked his keyboard, moving on to the next. Tensions were high. This was an emergency Saturday meeting after all.

“Glitter Galore would be a great catch. She recently won a competition reality show and her star power has been skyrocketing since.” Kenneth grinned at me with the same desperation for approval as the influencers he was trying to sell me on.

I recognized Glitter. She had been on the same reality television as Layana. “From *What the What?*”

She purposefully covered her body in glitter. I’d find it under my nails, in my hair, contaminating my work. No. Glitter Galore was as unfit to help me as the rest.

“Do you like her?” Pamela tilted her chin, seemingly picking up on my recognition and taking it for approval.

I waved a dismissive hand. “Pass.”

“That’s...she was my last one,” Kenneth dropped his head in defeat.

“Keep searching, Kenneth. Good work,” Pamela said. “Moving on to Kaylee.”

Kenneth looked at her like a puppy both pacified but fearful of its owner's praise.

Kaylee gave me the same nervous look Kenneth had. "Hi, I'm Kaylee."

I knew this. I made it a point to know everyone's names. They spent their lives devoted to the same cause I did; why would I not learn who they are?

"Hi," I said.

She *eeped*.

"Tell us about your idea," Pamela said, with a curt nod.

"Right." Kaylee stared at her laptop and talked in a rush. "I was thinking since Mr. Stryker looks so much like a younger Justin Theroux, we could try to capitalize on that."

I didn't look like Justin Theroux.

"How so?" Pamela asked.

A wash of red climbed up Kaylee's neck and over her face. "I was thinking it could be perfect if we could convince people that they had more in common than looks. Like maybe even mannerisms and that cute smile and...."

A different kind of coaching. It was far from the worst idea that we'd heard during the meeting.

She sank lower into her seat, hiding herself more thoroughly behind her laptop so I could only see her hairline.

"And then I thought it would be even better if we could just replace him with Justin Theroux, you know for media stuff," Kaylee said. "Pretend they're the same person."

She wanted to replace me. People had said I'd already been replaced, that I was a lizard person in a flesh suit masquerading as Gabriel Stryker. That's what Kaylee wanted to sell me—that I'd be better off as a fake.

A cold gust swept through my veins, momentarily freezing every thought. My heart hammered a beat too loudly, its rhythm echoing my surprise.

“Did I just hear that correctly?” I asked, in a cool, even voice.

Every head in the room snapped in my direction.

The inch of Kaylee’s forehead I could actually see turned bright red. She squirmed.

I had definitely heard her properly. My initial reaction to her proposal was premature. Hers was the worst idea I’d heard so far.

“What if I’m required to speak?” I asked. “You want Justin Theroux to answer questions about our work?”

“I mean *no* but...also maybe?” Kaylee squeaked. “Couldn’t he have generic answers to memorize that lead people to find more information on the website?”

The suggestion stung like a slap in the face, but I maintained my calm exterior.

“That’s not bad, actually,” Pamela said. “But Justin Theroux is too high profile. Work with one of the background checkers to find suitable stand-ins we can trust. We don’t need interviews. Staged photos and videos....”

Pamela endorsed this farce. I should have expected as much, yet it still came as a shock.

A wall, built from years of similar situations, snapped into place. My posture stiffened and my shoulders squared, ready to deflect the blow.

I couldn’t listen to another word. I rose from my seat and left the conference room. Icy detachment cooled any anger or hurt I should have felt.

I needed this merger to happen. All of Terraroot Labs needed this merger to happen.

Replacing me couldn’t be the only solution. What happened when this stand-in went off script and misrepresented the science? What happened when he broke his NDA and told the press that I’d hired an actor to pretend to be me? One mistake and the entire company would be ruined.

There were only twenty-three days left until the meeting.

What other option did I have?

What I wanted to do was walk to Eterni-Tea. If only Layana Hartley was a reasonable person and I could accurately convey my intentions in a way she could understand—I was certain that would be Terraroot's best chance.

But we weren't different people. She wasn't reasonable, and I couldn't properly communicate my intentions.

Most importantly, she'd made clear that she wanted me to leave her alone.

I ran my hands through my hair and stalked the building, wishing for an anomalous strike of inspiration. I took the staircase instead of the elevators, needing to move. There had to be someone, anyone else who could help me.

I reached the lower floor, where sounds of bustling footsteps and indiscernible chatter echoed through spacious halls.

And amongst the noise, I could swear I heard *her* voice.

"I'm not leaving until I see him, so good luck closing shop at the end of the day."

"Ma'am, you're welcome to sit in one of the chairs. But if you're going to cause trouble, or you refuse to leave when you're told to, you will be removed," a second person said. It sounded like Jeff, the receptionist.

"Is that a threat?"

I'd only ever met one woman who spoke with that distinctive, indignant tone. But, the prospect of Layana coming here in my greatest hour of need was too good to be true. I had to be mistaken.

I followed the sound, cautious optimism clawing through my chest.

"A warning. Security will physically remove you from the building," Jeff said.



“Not until I speak to Gabriel Stryker, they won’t. I’m inspired to stay inspired. Call him. Tell him I’m here.”

“I don’t know who you are, or what that means,” Jeff said, exasperation dripping from his words.

I turned the corner to the lobby and found Jeff with a constipated twist to his features. His face was redder than his scarlet hair. Across the desk from him stood a woman wearing a puffy white coat, tight jeans, and an aggressive stance.

Her back was to me, but if any question about her identity remained, the blue twists of hair on the top of her head confirmed my suspicion.

Jeff lifted his phone. “Security, we need—”

“That won’t be necessary,” I said.

Layana whipped around. Her eyes lit up as soon as she spotted me.

Being caught in those bright blues was akin to catching sunlight for the first time after a lifetime in the dark. It was blinding, warming, and utterly disarming.

Of course, any positive impact she sparked dissipated the moment she opened her mouth.

“Gabriel Stryker.” She stalked across the lobby, a proud and unpredictable predator. “I’ve been looking for you.”

In the periphery of my awareness, I noticed people stopping to watch our interaction. They didn’t matter. My focus sharpened on Layana as she reached me in four long strides. She jutted out her chin and quirked up the corner of her lips ever so slightly.

The air between us grew heavy, a wordless battlefield crackling with anticipation. The challenge—who would strike first?

She sucked in a sharp breath, and parted her lips.

Before she could speak, I repeated her own words to her. “First it was the unsolicited dick pics, now this? You’re upping the creep factor by showing up at my place of work.”

Her eyes hardened to steel.

I shouldn't antagonize her. I needed her help, after all. But I couldn't seem to help myself.

She took a step closer. If she thought I'd step back, she was sadly mistaken.

Her next words were softer, little more than a whisper, so only I could hear. "Now I *have* to send you dick pics. You've requested them, so they're totally solicited."

A small tick of pain formed in my temple, but it did nothing to tamp down the thrill blooming through my chest. "What are you doing here, Layana?"

"I would have waited for you to run by Eterni-Tea, but you stopped running."

"I still run. I changed my route."

She didn't move her feet, but she pulled away so that the space between us seemed infinitely larger.

A fleeting shadow of doubt crossed her face, momentary but unmistakable. "Why? You're so...predictable in your schedule."

"Two reasons."

"Which are?"

"One—I was assaulted on my last route when some maniac attempted to kill me with a door."

"If a little bonk is all it takes to kill you, I was doing you a kindness, putting you out of your frail misery."

I knew I should be offended and I knew I should stop baiting her, but I was powerless to stop. "Two—I was told to never return."

"I told you never to return to *my home*. You don't show up uninvited when you weren't given an address or any indication that you were supposed to."

"Like you're doing now?"

A devious spark filled her eyes and an equally disarming grin crossed her lips. She'd gone full Cheshire cat. "Ah. See, you don't have me on that one. I've got you. This is an office building, not where you live."

"The distinction is most likely due to you not being able to find my personal address."

She shrugged, self-satisfaction beaming from her every pore. "Maybe. Doesn't matter. I win. You were wrong."

This was it, quite possibly my only chance to redirect this conversation, let alone my only chance to convince her to help me.

"I apologize for making you uncomfortable at your home," I said. "That was never my intention."

"So let's start over," she said, her smugness completely forgotten, replaced by what appeared to be sincerity. "What exactly was your intention?"

"I wanted to offer you a job."

"What job?"

"Despite your"—I wanted to say *atrocious*, but instead, left that part out—"personality, you have a unique ability to endear the general public."

She nodded, unbothered by my pause. "You're clearly terrible with people."

I didn't understand how she could flip a switch and bring out the charm like she seemed to do so easily on television and when in the company of her fans.

She said, "You have the personality of a wounded raccoon with rabies."

That was a new one for me. Most people called me a robot.

I continued, "I have a fast-approaching deadline and am in need of assistance from someone with your particular skill set."

"You need a personality makeover. Or at least the appearance of one."

“Yes, I need to appear personable. I’m not interested in making any changes, only in procuring evidence that I’m not a robot.”

“Robots don’t come in this shade of surly.” She gestured a hand up and down at me.

Was that meant as a compliment or an insult? More importantly, did she intend to help me?

“I also need someone to speak in my stead at a public event,” I said. “Possibly to accompany me to other appointments as well.”

I waited for her to say something else. She didn’t. She seemed content to stand here in silence indefinitely.

“You still haven’t explained why *you’re* here,” I said. “What does *inspired to be inspired* mean?”

She flashed a dangerous smile at me, a feral look that made me once again question this possible alliance. Desperation held me still.

“I have my own problem, and torturing myself by being in your company seems to help,” she said. “So I’m taking you up on your job offer, but I’m making the terms.”

I would agree to anything at this point. Keeping my demeanor cool and unaffected, I asked, “What terms?”

“To be decided, mostly. Also, if it turns out I’m wrong, and you’re not the fix to my problem, I quit.”

Easy. Whatever her problem was, I had ample resources to fix it.

I asked, “What else?”

“I want to be paid for every session, in cash, before filming. I’ll talk to my people and text you the details.”

Her people? Did she have an assistant to help her maintain her image? That wasn’t the impression I’d gotten thus far.

She held out her hand. “Give me your phone.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m going to put my number in there, and take yours. Why do you think?”

I handed her my phone. “When can you start? As I said, there is a looming time factor.”

“Today,” she said. “After your work but before mine.”

“Seven?”

“I need time to eat first.”

“I’ll provide food.”

She narrowed her eyes at me. “Another rule—this is *not* a date. You don’t do anything creepy or assume this is anything more than what it is. I don’t like you like that. I don’t like you at all.”

“The feeling’s mutual.”

“Good. Then yes, by all means, buy all the food. We’ll meet at your place at seven.”

“I’ll text you the address.”

She returned my phone then held out her hand. “A pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Stryker.”

I wrapped my fingers around her hand. Her skin was warm, her shake as firm and feisty as the rest of her. But as she pulled her hand away from mine and I watched her go, a sinking feeling settled over me.

Everything was about to change. I was trusting my fate to the most unpredictable person I’d ever met.

It hadn’t been an intellectual weighing of pros and cons that led me here. It had been impulse, which was utterly out of character for me. The prospect was terrifying.

Even more terrifying, the reasonable dread I felt about seeing her again mingled with something unfamiliar: some minuscule, perverse part of me was looking forward to it.

# ELEVEN

LAYANA

Morgan opened the driver's side door to her car, where I sat waiting for her in the passenger seat.

"Hey," I said, with a small wave she may or may not have been able to see.

She stood completely still, too still, like she'd been hit with an ice ray.

I'd texted. She knew I was here, didn't she?

She stumbled a step backward. I watched her features contort in shock as she scanned the back seat and then her eyes met mine.

She clenched her chest. "*Are you trying to give me a heart attack?*"

"No, of course not," I said. "I texted that I was coming."

Things were usually easier between the two of us, like we shared the same brain and she always knew exactly what I meant even if I said it wrong. But since she'd gotten engaged, it seemed we were a bit out of sync.

Morgan slipped into the seat beside me, shut the door, and checked her phone. There on her screen, exactly as I'd said it would be, was a text from me.

Layana: I have news. You're going to want to hear it in person. I'll be waiting in your car so don't freak out.

“I DIDN’T SEE THIS,” she said on a slow, deliberate breath.

“I gathered that by your reaction. Next time I’ll sit on the roof.”

“I don’t know if that would be better or worse.” She deflated into the driver’s seat and tossed her bag into the back. “So what’s up? What’s this news I want to hear?”

My hands felt clammy all of a sudden. Was I nervous? Why would I be nervous? It was probably residual shock from the whole me-lying-in-wait misunderstanding.

“If our roles were reversed, I’d expect you to tell me, so here goes,” I said. “I’m going to Running Man’s house to work for him.”

“What?” Morgan’s tone was arsenic laced with disapproval. “The guy who wants to murder you or make you his sex slave?”

“No.” I smiled my most reassuring smile. “That was all a misunderstanding.”

“How?”

I shrugged. “He wants to hire me for some pics and videos.”

“This still sounds like a sex thing.”

I snorted. “Not *those kinds* of pics and videos.”

“Normal photography with all parties keeping their clothes on and their hands to themselves?”

“Yes.”

“Even so, you said yes to this creep?”

“Not a creep.” Jerk? Absolutely. But I kept that bit to myself. “You know that quarter life crisis I may or may not have mentioned?”

“Yes.”

“He’s the fix.”

She slouched down a little farther, her expression drooping along with it. “This is a bad idea. You can still back out, right? When are you supposed to do this first shoot?”

I grinned at her. “Right now. Surprise! I stashed my ring light and tripod in your trunk.”

“I know it’s impossible to talk you out of anything, but you can’t go to his sexy murder dungeon alone.”

I grinned at her harder.

She deflated so hard on her next exhale that I was pretty sure she’d soon be one with the floor.

“That’s why you’re here,” she said. “So I don’t worry, and I can come along and judge this guy and the situation for myself.”

“If you don’t want to go, I’ll call Juno. She might be free. And if not, I’m sure Chester is. That dude never does anything except hang around at Juno’s to help her film. He might not be a real person. Maybe he’s her shadow instead.”

She popped back upright. “I’ll go.”

I wrapped my arms around my bestie and gave her a squeeze. “This is going to be great.”

She pressed her lips together in a face that was almost a smile, made a noncommittal noise that almost sounded like agreement, and nodded.

Best friend backup acquired, woot!

We used the GPS to take us to the address Gabriel had texted. Traffic made the drive take longer than it should have. Then, we got stuck in front of a fancy shmancy gate.

Morgan slowed the car to a stop, and we both took in the scenery outside of the car. Spotlights lit the high walls and lowest branches of the towering trees behind them. Still, there really wasn’t much to see.

“Running Man lives *here*?” Morgan asked.

“Apparently.”



“Who *is* this guy?”

A man in a security suit knocked on Morgan’s window. She jumped, then rolled it down. Maybe it wasn’t just that the two of us were on different wavelengths, maybe she was extra jumpy tonight for some reason.

“Hi,” I said to the security man. “I’m Layana Hartley. We’re here to see Gabriel Stryker.”

“Welcome, Ms. Hartley. Mr. Stryker is expecting you,” the guard said.

He returned to his booth and opened the gates for us.

Morgan didn’t start driving. Instead she turned her whole body toward me. “Your Running Man is *Gabriel Stryker*?”

“Yeah. Why? Do you know him?” It made sense, I guessed. Rich dudes probably loved the theater, so she could have seen him there sipping a tiny cup of tea with his pinky up. Also, Morgan’s fiancé was a billionaire. They probably hung out at billionaire parties, scowling down at all of us peons as they plotted world domination. “Do you know him from work or social stuff? Fancy billionaire sex clubs?”

She barked a laugh. “I don’t know him. I know *of* him. Everyone does.”

I didn’t. Or at least I hadn’t before kicking a door into his face.

The security guard waved a hand at us to get moving. Morgan took the hint and drove us through beautiful streets of perfectly manicured lawns and mega mansions. Garden lanterns and streetlights were freaking everywhere, so it hardly felt like the sun had gone down.

I wasn’t quite sure what to think of this place. It was private, which made sense for what little I knew of Gabriel.

“Are we all right?” I asked Morgan. “Our vibe’s been off lately. And I don’t know if it’s us, or me, or—”

“It’s me,” she said. “Work is amazing, but it’s so crazy that when I get out, my brain is so frazzled. And then I feel this pressure, guilt, for not working on the wedding planning.”

“I’m sure Oscar is happy for you to take the time you need. He’s so...I don’t know.”

“Wonderful?”

“Yes, he’s perfect for you. I’m ridiculously happy for you that you’ve found him. And if there’s anything I can do to help lighten your load, I’m here.”

“Thank you.”

“That’s what besties are for.”

“I know. But still, knowing you always have my back, and just offering, it means the world to me.”

I gave her shoulder a quick squeeze.

Now that I knew what was up with her, I felt a little bad about dragging her along tonight.

“If you want to just drop me off here, and then you need to go—” I started.

She didn’t let me finish. “*I am in this*. I need to see this guy for myself. Gabriel Stryker’s pretty much a genius dedicated to saving the world.”

“A real-life superhero?”

“Saving the world *through science*. He invented something that makes landfills less bad for the environment. I don’t know the particulars. But I do know he’s a *big deal*, international-honors-level big deal.”

“If he’s such a saint, I should be perfectly safe with him.”

“I hope so. But I’ve never actually heard anything about his personal life. Maybe being a world-renowned good guy is the perfect cover for a serial killer.”

“That sounds like something I would say.” I grinned at her.

“It really does.”

At the far end of the mansion-filled labyrinth, we turned onto a weaving private drive and snaked through more trees before finally arriving at our destination.

While the rest of the buildings we'd passed on our way here were marvels of brick and stone that a person was more likely to call an estate or castle than a house, Gabriel's dwelling looked like a prison.

A single porch light illuminated what was basically a big gray, concrete box.

"This is..." Morgan shook her head. "There are no words."

"Depressing," I said.

We parked and climbed out of the car.

Gabriel appeared on his doorstep with his hands in the pockets of his fancy suit and a scowl on his face. Even when I turned my back, I could feel his displeasure all over my skin. I breathed in the cool night air and tried to push away the tingling in my limbs that was either exhilaration or foreboding—I wasn't sure which.

Morgan popped the trunk, and we carried the equipment up the sidewalk to meet the grump. Each step forward left my body feeling heavier than the last, yet my heart felt light, like I might float away.

Gabriel's hair was more mussed than usual. He'd probably been running his hands through it. His dark gaze somehow darkened further as he locked eyes with me.

"You're late," he said, his voice even and cold. "I was beginning to think you weren't coming."

"I said I'd come, I'm here," I told him. "And I'm not late. It's like what...seven ten?"

"Seven eighteen. You said you would be here at seven."

"It *is* seven." I shook my head and brushed past him. "This is Morgan. Morgan, Running Man."

"Hi, Morgan. I'm Gabriel." His voice sounded less clipped when he spoke to her.

"Hi," she said, her voice somehow both hesitant and light. She had a way with being personable no matter the situation, which was just one of the many things I loved about her.

I stepped across the threshold and into the heart of Gabriel's cement box.

The inside wasn't as harsh as the outside. Next to a simmering fireplace was a sofa and a chair. Even though they were the modern kind of furniture that looked too stiff for actual sitting, they were nice.

I set my coat on one of the hooks by the door and set to exploring. Above the fireplace was actually a kinda cool stained-glass feature with little glass circles arranged in the concrete. Also, Gabriel had a surprisingly HGTV-worthy kitchen.

On the counter sat two trays. One had sliced meats, cheeses, nuts, and crackers. The other was piled with veggies and dip. It was the perfect spread for what we were about to do, and not date-ish at all. The jitter in my hands, the slightly off-kilter feeling that was wrecking my whole nervous system—definitely hunger. I needed a blood sugar boost, stat. I grabbed a couple of pistachios and a chunk of cheese and popped them in my mouth.

The cheese was *so* good it should be a crime. Maybe it was. Maybe in addition to being a surly genius, Gabriel Stryker was an international cheese thief.

Gabriel watched me chew with a stoic expression, moving just an inch from invading my personal space. "When you say seven, I expect seven."

"You're still going on about that?" I rolled my eyes at him. "It's time to set up."

"What exactly do you have in mind?"

"Well, it's dark, and the exterior of your home looks like a personality-deficient supervillain lives here, so we don't want to shoot that."

Morgan shot me the look she did when she thought I was being too rude. I ignored her.

"It's utilitarian." Gabriel's dark eyes seared me in place, melting my shoes to the floor.

A switch flipped in my brain, making my skin hot and my brain fog.

Breath caught in my lungs.

*What was wrong with me? Did I need more cheese?*

“Utilitarian and unique, especially in this neighborhood,” Morgan said, snapping me out of Gabriel’s evil spell. “You must have used a different builder than everyone else.”

“It’s custom work based on the Earthship project,” Gabriel said without missing a beat. “Sustainability is paramount. Therefore, inside the walls discarded cans and tires are utilized as part of the foundation. If it didn’t violate city code, there would be a windmill on the hill, but I had to settle for solar panels.”

Basically, he was exactly what Morgan had said—a freaking hero trying to save the environment one piece of garbage, and one sustainable energy source, at a time. Now I felt bad for thinking the place looked like a prison. He also seemed not to have felt whatever was in the air a second ago, whatever had fried my system. I definitely needed more cheese.

I popped another piece in my mouth.

Pulling myself together, I told him, “I like the stained glass above the fireplace.”

“Those are wine bottles.”

Of course they were. Did it make me a bad person to hate a saint? Probably. But like Morgan had said, doing good made for good cover for the bad. And Gabriel Stryker had plenty of bad, too. I could see it in his eyes whenever I said something that he didn’t like. I could feel it sizzling in the air.

It felt like the kind of bad that would make a girl’s toes curl. But then again, every time that sizzle appeared, it quickly fizzled. Maybe the whole thing was my imagination. I hated that I’d ever allowed him to affect me.

“Wine bottles. Fancy,” I said about the fireplace, dismissing what really was a cool feature. “Morgan, do you

want to eat something before we start?”

“Sure,” she said, eyes sparkling with delight as she looked back and forth between Gabriel and me. She circled around to the other side of the counter, leaned on her elbows, and watched the two of us as she snacked away, like we were putting on an entertaining show.

I ignored her.

“What does ‘inspired to be inspired’ mean to you?” Gabriel asked.

I sighed, remembering what I’d said to his security guard in the lobby of his work building. “I write a blog. *Confessions of a Serial Mood Killer*. Being around you makes me so frustrated the words pour out of me.”

That was too much sharing. I didn’t like it. Didn’t want to do any more of it.

“Do you have any soft touches we could add to the living room?” I asked Gabriel, desperate to change the subject, move the focus to him.

“Soft touches?”

“It’s exactly what it sounds like,” I said. “Throw pillows, throw blankets, that kind of thing. Something that can soften all the hard lines, make this place feel homey instead of sterile.”

“I don’t spend much time here.”

“So that’s a no? Who doesn’t have a throw blanket? Where do you curl up and read or watch TV?”

“I don’t have a television.”

“Of course you don’t. What *do* you have?”

“Dwindling patience.”

“Ha!” Morgan grinned harder at the pair of us and popped an olive in her mouth.

I crossed my arms and tilted my chin up at Gabriel, basking in the bitterness of his dark eyes. From so close I

could see that they were brown—a spiked ring of chocolate on the outside, so dark in the middle the irises almost bled into the pupil. There was intelligence there, brazenness, and a sharp bite.

I said, “Is that the image you want the world to see? Scalding espresso glares that burn unsuspecting grandmas?”

Gabriel continued to stare at me. His nostrils flared.

The temperature in the room seemed to rise ten degrees.

*Inhale. Exhale. Break him before he can break you.*

He ran a hand through his hair and snapped his gaze away, releasing me.

“This was a mistake.” He turned and stalked out of the room.

Did I just win?

I blinked once, twice, waiting for Gabriel to come back.

Morgan and I exchanged a look that spoke volumes in the way only two people who were basically attached at the hip their whole lives could. *Did he just leave? Are we supposed to leave? What just happened?*

Before either of us could express any of those sentiments out loud, Gabriel returned with an envelope in his hand. Something was different. Every movement he made was stiff as stone. He clenched his jaw so tight he might crack a tooth. Then he offered me the envelope.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Your payment.”

“For what? We haven’t done any work yet.”

“Cash payment is required before filming, as per your terms. You did not specify an amount as you said you would. I assume this will suffice. Take it.”

I took the envelope. There were a bunch of bills in there, all hundreds. I’d never had so much money at one time in my

bank account, let alone in my hand. Instead of being delighted, like I knew I should be, my stomach dropped.

It was too much.

I needed to tell him it was too much.

I needed to thrust my middle finger in his face, reject his gesture, and walk away.

But I needed the money more.

More importantly, if I left now, this arrangement was over. No more fiery interactions that left my brain buzzing with creativity. The well would quickly dry back up, never to refill again. There were no more do-overs.

I shoved the envelope in my messenger bag. "It's fine."

Gabriel's eyes flared, maybe with satisfaction, maybe with something else. I didn't know, and it didn't matter.

"We'll film in front of the fireplace," I said. "Next time I'll bring a throw blanket."

I put up the ring light and set up my phone on the tripod.

Gabriel walked in front of the fireplace and stood there like a mannequin, like a piece of furniture more than the focus of the camera.

"You're carrying yourself wrong," I said.

"I'm not even moving," he said.

"*Exactly.*" I strolled right up to him and grabbed the tops of his arms. The firm feel of muscle beneath the fabric of his suit jacket made me pause. I took a breath.

*This was no different than working on a Glitter Galore video. Pretend he's your friend and accept that he needs extra help to look natural.*

*Touching him means nothing.*

He tensed beneath my palms, the strength of him undeniable. My entire nervous system went on the fritz.

I tried to shake it off. I pulled my hands away.



“Take off your jacket,” I told him.

He did as I said, stripping the jacket slowly from his shoulders, and set it neatly on the edge of the sofa.

“Pull your tie loose,” I said.

He did that, too, then he ran his hands through his hair like he did before. It was an agitated habit he did whenever he spoke to me. I *was* affecting him, deeply frustrating him if I had to guess. And I loved it. It gave me a thrill of excitement and power. *Why was it so freaking hot to undo him like this?*

I cleared my throat at the unwelcome thought and took a step back.

“Better,” I said, without really looking at him.

My heart fluttered in my chest, probably from the power trip. Or maybe we were too close to the fire. It was hot in here and none of this meant anything.

I turned around to give myself a moment of composure and took a step toward the tripod, but Morgan was already there. I’d nearly forgotten she was here with us, which was crazy.

“I’ve got it,” she said. “You go ahead.”

What was the plan here? What was I going to do with him?

Something that would play well on social. Something fun and distracting. Something where we didn’t have to touch.

“Dance challenge,” I said.

“I don’t dance,” Gabriel said.

“Then it’ll be even more of a challenge,” I said, forcing a smile to my face.

I picked a popular dance that I knew would keep me in the moment. I told Morgan the song to play. Then as the music started, I moved to it.

Beside me, Gabriel wasn’t moving.

He stared straight ahead as still and stoic as I’d ever seen him. He didn’t try to mimic my movements. He didn’t even

look at me.

“I don’t dance,” he said again.

I stopped swaying my hips. I stopped moving my arms. I turned to him. “*You could try.*”

He didn’t say anything. He didn’t move. He just kept staring straight ahead at the camera.

With a sigh, I walked across the room and retrieved my phone from the tripod. “Forget video. We’ll stand near each other. Pretend not to hate me.”

I snapped photos of us with him over my shoulder, of the two of us on the sofa, and in the kitchen. Morgan snapped some with her phone too.

I didn’t need to see the reel to know every single image was terrible. If anything, the longer we were at it, the more statuesque Gabriel became.

Finally I called it and packed up. I told Gabriel, “I’ll check out the footage and post and tag you with whatever is the best.”

“Do you have a Socialface account?” Morgan asked him.

“The marketing people made one for me,” he said.

“We’ll try again tomorrow,” I told him.

Something like concern flashed across his face. “I can’t tomorrow. I have plans.”

“Great. I’ll assume these plans include doing something besides standing like there is a pole up your backside holding you in place. Seeing you in the world will be good for people. We’ll have better luck.”

“I can’t tomorrow,” he said again.

A small spark of concern flitted through my stomach. He knew the photos were garbage as well as I did. But I couldn’t let him quit. I needed to lock him in to see me again.

He went to the door, and opened it.

“How about after you’re done with your plans?” I said. “We’ll do like today, and get together after. Maybe you have some gardens or something outside that will work better.”

Gabriel said nothing.

Morgan helped me carry the equipment to the door. Gabriel stepped forward, forcing us to step back, and outside.

“I appreciate your effort, Ms. Hartley,” Gabriel said. Then he shut the door in my face.

We stood under the porch light, surrounded by darkness. A billion things filled my head, most of all frustration.

“Bah!” I called out into the night. “We got two things, jack and sh—”

“I saw plenty.” An elfish grin crossed Morgan’s face. “And I recorded the evidence.”

“You think you got a picture where he doesn’t look like he’s been frozen in carbonite?”

“I did. I got a bunch. And they’re *good*.”

When we were back in the car, we flipped through my photo reel first, and found exactly what I expected—nothing. But Morgan’s photos were an entirely different beast. She’d captured candid between takes.

I stared at a photo from the kitchen. Gabriel’s back was turned to the camera. I was pressed against his side, my hands cupping his face, my lips slightly parted as I stared at his mouth.

The image seared into my irises. I couldn’t blink. I couldn’t breathe.

Clearly I’d been in the middle of saying something, because there was no other excuse for what I’d been doing with my lips in the shot.

I followed the wide shape of Gabriel’s shoulders, down his thick biceps to where he’d clutched the counter so tightly his knuckles went white. *And his eyes.*

My mouth dropped and my belly clenched.

If I didn't know better, I'd say he'd wanted to kiss me. If I didn't know that he'd actually been glaring, I'd say he'd wanted to do a whole lot more than kiss me.

In another photo, we were on the sofa, bathed in sparkling light from the wine bottles above the fireplace. This time the camera caught the whisper of a smile on my face, and that same look in Gabriel's eyes.

A fresh wave of heat crossed my skin.

It was a dangerously salacious look, positively depraved. His eyes weren't merely hungry; they were ravenous.

Except that wasn't true. Really, he'd wanted to ring my neck, not screw my brains out. Unless...could it have been both?

I ignored the flutter in my chest, along with the totally baseless thoughts that ping ponged in my head.

The truth behind every photo remained. All I had done was stage him like a prop. All he'd done was hate every moment. It was tricks of angles and timing that made us look physically closer together than we were. None of the explosive attraction that appeared in these pics was real, even if my body hadn't gotten that memo.

Morgan was a miracle worker. She'd created magic from nothing.

I opened Socialface. A billion notifications awaited me, all about some posts I'd written after way too much alcohol last night—threats about the testicular extraction of one “Maximum Disgust.”

I decided that I would have to figure out how to lock myself out of my phone next time I had a drink, or maybe just not drink like that again any time soon. I deleted the regrettable posts and uploaded tonight's best pic.

And then at work later in the night, I wrote like I'd never written before.

# TWELVE

GABRIEL

As I lay on my back, head and shoulders wedged into the cabinet under my grandmother's bathroom sink, Jasper kept me company by lounging atop the closed toilet lid. He rocked his foot back and forth like a pendulum at the edge of my vision, the thick tread on the sole of his boot catching my attention every time it almost hit me.

"You really should've come to the beach house on Friday," he said.

I grimaced at the thought. The last thing I wanted to do was spend my time trapped in the elements, away from my lab.

Jasper bumped my shoulder with his shoe, but he didn't seem to notice.

The pipe joint loosened under my grip. Between thoughts of the impending merger and Layana plaguing my mind, I'd forgotten about my invitation for Jasper to meet me here this morning. When I'd shown up ready to work around Oma's old farm house, I was surprised to find Jasper on the porch drinking lemonade with Oma.

Jasper sighed. "I know, I know. You couldn't leave your experiment. But I really could've used a wingman on the sand Friday night, or company at the bar last night. Ended up getting bored, calling it early, and driving home."

Perhaps alone time had provided him needed introspection. It was unlikely, given Jasper's reliance on constant

stimulation. I grunted noncommittally, applying deliberate torque to the joint. There was a looseness to the movement that shouldn't be present.

I'd made the mistake of choosing a too-large wrench. I reached my hand into my tool box and felt around for the smaller version of the same tool. Even though I knew better, I'd been making a lot of minor mistakes this morning.

Last night's disaster had replayed over and over in my mind—Layana's insults, her defiance, her touch. Every moment she was inside my house had been torture, bringing out the worst in me. I preferred cool detachment, but I couldn't manage it when she was near.

And every insufferable moment we'd spent together had been a waste. Layana couldn't help me change my image. It was a hopeless cause. I needed to find another way to ensure the merger happened.

Jasper placed a wrench in my palm, the correct one.

"Thanks," I said.

"You want me to get in there?" he asked.

"No. I've got it."

"Okay." His tone lifted. "I have news. Found another diamond-in-the-rough. You know the craftsman on Cedar I've had my eye on for years?"

I drew a blank.

"The murder house," he said.

When we were children, everyone believed the mold-blackened building with the overgrown yard belonged to a serial killer. We listened to stories of child-eating witches, and tales of a man pushed over the edge of sanity. More than once, scrawny tween Jasper had said he'd slay whatever monster lived there and claim the house as his own.

"No." I cocked my head sideways to get a look at Jasper's face.

He wore a wistful expression. He was serious about purchasing the old murder house, and he couldn't be more enchanted by it. The monsters he'd be required to slay would most likely be fungal.

"Oh yes," he said. "She has great bones. Can't wait to strip her out of that nasty shag carpet, help her reach her gorgeous potential."

I'd never understood his tendency to anthropomorphize houses. Renovations irrationally delighted him. Who was I to judge? My own satisfaction followed disciplined adherence to routine, and hours spent alone in my lab.

"In negotiations, disclosure is a part of the sale process, correct?" I asked. "Did you find out how many people were actually murdered there?"

He grinned at me. "Zero. It's all a bunch of malarkey, stupid rumors."

"Aren't you concerned no one will want to purchase the property, based on the history—real or fictional?"

"Anyone who puts public perception over recognizing her inner beauty doesn't deserve her anyway."

I wished everyone could see the world through that lens. Instead of focusing on how unnatural I behaved in front of the camera, I wished they could look past me to appreciate my work for its own merit.

A faint hum sounded. Jasper bolted upright and pulled out his phone. His brows shot up as he looked over the screen.

"Everything all right?" I asked.

"I have to go. Gotta put out a fire."

"In your line of work, always," I said.

"Yes, but not what I mean." An easy grin crossed his face. "This one's a literal fire."

Jasper viewed disaster as opportunity. No question, he was going to enjoy dealing with this.

“Next time,” he said, “I want an update on your merger, or details on what shade of green your algae is, or how well you’re sleeping. I promise if *you* share something about *your* life with me, I’ll be gentle with my response.”

“Pistachio,” I said.

He blinked, a line forming between his brows.

“My current trial substance appears a pale shade of green, like a pistachio, or pastel spring hue,” I said.

“That wasn’t so hard, was it?” His grin returned. He nudged my knee with the toe of his boot. “I better go put out that fire.”

“Goodbye,” I said.

He waved a hand over his shoulder as he disappeared through the bathroom door.

I tried to remember exactly where I was with the sink. A moment later, my phone dinged in my pocket.

No one from the office was permitted to bother me on the rare Sunday I spent outside of the office, and it was too soon to be Jasper, which meant the message must be from my sister.

Or worse, my corporate consultant, Pamela.

Temporarily postponing the plumbing work once more, I pulled my phone from my pocket into the cabinet with me to see what the emergency was.

The screen lit up with an image—a smooth apricot-hued squash on a bed of ink-black pasta. No. The reality was far more horrifying—*it was a penis*.

Shocked, I jolted upright.

And smashed my head on the PVC pipe.

A jolt of pain stormed through my skull. I let out a frustrated *ugh*, and the phone slipped from my grasp.

“Are you all right, Gabriel?” Oma’s voice echoed down the hall. The sound of her footsteps grew nearer.



“Yes.” I batted my hand frantically around on the floor until my fingers met cool glass. I snatched up my phone and pulled it back in with me, hiding the horror from sight.

Oma’s stocking-clad legs came into view.

“Sorry to see Jasper go so soon,” she said. “Anything I can do to help you?”

“No. I have everything I need.”

“I’ll be out in the garden then. I left you a glass of sweet tea on the table.”

“Thank you.”

She chuckled, a warm and hearty sound. Then she left.

I lifted my phone so I could once again see the screen. The sender of the offensive image was none other than Layana Hartley. My heart beat a little bit faster as dots blinked across the screen.

Layana: Good morning, sunshine

I COULD PRACTICALLY HEAR the words in her voice, rough and acidic.

Me: It’s two in the afternoon.

Layana: It’s two twenty-one in the afternoon. Now who doesn’t know how time works?

I CLOSED my eyes and took a breath.

Me: Why did you send me that image?

Layana: You asked for it

Me: I would never.

Layana: Yet you did. Interesting how that happened. Now it's our thing and I will send you daily dick pics in perpetuity. It's part of my job

Me: It's not.

Layana: When can I see you again?

I PAUSED, my thumbs hovering over the screen. Layana wasn't the solution I'd hoped she could be. Instead, she was a distraction. I had no room in my life for distraction. Even now, I was supposed to be fixing Oma's sink, yet I was allowing Layana to consume my time instead.

I locked the phone and set it on my chest.

It dinged.

Despite better judgment, I checked the screen. But it wasn't Layana who had texted. It was Pamela. I ignored the pang of disappointment in my chest and clicked to see what Pamela had to say.

Pamela: YOU DID IT

I GLARED at the all-caps message. Before I could respond to question what she meant, she sent another text, a link. I clicked it.

A large photograph filled my screen. It was captioned: *Newest addition to the WTW crew?*

WTW likely meant *What The What?*, the title of the show that had catapulted Layana and her friends to fame.

In the image, circles of colored light glowed behind a man with wild hair and wilder eyes. I hardly recognized myself. My expression was completely untethered, filled with something akin to greed, yet far more visceral.

I looked like a stranger. I looked feral.

The camera didn't capture Layana save for the small hand she'd placed on my arm. But it was her who had drawn whatever this expression was out of me—perhaps contempt, or frustration, or something else entirely.

The sight left me uneasy. A clammy sheen covered my hands. An invisible weight pressed down against my chest. I felt exposed.

I locked the phone, needing to look away. Immediately it rang.

It was Pamela.

I answered. "What?"

"Did you see it?"

"I saw the photograph," I said, my voice shockingly even.

"Did you read the comments?"

"Of course not. If I cared about nonsensical opinions, I'd engage in small talk. I go out of my way to avoid it."

"Social media is all about engagement, and that picture of you is getting a ton of attention. Here, I will read a couple comments to you."

I wished she wouldn't.

She cleared her throat. "O-M-G is that Justin Theroux? I would give every penny in my bank account for him to look at me like that."

My patience was wearing thin, and the pipe above me began dripping on my cheek. "Get to the point, Pamela."

"The latest polls have recognition of your name and face up nineteen percent."

She had tracked people's thoughts on me since this image was posted last night. It didn't surprise me.

"Of those who have discovered you in the past eighteen hours," she said, "the percentage who believe you're literally or figuratively a robot—zero."

“This is what we wanted,” I said, the unsettling image of me in the photograph ping ponging through my head. With it came the feel of Layana’s hands, small yet forceful as she’d posed me.

“This is exactly what we need,” Pamela said. “Get more time with her, preferably shots of the two of you together. And if you’re willing to consider it...”

I sighed, knowing whatever was coming was somehow going to make the entire situation worse.

“We should see how much it would cost to hire her to play your girlfriend,” she said. Then she went on, saying more words including numbers and optics.

But my ears were ringing, and I heard nothing.

She wanted to pay Layana to pretend to be my girlfriend. The prospect made my chest feel so tight, I could hardly breathe.

“No,” I snapped.

“It’s worth leaving the option open,” Pamela said, defying me.

A little pain formed in the center of my forehead. I tried to tilt my head to the side, to rub it, but it made the dripping water fall into my ear.

“I need to go.” I hung up the phone and shoved it back into my pocket.

Then I finished fixing the sink and headed out to meet Oma in the garden.

Layana Hartley was the most frustrating human being I’d ever met. I couldn’t imagine having to repeat last night. Pamela’s proposal would require exactly that, and far more time together.

Layana wanted to see me, yes, but certainly there was no way she would be willing to fake date me. She despised me as much as I loathed her. What if she found that torturing me was worth suffering herself? *What if she said yes?*

I needed time to think.

# THIRTEEN

LAYANA

The cacophony of buzzing and dripping filling Eterni-Tea felt like an assault on my eardrums. Sure, it was all the same gentle sounds at exactly the same gentle volume as every night, but tonight it felt targeted *and* personal.

It was as if the percolators knew Gabriel was completely ignoring me, and they knew I hadn't been able to write in two days. Each droplet was a needle in my side, a whispered taunt reminding me I'd screwed up, even though I had no idea how.

I reopened our text exchange from Sunday, and reread what we'd said for the gazillionth time.

I'd sent the dick pic. He corrected me about the time of day. We shared some playful banter. I asked to see him again.

Then nothing.

I'd sent another dick pic on Monday, a happy little guy with a smiley face drawn on the side of the shaft. Still nothing. If that wouldn't elicit a response, I didn't know what would.

The calendar turned over to Tuesday about an hour ago. I was growing desperate. Didn't Gabriel understand how badly I needed to write? That when I couldn't, it was like my eyelids were glued open and a family of caffeine-fueled racoons had nested under my skin?

A bit of bile rose up in my throat at the visual.

If Gabriel didn't respond soon, I'd be left with no course of action but to force him to see me. I'd have to show up, maybe at his office, which had worked out for me last time, or

maybe at his home. Unfortunately, both options included gatekeepers, which I'd have to somehow bypass.

If I tried climbing the brick wall around Gabriel's neighborhood, what were the chances I'd get tased and thrown right back out? Hmmm.

The café door opened.

A tiny glimmer of hope bloomed in my chest. Perhaps detecting my strife, Gabriel had come to his senses and ran his tight buns straight to me. We were supposed to be helping each other, dang him.

And then Dani walked through, snuffing that glimmer right out.

Today she had on a long wool skirt instead of sleep pants, but the rest of her get-up was the same as always.

"Hi, Layana," she said, loosening the neck hole in her hoodie enough for her eyes and nose to fit. Her mouth remained hidden. "It's me, Dani."

"Hi, Dani. Do you want your usual?"

She shuffled toward the counter. "Oh, yes."

I filled a cup with the mix of teas she fancied, and topped it off with a squirt of goat's milk. Then I made sure to write her name on the side nice and big so we didn't have to go through that whole thing again.

She set money on the counter, along with a stack of papers.

"This is my blog," she said.

There were handwritten notes and scribbles in red pen all over the top page.

"I can't read it," I told her.

"You have to."

"But here's the thing," I said. "I don't. Plus, I probably can't with all the markings anyway."

She narrowed her eyes, snatched the cup, and pushed the papers closer to me.

“You should trust your voice and your creative vision,” I said. “Stick to it, and the right people—the ones destined to be your fans—will find you. The worst thing you can do is be disingenuous.”

She made an almost growling sound and pushed the papers forward another inch.

Ignoring her, I took the cash and put it in the register.

By the time I looked up again, she was sitting at a table at the far end of the room, scribbling on her papers as wildly as a doctor signing a script.

I spaced out for a bit, lost in unnaturally buzzing lights above the plastic clouds that dangled from the ceiling.

Then the door opened again.

I expected it to be Dani leaving. Instead, it was Morgan arriving.

She had on her work clothes—flowy blouse, pencil skirt, and flats that had style but were built to tolerate long hours of standing. She looked a little dazed, probably because she wished she was asleep right now.

I grinned like an idiot. “What are you doing here?”

I hurried around the counter and gave her a squeeze.

She squeezed me back. “Long night.”

Too long, since it was technically morning now.

“Lemme guess,” I said. “You’re still wired, even though you’re exhausted. So you want something that will help you sleep?”

“Yes. Also it’s a nice excuse to say hi.”

“Hi.” I told her, then hurried back to fix her up with a nice sleepy tea.

We met back at one of the tables as far from Dani as possible. With no one else here, there were plenty of options to choose from.

“So how was work?” I asked.



“Good. It’s just that we have a deadline for the new piece coming up, and the lead actor decided he doesn’t like green,” she said.

“Peter Pan always wears green.”

“But lead actor, Jean Von Jean *does not*.”

“Didn’t I see him wearing a green suit at that award show you made me watch?”

“Mm-hmm. But he doesn’t wear green *anymore*.” She rolled her eyes. “So we have to remake his entire wardrobe.”

“That’s terrible.”

“I don’t mind too much. Some of the pieces can be dyed. And what can’t, I get to keep for future use. Maybe I’ll make Oscar dress up as Peter Pan next Halloween.”

I snorted at that. He’d never do it. “I bet Chester would wear it.”

“Ha. I bet he would.” She chuckled. “What about you? Have you heard back from Gabriel yet?”

“No. And it’s torture. I’m debating the best place to ambush him.”

“Don’t do that.”

“Jump out of the bushes, point a finger in his face, force him to tell me what his problem is.”

“I know you’re joking, or at least I hope you are, but just in case—*don’t do that*.”

“Fine. But then you tell me what I should do to get him to talk to me.”

She squished her lips together and pulled them to the side. “Can I see the texts?”

I showed her my phone.

Her expression went blank. She blinked at the screen. “You didn’t tell me you were sending him these pictures.”

“Well, I am. It’s our thing.”

“Maybe he’s not so into it.”

“Psh.” I waved away the suggestion, but the sentiment danced around in my brain. Maybe Morgan was right. Maybe the problem was the pictures.

“He needs your help, right?” Morgan asked. “For his image.”

“Right.” At least he used to. “Unless one post did enough to fix things for him. Do you think that’s possible?”

“I doubt it.”

“Yeah. He should be as desperate to see me again as I am to see him.”

“Writing troubles?” She raised a brow, but the look in her eye suggested she had other thoughts pinging around in that big beautiful brain of hers.

“Well Sunday, after *the encounter*, I wrote. It’s a decent little blog post about my favorite hotdog carts that I haven’t posted yet.” Most of my creative energy went to starting a new project, one I hadn’t intended on writing. It was more of a journal than anything, about my time with world-class grump Gabriel Stryker. I wasn’t going to share that with anyone ever, even my best friend.

“I look forward to reading it,” Morgan said. “Did you mention the little bodega on Market?”

“*Did I mention the bodega on Market?* Of course I mentioned the bodega on Market. They’re the only ones to do the chicken teriyaki dog with that killer slaw. It wouldn’t be a best-of list without that slaw.”

Morgan raised her hands in mock defense. “Okay, okay. Got it.”

We both chuckled.

“Well for what it’s worth,” she said, “I think Gabriel is going to contact you. And your best bet is to play it cool. Don’t come on too strong. He seems...reserved. I bet you’ll have better luck getting him to commit to more time together if you *don’t* ambush him from the bushes.”

But bush is right in the word *ambush*. Clearly the English language wanted me to do it. I didn't share that with Morgan, though. Instead, I said, "That's possible. I will wait, at least another day."

"At least two."

"One and a half."

She shrugged. "I tried."

Then she yawned.

"You should go," I said. "Drink your tea at home, get some good sleep."

"Yeah. I'm starting to think as soon as I walk into my bedroom I'm going to crash, tea or no tea."

"Good."

We both stood.

"When he does text," Morgan said, "which he totally will, you have my blessing to spend time alone with him."

"He passed the not-a-serial-killer test?" I asked.

"With flying colors."

We said our goodbyes, and Morgan left. Which left me thinking that the next time Gabriel and I were together, we'd be alone. No buffer. No safety rails. The prospect made my stomach flutter and my heart skip a beat—in horrified disgust, clearly, because there'd be no Morgan to share isn't-this-guy-the-worst looks with.

"How's your end of the bargain going?" Dani's voice ripped me out of my head and grounded me.

I'd forgotten she was still here.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Right. Good." She winked in an exaggerated manner. Twice. "Same. I don't know what we're talking about either."

"We're not talking about anything," I said.

"Of course." She winked again. Then she left, too.

Weirdo.

When it was time to go, I handed off the keys to Edwardo. Then at home, I strolled right through the front of the building and slid an envelope with my rent check under the door to Maxim's apartment. I had to guess what I owed since he'd basically robbed me for a chunk of it. Then I went back around the outside of the building and climbed my ladder.

Maxim wasn't lurking anywhere in my private space—I checked every corner twice to be sure—so I settled down onto my stink sofa for a rest.

As soon as my eyes snapped shut, my phone buzzed with a new text. I couldn't check it fast enough.

Sure enough, it was Gabriel.

My whole body buzzed with excitement.

I checked to see what he said.

Gabriel: My house. Seven p.m.

YASSS! I pumped a victorious fist in the air, then settled down and texted Morgan.

Me: I'm stealing your car

Morgan: Sounds exciting. Why exactly?

Me: It's on

THAT WAS VAGUE, but Morgan was my bestie. She'd know what I meant.

Morgan: Go claim your billionaire superhero!

Me: Not until 7, but yes, I will control him and make him want to spend time with me, using some kind of psychological tricks I haven't figured out yet

Me: If that doesn't work, I can always make threats

Morgan: You love threats

Me: I so do

Morgan: Don't scare him off, or you'll have to find a new muse

Me: Never

I HOPED I wouldn't scare him off. I'd try my best. Excitement bubbled through my veins. I couldn't wait.

# FOURTEEN

GABRIEL

Minutes crept by at a snail's pace while my heart hammered at twice the rate it should. From my doorstep, I stared down the dark driveway, waiting.

Once again, Layana was late.

The success of my company was effectively in the hands of an unfiltered free spirit who did whatever she wanted no matter the consequences. This was the biggest gamble of my professional career, and it left a sour taste in my mouth. It left my stomach twisted in knots and my need for order unsatisfied. Yet I had no other choice but to follow through.

Under any other circumstances, I would have gone back inside and written off the person who clearly did not respect my time. Under any other circumstances, I would never have set up this second meeting.

I hated that my hands were tied. I hated that I had no choice and no control.

Seven twelve.

The sound of thumping bass preceded a familiar sedan.

She was here. I wanted to feel relief. Instead, tension rippled across my shoulders.

Layana parked her car, twisted around, and crawled through the space between the seats. Her legs flailed a bit on the way. Once her legs disappeared, her head bobbed up. Then she threw open the back door and stepped out with all the confidence of a person who felt no shame.

Her tattered black jeans clung tightly to her legs. The v-neck of her long-sleeved white t-shirt cut down an inch too low. Peeks of skin were visible everywhere—distracting and inappropriate for a business meeting, which is what this was supposed to be.

With one arm filled with equipment and a blanket wrapped around her neck like a scarf, she shot a friendly wave in my direction with the other. The look in her icy blue eyes was anything but friendly.

I clenched my jaw.

She walked closer, swaying her hips with every step. I could feel my every muscle tightening.

“So glad you could finally make time in your busy schedule for me to do you this favor,” she said, the lilt of her voice jovial even though her words were sharp as vinegar.

“It’s not a favor when both parties benefit.”

“Of course it is. I’m providing you a service.”

“And I’m compensating you for it. Generously.” I pretended there was something on my sleeve and brushed it off, just to break free from that harsh glare. “Given the nature of our arrangement—”

“And what nature is that exactly?”

“Business,” I said, meeting her gaze once more. What had been cold was now so hot it burned through my throat. “I expect you to arrive at the agreed-upon time.”

“I never agreed to any particular time.”

That caught me by surprise.

“You shot me a text out of the blue after *ghosting me for two days*,” she said. “You should be glad I showed up at all.”

She was right of course. I’d let our conversation drop without responding. Then she’d sent me another graphic picture the next morning and nothing more. I supposed I should be grateful she hadn’t sent one this morning as well.

Unable to help myself, I corrected, “It was closer to thirty-six hours than forty-eight.”

She flinched as if I’d slapped her.

“This way,” I said, without waiting for her retort.

I could feel her stalking after me as I headed toward the gardens.

“*Given the nature of our arrangement,*” she said in a mocking tone, “you must agree that ignoring business correspondence is unprofessional. A breach of contract even.”

I stopped and twisted on my heel to face her. White-hot fury rose in my veins. “Is that what you call images of genitalia? *Business correspondence?*”

She crossed her arms and tilted her chin up. A defiant grin crossed over her cherry-red lips. “Yep.”

She was impossible. This entire situation was destined for failure, sooner rather than later. “This was a mistake.”

She dropped her arms and her smile. “You saw the post. Or your people did. We both know that’s why you agreed to see me again. No matter how mismatched and explosive this is”—she gestured between us—“it works.”

I took a moment to breathe.

That was more or less what Pamela had told me. Whatever trials I needed to endure to fix my image, I needed to suffer through. I needed to let my ego go and endure Layana Hartley. It was only for a limited time. In three weeks, the merger would be secured and I would never have to see her again.

I turned back around and forced myself to keep walking. “Not much farther.”

She skipped up beside me and matched my stride.

I didn’t look at her.

“You’re not leading me to a secret dungeon out in the dark woods, are you?” Her voice was completely conversational, lacking the levity her accusation deserved.



“Why would you say something like that?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

I gritted my teeth. “Of course I’m not. I do not have a dungeon of any kind.”

“What a shame.”

I snapped my gaze to her.

Moonlight illuminated the crinkles beside her laughing eyes, and highlighted the soft curve of her full lips.

“I imagined with such a cold exterior, you were the type to keep an exciting sex dungeon,” she said. “Now *those* pics would have gotten you some serious social clout.”

Her smile turned more tentative than before, almost beseeching. Was this meant to be a joke? Was this an ill attempt to lighten the mood?

“If I had a sex dungeon, which I don’t, I’d never allow it to be shown on social media,” I said. “Cameras and cellular devices would need to be left at the door.”

She whispered, “Now I kinda think you do have a sex dungeon.”

She fluttered her lashes, and I couldn’t help the quickening of my heart in response.

As much frustration as she caused me, these tiny moments made me feel something entirely different— something unexplained and not entirely unpleasant. As quickly as the thought had struck, I pushed it away.

“Sorry to disappoint, but I do *not* have a dungeon,” I said. “We’re here.”

My proclamation came before the gardens were in view.

Sparse solar lamps illuminated my favorite place on the property. I watched Layana’s expression as she took it all in, finding little reaction.

“There are tomatoes over here in the summer.” I pointed. “In the next row, cabbages, radishes, and collard greens. I’m

experimenting with lettuce. The spinach in particular is thriving.”

“That’s a lot of plants,” she said.

“You mentioned this photography session taking place in my garden. This is my garden.”

She just blinked at me. “I meant flowers.”

Flowers? Why? “Few flowers bloom in the winter. For my purposes, beyond what’s required for attracting bees, they’re useless all year round. I choose to nurture plants with value.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Beauty isn’t useless.”

“Isn’t it? It applies meaningless value where value isn’t deserved,” I said. “If you become stranded away from civilization—”

“Like a plane crash on a tropical island?”

“Sure. You’ve crashed on an island, and you need to secure the resources you require for survival.”

“Okay.”

“After securing shelter and fresh water, the most valuable resource you could find is the humble potato.” I walked across the garden and pointed to the potato plants. “The green stalks and leaves waste no effort on appearances, but the colorless root beneath the soil contains all the amino acids the human body needs to repair the body’s cells.”

“But french fries aren’t all you need to survive.” She crossed her arms. “You’re going to need a more balanced diet in the long term, one with a rainbow of color. I say while you’re waiting for your next potatoes to harvest, go out and find the most gorgeous fruit to ever exist—a dragon fruit with its beautiful pinks and greens. How about the almost-as-humble-as-a-potato banana? It’s sweet and filled with potassium.”

“Potatoes also have potassium.”

She was right about the necessity of eating a rainbow of fruits and vegetables, but that wasn’t my point. Dragon fruit

and bananas held less value than potatoes.

“What about strawberries and blueberries? And beauty that reaches beyond the basic needs of our stomach? What about beauty that feeds the soul—kindness and sunsets, an adorable toddler snuggling an even more adorable puppy? Rainbows and confidence? What about u—”

I stared at her, waiting for her to finish whatever word she’d been about to say.

University? Unification? Utilitarianism?

She didn’t finish her sentence. Unless....

“*Me?*” I said.

“You’re gorgeous. Don’t pretend you don’t know.” She glared at me. “And that beauty is only one check box on a mile-long list of other things that you are. Does being pretty take away from the good you’re trying to do with your trash algae?”

“Eukaryotic organisms,” I corrected, amusement forming a bubble of lightness in my chest.

“You know what I’m talking about.” She clipped her words and glared harder. “Does being pretty mean you’re not an infuriating jerkhole? No. Because you’re that, too.”

Here I thought we were going to spend our time together trying not to tear each other’s eyes out. This turn of events was wonderfully amusing.

“So you think I’m pretty and doing good work,” I prodded.

“*And* a jerkhole.”

“Noted.”

“If anything knocks points off your value, it’s the jerkholeness, not the beauty.”

“I got it. Thank you, Layana.”

“Now that I’ve crushed your weird potato argument, let’s get to work,” she said with a clap of her hands. “It’s cold out

here. And I can already tell it's going to get weird taking pics of you crouching in the dirt and smooching your tomatoes."

*Smooching my tomatoes?*

"I don't have to crouch in the dirt for that. There's a bench." I headed in that direction.

She followed.

The small patio area ahead came into view. It was an impractical space Oma and Esme had coerced me to help them build for when they visited. The solar string lights made the functional lamps in my garden look dull in comparison.

When Layana stepped into the light, she beamed like the sun itself.

"You faker." She threw an elbow into my ribs. "*This is beauty.*"

And as I watched unbridled joy overtake her usually sour expression, I couldn't help but agree.

She was a beautiful ornament formed of shattered glass. To be near her was to be scraped, cut, and battered. But as much as I hated to even think it, that didn't dull her beauty. If anything, her sharp edges made her shine brighter.

Unfortunately, I had no idea what to do with this revelation.

# FIFTEEN

LAYANA

Moonlight broke through tree branches and danced across the ground. A small brick patio waited in the shade beneath strings of fairy lights. A bench sat in the center of the space, its metal shaped in an intricate leaf pattern.

I hurried over to the gorgeous garden bench. This piece proved that Gabriel actually had taste. Okay, his personal style—his hair, his suits—those all spoke to taste, but this was one of the first touches of personality I'd seen in the surroundings he'd chosen for himself.

It was the perfect place for us to shoot.

“You've been holding out on me,” I told Gabriel.

I placed the pillow I'd stuffed into my bag onto the seat and draped the blanket I'd had around my neck over the top of the bench. A shiver rippled across my skin. Without the blanket as a scarf, I was beginning to regret leaving my coat in the car.

“This is your cozy nook, where you curl up and read in the shade on a sunny day or under the twinkling starlight,” I said. “Don't bother denying it. This is the perfect place for it.”

“It's not for me,” he said.

“What's that supposed to mean?”

He snapped his gaze away and shoved his hands in his pockets. In that perfectly fitted suit, he looked as in command of the situation as always. Still, discomfort radiated off of him.

“Where would you like to set up your tripod?” he asked.

Why was he ignoring my question? If the bench wasn't for him, who was it for? Wait...did he have a wife he hadn't mentioned? That couldn't be it. She'd be all over the internet, the envy of every woman with a pulse. Except...what if *she* didn't have a pulse?

Was this a shrine to his *dead wife*? Was Gabriel Stryker a widower? That would explain his apathy. She had likely been a lovely woman brimming with inner and outer beauty, and after losing her, Gabriel purged every reminder of her from his life, all the color and happiness.

All that remained was this bench in her honor, safely set away from everyday view, but waiting for him when he sought that connection and memory.

What a sad story, a sad life.

I wanted to ask, to pry, to delve deeper into what made him tick. But also, asking if he was a prick because the love of his life had died wasn't exactly the best way to get today's mission on track.

So, swallowing all of my questions—*for now*—I let him change the subject. “The camera should be at an angle from the bench, but also focusing on it.”

I got to work setting up my ring light and tripod. “You never did tell me—did you see my post?”

“Yes.”

“What did you think?” I turned to look at him.

Something flashed across his face, an expression I couldn't comprehend.

“I'm told the reception has been positive,” he said in a flat tone. “Your post is doing what we need it to do.”

I knew that without asking. “But what did *you* think?”

He clenched his jaw, like this was the most frustrating thing I could possibly ask, which was absolutely ridiculous.

“I don’t understand your choice in caption,” he said. “What do I have to do with the contestants on your show?”

I blinked at him. “I implied you might be joining our friend group. That’s a nice thing.”

“But I’m not a part of your group.”

*“Obviously.”*

He pointed to the bench. “Do you want me to sit?”

I wanted to explode at him. Instead, I gritted my teeth and forced my lips into a smile. “Sure. So you don’t like the photo?”

He took a seat on the bench, as stiffly as possible. “No.”

*“Why not?”* He was impossible. It was the perfect picture, showing freaking emotion, which was a real feat given the subject. Just remembering the look on his face, the way he’d been looking *at me*, made a fresh wave of heat cross over my skin and I forgot to be cold.

“I’m not that person,” he said, his voice softening.

Looking at him now, seeing him gear down instead of amp up, a pang of regret wriggled through my brain. “You’re not what person?”

He paused a moment as if considering what to say. His whole body went even more rigid than before, like he’d put on an invisible layer of armor.

He said, “The guy who joins a group.”

That’s not what he meant. No way was that what he meant. He was putting up his guard and holding back.

“Why do you do that?” I asked. If it sounded more like an accusation than I’d intended, but so be it.

“I’m not doing anything but sitting where you told me to sit.”

“You know that’s not what I’m talking about. You’re being weird.”

We stared at each other. My blood pumped faster and faster through my veins.

He wasn't responding. Frustrated, I continued, "We're supposed to be working together but you keep pulling away and shutting me out. Tell me the real reason you don't like the picture...or I'm out."

*Why did I say that?* The last thing I wanted was to stop spending time with my frustrating writing muse. I'd be losing the one thing I really wanted. What if he called me on my bluff?

Fingers trembling, I started taking down the ring light.

"Stop," he said.

I froze, closed my eyes, and whispered a silent prayer.

"This arrangement is difficult for me." His voice was gruff, like the stakes of this were as high for him as they were for me. Like *he cared*.

*Thank goodness.*

"I like order. I like control," he said. "I believe all that should matter is the work. Not appearances, not how personable I am or who I choose to spend my time with."

"The spotlight can be exhausting," I said, letting go of the light.

"Yes."

"I *need* our arrangement to continue," he said. "My life's work depends on it."

I needed this to work, too.

"Then let's try to give each other some grace," I said.

"I would like that."

"Assume the best intentions, try not to snap at each other."

"Agreed."

I was the one setting the terms, but I was a little afraid I'd be the one to break them. At least I'd said *assume* and *try*. That left plenty of wiggle room for screw ups.



“All right, let’s get some pics in before it’s pitch black out. We don’t want it to end up looking like we’re going for a horror vibe.”

He just blinked at me.

“You’re too stiff,” I told him.

He adjusted slightly in his seat, clearly unsure how to be not stiff.

I dug through my bag, and pulled out my battered copy of *The Great Gatsby*.

“Give me your jacket,” I told him.

He stripped it off and handed it to me. I handed him the book, and put his suit jacket on. No reason for both of us to be cold.

But the cool, masculine scent of him washed over me. His jacket smelled like sunbathing on the front of a yacht in the Mediterranean, like being cooled by the sea breeze, wearing freshly washed linen pants, and sipping brandy. It took me away to a happy place that belonged to someone else, and made my brain the ittiest bittiest bit fuzzy.

I cleared my throat. “Now lie down on the bench and pretend to read.”

He lay down, but it looked hecka awkward and not at all like he was actually reading. It wasn’t just his stiffness, either. It was the formal clothes. It was like I was *Weekend At Bernie’s*-ing him.

“No one relaxes in a suit,” I told him. “Next time I want you to wear something casual. *Not the bee running gear*. Do you own any normal clothes?”

“These are normal clothes,” he said, his brows knitting together.

I was doing it again. I was antagonizing him without intending to.

“If you don’t own jeans and a t-shirt, use some of your billions and buy some. Or have one of your minions do it.”

“You think I have minions? As if I’m some kind of tyrant?” He raised a brow, and I could swear there was amusement dancing in his eyes.

“More like a super villain,” I said, not at all meaning it, but unable to help myself.

“Incapable of purchasing or owning normal human clothes?” There was a bite to his words this time, punctuating the *normal human* part.

“Human? Absolutely. Normal? Not so much,” I said. “No one interesting is normal though, so don’t take that as an insult.”

“I’ll try not to.” A dimple formed on his cheek. *Since when did he have dimples?*

I raced toward him with my phone to capture the moment.

His eyes grew wide and he popped up on the bench, clearly startled by my charging him like a linebacker.

I sighed, and dropped down onto the bench beside him. “I missed it.”

“Missed what?”

“Your dimple.”

“I don’t have dimples.”

“You only think you don’t because when you look in the mirror you scowl,” I said. Then immediately I regretted it. I was supposed to be behaving, pretending I could be nice.

“I don’t scowl in the mirror.”

“You don’t seem the type who’d smile either,” I said.

“Why would I smile?”

“Out of happiness, a pleased feeling that you’re looking good, a mental high five for being a hot awesome person before you walk out the door in the morning.”

“Is that what you do?”

“Everyone does,” I said. “Everyone but you.”

“I don’t think so.”

I shrugged.

My shoulder brushed his arm.

All of a sudden, my body seemed to realize how close he was, how firm his arm felt, how if I even breathed funny, my body would brush against his again.

And that amazing smell that was all over his jacket? It was even more all over him.

Instead of sunbathing on a yacht, he smelled like diving headfirst and swimming in the sea. He smelled like contentment, like everything my life wasn’t.

My brain went fuzzy as heat sizzled across my skin. I could happily drown in that sea with no regrets.

All at once, I became suddenly aware of every nerve, every inch of skin where we were almost touching.

My body did an involuntary thing as if my muscles knew one of two things was about to happen. One—I was going to screw up our new-found truce by shoving my tongue in his mouth. Or two—I needed space, stat.

My legs decided on the latter, stiffened, and shoved up off the bench. And then reflexively, everything clenched, pulling my legs out from under me.

And I tripped.

In slow motion, I reminded myself this was not who I was, not how I behaved. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before.

I fell to the ground, hit my shoulder, and lay there curled and stunned.

Embarrassment and confusion left me in a state of paralysis, unable to move or flee or hide. I couldn’t comprehend what had just happened or how exactly I’d ended up on the ground.

But then the catalyst to this catastrophe reemerged. Gabriel was there, on the ground, leaning over me. His hand was on

my arm. He was speaking words.

His face was close, lined with concern as he stared at me.

Apparently my body's response to his unnaturally attractive pheromones was to flail and throw myself to the ground. This was a new low, even for me.

"Layana." His touch was as gentle as his voice.

For self-preservation, I made the only move I could. I shoved my phone between us and snapped a bunch of pictures, blinding him with the flash.

Then I laughed it off as he pulled back, and righted myself to my feet.

He was sitting on the ground, and I kept taking pictures.

"Just like that. It's perfect. So funny. What a great joke," I said.

He ran his hands through his hair in that frustrated way he did.

Before he could call me out on my clear lie, I said, "You know what, I think you should keep the light and camera stand here for next time. Clearly we have done enough work for today."

"I have dinner inside," he said, still sitting on the patio while I towered over him.

"I'm not hungry," I said. This was not a lie. I probably would have been hungry if my whole innards hadn't turned into a writhing, twisted mess. But that was neither here nor there.

"Layana—"

Somehow, my name on his lips sounded like a warning, a curse, and somehow a show of concern. It was the last of those I couldn't handle.

"See you next time," I said. Then I booked it out of there before he could call me out on whatever my unhinged behavior could be classified as. I ran away before he could tell

me this arrangement wasn't working or that he didn't want to see me anymore.

Next time I'd be better prepared. I just needed to inoculate myself, remind my body and brain that I hated Gabriel Stryker and he hated me. Kissing wasn't even in the realm of possibility, so there was no need to worry about that happening.

It wasn't until I got home that I realized I'd accidentally stolen his suit jacket. I folded it carefully and set it on top of my dresser.

I needed to reread all the worst articles I could find about him. I needed to dig deeper into his flaws to refresh my hate and regain my power.

But first, I needed to write.

# SIXTEEN

GABRIEL

The street lamps were spaced close enough together that I was never truly in darkness during my morning run. My muscles moved on autopilot as I returned to the same path I had tread for years before Layana crashed into my life like a wrecking ball.

At the time, I'd thought there was no alternative but to avoid the unpredictably explosive obstacle and forever alter my course. I'd held onto this belief until yesterday, when everything changed.

We'd negotiated a truce.

I'd scared the woman I'd thought was fearless.

She'd run away.

Now I found myself altering my routine despite my reluctance to do so. I ran toward Eterni-Tea in the hopes of seeing her. I carried her blanket wrapped around my neck like a scarf, just as she had done last night—a completely impractical action that offered me an excuse to speak with her.

I breathed in the hints of vanilla and hazelnut that saturated the soft fabric.

None of these actions made any sense to me, which was entirely unsettling.

I thrived on order, on sameness, on knowing exactly what to expect. Changes to that routine were distractions, energy wasted on meaninglessness when I should be focused on my work.

Yet a spark of nervous anticipation filled my stomach as I neared the twenty-four-hour café. My resolve wavered. I didn't have to stop, didn't have to see or speak with her. She hadn't posted a photograph yet. She was busy, and likely unprepared for me to drop in. She may not even be working this morning. Perhaps I should wait until she texted me requesting a future appointment. Of course that's what I should do. It was ridiculous that I had considered otherwise.

I watched the flickering sign grow closer. I held my breath as I ran past.

Then it was done.

I'd gone by exactly as I used to, without confrontation, without alteration to my day. My nerves settled as relief took over, with perhaps a tinge of something darker. But there was no reason for regret.

Everything was as it was meant to be for the rest of my run. Nothing was out of place. No surprises awaited me as I reached my building or rode the elevator up to my office, either. I tucked Layana's blanket into my desk drawer. Then I showered in my private bathroom and changed into a fresh suit, every event happening exactly the way it was meant to.

As soon as I stepped across the threshold to my lab, I lost myself in the flow of science.

I ran samples through the regularly scheduled tests and recorded the latest numbers. No significant changes noted. The droplet I examined under the microscope remained structurally stable.

Adjustments to pH and nitrogen levels did nothing to make the sample react.

I considered the pale green fluid in the flask. I'd described the murky yellowish green color to Jasper as pistachio. Compared to a similar, undomesticated sample, the shade was unnaturally pale.

But there was nothing natural about my genetically engineered strain.

Still, color was not a factor I had attempted to alter. Perhaps that had been a mistake. In most circumstances, color was simply a visual measure of reflected light, but in eukaryotic organisms, it indicated levels of chlorophyll-a.

Layana's voice played, unbidden in my head. *"Dragon fruit with its beautiful pinks and greens. Blueberries and strawberries."*

She was right about color indicating value in vegetation. I shouldn't have dismissed her point.

*"What about beauty that feeds the soul—kindness and sunsets? Rainbows and confidence? What about you? You're gorgeous. Beauty is only one check on a mile-long list of other things that you are. Does being pretty take away from the good you're trying to do with your trash algae?"*

She'd complimented my work in the least flattering way possible, and in turn I'd lied to her about why her social media post bothered me. I didn't care that she was pretending that I was a part of her friend group. I cared that she'd captured me in a photograph in a way that turned my stomach. I didn't want the world to see me like that. *I* didn't want to see myself like that.

The last I'd checked, she hadn't posted another photo. I dreaded that she soon would.

I closed my eyes and took a breath. This wasn't the time to indulge in such thoughts.

Perhaps there was something I could alter to change the production of chlorophyll-a. Perhaps temperature was the limiting factor. The culture was currently sitting at twenty-three degrees Celsius—optimal for most microbial growth.

Like every other factor, the ideal temperature for this genetically engineered strain was unknown.

I turned up the temperature on the sample case by a single degree.

The alarm on my watch alerted me to the time. I scrubbed my arms in the sink and pulled the lunch my chef service had prepared for me from the mini fridge.



I set a fork on the folded napkin to the right of the box, the reusable water bottle two inches to the left and two back.

Before I could even lift the lid to the lunch box, a frustratingly distinct knock came from the door.

“Enter, Pamela,” I said, letting my irritation tinge my words.

“Did you receive my text?” She shot me a look I had never seen on her face before—alarm.

“No. I’ve been in the lab. And as you know, this is my lunch break. Please return during the allotted—”

“You shouldn’t have silenced your phone. I tried to warn you,” she whispered. She snapped her lips closed and transformed her expression of panic to her usual look of professional composure.

A man followed her into my office. White hair mixed with gray atop his head and over his lip and across his brow. The deep smile lines around his eyes belonged on an older face than his. He carried himself like a relaxed golfer strolling onto the course, a look that matched his khakis and powder pink polo shirt.

Immediately, my muscles tensed. Who was this stranger invading my space? He had to be important to explain Pamela’s behavior.

The man looked around with a smile on his face, a smile that grew larger as it snapped to me.

“You must be the infamous Gabriel Stryker,” he said.

*Infamous?* My reputation revolved around my social ineptitude, nothing nefarious. Either he didn’t understand the meaning of the word, or he knew something I didn’t.

“I’m afraid you have me at a disadvantage,” I said, in an even tone.

“Gabriel, this is Peter Daniels,” Pamela said. “From Biotabloom Dynamics.”

“Sorry to drop in like this,” Mr. Daniels said in a way that implied he wasn’t sorry at all. He ran a finger across my bookshelf, touching every book’s spine. “I was in the neighborhood.”

Unlikely.

He dropped his hands and turned his perpetually amused—or possibly genuinely jolly—attention back to me. “After a heated discussion with my wife and teenage daughter last night, I just had to see for myself.”

“See what?” I asked.

“What kind of person you are.” He raised a brow.

We stared at each other, me from my seat behind my desk, him strolling about my office as if he had a right to touch anything he pleased.

This was my lunch time. Routine dictated I should be eating my lunch right now. I refused to stand and accommodate whatever it was he wanted. Clearly this was an inopportune time from me, which didn’t seem to bother him in the slightest.

I’d be cordial, but I wouldn’t bend.

“I understand you’ve befriended the cast of a reality show,” he said.

“Layana Hartley from *What the What?*” Pamela offered.

“Mmm,” he said, and waited like there was something I was supposed to say next.

I spun the waiting water bottle on the desk. “I know her.”

He nodded and stuck his hands in his pockets. “I also come bearing an invitation.”

And baring his teeth apparently, as he smiled wider. He pulled no envelope from his pocket, so whatever this invitation was, it was the worst kind—an informal one.

“If you don’t have plans over the weekend, a few of the execs and their families are getting together for a skiing trip.

We'd love to have you join us. You'll get a chance to get to know the Biotabloom Dynamics family."

I was supposed to get ten days before I had to interact with any of these people if they attended the gala, nineteen until our meeting if not. He expected me to drop everything and spend what should be work time and free time with them?

"I'm working Saturday," I said.

"We'll have to check with his assistant, see what appointments can be moved around," Pamela said.

Mr. Daniels's smile dropped a bit. "It would be a great opportunity. We hope you can make it." He turned for the door, and casually added, "Oh, and bring your friend if she's free."

The comment was added as if it meant nothing, but I knew exactly what all of this meant.

Layana's post was why they wanted to *get to know me*. And she was expected to join.

I didn't want anything to do with any of it.

"We'll be in touch," Pamela said, as she ushered the uninvited guest back into the hall.

Finally, peace returned. I popped the lid to my lunch box.

Pamela returned and sat down across from me.

I sighed.

"You have to go," she said. "And you have to bring the girl."

"I don't *have* to do anything but my job."

She leveled me with a look that I should have seen coming. "You do if you want this merger."

I knew that. It was why my stomach felt like it was filled with stone.

"It's a huge risk to go, though, too," she said. "A weekend is too much face-to-face time. We could commit to a shortened

stay. Perhaps a dinner plus outdoor time where minimum conversation would be required.”

“That would be preferable,” I agreed.

She gave me a nod and rose from her seat. “I’ll see to it.”

I said nothing as she left.

I felt nothing but a quickly growing sense of dread. There was no chance of escaping this forced social situation. I was going to have to go. I would be expected to shmooze.

There was nothing I hated more than shmoozing.

My stomach twisted further. There was no way I was going to be able to eat now.

I tucked my lunch back into the fridge and tried to conceive of a plan that could release me from this obligation. Certainly Jasper would gladly pretend we had prior plans. Perhaps bodily injury would suffice as an excuse.

My phone buzzed in my pocket.

It was a text from Layana. All other thoughts fell away as I opened the text.

Layana: Good morning, sunshine

ACCOMPANYING the message was an image of a penis. The hair above was shaved into a puffy ball and dyed orange. A red ball was affixed to the head, and a bowtie strung to the testicles. This genitalia was fashioned as a circus clown.

A strange sound came from my throat, a near choke on my own saliva.

Me: It’s afternoon. And it would be a better afternoon without the visual.

Layana: No. A good penis in the morning makes the day

Me: It’s still afternoon.

Layana: Not on my schedule. When can I see you?  
Are you free tonight?

Me: There's something we need to discuss.

Layana: That sounds ominous. You're not breaking  
up with me, are you? Is it because I flopped on the  
ground like a salmon with no sense of direction?

I SHOOK MY HEAD.

Me: No. I enjoyed your flop.

Layana: Ouch

Me: It made you more human.

Layana: As opposed to what?

I DIDN'T KNOW what to say to that.

Me: Why didn't you post a new photo yet?

Layana: They were all garbage

I BREATHED A SIGH OF RELIEF.

Layana: We need other people around. For sure

Me: You can come over at seven and bring your  
friend.

Layana: Let's make it nine. And I'll be there

IF WE COULD CONTINUE HONORING our truce and  
behave civilly until then, and if she actually agreed to

accompany me, I would need to spend an extended period of time with Layana on this ski trip.

I peeked into the drawer where I'd stored Layana's blanket. The memory of the vanilla and hazelnut scent of it filled my brain. I needed to return it to her.

No matter the circumstances, there was no question that Saturday was going to be torture.

# SEVENTEEN

LAYANA

Even though I'd paid my rent, and even though there'd been no further incidents with Maxim since I'd found him creeping in the dark on my sofa five days ago, I still felt uneasy stepping into my apartment complex's lobby. My skin itched with the sensation of being watched. The little hairs on my arms stood on end, tiny sensors waiting for a shift in the air that would alert me to my enemy's presence.

Janet, from 207, was standing at her mailbox, flipping through a pile of envelopes. She had on her favorite velvet overalls over a fuzzy sweater, and no shoes.

"Hey," I said, as I approached my own box, four boxes to the left of hers.

"Oh, hi," she said. "I wish I could pretend mail wasn't a thing. Then the bills would never find me."

I smiled at her. "Wouldn't that be nice?"

She leaned in closer to me and looked around conspiratorially. "Do you know what's going on with Maxim?"

Whatever hackles were—mine rose. "Speaking the demon's name gives him power."

She laughed, loudly.

It startled me a bit. I opened my box and pulled the contents out.

“Speak of the devil and the devil appears?” She smacked her thigh and continued with her laughter. “You’re so funny, Layana. I swear, you—”

The words died in her throat. Her face went white.

I turned slowly, following her gaze over my shoulder.

Maxim stomped into the lobby, with his furry arms bare, and his stupid bowl cut hair covering his eyes. Somehow he looked even more terrible than usual. Dare I say haunted, as if he hadn’t slept in a week.

I would have been pleased to see a little misfortune coming his way had the look in his eye not been so freaking predatory.

*Wait...had he read my Tragic Tank Topper post?*

He shoved out his sausage finger in our direction. “You two,” he snapped.

My shoulders went stiff. My butt clenched. I stuck my hand in my messenger bag and found the bear spray.

Something weird happened to Maxim’s face. His usual sneer morphed into...slobbering dog mouth? He shoved out his bottom lip.

*It quivered.*

He looked an entirely new kind of pathetic.

“Did you get a weird envelope in your box?” he asked. “With no markings? And full of white powder?”

“Someone sent you anthrax,” I said in a flat tone. Even though Maxim was terrible, I doubted anyone would actually try to kill him. Plus I was pretty sure the postal service had systems in place to check for that kind of thing.

“*No.*” Janet’s mouth dropped open. Quickly she shielded her face from Maxim with a fan of mail. She mouthed at me *O-M-G*.

“That’s bad, right?” Maxim asked. “You’re probably not supposed to taste anthrax.”



“You *tasted* it?” Janet dropped the mail down.

He wasn’t stupid enough to lick the mystery white powder...was he?

“You’re not supposed to do anything with it,” I said. “Except turn it over to the police.”

Tears welled in his eyes. “I opened it up, thought it might be...a nice surprise and...” The tears fell. He choked up and snotted and rubbed his nose with his hairy wrist.

“I snorted some and it didn’t feel right so I licked it to see the taste and it was sweet. The good stuff isn’t supposed to be sweet.” His chest heaved. His eyes passed between us, wide with panic. “*Is anthrax sweet?*”

“How do you expect us to know?” Janet asked.

“Anthrax probably tastes like sugar cookies,” I told Maxim.

He twisted on his heel and hustled in the opposite direction while murmuring to himself. I caught words like “hospital” and “never trust free drugs.” Then the sound of a door slam echoed down the hall.

Janet stared wide-eyed at me. “Do you really think anthrax is sweet?”

“No. I’m not a poison expert, but whatever he got, it’s probably powdered sugar.”

“No matter what it is, he’s an idiot for eating it.” Janet shook her head. “Who eats mail powder?”

“Maxim, apparently.” I stuck my stack of bills in my bag, gave Janet a wave, and headed out the front door of the building feeling a little lighter.

I circled around to the alley and used my rope ladder to return to my apartment. Given my latest interaction with Maxim, and the fact that I’d actually paid my rent, the whole ladder and security bar on the window were probably overkill. The thumbtacks on the floor definitely were. I’d stepped on one of them the other day, and that sucked pretty hard. So, I cleaned those up.

I moved my sofa away from the door and back across the room to where it belonged. I left the window bar and fire ladder in place, because it really was a fire hazard to not have a ladder there. The multiple locks I'd installed on the door would be enough to keep Maxim from sneaking in again. Plus, he had his own problems to keep him occupied.

It felt good getting my apartment back in order. And then I spotted Gabriel's jacket folded nice and neat on top of my dresser. I should give it back.

Later.

I had enough to carry with me this time, even if most of that baggage was psychological.

I left through the door for the first time in forever and took Morgan's car, which she was still letting me borrow until she needed it tomorrow morning.

On my drive to Gabriel's place, I couldn't help but replay our last interactions in my head—primarily me throwing myself on the ground. I'd always been confident with men. I'd never ducked out of any kind of confrontation out of fear. *So what happened?*

It was the weirdness. It had to be.

Things between me and Gabriel didn't fit safely into any one box. I kinda hated him, but I also kinda wanted to kiss him. I never wanted to see him again, but also if I didn't see him every single day, then my words dried up and writer's block smashed me into the ground like a giant foot dropping down from the sky and relentlessly bashing me until I was flattened into a piece of blank, wordless paper.

Why did being near him have to feel so complicated?

Why was our first time alone together so...ugh, I didn't even know. There was no reason I shouldn't have been able to just take the pictures, act like a normal human, and then leave.

Except I had taken some pictures.

And I'd told him they were unusable.

That was a partial truth. Some of the photos—the ones where I made him lie down on the bench—were terrible. He looked so stiff that it was like he'd never lounged before and didn't know how.

But then there were the ones when I fell.

The photos of him leaning over me were filled with emotion. The look on his face was too...I didn't know. Something. They felt intimate, too private to share with the world. So I was keeping them to myself. I should have deleted them, but I hadn't. There was no good reason not to, either. I just didn't do it.

Maybe I'd delete them later.

Before I knew it, I arrived at Gabriel's big-walled neighborhood. The guy at the gate greeted me and let me in without question, as if I actually belonged here.

I drove through the artificially bright streets, past all the fancy mansions that looked exactly the same. Then came the dark, curving path that led to Gabriel's place. Nervousness prickled my skin and made my chest tight.

As the cement cube came into view, I decided it wasn't really like a prison at all. It wasn't depressing. It was simply unpretentious and uninterested in appealing to traditional standards. How could a man who valued beauty so little be expected to prioritize beauty in his home? He couldn't.

Gabriel Stryker had evolved beyond desire or the need to appreciate the world around him. At least, he didn't appreciate it in the same way the rest of us did. I wasn't sure if that made him better than the rest of us, or a little sad.

As I parked, I spotted a man standing under the porch light.

He was totally rocking a black jacket, plus a simple t-shirt and jeans, like each piece was custom made to show off his form—all broad shoulders and strong arms.

That hottie was Gabriel, and he was walking this way. Somehow his confident stride made him appear less stuck up now that he wasn't wearing a suit. It made him look more like

a rockstar. *Jerks can wear jeans, too*, my brain reminded my ovaries. I bet plenty of rockstars were jerks.

I rolled down the window. “Someone nailed the assignment.”

“What assignment?”

“You’re looking all casual,” I said.

“I own a variety of clothing.”

The facade shattered, I said, “Cool. Get in.”

He stopped walking in the middle of the driveway. “Into your car?”

“Actually it’s Morgan’s car, but yes.” What else would I be talking about? My spaceship?

“Why are you driving your friend’s car?” he asked, still just standing there.

“Because she lent it to me and I don’t have one. *Get. In.*”

He finally went back into motion, walked around the car, and climbed into the passenger seat. And just like that, even though cold air whooshed its way in with him, the little sedan felt ten degrees warmer.

“Are we going somewhere?” Gabriel asked.

“Yep.”

He pulled something out of his pocket, then strapped in. He held an envelope out to me.

“What’s this?” I asked, accepting.

“Payment for yesterday’s work.”

I shouldn’t take it. I was holding out on him with the whole posting thing. “I didn’t put up a post.”

“You came to our appointment. You get paid.”

I wanted to argue, but also, *money*. Why should I shoot myself in the foot? I’d make it up to him. Tonight I’d get more than one usable pic, and I’d post them all while enjoying the safe company of my friends.

I tucked the envelope into my messenger bag and started driving.

“If you need a ride somewhere, I have a driver who can take you,” Gabriel said, as if I wasn’t already driving myself.

I tried to think of an occasion I’d seen him climbing out of the back of a limo. Nope. I couldn’t think of a single time. I shot a glance in his direction. “You have a driver?”

He was staring at me. Why was he staring at me?

“Yes,” he said.

“But you always run everywhere. I thought the bee suit was your car.”

“I have a driver for when I need one.”

“A driver you don’t use.” It was kind of a question, but more of a statement.

“I use his services when I require them.”

“But you rarely require them since you’re offering those services to me. Why even have a driver if you don’t need one?”

His impassive expression told me nothing.

“He needs the work.” Gabriel ran a hand through his brown locks, mussing them up. “Where are you taking me?”

He was paying someone to be a driver even if he didn’t need a driver...because the guy needed the paycheck. Just like he insisted on paying me even if I didn’t do anything to help him. It didn’t make sense.

“Why do you like throwing your money away?” I asked.

He knitted his brows together. “I don’t throw it away.”

“Is it a charity thing? You feel sorry for whoever this driver guy is? And me?” I wasn’t offended, even though I knew he could take my question that way. I was simply curious as to why he’d do something that made zero sense to me.

“I don’t pity you.” He said, his voice tight. “I pay you for the service you provide, as we discussed prior to beginning our arrangement. Where are you taking me?”

*Where are you taking me? Where are you taking me?* I shook my head. He couldn’t just go along for the ride. “I’m taking you out. To the bar with my friends. It’ll be fun.”

He stiffened in his seat.

“They won’t bite,” I said, trying not to take it personally. “They’re nice people. You’ll like them.”

Even on short notice on a Wednesday night, Juno and Chester were both happy to drop everything and come hang out just because I asked them to. I would have invited Morgan, too, but she had finally gotten off of work early and was looking forward to a hot date with Oscar.

Gabriel didn’t say anything for the rest of the drive.

He didn’t ask any questions when I parked two blocks down on Maple Street, or as we walked toward the bar that had been the WTW crew hangout since day one of filming the reality show. The rollercoaster of shared thrills and trauma required drinks.

I tried to imagine what it was like seeing this place for the first time through Gabriel’s eyes. Broken glass, a used adult diaper, and other less discernible garbage littered the sidewalk in front of the bar. The bar’s name, *Pour Decisions*, flickered in fluorescent light above the door. It was maybe not the best first impression, but it’s what’s inside that counts.

I took a hesitant glance at Gabriel, ready to defend what was unquestionably the most awesome bar in Epiphany.

His stance was open, his expression unreadable. He said, “Looks like the kind of place Esme would work.”

*“Esme?”*

He opened the door and held it for me.

Too many things were happening at once. He wasn’t making a joke about how entering would be a poor decision or insisting it was too much of a dive for him to enter. I guessed I

should have assumed he'd make a joke. But still, this was not what I'd expected from a stuck-up rich guy who wore suits that cost more than everything I owned.

*And who was Esme?*

I crossed my arms and glared at him as he held the door. Why wasn't he telling me who this woman was?

Oh. My.

Esme had to be his dead wife, the one he'd built the garden patio for. I let my arms drop, gave him a quick apologetic smile, and walked inside.

Dim lighting, sticky floors, and a crush of dancing patrons greeted me like a warm hug. I grabbed Gabriel's wrist and dragged him through the crowd toward the corner where our usual table stood.

Halfway there, a head of bright pink hair popped up in my face.

"LayLay!" Juno pulled me into a big hug. "I'm so glad you called. I'll tell you, with the reaction to my last video, I could really use a drink. Or ten."

Even though her words implied something was wrong, her expression was pure delight.

"You posted a new video?" How could I have missed that? I tried to check in every day. "I'll have to watch it. Things have been weird and busy. Sorry I haven't watched it yet. What was the reaction? What happened?"

Her bright eyes flicked to Gabriel. Right—introductions.

"Gabriel, this is Juno." I scanned the bar and found a tall slender shape lingering in the dark corner by our table. I pointed. "*That's* Chester."

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance," Gabriel told Juno with his flattest tone.

"Same." Juno's smile grew. "I saw on social that you're joining the crew."

I'd upset him by posting that.

“It’s a paid arrangement.” As soon as the words left my mouth, I regretted them. There was something more than just a financial transaction between us, and it felt wrong to sum it up that way. Though I couldn’t put my finger on exactly what that something more was, and it was safer not to think about it.

“Always happy to help with the hustle,” Juno said. “Is this a branding thing, trying to shake the obvious comparison to Justin Theroux?”

Gabriel said, “I don’t look like him.”

Juno chuckled. “If you say so.”

On the surface, he most definitely did. I’d thought so when we met, but it was harder for me to see it now. I didn’t get bad boy vibes at all from him anymore. Even though I still hardly knew anything about him, I knew he was ridiculously focused on his work, so much so that he didn’t seem to have a life beyond it. It was like he didn’t want to, which made me feel a little sorry for him.

Connection to other people was everything. And Gabriel didn’t seem to understand that.

“What do you do for a living?” Gabriel asked Juno as the three of us headed in Chester’s direction.

“I’m a food influencer,” she said.

“You...work with restaurants?” Gabriel asked.

“Wouldn’t that be something?” Juno chuckled. “I make videos about food.”

“Who are you attempting to influence? What are you trying to get them to do?”

“Part of it is sales, where I’m given a product and I show people how great it is. The rest is trying to make beautiful, tasty recipes that connect with my audience.”

We reached the table, but Chester wasn’t here. He must have wandered off.

“So your business is marketing,” Gabriel said.



“And content,” Juno said. “It’s an all-in-one kind of job, where I do all the parts. Except Chester helps film.”

It surprised me that I didn’t feel a pang of jealousy over that. I guessed since I’d been actually writing, I hadn’t missed helping Juno in the same way I had before.

Chester slipped in beside Juno at the table and set down a tray of shots.

Gabriel gave him a nod.

Chester wiggled his fingers in hello.

“Are you happy?” Gabriel asked Juno.

It surprised me. I didn’t expect that kind of question to pass through Gabriel’s lips.

“Sort of,” Juno said. “Nothing’s ever quite everything you hope it’d be, you know?”

Gabriel gave her a small nod. “Excuse me a moment, please.”

He headed toward the bar. I eyed the shots on the tray. I couldn’t partake since I was driving. That was probably for the best anyway, or I was likely to do worse than throw myself on the ground.

Gabriel returned with a tall glass. Was it beer? There weren’t any bubbles.

I leaned over to give it a sniff—water. That was definitely *not* going to loosen him up for fun group pics. But at least he and Juno seemed to be getting along so far.

“What about you, Gabriel?” Juno asked. “What do you do for a living? After I saw Lay’s post with you tagged, I did a little digging. But I have no idea what any of the science jargon actually means.”

“I’m engineering an organism that will reduce inorganic matter buildup in waste depositories.”

I blinked at him.

“That’s amazing,” Juno said. “We’re taking pictures of cupcakes and you’re out there doing things that matter.”

We were doing things that mattered, too, even if not in the same way. My writing mattered to me. And I’d thought her food influencing gig mattered to her.

“Value comes in many forms, including that which feeds the soul,” Gabriel said.

He turned his head. His eyes locked with mine. Staring into those dark irises, I could swear I almost saw warmth.

My brain sputtered and kick-started. Did he just reference the argument we’d had about beauty, and in doing so imply that I was right?

Heat slowly rose up my cheeks. I snapped my attention away, turning it back to Juno. “You said you had backlash on your last post. What happened?”

“It’s the sponsor—Paprikatown.” She sighed, her smile finally faltering. She searched my expression for recognition.

I shrugged.

“They make knives here in the US,” Chester said.

“Seemed like a good company, and the founder—Nylon Johanson—seemed nice enough, too.”

“His name’s Nylon? Like...the material they use to make tights?”

“Yes,” Juno said.

That right there was the first red flag. Anyone who was born with the name *Nylon* was bound to be a monster.

“A video of him went live within minutes of my sponsored video. Nylon....” The color drained from her face.

Chester looked from her to Gabriel to me. Then after one more look at Juno, he said, “Nylon accidentally butt filmed himself robbing a sex toy store.”

“Butt filmed?” I could not believe what I was hearing. “Like a butt-dial?”

“Except he started a live stream.” Chester nodded solemnly. “The phone fell out of his pocket, hit the ground, and clearly showed his face when the tights he wore on his head split down the seam over the center of his face. Nylon was foiled by his nylons.”

“I pulled my video, but it’s too late,” Juno said.

“The masses are posting hate on every single Glitter video,” Chester said.

“I’m so sorry,” I told Juno. “What can I do to help?”

“I...an apology piece. I already made it, but I need to rewatch a few times, make sure I didn’t screw something up in that.” She licked her lips and filled her lungs with a deep breath. “If I send it to you, can you look at it for me?”

“Of course,” I said.

“Thanks.” She threw back two shots, slid her signature smile back on her face, and grabbed Chester’s hand. “I have to dance or I’m going to scream.”

I gave her arm a squeeze of commiseration as she and Chester disappeared into the crowd.

And then Gabriel and I were alone.

“I can’t imagine how devastating this has to be for Juno,” I said. “That channel is everything to her.”

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Um, yes.” I was a bit annoyed that he’d question that.

“She seems to be in search of an out.”

“Why would you say that?”

“She implied she’d prefer to work for a restaurant.”

“No she didn’t,” I said. Except...what if she had? She’d been venting, sure, and this whole thing was obviously super stressful. But she was living her best life, wasn’t she?

“I have something to ask you,” Gabriel said.

“If it’s about life goals, I’m going to need to take a shot first. And then you’re going to have to drive.”

“It’s not.” He clenched his jaw and leaned closer.

My breath caught, which was for the best, because I could *not* let myself sniff him. His pheromones were more intoxicating than alcohol.

“Would you be willing to accompany me to an event on Saturday?” he asked.

“An event?” *Why?*

“I must go to Alpine Aurora.”

“The swanky ski resort?” I’d definitely heard of Alpine Aurora ski resort. It was the fanciest vacation destination in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Gabriel gave a curt nod. “It’s for the merger. It has to go well. I need you to act as my intermediary—make me appear personable by association. Please.”

I’d always wanted to go there. But this was very different from any of our other arrangements so far. This was travel. “How long?”

“One day. We return after the required socialization.”

One day socializing and taking pictures in the Blue Ridge Mountains sounded like a dream. Spending that one day in Gabriel’s company made it a whole lot less appealing. What if we ended up tearing each other’s hair out? What would *that* do to his image?

“That’s a long drive for one day,” I said.

“We’ll have a driver. It’ll be fine.”

I wanted to say yes. I really wanted to say yes. But this whole arrangement could end up going south fast and then we’d be stuck with each other in close quarters on the drive back.

“I don’t know if I can get off of work,” I said.

His lips turned down. He flashed his gaze over the crowd. “I understand.”

The soft resignation in his tone made my heart ache.

“It’s fine. I’ll call in sick,” I said before I could stop myself.

*You’re supposed to hate him, dummy. What are you doing?* I was going to appreciate a day of free travel enjoying the mountains, that was all. Anyone would say yes to that.

“You’ll come?” He studied my face, his gaze landing on my mouth.

“Yes.”

He smiled. Actually smiled. And I caught a glimpse of that dimple.

I wasn’t sure if I’d just made the most awesome or most catastrophic decision of my life. But the trip was only one day. What was the worst that could happen?

# EIGHTEEN

GABRIEL

I focused on my phone screen and ignored the ridiculous, flashy interior of the SUV. Layana had sent me an obscene image on Thursday, and another on Friday, with no other correspondence between us since our outing on Wednesday night. Now that it was quarter to four on Saturday morning, nearly time for us to spend an entire day enduring torturous social interactions, that pleasant silence was about to be obliterated.

Since the custom seats flanked the sides of the vehicle, when I looked up, I could see straight out the right side window, where Wallace stood like a sentinel watching the apartment complex's pitch-black alley.

I'd told him he needn't bother getting out yet. Layana was never on time for anything. Give it another thirty minutes, then perhaps we'd catch sight of her climbing down the rope ladder she'd installed on her fire escape.

Wallace had insisted on arriving early, just as he'd insisted on "dressing the part." I hadn't known what exactly that was supposed to mean until he'd picked me up wearing a full suit including a jacket with tails, a top hat, and gloves as white as his hair.

I returned my attention to my phone, where I scrolled through the photographs taken three nights ago at the dive bar with Layana's friends. Each of them had posted images and tagged me, implying I was an essential member of their group

instead of the mere tagalong I truly was. I hadn't offered them compensation. I hadn't asked for their assistance.

It was loyalty to Layana that had inspired their actions.

Movement out the windshield caught my eye. Layana was approaching the car from the front of the building instead of the side, and according to the clock on my phone, she was exactly on time.

I shoved my phone in my pocket and tapped on the side window to alert Wallace.

He jumped and hurried to the front of the car to meet our guest.

Moments later, he opened the door for her. On the ground beside him were three large luggage bags. How Layana had managed to carry all of that out here herself in one trip I couldn't fathom. Nor could I imagine why she'd packed any bags at all for a single day away.

"Good morning, sunshine." Layana slipped into the SUV, looked around, and her eyes brightened.

My chest both tightened and felt lighter.

She gestured to the ridiculously-designed vehicle. "What in the name of Narnia is this?"

She had on leggings, an oversized sweater, and a matching knit hat. Two long braids framed her face. The blue tint that had been painted on the ends of her hair was completely gone. She looked like she was ready for snuggling up by a fire, not a day out in the snow.

From the cargo area behind me, Wallace said, "It's a Cadillac Escalade ESV. Isn't it glorious?"

"Glowingly glorious," she said, beaming at me.

That was an apt description, given the space literally glowed in colorful strobing lights that belonged at a rave, not in a vehicle.

"Please tell me you brought a coat with you," I said.

"Two, actually."

“And real pants.”

“These *are* real pants. Real comfortable pants, and cute too.” A devious spark flitted over her features.

“Master Stryker gave me free rein to design the interior myself,” Wallace said.

His aesthetic permeated every ridiculous detail, from the periwinkle faux-leather seats to the rhinestone encrusted cup holders.

Layana, still standing in an awkward ducking position, pinned me with a sharp look. “You make your driver call you *master?*”

“No,” I said. “I’d prefer he didn’t.”

“What a kidder,” Wallace said. “We both like it just fine, right? The alternative is I go back to your childhood nickname.”

My heart jumped into my throat.

“Master Stryker is fine,” I said in a rush. “Though I’d prefer you call me Gabriel. As we’ve discussed ad nauseam.”

Wallace closed the cargo door and circled around to the driver’s seat. The flashing rainbow lights dimmed, but didn’t go out.

Wicked glee filled Layana’s eyes. “You’ve had the same driver since you were a kid?”

“Please take a seat,” I told her.

She chose the spot across from me, perfect for setting the day’s mood. Perfect for an interrogation. This was going to be a long day.

“He must know all your secrets.” She grinned wider, her gaze dissecting.

Wallace knew plenty about me, but not for the reason she thought.

“I don’t have secrets,” I said.



“Perfect, so you won’t mind if I ask him about them,” she said.

I sighed. Wallace climbed into the front and started driving.

“So, Wallace,” Layana said, “I’m dying to hear Gabriel’s childhood nickname. I bet it’s something like Smolder, for the look he’s doing right now.”

I was not *smoldering*.

“Actually, I used to call him Gremlin,” Wallace said.

I should never have allowed Wallace to drive us. I should have driven myself.

“He’d spend all day running around in the woods, come home covered head-to-toe in dirt, and snatch fruit from the bowl when he thought no one was looking. He’d shove it in his pants and go hide in his room, snack away before his mother could make him wash or tell him not to eat or he’d ruin his dinner.”

Layana stared at me, mouth in an *o* shape, eyes dancing with delight. To Wallace, she said, “You’ve known Gabriel his whole life, then?”

It would have been an adorable expression under any other circumstances.

Wallace said, “Since the doctor pulled him out and smacked his baby bottom.”

“That will be all.” I pressed the button to lift the separator between front and back seats.

“You’re a blast, Wallace,” Layana rushed to say as the separator rose upward. “I have to know more. We’ll wait for him to fall asleep, then we can dish.”

Wallace let out a hearty laugh.

My head throbbed.

Finally, the two of us were alone, but I could feel the buzz of Layana’s excitement in the air.

“So should I greet you every morning as Gremlin from now on?”

“Please don’t.”

“Who gave you the name? One of your parents?”

“Wallace did.”

“And he was your driver even then? You’ve had hired help your whole life. And this interior styling is...a lot. Why haven’t I seen a chef or maid or someone at your house? Why is this all so opposite of everything I know about you?”

“He wasn’t our driver. We didn’t have money when I was a child.”

She blinked at me, her brows slowly coming together.

“He’s my uncle.”

Again, her mouth formed into an *o*.

“So as an adult, after you made a bazillion dollars, you hired your uncle as your driver.” It didn’t sound like a question.

“It’s my dream job,” Wallace said.

I realized then that the window wasn’t closed all the way. An inch of space remained.

“Well,” he continued, “race car driver’s my dream job, but this is as close as I can get. Especially after I was discharged from the service. My only wish is Gremlin would call me to duty more often. I pride myself in all the design details. Push that button to your left, ma’am.”

“Here?” Layana pushed the button.

A tiny disco ball dropped down between us, blinding me with harsh sparkling beams.

I bashed the button a few more times until the window went up the rest of the way.

“So your uncle is a military vet, and you hired him to be your driver when you don’t really need a driver since you run everywhere,” Layana said with a smirk. “That’s so cute.”

You're marshmallow beneath your steel exterior, *Master Stryker*."

A mix of emotions filled me. The way she said my name gave it an entirely new meaning.

I cleared my throat. "It's nothing."

"It's not nothing. That man clearly adores you."

"He hardly knows me."

She furrowed her brows. "With the nicknames and describing your bottom? He seems to think he knows you pretty well."

"He's overcompensating," I said. This was getting too personal. I didn't want to talk about it anymore. I didn't want her looking at me with pity, which was inevitable without a change of subject. "Why did you bring a week's worth of clothes for a day trip?"

"I guess you don't want to tell me *what* he's overcompensating for."

I didn't respond.

"Fine. I didn't know what I would need, because I've never been skiing before. Juno insisted on lending me some of her gear. Even the luggage is hers."

"You've never been skiing?"

"That's what I said, isn't it?"

That shattered my plans of spending as much time as possible on the slopes to avoid social interaction. Trying not to let my disappointment show, I said, "If you don't want to, we can remain inside the lodge."

"I didn't say I didn't want to ski. I said I hadn't been. Don't worry, I'm content to hang on the bunny slope while you do the double black diamonds or whatever. Then when it's time to talk to people, I'll pretend to be whoever you want me to be, just like I promised."

Her words hit me like a punch to the kidneys. Why would she think I wanted that? "I would never want you to be anyone

but who you are.”

She stared at me for too long without speaking. The flickering lights of the disco ball danced over her tight-lipped scowl. I wanted to ask more, why she would assume that was my expectation. But I couldn't seem to get the words out.

Eventually she lay down on the bench seat. “I'm going to try and get a nap in. It's going to be a long day.”

With that, our conversation was over.

Part of me wished I had left the window down. At least when she'd talked to Wallace, she'd been happy.

# NINETEEN

LAYANA

A soft touch on my shoulder ripped me from my sleep. My first thought was of Maxim in my apartment, and I went immediately into defense mode—growl and tear out his throat. But quickly I realized I wasn't in my apartment, and the man across from me was nothing like my landlord.

Gabriel snapped his hand back as if I'd bitten him. Maybe I almost had.

"We're here," he said softly.

*Here* was bright white snow and mountains. Right, because I'd fallen asleep in Gabriel's swanky SUV, not on my stink sofa.

I sat up, my head swirling. Gabriel stepped out of the car first and offered me his hand, like I couldn't handle walking myself. I ignored him and stepped out, too.

It was hecka cold out even with the sun fully up. My insides felt all weird and twisty. It was completely disorienting to wake up halfway through my sleep cycle. But the sight before us was sobering—a real-life Swiss chalet.

The dark browns of the wood popped against a backdrop of freshly fallen snow. Towering windows reflected the morning sun, as did the snow everywhere, making for a beautiful but blinding landscape.

I'd seen pics of this place on Socialface, but they didn't do it justice.

"Wow," I said.

Gabriel watched me as if my reaction was far more interesting than the wooden freaking castle. The dude probably thought this was all so mundane, since he grew up in a castle or something. “*We didn’t have money when I was a child*” probably meant his parents only had a small castle instead of a big one. Only one yacht instead of five.

Wallace came around the side carrying my bags, and my bags only. Not a single bag for Gabriel. Sure, he was already wearing a weather resistant coat and pants, along with snow boots, but had he really brought nothing else to wear?

It was just one day. Maybe I’d let Juno talk me into bringing too much. No time to second guess myself now.

I reached for my bags.

Wallace shook his head. “It’s a pleasure, ma’am, let me carry them.”

He was smiling so widely and so sweetly I actually believed him. He totally loved his job.

The three of us headed up to the building, with Wallace leading the way. With every step, Gabriel grew stiffer. I twisted my fingers together so I didn’t reach out to reassure him.

He was scared. I was here for him. But that didn’t mean he’d want me touching him.

Halfway to the building, Wallace stopped walking. He set down my bags and turned around to us. “Almost forgot Pamela wanted me to give you these.”

He pulled two folded packets of papers from his jacket and handed one to each of us.

*Rules of Engagement* was typed across the front page.

Like the movie?

“Who is Pamela?” I asked.

Gabriel glowered at the paperwork. “Corporate consultant.”

Whatever that was supposed to mean.

I flipped to the second page, a table of contents. I flipped through some more just to see what all was in here. There was a history of the chalet—*Alpine Aurora named for Aurora Williams, an almost-Olympic alpine skier in her youth. Williams established the ski resort on the very slopes where she once trained. During the 1900s, the land was owned by a timber magnate...yada yada yada...something about a fire.*

That caught my attention.

The fire part turned out to be not nearly as interesting as I'd expected. The mill burned down. No one died, which was good, but there were also no interesting details like if the building went down from arson or got struck by lightning or something. It was probably just boring old negligence and an accident like some dude set down his torch to take a pee break. Even that would have been more interesting than the no details I actually got.

I skipped ahead to pages and photographs of business dudes with smaller accompanying pics and descriptions of people I assumed were their families, likely key players in Biotabloom.

This could be useful for the social aspects of the day. Too bad Wallace hadn't given the packets to us sooner. I bet Gabriel would have appreciated the chance to prepare on the drive. Honestly, I probably still would have taken that nap.

"This is good stuff," I told Wallace. "Thank you."

Gabriel didn't say anything.

Wallace beamed at me.

"Are you going to be skiing too?" I asked him.

"No," Wallace said. "I'll be heading into Boarsville for the day. It's a little town about twenty minutes from here. I still have some shopping to do for Valentine's, and I'm hoping I might find something good for my wife at one of those little fancy shops."

"That sounds nice," I told him.

"Fingers crossed," he said.

“Let’s continue on our way,” Gabriel said, his voice colder than the biting winter air.

Maybe it was social anxiety that did that to him, turned him into an armadillo curled into its shell.

“Do you want to take some time to read over the packet before we go skiing?” I asked him.

“No.”

“You’d rather get out onto the slopes and away from people?”

“Something like that.”

Inside the chalet, a gorgeous, cavernous space greeted us—below, big fancy chairs fit for Viking kings. Above, exposed beams three stories up with a massive wrought-iron chandelier at their center, the type that would get shot down by a crossbow and crush all the villains at once in an epic old-timey sword fight.

Just beyond the kill-zone, an over-the-top fireplace loomed behind the concierge desk.

“Looks like there are lockers over here.” Wallace pointed to a room off to the right.

“Sweet. That’ll be perfect for my stuff while we do all of our avoidance and eventually official business.”

“If you can actually fit the bags in a locker,” Gabriel said.

He looked kinda pale, so I took the comment as a good sign. If he could still manage to be a jerkhole, he had only gone seventy percent armadillo, instead of one hundred percent.

“Oh, I can make them fit. I’m an expert at shoving big things in tight spaces,” I said.

His brown eyes darkened, like I’d said something about fitting his big thing in my tight space, which I hadn’t, and hadn’t meant to imply.

I’d been thinking more along the lines of getting the stink couch into my apartment. But that was neither here nor there.



And the heat of those searing eyes made me forget that I'd been shivering with cold.

I flashed a charming smile at him and spoke softly so only he could hear. "After I finish with my luggage, I could shove your big jerkhole face into one of those lockers, too, if you'd like."

"I'll pass."

He snapped his attention from me, leaving me smug and a little colder.

The lockers were ridiculously huge. I pulled out all of the outdoor gear I'd borrowed from Juno and put it on over my clothes.

Wallace helped me tuck everything inside. When we were done, he took off, leaving Gabriel and me alone, which was always dangerous.

Today was going to be fine. All I had to do was not make a fool of myself, pretend I actually liked Gabriel, and try not to say anything too nasty loudly enough to blow our cover. I could do that, right?

I followed Gabriel to the front desk where a woman with two blond braids stood waiting. She had the most plastic smile I'd ever seen, and a name tag labeling her Jane.

Gabriel asked, "Where do we rent equipment?"

"You want to rent skis?" Jane's expression stayed creepily the exact same.

"Yes," he bit out.

"Do you have your reservation number?"

I flipped through the packet of papers to find information about ski reservations. It seemed like the kind of thing Pamela would figure out ahead for us.

"It'll be under Stryker," Gabriel said.

"I'm going to need that reservation number," she said.

I could feel him growing stiffer and stiffer beside me, like he was slowly turning to stone from the inside out.

I found the number in the packet and read it aloud.

Jane clattered her fingers over the keyboard. She stopped. She narrowed her eyes at the screen and twisted her lips.

Gabriel just kept stiffening, beyond the limits of normal human stiffening. Maybe he'd died of minor frustration and social antipathy, and his corpse was entering rigor mortis.

"I apologize," Jane said, "but it seems there's been a double booking. Your skis are currently being used by someone else."

If we couldn't ski, that wasn't really so bad for me. It meant getting to sit around in a fancy lodge sipping hot chocolate and gazing through the towering windows at the snowy landscape.

But if we couldn't ski, Gabriel was going to do more than have a corpse-like conniption. He'd die for real. Maybe. Probably.

Whatever he did, he'd make sure I didn't get to enjoy my snow bunny day lounging in the lodge.

"Get us another set," Gabriel said. "Fix this."

"Oh, well, most people bring their own equipment. The lodge only keeps a couple of sets to rent, and if you didn't reserve them in advance, there's nothing I can do to help you. You can head into Boarsville and purchase your equipment."

Gabriel scowled. "But we *did* book them in advance."

"I know. I apologize for the inconvenience. There's nothing I can do."

Gabriel turned and stalked away.

I followed after him. "It's fine. We'll read the packets, and most of the people who would want to talk to you will be out skiing anyway, so this just means we have extra time to prepare before they get back."

“You can go tubing,” Jane called after us. “Take the purple lift.”

“Perfect,” I told Gabriel. “Let’s do that.”

He grumbled as we stepped back through the front doors.

I followed him around the side of the building. The snow was crazy with people. They were crashing into each other on a mostly flat hill, flying down an actual mountain side, and standing around chatting.

Gabriel kept walking, ignoring everyone, like he knew where he was going.

“Have you been here before?” I asked.

“No.”

Down past all the skiers and snowboarders, Gabriel finally stopped walking, beside a lift with purple pods. The pods didn’t stop when they reached the bottom of the hill. Instead they turned in a small U, and headed straight back up.

“Let’s go,” Gabriel said.

“Do they expect us to jump on it? *While it’s moving?*”

“It’ll be fine,” he said. “I won’t let you get hurt.”

As if he could control the freaking universe. “I didn’t say I was afraid.”

“I didn’t say you were either.”

I wanted to stick my tongue out at him, maybe kick him in the ankle, too. Instead, I followed him to a flat people-loading area.

We lined ourselves up. A little pang of nervous excitement flitted through my bones. I watched the pod approach.

“Ready?” Gabriel asked, his expression actually weirdly concerned.

“I was born ready. I think it’s you who’s sc—” My biting insult was cut short by the pod smacking into the back of my legs and scooping me onto its little bench.

A bar snapped over us and we lifted off into the air.

I looked over the edge and out the side. All the tiny people looked like toys.

“Falling from up here would hurt like a mother,” I said.

Gabriel kept his gaze straight ahead and said nothing.

“It’s beautiful, too,” I said. “Out here in this winter wonderland.”

He still didn’t say anything.

At the top of the hill, we reached a flat area, like the one at the bottom. It did not slow.

Gabriel offered me his hand. “We need to hop off and move out of the way.”

“I’ve got it.”

And I did have it. I hopped off that deathtrap like a perfectly capable person who knew exactly what she was doing.

There was a pile of massive inner tubes, guarded by one teenage worker popping gum and mostly ignoring people. And everyone over here seemed to be children.

One kid was building what could only be described as a snow goblin based on the size and the pointy leaf ears. Another kid was rolling around in a flat spot by a tree, smearing a trail of snot across the ground while screaming, “Wheeee!”

Gabriel took in the scene, and the stiffness in his shoulders seemed to lessen. His expression became less stone-ish, too. Now that there was little chance of running into someone he’d be forced to converse with, he clearly felt better.

“You like kids?” I asked.

“They tend not to read into body language,” he said.

“Which is more comfortable for you, right?”

“Yes.” He grabbed one of the tubes, which had a second attached to the side of it.

“Doubles,” I said.

He went to put it back.

“No, let’s do it. It’ll be fun,” I said with way more confidence than I felt. Could anything make this day fun? I wasn’t so sure. My cheeks and nose already felt frozen from the biting cold. The one time I’d gotten the chance to sled as a kid, I’d loved it. Maybe all we needed was a little positivity, a little adrenaline, and everything would be fine.

Or it’d be awful, and that was cool with me, too. Terrible experiences made great writing fuel.

Gabriel set up the tube and sat down on one side. I sat down on the other.

“Ready?” he asked.

The rolling kid *whee’d* his way in front of us, rolling across the slope.

“Other way,” came a drone-like voice from right behind me.

The gum popping teenager gave our little tubes a twist to the side, flinging me in front of Gabriel, both of us sitting sideways, and then shoved us off with his boot.

Gabriel tried to protest, but the rush of icy air stole his words away.

We were going too fast. Sharp bits of snow and ice flew up at my face. The tube wobbled. My butt scraped across the ground.

My heart raced like the speeding inflatable deathtrap we were riding in. Whooshing down the slope was somehow terrifying and exhilarating, horrible and wonderful at the same time.

I tried to adjust, tried to turn my body so I could properly see what was coming.

“Whee,” screamed the snotty whee kid as he zoomed up to us and slammed into our side.

With me halfway through my wiggling, the impact made my hip slip up and over the side of the tube. And all at once,

everything whipped around. I was tumbling in the snow, the tube flipping over me, and something heavier, too.

We crashed and landed in a tangle of limbs.

I was on top, but also trapped under Gabriel somehow, with the tube on top of the pair of us.

“Are you all right?” Gabriel brushed my hair back from my face, his rough glove scratching my cheek.

I laughed and lingered over him, giving myself a moment to catch my breath, but it never came. My chest felt tight. The cold melted away as a pleasant warmth crept over me. We were pressed together, trapped here in this catastrophe that was half my fault, and half not.

I should have been miserable, but I wasn't. This was the good kind of story, the kind where the injuries were minimal and the thrill of the experience reigned supreme.

“Peachy.” I smiled at Gabriel. “Let's go again.”

In a concerted effort, we threw off the tube. We were only about halfway down the hill.

“We should probably reach the bottom first,” he said.

Snow began to fall, light and fluffy flakes catching in my eyelashes and peppering my nose and cheeks.

“I don't know,” I said. “This felt like the end. Maybe the lift will make a special stop for us.”

“It doesn't work like that.”

“What a pity. I guess we'll have to climb back in.”

“You'll have to climb off me first.”

“You're pinning my leg. I can't move.”

He wiggled. I wiggled. And oh my goodness we were like writhing worms, rubbing our snow suited bodies against each other in front of a bunch of children.

I laughed again, and this time I couldn't stop until we were completely untangled.

Then I made Gabriel go down the hill again and again until my limbs grew numb with cold. We only stopped for food and pee breaks. After the fifth or tenth or ninety-seventh run down the hill, sitting at the bottom of the slope, Gabriel popped up and offered me his hand.

I took it. Then we stood there together, me admiring the warmth that had returned to his hot chocolate eyes, pools of delicious heat I'd love to dive into and never stop swimming in.

"Your cheeks are pink," he said.

"So?"

"Your teeth are chattering."

"Nah," I said, through bouts of obvious chattering.

"We should go in."

"But I don't wanna." The sun was definitely on its way down. I didn't want the day to end.

"Neither do I." He cracked a small smile. "But it's time."

As soon as we went inside, his walls would go back up. Instead of sharing smiles, we'd be back to pretending we liked each other for the sake of others, back to snapping at each other when no one was looking.

I liked it sometimes. It was fun. It sparked the inspiration I needed. But I wanted to put it off just a little longer.

Gabriel set the tube off to the side and waited for me to follow.

Fine. We'd do the responsible things, the peopling, then this would all be over, and I'd go back to my stink sofa, and to my impatient waiting for our next meeting.

As soon as we stepped inside, warm air wiped away the cold.

And an ambush of business people wiped away the calm.

"Gabriel Stryker, I can't believe you came," one man said.

“You’ve been out enjoying the slopes I see,” another said with a chuckle. “Need to get out of those snow clothes and into something more fitting?”

“I don’t—” Gabriel started.

“What are you talking about?” said another. “He looks a helluva lot less stuck up with snow in his hair.”

I could feel him retreating into himself. I could feel my fury rising—it was not okay for these strangers to treat Gabriel like this.

This was what I was here for. I could be his shield, his buffer to this level of scrutiny, and I could buff like a pro.

“What is the proper term for a bunch of half-drunk middle-aged men in semi-formal dress?” I asked.

All eyes turned to me.

I just needed to remember to keep my temper in check. I needed to be the social sweetheart tiger warrior and charm their stupid faces off.

I slipped on my peopling smile. It was easy. Practiced.

“A horde? A gaggle? I can never remember.”

One of the dudes burst out laughing. Then another.

That was easy.

“Hey, you’re the...*What’s Up With It* show star, right?” Another man was waving as a teenage girl and a middle-aged woman pulled him toward us.

The girl had on all black, a number of facial piercings, and a wild look in her eye. She whisper-yelled at him through gritted teeth. “*What the What?* Dad. I swear, you’re so embarrassing.”

“Hey, Gabriel, so glad you could make it,” the man said, seemingly deflated as the two women assailed me with a barrage of questions.

From the corner of my eye, it looked to me like Gabriel had gone completely still.



“I totally love you,” the girl said. “You should have won.”

“*We*, both of us do,” the woman, who guessing by the resemblance was her mother, added. “Glitter Galore isn’t—”

“Glitter’s amazing,” I said. “Totally deserved to win. She’s even sweeter than she appears on camera.”

“You’re just the sweetest, too, aren’t you?” the woman said.

The business men looked amused by the whole scene, except for the guy the two women had pulled over here. Good, let me command the attention. I slowly inched myself in front of Gabriel, physically shielding him from everyone else.

“I’m Layana Hartley,” I said to the girl. “What’s your name?”

She giggled, a soft and high-pitched noise that didn’t look like she could produce. Celebrities did that to people, and I kind of was a celebrity, if only a D-list one since the show. Juno a.k.a. Glitter got it much worse than I did.

“Pom. Pom Daniels.”

“Nice to meet you, Pom,” I said.

“Is Morgan really as mean as she seems?” Pom asked.

“I’m Gloria,” the mom said.

“Nice to meet you, too, Gloria,” I said. “Absolutely no way is Morgan at all like the producers portrayed her. She’s the sweetest person you could ever meet. Always doing everything she can for others. It was so wrong the way they made her look like a villain.”

“What else isn’t like it seemed on TV?” Gloria asked.

They kept creeping closer. With each step, the business dudes stepped a little farther back. Perfect.

“Chester,” I leaned in conspiratorially, “is even quirkier in real life.”

“No way,” the two said in unison.

They shot each other a confused glance. The mom smiled. The daughter shivered with disgust.

Chester would love that I was talking about him. Even better if these people posted about it on social media. “You remember his cheese beard, right?”

“That’s his whole thing,” Gloria said.

I nodded. “In his fridge, he keeps a pair of cheese underpants to wear with it.”

Pom looked horrified. Gloria looked absolutely delighted.

“You two want to take some selfies?” I asked.

“Yes.” Gloria pulled out her phone and stepped in next to me. She waved Pom to join us.

Pom shook her head. “I’ll wait until you’re done.”

Gloria rolled her eyes and sighed. “Teenagers.”

I smiled, posed, and didn’t comment. Behind me, I could feel Gabriel’s presence, just a few steps away. I could feel his attention as if he were pressed right up against my back.

A flush carried up my neck. I shook off my wandering thoughts as Gloria snapped her pics. When she finished, Pom stepped up to take her turn.

“Can we go outside, catch the sunset? And not have the same backdrop as the ones with *Gloria*?”

“Sure,” I said.

Gabriel was two steps ahead, booking it for the door.

A loud crack boomed through the building, shaking the floor beneath our feet.

I froze.

My heart jumped into my throat.

Was the building falling down on top of us? If it was, the best thing to do would be to run outside. So why wouldn’t my feet move?

“What was that?” I said to no one in particular.

But Gabriel was right there with me, suddenly so close I could grab onto him if we were two people who got along well enough for that kind of thing. Which we weren't.

An announcement played overhead.

*Good evening. We're currently in the midst of an avalanche. The road is snowed over and will be closed for the foreseeable future. In the meantime, grab a hot cocoa and snuggle in by the fire. Your rooms will be extended automatically.*

Avalanche? The word repeated in my brain on repeat. What about whee kid and the snow goblin builder? What about everyone else who was out skiing?

Gabriel snatched my hand and dragged me toward the desk. He was gripping me a little too hard that it hurt.

"We don't have rooms," he snapped at Jane, the same woman who was here before.

"How many people are trapped out in the snow?" I asked. "How can we drink cocoa when we need to be out there rescuing them?"

"Oh no," she chuckled. "Everyone here is just fine. It's the mountain down the road. Happens all the time. No rescues necessary."

Thank goodness.

"We need to book two rooms," Gabriel said. "Ideally adjacent."

"I'm sorry, I can't do that," Jane said. "I only have one room."

"That'll be fine," I said, telling myself as much as them. Better than no rooms. I preferred not to sleep in the janitor's closet. "We'll have our own beds and—"

"There's only the king." She cringed and looked between us.

"What else can you offer us?" Gabriel asked.

“That’s all I have. You could sleep in the common area?”  
She pointed to the floor where we were standing.

That was worse than the janitor’s closet.

“We’ll take the room,” I said.

Gabriel’s face was white.

It would be fine. I’d had roommates before. It was survivable, even if not pleasant. This was going to be just like that...I lied to myself.

# TWENTY

GABRIEL

“Overpacking doesn’t look so foolish now, does it?” Layana’s smug words were at conflict with the tightness in her shoulders and in her expression.

Perhaps she was trying to mask her unease with conflict. I wasn’t interested in fighting.

“I never said you were foolish.”

“You implied it.” She shifted her weight, and her attention from the door to me.

Why was this elevator taking so long? The lodge was only three stories tall. If Layana hadn’t brought so much unnecessary clothing along with her, we could have taken the stairs. Perhaps we should have taken them anyway.

Finally the doors opened. She stepped out and I followed, both of us toting her luggage.

We went down the hall and found our room.

Inside was far too much flannel—flannel curtains, flannel bedspread, flannel pillows, flannel wallpaper.

Unfortunately, there was no sofa for me to sleep on, only a small desk, the accompanying chair, and the four-poster bed that took up half of the small space.

Layana threw her arms wide. “It’s a lumberjack fairytale.”

And my downfall.

She hoisted one of her bags up onto the bed. Then another.

I wanted to ask what she thought she was doing. Civility was the only thing keeping me from spiraling. So instead, I held my tongue.

She unzipped her bags and spread her belongings across the comforter, immediately ruining the neatness of the room.

Tomorrow the road would be cleared and we could leave this place. It was only a limited amount of time, and order would be restored.

In the meantime, we needed rules. I needed to be anywhere else.

“I need to call Wallace,” I said.

“Do you think he’s all right?” She looked up from her mess making. A crease formed between her brows.

“Yes.”

She twisted her lips. “Let me know after my shower. I’m going in.”

She scooped up a small bag from inside a larger one, along with a set of clothes, and headed into the bathroom. She left the rest of the mess without cleaning it up.

The door clicked shut after her, and I could hear the sound of water, followed by humming. The walls were too thin.

I called Wallace.

“I hope you’re not ringing to tell me it’s time to come get you,” he answered.

“I’m told there was an avalanche. Are you safe?”

“Oh yes, I’m good,” he said. “Found a nice room here.”

“Good.”

“What about you? Do they have space in the lodge?”

“We are settled for the night. Have you seen plows moving through Boarsville yet? I’d like to get out of here as soon as possible.”

He barked a laugh. “No way they’re getting that cleared out in one night, Gremlin. Can you not see the snow from your

perch? The road is *buried*.”

“If it’s about resources....”

“Money’s not going to solve it. You just try and enjoy this vacation. You never take the time to do anything for yourself. Maybe it’ll be good for you.”

I could hear Layana in the bathroom. She was naked in there. We would be forced to stay in the same room, sleep in the same bed. There was no reprieve to be found outside of this room, either, not with Biotabloom Dynamics roaming the halls. This was *not* a vacation. And it was definitely not going to be good for me.

Money had to solve this. It was my only hope.

“Watch for updates,” I said. “As soon as you can get here safely, I need you here.”

“Will do,” he said. “One more thing.”

“What?”

“Thanks for having me drive.”

He shouldn’t thank me for getting him stranded in the middle of nowhere.

I said, “Good evening, Wallace.”

“Good night, Gremlin.”

With that, I hung up and paced. I stared at the open bags, stressed about how any of this was supposed to work.

Finally I set the scattered contents back inside, zipped up the cases and set them neatly lined up along the wall by the side of the bed Layana had claimed.

As I looked over the wrinkled, but no longer cluttered bedspread, I felt the tiniest bit more in control. I took a moment and a breath. Then I searched for local emergency service numbers and put through a few calls, none of which ended up being fruitful. Local authorities were already on the job, working on their own timetable, of course.

What if it wasn’t enough?

I stripped to my undershirt and boxers, neatly folded my clothes and set them on my nightstand, then climbed into bed, arranging the extra pillows between where the two of us would lay. I turned off the lamp on my side and lay on my side, facing the wall.

None of this was a part of my routine. None of this was acceptable, or close to comfortable. I wanted to crawl out of my skin.

Layana returned not long after.

“You moved my bags,” she said.

I kept my back turned to her. “You left them in the bed.”

“That’s because I was using them.”

“And I needed to use the bed.”

I felt the mattress dip slightly as she climbed in.

My every muscle tightened with awareness. I could smell her vanilla and hazelnut scent more clearly than usual. It must have been a soap or shampoo instead of a byproduct of working at a café.

“Pillows are supposed to be for your head, not used to take up a third of the mattress space,” she said.

There was still a pillow for her head.

“If you need extra, take it,” I said.

One of the pillows in the center of the bed brushed against my thigh, carrying up my side until it was gone. The space between us felt too open, leaving us too close.

“Don’t touch me while I’m sleeping,” she said.

As if I would even consider it. “That’s what the pillow barricade was for.”

“So we’re on the same page,” she said, voice slightly questioning.

“Completely.”

Same page? Same bed? I wasn’t entirely sure we were even on the same planet.



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THE SOUND of someone else's breathing ripped me from my sleep. Disoriented, I blinked at the ceiling that wasn't my ceiling, my heart hammering in my chest.

None of this was right.

It took me a moment to orient myself. I was trapped in a mountain lodge, in a social environment, with a woman sharing my space—it was my worst nightmare.

The cold space around me suggested Layana wasn't in bed with me. I turned my head to look and be certain.

The room was dark, and I could make out her arms sticking straight up in the air over the open part of the room.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I didn't mean to wake you."

"I'm not sure you did wake me." I felt like I hadn't slept at all.

"Want a muffin?"

"No."

"Banana?"

"No."

"Well, I couldn't sleep—hazard of having an overnight schedule—went downstairs and found they were putting out breakfast. I snatched the best stuff."

She'd been awake long enough for all of that? And based on her movements, it seemed she'd been doing yoga, too.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Sixish."

I hadn't slept in until six since...possibly never. I sat up and turned on the light.

"Whoa, cowboy." Layana crossed her arms over her chest.

She was wearing a tank top and loose pants—apparently a completely different type of outfit she'd deemed necessary to bring along.

“What?” I asked, having no idea what I'd done to offend her this time.

“You're obscenely naked.”

If she truly believed that, she didn't seem to mind too much, with the way her eyes slowly devoured me.

I looked down. “I'm wearing an undershirt and boxers.”

“But no pants. I thought you always wore pressed slacks.”

My head began to throb. “To sleep?”

“Or the bee suit.”

She'd already made her hatred of my running apparel clear. What reason did she have to bother me about it again? As usual, she had no interest in being civil, even though we were supposed to have a truce.

I climbed out of bed and put on the pants I'd left on the nightstand. “Better?”

She gave me a half shrug, tilting up a single shoulder. “I didn't say it was bad seeing you in your skivvies.”

She was impossible. The sooner we were back to our usual routine, our time together limited to small, manageable doses, the better.

For a subject change, I asked, “Any news on the snow?”

“Loads of news,” she said. “All about how impossible it'll be to clear.”

“Impossible? No,” I said. I couldn't accept that. “I can fix this.”

She snorted. “You can't fix every problem personally.”

“I can make sure everything that should be done is done.”

“Micromanage people who don't work for you? I'm sure that'll go over well.”

“I’ll place calls,” I said. “Make sure we’re able to sleep in our own beds tonight.”

“We? Don’t pretend this is for me.”

I just looked at her, not understanding. How could she not want to return to her own home? She wasn’t actually enjoying being trapped here with me, was she? The tubing hadn’t been entirely unpleasant. But it certainly wasn’t enjoyable enough to make the rest of this situation endurable.

“I might not be game for a whole sharing-a-room-with-you thing, but this bed is way better than my stink sofa,” she said.

“Did you say stink sofa?”

“Yes. It’s where I sleep. Now if you don’t want my muffin, and you’re going to just stand there staring at me like that, you might as well go about your business and make your calls.”

“I’m not staring,” I said. My mind whirled with the revelation she’d shared. Layana slept on a stink sofa? “We’re conversing. I’m offering the appropriate level of eye contact.”

“Well, my eyes are up here.” She pointed at her face.

I’d been looking her in the eye the entire time. I ran my hands through my hair and looked away, but not before catching a glimpse of her grin.

Frustrated, I pulled on my shirt, shoved on my shoes, and left the room.

I called Pamela.

“Where are you?” she asked.

“Stuck in whichever circle of hell is filled with other people because you told me to come here.” Every circle was probably all filled with other people. A small shiver carried up my spine.

“You didn’t make it out before the avalanche? I’d hoped —” Pamela sighed. “Minimizing contact with the Biotabloom people will be difficult if you’re trapped in the same building.”

Obviously.

Minimizing contact with Layana would be significantly more difficult.

“Find out if there are any private companies that can assist with the road clearing,” I said. “Cost isn’t a factor.”

“I’m on it.”

“Hurry,” I said, even though I knew she’d do everything she could as quickly as possible. Pamela was competent. She was a real asset, one I wished I could keep even after this merger was decided, one way or the other.

“I’ll start right now. Good luck.” With that, she hung up.

I was going to need more than luck to survive.

I wandered down to the lobby, where updates on the snow were on the television. It was the first I had actually seen for myself. The situation was far worse than I could have imagined. The images where the road was supposed to be showed no sign of a passageway at all. They might as well have been showing a field.

It was lucky the lodge hadn’t been buried along with it.

I found a little shop and purchased a set of clothing that was in my size, if not at all my style, along with essential toiletries to tide me over until the situation was resolved.

Then I ate eggs and a whole grain English muffin in the dining area for a little more time to myself.

“Gabriel!”

The jovial voice made my entire body freeze mid-swallow.

A bit of egg lodged itself in my esophagus. I coughed and pounded my chest.

Peter Daniels stepped into view, leaned over, and furrowed his brows with concern. “Need me to do the Heimlich? Never actually tried it. I’ve heard it can break ribs.”

I shook my head no.

“Are you sure? You look a little blue.”

The last thing I wanted was for him to wrap his arms around me and break my bones. I shook my head no as I coughed.

“No you’re not sure? So you want me to do it? Can you stand?”

I turned my entire body in my seat so he couldn’t get behind me.

Finally, the slimy bit of scramble dropped down into my stomach.

“Close one, huh?” Peter smiled and eyed the spot across from me.

“I appreciate your concern, but I’m fine,” I said, rising before he could sit.

“Good. I’m glad. What are your plans for today?”

“I’m leaving.”

He smiled wide. “Snow’s chance in hell of that.”

I was already living those chances. “We’ll see.”

“Well, we’re all getting together for dinner tonight. It’d be a shame for you to have come all this way and not get some face time with the execs.”

He wasn’t wrong. The torture I’d endured would all be for naught.

“Tell you what,” Peter said. “If you’re still here at dinner, come on back to the private dining room and join us. We’ll be there all evening.”

I wanted to tell him again that I would be gone by then. Instead, I gave him a courteous nod. “I appreciate the invitation.”

“See you then.”

I hoped not.

# TWENTY-ONE

LAYANA

As soon as Gabriel left, I snatched my laptop from my bag and set up on the tiny desk by the huge window. It was still a bit early for sunlight, but I opened the curtains anyway.

I broke off a piece of the massive chocolate chip muffin sitting beside my slow-to-start laptop and popped it into my mouth. The texture was slightly dry and grainy, but not bad. I'd been spoiled by Juno's baking into thinking this perfectly good baked good was not super good. Then again, it put Edwardo's bran muffins to shame.

Maybe I needed to bring him one back. Better yet, I could let him taste one of Juno's. No. Sharing with Edwardo, even if for the betterment of Eterni-Tea kind, would be a waste. He would never appreciate the quality enough to make it worth giving up one of Juno's goodies.

My laptop groaned, cranked, and sputtered.

Then like always, voila, it lit up!

When I'd packed for the day trip, I hadn't expected to get any writing time in at all. Lucky for me, I'd brought my laptop along just in case.

Just a little indulgence in my side project, and then I'd really get to work.

I hovered over my super secret file with the most boring title I could think of, the absolute least clickable file ever. I'd considered a few other titles like *Justin Bieber's Secret Rap Album*, *The Life and Times of Dryer Lint*, and *Diary of a*

Potato, but nothing was less inspiring than unflavored toothpaste.

I clicked *Unflavored Toothpaste Reviews* and my diary of Gabriel encounters opened. I glanced back at the door, just to be one thousand percent sure he was gone and not sneaking up behind me.

Then I let loose. My fingers flew across the keyboard.

---

*I didn't think it was possible for the human equivalent of a cactus to smile, but he can, and he has. Knowing the possibility exists, I can't help but watch for the anomaly, like staring at the night sky for a shooting star.*

*Better still, he has a dimple—an adorable, boyish feature on an otherwise hard, perpetually scowling face.*

*I haven't decided yet which face I enjoy looking at more, the frustrated scowl that sears me like I'm a marshmallow spinning over a fire, or the rarer sighting. I think the former. The latter is unnatural, alluring only in its rarity.*

*His smile is a petrified dinosaur turd, while his frown is a glorious display of fireworks.*

---

I CACKLED. The dinosaur turd bit was hilarious, but not at all true. I debated deleting the line. No. I needed to remember that the tension between us was the entire reason that I was here. I needed to forget the flutter I felt in my chest when he smiled.

Light filtered through the glass, pulling my attention upward. The sun rose behind the mountain. It was beautiful.

This was everything I could have asked for—forced time with the ultimate grumpy inspiration. I hoped the snow never cleared and the inspiration flowed freely forever. Well, that was only kinda true.

I would miss Morgan and Juno and Chester. I'd miss late nights at Pour Decisions. So instead of forever, I'd settle for until Gabriel and I grew so frustrated with each other's presences that I couldn't help but beg to return to my stink sofa rather than spend another night trapped with him.

---

*As we traveled into the picturesque snowscape of the Blue Ridge Mountains, I imagined the types of interactions that awaited me.*

*G: Snow is nature's glitter. I hate glitter. Grr: Grr.*

*Me: You probably hate sprinkles, too.*

G: Grr.

*Except that wasn't what happened. And when we were forced to share a bed, I imagined the things he'd say to me then—comments about my feet feeling like ice, that I took up too much space, that I snored. I imagined me falling out of bed to get away from a rogue hand, an unexpected, unintentional touch.*

*The brush of skin against skin, the way his growling reverberated through my chest, the way he set my nerves sparking like lightning. The way that touch would go from accidental to intentional, sliding over my bare arm, around to my stomach, soft fingertip brushing circles over bare skin.*

---

AND THAT WAS ENOUGH of that. I snapped my laptop shut.

The words might not have had their fill of me, but I'd definitely had my fill of them. For now.

I rose to my feet and stretched, pretending I wasn't even a little bit turned on by those ridiculous imaginings. There was nothing but hatred between us, and maybe a little bit of necessary camaraderie every now and then.

Maybe hate sex would be the best sex. Maybe it would be as rough and searing as the way he looked at me when I riled him up.

I coughed on some spit.

It was Sunday, which meant even if Gabriel was able to pull some kind of crazy feat of richness that cleared the roads in a single day, I still was unlikely to return home in time for my shift at Eterni-Tea. And even if I was home in time, I wouldn't have gotten any real sleep.

It was time to call in.

“Thank you for calling Eterni-Tea, home to day ‘n’ night delights. This is Edwardo. How can I delight you?”

I shivered at the gross way the official phone greeting sounded coming from his lips. “Hey, Edwardo, it's Layana.”

“You're not calling out,” he said.

“Actually—”

“You can't.”



“I have to.”

“You don’t sound sick.”

“I never said I was sick. I’m stuck in the mountains actually. There was an avalanche and—”

“You expect me to believe you are stuck at that swanky ski resort in the mountains?”

So he’d heard about the problem, which *should* help my case.

“I am,” I said.

“Yeah, right. And you also inherited a unicorn named Sparkles.”

“I would if unicorns existed.”

“And Sparkles has a hoof infection, so you have to take her to the vet.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not coming in tonight.”

He hissed like a frigging snake. “Layana, you can’t lie and expect special treatment because you feel like partying with your glam squad will be more—”

“My *glam squad*?”

“Being on television doesn’t make you special.”

“Neither does eating squirrel food, Grand Poobah of Pretension.”

This time he didn’t hiss—he squawked, loudly. “*Bran muffins aren’t squirrel food.*”

“Watch out, your self-righteousness is showing. Knowing you, there’s a bit of spittle, too.” I hung up before he could respond.

It felt *so* freaking good.

Immediately, he called back. I rejected his call, posed in front of the gorgeous view from my window that proved I was exactly where I said I was. I smiled, flipped off the camera, and took a pic. I sent it to Edwardo along with a one-line text.

Me: Shove that shift right up your pooper with the stick that's lodged there

THEN ONE MORE TEXT FOR good measure.

Me: I quit

THE THRILL of control coursed through my veins. I let out a laugh of victory. Little dots flicked across my screen. He was writing back. Before his message could come through, I blocked him. I had never felt so empowered.

The door opened behind me, and the feeling in the air changed immediately because of Gabriel's presence. My eyes snapped to my laptop, a quick jolt of panic that he could see what I'd been writing. Of course it was fine, closed, and hidden the way it was supposed to be.

He was looking a bit undone this morning, his top button not buttoned, his hair deliciously mussed. He'd been running his hands through it, the way he did when I drove him crazy.

"How was your hero jaunt?" I asked.

"I never claimed to be a hero," he said.

"You're fixing all the world's problems with a wave of your cash. I bet you promised half a bazillion dollars to whoever could dig you out of here the fastest."

He went all stiff shouldered and extra scowly. "I do not see myself as a hero."

"Oh yeah? That's certainly how the world sees you, after you get past the personality thing." I didn't want to call him a robot, even when talking about others' perceptions. It felt wrong. He was an anti-robot; he was a broody, grimacing sourpuss.

"That's ridiculous."

"Is it?"

"Yes. I'm...practical. Doing what I can."

“Sure. You’re just like any other guy, doing whatever job he has to do to pay the bills for the mediocre life he’s settled into, telling himself that the dreams he used to have for himself were silly, that he never really wanted more, never wanted the American dream anyway.”

Gabriel pursed his lips. I wanted to poke them back into place, maybe give him a proper poke in the nose, too. He wasn’t giving me the reaction I was looking for. I wanted growly, snappy retorts to fill my writing well. I wanted to put things back to the way they were supposed to be between us, before I’d started fantasizing about forbidden touches in our shared bed.

“My dad worked in waste management,” he said, ripping his gaze from mine. “He’d tell me about everything people threw away—perfectly good things. How all of that waste filled huge swaths of land, plenty of it ending up in oceans when it was shipped off to other countries.”

His father was a garbage man? Everything he was saying was so opposite of the vision I’d had of him as a little rich boy growing up in a mansion. I figured his cold social awkwardness was from never having his parents give him enough snuggles. But this was a different picture entirely.

“I went once, to the landfill that serves Epiphany,” he said. “The mountains of garbage were larger than the buildings. I could never forget. So when I went to college and found biochemistry, the pieces clicked. It was never about being one thing or another. It was about doing what I could do with the skill set I had.”

“So when you said you didn’t have money growing up... you didn’t mean you weren’t yet a bazillionaire.”

“Billionaire.”

“Same thing. You meant you weren’t a millionaire either.”

“Like I told you, I didn’t grow up with money.”

“Or yachts?”

He shook his head. “Not even a fishing boat.”

I said, “I had no idea.”

“Why would you? Before our arrangement, I went out of my way to never share any pieces of my personal life with the public.”

Like the fact that he was a widower, or whatever it was he did with his time when he was hiding out and not wanting to meet with me. Maybe he actually had a secret girlfriend or second wife or a whole harem of wives. Why hadn't I considered any of that? Why had I allowed myself to get trapped in a mountain lodge with only one bed with a man who could be in a committed polygamous relationship?

“Are you married?” I asked.

He furrowed his brows and crossed his arms, all defensive stoniness. “No, Layana, I am not married.”

“How many girlfriends, spouses, paramours, and/or bang buddies do you currently have?”

“This is ridiculous.”

So twenty? Thirty? “Answer the question.”

“Zero.”

“What about Esme? Did she die?”

“Esme?”

“She's your wife, right?”

His face contorted with disgust. “Esme *is my sister.*”

“What?” Was he serious? He'd never looked more serious. Somewhere along the line, I'd crossed some information.

“You built that brick shrine for Esme, right? In your garden?” I asked.

“My grandmother and my sister like to have a place to sit when they come to visit. The patio is *not* a shrine.”

“Oh.”

He didn't talk about his family to the press. And now he was being forced to share more of himself with the world, even if some of those pieces weren't entirely real—i.e. me. He

was putting himself out there with me now, and for this business merger thingy. Why?

I asked, “Why’s this business deal so important to you?”

“There is no better opportunity to see my goals come to fruition.”

Goals above comfort or happiness. I understood that to an extent, it’s what made me agree to this arrangement to begin with—suffer any torture in the name of my writing. Lucky for me, this trip wasn’t turning out to be so bad.

To keep it that way, I could try to make it as painless for him as possible, too. I’d been doing that with the social situations, but I could be nicer when we were alone. Maybe.

“I’ve secured us ski rentals for the day.” His jaw was tight as he spoke. “After my shower, I’d like to go, if that sounds acceptable to you.”

He wasn’t a widower, or committed to anyone romantically. And he was letting me into his life because he wanted to clean up the city we lived in. He wanted to do the kind of job his dad did, only on a bigger scale because he could.

He wanted to make the difference he could in the world.

I felt like I was in a daze, hit with a bulldozer.

“Skis.” I said, “Acceptable, yeah.”

He carried a large paper bag I hadn’t realized he was holding into the bathroom with him and shut the door.

I tucked my laptop back in my bag and sent a group text to the WTW crew.

Me: Is it possible that Gabriel is actually a good person?

Morgan: Duh

Juno: He seems lovely

Chester: ͇\_(ツ)\_͇

IF HE WAS REALLY that altruistic, what was wrong with me that I hadn't recognized that? Why did I only see the worst in him?

Morgan: Did you make it safely back to the city last night? You didn't text

Me: Sorry, I couldn't. We're stuck here. Avalanche

Chester: I heard about that on the news

Me: Safe though, promise!

Juno: Where are you?

Morgan: He took her to Alpine Aurora

Juno: !?!

Juno: Tell me you're taking all the pictures!

Me: ...

Juno: Take. More. Pictures.

Me: Will do

Morgan: Try to have fun, and not assault the sexy billionaire who totally has the hots for you

Me: I'll try not to assault him

Juno: !?!?!?!?

Morgan: Maybe he could teach you how to ski

Me: He's supposed to once he gets out of the shower

Juno: You know when he's showering? Are the walls really thin...or are the two of you...

Me: No

Juno: No to which part

Me: GTG <3

I SHOVED my phone into my pocket and ignored the dings as I put on my snow gear. No way was I going into the details of the one bed with everyone right now. Or possibly ever? Maybe I'd talk it all out with Morgan when I got back.

When Gabriel returned and got himself ready, I was revved up and ready to go. He was wearing a pair of khakis and a baby blue polo that did *not* suit him at all. If the mismatch to his personality wasn't enough of a dead giveaway that they weren't his from home, the little logo for the lodge made it crystal clear. I debated harassing him about it, but I decided to hold off for now.

We got our gear and stepped into the skis out in the snow.

My feet immediately felt heavy and awkward.

"How am I supposed to walk in these?" I asked.

"You don't."

"Because I have to clomp like Godzilla crushing all the running city folk?"

“Because you’re going to slide your feet.” He sighed. “Move slowly and keep your skis parallel. Avoid crossing them.”

“Summon my inner penguin and waddle.”

He seemed to consider a moment, his dark eyes glossing with a distant look. “Yes, do that.”

My ankle almost immediately twisted as the skis caught on one another. Gabriel caught my arm, steadying me.

“It takes some getting used to,” he said. “The boots are rigid for proper support. Try to remember, wherever your shoulders go, your hips and feet should follow.”

I visualized keeping my upper body and lower body aligned as I took a few more penguin glides. I mimicked the motion he did with his poles.

“Much better,” Gabriel said. “Let’s continue in this direction, toward the bunny slope lift.”

Given my current speed, it would take ten point two years to reach the lift, which was all right with me, because that meant not tumbling down the hill head first and bruising my brain.

Gabriel stayed next to me, keeping my pace, but making it look way easier. “The most important thing is learning how to stop.” Gabriel said patiently.

“Stop? I’m not even sure I can start.”

I could swear, for a fraction of a second, I saw a glint of amusement dance across his eyes.

“Gravity will take care of that part,” he said. “While going down the hill, you’ll create wedge shape with your skis.”

He demonstrated bringing the tips of his skis together into a pizza slice.

I imitated the motion, though it felt awkward trying to finagle my feet and skis into that position. “I thought you said never to do this. Won’t the skis just crisscross and make me trip over myself?”



“No.”

“If you say so.”

Somehow, eventually we made it to the lift.

On the way up, looking down, this hill seemed mostly flat, flatter than the one we’d taken tubing. The other patrons of this level were all small children, also like yesterday’s tubing excursion.

“The slope is likely to be choppier than higher difficulty slopes” Gabriel said.

“Then why start here?”

“For practice.”

We hopped off the machine.

“To maintain a decelerated rate down the slope, carving to the side will help, versus aiming straight down,” Gabriel said.

“Makes sense.”

A small child raced past, nearly knocking me over. And all of a sudden I wasn’t so sure this was going to be fun.

“Maybe we should go tubing again instead,” I said.

“Let’s make it to the bottom first, then if you’re still ready to quit, we’ll quit.”

We started moving, falling slowly down the lumpy slope.

“Whoa.”

Gabriel stayed by my side. He said, “I’ll be here the whole time.”

I tested moving side to side a bit, tested the pressure needed to turn my skis together, and before I knew it, we were halfway down.

“This isn’t so bad,” I said, turning my head to see Gabriel.

My body twisted with it. My skis crossed over each other. My balance shifted, twisted, and I started to tumble.

Gabriel was there, just like he said he’d be.

He caught me.

I found myself leaning against his firm chest, his arm around my waist. I looked up into his warm brown eyes. I felt seen and cared for and ridiculously unlike myself.

His lips called to me—pink and plump and tempting.

I breathed in the cold air, filling my lungs with the crisp scents of pine and snow and him.

Before I could overthink it, before I could think at all, I pulled myself upright.

And I kissed him.

# TWENTY-TWO

GABRIEL

Layana ambushed me with an assault on all of my senses—she tasted sweet like chocolate chips, she smelled warm and comforting, she moaned ever so softly, and she pulled hard on my jacket as she pressed her pillowy lips to my mouth.

The surprise contact made my entire body tense, every nerve coming to life in a way I'd never felt before.

This small kiss was a tease of what could be, what *we* could be, like this moment the two of us existed in a bubble frozen in time and space, away from reality. She felt amazing, which felt so wrong.

This kiss changed everything.

She pulled back, her hands still lingering on my chest. A pleasant blush tinted her cheeks.

Her bright blue eyes searched my face, then narrowed, suggesting I'd displeased her in some way.

“You're all stiff as a board,” she said.

Oh I was stiff all right, and not by choice. My body simply reacted to hers, involuntarily.

I clenched my jaw. “You kissed me.”

“It was a friendly, happy, thanks for getting me safely down the mountain smooch. It didn't mean anything, clearly.”

Clearly? Did she truly feel that way?

Did she not feel the air siphoned from the sky? The irresistible magnetic pull of two opposing forces colliding?

She smiled at me and punched my shoulder. “Let’s go again, *friend*.”

We were fake friends. The kiss meant nothing to her. None of this was real.

I tried to clear the fog and frustration that battered through my head. I tried to pretend the kiss meant nothing to me, too.

With a successful first run down the bunny slope behind us, we moved on to the green trail. I told her to keep her legs loose. I showed her how to zigzag more smoothly. I pretended everything was fine as I offered tips on each subsequent trip down the slope.

We drifted into a comfortable rhythm, riding the lift and going down the green slope. With each run, Layana’s performance and confidence improved. Her cheeks grew more flushed from the cold. Hours passed.

Eventually, my internal clock warned that it was time to eat something more significant than we had yesterday. We both required proper sustenance.

“We must go in for lunch,” I told her.

“One more time first.” Layana put her hands together and batted her eyelashes up at me. “It won’t take long. Plus, if we’re avoiding typical meal times, we’re also avoiding all the people.”

She knew exactly what to say to manipulate me. “Fine.”

A pleased grin overtook her face as she took off toward the lift.

We went down twice more before I successfully convinced her we needed to eat. Back inside, we went to the little restaurant. We took a seat at our table, but before we even received menus, the vultures descended.

The back of my neck prickled at their approach.

“Gabriel!”

It was too late to cover my face, too late to pretend I hadn't heard and run away. After my conversation with Peter this morning, I should have seen this coming, but I'd thought I had until dinner to prepare myself.

I looked to Layana, hoping she had some sort of excuse for the both of us. Footsteps grew nearer. Layana wasn't looking back at me. She was busy tipping back her glass of water as if she was completely dehydrated.

The host set menus in front of us and started listing wines of the day.

Layana asked questions about the listed vintages, still not looking at me.

Peter was growing closer. Desperate, I nudged Layana's leg with my toe.

She shot me a dangerous scowl. "What's that for?"

"I—"

Peter reached us. It was too late.

"Fancy seeing you here." Peter laughed.

I'd been consumed with thoughts of Layana's kiss. I'd made a fatal error. We should have gotten room service or a quick snack.

"It's been a long morning on the slopes," I said.

Layana's attention was completely focused on me now. She wasn't saying anything, or shielding me as she had before.

"Come on. You're coming with us," Peter said.

The host picked off some imaginary lint from his chest. "Wherever you sit, your server will be with you shortly."

"Don't be silly," Peter said. "We're all one big happy family at Biotabloom, right, Gabriel?"

The host looked from me to Peter and back again, and slowly backed away.

"Of course," Layana said. "We'd love to."

Any hope of her helping me escape died.

I glowered all the way to a private room where Biotabloom had gathered.

I couldn't do this again. Say I suffered through lunch, and didn't completely alienate the people I was supposed to be connecting with. What was next? Dinner tonight? Breakfast tomorrow? Then another lunch and dinner? I was trapped in an infinite loop of dining torture.

It was only a matter of time before they realized I was not the kind of person they would be willing to deal with. It was only a matter of time before I screwed up and the merger was canceled.

I needed to get out of this lodge.

As Peter gestured and we walked into the room, I scanned the overfilled space, packed with expressive faces, loud conversations, and laughter. An unseen weight settled on my chest, squeezing the air from my lungs. Each breath became a monumental task, every blink a conscious effort, as I fought the urge to turn and flee. My mouth went sandpaper-dry and my mind blurred as I wondered what horrible conversations would be thrust upon me.

There were only two open seats, unfortunately placed between the two loudest men in the room—Laurence Davis and Bill Clark.

Layana leaned in close, too close. She touched my wrist, alerting me to the fact that I was crushing the menu in my fist. I forced my grip to loosen.

She tilted her chin so her jaw brushed my shoulder. She whispered in my ear, "Wanna play a game?"

I worked my throat, frozen in fear.

"Every time someone says *family*, we drink," she said, gently leading me through the suffocating mass.

Her warm breath tickled against my jaw. It was a pleasant sensation that tethered me, pulled me back from the brink of complete panic.

She led me to my seat, and I dutifully sat.

“Drinking during a business lunch dulls the sharpness I require to appropriately respond to questioning,” I said softly without looking at her.

“It also dulls the nerves. You’ve tortured yourself by doing your other interactions with these dudes sober. You didn’t love how it went. Why not try a different tactic?”

Mr. Davis leaned over and clapped me on the back. “That’s quite the lady you got there, my boy. Bet you’ll be getting frisky later, eh?” He punctuated his invasive comment with an obnoxious wink. “If you aren’t interested, tell her she can call me. Just joshing you. Mostly.”

I ground my teeth together and imagined giving him a sharp jab to his throat, just enough to keep more words from spewing out of his mouth while we were forced to endure this event.

Layana’s knee brushed my thigh. She’d trusted me with her safety to teach her to ski. I could trust her now, in her area of social expertise. Couldn’t I?

Given any other day, with any other person by my side, I wouldn’t even consider it. But Layana had a way of pressing all my buttons and pushing me out of my usual way of looking at things. It was dangerous. She was dangerous, and ridiculously alluring.

I set the menu down and twisted fully toward her. When I looked into her eyes, I no longer bristled at her every reckless whim. Instead, it sparked something else inside me entirely. I couldn’t say exactly what that was, but I felt drawn to chase it.

She tempted me to throw away my self-control. She tempted me to take risks.

“*Circle back and synergy, too,*” she whispered.

I could feel my resolve wavering. I wanted to play this game with her, wanted to let her guide me into the dangerous unknown.

“Just a sip,” I said.

“Of course.”

“Don’t mind Laurence, son,” chuckled Mr. Clark, seated beside Layana.

I was neither man’s son nor boy, and I didn’t care for either’s choice of words.

“We’re all just one big happy family here at Biotabloom,” Mr. Clark said.

I cringed at the word *family* and took a big gulp of my drink.

“That’s right,” agreed Mr. Davis. “We like to think of ourselves as having a real family vibe around the office. Lots of synergy between teams, people circling back to collaborate. Keeps that family bond nice and tight!”

He elbowed me while Mr. Clark nodded. “Couldn’t have said it better myself. We’re all about family and synergy here at Biotabloom. Always open to circling back for more collaboration across teams. Keeps us tight as a family!”

I shuddered. This wasn’t happening. How could the two men actively choose to repeat these same words so many times in such a short period?

I shared a glance of private amusement with Layana, and took a large gulp from my glass.

The words seemed to echo across the room, different voices repeating the same ridiculous script.

No drink could dull my senses fast enough.

We ordered more drinks, then more still, transforming torturous conversations into something lighter. Eventually members of the “family” began to slip away.

I found that I was no longer eager to flee, and rather enjoyed watching them go instead.

Then the two of us were alone, the fire crackling in front of us. Behind our backs, the sounds from the rest of the restaurant and the people beyond grew distant.

Layana leaned her head on my shoulder. “You survived.”

“Are you sure?”



She ran a hand across my chest. Warmth radiated through the thin fabric of my shirt. The alarm bells that should have been blaring in my head whimpered in the distance.

“You feel just fine to me,” she said.

“*Just* fine?”

She flexed her fingers and froze. “Spectacularly unharmed.”

“Physically unscathed,” I said.

She tilted her chin so our gazes caught. The usual deep oceanic storm in her eyes abated to a gentle whirling tide pool. The flush in her cheeks and softness in her expression mirrored the effects of intoxication I felt within me.

My attention flicked to her gently parted lips. “We’re drunk.”

“Thrillingly tipsy.”

She began moving her hand once more on my chest, gliding her fingers ever so slightly back and forth. Given her relaxed expression, and the swirling disorientation in my own head, it was possible she didn’t realize what she was doing.

“It’s not safe to return to the slopes in this condition,” I said, my voice rough.

Heat radiated outward from her touch, igniting my nerve endings. A knot formed in my throat. I tried to swallow it away, but it grew larger instead.

“Maybe we should take a nap,” she said.

“I’m not tired.”

“If we stay here like this....”

Her words drifted off, leaving me to imagine what she was going to say. If we stayed like this, her touching me like that, I might lose my mind and kiss her.

She sucked in a tiny breath and nuzzled my shoulder with her cheek.

If she didn't stop touching me, I would want more than a kiss.

"If we stay here like this..." Her lips curved in a devious grin. "Someone might come in and try to talk to you again."

"I'm sold."

"What?"

"Let's get you a nap."

I slowly rose to my feet, careful to pull her along with me. But once I was standing, I tottered.

We were not *thrillingly tipsy*. We were both most definitely drunk.

The only reason I'd survived the meal was because of Layana and her game. I'd thank her by getting her safely to our room, and keeping my distance so we didn't end up doing something both of us would regret.

We grabbed our coats. I held onto her in the elevator. She leaned into me.

On our floor we clumsily made it to our room, opened the door, and snapped it shut behind us.

Layana bent down to the floor and undid one of my boots. She tried to do the second and laughed as her fingers fumbled. My head was spinning. I tossed our coats at the rack. They missed and landed on the floor, but it didn't matter.

Layana tried to stand, but she began to fall. She grabbed onto my legs.

With my head spinning, I was liable to fall on top of her. I squatted and tried to sit but toppled the rest of the way.

She laughed, her face turning redder. "I can't shoes."

Grinning despite myself, I tried to force my gaze from hers, tried to focus on unclasping my boot. My fingers didn't follow my mental instructions.

"It's stuck," I said. "I'll have to wear it forever."

She laughed and set one of her feet in my lap. "Do me."

Her words echoed in my head, funny because she had no idea how much I wanted to follow that instruction right now. There were a thousand reasons not to touch her, not to kiss her, not to live this moment only for the now. But I couldn't remember a single one.

With concentrated effort, I focused on the task she'd given me—all she wanted was for me to help her with the clasps. I could do that. Maybe. Probably not.

Actually, I got it. I slipped her boot off, and realized my hand was on her calf. She had strong, curvy legs. She was strong, period.

"I'm in awe of the way you handle people," I told her. "Navigating social situations like there's nothing to them. But I don't understand it. And it makes me crazy that you disregard the stakes."

"Stakes shmakes." She grinned at me.

"It's like watching a master of zui quan."

"What's that?" She pulled her leg under her and crawled closer to me.

"Drunken Fist, a martial art with a loose style that appears like the person has no idea what they're doing, like they're drunk and lucky in their hits."

"But they're great at kicking ass? Like Jar Jar. He was the ultimate supervillain pretending to be a bumbling idiot. That's how you see me?" She climbed up onto my lap, her legs straddling mine. Her blue eyes were no longer soft, but raging.

I could feel the heat of her all over me, feel the softness of her body pressed against my chest, my hips, her hands gripping my shoulders.

I tried to swallow it away, tried to focus on keeping my hands to myself and forming words. "I didn't say you were an idiot."

"But you think that, because you're a genius."

I would never think that she was an idiot. She was smart in every way I wasn't. "I was trying to compliment you."

“Don’t. You’re terrible at it. You probably shouldn’t speak at all, since that’s the one thing you’re bad at.”

That struck a nerve. “I’m perfectly capable of civilized speech with anyone who is not you.”

“You’re *too* civilized. That’s the problem.”

“You’re too spontaneous,” I snapped back. “It’s reckless.”

“Maybe if you let loose a little, you’d actually have fun, you grumpy, stuck up—”

She wanted spontaneous, I’d give her spontaneous. I grabbed her face and stole her words with my lips. Our mouths crashed.

The sound she made was ferocious, a rabid beast lashing out. She clawed at my shirt, tearing it up over my head, ripping buttons and catching skin with her nails.

We couldn’t do this. Touching her was crossing a line, one that I couldn’t cross. We were supposed to be in a business relationship only. Never ever mix business and pleasure. Never mix business with whatever this thing between us was. I didn’t even like her.

She wrinkled her nose in a snarl.

I shoved my tongue between her teeth. She pressed her chest to me and lifted herself higher onto her knees so her face was above mine. She tried to shove my shoulders back.

This was a battle of strength and wills. She wanted to prove she was stronger, to prove she was the one in control.

My head spun and reason flew out the window. I’d never felt so out of control.

I tore the fly of her snow pants open and pulled them down, taking her leggings and panties with them.

I stared at her beautiful pussy, and let her shove me back.

“I’m going to make you come first,” she growled, and positioned herself on all fours overtop of me, legs spread wide.

“Is that how you think you win?” I barked a laugh, scooted down between her knees, then nipped her thigh with my teeth.

She squealed and wiggled and her legs gave out.

I guided her hips over my face and licked between her slick folds. She bucked and moaned and cursed as she reached behind her and tried to both find balance and tear at my pants. I held her hips still and reached around her thigh to find her clit.

She hissed as I circled the tiny nub and shoved my tongue into her.

“*Ohmygosh*. It feels so...” She gasped. “I hate you so hard.”

I took her words as encouragement, and worked her clit until she cried out my name.

She bucked into me. “Gabriel, fuck.”

It was a prayer and a curse. It was the sound of my victory and the certainty of my undoing.

# TWENTY-THREE

LAYANA

I woke up cold in an unfamiliar bed, pillows under my stomach propping my bare ass up in the air. The room was dark. Based on the prickling sensation of cold, exposed skin, I realized I was completely naked. My head felt like it had taken one too many hits with a shovel and my brain had come loose.

A pleasant ache carried from my core down my thighs.

Frack. There was no chance of waking up like this and not having had sex.

Only, who could I have done that with? No chance was it with Gabriel freaking Stryker who I shared this room with. At a swanky ski hotel in the middle of nowhere. Whose tongue I distinctly remembered going *everywhere*.

Oh no.

Flashes hit me all at once—a drinking game, a make the other person come first challenge, and then...nothing. I was determined that at least this was a challenge I could win—I'd get myself together and be totally cool before I had to see him again. I'd show him he couldn't affect me.

I hopped out of bed and hunted for my panties.

The trashcan in the corner had a condom in it, so high-fives to drunk me for doing one right thing at least.

I found my underpants and the rest of my clothes scattered in a ring around a very naked Gabriel, who had his left ski boot still on, and his pants gathered around his calf above it.

He was on his back, his eyes closed, and all of his body on full display.

Despite the fact that every part of my brain was screaming to grab my clothes and run, my treacherous body decided it was prudent to stop and take in the view.

A smattering of hair crossed the broadest part of his chest, leading to a happy trail that led down between beautifully defined abs. He had the body not of a gym rat or the kind of guy who spent all his time behind a desk. It was the frustratingly sexy kind that came from frustratingly annoying discipline. Dudes didn't look like this when they knew how to relax, lounge around, and eat Twinkies with you on your stink sofa.

He also had a big dick, which the pleasant soreness between my thighs attested to.

I'd had sex with Gabriel Stryker. And I only remembered a fraction of it.

A pity, truly, because this monumental of an event would never ever happen again. It had hardly happened this time, because if you can't remember it, it doesn't count. Monumental was clearly the wrong descriptor. Fluke was much better because it was no big deal and totally dismissible.

I could mimic this kind of afterglow with a vibrator, and have none of the regret.

I snatched my clothes and dressed as quickly as possible. Halfway to making myself presentable—bottoms on only—*he moved*.

I snapped my bra on and reached for my shirt on the bed.

“What time is it?” Gabriel asked, voice deliciously raspy.

“Dark time. How should I know? Do I look like a clock to you?”

I pulled on my shirt and felt way more in control of the situation.

“Layana,” he said, suddenly sounding very sober and very awake. “Why am I naked? Did we—”

“Yes. It appears so. Don’t make a big deal about it though, okay?” I said as calmly as possible.

“We had sex and you think it’s *not a big deal?*” He rolled up to a sitting position, winced, and grabbed his head.

I didn’t say I thought it wasn’t a big deal. I wanted to play it like it wasn’t, and that’d be a lot easier if he did the same. I turned toward the window like there was something to see out there instead of more darkness. “We’re stuck with each other, right? Trapped indefinitely in this snowy situation? Let’s not make it any more complicated than it needs to be. Nothing has changed.”

I could hear him moving around, probably getting himself dressed. Light filled the room from one of the lamps. Then I could feel him approach. It was like my entire body was now in tune with his movements, and whispers of excitement carried over my skin as he grew nearer.

I didn’t want to be excited. I didn’t want to feel anything.

“The other alternative is I go out into the night with a spoon from the restaurant, and attempt to burrow my way to Boarsville where your uncle’s waiting,” I said. My nerves made my fingers tremble. “Maybe we’ll go shopping together. I can help him pick a nice gift for his wife before he drives me back to civilization and reality.”

Gabriel stopped in his tracks, *not* joining me by the window. “Look at me.”

I didn’t want to.

“Layana.” He stepped closer. I could feel him right behind me, still not touching, but so close we could if either of us reached out.

“Agree that it means nothing,” I said, refusing to turn around, refusing to acknowledge any other possibility.

“I—”

A phone rang from across the room. Based on the fact that I could feel mine in my pocket, I knew it had to be his.

“You’d better answer that,” I snapped.



He waited another two rings before I heard him move.

“What?” he answered the phone with the same coldness I felt carry across the air. “How long?”

I ignored him and took the opportunity to go into the bathroom and splash some cold water on my face.

If I couldn't remember, it didn't happen, I told myself again. Except I did remember quite a bit.

Fine. If it happened under the influence of alcohol, it didn't count. At least that one couldn't unravel itself.

I toweled off my face and gathered my toiletries. Better to be prepared to leave. What was the alternative? Letting our soaps intermingle? No. Boundaries had to go back into place, strict rules for both of our sakes.

I felt him move into the doorway behind me.

“The roads will be cleared imminently,” he said.

“Your billionaire dollars in action.”

“A concerted effort between local and outside companies,” he said, confirming my guess.

“Must be nice to get whatever you want at the snap of your fingers.” I didn't want to fight, so I needed to stop pushing him. I caught his gaze in the mirror. It looked...I didn't know. “Not that I'm complaining. It worked out for me this time. I'd hate to be on your bad side.”

“Would you?”

“Um, yeah. Duh. *I* don't have minions to do whatever I want for me. A war with you would be a total David and Goliath. I'm clearly the David, and so naturally I'd win, but I'd probably get smashed up way too much for my liking first. That's not my jam.”

He stared at me, earthy brown eyes searing.

I broke the contact. “You better pack, too. As soon as the road's clear, I want out of here.”

I could feel his attention a bit longer, lingering, watching. And then he stepped away. Honestly though, looking around, it was mostly me who had things to pack. He only had the bag from the shop downstairs and a few pieces of clothing.

With him not in the bathroom, I finished packing in peace. And when I went back out into our room, he wasn't there either. That was weird. I was grateful for the space though, so I finished up and then sat down on the edge of the bed.

It felt like I sat alone in the room for an eternity. I knew I should spend the time writing. I knew I should do something, but I didn't. Eventually he returned, told me the car was waiting, and we headed downstairs.

Wallace chattered away on the drive back, all about the presents he bought and what a wonderful time he'd had in Boarsville. But neither Gabriel nor I spoke much at all, and certainly not to each other.

Once we reached my building, I popped out of the car and hurried to meet Wallace at the trunk.

"I'll do it," Gabriel told his uncle.

"I don't need any help," I said. "I got my bags down here on my own just fine. I can get them back up, too."

I tried to pry my bag from Gabriel's grasp, but he was ridiculously strong and wouldn't let go. It wasn't worth the fight.

Inside, once we made it to the stairs, I was actually kinda glad that he was here because I was exhausted from the weird sleep, from the weird tension, and from the long drive.

"No elevator?" he asked.

"It's broken," I told him.

I could feel disapproval wafting off of him in waves. I ignored it and lugged my bag up the steps to the second floor.

At the end of the hall, I spotted Maxim looking down and mumbling something to himself. I didn't know what that was about, but I was glad he was preoccupied and leaving me alone.

I opened the door.

“This is where you live?” Gabriel asked.

“No. I just have a key and hang out in the worst building in the city for fun,” I said as flatly as humanly possible. “Watch out for the tacks, in case I missed one. Hurts like a mother.”

“Tacks?”

“Thumb tacks. On the floor.”

“Did...you spill them by accident?”

“No. I put them there on purpose. The best home protection is the boobytraps the bad guys don’t see coming.”

“The worst home protection is the kind that wounds the homeowner.”

“If you’re done judging me, you can leave my bags and go.”

He had his phone out, working on something, and ignored me.

“What are you doing?” I asked. “I said you can go.”

“I heard you.”

“So?” I waited for him to turn his tight butt around and stroll out the door.

“I’m moving payment for your services to your bank account.”

My mouth dropped. “Why do you have access to my bank account?”

“Pamela located all of your details upon our agreement. It’s standard, like the background check.”

“That’s not okay. I didn’t give you permission to pry into my personal anything.”

“Pamela did it. Not me.”

“I didn’t give Pamela permission either.”

“The transfer is complete.” He slipped his phone into his pocket.

“This is a huge violation of personal boundaries. You know that, right?”

“It’s standard.”

I used my phone to check my account to see that no funny business was happening. Of course Pamela didn’t have a reason to steal my twelve dollars, or whatever chump change was in there, but that wasn’t the point. Boundaries were the point, and Gabriel and his people didn’t seem to understand....

All thoughts floated away into the ether as I stared at all the zeroes—and not the usual kind. There were numbers in front of the zeroes.

I poked a finger of righteous accusation into the center of Gabriel’s chest. “*What did you do?*”

“As I said, I moved payment for your services. Nothing more.”

“This isn’t....” I shook my head trying to gather coherent words. “You can’t put that kind of money into my account. The cops are going to think I robbed a bank.”

“It’s all perfectly legal.”

“I’m going to get flagged as a drug dealer.”

“You won’t.”

“It’s too much,” I said, completely flabbergasted. It felt wrong, and I couldn’t exactly put my finger on why. “Is this goodbye? A grand gesture for our agreement’s end?”

“Of course not. You promised to help me on February fifth, and until the merger meeting has concluded on February fourteenth. I expect you to hold up your end of the bargain.”

“Then what is this for?” It hit me why this felt so wrong. “Is this for the sex? Like you can buy me? That’s not what happened. It was a drunken accident that meant nothing.”

“You’ve made that clear. Along with the fact that you hate me.”

I expected anger, but that’s not what I saw. If anything, he looked wounded.

I didn't *hate* him. Why would he...and then I remembered sitting on his face telling him just that.

"I don't hate you," I said.

He clenched his jaw.

"You're frustrating and difficult and you make me want to rip my hair out."

He raised a brow like I was proving his point.

"But I don't *hate* you. I'm sorry I said that. It's not true."

He stared at me hard, possibly debating whether he believed me or not. I wasn't sure why it mattered if I hated him or not anyway, because it wasn't like he liked me. I clearly made him as frustrated as he made me.

Why wasn't he talking?

"I actually had fun skiing," I said. "The other part—that's not happening again."

He just kept staring at me, and I wanted to smack the life into him. Where was his fire? I needed his anger, or *something*. I needed a reaction to know how he was feeling.

"If your schedule allows, I'd like to schedule an appointment to meet with you for Friday."

So he was cool with everything returning to normal. Good. "Sure. I've quit my job, so I'm free any time."

"I won't see you on my morning runs."

I blinked at him, unsure what the expression on his face meant. "I guess not. But you'll see me Saturday for the gala."

He gave me a sharp nod. "Before that, Friday at seven."

"Perfect."

"Take care, Layana." He turned and left.

Even though I should have felt relieved that he wasn't going to make things weird, that everything was continuing the way I wanted it to, a strange feeling settled in my gut.

I wasn't sure I could process this alone, or at all. After such a complicated trip, I knew exactly where Gabriel and I stood, and somehow that didn't feel right at all.

# TWENTY-FOUR

GABRIEL

A rush of temperate air swept through my lab, the faint hum of the climate regulator accompanying it. I stared at my open lab notebook, again unable to find my usual level of focus.

It was entirely Layana's fault.

No matter how important my task, my mind wandered back to her. This problem began the day we'd first met, when she'd bludgeoned me with that door. Her consumption of my thoughts had only grown since then.

If I wasn't thinking about the frustrating things she did and said—like her refusal to arrive in a timely manner, or the way she spread her belongings across the bed without a care for order or anyone else's comfort—then I was thinking about the devious sparkle in her eye when she teased me, or the easy way she navigated a crowd, or the sweet taste of her on my tongue.

I wasn't supposed to be thinking about her.

I was supposed to be working.

Only if I wasn't thinking about her, who would? Someone needed to.

Though I'd transferred enough funds to cover her needs last night when we'd parted yesterday, I knew her well enough to recognize that she still might *choose* not to take care of herself.

I'd seen her apartment.

It was one tiny room, with tacks on the floor, and no bed.

Certainly the payments I'd made during our arrangement thus far had been ample enough to right her situation, to afford her a vacuum to remove the hazardous objects on the floor and a bed on which to sleep.

Perhaps time was the issue. She could have no time to take care of herself after working multiple jobs—the café, social media posts for me, and her blog.

Or perhaps she simply didn't take care of herself. I couldn't understand it. I couldn't condone it. She deserved to be pampered, to never have to work more than she wanted, while having her every need met.

I couldn't force her to do anything she didn't want to. I knew her well enough to know that, too.

I took a deep breath, refocusing my attention on the task at hand.

Six days had passed since I'd altered the temperature on one of my samples. Compared to the control, that rise in a single degree had most definitely caused changes. The color could no longer be referred to as pistachio. The yellow-green hue had lightened, transforming into a shade akin to a waxy Granny Smith apple.

If anything, I'd expected the sample to darken, not to grow brighter.

I prepared a droplet onto a slide.

My phone dinged.

Had Layana texted me? A sharp sensation flitted through my chest—anticipation, nerves—I wasn't sure.

I scrubbed my hands in the sink, thoroughly dried them, then pulled my phone from my pocket.

In front of a red background, a pair of long, curved penises met in the center of the screen. They were painted gold and posed to form a giant letter M, like a phallic version of the McDonald's logo.



Another dick pic.

The shock factor wasn't nearly as large this time. Instead of feeling horrified, I found myself grinning at my phone.

Layana: Good morning

I CHECKED THE TIME. It was in fact still morning.

Me: It's ten, not two. You managed to wake during morning hours.

Layana: Way easier when I don't have to stay up all night under Eterni-Tea's hellish fluorescent lights

Me: What will you do with your newly-reclaimed free time? Procure a hamburger? It seems you're in the mood.

Layana: I'm always in the mood for meat. Can't grab a Big Mac before eleven though, sadly

Layana: As for my free-time plans, I was thinking I'd pretend to be friends with a reclusive billionaire genius, probably

Layana: You know, totally normal things

SHE'D CALLED ME A GENIUS. Because the word came from her, the sentiment made my chest feel lighter.

Layana: The writing is starting to flow, actually. Some of that. And I'll catch up with the girls

MY THUMBS LINGERED over the screen as I debated if I should say what I felt. It was dangerous, my need to see her again. I couldn't forget what she'd said when her inhibitions were down.

She hated me.

The words were still fresh, as fresh as the memories of her cries of pleasure. Even if she'd taken the words back, told me it wasn't true, she'd still said them. And it hurt.

I couldn't wait until Friday to see her. I wanted to see her now.

Me: Time until the fourteenth of February is running out. Create another post with me tonight.

I WAITED for the telltale dots to appear on the screen.

They didn't.

She said nothing.

Had I made a mistake by requesting time with her? Did she not know what to say to me now that we'd slept together? Perhaps she didn't know how to respond. Perhaps I'd spooked her.

What could I say to reassure her? I wasn't good at this, and usually I didn't care. But everything was different with Layana, and I didn't want to allow my lack of social skills to scare her away.

Layana: DID YOU SEE THIS????

SHE SENT A LINK. I clicked it.

It was an image of the two of us wearing winter attire, with a backdrop of a powder white landscape. Layana's fists gripped onto the collar of my jacket. Her eyes were shut, her lips pressed to mine.

In that moment, I'd felt shock and confusion before a rush of warmth and thrill. It was the surprise kiss over the weekend at the ski lodge, immortalized by a stranger. Staring at the image now, I felt a similar mix of emotion, only in reverse.

I hated that what should have been a private moment was public, due to both an invasive photographer and to Layana's recklessness. If she'd kept her lips to herself on the snow, this would never have happened. I hated to think that, especially remembering how earth-shattering those lips had felt. I wished

I could be kissing her right now, scolding her for her audaciousness, yet reveling in the effects of it.

Layana: Check out the engagement

I PEELED my gaze from the pink of her cheeks, from the adoring look on her face. She was gorgeous, dangerous, and undeniable. I forced myself to scroll. Comments filled my screen, tons of them.

From the screen to the slopes, our girl can do it  
all! And with such a hottie? Swoon

THIS is the winter warmth I needed today!  
#SnowQueenWithHerKing

OMG the chemistry!!!!

YASSSSSS

#RealityLoveStory

#KissingForRatings

Isn't he like Bill Nye or something? Love in a  
test tube!

Did my screen just glitch or are they kissing?

Back off, honey! He's mine #Heartbreaker

It's like watching black haired Barbie steal my  
crush. No thank you

Anyone else think she's desperate to stay in the  
limelight

Snow thanks!

Gross

I'd hump that

She doesn't deserve him. She's so fake.  
Someone should stab a bitch

Me: There are threats to your safety.

Layana: Look at the number of likes

I LOOKED. The numbers meant nothing to me.

Layana: It's triple the usual post and climbing fast.  
You're going viral, Mr. Stryker

I DIDN'T WANT people threatening her. What other negative attention would this photograph bring? We were doing just fine with our plan the way it was before, with people speculating, but nothing more than friendship captured by the camera. This crossed a line.

Layana: You're welcome

I WASN'T THANKFUL. I was frustrated and concerned. She needed security. I couldn't let her be at risk because of me.

Layana: ??? Hello?

I DIDN'T KNOW what to say to her right now, so a reply would have to wait. I couldn't risk saying the wrong thing. More pressing matters needed to come first, and I needed to move quickly.

# TWENTY-FIVE

LAYANA

Agitation thrummed through my limbs. I needed to move.

I headed out and stalked the streets as I waited for Gabriel to respond. His whole drop-a-conversation-without-another-word habit was one of many things about the man that drove me crazy.

Going nowhere in particular, I texted the WTW crew.

Me: I texted him about the kiss pic

Juno: ♥♥♥♥ It is seriously the sweetest thing ever

Morgan: Is he happy with the engagement

Me: Idk. He's ghosting me again

Morgan: You didn't send him another penis, did you?

Me: ...

Morgan: It's fine. I'm sure that's not the problem

Morgan: It's probably the social anxiety, fear of the attention that allllll the likes and comments are sending in his direction

MAYBE. That could be it, right? He could be completely shutting down because he hated people knowing his private business. Then someone took a picture of a private moment and made it public, without his knowledge or permission.

But also, I thought we looked pretty cute. If anything, he should be thanking me. My whole job was to make him look good in public, which I did. And then he just stopped talking to me. *Again.*

Me: It's super frustrating

Me: I hate being ignored

Morgan: You're the most unignorable person ever

Morgan: Sorry, GTG. Actor drama

Me: Kick him in the face for me

Morgan: <3

SHE WOULDN'T DREAM of it. She'd smile and nod and do all the polite things. I couldn't handle that kind of thing, but she rocked it. And I knew after all of the headaches, she was doing what she loved and she was happy.

Juno: Come to my place, Lay. Chester's sick and I could use your help if you're free

Juno: You can dump all the juicy details on me, and I'll bash that smoking hot jerkface with you

Juno: There's cupcakes in it, too, if that helps

Me: OMW

A FEW MINUTES LATER, one more text came through.

Chester: I'm sick

JUNO PROMISED to make him some soup. I sent a feel-better-soon note in response. It was unfortunate for me that I didn't have Morgan's car anymore, even though I was super grateful she'd let me borrow it before. I really needed to get one of my own. I took the subway, then walked the rest of the way to Juno's apartment.

One knock on the door later, and Juno greeted me with a hug and a wide smile. Her skin glowed, as always, and her powder pink hair was pulled up in the perfect ponytail. The touch of glitter on her cheeks gave her just the right amount of sparkle to draw the camera's attention to her bright eyes.

Squeezing me, she said, "Hey, girl. I'm so glad you're here."

"Me, too," I said. "You look great."

"You, too."

I didn't. I looked like I'd just rolled off of a stink sofa, put on some wrinkled clothes, and fretted and sweated my way here, because that's what I'd done.

"Before we start, do you want to sit and chat things out a bit? I have coconut cake with passionfruit buttercream."

"Yes to everything you just said."

I followed her to the kitchen table. She brought along the cutest tiniest baby cupcakes to ever exist.

It felt strange being here, in the space we'd briefly shared. It felt like a life that could have been for me, but hadn't quite fit. My current set-up was objectively way less awesome, but it felt more genuine, because it was mine.

“Before we delve into my damage, tell me about the Paprikatown saga,” I said. “How’d the apology video go? I’ve been so wrapped up in my own drama recently, I haven’t properly asked about yours.”

“It went...okay.”

“If you need me to kick someone’s ass, just give me a name.”

She gave me a small smile. “It went as well as it could. And everything’s back to normal.”

She didn’t sound happy about that. This would require further questioning.

I licked the icing off one of the baby cupcakes. Smooth, fruity cream bathed my taste buds in tropical heaven. “Ohmygosh you’re a culinary wizard.”

“Thanks.” Juno chuckled. Then, without an ounce of judgment in her tone, she segued into my issues. “So you quit your job.”

“This whole fake friend of a billionaire thing is paying plenty,” I said, letting her change the subject. “There’s no reason to torture myself at Eterni-Tea.”

“Your arrangement with Gabriel has an end date though, right?”

“Valentine’s Day.”

“That’s kinda weird. Have you thought about what you’d like to do after that?”

I shoved a cupcake in my mouth so I didn’t have to answer. It was soft and pillowy and delicious. I chewed slowly, savoring it.

After a moment, Juno said, “I’m in a similar position.”

“Hawww....” I swallowed. “How so?”

“Well honestly, the whole brand deal aspect of being an influencer—it doesn’t feel right.”



Was this about the Paprikatown issue, or something else?  
“I thought you loved what you were doing.”

“I do, kind of. I’m wearing down. The burnout is real. And I don’t think this is something I want to do for the rest of my life.”

Just like Gabriel had said when he met her. Did that mean even though he was bad at talking to people, he was somehow good at reading them?

I asked, “So what *do* you want to do?”

“I don’t know yet. Maybe something similar, but with less pressure to churn out new content constantly. I haven’t figured out the particulars, and I’m happy that the show money is there, and that I can get brand deals to pay the bills now.”

“You’re not having money troubles, are you?” I asked.

“No, nothing like that. But it’s like you and your billionaire job. It’s a cushion and an opportunity. We both can figure out what it is we really want to do.”

“I thought you had everything figured out already,” I told her.

She laughed. “I wish.”

“Same.” Except I did know what I wanted to do, at least with my life at the moment, and for now that was all I needed. I wanted to write, and I wanted Gabriel to text me back.

“So tell me more about Gabriel’s reaction to the photo of your kiss.”

I showed her my phone, how the texts had just stopped.

“Does he do this a lot?” she asked.

“Ghost me? Kind of. It’s like he doesn’t care that he’s leaving me hanging.”

“You said he has trouble with social interactions, right?”

“That’s what he hired me for.”

“Maybe he doesn’t know how to express what he’s thinking.”

“Shutting me out is not the way to deal with that.”

“I agree. Maybe the kiss being out there freaked him out somehow, because it is totally going viral.”

Or maybe it freaked him out because it was proof that our ski trip and everything that happened during that trip was real.

“It didn’t mean anything.” I said. But it wasn’t Juno I needed to convince...I had to convince myself.

“Okay.”

Juno’s expression was pretty much the same one she always put on—a smile that said everything was fine, that she had everything under control, and that no matter how many stupid lies you told to her face, she’d believe and support you.

“Let’s do your thing,” I told her. “What are we filming today?”

“I’ve planned something easy, so everyone from all skill levels can follow along.”

Juno’s definition of easy and my definition of easy were completely different. I nodded.

“Ricotta pancakes with raspberries and walnuts,” she said.

“Raspberries for the whole Valentine’s thing.”

She nodded. “Everything for Valentine’s until February fifteenth, when we move on to St. Patrick’s Day.”

“Will I get to dye your hair green?”

“Only the ends.”

I grinned at her.

The lights and phone stands were already set up all around the kitchen. We fell into our easy rhythm, her working her magic turning creamy goop into perfectly shaped hearts, me making sure every detail was caught on camera.

Morgan texted when I left, asking if I wanted to get together after she got off work. I said no, because I wasn’t sure I could see her right now. If I did, I’d spill the whole story

about Gabriel, including every sordid detail, and she'd microscope the crap out of it in a way Juno hadn't.

I loved and needed that scrutiny at times, for sure, but I couldn't handle it right now.

On my walk, and on the subway ride home, I got this weird feeling that someone was following me. It was a prickling, nagging sensation from the tips of my toes to the back of my neck. But no one bothered me, and I didn't actually see anyone being a creeper. It was probably all in my head. My creeper-dar, just like all of my other senses, was thrown off by the weirdness of the weekend.

I knew exactly how to set myself straight. As soon as I got back into my apartment, I let my frustration and confusion pour into words.

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*When I close my eyes, it's not the bristling porcupine side of him I see.  
It's the hungry wolf who wants to devour me whole.*

*Flashes come to me, images of him pulling my hips down over his face, the feel of his bruising grip holding me still, the tremble of my unsteady fingers tearing at his fly as I try desperately to hold onto some semblance of control.*

*His tongue lashes my already swollen clit, frying my nervous system and thrusting me over the edge of rational decisions into beautiful chaos. He doesn't hold back, doesn't ease into me. He thrusts his tongue, nips at my tender flesh, and makes me come faster than I ever have in my life.*

*It's me who needs more, me who pulls out the condom Juno stashed in my borrowed bag with my borrowed clothes. It's me who tells him to put it on, me who climbs onto his lap and takes exactly what I want from him and not an inch less.*

*He's rough, commanding, and easily takes control.*

*I don't care. It feels too good.*

*We're two desperate bodies, coaxing pleasure from each other's flesh, too hazy to remember all the reasons we shouldn't.*

*He unravels me so completely I no longer care that he makes me feel so far out of control that I lose myself. Or that he removes my suitcases from the bed without asking. Or that he drops our conversations in the middle of texting and freaking ghosts me for days.*

*Nope. I do care.*

*I care right now. And I'm flipping furious.*

---

I KNEW EXACTLY what I needed to do.

I snapped my laptop shut, then dug around through my bag until I found what I was looking for. I flipped through the packet of papers Gabriel's assistant had put together for the ski trip, and found Pamela's info.

Nervous excitement thrummed through my veins as I called. It rang twice.

"Ms. Hartley," she answered, apparently already having my number in her phone. "How can I help you?"

"Pamela, hi," I said, suddenly unsure. "Call me Layana."

Silence reigned.

That feeling prickled at the back of my mind, the one like there was someone watching again, even though I was alone in my apartment.

"Where is he?" I asked.

"Mr. Stryker's location is not something I'm authorized to share."

This was not going well. "I need to see him."

"I believe you have his number, correct?"

"You're not helping."

"Will that be all?"

"No. That will not be all. Tell him I need to talk to him."

"You tell him yourself. Good day, Ms. Hartley."

She hung up.

It was not a *good day*. Grr.

I stalked off, deciding to take her advice and find him myself. I'd go to his office first, then his house if he wasn't there. Other than his morning run, those were the only two things I knew he did.

Did he have friends? Could he be talking things out with one right now, like I'd done with Juno?

Why didn't I know that about him? I felt like we were close enough that I should know that and more.

As I headed back toward the subway, that feeling of being watched hit me again, this time more intensely than before.

I checked for reflections in the glass windows I passed. No one was sneaking up on me, but the creepy feeling remained. I turned a corner I didn't need to turn, then ran down to the next block and peeked back the way I'd gone.

There, most definitely following me, was a big guy in jeans and a black jacket. Now that I was noticing him here, I knew with certainty I'd seen him before.

He was on the subway with me on the way to Juno's. He'd gotten on at the same stop as me, after me. He'd seemed normal enough at the time, and I hadn't caught him looking at me, so I hadn't given him a second thought.

Now though, I knew better.

I waited at the corner, my back pressed against the brick wall, and listened for his footsteps.

I heard city sounds—cars and people and distraction.

I couldn't hear him.

My pulse pounded in my ears. I shoved my hand in my messenger bag and grabbed my bear spray.

He stepped out, towering over me, proving he was even bigger than I'd realized—six two maybe, and at least twice my weight.

Awareness flickered across his face. He hadn't expected me to be here—good.

What was the plan here? This guy could snap off the bottom half of my leg like it was nothing and floss his teeth with it.

I shoved my bear spray up at him, aiming for his eyes. "Who are you and why are you following me?"

He flattened his lips together into a line.

He looked like a bouncer from a club, and not at all like the reality show fans who typically accosted me.

“You don’t look like the typical stalking type,” I said. “Who are you? Tell me or I’ll blind you, kick you in the nuts for good measure, then once you’re crying for your mommy, I’ll call the police.”

His left eye twitched. “I’m security, ma’am.”

Security? “I didn’t rob any stores.”

“Not that kind of security. Personal security.”

“Like...a bodyguard?” That didn’t make any sense. “I didn’t hire security. I won’t be paying you.”

His expression was blank. He hadn’t flinched at my threats, and he wasn’t leaving either.

Realization struck. There was only one person who’d hire someone to follow me and not even consider that it’d be polite to tell me about it first.

“Did Gabriel do this?”

“I work for Mr. Stryker, yes.”

I held out a hand. “Give me your phone.”

His brows furrowed with confusion.

“I will spray this stuff up your nose, tackle you, and take it myself.”

His lips quirked up at the side in amusement.

I growled my frustration and dove for his pocket.

He easily moved out of the way. And then, unexpectedly, he pulled out his phone and handed it to me.

I scrolled through his contacts and found Gabriel’s number. I tapped the screen to dial it.

This was going to be good.

Gabriel answered on the first ring. “Is she all right?”

“Aha!” I yelled in his ear. “You think you can ghost me? Well, you can’t. What do you think you’re doing hiring a guy to stalk me? And for the record, he’s doing a terrible job. I found him and with only a little threat, he gave you up.”

“He’s not hiding from you.”

That was...well...ugh.

“Why did you hire him?” I asked. “This is crossing a major line, and that is not cool. And we were having a nice conversation earlier and then you just dropped off. That is even less cool. Where are you right now? I want to see your face as I berate you.”

“I’ll text you the address. Let Harold drive you. It’s too far to walk.”

With that, he hung up.

A ding came from my pocket.

Scowling at the big guy, I asked, “Are you Harold?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I pulled out my own phone, and there was an address, just as Gabriel had said.

I was going to get my answers.

# TWENTY-SIX

GABRIEL

I braced myself for Layana's arrival, for the verbal lashing she'd inevitably assail me with. I would not apologize for sending security to watch over her. It was the right course of action, and I refused to pretend otherwise.

My biggest hesitation, though, was inviting her here.

To see the house, and meet the person who made me who I was.

Was this a mistake? It was spontaneous, reckless, and more like something Layana would do than I would. Yet she'd inspired me to make a quick, rash decision.

I wanted to let her in.

As I swiped the paintbrush across the wooden shutter, I listened for the sounds of her approach.

Before long, the grating sound of gravel crunching beneath tires let me know that she had arrived. A car door slammed.

"What are you doing?" she called out to me, with less fury in her voice than I'd expected.

"Painting."

"Why?"

I could feel her drawing closer.

I said, "The shutters are due for a fresh coat before the spring showers and pollen begin."

"This isn't your house."



“I know,” I said, dipping the brush back into the bucket for more paint. “It’s my grandmother’s.”

“Oh.”

“It’s imperative that no personal information of her homestead or her become public,” I said.

“You think I would post private information about your grandmother?”

I didn’t answer, because I didn’t know. I knew she wouldn’t purposefully cause harm to Oma. I wanted to trust that she’d respect the privacy I’d worked so hard to maintain.

But she didn’t have to intend harm to cause it.

“You don’t think I respect boundaries,” she said with a bite to her words.

“I think it’s best to be clear with my expectations.” Before she could snap a response back, I added, “What can I do for you, Layana?”

“First, you can look at me.”

I set down the brush on the lid of the paint can and turned to look at her fully.

She wore tattered jeans and her puffy white coat. Her long black hair hung loose today, framing her beautiful, sharp features. Her eyes weren’t the icy daggers I’d expected, but vast, searching pools.

My chest tightened. I was glad to see her, yet uncertainty reigned over all other emotion.

“That’s better,” she said. “Now you need to explain yourself. Why didn’t you text me back earlier?”

I considered what exactly she might be looking for from me, but came up blank. “I didn’t have anything productive to add to the conversation.”

“What *unproductive* thing do you want to say?”

“Nothing.”

“But that’s not true, is it? Not really. You’re...” She narrowed her eyes at me. “You’re pissed.”

I wasn’t mad. I was...guarded.

A pleased defiance crossed her face, like she’d figured out the puzzle I presented.

“You like it when I’m mad,” I told her.

“Psh.” She waved a dismissive hand at me.

“You do. That’s what you’re looking for. You like inspiring my frustration.”

“Maybe I like a little heat. But no one likes fighting.”

“You do.”

“That’s...” She turned.

I followed her gaze.

Oma was approaching with a warm smile.

“Hello,” she said to Layana. Then to me, “I didn’t realize we were having company.”

Layana’s whole demeanor immediately shifted. She mirrored Oma’s warmth and openness, meeting her halfway across the yard.

“Hi, I’m Layana, Gabriel’s friend.”

Is that what we were? Friends? The word turned my stomach to knots. The whole situation added to those knots.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Oma said. “Come, let me get you a glass of lemonade.”

“That sounds lovely.”

The two were immediately acting like the best of friends.

I realized then that Layana didn’t simply like fighting, she liked fighting *with me*. Any nervousness I’d felt about her coming here immediately evaporated as I watched the two of them compliment each other on their clothing and accessories.

We took seats on the porch, where Oma set up lemonade and snacks.

“Give me all the dirt,” Layana said, with a megawatt smile. “Tell me what Gabriel was like as a kid.”

Oma chuckled. “He was a fiery little thing, using trouble as a way to get attention.”

Layana leaned forward. “*Really?*”

I watched her react, nervously waiting to see what she would do next.

“He’s so private and reserved with others now,” Oma said, “but he wasn’t like that at all when he was little. Poor little thing had a rough time of it.”

My heart caught in my throat. I didn’t expect childhood trauma to be on the table.

Why hadn’t I thought this over? Why hadn’t I laid down the groundwork of what conversations were appropriate for discussion?

“Rough how?” Layana asked.

Oma shot me a questioning look that asked if it was all right to share.

My heart beat hard in my chest, so hard I thought it might burst. I gave her a nod.

“After his father died. Anyone would be angry about that, and Gabriel was only eleven.”

“That sucks. I’m so sorry.” Layana looked at me with something other than pity. Though I couldn’t quite understand it, it made a lump form in my throat.

“Being raised by a single mom must have been rough,” Layana said.

“My mother left when I was a baby,” I said, the words sounding foreign in my ears. “Oma raised me. I never knew my mother.”

Silence settled around the table. I twisted my glass, focusing on the cold moisture on the smooth surface.

“That’s...I’m so sorry,” Layana said again. “This is a beautiful area. I bet you and Esme had a lot of fun running around when you were kids. How much older is she?”

“Esme’s nine years younger than Gabriel,” Oma said.

Confusion squished up Layana’s features. “Is she your half-sister?”

“No,” I said.

When I didn’t elaborate, Oma said, “Their mother came by back then, a few times.”

The implication hung in the air. She’d come back long enough to get knocked up a second time. And again to drop off Esme.

“Did you spend time with her while she was in Epiphany?” Layana asked.

“She wasn’t interested in knowing me, or Esme. She was only around long enough to break Dad’s heart again. No, I did not spend time with her,” I said, with enough force to end the conversation. Dad’s heart wasn’t the only one she’d broken.

Oma cleared her throat and smiled at Layana. “Well, tell me about you, dear.”

Layana’s gaze still lingered on me. “I’m a writer from a small town about four hours’ drive from here, called Cricket Falls.”

“What brought you to Epiphany?” Oma asked.

“My dream to be on reality television, and my best friend Morgan. Really, it was more me who brought her here, though. I thought I’d be one of those runaway success stories, a bright star whose tenacity meant they were bound for megastardom.”

“How is that dream going?” Oma asked. “I imagine it’s difficult to make it onto television.”

“I made it. But it wasn’t everything I’d thought it would be,” Layana said. “The producers painted my best friend as a villain, twisting her words and making the world hate her even though she’s sweeter than this lemonade.”

Layana took a sip of her drink before continuing, “I thought it was going to be magical and that as soon as I made it, I’d end up on a different kind of show, like as a host, or I’d get a documentary of my new glamorous life. But it didn’t make me happy. When dreams become reality, they can’t live up to the lofty expectations, because life is full of surprises and it’s weird and twisty.”

She hadn’t shared that much about her experience with me before.

Oma patted Layana’s hand. “Experience teaches you what you actually want, even if it’s not what you expect.”

What did Layana want now? She wanted to write. She said being near me helped her do that.

“Layana’s using her fame to help me with my image,” I said.

Oma knew full well what the press had decided about me, and I hated that because I knew it hurt her.

“That’s so nice of you to help Gabriel. Those interviewers have painted such an unflattering picture. He’s misunderstood is all,” Oma said. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

I tensed.

The last thing I wanted was a photo caption on the internet labeling me “Gremlin,” or a story told in the papers about how I’d repeatedly skipped school after my father had died, or one about the fire I’d accidentally set when I’d thought vices could be the answer to my pain and I tried a cigarette in the woods behind Jasper’s old house.

“We’re going to keep personal stories private,” Layana said.

I felt the full body tension ease from my muscles.

“Maybe I could help paint, and then you can show me his baby pictures,” Layana said. “I bet he was the freaking cutest.”

“Still is,” Oma said.

We helped Oma clean up, and then Layana helped me with the painting. It was a comfortable quiet, something I hadn't expected.

Unexpected...sort of like Layana.

# TWENTY-SEVEN

LAYANA

It was the most weirdly normal afternoon and evening ever—painting and doing other random chores. It was dark now, and Gabriel was driving me home. And that felt anything but normal, at least for us. From the corner of my eye, I watched the way he worked the gear stick.

“If you ever want to talk more about your parents I’m happy to listen,” I said, to break the silence.

“Thank you.”

He didn’t elaborate, so I debated pushing it and asking more. Instead, I chickened out and swerved back into safer territory. “Your grandmother’s a sweetie. I absolutely adore her.”

“Me, too.”

“She’s so warm and open.”

“The opposite of me.”

“I wasn’t going to *say* that.” I licked my lips. “I think you might be warm too, on the inside. You’re like a nearly impenetrable bank vault.”

“You think there’s gold in here.”

He laid a hand over his chest and before I could help myself, I put my hand over his. It felt really nice. Dangerous heat swirled in my belly. I pulled my hand away.

“Doesn’t feel like gold,” I said. “Too squishy.”

“Squishy?”

“If I had to guess, I’d say there’s soft goo in your vault. Maybe a cinnamon and sugar swirl. The kind of stuff that makes a person volunteer to feed the homeless and rescue puppies.”

His expression flickered, and I got a hunch.

I waved a finger at him. “You *do* do charity work with your free time.”

“Not as often as I’d like.”

“How does the media not latch onto *that*?”

“Likely they don’t know. I used to volunteer more often, but lately I can only spare holidays and the occasional weekend. I donate, but it’s not the same.”

“What charity, you total teddy bear?”

“You’re mocking me.”

“Never.” Maybe a little, but it was more like good-natured ribbing than anything mean. “But seriously, this is the kind of thing your people should post on social for you.”

“The kitchen doesn’t need paparazzi turning it into a circus.”

Kitchen...as in soup kitchen? That had to be it. He spent the holidays volunteering to feed the homeless. And here I’d thought he was a stuck-up jerkhole. What kind of person did that make me?

I shook the thought. “Are you sure *the kitchen* doesn’t really need some press attention? Maybe it would draw in new volunteers who haven’t heard of this charity before. New donations, too. Maybe if you let people in a little, let them see the real you, you wouldn’t need PR help.”

He looked at me like I was talking about him letting *me* in. Was I? A little, maybe. But he was doing just that already by sharing with me now, by letting me visit him at his grandmother’s and sharing the day with me in a piece of the world he generally preferred to keep to himself.



“I hadn’t thought of it like that,” he said, pulling my attention back to the small, dark space where it was just the two of us all alone and actually connecting in a meaningful way.

I gave him a curt nod and turned my attention back out into the dark road before us.

It wasn’t long until we reached my apartment building, and Gabriel parked.

“Harold will remain close,” he said.

“Whatever.” I’d been living my life just fine without security, but if it made him feel good, then I didn’t care. Maybe Harold would help keep the weirdos away so I didn’t end up with photoshopped pictures of me and strangers slipped under my door again. Or an envelope full of toenails. That one had probably been the worst.

Gabriel got out of the car with me.

“I’ve got it from here,” I said.

“I’d like to walk you up.”

“Fine.”

I let him accompany me up to my apartment, and as we reached my door, I debated shooing him away. I couldn’t let him in. If I did, I could make another mistake, cross another line. But that wouldn’t happen, would it?

We could totally just talk and connect like two rational fake friends.

Opening the door, I said, “Can I get you something? I have Bugles, Mt. Dew, and LaCroix, and pretty much nothing else.”

No. I wasn’t supposed to do that. Damn my clearly overactive manners.

“A sparkling water sounds nice,” he said, following me inside.

I watched him look around my space again, and even though I couldn’t see it on him, I knew he had to be judging me. How could he not?

So when he opened his mouth to speak, I beat him to it.

“I know it’s not much,” I said. “I should use some of my new cash to get a real bed and some seating that is a separate piece of furniture.”

He furrowed his brows.

I plowed ahead. “But I don’t have to, and I’m not going to. This is enough for now. I’m keeping every bit of that dough until I’ve secured a new gig so I don’t end up having to beg Morgan if I can crash on her sofa, which she totally would let me do out of pity and love.”

He furrowed his brows further. “That’s not what I was going to say.”

“It’s not?” I asked, confused and a bit embarrassed. “Well, fine. Tell me your thing then.”

“I was going to ask what you think we should do about the kissing photograph circulating the internet.”

“What *I* think *we* should do?”

“Yes.”

I stared at him dumbfounded for a moment. This conversation was giving me whiplash.

“I think it’s cause for celebration. People are loving you.”

“But they’re turning on you.”

Were they? “No more than usual, I’m sure. People love to hate reality stars. It’ll blow over like it always does, and there’s always a cheering fan for every hater anyway. It’s just harder to feel that support through the noise. When haters yell, it’s best not to listen.”

“So you don’t think we need to make a joint statement declaring the photograph a misunderstanding?”

It was a nice surprise that he was deferring to me. It was not so nice that he thought we needed to lie about the kiss. Was he cool with people thinking we were friends, but thinking there could possibly be more between someone like

him and someone like me, that was just too much for him to handle?

“Nope,” I said, testing the waters. “You don’t need to tell people they’re not seeing a kiss, when they’re clearly seeing a kiss. We could turn it into a fake fling if you want, pretend we’re actually dating.”

“I don’t like pretending with you, Layana.”

That actually hurt. *I* thought as fake friendships went, we had a deeper connection than expected. *I* thought pretending with him was exhilarating. I loved our fights, more than I had any right to. I loved the normalness of hanging out at his oma’s, doing chores and sipping lemonade.

But if he didn’t feel the same, I guessed there was no reason for me to worry he was reading too much into the whole drunken sexcapade, was there? He wasn’t *too* into me. He still didn’t like me at all.

My cheeks burned, and I couldn’t say why. Anger rose—never tears—up my throat.

I jabbed a finger into the center of his chest. “Take it back.”

“No.”

Heat radiated out from the pad of my finger where we touched. It wasn’t even his bare skin. It was his paint-stained t-shirt.

“Am I really that repulsive to you that you can’t stand the thought of people believing you could possibly like me?” I found myself gripping him, twisting his shirt in my fists.

“How can....”

He looked at me like I was from another planet, like our languages were so foreign to each other we had no chance of meaningful communication.

He breathed in, his chest rising against my fists.

I wanted to scream, then to pinch his nipple and twist. I wanted to shove him out of my apartment and slam the door in

his face.

He wrapped his arms around me, pulling me flush against him. His sea-breeze scent enveloped me, coaxing me to toss my hair back and relax, promising that in his arms I could let my guard down.

My breath caught.

He was too close. I wasn't supposed to let him get close.

His lips parted ever so slightly. A dark seriousness cast over his expression, making his espresso irises appear black as night.

These weren't just mixed signals—this was a mess of wires with a kitten in the middle chewing through and destroying every circuit.

He kissed me.

It wasn't playful like the smooch on the slopes. It wasn't harsh and hateful like the clash of mouths in the hotel after. This was an entirely different beast, firm and deliberate, coaxing and sure.

He kissed me to tell me what we couldn't get right in words. He kissed me to tell me that it wasn't hatred that he felt toward me, or if it was, that wasn't the entirety of it.

He craved me. He wanted me. And just like me, he wanted more.

I kissed him back, hard and heated.

I told myself that kisses didn't have to mean anything, but it was a lie. Kisses like this—if there was ever anything that could compare—meant everything.

His hands roamed, carrying wanton desire with them.

I jumped up around his waist, wrapping my legs around his middle and my arms around his neck. He caught me easily, his grip sure and possessive.

With my kiss, I wordlessly begged for him to stay with me a little longer. I promised I could see that gooey bit inside of him that he kept from the world, and that I would protect it as

fiercely as he did. Without speaking a word, I swore that he could trust me.

My shoulders met the wall, and he held me there, pulling back from my mouth. His hard cock pressed up against my pussy, and he pinned me with a look of searing sincerity.

With a voice so rough it could scrape concrete, he said, “You are so far from repulsive it’s blinding me.”

I grinned at his swollen lips. “You think I’m pretty.”

“You’re fucking gorgeous.”

I kissed him again. This time it didn’t mean anything—no promises, no hidden riddles I needed him to decipher. I kissed him because his lips were the best thing I’d ever tasted, and because in the murky in-between, where there was no definition or label, I was free to do exactly what I wanted.

And right now, I wanted him.

“Condom in the drawer,” I told him.

He took us to the dresser, and I fumbled through to find one.

He set me down at the back of the sofa. “Strip.”

It was a command, and my body wanted to obey. But my brain liked the fight. “You strip.”

I watched as he did as I said without hesitation.

He dropped his jacket and his paint-stained t-shirt. He took off his shoes and pulled down his pants and his boxers along with them. He stood completely bare to me, all muscles and delicious tanned skin for me to devour.

“Your turn,” he said.

I obeyed, leaving my bra and panties on, a small act of rebellion.

He grabbed me, planted a surprisingly chaste kiss on my forehead, then flipped me around and bent me over the top of the sofa. “Tell me if you want me to stop.”

“Never,” I said.

He ran a hand down my spine. The air felt suddenly cold, colder where his touch had been but now it wasn't.

“Lean forward and hold on.” He slapped my ass, a small surprising sting.

I bit my lip and leaned forward. He ran his hands down the back of my thighs, down my calves, and spread my ankles.

Then I felt him pull my panties to the side, baring me to him. My breath hitched. His warm breath hit me first, a small tease, before he assailed me with his tongue.

I bit my lip so I wouldn't cry out in the pleasure of it. I didn't know why I cared. It was like it was some sort of messed up part of this game we played. We faked a friendship and we fought for power. I couldn't let him know how fucking good he made me feel.

“You're sweet as honey,” he whispered against my tender flesh.

“All the acid's on my tongue.”

“Your mouth tastes sweet, too.”

He ran his tongue up and down my folds, and I felt deliciously exposed. I felt used in a way I hadn't before, yet somehow safe in his steady hands. We might be fighting for power, but he would never hurt me.

My head began to spin, every thought slipping away as the pleasure overpowered everything else.

I held tight as he lashed harder, until I came undone on his tongue, hard and fast. Noise burst from my lips, surprising me, but I didn't care.

I meant to twist around, to take a turn controlling his body and make him lose the control he held so tightly to his chest. But before I could manage to move, he was on me once more, not on my pussy, but everywhere—lips and teeth and tongue marking my ass, my side, my back. The heat of him surrounded me, rough hair scratching gently on my back.

I heard the tear of foil.

He pressed against me, his bare chest over my back, one arm up between my breasts. He gently cupped my chin and turned my head so our eyes locked over my shoulder.

His condom-covered cock rubbed against my thigh. It was so hard, so big.

The memory of him being inside me was fuzzy. I wanted a repeat, only this time I would remember it all.

He slipped his other hand down the front of my panties and gently stroked my clit. It felt so good, so raw. It wouldn't take much to make me come again.

I stared into his eyes and saw all the fire I'd felt before, and something more, like he was looking for more than my submission, but I had no idea what it was.

He rubbed faster on my clit, and I murmured, "Yes, Gabriel. It feels so good."

"Tell me what you want," he said.

"Fuck me."

And then he pressed inside.

The slow stretch was delicious torture.

With one hand, he worked my clit and with the other, he found my breasts, gently teasing my nipples through the lace of my bra.

How could sex be this good? How could my body endure so much sensation and so much pleasure under the hands of a man I was supposed to hate?

All I wanted to do now was sing his praises and take him deeper, but words were impossible. All I could manage was to wordlessly ride the wave sensation.

As he reached his full, massive length, stretching me to my limit, he lowered his hands to my hips, pulled back slightly, and crashed his dick in hard.

I cried out.

He froze. I turned back and found his gaze looking up and down my face.

“You okay?” he asked, his voice taut. Concern knitted his brows together.

I was better than okay. I needed him just like this. I needed more.

“Stop and I’ll kill you,” I whispered.

The corner of his lips quirked up to the side. I turned my head back and squeezed onto the top of the sofa, bracing for it.

He thrust in again, causing stars to form in my eyes. My breath caught in my throat. My whole body felt hot and tingly and alive.

I took each deep stroke, fast and hard and boundary-smashing, until I came so hard I swear there was no chance I could ever walk again. He persisted, working my clit with one hand, my breast with the other, prolonging my ecstasy.

Finally, I felt him tense with me, and he stopped, still inside me, still pinning me to the back of the sofa. And for a moment, I wondered why he wasn’t letting me go so I could curl up on the sofa and drift off to contented dream land.

“You’re beautiful, Layana,” he whispered against my neck. “If I’m not careful, I’m going to fall in love with you.”

If that wasn’t ice on my hot-as-bananas pleasure parade, I didn’t know what was.

I gritted my teeth. “Why would you say that to me?”

He slowly pulled out and took a step back, discarding the condom in the trash can.

“Because it’s true.”

*He* was beautiful. And so wrong for me.

“You can’t say that to me when I work for you and we have trouble even pretending to be friends.” Yes, we’d gotten along well today. And also in the mountains. But those were small moments. They weren’t who we are.



He was Mr. Order, having his life exactly the way he wanted it, everything in its place. I was a tornado of spontaneity, and not even sure what I was going to eat for breakfast in the morning, let alone what my ten-year plan would be.

I said, “This thing between us is too complicated to define. If it leaves the gray bubble it’s floating in...it’ll burst.”

He flattened his lips into a line, gathered his clothes, and refused to meet my eyes.

“Tell me you understand,” I said. “We have an expiration date for our fake friendship. This isn’t real. We have to be on the same page here.”

As flat as humanly possible, he said, “I understand. Good night, Layana.”

With that, he left.

And even though I’d been sure we both knew what we were doing—that we were just pretending—I worried that maybe we were both lost.

# TWENTY-EIGHT

GABRIEL

Jasper stretched out across my living room sofa, watching me pace.

“The gala’s going to be fine,” he said. “All that you’re supposed to do is step up on stage, read the speech that your speech people prepared for you, and smile while people shake your hand and glob on the praise.”

I was grateful he was here, that he was coming tonight. At least if Layana didn’t show, I’d still have an ally.

It had been five days since we’d had sex. Five days since she got mad at me for having feelings, for not being the robot everyone believed I was.

Every morning since, when Layana woke, she texted me a photograph of a penis. Every morning, my heart skipped a beat, hoping she’d say we should get together for another social photography session.

She hadn’t. Not once.

When I asked yesterday if she wanted to come over for one last session, she made up an excuse to stay away from me.

It was fine that she needed space and time to think things out. I needed to focus on my work throughout the week. Except I couldn’t force my brain to focus on anything at all. Now that Saturday had finally come, I worried that Layana would back out of her final commitment.

Even if she did attend the gala, our agreement ended today, as did her reason to speak to me.

If she were anyone else, I'd gladly say goodbye and never look back. But the truth was, I wasn't at risk of falling in love with Layana; I was already falling hard.

It had started before we even met, when I would catch glimpses of her at Eterni-Tea. I hadn't relished our squabbles along the way as she clearly did, but I appreciated what they'd done for us. Her brazen attacks had let me know exactly how she felt. She never tiptoed around issues as most people did with me.

She was direct. She was a force of nature. She wasn't easy. She made me suffer. But she was undeniably what I needed.

When she inevitably abandoned me at the end of the gala, or perhaps before, it would be over.

My throat tightened at the thought.

“—abducted by aliens. Probably a little anal probing, too, if you know what I mean.”

I shot my attention to Jasper, who was leaning his elbows on his knees and waggling his brows suggestively at me.

“What?”

“You got that glazed look in your eyes.” He grinned at me.

“I....”

“It's all right,” he said. “Seems like you're not just nervous about tonight. What's bothering you?”

“Nothing,” I said, automatically.

“All right, you can lie to me. But you should talk to someone about it, because if you don't, you're going to give yourself an ulcer.”

Maybe he was right, but that didn't make it easier for me to open up.

“Is Esme coming as your second security blanket tonight?” he asked.

“She's not in the states,” I said.

“Oh.” His expression shifted. He rose to his feet and stretched.

I checked my phone and kept pacing, waiting for Layana to arrive, or for her to send a message that she wouldn't come.

Eventually I caught a flash of lights in the window.

“The car is here.” I went to check, and sure enough, Wallace's Escalade was coming down the driveway.

But was Layana inside?

Jasper clapped a hand in the center of my back. “Let's go get you that award.”

We stepped outside. I maintained as much of a composed exterior as possible, steeling myself for the possibility that she wasn't here.

“Good evening, Gremlin.” Wallace opened the back door of the Escalade. “Jasper, what a pleasant surprise.”

“It's been a minute,” Jasper gave Wallace a fist bump. “I had no idea you were Gabe's driver. How's life, man?”

“Can't complain. Technically I've been Gremlin's driver for a long time, but he almost never lets me actually drive him. He did let me design the interior myself though. You'll have to let me know what you think.”

“You know I will.”

I ignored them and climbed into the back.

Layana was inside. My heart fluttered and relief washed over me. She was actually here.

She wore her hair down in large curls, which was different from her usual style. She had on more makeup than usual as well, a classic Hollywood look that suited her. Her dress was long and emerald green—stunning, yet only a fraction as stunning as the woman wearing it.

“Looking good, hot stuff. How are you feeling?” Layana asked. Her expression was tight. She was nervous, too.

I settled in across from her. “Concerned about being on display.” *More concerned about us.*

She folded her hands in her lap. “It’s going to be great. I’ll be there with you the whole time, and we’ll knock their socks off with in-their-faces charm.”

It sounded like she planned to beat them into submission. I couldn’t help but smile back at her.

I wanted to tell her she looked amazing. I wanted to scoop her into my lap and taste her, run my hands all over the sheer fabric of her dress. But I didn’t want to ruin the ease we seemed to have between us. Every time we grew closer, whenever we shared a moment of vulnerability, she shut me out.

I couldn’t handle that on our last day.

I needed to keep her comfortable and happy for as long as I could before the inevitable end.

The thought made my heart hurt again already. Could I say goodbye at the end of the night? When it was time, and she was ready to be done with me, how could I let her go?

She glanced over to the open door. “Should we shut that?”

Right. “We’re waiting on someone else.”

Concerned lines formed around her eyes.

I was about to explain that Jasper had invited himself, that it would be good to have him at the gala, and how long I’d known him.

But he popped his head in first.

The look on Layana’s face—was that recognition?

“Jasper Carrington?” Her voice lifted like she not only knew him, but was happy to see him.

“Layana Hartley. What a pleasant surprise,” Jasper said. “I was going to tell my bud here that I was going to ride up front and catch up with Wallace, but—”

Agitation flitted through my veins.

“How do you two know each other?” I asked.

“New Year’s party,” Jasper said. “And that play.”

“Mm-hmm,” Layana said. “Morgan’s fiancé is Jasper’s brother.”

I should have known that. Why didn’t I know that?

“Small world,” Jasper said with a wide smile. When he turned that smile to me, it faltered just a bit. “Well...I’m going to ride up with Wallace, let you two chat. I’ll see you when we get there, Layana.”

She gave him a wave. He shut the door.

“How do you know Jasper?” she asked.

“We’re friends,” I said.

“That’s so funny that you two know each other.”

“Mm,” I said.

“You seem...never mind.”

I opened my mouth to ask how exactly I seemed, but I knew it would only lead to a fight.

The car took off. I watched Layana’s racing thoughts transform her features.

Her gaze turned steely. She crossed her legs and lightly kicked my knee. “There’s nothing to be jealous about.”

“I didn’t say I was jealous.”

“You didn’t have to say it.”

Was I jealous? The two of them knew each other, but that didn’t mean anything. If anything, I was frustrated that I hadn’t known about their connection. That didn’t make me jealous.

But, I did envy how easy their greeting had gone. She was *happy* to see him. She actually *liked* him.

We rode in silence, dread of the upcoming event dominating my thoughts. Finally, the car pulled up the curb in front of a classic stone building downtown.

Flanking the walkway to the building, a mass of bodies swarmed like ants after their hill had been crushed.

Wallace opened the door. The noise and lights that flooded in were already overwhelming, and we hadn't even exited the vehicle yet.

"Ready?" I asked Layana.

"As I'll ever be. You?"

"Never."

She grabbed my hand and gave it a squeeze.

The moment we stepped out of the Escalade, we were bombarded by aggressive stimuli. Bulbs flashed, reporters shouted, and the crowd surged forward against the velvet rope.

"Gabriel, over here!" photographers shouted.

I tensed and held tighter to Layana's hand.

I spotted our bodyguard Harold blocking a particularly aggressive woman using her phone as a camera.

A stone wall flanked our left, the onslaught our right. Security held the vultures at bay, but didn't stop them from leaning over the ropes and flashing lights in our faces.

"Over here!" someone yelled again.

"Gabriel! Layana!" others called.

I heard something about nudes, but it didn't make any sense.

Layana laid a hand over the center of my chest and whispered in my ear, "Try not to listen. They'll say anything to get a reaction. Scowling pics are worth more."

Jasper stepped between us and the cameras, giving us a wink. He stopped to answer questions.

Blinded and ready to call the whole night a loss, I forced a smile and kept moving with Layana, grateful for her strength, and grateful for Jasper's interference.

The interference couldn't keep everyone away, however. Hands armed with microphones shot out in front of us.

“When did you start dating?”

“Layana, how has your life changed since *What the What?*”

“What can you tell us about the cast? Who was sleeping together? How does it feel to lose to the human equivalent of a disco ball?”

The barrage of questions came in rapid fire. Layana maintained a pleasant, amicable smile. “It was a joy and privilege to be a part of the show. I’ll cherish the memories always.”

“Gabriel, how much are you paying her to be your girlfriend?”

My jaw clenched.

“*Enough.*” My single word cut through the noise, quieting the crowd for a heartbeat’s time, before drawing more flashes and louder voices than before.

We needed to escape. I needed to get Layana inside.

I pulled her toward the steps, shielding her as we made our way toward the open doors.

A mechanical buzzing hummed beneath the din.

I paused, curious, and glanced back.

A black object swooped over the crowd—a drone. It wobbled erratically, as it headed in this direction.

Instinctively, I turned to usher Layana inside and out of harm’s way.

The sound grew louder.

Sharp and forceful, something pelted me between the shoulder blades. The buzzing stopped.

I turned back, and found the drone on the steps, one of its propellers bent. The shape of the body was strange, altered with hot glue and plastic sheets to look like a child’s toy train. Pieces of the plastic facade had broken and lay scattered on the



steps. The drone flailed sadly, turning back and forth, unable to lift back off the ground.

I was about to head inside when I noticed a piece of paper taped to the bottom of the broken machine—a note. The hot frustration pulsing through my veins turned to ice.

The note read: *The truth will emerge.*

# TWENTY-NINE

LAYANA

“What in Godzilla’s name just happened?” I asked Gabriel.

But he seemed in no mood to talk, at least not yet. He had a stone-cold expression on his face as he whisked me away from the doors and the lobby, down a side hall.

The barrage of questions and flashes we’d just faced left my brain buzzing in a paralyzing fog.

Gabriel pulled me into the bathroom, locked the door, then only then did he let go of my hand.

He looked me over and touched my cheeks so softly, I immediately felt comforted. His gaze burned—with fury and something else. *Fear*. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Of course. “Are *you*? What hit you? Did someone throw a remote-control car or something? I didn’t get a good look.”

His clenched jaw ticked, but he didn’t answer. He pulled his phone from his pocket and raised it to his ear. “Around back. Now. I need to take Layana home.”

“What? No.” I smacked his arm. “You can’t do that. I’m fine.”

We locked gazes in a battle of wills. I knew the kind of person he was, the dedication that had won him this award. More than that, I knew what this night meant—it was his last chance to sway public perception, his last bid to seal the deal with Biotabloom Dynamics.

If I had a small shark attached to my ankle this very moment, gnawing on me, I'd still insist we stay.

"This place is crawling with security. I'm safe, Gabriel. This is your big night. Nothing happened to me. This is what I signed on for, to help you through this. Everything you want is within reach. Don't take that away from yourself."

He stared at me.

I wouldn't lose this disagreement. If he made me leave, it'd be kicking and screaming.

Instead of saying that, I laid a hand on his shoulder and told him, "I promise, I'm fine."

His gaze softened. It was sweet, really, that he was so concerned, but he didn't need to be. I had thicker skin than that. Words couldn't hurt me.

He ran his hand through his hair, mussing up the perfect comb job he'd done to it earlier this evening. He sighed and said into the phone, "We're staying for now. But be ready."

I gave him a nod of approval. "Let's slay this party. But before we go out there, I want to know what someone threw at you."

"No one threw anything. It was a drone."

"Like the flying robots that people use to spy on nude beaches?"

He pressed his lips together, clearly not agreeing about the use of flying robots.

"Or to watch their hot neighbors who leave the curtains open," I said.

"Yes?" He didn't sound sure. He opened his palm and held out a ball of white paper for me to see. "A flying machine hit me. This was taped to it."

It was my turn to look at him weirdly.

"Read it."

I plucked the paper from his hand, unfurled the ball, and saw the line written in scratchy handwriting. “The truth will emerge.”

My stomach dropped.

The truth? Which truth? Did this mean someone knew about Gabriel’s and my arrangement? That they knew we’d pretended to be friends and they were going to call him out on it? One of the reporters had accused him of paying me to date him.

Or worse—what if someone knew what I’d been writing? What if I had a computer virus and someone knew every juicy detail I’d written in my digital journal?

That wasn’t possible. I was blowing this situation out of proportion.

I shoved the paper back at Gabriel. He took it, folded it, and put it in his pocket.

I licked my lips. “What do you think it means?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t matter.”

“Okay.” It’s nothing. It doesn’t matter. It’s a cryptic note from a weirdo, who knew nothing real about either of us. I’d certainly had my share of those, and everything had always been fine. Everything was fine now.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Gabriel asked.

“Peachy.” I linked my arm with his. “I believe we have schmoozing to do. Let’s get out there and crush this gala.”

He opened the bathroom door, and we stepped back out into the hall. The warm museum air greeted me with a faint scent of antiquities. It was like stepping into a fancy thrift store that smelled of old books and polished brass.

“Please don’t crush anyone,” Gabriel said.

“I won’t. Probably.”

Our footsteps echoed off the high ceiling and the swirly marble floor as we took our last few steps before reaching whatever circumstances constituted a gala.

I said, “I’ll only crush them if they deserve it.”

He looked down at me, his chocolate eyes dancing, like he thought I was the most amusing thing he’d ever seen. And that adorable little dimple formed in his cheek. It was the only thing about him I would dare to describe as cute, and it was so rare and fleeting, I made sure *not* to mention its appearance.

We stepped into the main exhibit hall. It was a large open space, buzzing with fancy looking people in fancy clothes. Any one of their dresses or tuxes was probably worth more money than I’d ever seen in my life.

I didn’t belong here. I was an imposter parading around in a fancy dress I couldn’t have afforded without the ridiculous sums of cash Gabriel had given me.

As glazes flicked to us, I felt Gabriel tensing, too.

He didn’t belong here, either, but for entirely different reasons.

We could not-belong together.

I gave his arm a squeeze with my elbow, a gesture I hoped he would know meant I had his back.

The walls were adorned with intricate woodwork details. Beautiful crystal chandeliers dangled from the high ceiling and shimmered in the muted light. Gala-goers approached us, weaving between tall, glass-topped display tables that dotted the space.

I put on my public persona, my inner tiger warrior. I smiled and pretended that I belonged. Harold shadowed us, keeping his distance, but always watching.

“Gabriel Stryker, I wasn’t sure you’d actually show,” a small woman with beautiful white hair said. She was a good foot shorter than me, and she was decked out in a mountain of animal fur. There were at least three creatures wrapped around her neck alone, and another crossing from her shoulder to her middle.

I found myself caught in the dead-eyed stare of one of her furry scarves—a striped purple and black raccoon-like creature

with a curly mustache over sharp fangs and the most ferocious snarl to ever grace a faux face.

For basically a long, deflated plushy, it looked crazy real. That was true craftsmanship.

“Gabriel not show?” I said, forcing myself to look away from the creature. “And miss all of this? I hear he’s receiving an award tonight.”

The woman’s gaze flicked to me. She assessed me up and down before she deemed me worthy of a response. “Trust me, that’s not enough to pull him from the lab. At least not usually. Perhaps it’s you.”

“Me?”

“I’ve seen the pictures on the computer,” she said. “Heard the rumors, too.”

“It’s easy for strangers to be cruel online, when there are no repercussions for that cruelty,” I said.

She smiled. It wasn’t exactly a kind smile, but it did seem genuine. “You’re a television star.”

It wasn’t a question. Still, I answered, “I was on a show. It’s over now.”

“I like you. Maisel Turnbottom.” She offered her hand.

I shook it. “Layana Hartley.”

“Don’t let him run off before we give him his award.”

“I won’t.”

She gave me a curt nod and sauntered off to talk to someone else.

“She’s the curator of the museum,” Gabriel said softly into the crook of my neck.

I turned around slowly. “She seems....”

“Horrible.”

“I was going to say lovely.”

He raised a brow.

“And eccentric.” I smiled at him. “She gets a pass for just about anything because she thinks I’m awesome.”

“There you are.” Jasper rushed toward us. “You two okay?”

Gabriel took in a deep breath. He seemed both more relaxed and more uptight with Jasper joining us.

“We’re good,” I told him.

Jasper glanced at Gabriel. Gabriel nodded.

“Great. We need to get you around to see everyone before you flip out and run away,” Jasper said.

Gabriel clenched his jaw.

“He’s not running,” I said.

“Great,” Jasper said, in a way that made clear he didn’t believe me.

Had Gabriel run off from every event in the past? I didn’t think he was that kind of runner. Avoider, absolutely. I figured he simply would choose not to come to these kinds of things as much as possible, but if someone dragged him to it, he’d suffer through it.

Gabriel’s grip on me tightened, like he was afraid *I* was going to flee. I didn’t plan on going anywhere. If anything, I made up my mind on trying something entirely new to me—I’d give him the benefit of the doubt. See, we could all stretch our comfort levels tonight.

Jasper led us around through the crowd. People gladly talked to me, and seemed unbothered when Gabriel stayed silent except for the occasional comment here or there. Gabriel kept his hand on my hip, holding me close the entire time.

Pictures were taken—lots of pictures. My cheeks started to hurt from smiling so much. Time passed. Hors d’oeuvres were eaten.

Eventually, Maisel Turnbottom reappeared to drag Gabriel to the end of the room and slap a clear statue, shaped like a microscope, into his hands.

“As you all know, I’ve been trying to wrestle Gabriel Stryker into accepting an award for years now,” she said. “And I know I’m not the only one.”

Some whispers and chuckles carried through the crowd.

“Due to Mr. Stryker’s efforts, the city of Epiphany has had an eighteen percent decrease in waste piling over the last five years. The air here contains fewer toxins because of it,” she said. “And while he’d rather be in his lab working to make the world another eighteen percent better of a place than mingling here with us tonight, he came. And so I proudly thank him for taking the time, for putting in the work, and for continuing his pursuits so the rest of us can keep doing what we do, knowing we’re in good hands.”

Applause followed.

Maisel handed off the microphone to Gabriel.

My stomach fluttered. I clasped my hands together and watched, waiting to see what he would say.

He looked like a statue on display rather than a living, breathing person standing up there. And he was staring at me.

*You can do this*, I mouthed at him.

He pulled note cards from his pocket in as stiff a motion as possible.

“Distinguished guests, we gather tonight in recognition of incremental scientific progress. While my contributions to waste management are scientifically significant, much work remains.”

He looked at me while he spoke, like out of the crowd here, he could only see me.

“Some view science as distant, cold, inhuman. Logic over passion. Process over impulse. But there’s nothing logical about my passion for genetically engineering eukaryotic organisms. It comes from a place much deeper than that, from a need I can’t quite comprehend or control.”

And I was starting to think maybe he wasn’t talking about science at all.



“Change necessitates patience and diligence. One failed experiment cannot derail necessary progress. Neither can twenty failures, nor one hundred. One mistake cannot fracture composure. Persistence wins the day. A dash of hope doesn’t hurt, either.”

My chest felt tight.

“Tonight, we celebrate a slight betterment of conditions for all species. Long-term thinking over short-term reward. I accept this honor not for myself, but for the scientific community’s collective commitment to reason and discovery. Lead not with ego, but evidence. Progress depends on it. Our fragile world depends on it. Thank you.”

He wasn’t talking about us. His view of order and routine over everything else had led him to his scientific discoveries. *I* was what he couldn’t comprehend or control. Maybe that was okay.

Being here, doing this with him, was thrilling. We felt like a team instead of opposing forces. It was like somehow, at some point without me realizing it, we’d stopped pretending and really had become friends.

As he slowly crossed the room, people stopped him to talk and shake his hand. I stood in the back, waiting next to Jasper.

Gabriel’s words from the other night repeated in my head over and over on loop, just like they had a billion times since he’d said them.

*I don’t like pretending with you, Layana.*

I’d taken it as he didn’t like being around me, that he didn’t like acting like my friend. But the things he’d told me after, and the way he’d responded to that over-enthusiastic fan, had me thinking maybe I was wrong.

Maybe *I don’t like pretending with you* meant he wanted more openness. Maybe he meant he wanted us to actually *be* what we’d been pretending to be.

Isn’t that what was happening now?

“He did great,” Jasper said.

“Yeah.”

“I can’t believe he actually came to this one.”

I turned to fully look at him. “Why not?”

“He’s always too busy, plus he hates these kinds of things.”

“So it’s the merger,” I said. “It’s that important to him because he can do more good.”

“I don’t think so.”

“What do you mean? What else would it be?”

Jasper gave me his easy smile. “Couldn’t say. He’s not much of a sharer.”

But that smile said plenty. He thought Gabriel was here somehow because of me.

Maybe Gabriel and I didn’t have to pretend, because everything we did—the fighting, the getting along, the hottest sex to ever be experienced by anyone ever—*maybe it was all real.*

Finally, Gabriel reached us.

I whispered in his ear, “Are you ready to make a run for it?”

His fingers flexed. The flat line of his mouth turned down at the corners.

Had I said something wrong?

“Don’t tell me you’re having fun. It’s clear you’re not,” I said, confused.

“We can leave,” he said. “Jasper, are you ready to go?”

“I’ll get a car later on. You two go ahead. Great work tonight.” He gave Gabriel a clasp on the shoulder, then left the two of us alone.

Gabriel didn’t say anything else as we went out to the car. He told Wallace to return to my place. But our arrangement as it was ended tonight, and I wasn’t quite ready to say goodbye yet.

“I was thinking we’d go to yours,” I told Gabriel. “If that’s cool.”

“My place,” he relayed to Wallace.

We didn’t sit across from each other this time. We sat together, side-by-side. And something heavy hung in the air, maybe the conversation we needed to have about intentions. But I didn’t want to talk until we were actually alone. And putting up the separator wasn’t enough. Or maybe all of that was just an excuse.

Once we reached his place and went inside, he poured us each a glass of wine and led me to the sofa. My pillow and blanket were here, the ones I’d brought by for the photoshoot in the garden.

I patted the pillow. “This is mine.”

“I know.”

“You do really need some throw pillows of your own,” I told him.

“Pick what you like, and I’ll buy them,” he said, his voice tight. Everything about him was tight. He looked at me like he was in pain, but he didn’t say why. I’d thought leaving the gala would put him at ease, but it hadn’t.

“Maybe I will,” I said.

“I’d like that,” he said, with a softness that was so un-Gabriel-like I hardly recognized his voice.

Why was I getting nervous? There was no reason to be nervous.

“I think maybe we should go together tomorrow, and pick some out.” I licked my lips. “After you treat me to a fancy brunch.”

He turned toward me, bumping my leg with his knee. We both looked down to where we were touching. He didn’t pull back and he didn’t apologize. He just kept on touching my leg with his.

“What time would you like me to pick you up?” he asked.

“I thought maybe you wouldn’t have to,” I said, my stomach feeling lighter by the second. “If it’s cool that I stay?”

He smiled at me. “I’d like that.”

I took his glass and set both his and mine on the table. Then I touched his freshly-shaved cheek.

His skin was pleasantly rough against my fingertips. Heat carried over my thighs where he’d scratched me before with his cheeks.

I remembered the feel of his mouth on my belly, on my breasts, his rough chest rubbing against my back. I’d enjoyed every moment of it, but those times had felt like they’d happened between different people.

Maybe it was just me who was different, who was seeing him differently.

I looked at his mouth, admired the barely visible freckle above his lip, and I did exactly what I wanted—I kissed him.

It was soft, not needy, not desperate or commanding. I didn’t need to prove anything or conquer him. The kiss was sweet and caring, and a reassurance that even if we were supposed to have an expiration date, I wasn’t ready to reach it yet.

He tasted like wine, happiness, and all the nice things I hadn’t imagined for myself.

I’d spent so much time this past week focusing on all the reasons we didn’t work together—we were complete opposites, he drove me crazy, I drove him crazy, we lived in completely different worlds—that I’d overlooked a key point that now seemed so clear.

Each of those reasons was only an obstacle. Obstacles could be overcome. If we didn’t let our differences come between us, none of those differences actually mattered.

“Take off your pants,” I told him.

He slid them down his thighs, his movements hurried. And then I did more of what I wanted. I took him into my mouth, exploring, enjoying every gloriously long inch of velvety skin.

He dug his fingers into the sofa cushion and watched with a heat in his eyes that I recognized. He was holding back, he was letting me have my win. But this wasn't a battle.

“Come up here,” he said. “Please.”

I climbed up onto the sofa with him, and he gently guided me onto his lap.

“You're so beautiful, and that dress—” He sounded pained again as he ran his hands over my arms, down my sides and up my thighs.

I reached between us and wrapped my hand around his base. Slowly I lifted my hand, sliding up his length, imagining what this would feel like inside of me. It would feel good. He always felt so freaking good.

He captured my lips with his, gripping my cheeks in his hands. “You make me feral. Wild. Out of control.”

I smiled against his mouth.

“We need a condom,” he said.

If I had to get up now, I was pretty sure I would die.

“I'm clean,” I told him. “On the pill.”

He looked from one of my eyes to the other. “I'm clean, too.”

With that, he reached up a little farther under my dress. I felt a sharp bite of fabric dig into my skin, and a second later, I heard tearing.

I gasped. “Did you just rip my panties?”

He grinned at me, a full-on smile.

I kissed him, harder this time, tasting all of the possibilities as I sank slowly onto his tip. He pulled me flush against his chest.

“I love this dress,” he said, then nipped the fabric over my nipple.

I gasped, and took a little more of him. He nipped me again, on the other side.

I took him all, sinking down so our mouths met.

We worked together to find a slow, sweet rhythm, there on the sofa. It was tender and delicious, and exactly what I needed. I wanted the moment to last forever, clinging to him, feeling physically and emotionally connected. We climaxed together, and still I didn't want to let go, so we stayed right there for I didn't know how long. He didn't try to label it. And I didn't either.

# THIRTY

GABRIEL

Amidst the steel and glass skyscrapers, the rooftop restaurant Alton's Terrace offered a secluded respite from the bustling city streets. Ivy cascaded from trellises above us, creating shade on the tabletops. A gentle fountain sat beside our table, with stone cherubs spouting water from their mouths.

I'd been forced to attend a business brunch here once. Recalling these details, I'd hoped the location would delight Layana.

We'd made a quick stop for fresh clothes at Layana's apartment this morning, and she'd brought an overnight bag back out with her. I hadn't asked if that meant she'd planned to stay another night at my house. I didn't want to pressure her into committing to anything, or risk scaring her away.

At the moment, she appeared completely at ease, her dark hair pulled up in a messy bun, the suit jacket she'd borrowed from me over her shoulders.

"Nice jacket," I told her.

"I know. Some hot guy gave it to me. It works with my tight pants and tall heels, don't you think?" She shot her leg out next to my hip, showing off the long, curvy shape. The red heel at the end felt even more like a tease.

I was tempted to take her foot and put it in my lap, just so I could touch her.

She pulled her leg back, as if sensing and dismissing my thought. It was probably for the best given we were in a public

space and I couldn't seem to control myself with her.

She took a bit of pecan praline french toast and popped it into her mouth. I watched the way she worked the caramelized pecans, buttery syrup, and cinnamon swirled bread over her tongue. She closed her eyes and moaned with pleasure as she swallowed.

I'd heard her make the same noises last night, and again this morning. Already I wanted her again, right here on this table.

"This is real food." She pointed at the french toast, then to the other two plates sitting before her, one with shrimp and cheesy grits, the other holding a bourbon peach cobbler and vanilla ice cream. "Can you imagine eating like this every day?"

"No."

"Why not? It's not like you can't afford it."

I leaned forward. "I input the necessary nutrients to keep my body running at maximum efficiency. That means whole grains, a rainbow of fruits and vegetables, and lean protein only."

"You can't use words like *input* and *efficiency*. It risks undoing all the progress we've made on your image." She wrinkled her nose and cast me a crooked grin, proving she was only teasing. "Come on, a little sugar never hurt anyone."

"Tell me, how do you feel after consuming a calorie and sugar bomb like that?" I teased her right back. "Energized for the day or lethargic and mentally clouded?"

"Happy," she said. "Full and sated and positively delighted. You can't spend your whole life doing only what's good for you. Then you miss out on what makes life awesome."

*Like Layana.*

"You're reckless," I said.

"You're trying to be boring. But I know better. There's a little rebel in you, the one who plays drinking games and



wants to take a big old bite of this delicious french toast and syrup drenched in unnecessary calories. It's called indulgence, and it's what happiness is made of." She held out her fork for me to try.

"I'm enjoying watching you indulge," I said.

*"Try it."*

She pushed the fork gently against my lips. The warm bite left sticky residue in its wake. She poked it against me again. She wasn't going to let this go.

I opened my mouth and accepted the food.

It was decadent—buttery and sweet, and an absolute delight on my tongue.

"You love it," she said.

"It tastes good."

"I knew it."

"Overindulgence is a dangerous game," I said.

"Maybe that's part of what makes it so enjoyable."

Was it the danger of being thrown into complete and utter chaos that made Layana so alluring? In part perhaps. But it was more than that. I cherished the bits in between even more, where she let her guard down and didn't constantly prod at every guideline and guardrail. Last night, when we could just be ourselves, when we made love on the sofa and again in the bed, I could swear I had never been happier.

"How many dates have you brought to this spot?" she asked, casually returning her attention to her food. "It's fabulous."

It was a not-so-subtle way of asking about my romantic history. Then again, nothing about Layana was subtle.

"Zero," I answered.

"You don't take all the women for fancy brunches?"

"I don't date."

She furrowed her brows at me. "Why not?"

“I invest my time in working toward my goals. That doesn’t leave space for additional commitments.”

“Except you’re here with me right now, after the gala that was supposed to be our last commitment. I’m not taking pictures. It’s for no one’s sake but yours and mine.”

Her expression turned combative, like she was waiting for me to argue.

“You’re different,” I said.

“How so?”

I considered my words carefully. How should I tell her that every frustrating and wonderful moment together had felt like a gift? Finally, I said, “It’s my chosen indulgence.”

*“I’m your french toast?”*

I shrugged like it was nothing, like the feeling in my chest wasn’t so strong I thought I might explode.

“Hmm,” she said. “Interesting.”

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing.”

*“Layana—”*

She shoved a piece of toast into her mouth, moaned in pleasure, and then grinned at me.

That was it, right there, the heart of what it was that was different about her. She made me feel like no one else had. She made me feel alive. It was terrifying, exciting, and wonderful. And I was scared that now that we’d past our allotted time, at any moment, all of it could end.

# THIRTY-ONE

LAYANA

From the gala to fancy brunch to shopping in a fancy department store, I felt like I was living in a different world. This life belonged to a princess. I was mid-ball Cinderella, pretending I belonged until the clock struck midnight and the spell fell apart.

The future didn't matter. I didn't need to have everything figured out. Reality might be waiting in the darkness with a barbed wire baseball bat, but that didn't mean I couldn't enjoy the fantasy while it lasted.

Soft music hummed in the background. No one but an eagerly smiling clerk was in the store with us. Apparently that was a thing you could do with billionaire bucks—book a store for only you to shop. I steered Gabriel toward a towering wall of pillows. If Belle's library had been filled with pillows instead of books, this place would be it.

Gabriel's phone rang. He silenced it without even looking at the screen.

“Are you sure you shouldn't at least check that?” I asked.

“I'm sure.”

“What if it's an emergency?”

He frowned and checked the screen. “It's only Pamela.”

“Don't you always jump when Pamela calls, Mr. Workaholic?” I teased, but only kind of. I actually wanted to know what he was thinking.

“Not today.”

“One day just for me, huh?”

Instead of answering, he asked, “What about you? Do you have any commitments you need to attend to?”

“Nah. I’m just spending some time helping Juno do her thing for now. That’s a drop-in as I please kind of gig. Plus, it’s Sunday. Sundays were meant to be lazy.”

“How is the writing going?”

I’d been writing up a storm. But all of it was about him, every private thought and detail. I felt a blush carrying up the back of my neck.

“Good.” I grabbed a pillow to change the subject and held it between us. “Check this out.”

It wasn’t particularly fluffy. And the fabric felt like it was sandpaper’s cousin, suitable only for a potato sack race at a family reunion.

Gabriel touched it, recoiled, and frowned. “You enjoy the feel of this?”

“Can you imagine leaning your face against the fabric when you curl up on the sofa for a nap?”

His frown deepened. “Unfortunately, I’m imagining it right now.”

I shoved the pillow back onto the shelf and pulled out another covered in long, faux fur. “Or this.”

I pressed it straight up to Gabriel’s face.

He pushed it away, wrinkled his nose and narrowed his eyes. Then he sneezed.

I laughed. “Okay, seriously, do you have any opinions at all about color or feel?”

“Nothing like the last two.”

I grinned at him and pointed up to one that caught my eye. It was the same forest green shade as the light that poured

through the wine bottle stained-glass above his fireplace. “The green one.”

He reached up on his toes and pulled it down. “You like green.”

“It’s a fabulous color. Apples, grass, turtles...”

“Your dress.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, I know you’re obsessed with that dress.”

I could almost swear I heard him say “I’m obsessed with you.” But it was so soft, that I was pretty sure I imagined it.

The pillow was extra large. I snatched it from his hands and gave it a small squeeze. “Oh yes.”

“That good?”

“Look at the elegant swirls. Feel the snugliness.”

“Is snugliness a real word?”

“Feel it and you’ll understand.”

“I touched it when I pulled it from the shelf.”

I stuck it to his face, and pulled his arm up to position it against the fabric. “*Feel it.*”

He chuckled softly into the forest green fabric. “This one is acceptable.”

“*Acceptable?* Psh.”

He lowered the pillow from his face and grinned at me.

“It’s glorious,” I said. “We’ll get two.”

The worker dude appeared from nowhere. He took a second pillow from the shelf along with the one in Gabriel’s hands toward the register.

“Great, with that done, what would you like to do next?” Gabriel asked.

“Done? Oh no, we’re not done.”

His throat worked up and down, the only time that wasn't a social situation where I'd sensed anything close to fear in him.

I gave his arm a reassuring pat and led the way through the treasury of pillows and throw blankets.

"You never told me about your family," he said out of nowhere.

"Me? Oh. I'm a boring story. Youngest of four girls, the only one who doesn't have a high-powered perfect job and life, parents still grossly in love with each other."

"You're not boring to me," he said, his attention on one of the blankets. "What makes it gross?"

"They glommed together as a single unit, knowing every single thing about each other, always agreeing on everything. That's love for you—basic, boring, and sickeningly sweet."

"That sounds nice."

And then I felt like a big fat dick. "I...That was insensitive. I shouldn't complain about my parents to you. I know I'm lucky to have two of them, to have them still together, and all of that."

"I want to know you," he said. "It's not a competition."

"Isn't everything?"

"It doesn't have to be."

I considered what he was saying, and immediately dismissed it. "I would never settle for boring."

Gabriel rifled through the blankets and pulled out a purple and black furry one. "This isn't boring."

I gaped at him. "That's just like the shawl Maisel Turnbottom wore to the gala! Do you think she made that Wonderland-esque raccoon from this very blanket?"

He shrugged. "I wouldn't put it past her."

"We need this one."

The cashier reappeared, snatched the blanket, and disappeared once more into the depths of the department store jungle.

“Is there anything you’d like for your apartment?” Gabriel asked. “My treat.”

Brunch felt like one thing, decorating my apartment felt like another. My stomach clenched, and a wave of discomfort carried through my limbs. Why would him buying me something feel like too big of a deal? I’d commandeered his jacket *and* let him overpay me for taking a couple of pictures and posting on social.

Why did this feel like it would be crossing a line?

“Nah,” I said. “I’m good.”

I felt his gaze linger on me as we kept walking around. He wanted to say something, to probe me about this, and I didn’t want anything to do with that.

“Maybe that’s enough pillows for one day,” I said.

He stopped. “You seem particularly concerned that I might judge your apartment.”

“No I’m not. I don’t care what you think.” Defensive much? I knew I was being silly, even as I crossed my arms.

“I assure you that’s not my intention.”

“Okay.”

“You’re free to live however you like.”

“I know.”

“And I can spend my money how I like.”

“Of course you can.”

“So if I offer to buy you something, it’s meant as nothing more than me wanting to spend my money on you.”

“Got it.”

We headed toward the checkout.

As Gabriel paid, I said, “I’ll take the raccoon blanket.”

That little dimple formed at the corner of his mouth. “All right.”

And that was that. There was nothing else said about it, no big deal or anything. So, I figured he was probably right. I was being weird and assuming he was judging me, which he had proved time and again wasn’t his jam. When he said something, I needed to take it at face value. I could do that.

We walked for a while after that, through the city. I couldn’t see Harold, but I knew he was around.

“How often do you do stuff like this?” I asked.

“I don’t date.”

“No, I know. We already had that conversation. I mean how often do you go out and buy things, or spend the evening walking around the city?”

“I don’t.”

I nodded. Of course he didn’t. Enjoying life fell into the inefficient-use-of-time category.

“What about Jasper?” I asked.

“What about him?”

“You guys seem nothing alike. He’s so...laid-back.”

“He has a stronger work ethic than his demeanor lets on.”

I snorted. “I don’t think you have to come across a certain way to have a good work ethic. What do you two have in common? It can’t be just the rich dude thing, right?”

“His mother’s house is next door to Oma’s. We grew up together.”

“So you forged your friendship in middle school fire?” I smiled. “That’s like me and Morgan. We’ve done pretty much everything together for forever. It’s her optimism that drew me in. How about Jasper? What do you like about him?”

“You’re asking a lot of questions about Jasper.”

I sighed. “I’m asking questions *about you.*”

“Jasper is...open. Warm. Loyal.”



“And you like all of those things,” I said, only half in question.

“It can be difficult at times for me to understand him. But he didn’t let me push him away when I was a damaged kid trying to be alone.”

“That’s sweet.”

“No matter what I did or said, he always came back.”

“And you needed that.”

He scrubbed a hand through his hair. “Yes.”

“I’m glad he was there for you. Everyone deserves a friend like that.”

“I don’t know that I deserved him, but I am grateful for him.”

“I feel the same way about Morgan.”

We happened upon Mellifluous, a fancy restaurant I’d read about but had never been able to afford. I’d also heard even for super rich guys it was hard to get a reservation.

“Have you ever eaten there?” I pointed.

“No.”

“It’s all the rage in the food scene. Should we try it?”

“If you’d like.”

As I walked toward the door, I wondered for the bazillionth time today if I was dressed appropriately for this. My tall heels made me feel powerful, as did the square shoulders of my stolen jacket.

No one was going to look at me and assume I didn’t belong. They’d be too busy checking out the hottie beside me. Plus, confidence could take you everywhere in life. I squared my shoulders and held my chin up high.

Still, as two dudes in tuxes opened the doors for us, a whisper of doubt crept through the back of my head.

Gabriel went right up to the maître d’, asked for a table, and was directed to the bar to wait. We were getting a table.

No questions asked.

Everything was easier for Gabriel. Part of me thought I should be salty about that, but I knew better now. He didn't take his privilege for granted, and he didn't abuse his power.

Instead, I got to enjoy the benefits, and that was bananas.

We were immediately given some sort of house bubbly water to sip on while we waited. It tasted like lime and a little bit like rocks. I smacked my lips together and debated whether I should share my opinion or let Gabriel decide for himself.

He took a sip.

He flinched.

Our eyes met. I didn't have to say, because he already knew it tasted like rocks.

I grinned at him. "I'm going to take a pee—I'm going to use the restroom. Be right back."

I could feel his gaze on me as I walked away. My breath felt heavy in my chest. I belonged here. I belonged anywhere I wanted to be, because I was a confident person who deserved to try nice new things and hang out with a gorgeous billionaire who was entirely out of my league. Every affirmation in my head played in Morgan's voice, except the out of my league bit. That was definitely my voice.

I found the bathroom, laid a bunch of toilet paper over the seat, and locked the stall behind me.

I took my seat and a breath.

Sitting on the toilet with my underwear down my calves, I caught movement through the crack in the door.

It was an eyeball.

And it blinked.

I screamed.

"Shh. Don't scream. It's just me, Dani."

How had she even gotten into a place like this? It was supposed to be impossible for even the most connected of

uber-connected socialites to get a reservation. Plus, even though I knew people could be more than one thing, I couldn't picture Dani as anything but a hoodie-in-a-coffee-shop type. She couldn't be crushing it in the social department if I, a stranger, was her go-to for writing feedback. The restaurant must not have been nearly as exclusive as I'd heard. It didn't matter.

I pulled my pants and underwear up in one go.

I snapped the lock open and shoved the door.

It hit Dani in the face. She stumbled back. "Ow. I said it was just me. Didn't you hear me?"

Oh, I'd heard her all right.

"If you happen across someone you know in a public restroom, the polite thing to do is give them a friendly smile in the mirror once you've both done your business, maybe a hello, too," I said. "You don't watch them pee."

"I wasn't watching. I was just peeking to see if it was you."

A middle-aged lady in a fancy dress ran out of the bathroom as fast as she could to get away from us. I couldn't blame her. I'd have done the same.

"I haven't seen you at Eterni-Tea in a while," Dani said.

"And you'll never see me there again. I quit."

She squeezed the strings on her hoodie, covering half her face. "Oh."

"Great, right?"

"I liked our little rapport. It makes me sad that you're not going to be there for our hangouts."

Hangouts? We clearly had entirely different perceptions of our previous encounters.

I shrugged. "Them's the breaks."

I pushed past her to the sink and washed my hands.

“Since we haven’t seen each other, we haven’t been able to update each other on our progress,” she said. “I can see you’re doing well, making enviable headway.”

“I’m peachy,” I said.

“Me, too. I promise I’ll do my part. I won’t let you down.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” I dried my hands under the hand dryer.

I glanced at Dani as the machine blasted at an eardrum-breaking level.

“Of course. I don’t know what I’m talking about either,” she hollered over the noise. Then she winked in a weirdly exaggerated manner.

I left the bathroom, hoping Dani wouldn’t follow me.

I’d lost my appetite.

As I reached Gabriel, I said, “I’ve changed my mind. Can we just go back to your place and eat in?”

“Of course.”

# THIRTY-TWO

GABRIEL

Layana set down the bags she was carrying, tossed my suit jacket over the top of the sofa, and strutted from the living room into the kitchen. My attention lingered only a moment in the messy way the jacket dangled before it flicked back to Layana's swaying hips and long, curvy legs.

She had the best thighs, thick and soft. And I loved the way she squealed and squirmed when I nipped them.

The kitchen island blocked my view as she reached the fridge, breaking the spell. I set down my own bags and emptied the contents of my pockets into the bowl by the door.

But my phone screen caught my eye, because of the numerous missed messages upon it. I'd silenced my phone in the morning to avoid this exact moment—the one where I was tempted to check what emergency could be happening to demand multiple people that required my immediate attention on a Sunday.

"There's lots of prepared stuff in the fridge," Layana said from right beside me.

I startled, not having realized she was so close.

She looked smaller without her heels on, like she could fit perfectly under my chin if I pulled her close.

"Do you have a meal service?" Layana asked.

"Personal chef."

"Of course." She shook her head.

“Celeste comes in once a week,” I said, feeling like I needed to explain, as if hiring someone to do their chosen job was an offense. “She prepares meals, and I heat them. I compensate her well.”

“I’m sure you do.” Layana’s voice was soft, her smile softer. “What’s all that?”

She pointed to my lit-up phone in the bowl.

“Texts and calls from today.”

“Everything okay? Do you need to call them back?”

Even though I didn’t want to, I picked up my phone to check. “Pamela sent links to Socialface and congratulations on our successful evening at the gala. Jasper sent—”

Photographs filled the screen, selfies of him with the pair of us in the background. We looked happy, like we belonged together.

Layana leaned her head against my arm to peek. “Aww, we look cute. And he’s such a ham.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“What’s going on with the Socialface posts?”

“I’m not sure I want to know.”

“It’ll be good things, I’m sure.”

“It wasn’t all good things last time.”

“Nothing’s ever only good. If you never do anything that might hurt you a little, you never live at all. Lemme see.”

I handed her the phone.

She pressed her finger to the screen, scrolled, and smiled. “It turns out the Tin Man does have a heart. Gabriel Stryker strikes a human note with his acceptance speech while receiving his award for scientific discovery.”

*Tin Man. Human note.*

“You look upset.” She frowned and touched my shoulder. “These are good things. They might be saying it in jerky ways, but it’s progress. You’re winning.”

I didn't say anything.

Layana closed the site and handed me my phone back. "All of this is in the name of greatness, right? Securing the merger means you get to do more good. Everything else is just noise."

Her words and her touch calmed my nerves. "You're right."

"Of course I am. It's my special skill. Looks like you still have another text."

"It's Esme," I said, clicking it. "Video chat me as soon as you can."

I sucked in a sharp breath, my lungs burning.

"Is that a bad thing?" Layana asked.

"I don't know."

"You can call her. I'll be fine by myself until you're done."

Before I could think about it, a video call came in, from Esme.

I answered.

Layana moved to walk away, I grabbed her hand. I wanted her here, especially if something was wrong. And as my sister's face popped up on the screen, I realized I wanted Layana here even if everything was right.

She'd met Oma and Jasper. I wanted her to meet Esme, too.

A smattering of freckles crossed Esme's cheeks, which I'd only seen happen during the summer when we were kids. She must have been spending more time in the sun than usual. There was something else about her that seemed different, too, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

"Gabe, you socially competent fox!" Esme beamed at me.

In the background was a wooden wall, and the sound of the ocean. Was she living at the beach? I knew so little of what she was up to recently, which concerned me.

"Hi?" I said.

“I saw all the videos of you,” she said. “Congrats on the award. Tell me about the woman.”

I sucked in a sharp breath and turned the camera. “Esme, this is Layana. Layana, my sister.”

“Layana, hi,” Esme said. “It was you, wasn’t it. You dragged that turtle out of his shell.”

Layana smiled back with as much enthusiasm as Esme exuded.

This was a mistake. What had I done?

“Gabriel did it. He hired me to help, but it was all him,” Layana said.

“Ooh, juicy. What *exactly* did he hire you to do for him?” Esme asked.

“Social posting,” Layana said. “We’re changing his image for the merger he’s been working toward.”

“Right, the go more global plan. I get why he thinks it’s a good idea, but it’s so not him to work with a big company like that. Did he tell you he’s going to have to give up control if it works out?”

“No,” Layana said. “He *loves* control.”

I sighed. “I’m trying to do good.”

“I know,” Esme said. “He thinks he has to fix everyone’s problems all the time, be some big protective hero, when all anyone who cares about him wants is for him to stop being so hard on himself and let himself be happy.”

“He is strict with himself,” Layana said.

“It started after Dad died. He thinks he needs to take over that role and micromanage things or they’ll go wrong.”

“It’s because he has a good heart.”

Layana really thought that about me? I watched her smiling at my sister. It wasn’t the public persona she put on for fans. It was the private smile she wore with her friends, the one she showed to me.



“Where are you? Do I hear the ocean?” Layana asked.

“I was doing this whole travel the Caribbean thing, but I’ve settled in for a bit, in a cabin *on the beach*. It’s a little island called Calypso Caribella. I’ve got a sweet gig bartending that pays for the rental and everything I need.”

“That sounds amazing.”

“Why put off your dreams, you know? Something could come along that weighs you down, and then you miss out forever.”

Something was off about what she was saying. What would weigh her down? A real job? Security?

“You never mentioned wanting to go to the Caribbean before you jettied off,” I said.

“I don’t have to tell my big brother everything,” Esme said.

“I think it’s brave and awesome that you’re living your dream,” Layana said.

“What about you?” Esme asked. “Tell me everything about the woman who makes my big bro step out of his comfort zone.”

“My dream was to come to Epiphany and be on reality TV,” Layana said. “I did that, so now I’m working on what comes next. After the glitz, my real passion is writing.”

“Congrats on making your dreams come true,” Esme said. “Have you written anything I might have read?”

Layana’s face went red. It wasn’t like her to be embarrassed about anything ever, so maybe I was misreading her.

“I have a blog,” she said. “*Confessions of a Serial Mood Killer*, but I haven’t posted anything new recently.”

That was strange. She kept telling me her writing was going well. Perhaps she had been making strong progress toward future posts.

“I’ll check it out,” Esme said.

“We should go,” I told them both. “We need to eat.”

“It was great to meet you, Layana,” Esme said.

“You, too,” Layana said and waved.

Esme pointed at me. “Don’t screw this up. I’ve never seen you so happy.”

“Why does that sound like a threat?”

“Because it is. Love you. Byeeeee.”

I could feel Layana watching me as I set my phone down.

“Your sister....” she began.

“She’s a mess.”

“She’s fabulous.”

“I’m glad you like her.”

“How could I not?”

“You two could get into serious trouble together. I’ll have to watch out for that,” I said.

“How so?”

“She’s spontaneous, like you. She makes rash decisions.”

“Like me.” She raised a brow and crossed her arms.

No, they weren’t the same. The most dangerous parts of their personality were similar, but they were still very different people.

I tried to explain. “You’re...stronger than her. You choose the paths in life that don’t make sense to me, but you’ve considered them. You make them work for you. You’re resilient and wild, free from the pressure that makes other people choose paths they think they need to take. Esme doesn’t understand the impact of the choices she makes. She’s just a kid.”

“A kid?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t think so.”

“You’re controlled chaos. She’s...” I didn’t know what exactly to say.

“Uncontrolled chaos?”

That did appear to be the obvious counterpoint. “Yes.”

“Maybe she doesn’t need to be controlled. Maybe she’s free from life’s shackles, enjoying riding the storm.”

“It’s impossible to get caught in the gale force and come out unscathed.”

Layana stared at me, likely wondering if I was talking about her instead of just my sister. That wasn’t my intention.

I needed her to understand the kind of person Esme was, which meant telling her everything, including the one secret I’d never told anyone before.

“You know my mother wasn’t around when Esme and I were children,” I said.

Layana nodded, her intense blue eyes piercing right through me. My chest felt heavy, like a vise was slowly tightening around my ribcage. I turned to the cabinet and retrieved two wine glasses.

“Based on the conversation we had at your oma’s house, I assumed you didn’t see her again after she dropped off Esme,” Layana said. “Is that right?”

“Yes. We had no idea where she went. Esme would ask Dad, but he’d always gently change the subject. For a time, I believed he might know, but he didn’t.”

“Did he tell you outright?”

I pulled out a bottle of Cabernet and showed it to Layana.

She shrugged, her gaze never leaving mine. “Sure.”

I popped open a bottle and poured the dark contents into the waiting glasses. “I heard him on the phone once, on New Year’s Eve, begging her to visit. She hung up on him.”

A knot formed in my throat. I washed it down with a gulp of wine. Notes of black current and oak coated my tongue. The

conversation was drifting off topic.

“When Esme was twelve,” I said, “she decided to take matters into her own hands and hunt down our mother.”

Layana leaned on the counter and twisted the stem of her wine glass between thumb and forefinger. Her gaze still lingered on my face, but the look in her eyes was softer.

“It didn’t matter that I told her to leave well enough alone. She decided she was going to do it, so she did.”

“If she was twelve...that would have made you twenty-one?”

“That’s right.”

“And you’d stepped up to help raise your sister, while you were also going to college.”

“Yes.” I took another sip of wine. “I’d recently started graduate school.”

Layana took a sip, too, her expression soft, open.

I took a deep breath. “Esme posted photos on social media, tracked down leads based on feedback.”

“Serious amateur sleuthing. Did she find anything?”

“Enough. But she doesn’t know the whole story. No one does.”

“What does that mean?”

My throat burned. My chest felt tight. I couldn’t wash away the feeling with wine, but that was fine. It was an old wound, one that couldn’t be healed, yet one I needed to expose. It was the only way Layana would understand.

But was that really what this was? Did telling my story to Layana really have anything to do with my sister?

“One day, I found an unmarked envelope in our mailbox. It wasn’t addressed, so I opened it. It was meant for Esme.”

Layana took my hand. That small contact, the little squeeze of her fingers, offered the support and encouragement I hadn’t realized I needed. The words poured out of me.

“Our mother had seen one of the many posts Esme had put out there looking for her, and had decided to respond. It said not to look for her. It said she wasn’t the right fit for us.”

I turned fully to Layana. The tension in my muscles began to numb.

“I tracked her down. And I watched. She had a new family.”

“Oh, Gabriel.”

Now that I’d started, I couldn’t make the words stop even if I wanted to. “She discarded us and started anew with a much larger house and some rich investment banker husband. We weren’t good enough for her.”

I wasn’t enough.

Layana ran her hands up my arms, and over my shoulders. She pressed herself to me, holding me. “You’re enough.”

“If it was about money....”

“It wasn’t money. It wasn’t you. There is nothing wrong with you. There never was. You’re wonderful, Gabriel. You deserved better. I’m so sorry.” Layana wrapped her arms around my middle and settled her cheek against my chest.

I felt safe in her arms, and something else, something akin to relief. I felt lighter sharing my story with someone. I felt like I didn’t have to carry this burden alone anymore.

My eyes burned, but I didn’t cry. I hadn’t cried since my father died, and even if I wanted to now, my body wouldn’t let me.

I took the relief she offered and squeezed her back.

I didn’t ever want to let her go.

Eventually, she took a step back and smiled gently up at me. “I think we should eat.”

“All right.”

I heated up two servings of eggplant lasagna while Layana prepared a quick salad. We ate in comfortable silence. Then

we made love in bed and held each other all through the night.

# THIRTY-THREE

LAYANA

It was dark when I stirred, naked and sprawling in the softest sheets known to man. I heard Gabriel moving around in the bedroom, probably getting ready for a run and then work even though it was still dark out.

“Hey,” I said, without opening my eyes.

“Hey,” he said softly.

“I dreamed about you, and about a big tornado with sharks and fire in it,” I said. “And you were feeding me powdered donuts.”

“Not sure how I’m supposed to interpret that.”

*Donuts. Mmmm.*

I realized it was my turn to speak again. “I think you should tell Esme.”

He was quiet. Had he left? With great effort, I forced one eyelid to lift. And there, I could see a blurry image of a giant bee standing by the bed.

That probably meant Gabriel was still here, or maybe that I was dreaming again.

Either way, I said, “You think it’s too much, so you shoulder the burden alone. But you don’t know what she can handle. I bet she’s stronger than you give her credit for. Maybe she won’t crash. Maybe she’ll soar.”

“I think you’re still half asleep.”

“I dunno. Maybe I am.”

He kissed my forehead, sweet and soft. And then I drifted back to sleep.

When I woke again, the bedroom was bright, and it was well into Monday morning. As I stretched, a thought came to me—this was nice. Really nice. The last thing I wanted to do was go back to my own place.

It was weird. I felt like I *should* be ready to go home.

Sure, Gabriel’s house was way swankier than my apartment, but that wasn’t the reason I wanted to stay. I’d had such a weirdly good time over the weekend, I guessed I just wasn’t ready to let it end yet.

And since he’d left me here to sleep in and do as I pleased, I figured it was the perfect opportunity to take advantage. I used his shower, heated up a refrigerated egg and veggie scramble which turned out to be crazy delicious, then did some proper snooping.

There was a very generic guest room that looked more like it belonged in a hotel than someone’s house. Everything everywhere was perfectly clean and perfectly tidy.

Even his underwear was so perfectly folded it didn’t seem possible. Every folded square was exactly the same size, every pair exactly the same shade of black. I didn’t know if a folding machine could manage that level of precision.

I stuck my finger in there, and pulled one ever so slightly out of place, for normal human sanity’s sake, to make sure all of this was actually real.

A super neat, perfectly orderly collection of watches sat in a line on top of the dresser. They all looked classic and vintage, and pretty cool, even though I couldn’t remember seeing him wear any of them. At the end was a pocket watch that looked the oldest, like maybe it had been passed down from his great-great-grandfather or something.

In the kitchen, every plate matched. Every glass was exactly the same, turned in exactly the same way. Every mug



was a clone of the next, their handles at the exact same angle. I wiggled one a little so it went the other way.

Maybe I was compelled to do it because I wanted to leave a mark, proof that I'd been here in his perfect space. Our time was already supposed to be over. He didn't need me to help with his image anymore, or at least he wasn't supposed to. I guessed it was still possible that he'd need one final favor, a last-minute request.

But then what?

Everything about Gabriel was the opposite of me. It was fabulously fun in the short term, but how could we possibly overcome our differences if this—whatever we were doing—lasted longer?

Ugh, the gravity of the thought was too much to bear. I needed these questions out of my head; it would be better if I could put them on page.

I dug through the overnight bag I'd stashed in the corner of the bedroom. I felt plenty of soft clothing, a bristly hairbrush, and no cold hard plastic.

A tiny ripple, not quite a flutter, passed through my stomach. Where could my laptop be? It had to be here.

I flipped the bag over on the floor and shook out the contents.

My laptop wasn't here.

I couldn't believe it. I *never* forgot my laptop.

I tossed everything back in the bag and debated going home. No question Harold was hanging around outside watching over me, and he'd take me to my apartment if I asked.

That was silly. I was being weird about nothing.

If I was going to write, I could do it on my phone. I settled into the new pillows on the sofa. I found myself absent-mindedly tapping my fingers on the sofa cushion, my agitation manifesting. I blew out a long, deflating breath and opened a document on my phone.

A text popped up on the screen. It was from Morgan. I'd gladly take that distraction any day.

Morgan: Hey, are you busy? I miss you

Me: Nope. Good time to chat?

A SECOND LATER, my phone rang. I picked it up right away.

"It's been forever," I said in way of greeting.

"Agreed. Tell me everfin I'f miffed."

"You're eating lunch."

She audibly gulped. "Sorry. If I don't eat and chat, I have to put one off. And then my break will be over."

"All good," I said. "What you've missed...hmm, let's see."

"Your confused feelings about what's going on between you and Gabriel. The gala. Okay, go."

I grinned. "The gala was...weird but good. Did you know Gabriel and Jasper were friends?"

"Uh-uh," she said. I could picture her shaking her head with her mouth full.

"Well they are. So that was a weird surprise. I spent the weekend here at Gabriel's place, and it's all so...."

"Magical?"

I shook my head as if she could see me. "Normal."

She was quiet a moment like she wasn't sure what to say. Then with a soft hesitation in her voice she asked, "And is normal good or bad?"

"Good, I guess. It feels nice, but also like I'm living someone else's life. I don't belong in fancy gowns at fancy galas in fancy billionaires' homes."

"Okay, you've come to the right place on this. It's imposter syndrome. I've been exactly where you are."

Of course she had. She'd come from the same small town as me, and now she was *marrying* a billionaire.

I said, "I can't help but feel like I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop, for when we both realize that even the possibility of being together, for no matter how short a time, is absolutely bananas."

"Why can't that be okay? Bananas are delicious."

"There's a book on his shelf titled *The Power of Routine*."

"So?"

"I hate routines. They're boring and predictable and everything anti-me."

"But is *he* boring and predictable and anti-you?"

"No," I said, because he wasn't. He was weird and interesting and unpredictably fun. That could be enough, couldn't it? We could take this time for what it was, which was exactly how I liked things. No plan. All spur-of-the-moment fun. We didn't have to have a future. I liked not knowing the future, so there was no reason our incompatibility should bother me.

"Thanks," I said. "I needed this."

"Me, too," Morgan said.

"How's the play? The costume redesign and everything?"

"Good actually. I've been crushing it, and so far, there are no new complaints. Cross your fingers for me."

"I will," I said. "My toes, too."

"Thanks! I should go. I have to get back."

"Good luck with the rest of your day."

"Good luck with Gabriel."

I didn't need luck because everything was fine exactly as it was—better than fine, even. We were having crazy awesome sex and he was surprising me all the time by sharing new parts of himself. It was great.

After we said goodbye and hung up, I reopened the blank document on my phone to write.

And I got another text.

This time it was from a blocked number. That was never a good sign. If too many weirdos had gotten wind of my newest number, I'd have to get another one. Again.

A touch nervous, I clicked the text to see what it said.

It was a picture. The background was gray and indistinguishable. At first glance, the focal point appeared to be a boulder covered in brown moss, or a sleeping bear with mange.

On closer inspection, I realized it was a large, hairy, completely naked man. He was balled up with his butt sticking into the air, his head covered under his arms, and a long line down his back where his pelt of curly hair had been shaved off.

I locked my phone and set it down.

My hands were shaking. A weird mix of exhilaration and disgust thrummed through my veins.

While I waited for my heart rate to slow, another text came through.

I shouldn't look. It could be so much worse than a naked dude. What if it was worse? If it was even more disturbing, how could I *not* look?

Curiosity killed the cat, but more importantly, satisfaction brought him back. I pretty much lived for those little satisfactions. And if I didn't check it now, it'd drive me crazy all day until I did.

Throwing caution into the wind, I picked up my phone.

This time there was a written message.

???: Criss Cross.

TWO THUMBS UP EMOJIS FOLLOWED.

Weird. Something about this felt familiar, like I'd heard from this particular weirdo before. Maybe it was the guy who'd requested feet pics. I debated simply blocking the number.

Nah. Curiosity got the better of me again. I texted back.

Me: Who is this?

I WAITED A WHILE, but Bear Man never answered.

I decided to do a quick web search for *criss cross*. I found an old singer group called Kris Kross, so...maybe it was a reference to them? Probably not. "Criss Cross" was also a song by the Rolling Stones. The definition of criss-cross was something along the lines of a meandering path that zigzagged. And then there was a waffle-cut potato chip labeled Criss Cross, too.

There were too many weird possibilities. It was probably the dude's name, like the music group, only spelled differently. Whatever.

I closed the texts and tried to write, but whatever inspiration I might have had earlier was gone.

And now I was in the mood for potato chips.

There was only one possible course of action—I needed Harold to take me to the store.

# THIRTY-FOUR

GABRIEL

I stared at the vial of electric yellow fluid.

Incremental adjustments in temperature had transformed its appearance from murky swamp water to the vitamin B-infused urine hue of Layana's favorite carbonated beverage.

Unfortunately, the sample remained otherwise unchanged. The stability was encouraging, but there was no improvement in metabolic consumption.

I was no closer to my goal.

"What transformation do you require?" I asked the sample.

I smiled to myself, surprised to hear my own voice. It wasn't as if the fluid could talk back.

"She's transforming me in every way possible," I said.

It was unsettling, yet not entirely an unpleasant revelation. Instigators were required in science to propel progress forward. Without outside force I, like the sample, would remain stagnant.

"What happens if I throw caution to the wind, accept Layana's suggestion, and assume telling my sister the truth could somehow benefit her?"

It could harm her. But I would never know if I didn't tell her.

My instinct said to stick to the safe option, to the steady equilibrium I had carefully crafted in every aspect of my life but my work. Here, I took chances because they were required.

I followed along with Pamela's plans to make this merger happen, because if I didn't, my work would never reach the world stage.

Recklessness was paying off. Everything was going according to plan.

The yellow liquid taunted me, pushing me to follow this twisting path away from the tried-and-true safety of the main road.

I poured a portion of the liquid into a new vial, capped it off, and shook it. A whirlpool formed in the center of the fluid, a violent storm.

Something unexpected happened. Tiny white crystals formed in the eye of that storm, building slowly one on top of another. I kept the motion going, afraid if I let it stop now, the crystals would fall apart.

Once the crystals ceased their growth, I slowly let the liquid settle.

Cautiously optimistic about the newly formed substance, I checked a sample on the microscope.

The cells were a hive of frenzied activity—membranes pulsating, organelles swelling and swirling.

This was strange, uncharted territory. There was no way to know if the bizarre change would alter the organisms in a beneficial manner.

Quickly and carefully, I entered a sample into the spectrometer.

I held my breath as the machine separated and analyzed the molecules. The minutes passed at an agonizingly slow rate as I waited for the results to populate.

Chances were that no significant differences would show. Chances were equally as likely for a negative result as a positive.

Whatever happened, I would learn something.

After a moment that felt much too long, the results came in—nearly a two percent increase in inorganic consumption.

It was more than I had dared to hope for.

I leapt for my notebook, scribbling stream-of-consciousness notes on the next steps to take. The Biotabloom Dynamics deal was within reach, the planet's garbage problems closer than ever to being solved. All because of today's hard-earned breakthrough, inspired entirely by Layana.

I was seeing everything differently now because of her. She inspired me. She'd changed me, for the better.

Tonight, we'd celebrate. Whether she was ready or not, I'd take the leap and tell her exactly how I felt. She was worth any risk.

Tonight, I'd tell her I loved her.



# THIRTY-FIVE

LAYANA

I strolled into the front door of my apartment complex with a weird mix of thoughts pinging through my head. Harold begrudgingly waited out in his car, guarding my newly acquired Criss Cross waffle chips. Nothing against Harold, and I felt bad leaving him outside. But it was one thing letting Gabriel into my private space, another entirely to let in a complete stranger.

I longed to be reunited with my laptop, and I needed to get some quiet alone time in my apartment to do actual writing. This time it wouldn't just be journaling, but less personal content for my blog.

I stopped at my mailbox and opened the little door. My phone dinged in my pocket. I pulled it out and found a new text from Gabriel.

Gabriel: If you don't already have plans, I'd like you to join me for dinner at seven.

Gabriel: Do you have any allergies?

Me: penicillin

I COULD PRACTICALLY HEAR him sighing from across the city. I grinned at the screen.

Gabriel: I will tell the chef not to include antibiotics in the entrée. Does that mean you will join me?

Me: I'll have to check my calendar

Me: Yep, I'm free

Me: We could try again at Mellifluous. Maybe this time I won't get ambushed in the bathroom

Gabriel: ?

Me: I'll tell you all about it later. Can we go?

Gabriel: Of course. I look forward to seeing you then, Layana.

Me: Samesies

I SHOVED my phone back into my pocket and grabbed the junk piled in my mailbox, locked the door, and twisted on my heel.

And nearly slammed into a brick wall. Not a literal brick wall, but a large meaty blockade barring my path.

“Ah.” I startled and looked up from the white tank top on the man's chest, to a face not at all obscured by a shaggy bowl cut.

The details didn't compute.

Only one person in the building wore this ridiculous getup all winter long. Only one person scowled at me like he'd bash me in the head with a boulder given the chance.

But it looked like this guy had bathed in a kiddy pool of Nair. He didn't even have any eyebrows. If he wasn't the worst person I'd ever met, I might actually feel sorry for him.

I snorted. “Nice haircut.”

He sneered and took a step closer, too close, so he was right up in my personal space. “*You.*”

In my head, I told myself to stand firm and tall, because Maxim freaking Loughty had no power over me.

In practice though, he was a snarling mole rat twice my weight who’d sooner rip my arm off than give me a handshake.

Instinctively, my feet moved away from the threat.

Two steps back and I hit the wall of mailboxes.

I reached for the messenger bag that wasn’t slung over my shoulder. I’d never wished I’d had my bear spray more. But of course my messenger bag was upstairs, inside my apartment.

I could still use my phone, beat him in the face with it. The metal and glass brick to his nose would crack the delicate cartilage and give me enough time to run away.

“I’ve paid my rent, jerkhole,” I said. “I don’t know what your problem is, but you and me, we don’t have beef.”

“I know you did it,” he hissed, his New England accent hitting even heavier than usual. “I don’t know how you pulled it off, but I know it was you.”

“What was me? Whatever you think I did, I didn’t. I haven’t even been around.”

His nostrils flared like he was about to spit troll acid.

I refused to let him intimidate me. There was a fire in my gut. Every word he said, every glare he cast, was a drop of gasoline.

The flames building inside of me burned to be set free. I said, “Get out of my face or I’ll make you.”

My words sounded strong and sure in my ears. They hit with enough strength that anyone standing before me should clear out of the way.

Maxim didn’t move.

A sliver of doubt wormed its way through my composure. I needed to step this up a notch. I couldn't let him win.

I said, "Watch yourself or it'll be *me* lurking in *your* apartment in the middle of the night waiting to strike."

Something in his expression changed. His eyes narrowed, not quite squinting but focusing intently, as if trying to decipher a hidden message in my words.

A fleeting shadow of doubt crossed his face, momentary but unmistakable, uncertainty overtaking his bravado. And was that...could I possibly smell what I thought I smelled?

*Fear?*

Satisfaction washed over me.

He finally saw me for who I was, finally recognized the ferocious tiger lurking beneath my deceptively soft exterior. And what he saw worried him. It should. I was a fracking force of nature.

"You're effing nuts." He leaned his hairless body away from me, uncertainty softening his harsh expression.

"That's right, I am. Don't forget it," I said, chuffed. "And don't speak to me ever again. Don't even look me in the eye, or I'll make you regret it."

The left side of his face twitched. He chewed the inside of his cheek.

Then he slowly backed away, never taking his eyes off me for a second.

I waited until I heard the door to his apartment slam shut. Then I thrust my fists in the air and did a happy little dance to celebrate my victory.

"I did it. I did it," I whispered to myself. Then I headed upstairs to my apartment, humming "We Are the Champions" on my way.

I locked the door behind me and flopped down on my sofa.

Everything was working out. Everything was awesome. I was awesome, feisty and powerful.

Now that I was here, I'd settle in and start my writing. I needed to prep a few blog posts, get them scheduled. It was possible to be both regular in my production, and badass in every way that mattered. Routine had a place in life, I could see that now.

Time with Gabriel. Write. Post. Succeed.

That was a good routine—the only one I needed, really.

Who'd have thought Gabriel could teach me something about life that would stick? Not me. But I liked it. Maybe I could rub off a little bit on him too, throw a little happy chaos into his order. I wouldn't just make his underwear crooked, either. Maybe I could convince him to open up a little with the people close to him. That'd be nice.

I went to my dresser to pull out my laptop. I opened the drawer.

It wasn't there.

A weird sensation prickled across my skin.

I was sure I'd put it in there. Where else could it be?

I checked my messenger bag, under the sofa, and between the cushions. I even checked in the fridge and freezer for good measure.

Knots formed in my shoulders, pressure building up the back of my neck. Every thud of my heart felt like a subwoofer, pounding louder and louder in my ears.

Where was it? It had to be somewhere.

I checked the bathroom and twisted around my tiny apartment, praying that I'd somehow glanced past it, like it had been sitting right in front of me this whole time.

Nothing. Nada. Zilch.

If it wasn't here...Maxim must have broken in and stolen it.

It was the only possibility that made any sense. I checked the locks on my door, including all the extra ones I'd installed after I'd found him lurking here in the dark.

Everything looked fine, not a single break or scrape.

He hadn't broken in through the door at all, which meant....

I ran across the room and threw back the window curtain.

Jagged shards of glass stuck out the frame. Scattered and shattered bits crunched beneath my heel. Winter air bit my cheeks.

As bitter fury coursed white hot through my veins, a primal growl climbed up my throat and burst forth.

My window was broken, my laptop was gone, and Maxim freaking Loughy had broken into my private space and stolen from me. He couldn't get away with this. I wouldn't let him.

I stalked my way to Maxim's place, every step closer raising the pressure forming inside of me. I slammed my fist against his door.

I could hear him approach. Through the small gap beneath his crooked door, I caught his shadow on the carpet.

"If this ain't a free pizza—" Maxim threw the door open.

Our eyes met.

His grew wider, and he tried to slam the door shut. I wasn't having it. I darted forward, unwilling to let him get away so easily.

Unfortunately, I wasn't quite fast enough.

He smashed me in the jam, sandwiched between door and frame, crushing the air from my lungs.

"Ouch," I said.

"Get outta here," he snapped.

I couldn't at the moment even if I wanted to. I couldn't move. "Give me back my laptop."

He lessened the pressure, keeping me still, but no longer in pain. He kept himself firmly in the way, blocking me from entering.

“Why would I have your laptop?” he asked, the bite of anger dropping from his words.

I wasn't buying it. I turned my head just enough to see the crinkled eyes beneath his bare brows. “Because you're a garbage human who threatened to steal all of my things. When my prized possession goes missing, who else should I suspect?”

His features twisted. “Hell if I know. I didn't touch your stuff.”

He sounded sincere. He looked confused. The expression on his face seemed so genuine, I almost believed him.

“Give it back or I'm calling the cops,” I said.

“Great, you do that, and I'll tell them how you threatened my life.”

Okay, so I wasn't entirely innocent in our interactions, but he deserved it. Plus, I hadn't threatened his life, I'd made a vague threat of undisclosed harm during our last interaction.

I licked my lips. “I'll tell them how you let yourself into my apartment, waited in there in the dark to threaten me. Which threat do you think they'll find more sinister, the one coming from a damsel in distress or the one of a wildebeest?”

His features contorted into a snarl. It was the only warning I got before he lifted his foot and slammed it into my shin.

Pain radiated up and down my leg. I groaned and stumbled back.

Maxim slammed the door and locked it.

I was going to the police. My laptop was everything, and there was absolutely no way I was going to let Maxim take that away from me.

# THIRTY-SIX

GABRIEL

The vaguely familiar tune Wallace was humming in the front seat pricked at my brain. I felt like I should know what song it was, and also I was already mildly regretting allowing him to drive me.

“What is that?” I asked.

“Always Be My Baby,” he said.

I stared at the small mirror at the front of the car, waiting for him to elaborate.

“Mariah Carey.” He grinned into the rearview. “Classic. Diva. Goddess.”

Ah, now I remembered it. I nodded and turned my attention out the side window.

“You can sing along if you like, Gremlin,” he said.

“No, thank you.”

But the chorus played through my head, and I was fairly sure it would be trapped there, an earworm I wouldn't be able to shake for the rest of the evening. That was fine, as was his use of that awful nickname. Nothing could dull the high I felt over today's triumph.

I was on the cusp of everything I'd spent my entire career working toward, and I couldn't wait to share the news with Layana.

“Here we are.” Wallace pulled up to the curb of Mellifluous and put the vehicle into park.



“Thank you, Wallace,” I said, rising from my seat.

“Wait there, I’ll get the door for you.”

“That’s not necessary. I’ll text after dinner.”

“Will Ms. Hartley be joining you?” He was completely turned around in his seat, beaming at me.

“It’s best not to make assumptions.”

He cracked a laugh.

I climbed out of the vehicle and went inside. Layana wasn’t waiting at the bar, and had not yet been seated at our table. This was not surprising. Knowing her, she’d be fifteen minutes late to our reservation time.

Upon being seated, I sipped on the provided water, told the waiter to return after my companion arrived, and watched in the direction of the door.

I imagined how the evening would progress. She’d arrive late, think nothing of it, then order an extraordinary volume of decadent and sugar-laden food options. She’d regale me with a story from her day spent with the friends she adored so much, filming with Juno or bonding with Morgan.

I’d watch as her eyes rolled back and she moaned in pleasure over each indulgent bite, in awe over everything about her. She did exactly what she wanted and felt no guilt or qualms over whether those choices were correct. They were right for her, and she knew it. She called out the restraint I showed in every aspect of my life, pinpointing how that rigidity could be detrimental to me if I allowed it to be.

It’s why I’d called Wallace instead of driving myself tonight. I was trying to be better, to be more open to others, all because of her.

I’d tell her about my breakthrough in the lab, and how she’d inspired it.

I’d tell her I loved her.

And then...I didn’t know what would happen.

It was reckless to confess feelings she may not share, exposing my heart and admitting that she could still choose to allow our time together to expire. She could take the payments for our work together and move on to some other new and fun adventure.

I hoped that instead she'd see what I saw, that two opposing forces could not only repel each other, but find beauty in the balance between opposition and attraction. What made us right for each other wasn't the ease of falling, it was the challenge that forced us to grow, and grow together.

Fifteen minutes passed.

Then another twenty.

A thread of unease formed in my chest, slowly gathering into a knot. Perhaps filming with Juno had run longer than expected. I tamped down my impatience, refusing to allow petty anxieties to dampen this day.

Layana would come.

I checked my phone and found no new calls or texts. Any minute now, she had to arrive.

After watching and lingering, the waiter returned. Hesitation muted his smile as he asked me again if I would be willing to order something, gently suggesting if I didn't order something soon, the table would be better used to serve someone else.

He wasn't wrong. It was too soon to give up.

I ordered a bottle of whatever vintage Cabernet he suggested, letting it sit as I watched diners enter and exit the restaurant.

As the minutes passed, the knot of unease in my chest turned into a ball, then a twisting, churning boulder. Sure, Layana was chronically tardy, but she'd never left me waiting for forty-three minutes before. Had something happened to her?

For a moment I debated if she'd be annoyed if I texted, but immediately discarded the thought.

Me: Are you all right?

I WAITED a few moments longer for her to respond. When she didn't, I called her cell. It rang four times before going to voicemail. I tried again with the same result.

Worry ratcheted up my spine. The scents of garlic and woodsmoke in the air turned rancid in my stomach.

Where was she? When I'd asked last night what she was going to do today, she hadn't decided. The night could yet be salvaged, if only she would appear. Was it possible she had gotten so lost in thought, so deep into her writing or social exploits that she'd forgotten our plans? While involved in whatever it was she'd chosen to do for the day, her phone may have died.

I couldn't wait any longer. I texted Wallace to return, then set money on the table to pay for the untouched wine.

What exactly I would do next, I wasn't sure. Perhaps Jasper could get me in touch with Layana's friend Morgan. Perhaps I was blowing the entire situation out of proportion, but it was better for Layana to be annoyed that I'd worried for nothing versus something terrible having happened to her while I took no action.

Harold—of course. The obvious call wasn't to Jasper. It was to the bodyguard I'd hired to watch over Layana.

I grabbed my keys and headed for the door. I couldn't sit here any longer, even if everything was fine. Once I was outside, I'd call Harold, and I'd get my answers.

My phone buzzed with a text.

Immediately I checked to see if it was Layana.

The notification showed the message was from Pamela. I wanted to ignore it, but as I headed for the door, I unlocked the screen.

Pamela: Call me immediately. There is an urgent situation requiring your attention.

I FROWNED AT THE SCREEN. Whatever it was could wait. My priority was reconnecting with Layana. I slipped the phone into my pocket and continued on.

Two steps from the door, my phone buzzed again.

And again.

Pamela: This cannot wait.

Pamela: I strongly advise you to call me before taking any action.

TAKING ANY ACTION? Action about what?

Pamela: It's regarding Layana.

A CHILL RAN THROUGH ME, stealing the breath from my lungs. I hurried the rest of the way outside, fully intending to call Pamela the moment I was away from prying ears.

But as soon as I stepped outside, Pamela beat me to the punch. Her name lit up my screen as the phone rang. Apprehension swirled in my gut, and I answered.

“What is it?” I asked, my terse tone revealing more of my emotion than I would have liked.

Pamela's voice was grim. “Ms. Hartley has made the intimate details of your relationship public on her blog.”

For a moment, the words didn't compute.

Our private life was exactly that—private and precious. Layana wouldn't act so callously and break the trust I'd given her. There had to be some sort of misunderstanding.

Pamela continued, “She presents an unflattering portrayal of you personally. This could undo all of the progress we've made with Biotabloom Dynamics. It's a crisis requiring immediate damage control.”

My chest constricted, my mind reeling. “Layana would never—”

“She did. It’s already circulating across the internet.”

I sagged against the side of the building as reality set in.

I’d trusted Layana with details of my life I’d never shared with anyone. I’d trusted her with the family I’d kept guarded. I’d trusted her with my heart.

If what Pamela said was true, Layana had violated that intimacy. The hurt cut to the bone.

“Don’t read it,” Pamela added firmly. “Focus on formulating your response. We’ll say you don’t actually know her that well. We’ll cast blame on the attention-seeking nature of a failed reality star. I’ll put together notes for you once I gather more details. Take care, Gabriel. We *will* fix this.”

I didn’t want to harm Layana. I didn’t want any of this to be true. I couldn’t form words in any meaningful string before Pamela hung up the phone.

Cold air pressed in all around me, but I could hardly feel it. I could hardly hear the sounds of the city or even feel present in my own body.

My hands trembled as I pulled up Layana’s site.

Pamela’s warning echoed in my ears, but I had to see the violation with my own eyes. Legs unsteady beneath me, I stared at the site’s brightly colored banner labeled *Confessions of a Serial Mood Killer*, took a breath, then scrolled down.

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*The first time I thought the world had ended was in the second grade, when Blake Hornsby grabbed the crooked ponytail sticking off the side of my head in his sticky fist and chopped it off with a dull pair of safety scissors. Why would someone do such a thing? Because he’d never seen black hair before, and he wanted to take some home to show his mommy.*

*I learned that at any age, men are entitled pricks who take what they want from you, no matter the harm they cause.*

*The second time I thought my life was over, I was twelve years old when I chanced sliding in at the picnic table at Jennifer Davis’s birthday party next to the cutest boy in all of Cricket Falls. I was trying not to look stupid as I took a bite of my ice cream cake, when a flock of Satan’s seagulls passed overhead and pooped on my face.*

*I learned that shit happens—literally. And I could laugh at myself, or let someone else dictate my story.*

*So years later, when I'm leaving work and suffer an accidental collision, the kind of mishap that meet cutes are made of, I know I shouldn't be surprised that the man on the other side of the bonk isn't a charming, bumbling Hugh Grant.*

*Instead, I find a self-righteous prick in bumblebee-esque spandex, who'd rather rip my head off than ask if I'm all right.*

*Instead of doing the normal human brush off, a nod or muttered apology, he looks at me like I've taken a Sharpie to The Mona Lisa.*

*His reaction makes soap opera actors look like masters of subtlety. His roar rivals King Kong's.*

---

I PINCHED the bridge of my nose, my head swirling. I couldn't believe this was happening. Why would she do this?

I scrolled down, my vision blurry, my pulse pounding in my ears.

I couldn't see properly, couldn't read properly, and maybe that was for the best. Pamela was right, I shouldn't have seen this.

I caught words and phrases here and there: *houseplants with a better sense of humility, lemonade at Oma's, sister Esme over video chat.*

With building horror, I scanned for the worst words she could possibly share with the world, the darkest secret I'd confided in her.

*Unmarked envelope meant for Esme.*

Bile rose in my throat. I couldn't breathe.

What I'd experienced as moments of laughter, of trust, of tenderness—she'd recorded it all.

Nausea and anguish churned inside me.

A voice called out to me, familiar yet too foggy to register.

I stood paralyzed, staring blindly as reality set in. The closeness we had forged was ash, my reputation threatening to collapse with it. Layana's betrayal seared like no pain I'd ever known.

"Call nine-one-one?" Wallace bent his concerned face down so I was forced to look at him.

His words registered.

I shook my head. “No. I’m all right.”

It was a lie, and he could see it. Still, he ushered me into the car and believed me enough that he headed toward home instead of the hospital.

Once I was safely in my own space, completely alone, the tears I’d held inside of me since my father’s death poured forth.

# THIRTY-SEVEN

LAYANA

The stale scent of dirty mop water filled my nose as I tapped my foot impatiently. How much longer were they going to keep me trapped in this prison of laminate tile and flickering fluorescent lights? I'd been waiting for what felt like an eternity, but according to the ticking second hand on the blank-faced clock hanging crooked on the wall, it had only been a couple of hours.

A couple of hours was too long when I was the victim here.

A criminal had broken into my apartment and stolen my most prized possession—my laptop—and what had the police done? Kept me waiting at their station based on the ludicrous accusations of my trash landlord Maxim Loughty.

That hairy ape had the audacity to claim I'd threatened his life. As if. He was the one who'd sneaked into my home and threatened me. I had merely suggested I would harm his jerk face right back. I wouldn't actually go through with it. The worst thing I'd do was put dead fish under his rug, maybe hide a cheap but waterproof watch under the lid of his toilet to go off at two in the morning.

Anything bad that happened to Maxim Loughty, he deserved.

*He stole my freaking laptop.* But did Officer McPastyFace sitting smugly behind the desk care? No. He cared more about a yeti's lies than about helping me.



I crossed my arms and blew out an exasperated breath. This was ridiculous. I had half a mind to march right out of here. It wasn't like I was under arrest. I'd come of my own free will. If I left, what could they even do?

A door opened, and Maxim emerged looking far too pleased with himself. He shot me a sinister sneer. "Have fun clearin' your name, sweetcheeks."

My skin crawled. I gritted my teeth and said nothing as he passed. If he wanted a reaction, he wasn't going to get one. Once his back was turned though, the look I gave him was deadly. Maybe I would do the fish thing. Maybe I'd ask the WTW crew what I could do that was worse. If anyone would have a weirdly disturbing idea for revenge, it'd be Chester.

Finally, an officer called my name. I shot up from my seat and followed him through the door Maxim had come from. We passed empty interview rooms until we reached one at the end of the hall occupied by a woman in a pantsuit. She had a no-nonsense bun and cheekbones I'd kill for, not that I'd say that out loud given my current circumstances.

"Have a seat, Ms. Hartley," she said.

I sat and crossed my arms again. "Are we finally going to discuss the break-in and theft of my property?"

She clicked her pen and stared down at a notepad. "You filed a complaint alleging Maxim Loughy threatened you and stole your laptop. Is that correct?"

"Yes." I gave a sharp nod to emphasize my point.

"And Mr. Loughy filed a complaint that you threatened his life. That you told him you would be 'lurking in his home in the middle of the night' and warned him not to speak to you again or you'd 'make him regret it.'"

I waved my hand. "I'm not the bad guy here. Ask anyone in the building. He's the one who broke into my place, *twice*."

The officer raised a brow. "Mr. Loughy seems rather shaken up by the experience."

I snorted. "Yeah right."

The officer's lip twitched.

This wasn't going right. I wasn't saying this right, or they'd understand.

"Listen, Maxim has been making my life, and the lives of everyone else who ever met him, miserable for ages. And I would never hurt anyone. Now about my stolen laptop—"

"Do you have any evidence Mr. Loughy stole from you?"

"I'm sure it's in his apartment, if you'd just look in there, you'll find it." Unless he already pawned it. *What if he already pawned it?*

If it was gone forever, some of my writing would be lost, because I was not as on top of backing things up as I should have been. But, the one good thing in all of this—at least my laptop was password protected. Only an idiot didn't lock their shit down.

The officer clasped her hands together on the table. "Without evidence of a crime, our hands are tied. We have your complaint on file in case evidence arises to corroborate your claims. In the meantime, refrain from engaging with Mr. Loughy, and avoid any more...*misunderstandings.*"

She rose from her seat.

"So that's it?" I asked. "You're not going to help me?"

"You're free to go."

I wanted to scream. This was so unfair.

But getting myself worked up wasn't going to help. I needed to stay calm and handle this the right way. Gabriel would tell me to be patient and let the system run its course, and so would Morgan.

Unfortunately, patience was not one of my virtues.

I let out an exasperated sigh.

This injustice wouldn't break me.

Somehow, some way, I'd get my laptop back.

Justice would be served. All I needed was a brilliant, fool-proof plan. My mind raced with ideas as I finally stepped outside, free of the stale police station air. This wasn't over. Not by a long shot.

I finally escaped the stale confines of the police station after hours of wasting away. The chilly winter air bit at my cheeks, but I welcomed the cold. Anything was better than the despair of that windowless torture chamber.

My security guard stood waiting beside the car.

"I hope you weren't standing around in the cold this whole time, Harold," I said. "I'm sure they would have welcomed you in the building. For the record, it was horrible."

He didn't say anything, which was fine. He was simply doing a job. We weren't friends.

"Where to, Ms. Hartley?" he asked.

I needed to regroup and figure out my next move for getting my laptop back. I climbed in the back of his car as I tried to figure that out. Should I go home or should I go to Gabriel's?

Oh no.

Gabriel!

We'd had plans for dinner at Mellifluous at seven, which was over two hours ago.

"Please take me to Gabriel's," I told Harold.

As Harold pulled onto the street, I dug my phone from my pocket.

Several missed texts from my besties greeted me, as did missed calls and a text from Gabriel. I clicked on his text.

Gabriel: Are you all right?

SHOOT. I'd royally screwed up. I hoped he wasn't worried.

Me: I was at the police station. Everything is okay



The guard scanned his clipboard. “I don’t have either of you on the list.”

His words registered slowly, sluggishly, like my brain was trudging through molasses. Gabriel always made sure I was on the list. Always. So why wasn’t I now?

“There must be some mistake,” I said. “Please call up to the house.”

“No can do, miss. No name, no entry.”

Harold gave me a sympathetic look in the rearview mirror. “I can try calling Mr. Stryker directly.”

“Yes, do that,” I said.

Gabriel would get on the phone and fix this. He’d tell them I was supposed to be snuggled up on his sofa, getting kisses and eating olives and fancy cheese. I was supposed to be watching the fire from in his arms while he petted my hair and told me everything was going to be all right.

Harold stepped out of the car with his phone, which I assumed was to let Gabriel tell the guard that I was supposed to be here.

This was my safe place.

While I waited, I flicked my attention back down to my phone.

Juno: Did your account get hacked?

A KNOT FORMED in my stomach. What account?

Chester: That’s the only reasonable explanation

Morgan: This is a lot for a Monday. What’s going on?

Juno: Looks like Layana’s blog got hacked

Chester: It's wow. I can't look away

MY BLOG? A sinking feeling fell over me. Could Maxim have gotten into my blog when he stole my laptop? It wasn't possible. My laptop was password-protected.

Frantic, I pulled up the blog on my phone, and looked back out the window at Harold. What was taking so long? Whatever Maxim posted on my blog had to be terrible, and I wanted to be with Gabriel for the blow. I needed him, now more than ever.

Against my better judgment, I looked at the phone. The latest post loaded on my screen: My Most Private Thoughts and Feelings (and other things I never wanted you to know) by Layana Hartley.

“What the bloody barnacles....”

I squeezed my eyes shut, but forced them open again. This had to be a nightmare. But the words were still there in black and white when I looked.

Page after page of my private journal entries—my uncensored thoughts and feelings that I'd recorded since meeting Gabriel—all of it was right here for the whole world to see.

Bile burned my throat. I was going to be sick.

I had no idea how he'd cracked my passcode, but Maxim freaking Loughy had violated me more intimately than I'd ever thought possible. He'd shared my innermost secrets not to pawn it for cash, but to seek his own twisted revenge by exposing my most vulnerable thoughts.

It was a dagger to the heart, a boulder falling from the sky and crushing me down to the pavement. I couldn't breathe.

With trembling hands, I logged into my account and deleted the malicious post exposing my innermost thoughts. Then, for good measure, I set my entire blog to private.

It was the only thing I could do. A quick search showed the cruel post had already been screenshotted, replicated, and

shared across social media.

It was too little too late. The damage had already been done.

Shame, humiliation, and regret flooded through me.

And then came the wave of guilt, more crushing than all the rest. Gabriel had opened up to me, trusted me, cared for me. And I'd repaid that trust by writing petty, judgmental things that Maxim had broadcasted to the world.

That had to be what was happening now.

*He knew.*

I tapped on the glass at Harold.

Gabriel wasn't going to let me in.

I'd done the absolute worst thing I could to him. I'd violated his privacy as completely as Maxim had violated mine. I wrote cruel things about him when we first met. I wrote private details about his family.

Of course his gut reaction was to shut me out.

Tears spilled down my cheeks. I swiped them away and tried to hold myself together. I could be wrong. But even if he hadn't seen it yet, when he did, he'd be devastated.

My only hope was that he'd let me in so I could explain.

When Harold opened the door and I saw the pitying look on his face, hopelessness washed over me instead of shock.

"He's not letting me in," I whispered.

"No," Harold said.

Gabriel's gates were closed, and my heart was crushed beneath them.

# THIRTY-EIGHT

GABRIEL

The days after Layana's betrayal blurred together in a haze of shock and anguish. Jasper sent a message offering whatever support I needed. I hadn't yet responded.

News outlets swarmed, looking to expose weakness, ravenous for their pound of flesh. Running was impossible without being ambushed by the paparazzi. I otherwise retreated into my normal routines, unable to concentrate on anything but the gaping wound Layana had torn open.

My phone buzzed and chimed incessantly with her calls and texts. At first they came in a desperate flood—tearful voicemails begging me to let her explain, texts pleading for another chance, handwritten letters delivered to my office swearing the entire situation was a terrible mistake.

That first night, I lay awake, tormented by the constant barrage.

Layana: Please pick up. I need to explain

Layana: This isn't what it looks like

Layana: Gabriel, please. Give me a chance. It was a horrible mistake.

Layana: Just talk to me. Let me fix this



Layana: I never meant to hurt you

Layana: Don't do this

I IGNORED IT ALL, too ravaged and raw to face her. But I couldn't bring myself to block her number, either. Some masochistic part of me was unwilling to sever that connection.

Layana: It was my private diary

Layana: My laptop was stolen

Layana: I would never post something like that

Layana: I'm miserable without you

HER DESPERATION TOUCHED those lingering feelings I still wrestled to extinguish, feelings that had me wanting to believe our bond meant as much to her as it did to me.

But the farce was over. This whole relationship had been constructed on a carefully shaped illusion, one where she mirrored my feelings to earn my trust before exposing me to ruin.

She'd slipped past my walls and lulled me into a sense of safety with the force of her spirit, only to sear my vulnerabilities with careless fire. I knew now I would never allow someone so close again.

In time, her calls and messages tapered off, until one day they ceased altogether. No longer did she try to explain. No longer were voicemails left or notes written. No longer was I the recipient of sassy morning salutations and daily ocular assaults with strangers' genitalia.

In the deafening silence that remained, I mourned everything we had shared and lost. I missed her ploys for control, her defiance, her warm vanilla and hazelnut scent. I missed the way her bright blue eyes lit up when I said

something that amused her. I missed the contentment I'd felt in those brief moments where hope had reigned over everything else. I even missed the dick pics she'd so loved to send.

Her absence lingered as an ache in my chest as constant as the churning burn of her betrayal. A void formed where she once resided. My world was now as it was always meant to have been—cold, orderly, solitary.

Part of me wanted to believe her diary story. Believe our connection had truly touched her, that she regretted the damage she had caused. But even if releasing her accounts wasn't her fault, that changed nothing.

She still wrote them.

The most vulnerable parts of my life that I had revealed only to her were now scattered across the digital universe, completely public for anyone to see.

The scars she'd caused would remain, no matter the specifics.

I stood in my lab, staring at the sample I was meant to be evaluating, its fluorescent shade the same hue as Layana's Mountain Dew. In time, perhaps every stimulus around me would stop reminding me of her. Perhaps the pain would ease eventually, but it was difficult to imagine when my heart was broken so completely.

The sound of my phone ringing ripped me from my thoughts.

It was her, finally reaching out once more. I couldn't answer, even if a deep, emotion-focused part of me wanted to.

I pulled the phone from my pocket to check for sure.

It wasn't Layana.

Esme was calling.

We hadn't spoken in the four days that had passed since my world had fallen apart. It was only a matter of time before she became aware of Layana's blog post, and with it the revelation about our mother.

I should have called her sooner. She deserved to hear the truth from me before someone else. But I'd been so devastated, it was all I could do to get myself dressed in the morning. I hadn't been strong enough to carry someone else's grief.

It was too late now. I couldn't put the conversation off any longer.

She already knew.

I headed out of my lab into my office and answered.

"Hello, Esme," I said.

"Don't you *hello Esme* me like everything is fine."

"What can I do for you?" I asked, as if I didn't know.

"Um, how about treat me like a sister for once and spill."

A sickening feeling settled into my stomach. "You've seen it."

"The whole world has seen your girlfriend's innermost thoughts. Yes, I am a part of the world."

"I—" What words would adequately explain my actions? What could I possibly say now?

"How are you holding up?" she asked, her voice soft and kind in a way that I didn't deserve.

"I'm not," I told her, giving her the honesty she requested.

"I'm sorry."

"*You* have no need to apologize to *me*. It's me who needs to apologize to you."

"Yeah. You do. But that doesn't mean I can't wish this hadn't happened to you, or give you a chance to grieve before I give you a hard time."

For the first time in the last four days, I almost smiled. "I appreciate your grace."

"You should."

"I do."

“Then let’s kick the elephant in the room out in the open,” she said.

“All right. I’m sorry you had to find out about our mother, especially like this.”

Esme was quiet.

“I never wanted you to feel that pain,” I said. “I wanted to shield you from it.”

“That’s the problem,” she said. “Our mom sucks, I got that message a long time ago. She doesn’t want us. I got that, too. My problem is you decided for me that I didn’t get the answer you knew I sought. You decided for me that I would never get to know why she didn’t come home.”

I felt her words sink in. She was right. That wasn’t fair.

“I get that you were trying to protect me. You’re *always* trying to protect me. And the sentiment is sweet. But I don’t need protecting.”

“I’m sorry,” I told her.

“Thank you. Now tell me what you’re going to do to fix things with Layana.”

“There is no fixing what is broken.”

“That’s the biggest load of bologna I’ve ever heard. I saw you two together. I read her freaking diary, Gabe. She’s bananas about you, and I know you feel the same about her.”

“She broke my trust.”

“By keeping a diary?”

I clenched my jaw.

“Her friends are all over social making it *very* clear her diary was stolen. Her privacy was violated way more than yours.”

I sighed. “She broke my trust.”

“Yeah, you said that. But how do you think it feels for her to have the worst possible thing she can think of happen, have

every private thought stolen and plastered all over the internet for everyone to see?”

“That’s exactly wha—”

“I’m not done. And then in her hour of greatest need, the one person who she trusts the most to be on her team shuts her out. That’s what you’re doing, isn’t it?”

I didn’t say anything, because there was nothing to say. Esme had already decided exactly what she thought and it didn’t matter how I felt.

“Again, I apologize for the harm I caused you,” I said. “Now I must get back to work.”

“Sure, okay. Just...I’ve always been here, trying to protect you, too. If you’d let me. Love you.”

“I love you, too. Goodbye, Esme.”

“Bye.”

Upon hanging up the phone, a wave of exhaustion washed over me. I couldn’t handle navigating advice right now. I couldn’t handle the focus required for my research. I couldn’t handle the scrutiny of the scandal or the preparations for the impending merger meeting that was scheduled for three days from now.

I needed quiet detachment away from all of it. I needed time to process and time to think.

# THIRTY-NINE

LAYANA

I stared up at the grouping of circular stains on the ceiling of my apartment from my place on the floor. Either my eyes were blurry from exhaustion and crying myself dry, or that stain clump was starting to look like Barney the purple dinosaur.

How much wallowing does it take for stains to start singing about how we're all a happy family? Minutes, hours, days—all measures of time rolled together in one lump of breathing, crawling agony.

I'd called. I'd texted. I'd delivered actual physical letters to Gabriel's office pouring my sad, remorseful heart out.

Did he listen? Did he care?

Nope. Ghost train, last stop Self-pityville, passengers—one—this gal.

The worst part about writing that journal, leaving my laptop unguarded in my apartment, and knowing everyone and their momma had read my most private thoughts wasn't the fact that everyone I'd ever met knew all the nastiest things I'd thought about them. It wasn't even the fact that Maxim was probably down in his apartment celebrating his victory and my demise this very moment. It was knowing that I'd hurt Gabriel, and that I couldn't make him understand this shitshow no matter how hard I tried.

I deserved his silence. But that didn't make his absence ravage me any less.

I was broken without him.

I was a shell, hurt and exhausted and too shattered to move.

A droplet of water fell down from Barney's eye and hit me in the cheek. I flinched but didn't move. The floor was my home now. This was where I belonged.

Chester had texted to try to drag me out dancing, to help brainstorm viral challenge ideas that would push the entire scandal into news of the past.

Juno had brought by a plate filled with blueberry and chocolate cupcakes with little heart candies on top. Each candy contained an affirmation—*you rock, chicks before dicks, you're a good person.*

I tried not to cry. It didn't work.

I couldn't even bring myself to eat one.

They just sat there judging me, their happy delicious comfort too good for the garbage version of me I'd become.

Morgan showed up the most. She let the others in since she had my key. I didn't know how many times she'd been here, but I'd hear her promising me that time would help.

It hadn't.

She'd offered to call a lawyer for me about the laptop and everything, but that was the last thing I could think about right now.

I couldn't even make myself move when Barney spit on me again.

There was a gaping hole in my chest where Gabriel was supposed to be. Slowly and surely, it consumed me.

With past relationships, I'd moved on quickly. My wandering heart was easily distracted by the next thrill.

But my bond with Gabriel ran deeper. During our time together, he'd steadied me, pushed me, and forced me to grow. Somehow he'd softened my defensive edges. We balanced each other.

Without him, I'd become a floor person. I needed him so badly I could scream.

I'd never felt this way before, not even close.

The only thing I could remember that even fractionally compared was when one of my sisters stole my most cherished treasure, an adored-until-threadbare teddy I'd named Bearatrix Potter, and fed poor Bearatrix to the neighbor's Rottweiler.

The shreds of fabric and fluff decorated our lawn and haunted my nightmares for years. I'd been utterly devastated by the loss of my best friend in all the world, the one being I'd loved above everyone and everything else.

And that had only hurt a fraction of what I was feeling now.

Because...ohmyfreakinggosh...*I was in love with Gabriel Stryker.*

I slapped my hand down on the floor at the realization.

Sharp, piercing pain stabbed through my palm.

That wasn't what hitting the floor was supposed to feel like.

I lifted my hand in front of my face and found a rogue thumbtack sticking out of my skin, and because delirium had overtaken me, I laughed.

Love was sharp and stabbing. Love was the kiss that made all the pains of the world feel better. Love was Gabriel freaking Stryker.

I knew what I had to do.

If I had any hope of reaching him, any chance of regaining what we'd lost, I needed to write the most heartfelt of exposing apologies. I needed to not only convey the endless depths of my remorse, but take full responsibility, and make it clear that I didn't still cling to every thought I'd had along the way. I needed to show him how I saw all of the bickering and struggles now.



Gabriel valued honesty. It was time for radical truth from my soul.

I sat up, pulled the pin out of my hand, and opened my phone.

Then I typed. Light faded around me as I searched for the right words, as I let my heart pour out onto digital paper.

I crossed out sentences, rewrote paragraphs, agonized over every phrase. It had to be perfect. I didn't stop until I was satisfied with every single line.

Bleary-eyed and exhausted, I read over the finished post.

It was the truest I'd ever been, with anyone including myself. Terrifying in its vulnerability, but freeing too. Whatever Gabriel decided, for the first time I felt fully free, and I'd be fully seen, too.

Before making the rash decision to go ahead and hit post, I decided to take a moment—what would Gabriel do?

He'd sleep on it. He'd take perfection and scrutinize it a dozen more times just to be entirely sure he hadn't made some sort of mistake by choosing a word or phrase that could be taken in more than one way.

It was the smart move. And I needed to be smart.

So I grabbed one of the waiting cupcakes, gave the ceiling dinosaur the finger, and prayed that this time, finally, I was making the right choice.

# FORTY

GABRIEL

A knock at my door startled me from flipping through *Metabolic Pathways and Biochemical Synthesis*. Though the encyclopedia should have been a page turner, I had read the same passage three times without gleaning any insights.

The distraction wasn't more than my broken heart had provided on its own. Still, I wasn't expecting company.

Opening the door revealed Jasper's athletic frame leaning against the door jamb, a grease-stained duffle bag in his hand.

"Hey man," he said, peering at me over his sunglasses. "Thought we could tackle that tune-up on your old Ford today. If you're not busy."

Jasper and I occasionally worked on cars together, but every meeting was always planned in advance. His showing up unannounced was unusual. I didn't care for it.

But also, the prospect of having something to occupy my hands and mind was welcome. The other option was to sit alone in front of a book I couldn't focus on reading, while reeling over a woman who didn't love me back.

I said, "That would be...fine."

"Great."

I changed into appropriate attire and met Jasper in the garage. We quickly settled into our tasks. Jasper handed me tools as needed. The repetitive motions were soothing, and we worked in a familiar, comfortable silence.

But as usual, Jasper didn't allow the silence to last long.

"How's work?" he asked.

"Good."

"Any progress on the...pistachio?"

I'd nearly forgotten we'd discussed the color of my sample before. "It's Mountain Dew now."

"Cool. Does it glow in the dark?"

"No."

"Too bad. That stuff—the drink I mean—looks like it should glow in the dark."

I didn't have an opinion about that.

"How is..." I tried to split my attention between my task and the conversation my friend clearly craved. What had he shared before that I could ask him about now? "The murder house?"

"I could never call her that now that I know her. She's so beautiful, Gabriel, you wouldn't believe it. Sure, we found an old leak so there was some black mold and—"

"If it was significant enough an area of growth—"

"Oh yeah, it was extensive. And then there were the rats, so that was exciting."

"I hope you had a professional remove the mold. It can be dangerous in large amounts."

"I know. It's all good."

"It's gone?"

"Of course it's gone. I told you it's all good. She had some smudges, a few scrapes and bruises, but she's shaping up to be so much more than I'd ever imagined."

"She is the murder house, correct?"

"Yeah. I'm thinking of calling her Susan."

"You're very strange."

He gave me a small tap on the shoulder.

“Right back at you, brother. Speaking of—” He cleared his throat. “How are you holding up since the blog incident?”

This was why he was here. He wanted to check in on me since I hadn’t given him anything more than clipped responses to texts. He wanted to assess the damage for himself.

Layana likely had surrounded herself with her friends. She was probably already back out posing for pictures, trying to put all of this—and me—behind her. She had support because she built it; she put in the effort with the people around her, creating bonds and nurturing them.

I didn’t know how to do that.

But I also didn’t want to keep allowing things to go the way they always had. I wanted to grow, to build stronger bonds with the people who chose to stick with me even though I gave them little in return.

I couldn’t be as strong and open as Layana, but I could be better.

Jasper sighed, turning on the garage floor beside me to face me directly. “Dude, I’m worried about you. We don’t have to talk details, but it’s obvious you’re hurting. Just wanna make sure you’re okay.”

His honest concern crumbled the walls Layana had already cracked.

I said, “Everyone should be entitled to private thoughts, and to process them in any way they choose.”

“Of course,” Jasper said.

“And that’s all Layana did. She kept a journal on her laptop. That laptop was stolen, and her private thoughts were put on display for the world to see.”

He nodded. “It has to feel awful to be judged for something like that.”

“I think so, too.”

“That doesn’t nullify the harm done to you, either,” he said.

“I know. But I shouldn’t have shut her out. It hurt that she betrayed me, but not nearly as badly as it hurts not waking up to her smiling face every day.”

“Have you tried talking to her?”

“No. I’m not ready. I’m...confused. I’m afraid.”

“Of course you’re scared. Fear’s what nature gave us to keep us safe. It keeps us from making decisions that hurt, but sometimes life hurts anyway. Some risks are worth hurting for.”

“It almost sounds as if you know what you’re talking about.”

He laughed. “Almost.”

Interesting, since as far as I knew, Jasper had never been in love before. He dated plenty, but no one ever stuck for more than a few weeks before he moved on for one reason or another.

The act of verbalizing my pain and regret released some of the hollow tension I’d carried. I realized then how much I had isolated myself all over again.

“So maybe shutting Layana out wasn’t the answer,” Jasper suggested. “It sounds like she genuinely regrets what happened.”

“She called and texted over and over again. I didn’t respond.”

“Sounds like she wants to make amends. Seems like you might, too.”

His words rang uncomfortably true. In my pain, I had retreated back to cold solitary comfort. But completely cutting Layana off only deepened the wounds for both of us. I saw that now.

“You might be right,” I admitted. A hesitant hope took root. The damage between me and Layana couldn’t be erased,

but perhaps our connection was still salvageable. “What if she doesn’t want to hear from me?”

“Then if you give it your best shot, you’ll know you’ve done everything you can. You put the ball back in her court and see what happens.”

It sounded so simple, like the consequences weren’t the life or death stakes they felt like.

I clasped Jasper’s shoulder in gratitude. “Thank you for listening.”

“Anytime,” he said with a lopsided smile. “Now let’s get this baby tuned up.”

We returned to our tasks, conversation flowing more easily and naturally than was our norm. The ice around my heart cracked, just a little. But it was a start. This time, I wouldn’t let it freeze over again.

By the time he left, I had the spark of a plan.

It was reckless. It was desperate.

And if I was lucky, it just might work.

I needed to make amends and show Layana the intensity of my remorse. But words in a text or call seemed insufficient after the pain my silence must have inflicted. This required a grand, public gesture straight from her playbook.

With newfound purpose, I tidied up the garage, then called Pamela.

“Clear my schedule for tomorrow morning,” I instructed. “And book me an exclusive live TV interview, first thing.”

“*The meeting* is tomorrow,” Pamela said. “The one we’ve spent months preparing for.”

How could I have forgotten about the final meeting to seal the merger? I shook my head. “First thing after the meeting then.”

“If this is about the reality star—”

“I’m fixing my mistake.”

“It is extremely ill-advised in your current situation to go on television. Assuming all goes well with the meeting, there will be a trial period where either party can still nullify the contract. During that time, it’s imperative that you do not participate in any kind of interview given your track record. We need time and distance from the scandal.”

I heard her. I understood the stakes.

“I don’t care about how it looks, or how many articles label me a robot,” I said. A clammy sheen coated my hands as the reality of my choice became clearer and clearer in my mind. “This is for Layana. I will have a televised interview with or without your assistance.”

I could practically hear Pamela’s teeth grinding through the phone.

“If this all falls apart, I still get paid,” she said. “And I make clear to anyone who asks that it’s your fault.”

“I’m happy to tell them myself.”

“I hope it’s worth it.”

Unquestionably, Layana was. I only hoped my efforts would be enough.

# FORTY-ONE

GABRIEL

I'd arrived fifteen minutes early to Biotabloom Dynamics tower for the meeting that would decide the fate of our companies' relationship. An additional twenty minutes had passed since the meeting was supposed to start.

They'd left me waiting in a small lobby, decorated with heart banners and vases filled with roses, reminding me that today was Valentine's Day. Leaving me here was either some sort of test of my willingness to tolerate their poor excuse for professionalism, or possibly due to some other factor. Perhaps right this minute, the board was discussing whether or not to allow the merger to move forward.

I should have been sweating. I wasn't.

Pamela leaned over in the seat beside me, looking me up and down with that shrewd gaze of hers.

She whispered, "Don't lose sight of the reason we're here. It'll be over soon."

Sure, this meeting would likely occur at some point today, and then this particular situation would be behind us. But that didn't change the fact that they clearly didn't respect my time. It didn't change that this merger meant I would be forced to endure situations exactly like this repeatedly for the rest of my professional career.

For the first time since Biotabloom Dynamics had come to me with their offer, I didn't feel that my fate was in their hands.



I checked my watch. The meeting was now thirty minutes late. I'd been offered no apologies or explanations, and if I was unable to wrap this up shortly, I'd be late for my television interview. I refused to let that happen.

I rose from my seat.

"Gabriel," Pamela said between gritted teeth.

I walked to the desk, where the receptionist watched me with eyes growing wider by the second.

"I'm sure they'll call for you any time now, Mr. Stryker," she said in a rush.

It wasn't her fault I was being treated this way. I wouldn't take it out on her.

"You're going to call Peter Daniels, let him know we're having the meeting right now, or not at all."

I kept my exterior calm and unaffected, yet her face paled anyway. She nodded, grabbed the phone, and rolled her chair back slightly as if I might bite her.

"Hi, um, sorry," she said into the phone. "Mr. Stryker says he's going to leave. No. Nope. Uh-uh. Okay."

She hung up.

I raised a brow, waiting for the verdict.

"They'll see you now." She rose from her seat and walked quicker than I'd seen anyone move in high heels before.

I followed behind her and entered the door she opened for me. Pamela moved seamlessly by my side as I entered a packed conference room, with plates of half-eaten pastries on the table. They'd been here a while.

"Gabriel, so good to see you." Peter smiled amicably at me and gestured for me to take the seat beside him.

I didn't move.

Pamela stood sentinel by my side.

"Grab a donut and some coffee. You're going to want to sit for this," Peter said.

When I still didn't move, he continued smiling, and continued talking.

"All right, then. We here at Biotabloom Dynamics have reviewed the salacious details spread about your relationship with the *reality star*."

"Layana," I said.

"Excuse me?"

"Her name is Layana Hartley."

"Right," he said with a chuckle that grated further on my nerves. "You'd think I'd remember that the way my daughter and wife clammer on about her and all of those *influencer types*."

I didn't like the way he said *reality star* or *influencer types* with air quotes and a judgmental tone. I didn't like that he acted as if he hadn't met her, like her name wasn't important.

Layana was important. She was everything.

"Sex blogs aren't the image we're looking for. We're a family company," Peter said.

Families didn't force you to be someone you weren't. Whether they were born connected or chose each other, they bound together no matter the circumstances and accepted you as you were, and they loved you for it.

Pretending business was anything like family forced people into thinking they owed more, that it was for the better good. It was toxic under a sugary guise.

This was not the kind of attitude I wanted to deal with. I was done with pretending, done with bending and allowing others to dictate anything about me. Layana inspired that in me. I would speak my truth, always.

"It's not a sex blog," I said. "And if it was, that's her business, not yours. If this merger is going to happen, it happens despite the fact that you think I'm a robot, despite whether I go to galas or hide in my robot compound and never step into the spotlight again. This merger is about sharing

advancements in eukaryotic organisms to reduce waste in landfills. It's about doing good."

I had had my fill of this meeting, of this interaction. I wasn't even sure I wanted to work with Biotabloom Dynamics anymore, or that I ever should have, not after the veiled threats to cancel our relationship, not after forcing me into situations I was clearly uncomfortable with.

I didn't need them to do good in the world. I could find another way.

Peter's face was red. He appeared to be turning into a tomato in a microwave, about to explode.

"I have another meeting," I said. "I respect the time of those I associate with, so I won't be late. Goodbye."

Pamela was silent as I turned to go. She was silent on the way outside, all the way into the parking lot.

Wallace held open the door for the two of us to climb in, but Pamela stopped a few feet back.

"It seems our term has come to a close," she said.

No way was this merger going to happen now. Strangely, after everything, I was okay with that. I felt...lighter.

"I apologize for making all of your efforts for naught," I told Pamela.

"Sometimes no matter how hard we try, what appears to be a good match simply isn't."

And sometimes, those who seemed too wildly opposed fit together just right. Like me and Layana. I couldn't wait to see her, to make things right.

"Your work has been impeccable, and I'm happy to recommend you to any future clients." I offered Pamela my hand.

"Thank you."

We shook.

“Do you need a ride?” I asked. “Wallace could take you back to the office once he drops me at the studio.”

“Sure,” Pamela said. “Why not?”

We got in and headed toward the television studio. Pamela pulled out her phone. With the way she scrutinized the screen, she was likely already starting work for her next client.

I took the opportunity to pull out my own phone. Without allowing myself to overthink it, I sent Layana a hopeful text.

Me: I'd like for us to talk, in person, tonight if you're willing. I'll make reservations at Mellifluous for seven. I hope you'll come.

CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM FILLED my chest as I forced myself to breathe instead of focusing on the fact that I did not receive an immediate response. After a few moments, I got in touch with my personal assistant and asked that he set up the reservation. It wouldn't be a simple request, I was sure, given the significance of the date. I'd have to be sure to properly thank him later. Was Valentine's an appropriate occasion for a bonus? No. Spring, then.

A text came through. I opened it immediately.

Layana: Fat chance you'll be able to score it. I bet they've been booked for Valentine's for at least a year

MY HAPPY, hopeful heart pirouetted in my chest.

Me: Does that mean you'll come?

Layana: If you can deliver, I'll be there

WE HAD issues to work through, unquestionably. But a rock in the road was only an obstacle. She'd see the interview. I'd prove to her that I could be better, that I was worth the risk to her heart.

Wallace arrived at the studio three minutes before I'd been told to be there. With a steady breath, I said goodbye to Pamela, climbed out of the car, and stepped inside the studio.

I was ushered straight in by a mousy woman. The hustle and bustle of the studio was immediately overwhelming. Grips and cameramen rushed around, finalizing preparations. The interviewer, a polished woman in a smart pantsuit, gave me an encouraging smile.

A mousy assistant pressed a bottle of water into my hands and pushed me into a small room. "Wait here," she said. "Drink the water. Don't want you to get parched."

Then she left. I was grateful for the quiet moment alone in my greenroom, where I attempted to compose myself and determine what exactly I wanted to say.

It couldn't be a script, couldn't be predetermined. I would tell her I loved her. I would tell her I was sorry. It had to come from the heart.

Too soon, the same assistant from before fetched me, attached a mic to my jacket, and led me onto a bright stage. It was all happening so fast, too fast.

I felt my entire body tensing.

The interviewer, a woman named Aisha Coral, welcomed me before launching right into her questions. We hadn't met before, which helped. These scenarios always went wrong, and it would have been worse to interview with someone who had called me a robot before.

We breezed through my work, including my passion for waste reduction. I focused on giving thoughtful, honest answers, pushing down my nerves.

"And where exactly did your passion stem from?" Ms. Coral asked.

I'd been asked this before. I'd never been open about it, because it was personal. I reminded myself that it would be all right to let my guard down a little. Honesty required it. Layana required it.

“From my father,” I said.

Surprise crinkled the corners of Ms. Coral’s eyes. She offered an eager and encouraging smile. “Tell me about him.”

“He was kind, honest, hardworking, and dedicated both to keeping the streets of Epiphany clean and raising his two children as a single parent.”

“You’ve never shared any details about your family publicly before,” she said.

“That’s right.”

“Why now?” She fixed me with her gaze, making clear that the softball questions were over. “Does this change have to do with your relationship with Layana Hartley and the recent posting of the intimate details of that relationship?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve had a rocky path,” she said. “Have you somehow been able to forgive her divulgence of your secrets?”

“She didn’t make that post,” I said.

“Sure, her friends have said that, but Ms. Hartley herself has yet to make a personal statement or any posts addressing the matter.”

“Do you keep a diary, Ms. Coral?”

“No.”

“But I’m sure you know someone who does. Perhaps you choose to share your private thoughts with a therapist, or a partner, or you process in some other way. Everyone has thoughts they never intend for the world to see; they may record them or not. Either way, they’re private.”

“Sure.”

“Layana’s laptop was stolen. Her diary was published for the world to see and scrutinize without her permission.”

“So you believe that her story is true.”

“I believe in her. She’s honest and forthcoming, kind and loyal. She would never betray someone’s trust or harm anyone

on purpose. She's a good person."

"If Layana was here now, what would you say to her?"

I took a deep breath, willing my voice not to shake. I turned to the camera. "Layana, I know what happened wasn't your fault. I never should have shut you out. I never should have questioned your intention, and I never should have hidden so much of myself in the first place. What happened, the violation we both were subjected to, has set me free. I'm ready to drop the walls between us. You have my whole heart, if you'll still have me. I love you."

The words tumbled out in a rush. I'd never been so open, so vulnerable before. But it was worth it. For her, I would rip open my heart for all the world to see. I meant every word. No more hiding. For better or for worse, my heart was hers.

The studio lights beat down, exacerbating the cold sweat on my brow. I had laid myself bare, and now all that was left was to hope she would take me back.

I took a gulp of my water and answered the remaining questions. I shook Mrs. Coral's hand when it was over. I thanked her for the opportunity, and I took a moment by the exit and leaned against the wall.

I finished my water.

My nerves buzzed. I went out into the parking lot, terrified but sure I'd done the right thing.

The sun suddenly seemed too bright. A wave of dizziness washed over me. I swayed on my feet, blinking against the glare. Perhaps I was hyperventilating. Slow, steady breaths were required.

I reached for my pocket, for my phone, but I couldn't find my pocket.

Something was wrong with my hand. Something was very wrong.

A soft voice said, "No more waiting."

It sounded vaguely familiar.

I tried to respond, but my tongue was too thick. The last thing I saw was the pavement rushing up to meet me before everything went black.



# FORTY-TWO

LAYANA

I rocked my heels back and forth on the polished floor beneath the table. Soft jazz music mingled with the quiet murmur of fancy-dressed patrons chatting about how romantic their overpriced food felt. Oysters, chocolate, green M&Ms, whatever makes you horny. It was Valentine's Day, after all.

And Gabriel had gotten us reservations at the swankiest spot in town. Again. This was our third time attempting dinner at Mellifluous. First, Dani had ambushed me in the bathroom. I still had no idea how she'd gotten through the front doors with her shuffling, her socks with sandals, and the way she squeezed her hoodie so her mouth looked like it was inside a asshole.

The second attempt at dinner here involved me royally screwing up by getting myself not-exactly-detained at the police station and leaving Gabriel to celebrate here alone.

Had he sat at this very table, watching the door the way I watched it now?

Third time was a charm, right?

He'd said he wanted to talk. He'd said he hoped I'd come.

I was here, with bells on. Well, not bells. I wasn't a cow, ring-a-dinging my location. I had on my hottest dress that accentuated my boobs and hips just right, with the tallest pair of fuck-me heels I was actually able to walk in, and a bright shade of pink lipstick that I hoped said I'm-so-sorry and you-should-totally-kiss-me at the same time.

After days of silence, his invitation to meet had sparked a fragile hope I was afraid to cling to. We had so much ground to cover, so many wounds that needed mending between us.

Watching happy couples laugh and touch and wondering if Gabriel and I could ever find our way back to those sorts of easy interactions was a special kind of torture. It was only two minutes past our reservation time, so there was no good reason for me to be this worried.

He'd come.

*He invited me.*

The waiter stopped by. "Your dining companion still hasn't arrived yet? Can I offer you a beverage while you wait?"

He could very well see that no one was sitting across from me. I considered telling him that indeed my date was here, that he was simply an invisible ghost, and that it was very offensive to my ghost boyfriend that the waiter had yet to acknowledge him.

Plus, it was only three minutes after seven. People still hadn't arrived ten or fifteen minutes after they were supposed to all the time. It was called being casually, fashionably awesome, and they didn't deserve to be shamed for it.

He was just standing there staring at me, waiting for my assault or my drink order, definitely one of those.

I smiled then turned my attention back to the door. "Just water, thank you."

Gabriel would walk through that door any minute. I smoothed my dress, took a sip of water, and tried to gather my frayed thoughts. Would he have read my blog post yet? I only posted it twenty minutes ago, so he hadn't even had the chance to see what I had to say before he'd invited me out.

Maybe he hadn't read it yet. Would it be appropriate to shove my phone in his face and tell him to read when he sat down, instead of trying to condense all I felt into a few sentences that in no way could adequately convey everything?

That had to be the plan. He'd be all deep and sexy as he said *hello, Layana*. And I'd be like *hi, read this*. Then we would make out and maybe just skip dinner and have crazy hot make up sex in the bathroom until we both forgot what it felt like to be without each other and how close we'd come to losing each other.

Yes, it was the perfect plan.

I drained my water glass.

The waiter drifted by again, his smile tighter than before. "More water?"

I nodded, willing my stomach not to churn. Gabriel's punctuality was the stuff of legends. It wasn't like him to be late. Maybe he'd gotten stuck in traffic.

He'd be here any minute and all would be well.

Half an hour slipped away. Other guests shot me pitying glances. The waiter lingered nearby, hesitation clear on his face.

"I'll go ahead and order," I told him.

No way was I going to leave, and at some point soon if I didn't order something, they'd kick me out. The Valentine's waitlist was probably around-the-block long.

I ordered the cheapest thing on the menu that I didn't think would get me kicked out—a side salad.

When the salad arrived, I forced down bites between glances at the entrance. Where the frack was Gabriel? Had he changed his mind about coming tonight? He wouldn't just no-show on me. He wasn't petty, and he wasn't a coward.

No matter how many reassurances I gave myself, I still had to choke back the worry and bitter hurt rising in my throat.

I would stay here stabbing at my salad until the staff physically dragged me out the door. It was a good plan. It was my only plan.

I pulled out my phone and stared at our conversation from earlier in the day. There was no way I'd interpreted him

wrong, no way I'd gone to the wrong place or shown up at the wrong time.

Afraid but determined, I sent him a text.

Me: I'm here. I'll be waiting as long as it takes

THIS WHOLE WAITING thing was killing me. I deserved it, sure, but something had to be going on. Maybe Gabriel was having his own emergency. This was the day of his big meeting. I couldn't believe I'd forgotten that. Maybe he got held up. That had to be it. Peter Daniels was probably holding him hostage, had stolen his phone, and was making him smile for pictures over their successful deal.

I blew out an exasperated breath and sank down into my seat.

"Excuse me, Ms. Hartley. A message for you."

The waiter was back. He had an envelope in his hand.

Heart sinking, I took the envelope. Would Gabriel write a regretful cancellation note rather than face me in person? He wouldn't...he couldn't....

I steeled myself as I pulled out the paper and unfolded it.

---

Dear Layana,

Our engine of friendship has derailed. You failed to fulfill your half of the bargain, so I've been forced to take matters into my own caboose.

I didn't want it to come to this, but you've left me no choice. I'm railing mad about what needs to be done. Gabriel's fate is at a junction, and you're to blame for sending him down the wrong track.

Meet me at the park before this runaway situation veers completely off the rails. It's your last chance to pull the brakes and get things back on track between us. Don't be late, or you may not like where this train is headed.

All aboard,

Dani

---

I STARED at the cryptic note, dread pooling in my gut. Dani? Her words made no sense.

Except for the part about Gabriel being in trouble. That came through loud and clear.

I racked my brain trying to remember any and every weird conversation we'd shared. She was weird in the bathroom. She was weird...at work and on the subway. No meaningful exchanges were ever made. I'd certainly never made any bargains or deals with her.

I'd told her I didn't want to read her train blog, which was...was this about her blog?

So why was Dani showing up now, claiming I'd failed to uphold some imaginary agreement? The only explanation was that she must have lost touch with reality. She'd become obsessed with me in some delusional way, enough to threaten Gabriel, enough to lure me to the park with this bizarre note.

My blood ran cold. Gabriel was in danger because of me, because of my association with an unhinged tea and train enthusiast. I had to get to him fast, before Dani made good on her threats.

I threw cash on the table and rushed from the restaurant, blind to the concerned stares that followed my abrupt exit. Outside I scanned for a cab, cursing the lack of rideshares in this part of town. No time to wait. I took off sprinting toward the park, wishing I'd opted for flats instead of heels.

The night air seared my lungs as I ran. *Gabriel, I'm coming*, I promised silently. *Hold on*.

I didn't know what awaited me at the park. Dani would be wielding Godzilla-only-knew what kind of weapon. Gabriel could be incapacitated or injured.

I couldn't let fear stop me. Gabriel needed me. And this time, I would be there for him. This time, I couldn't screw up.

# FORTY-THREE

GABRIEL

I woke to a pounding head and blurry vision. I felt like I was swirling in a tornado, my body twisting and wrenching in unnatural ways.

I tried squinting to narrow my focus. I could see walls, a ceiling. Everything felt too close and like it was moving.

The ground gave beneath my shoulder, almost as if it were cushioned. I shook my head, but that only made the vertigo worse.

With slow, long breaths, I attempted to calibrate. Little details would help, anything would help. Rough and strong, some kind of bindings held my wrists together behind my back. The surface I was lying on was white—a bare mattress.

The space was small and dark, either a short room or perhaps the back of a van.

I moved my arms slowly, testing the binds. It did nothing but make my arms hurt.

I moved my legs, bringing my feet forward so I could see them. Thick ropes bound my ankles together.

“Are you awake? I thought I heard you moving,” a soft, feminine voice said.

I froze and closed my eyes.

“Your breathing has changed. You’re definitely awake.”

My heart seized in my chest, panic rippling through my entire body.

“What...what’s going on?” I croaked.

My tongue felt swollen, my delivery clumsy.

Had I been drugged?

“It’ll wear off eventually,” she said.

“What will?”

“The sedatives I put in your water.”

I searched my memory for the events that had led me to my current predicament. I’d been at the television station, delivering the confession of my feelings to the world. The assistant had encouraged me to drink a bottle of water.

She’d drugged me, but why?

I tried to move, to twist and see her.

She hopped over me and scurried on hands and knees close enough that I could confirm her identity. She looked so familiar that I was sure I’d seen her somewhere before today.

She smiled wide, a crazed grin that suggested nothing good. As suddenly as it had appeared, her smile vanished. “I should have been the one making millions off our work. You pushed me out and took everything for yourself. Now it’s time for both of us to get what we deserve.”

I shook my head, trying to clear the fog from my brain. “Our work? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Seriously?” Her expression fell.

I had no words. I had no idea who she was, except there was something vaguely familiar about her.

“We worked together for four years, Gabriel. In the same lab, doing the same research, as partners.”

That’s why she seemed familiar. I’d shared a lab in graduate school with four other students, including her. Her name started with a D, maybe, though I couldn’t be sure. I wasn’t entirely certain we’d ever spoken before, but I was certain that I’d never had a partner in my research.

She barked a humorless laugh. “Doesn’t matter now. I have you right where I want you.”

A spike of fear lanced through me.

I wasn’t certain if it would be better to acknowledge that I did in fact remember her, or to continue acting as if I did not. She had clearly lost her grip on reality. Correcting her delusional history was unlikely to be beneficial at the moment. I had no idea how she would react. I had no idea what she was capable of.

A thought occurred to me, chilling my blood. “It’s just me you’ve taken, right?”

“Hmm?”

“Layana. Did you hurt her?”

She scoffed. “Why would I hurt my best friend?”

*Her best friend?* After obsessing over my success and pretending she had somehow been involved, she’d latched onto Layana as well.

“Granted, she didn’t have the guts to take you down like I told her to,” she said. “I did my part. I shaved the yeti. I scared him. Criss-cross, like *Strangers on a Train*, you know? Or better yet, *Throw Momma from the Train*, because in the end, the two main characters become best friends like me and Layana. I like trains. But aside from collecting evidence, LayLay never made her move against you, like she was supposed to.”

My heart stuttered. “What move?”

“She didn’t publish your secrets. That’s why I had to do it for her. She’ll thank me. Don’t worry.”

Layana’s landlord hadn’t stolen her laptop. This stalker woman had. She believed they were friends, and nothing good would happen when that delusion popped.

I needed to free myself. I strained against the ropes again but only succeeded in chafing my wrists.



My captor smirked, seeming to enjoy my struggle. “I’d stop fighting if I were you. You’re only going to wear yourself out. And you’ll need your strength for what comes next.”

She laughed again and crawled over top of me once more.

An engine roared to life, proving that I was in fact in the back of a van.

I was left alone, fear flooding me. What did she have planned? And how could I protect Layana from this madwoman? I needed a clear head. I needed to break free.

For both our sakes.

# FORTY-FOUR

LAYANA

I'd notified the police and blatantly disregarded their warnings not to go.

I was glad I wasn't alone, glad Harold was here to drive me. I was shaking so badly that if I were driving, I'd probably crash.

Buildings blurred past until finally, my chest burning, we reached the park's edge. It was eerily empty and still. Streetlights cast pockets of light between brooding shadows.

Somewhere in this darkness, Gabriel was at Dani's mercy.

I climbed out of Harold's car and scanned the area for any clues. There was nothing but giant wooden hearts mocking me with their Valentine's Day cheer.

"You stay with me," Harold said. "Not one step out of my sight, do you understand?"

I nodded. "Sure."

It was a fair request, fairer than the one the police had made telling me not to come at all. I still didn't know if I could honor it.

"I'm going this way." I pointed toward the path flanked by giant heart decorations. Before Harold could argue or grunt or whatever, I headed that way.

Two steps toward the path, and my heel caught in the dirt. I slipped both shoes off, turned them in my hands like weapons, and hurried along.

I'd heard once that a quick, thwack in the right spot with a pointy heel could puncture a human skull. I really hoped I wouldn't have to find out.

Dani's voice crackled over the intercom system. "Welcome, Layana. I've designed a little game we can all play together."

My stomach dropped. She already knew I was here.

"First, a test of agility and speed," she continued. "Make your way through the tunnel without triggering the traps I've laid."

*Traps?*

I squinted towards a garland-lined archway reading *Tunnel of Love* in looping script.

Was it better to follow along or push back?

"Who's your friend, Layana?"

Was this about Harold, or was this a trick question?

I licked my lips, moving closer to the tunnel. I called out, "You are?"

Dani barked a laugh. "I meant the big guy following you."

That meant she could not only see me, but hear me. I twisted on my heel and looked back at Harold.

"That's Harold. He loves tunnels. Can he play in the Love Tunnel while I jump ahead?"

"Sure, for my best friend, anything," Dani said.

I pointed at Harold and gestured at the tunnel. He scowled back at me.

"She can see," I whispered. "You have to do it. At least go over there for a minute. The cops will be here any moment."

He gritted his teeth.

I squared my shoulders. "Do. It."

I didn't know if I looked threatening with my four-inch shoe daggers or if my scowl would have any effect on Harold,

but we had a stare down, and I stood my ground.

He gave me a curt nod. “Only for a second. Then I’m following you.”

“Peachy,” I said.

“In the next test, you’ll need to rely on your intellect,” Dani said over the speaker. “Answer correctly, and you’ll win a clue to Gabriel’s location.”

Finally, we were getting somewhere. “Ask me anything.”

Dani cleared her throat. “Here is your question: What has six wheels and flies?”

I blinked, waiting for the real question. “Wait, is this a riddle?”

“You have ten seconds!” Dani announced in a gameshow host voice.

“Uh, okay...a flying train?” I glanced desperately back at the direction Harold had gone. Did trains have six wheels?

A deafening buzzer sounded.

“Time’s up!” Dani said. “I’m afraid the correct answer is: a garbage truck full of dead birds. Better luck next time!”

Crap on a cracker. What was she going to do next? And where in the frack was Gabriel?

Before I could think of what sort of weird flattery I could use to manipulate Dani, she made a sharp choking sound. Then her voice cut out completely.

“Dani?” I called. “You said anything for your best friend, right? And since we’re such good friends, I’d really appreciate if you’d tell me where I can find Gabriel. Your games are fun, but I’m scared. You don’t want me to be scared, do you?”

Silence.

“Dani?”

A rustling noise came from the bushes.

Harold emerged with a grinning Dani in tow.

“Found her hiding out in the control booth,” he said.

“You win this round, but I’ll be back,” Dani declared. Her bravado quickly crumbled under Harold’s stern gaze. “Or, you know, maybe not. We’re cool though, right Layana?”

“Where’s Gabriel?” I snapped.

She pretended to zip her mouth shut and throw away the key.

I growled my frustration and raced off into the park, frantically shouting Gabriel’s name. All that mattered was finding him, making sure he was unharmed from this traumatic ordeal.

And once I did, I was never letting him out of my sight again.

The park seemed endless, each tree and bench frustratingly empty.

Then, in the distance, a train whistle sounded.

My heart stuttered. Surely even Dani wasn’t twisted enough to...

I took off running, mud squishing between my bare toes. The whistle grew louder, closer.

Please, let me not be too late.

I broke through a line of trees, breathless, and stumbled to a stop. There, tied to the tracks beneath the increasing roar of the oncoming train, was Gabriel.

“Gabriel!” I screamed.

His head jerked up, his eyes wide with panic that melted into relief at the sight of me. I rushed over and dropped to my knees beside him, checked him all over for wounds—he appeared unharmed—then clawed desperately at the ropes binding his wrists and ankles.

“Thank Godzilla you’re okay,” I gasped out between ragged breaths.

“Better now that you’re here,” he said. He kept his tone light despite the dense emotion swirling in his eyes.

The tracks began to vibrate beneath us as the train barreled nearer. The knots weren’t loosening. I swiped my hair from my face, swallowing panic. There had to be another way. I tried to pull him off the tracks, but he was tied to them.

In a last-ditch effort, I threw myself across Gabriel’s body, shielding him from harm. I squeezed my eyes shut, bracing for the impact. The tracks rattled beneath us, the train whistle piercing the night.

But instead of the bone-crushing force I expected, something lightweight bumped against my back. I peeked one eye open.

A pint-sized pink locomotive with heart decals chugged and whistled and sat in place on the tracks. Behind the engine were two small cars decorated like Valentine’s candy boxes. It was a train meant for toddlers.

The dinky engine bounced harmlessly off us, over and over again, trying to continue on its way. I stared in disbelief before dissolving into relieved laughter.

This was the end of Dani’s big game?

“My hero.” Gabriel smiled up at me. His eyes glowed with warmth.

My breath caught. I suddenly became aware of our bodies pressed together, faces inches apart. Gabriel’s gaze dropped to my lips.

“I posted a blog for you,” I said.

“What did it say?”

“The first time I met Gabriel Stryker, I kicked a door straight into his face. It was an accident, but one I’d gladly repeat over and over again.”

“Sounds painful for me.”

I grinned and kept reciting. “Because that one kick sparked a chain of events that led to the grandest entanglement of my

tangled life.”

“More promising.”

“Because without that one kick I never would have fallen in love with him.”

He craned his neck upward, capturing my lips with his.

Our first kiss had been a tease of what could be, the birth of a new world of possibilities. We’d shared a lot of kisses since. Some of them were chaste and sweet, some desperate and wanton. We’d shared a *Red Fish, Blue Fish*-style rainbow of kisses, covering every variety except this one that was happening right now.

This kiss said something entirely new. It said *I love you*.

A throat cleared. Loudly.

I reluctantly pulled back, giving Gabriel one more small peck.

The train was still bumping into us. And now Harold and the police were here, too.

“We’re going to need your statements,” one of the officers said.

“And a wellness check for the kidnapping victim,” said another.

Those were good things, and I was already pretty sure Gabriel was all right, but I really didn’t want to let him go even for a second.

“I love you, too, Layana,” he said with words that he’d already told me with our kiss. “I’m so sorry I wasn’t there when you needed me. I went on television to prove it to you.”

“What?”

“Today. After the meeting where I told Biotabloom Dynamics that I was done bowing to their whims.”

“*What?*”

The officers gently removed me from Gabriel, apparently unwilling to wait for us to finish catching up. They untied him

from the tracks, and that was good. The little pink train was finally able to continue on its way. We got checked out, gave statements, and then held hands and watched as Dani was stuffed, cackling, into the back of a squad car.

I would never have imagined our reunion would go like this. In the grand scheme of things, our mistakes and our hurts didn't feel so big. When I looked in Gabriel's eyes, and his smile formed a little dimple on his cheek, I knew everything was going to be all right. We loved each other.

Maybe we had needed to make each other crazy to push us into the people we were always meant to be. We were better for it, and best together. Our destiny was heading right on track.



# EPILOGUE

LAYANA

“Ohmyfreakinggobsmackers.” I gasped, wheezed, and fought to fill my lungs with cold air. Searing, clenching pain rippled through my limbs and twisted my insides. “You’re killing me, you know that, right?”

Moonlight cast the neighborhood in a soft glow. This hour, this glow—they were only meant to be seen by werewolves and vampires and whatever unfortunate schmuck was stuck working the graveyard shift at Eterni-Tea. Regular people were supposed to be asleep.

Gabriel stood there in his spandex, looking like the sexiest bumblebee in the world with an amused grin on his handsome face, watching me keel over. “It’s not much farther.”

“Running is the devil’s candy. You told me it would be fun. I trusted you.”

“You can do it. We’re almost back to the house.”

“I can’t. You’re going to have to carry me, or leave me here. I can curl up in a ball on the sidewalk, like roadkill. Come back for me with the car.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“My calves are on fire. My lungs are on fire. And my head feels like someone took a brick to it. After a few smashes, they shoved it in a blender. Why do you actively choose to torture yourself like this? I hate it.”

“That’s what you said yesterday, yet you came along again anyway.”

“Because it’s fun to pinch your bee butt when you run.”

The corners of his eyes crinkled. “You made it a whole block closer this time.”

“I’ll never make this mistake again.”

“Until tomorrow. And you’ll make it the entire way.”

“No. Never.” Maybe.

Gabriel raised a brow. “Come here.”

I tried to shuffle to meet him halfway, but my muscles refused to obey my commands.

“I hate routines,” I said as Gabriel bent down in front of me and let me climb onto his back.

“I know,” he said. “Let’s do something wild later to make up for it.”

“Like what?” I held on and snuggled against him as he carried me piggyback toward our house.

He felt good. This was my favorite part of the routine. Maybe tomorrow, even if I could make it the whole way, I’d ask him to carry me anyway, just that last stretch because I loved it too much to let go.

I loved him too much to ever let go.

“If we plan it,” he said, “that wouldn’t be very spontaneous, would it?”

His words vibrated gently against my cheek. I felt his muscles move, felt his heart beating. This was my happy place.

“Mmm,” I said, completely and utterly content.

Too soon, we returned to our utilitarian house, with its brand-new superfluous finishes. We showered, *together*. Then we ate protein and veggies and whole grains on the super comfy, not at all smelly sofa that I’d picked out for optimal snuggle space.

My phone rang, and the lit screen displayed Morgan’s name.

“I have to take this,” I said, giddy excitement filling my chest.

“Of course,” Gabriel said.

“Hi,” I told Morgan. “What’s—”

“Turn on channel five right now.”

“Channel five? Like live TV? Who has live TV?”

“Go to their website. On your phone. Right now.”

“Okay, jeez.” Before I could hang up, Morgan did. Then I did as she’d demanded and pulled up the news website.

In the center of my phone screen was Maxim freaking Loughy in tears and handcuffs being gently led into a police car.

I gasped. “Oh my banana.”

Gabriel shot me a confused look, then leaned in closer to see the screen. “Is that—”

“Uh-huh.”

“—video evidence of this man, Maxim Loughy, abusing his position as apartment superintendent by entering apartments when renters weren’t home and tampering with their personal belongings.”

The image flipped to my old apartment, to Maxim climbing through my broken window.

“I knew it! I knew he was in there!” I pointed to the screen and turned to Gabriel.

“I’m so sorry you had to endure those conditions,” he said, his hand on my knee.

“I’m not. I survived on my own, and I taught myself to thrive because of it.”

He smiled at me.

I smiled back, then returned my attention to the screen. The image changed to someone else’s apartment, where Maxim rolled naked on someone’s bed, tossing M&Ms at his

mouth and missing. Thankfully the worst parts were blurred out, but the idea on its own was revolting.

“Eww.” I had never been gladder that I hadn’t had a bed in that place.

“I should take this,” Gabriel said. He turned his phone screen toward me. It was buzzing in his hand. The screen said *Pamela*.

I nodded and watched more shots of Maxim rifling through peoples’ drawers, eating ice cream out of the tubs in their freezers and putting it back that way. *Gross*.

Gabriel stood and walked into the kitchen. I could still hear him, and everything sounded pleasant enough, so I focused on the drama unfolding before me.

“Also included on Daniella Marchesca’s laptop was video from a drone as it crashed into a man’s back outside a small science museum downtown. Sources say this man was billionaire scientist Gabriel Stryker, a recluse best known for his stiff public interviews.”

He *should* be best known for his amazing work, reducing the city’s dump fill volume by a whopping twenty-one-point-three percent, a number that would keep going up with every new breakthrough.

Also, what the actual what? Daniella Marchesca had to be Dani. And that meant she’d not only been the one to hit Gabriel with a drone, but she’d also put cameras throughout my apartment complex. That must have been how she’s gotten my password. She’d watched me type it.

“Ms. Marchesca attended the same graduate program as Mr. Stryker, but according to her manifesto, began believing they had worked together after seeing a news interview about him years later on television, a narrative that according to all accounts is entirely false.”

A shiver carried over my spine. I was so glad she was out of our lives for good.

The story changed to the weather, so I closed the app.

Since Valentine's Day, the police had returned my laptop. I'd moved in with Gabriel, gotten my blog back on track, and started writing a *mostly* nonfiction account of the last few months. Maybe one day it would be made into a movie, but for now, I'd already received a couple of offers to publish it as a book.

Better still, Gabriel was in total support. Of course I'd run everything by him again before calling the manuscript complete, because as my forever, his character played a large role in my story.

Gabriel rejoined me on the sofa, apparently done with his phone call.

"What's up with Pamela? Is she looking for a recommendation?" I asked.

"No."

He seemed kinda shellshocked, staring off into the middle distance, like there was something floating in the center of the room that he couldn't look away from.

"Are you all right?" I asked, climbing onto him and straddling his lap.

He tilted his chin up so our eyes met and rested his hands on my hips.

"She recommended me," he said.

That didn't sound like a bad thing. "For what?"

"A merger with her newest employer. They're based out of Germany and have twice the reach of Biotabloom Dynamics. They're interested in a collaboration."

"With what strings?"

"None. No galas, no retreats, no pretending."

"Oh my gosh, Gabriel, that's amazing. What did you say?"

"I said to send the paperwork, set up a meeting."

I squeed with excitement. "I'm so happy for you."

"For us."

“Definitely us.” I kissed him, slow and deep.

His hands roamed, his lips caressing. He pulled his mouth from mine and searched my face. “Marry me.”

All the air in my lungs whooshed out. “*What?*”

“I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you, Layana.”

“I love you, too. But Morgan and I can’t both be wedding planning at the same time. That’s too much planning. It’ll make my brain explode.”

“Let’s go right now. To Vegas. I don’t want to go another day without you being my wife.”

I squeed harder. “*That’s crazy.*”

“Sure, but is that a yes?”

“I have to bring my crew. We need to give them at least a few days’ notice.”

“I’d like my sister to be there, too. And Oma. And Jasper.”

“Are you committed to Vegas?”

“No. I’m only committed to you.”

“What’s that island where your sister is hanging out? It looks gorgeous, the perfect place to get married.”

“Calypso Caribella.”

“Okay.”

“Okay doesn’t sound like yes. I’m going to need a real, clear confirmation here.”

I kissed my answer, promising him forever, promising him everything that I was. He kissed me back just as fiercely. I didn’t ever want to let go, and I wouldn’t have to.

I whispered against his lips, “Yes.”

---

THANKS FOR READING Layana and Gabriel’s story. I hope you loved spending time with them as much as I did!

Guess what? It's time for a destination wedding.

Esme Stryker ran away for a reason. The last person she wants showing up on her doorstep is Jasper Carrington, her childhood nemesis.

But they're both in the wedding party, which means loads of time stuck together. Yay?

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