



*SINCLAIR
DUET
PART ONE*

remembering
PASSION

ALEATHA ROMIG

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Sinclair Duet: Book One

A workplace, billionaire, grumpy/sunshine contemporary-suspense romance

ALEATHA ROMIG

New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today bestselling author

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REMEMBERING PASSION

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DISCLAIMER

For the purposes of Damien and Gabriella's story, Beta Kappa Phi is a fictitious fraternity. Any resemblance to an actual fraternity is accidental and unintentional. In other words, this is fiction. Enjoy.

REMEMBERING PASSION

Damien Sinclair is a force of nature—the beauty of a sunset over the ocean yet capable of devastating hurricane-strength winds. At one time, he'd held my heart in his hands. That was, until the day I walked away.

I didn't leave him because I didn't love him. It was that loving him was too much, an all-encompassing affair. In his presence, I ceased to exist.

For two years, I worked to build a life free from Damien's irresistible pull. I succeeded until one fate-filled afternoon I found myself seated by his side for a long flight. Unbelievably, we were headed to the same destination. His sinfully charming smile, charisma, and devilish smirk reminded me of all we'd shared.

Attraction.
Desire.
Passion.

Forgetting him had been agony.
Will I survive remembering?

Have you been Aleatha'd?

The Sinclair Duet is a scorching hot, second-chance romance filled with the suspense and intrigue you've come to expect from New York Times bestselling author Aleatha Romig.

*REMEMBERING PASSION is book one, closely followed by book two of the Sinclair duet, REKINDLING DESIRE.

*“Be unreasonable, follow your passion.” ~ **Sudha Murty***

NOTE FROM ALEATHA~

REMEMBERING PASSION is book one of the Damien Sinclair Duet. The first seven chapters were previously published as the novella “Lucky Day” or “Falling Again.”

If you read “Lucky Day” or “Falling Again” before the novella was taken down, you can begin at [Chapter 8](#). “Falling Again ends in the middle of this chapter.

If missed the novella or you haven’t read “Lucky Day” or “Falling Again” today is *your* lucky day because you can read it here. Begin reading at [Chapter 1](#).

Thank you for reading. I hope you enjoy Damien and Gabriella’s story, the Damien Sinclair Duet.

Chapter 01

Gabriella

Running an obstacle course, I hurried through the airport, my cocktail dress flying behind me, and my carry-on—holding my personal satchel—rolling along the tile. If I ran faster, there was the possibility the wheels would spark, sending the contents of my suitcase up in flames. The line through security took what seemed like forever, giving me less than thirty minutes to reach the gate before the doors closed, leaving me stranded.

Thankfully, Indianapolis didn't have a large airport.

I'd lived near Indianapolis for the past five years. After working for the devil himself, I'd found new employment at a nonprofit north of the city in the smaller city of Carmel. No, it wasn't pronounced the same as the city in Monterey, but that didn't stop the residents from believing they were the elite suburb of Indianapolis.

That new position was why I was running through the airport, looking more than a bit disheveled and racing toward gate A-14. Despite truly liking my current career move, I'd spent all morning with an intern who didn't know one thing about running financial reports. He'd actually asked me how a nonprofit could provide salaries, as if he thought we were all there because of our love for the international fraternity. Don't misunderstand, the objectives to promote the concepts of health, knowledge, and humanity were worth our efforts. But the salary was why we stayed.

While other associates of mine were already in Los Angeles, I would be the last to arrive. That didn't mean I hadn't put in the time and effort to make tonight's gala a success. I had.

There was much more to my position in the Beta Kappa Phi fraternity than running payroll reports. A few of the pieces to the puzzle were schmoozing with alumni, securing donations, and maintaining relationships with sponsors.

Panting while trying to catch my breath, I slid to a stop at the counter in front of the door to gate A-14. All the seats in the area were empty. "Please don't tell me I'm too late," I said, my words labored.

The woman in the blue blouse shook her head. "It's your lucky day."

Blowing the rogue flyaway hair from my face, I sighed. "Not so far. I guess that means up is the only way to go." I lifted my phone with my boarding pass to the sensor. Instead of green, a red light flashed.

"Lucky day," I reminded her.

Looking at the computer screen, her forehead furrowed as she confirmed, "Ms. Crystal?"

I nodded.

"Give me a second. I'll be right back."

With the circulation of my fingers cut off from holding the hanger of my garment bag, I laid the bag over my arm and watched as the woman disappeared down the jet bridge toward the plane. Other travelers milled up and down the terminal at normal speeds, suggesting they weren't in as big of a hurry as I'd been.

With each passing minute, my level of anxiety rose. My schedule was too tight for error. My itinerary had one layover. My second flight would arrive in LA by five thirty, Pacific time. That gave me just enough time to check in to my hotel, shower, transform myself into the competent representative for Beta Kappa Phi, and make it to cocktails in the ballroom by seven. The gala began at eight. Despite other associates being present, I had a role to perform.

I couldn't miss my flight.

The Beta Kappa Phi annual gala was the national dinner and ceremony held each year at a different location. I wasn't only attending but was presenting an award to a donor—a big donor—from Wisconsin. I knew his name and during my flight planned to read his biography to be more familiar with him.

Finally, the door to the jet bridge opened. The expression on the airline

lady's face wasn't encouraging.

"Is there a problem?" I asked.

Her fingers typed feverishly over her computer before she looked up. "Your seat was moved. The only empty seat is between two mothers with small children."

Of course it was.

I feigned a grin. This was only the first leg of my trip, a two-hour flight. I could do it. "No worries. I'm the best aunt in the world—just ask my niece. It will be fine."

"The issue is oxygen masks."

"I hope we won't need those."

"There are only four for each row of three seats. Technically, the two mothers weren't seated together. We had passengers on standby. When you weren't here..."

Closing my eyes, I sighed. "Please, I have to get to LA."

She looked up from her screen. "We have another flight leaving at 2:22."

That was over two hours from now.

"What time will it arrive?"

"At 4:15, Pacific."

Blinking, I said, "That's sooner than I would arrive on this flight with my connection." And I'll be able to grab some lunch.

"Yes, ma'am, it's nonstop. Are you willing to change your flight?"

"Yes."

The woman flashed a smile. "I wish everyone was as accommodating."

"My lucky day, remember?"

The printer by her computer ticked and clicked. With a smile, she handed me the new boarding pass. "Gate A-7."

When I looked down, my eyes opened wide. "First class."

"Your lucky day." She softened her smile. "There was also a seat in row twenty-seven. Thank you for being flexible."

"Thank you."

Beta Kappa Phi could afford the expense of a first-class ticket. The issue was me. I wasn't comfortable using my travel expenses for that upgrade. Walking toward the center of the airport, I found a seat at the bar of a familiar restaurant, wheeled my carry-on in front of the stool, and hung my garment bag on the back.

Lucky day, I reminded myself.

As the bartender plopped a menu in front of me, my eyes met those of another patron.

My heart rate spiked and my skin chilled.

Quickly, I looked away.

“Would you like a drink?” the bartender asked.

“Shit,” I mumbled, trying to calm my abrupt onset of nerves. “A water and a chardonnay.”

The words on the menu didn’t register.

Two and a half years.

I hadn’t seen that dark-blue stare in over two years, and there he was.

Exhaling, I peered inconspicuously upward. Warmth filled my cheeks as I met the intense gaze of Damien Sinclair. Shit, he was as handsome as I remembered and probably the same conceited asshole.

Speaking of my previous job...

The man across the bar, the one with the broad shoulders, dark-blond mane, and deep blue eyes was my boss from hell. Leaving the world of pharmaceuticals—his world—to join Beta Kappa Phi had been because I’d decided to get as far away from one man as I could, the devil himself.

Now, after all this time, he was looking my way. I felt his gaze on me as if he could see beneath my slacks and soft sweater. Against my better judgment, I looked up once more. Damien’s smile curled into an incredibly handsome grin as he lifted a tall glass with amber liquid my direction.

The bartender returned with my chardonnay. “The good-looking guy over there—” she tilted her head toward Damien “—said to put your order on his tab.” She grinned. “You attract the hot ones. Your lucky day.”

I lifted my glass of wine toward him and spoke in a low volume. “Do me a favor.”

Her soft hazel gaze came to mine.

“Put his tab on mine. It will be our secret.”

“Oh, I like it.”

“Don’t tell him,” I said.

“Honey, your secret is safe with me. Girl power.”

Chapter 02

Gabriella

With my grilled chicken salad mostly consumed, my phone buzzed. Looking down at the screen, I saw the notification that my new flight was about to board. With perfect timing, the bartender came my way. Her smile shone at full voltage.

She lowered her voice. "I haven't told him yet. Here's your receipt."

"You're the best." I laid a ten-dollar bill on the counter for a tip.

"So, is there a history?"

I only smiled.

"Have pity on me. I work all day making up stories about customers in my head. The real story would be better."

I shook my head. "I doubt it. Do your made-up stories ever end in homicide?"

Her eyes opened wide. "Oh, now this will keep me up at night."

"Let's just say, what's in the past belongs in the past."

The bartender nodded. "Okay, I've got you. I'll give you a minute to leave before I break the news to Mr. Good-looking."

A quick look across the bar and I saw the bewilderment in Damien's expression. That image alone was enough to make my day. Maybe the gate agent was right: today was my lucky day. Gliding down the hallway with my luggage and garment bag, I stepped onto the moving sidewalk, for the first

time in a long while, floating on air.

It wasn't often I had the opportunity to outplay a player. Picking up his tab for two beers and a chicken sandwich wasn't exactly the power move of the year, but getting even one over on Damien was enough to fuel my good mood.

Well, that, and I was about to fly first class.

Making my way to gate A-7, I let myself think about the man I'd tried to forget.

Damien was a shark in the sea of pharmaceuticals. In a world where big conglomerates ruled, he took over as CEO and made a name with a small company in Indianapolis. Small was a relative term when it came to the pharmaceutical sphere. Sinclair Pharmaceuticals was primed and ready with a cutting-edge compound to treat PTSD. Damien had taken a risk, and it paid off. The sky was the limit for the future of Sinclair.

I could claim to have learned a lot from my employment as his executive assistant. I had.

I'd also made the biggest mistake one could make when trying to build a career.

I fell for the devil.

Demanding and abrupt, Damien was a force of nature—the beauty of a sunset over a sparkling ocean, yet capable of unleashing the power of hurricane-strength winds. Being in his presence, watching him work, and hearing his advice was empowering. Being in his arms and bed was pure ecstasy like I'd never dared to imagine.

I wish I could say that since our breakup, I'd succeeded in finding a man with greater skills, but I'd be lying. The only way to get over a man like Damien was to move forward. Replacing him was out of the question. It would be like finding a substitute for a Picasso. Indianapolis wasn't without its share of eligible bachelors. Nevertheless, Damien was in a class by himself.

No, I didn't want to replace Damien. I wanted to move on—to leave him behind.

Inside the airport bathroom, I splashed cool water on my face and stared at the woman in the mirror. In a matter of a minute, my balloon of bubbling elation had popped.

That was the way it was with seeing Damien for the first time in over two years—a roller coaster of emotions.

Shock.

Awe.

Jubilant at one-upping him.

The painful reawakening of the void he'd left.

The ache was real, causing my eyes to burn. As if visible, I felt the fissures splintering, one by one, demolishing the dam I'd constructed around my heart. Unwanted memories flooded my thoughts.

Holding back the onslaught of emotions, I peered into my own blue eyes and reminded myself that Damien Sinclair didn't leave me. I left him. Gathering my courage, I'd walked away. It wasn't because I didn't love him. It was that loving him was too consuming. There was the sense that, with him, I ceased to exist. Damien's fondness for the hunt made the game enticing. Once the pursuit was over, I felt my worth shrink. I wanted more out of life than to be a man's accessory.

"You're stronger for it," I said softly to the woman in the mirror.

It didn't matter that the woman at the next sink gave me a strange look. I turned her way and feigned a smile. "Have a great day."

"Yeah, you too."

Inhaling, I replied, "I will. It's my lucky day."

Back out to the gate, I stood in line as we inched toward the gate agent standing guard at the ticket stand by gate A-7.

It wasn't until I was up to the counter that it occurred to me I could have jumped the line. I had a first-class ticket.

That's right.

Lucky day.

My mind steered away from my brush with the past to the present—tonight's gala. I thought about the biography of the award winner I needed to read. The man had risen from nothing to create an empire. Now he was spending some of his fortune to improve the health of others. In the four-plus hours of my upcoming flight, I planned to learn more. Tonight, we'd be face-to-face.

Once the plane was airborne, I'd open my laptop and brush up on not only the award winner, but the other attendees of the dinner. Nothing elated a donor's ego more than remembering their name and asking specific questions about them. Throw in a story or anecdote about them, and their wallets magically opened.

Stepping from the jet bridge to the plane, I smiled at the attendants and

lifted my garment bag. “Is there a place where this can be hung?”

The attendant took my garment bag and motioned me forward.

I scanned the front section of the plane. All the seats were occupied except one. My heart rate went from sixty to one hundred and sixty. A quick look at my boarding pass told me that one empty seat was mine. Despite the line of passengers behind me, as the temperature of my skin elevated, I was incapable of moving forward.

The empty seat in the third row near the window would be perfect for a long flight were it not for one thing.

One person.

One man.

Damien’s midnight-blue gaze sparkled as our eyes met.

Inhaling, I moved to the third row. “That’s my seat,” I said, hoping my voice wouldn’t give away my unease.

Unsnapping his seat-belt buckle, Damien stood.

My mouth went instantly dry as all six feet, four inches of muscle, surrounded in a cloud of intoxicating cologne, unfolded in front of me. It was impossible not to remember what it was like being in his strong arms.

With his customary suit coat and tie missing, he had his shirt collar opened and his sleeves rolled to his elbows. As my gaze moved lower, I scanned his long legs covered in expensive slacks and shoes that no doubt were imported Italian leather.

“Let me,” he offered as I began to lift my carry-on to the compartment above.

“I have it.” As I pushed the carry-on into the space, my sweater lifted, revealing my stomach.

When I turned back, Damien’s stare moved upward as he grinned.

Trying to avoid contact, I held my satchel between us as if the large leather bag could protect me from the magnetism of this man. With my shield in place, I scooted past him to the seat near the window.

“I should thank you for my lunch,” Damien said as he took the seat beside me again. “It must be my lucky day.”

Obviously.

My luck had run out.

Chapter 03

Damien

Gabriella Crystal.

The gem who got away.

When I looked up at the airport bar and saw Ella taking a seat, I couldn't help but stare. She'd played a recurring role in my dreams and fantasies for so long, it took me a second to realize she was real.

Ella was more than a dream come to life.

No longer across the room, my gem was seated at my side. As I retook my seat, I told myself to give my assistant a raise. I'd need to call him and thank him for booking a commercial flight. If only we were headed to Hawaii or Paris instead of Los Angeles. The longer the flight, the better.

Ever since the night Ella walked out of my life, I'd known I'd missed the opportunity of a lifetime—more accurately, squandered rather than missed. There was a time I'd had this amazingly beautiful and exceedingly competent woman at my side. Letting her go was the worst decision I'd ever made.

Truly, I hadn't let her go. She left.

In time I realized that when she was with me, I took her for granted.

I'd been focused on succeeding in business and forgot that personal relationships also needed attention.

Time was a stringent teacher.

Maybe the gods were offering me another chance.

I didn't deserve that, but not deserving something had never stopped me before. Life was about opportunities. Mine was pushing her bag under the seat and fastening her seat belt.

Ella was as beautiful as I recalled—no, even more so.

She didn't need glitz and glamour to be attractive. Simply once again being in her presence, having her at my side, heated my blood.

Her little power play in the bar was perfectly Gabriella.

When the bartender told me that my check was taken care of, I was equal parts annoyed, impressed, and turned on. No, I'd put turned on ahead of the other two emotions.

Fastening my seat belt, I turned and flashed my charming smile—yes, I knew my assets consisted of more than my company and bank accounts. When presented with a second chance as I was now, I would employ my entire arsenal of strengths.

“Again, thank you for my lunch,” I repeated. “You left the restaurant before I could voice my appreciation.”

Shaking her head, Gabriella turned my way. Her crystal-blue eyes looked into mine. “Maybe we could spend the next four-plus hours not talking.”

My lips twitched with the need to smile.

“We could spend the next four-plus hours in other ways” —I lowered my volume— “but there are children on the plane, and we may cause a stir. The bathrooms are rather small, but the mile-high club is always taking new members.” I grinned. “Maybe we could call it renewing our membership.”

“Why are you here? Isn't there a plane with your name on it ready for inducting unknowing women into that club?”

“Never unknowing. I'm all about full disclosure and consent.”

With a humph, she turned toward the window.

I went on. “This trip was last minute, and my plane was already committed. I'm extremely glad that I was convinced to fly commercial. I think I'll give my assistant a raise.”

“I'm sure she gets plenty of bonuses.”

“No, Ella.” I waited until she was again looking my way. “I don't sleep with every assistant. Only one, and when I screwed that up, I lost more than a fantastic assistant.”

“Hmm. At least you can admit you screwed up.” Lifting her chin, she turned toward the oval window.

Her profile was perfect in every way. The elegance of her slender neck,

proudness of her jawline, and the upturn of her nose. No artist could duplicate her image, give it the beauty it deserves.

“Would either of you like a drink prior to takeoff?”

I turned to the woman in the blue dress with the name tag that read TAMMY and then over to Gabriella. “Would you like something?”

She turned to the flight attendant. “Honestly, yes. Would it be possible for me to change seats?”

Tammy straightened her neck and peered down the length of the plane. “First class is full.”

“I really don’t care where you put me. I’ll take row twenty-seven.”

“Let me see if we have any seats available,” Tammy said with a feigned smile before walking away.

Gabriella’s attention went back to the window.

I lowered my tenor and spoke in a hushed whisper. “You don’t need to move seats, Ella. I won’t bite...however, I don’t recall your being opposed.” When she didn’t respond, I tried for a less sensitive subject although I knew the answer. “What takes you to LA?”

“Work.”

“I heard you’re working for Beta Kappa Phi.”

She turned her mesmerizing gaze my way. “Are you stalking me?”

“Yes,” I replied with a scoff. “Today has been an elaborate plan on my part. Now that I have you here, I would prefer you didn’t change seats.”

“Damien, what you prefer isn’t my concern.”

“Excuse me, ma’am,” Tammy said, reappearing at my side. “I’m sorry. We’re a full flight.”

“Thank you for trying,” Gabriella said. “In that case, I’d like a glass of chardonnay.”

Tammy looked at me.

“The best bourbon you have, neat.”

I turned to Ella. “Perhaps we could start again.” I offered her my hand with a grin. “Hello. In case you don’t recall, I’m Damien Sinclair. Maybe we can call a truce for this trip.”

“This trip? Four and a half hours.” She sighed. “When it’s over, we part ways. I can do that.”

“I’m afraid it may be a bit longer.”

“Why?”

“I, too, am on my way to LA for the Beta Kappa Phi gala.”

Her blue eyes opened wide. “You *are* stalking me.”

“I’m not, but I wouldn’t mind taking credit. You see, a friend of mine—”

“You have friends now?”

I smirked. “His name is Donovan Sherman.”

Her eyes closed as she laid her head back on the headrest.

“You know him?” I asked.

“He’s one of the donors being recognized tonight. I’m presenting his award.”

My cheeks rose as my lips curled. “Does that mean you’ll be seated at Donovan’s table?”

Tammy returned with our drinks.

After thanking her, I turned back to Ella. “Donovan’s table?”

“Yes.”

I lifted the plastic cup with a shot of amber liquid toward Ella. “To tonight.”

She narrowed her gaze. “My luck has definitely run out.”

My cup was still raised. “I’ll be happy to share mine, Ms. Crystal. You see, my prospects for this trip have improved exponentially.” I tipped my cup and lifted it to my lips, remembering when Van had mentioned Beta Kappa Phi. I’d hoped it would mean my path would cross with Ella’s. “I’m sure you understand. Supporting foundations that promote good health is important to Sinclair Pharmaceuticals.”

The amber liquid burned, adding fuel to the fire growing within me.

“Fuck,” she mumbled before lifting her wine to her luscious lips.

She didn’t need to ask twice.

Chapter 04

Gabriella

*M*y heart wanted to order a bottomless glass of chardonnay.
Free alcohol was the perk of first class, right?

It was my better judgment that told me to take it slow. When we landed, I'd be three hours back in time. With cocktails beginning at seven and the dinner not starting until eight, I had a long night ahead of me. Apparently, a long night seated at the same table as Damien "the devil" Sinclair.

I could do it.

Fulfilling my role for Beta Kappa Phi was more important than drowning my loss of luck in a bottle—or make it a big box—of wine. That didn't mean I wouldn't take some advantage of the perk. Once we were high in the sky, my plastic cup was replaced by a glass one, and I was sipping my third glass of chardonnay for the afternoon.

With my laptop open, I began reading about Donovan Sherman.

"What do you want to know about him?" Damien asked.

I looked up and to the man at my side. "I see respecting privacy is still an issue for you."

Damien smirked. "Your screen is turned toward me."

"The sun—" I closed the blind over the window and rearranged my laptop. "I'll learn enough from here."

"I suppose."

I turned to my right. “Are you offering dirt on your friend?”

“No. I’m good at keeping secrets.” His dark gaze shimmered. “Remember that night in Aruba under the stars?”

His deep timbre was but one ingredient of the concoction brewing within me. Mixed with a third glass of wine and memories of the night he mentioned, my circulation warmed. The two of us were alone in a private pool. The sky above was velvety black and dotted with stars.

“Don’t worry,” he said, “I’ve never told a soul.”

There was nothing lewd or embarrassing about that night. Quite the opposite, it was more of a dream. No. Shaking my head, I went back to the biography.

It seemed Mr. Sherman’s interest in health care coincided with his marriage. His wife was the heiress to and current CEO of Wade Pharmaceutical. As I read, Damien sipped his second bourbon.

The numerous accomplishments of Mr. Sherman failed to register as the night in Aruba came back to me.

Damn him.

I had a job to do, but instead, I was a scattered mess. On the other hand, Damien was sitting there all masculine and sexy. Every now and then, I’d steal a peek to my side. What was it about men’s forearms that was so sexy? Damien’s were toned and tanned. His long fingers curved around the glass of bourbon. Every time he put the rim to his lips, I recalled the way they kissed, and yes, his teeth nipped.

Exhaling, I closed the screen of my laptop.

“Should I quiz you on Donovan?”

Turning in the large seat, I met Damien’s gaze. “Falling stars.”

His handsome face tilted.

“In Aruba. The sky was so dark out on that island that we could see falling stars.”

He nodded slowly.

“And the water,” I said, “was incredibly warm.”

“Do you want to know what I remember?”

I did, but I also knew this conversation was dangerous. “Probably not.”

Setting his glass on the tray to his side, Damien reached for my hand. Lifting it, he turned it over. Everything inside me said to pull it away, and still, I didn’t. I watched and marveled at the warmth in his touch and the way my palm fit into his.

“Damien?”

When he looked up and met my gaze, his normal arrogant smirk was gone. “I was going to propose.”

I pulled my hand away. “You were not.”

“I was. I had the ring.”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I tried to remember the entire vacation. Nothing horrible stood out. On the contrary, it was perfect. “Obviously, you didn’t.”

“Do you know why?”

“How could I know? I didn’t know you were even thinking about it.”

“I guess you could say I chickened out.”

“Right,” I said, “Damien Sinclair was afraid.”

He nodded. “I was afraid you’d say no. I decided that I wanted to keep things the way they were. I thought we were happy.”

“We were.”

“Would you have said no?”

Letting my hands fall to my lap, I sighed. “I really don’t know,” I answered truthfully. “Aruba was magical.”

“Being with you is magical, Ella.”

Shaking my head, I rolled my eyes. “Please, you haven’t thought about me in two and a half years. You’re probably engaged now or married now.” I looked over at his hands. “No ring, but that doesn’t mean a lot.”

“I’ve never cheated.”

“Neither have I.”

“What about you? Engaged, married? I know...you decided you prefer women.”

“Right,” I said with a scoff. “Because no straight woman would walk away from you.”

After another drink of his bourbon, Damien turned to me. “None of the above. Not married, engaged, or seeing anyone currently. When Van mentioned this gala, I thought about you. I knew you had been hired at Beta Kappa Phi.” He lifted his hand. “Not stalking. They called me for a reference.”

I opened my eyes wide. “What? I told them to call Steve in personnel.”

“I got the call.”

“You could have ruined my chances...after what I did.” I didn’t add my crime aloud...walking away from him.

“I could have,” he replied matter-of-factly.

“You didn’t.”

“No, Ella. I wanted you to get your dream.”

I shrugged. “I’m not sure Beta Kappa Phi is my dream. But I do like what I do.”

“I told the woman the truth, that you’re a fantastic employee, and they’d be lucky to have you. I said you were hardworking, willing to go the extra mile, and a quick learner.”

Well, fuck.

“Thank you,” I said with all sincerity.

“Thank me by letting me escort you to tonight’s gala.”

Warmth filled my cheeks. “I don’t need an escort, Damien. I’m part of the team, the presenters. My job is to work the room, not stand beside one man.”

“Then afterward.”

“Afterward will be three in the morning back in Indy. I’ll want nothing more than to fall into bed.”

His cheeks rose and his blue eyes sparkled. “It’s a date.”

Chapter 05

Gabriella

I wasn't certain how Damien had done it, but the flight to LAX wasn't awful. If anything, it was pleasant. The flight attendant whom I'd asked to move my seat made a point to check on me. The truth was, in a matter of hours, I'd fallen back under his spell.

That didn't mean the negative didn't exist. It did, but after a few drinks and hours of talking, I was remembering the good. I wasn't about to let my heart get broken again. Instead, as I grabbed my carry-on, satchel, and dress and made my way out of the plane, I thought just maybe we could be friends.

It would be better than enemies.

Now, in my hotel room, as I checked my hair and makeup, my thoughts were filled with memories that weren't terrible. There were good times and exciting times, things I'd blocked out to concentrate on the negative.

I removed the four-inch heels from my carry-on, wishing I'd chosen a more comfortable pair. Slipping my feet into the open-toed sling-back shoes, I stood before the full-length mirror.

By the grace of God, my dress had survived the small closet on the plane unwrinkled. A deep shade of navy blue, it fit my curves well. The neckline plunged to between my breasts, a long golden zipper ran over my spine, and the asymmetric hemline was longer in back than in front. Adding a long gold necklace and dangling gold earrings, I tried to convince myself my attention

to my appearance wasn't about the man who would be sitting at my table.

Part of my job was wining and dining. It seemed that most of the donors were ancient. Contrarily, the biography I'd read about Donovan Sherman said he was in his forties. I knew Damien was a bit younger.

One last look in the mirror and I began to second-guess myself.

The thing about packing for one event was that my carry-on wasn't a magic bag. I had no choice but to wear what I brought. There was no time to run to a boutique for a new outfit. I looked good, but would Damien think it was for him?

Of course he would.

That was the kind of man he was.

Placing my room key in my clutch, I left my room, and headed toward the ballrooms. The elevator door opened and immediately the small hairs on the back of my neck stood to attention. The boisterous group of men within appeared to be in their twenties and based on their volume, in the middle of a celebration.

As I came into view, a few whistled.

"Hey, sweetheart," one called, reaching out to keep the door from closing. "Come on in. We'll make room."

I feigned a polite smile. "That's okay. I'll catch the next one."

"Oh, don't be shy," another said.

"I'm good." I took a step back as the uncomfortable feeling that every woman has felt surged through me.

The men shuffled around, creating a space. "Look. Plenty of room."

As my hands began to tremble, I took another step back, bumping into a wall.

There wasn't a wall.

A strong hand came to my hip as the men in the elevator looked to one another and fell victim to a sudden curiosity in studying their shoes.

"I'm glad you waited," Damien said, tugging me to his side. He looked toward the elevator at the now-wide-eyed men. "Go on. Like the lady said, the grown-ups will catch the next one."

I stood in Damien's grasp as the elevator door closed. "Thank you."

He reached for my hands. "You're shaking."

"It's the air conditioning." Taking a step away, I scanned him up and down. No longer wearing rolled-up sleeves, Damien was dashing handsome in a custom-tailored dark blue suit, similar to the shade of my dress.

Grinning, I said, "I see you read the memo."

His gaze was like melting lava as he scanned from my head to my toes. "No wonder those boys wanted you in the elevator. You're stunning, Ella."

"I don't know why I let them bother me."

"Because they're drunk assholes. If I had to bet, I'd say bachelor party."

"That's no excuse," I said.

"You're right."

"I can take care of myself."

"No doubt."

The elevator door opened to an empty car. "Much better," he said, holding the door open while I stepped inside.

My skin warmed as I realized we were alone.

In the bar, plane, and airport, other people had been around.

The inside of the elevator was shiny, reflecting our image in all directions. "I guess," I said, "my luck hasn't completely run out." I curled my lips into a smile. "I appreciate your chivalry."

"Purely selfish."

I turned his way. "How was helping me selfish?"

Damien's smile quirked. "If you happen to decide to be ravished tonight, I want it to be by me."

"If I decide?" I asked with a smirk. "I don't think they were asking."

"I am."

Oh shit.

And just like that, my nipples drew tight.

Before I could respond, the elevator came to a stop. As the doors opened, Damien reached for my hand. "I'd rather you didn't go up to your room alone. No telling where those boys may be."

"I'm a capable woman."

"Yes, Ella, I know that."

"Gabriella," Niles, a good friend and associate from the Carmel office, called as we stepped off the elevator.

"Niles." My friend looked as handsome as ever in his gray suit and his long brown hair tied back in a ponytail at the base of his neck. The suit pants were narrow, and the jacket fitted, accentuating his toned body. The black shirt and white tie popped in a classy as well as metro way.

Niles turned to Damien and extended his hand. "Damien Sinclair. I'm Niles Watson. It's a pleasure to meet you. Beta Kappa Phi would love to have

an association with Sinclair Pharmaceuticals.” Niles looked from Damien to me. “Do you two know each other?”

“Old friends,” Damien answered, shaking Niles’s hand. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Watson.”

I took a step forward. “Niles and I have some work to do before the fun begins.”

Damien’s deep timbre resonated through me as he spoke with a grin. “The offer stands.”

With a nod to Damien, I began walking with Niles toward the ballroom where the dinner and presentations would be held. As we did, I contemplated the offer Damien mentioned.

Was it to walk me to my room or ravish me?

Niles lowered his volume as we walked among other patrons. “Ella, shame on you.”

Were my thoughts that visible?

“For what?”

“You’ve known Damien Sinclair—you’re old friends—and you never mentioned him. Wait until I talk to Kevan. He’s been wanting to land Sinclair Pharmaceuticals for years.”

Despite our friendship, I wasn’t ready to open that part of my past to Niles. “Damien is only here because he’s a friend of Donovan Sherman.”

“There will be so much money in that ballroom tonight.”

Chapter 06

Gabriella

The gala proceeded like the well-oiled machine it was. VIPs and donors arrived. The bars were stocked, and the waiters were plentiful, circulating with trays of champagne and others with hors d'oeuvres. Even though I hadn't spent the flight going over the guest list, this was my third gala, and I recognized most of the guests.

There was the one new face.

And every time I turned, it seemed that Damien was near.

Whether I was talking with a guest, a hotel employee, or an associate, his shimmering, protective gaze was on me. I felt his presence even when I didn't see him.

The cocktail hour was a success as Niles and I worked the room along with other associates from other offices. At our pre-dinner huddle, we calculated that we secured enough donations to carry Beta Kappa Phi through the first two quarters of next year. It was a start.

By the time I made it to my table, mine was the only empty seat.

Somehow, the place cards had been moved, landing me at Damien's side.

"Strange," I whispered to Damien. "It seems my place card was moved."

"Your lucky day."

"Gabriella," Donovan Sherman said, offering me his hand. "I've heard many good things about you."

It took every ounce of self-control not to look over at Damien. He and Donovan were friends. I could only imagine what he'd heard.

Instead, I pressed on. "Mr. Sherman, thank you again for attending this event. Beta Kappa Phi appreciates your support."

"Ms. Crystal."

I turned to see Walter Phillips, another VIP donor, standing behind my chair. "Mr. Phillips."

"You know my name is Walter." He smiled, his wrinkles growing deeper. "I was disappointed to hear you weren't presenting my award."

"Oh, there was a big fight." I lifted my eyebrows. "I lost."

He patted my shoulder. "Then I insist on a dance."

"Of course."

As the nearly eighty-year-old man walked away, Damien leaned close to my ear. "Your dance card is full."

"Mr. Phillips is hardly a threat."

Damien's smile quirked. "Maybe not, but I'll be standing by."

Bread, followed by salads, followed by side dishes and entrees—I watched the room as I participated in the conversation at our table. Unlike the last two galas, I'd been put in charge of the planning committee. I'd put more effort into arranging this gala than flying in at the last minute. And as the evening progressed, the hard work and planning were paying off.

After the awards and speeches, a dividing wall moved. A dance floor appeared as the room darkened, and the air filled with the sounds of a string quartet.

"I'm going to guess that leaving early isn't an option," Damien whispered.

"You may leave whenever you want."

"Not a chance. I made an offer. I won't be stepping away prematurely."

"To walk me back to my room?"

His smile grew. "That's part of it."

With the rumble of his voice and the curl of his smile, my insides twisted, and my nipples tightened. Nevertheless, I did my best to appear unaffected. "No worries, Niles can escort me."

Donovan Sherman cleared his throat. "Damien, thank you for making the trip. I'm afraid I'm not much of a dancer without my wife."

Damien stood and shook Donovan's hand. "Coffee in the morning."

Donovan nodded and turned to me. "Gabriella, it was a pleasure. I will

match last year's donation. Wade Pharmaceutical is pleased to help Beta Kappa Phi with their objectives."

Match.

His match would bring us very close to our goal.

"Thank you, Mr. Sherman."

"Van, please. Any friend of Damien's..."

"Van," I said, "Please give your wife our best. We hope she can make it next year."

"I'll let her know."

"How much more do you need?" Damien asked.

I shook my head. "I'm not taking your money."

"Then I'll talk to Niles."

"No. This is my job," I said, standing.

Damien met me as we both stood. "You're fantastic, Ella. Even though Van left me here alone, I'm not leaving until you do."

"Those boys are probably sleeping it off by now."

His expression remained unchanged.

"Okay," I said with a shake of my head. "Let me work."

"I'd never stop you."

Wasn't that what I worried about, part of why I walked away?

"Gabriella," Mr. Phillips said, miming a dance step or two.

Damien reached for my hand and whispered, "If he grabs your ass, I'm taking him down."

Mr. Phillips was probably a hundred thirty-five pounds soaking wet. If he grabbed my ass, I could take him down myself.

Two hours later, as the lights brightened on the mostly empty ballroom and my feet ached from the shoes, I smiled at Niles and our associates. We'd done it. Not only had the night gone well, but we'd exceeded our fundraising goal.

"How about a drink?" Niles asked.

"I'm exhausted. And" —I looked down and back up— "these shoes need to go."

"I never asked. How was your flight?"

My gaze went to the handsome man leaning against the wall with his arms folded over his chest and his ankles crossed. "I was upgraded."

"Seems like your lucky day."

"Seems like it." I laid my hand on his arm. "Goodnight, Niles. Send me

the numbers in the morning. I'll put it all together and we can regroup on Monday at the office."

Niles nodded. "See you, Ella."

Sitting at a table as hotel employees stripped tablecloths away and moved furniture, I slipped my feet from my shoes and sighed. As I looked down at my feet and wiggled my toes, an expensive pair of leather loafers came into view. When I glanced up, Damien was standing with my clutch in his hand.

"I'll trade you," he said, handing the small purse to me.

Maybe I was too tired to argue. Or perhaps it was nice to have someone wait for me. Whatever the reason, I took the clutch and passed my shoes to Damien. As I stood, he offered me his arm.

"This is nice," I said as we made our way out of the ballroom and down the empty hallways.

His lips came to my hair with a soft kiss. "I never forgot how great you are, Ella. But watching you tonight, I'm damn impressed and proud of you."

It was a simple statement, yet hearing it warmed me from within.

How does he have that ability?

A simple statement: I'm proud. Good girl. And my mind was goo.

Once inside the empty elevator, I laid my head against his arm. "I think I could sleep standing up."

I gasped as in a smooth, fluid move, Damien lifted my chin, pressed himself against me, and sandwiched me between the shiny wall and his solid chest. With his intense gaze on me, his nostrils flared, and his square jaw clenched.

My lungs burned as my breathing hitched. "Damien, I can't—"

Moving his touch from my chin to the back of my neck, Damien took my lips possessively with a kiss that stole the remainder of my thoughts. Our faces moved as our lips battled each other's and sounds of lust filled the air.

In only seconds, my body awakened. Sparks grew to flames as a wildfire rushed through me, tightening my nipples, twisting my core, and dampening my pussy. Without hesitation, my hands came to his lapels, grasping the material, pulling him closer, me closer, us closer.

My thoughts were scattered as his kiss consumed me.

It wasn't until the elevator stopped that we broke free from one another.

Using his hand holding my shoes, he reached out, keeping the doors open. At the same time, Damien ran his thumb over my bruised lips and moved his focus to my eyes. "You were saying?"

Smoldering desire clouded my mind.

“I don’t remember.”

He took my hand in his, and we stepped from the elevator.

“We could go to my room, or you can tell me where your room is.”

No. Going to his room was a bad idea.

My room.

Alone.

That was the plan.

“This way,” I said, tugging his hand.

As we approached the door to my suite, I slowed our steps.

This was a dream, and I didn’t want it to end.

But end it would.

Damien knew the secrets to my desires. He’d fanned the flames capable of consuming me. His kiss was only the start. If I allowed this to go further, for him to enter my suite, he’d consume me, sucking me into the depths of his stare.

“Damien,” I said, lifting my chin.

His finger came to my lips. “Fuck, Ella. I’ve missed you.” He looked into my eyes. “Tell me you haven’t missed me.”

I had.

I’d tried to forget the passion.

I had—for a while.

Lowering his finger, he came closer. This kiss was softer.

“I’ve missed you. I want you,” I confessed. “It’s taken me over two years to forget you...”

“I never forgot you.”

Inhaling, I shook my head. “I’m still trying. If I let you in tonight, it will take me back to the beginning. I can’t do that. I won’t be a lucky one-night stand, not with you.”

“It won’t be like that.”

I brushed my lips over his stubbly cheek and gathered my shoes and satchel. “Call me, Damien.”

“Will you answer?”

I hadn’t.

Two years ago, I’d refused his calls and deleted his text messages.

The green light flashed on my door as I tapped the key. With a smile over my shoulder, I answered, “There’s only one way to find out.”

Chapter 07

Damien

As soon as Ella disappeared behind the closed door, I pulled my phone from the inside pocket of my suit coat. Opening my contacts, I found the number I'd sworn never to delete.

The ringing in my ear coincided with the ringing on the other side of the door. With each ring, my pulse increased. I was ready to pound on the door when she finally answered.

"Hello?"

"You answered."

I turned to the opening of the door and Ella's sensational smile. She took a step back. "I don't know if this is right."

My smile beamed. "I'm feeling much more confident with my luck than a moment ago."

Ella took a step back, holding the door ajar.

(The end of "Lucky Day" or "Falling Again" novella)

Chapter 08

Gabriella

Could I blame my heart?
No.

My heart knew this was a bad decision. It was my body that wanted Damien.

As he stepped inside my suite and fastened the lock on the door, my breathing quickened, and I shook my head. “Damien...”

“No, Gabriella.” His deep voice reverberated through me like the rumble of thunder warning of an impending storm. He reached for my chin, holding my gaze to his. “Don’t overthink this.”

“I’m not,” I lied.

Overthinking was an understatement. My thoughts were multiplying by the second, each one frantic and scattered.

The storm brewing within me built, twisting my insides as my thoughts spun with tornado-strength winds capable of obliterating my new world, the world I’d built without the man before me.

The turbulent sea churning in his orbs meant he didn’t believe me or just maybe he was having the same cascade of thoughts.

“If I don’t kiss you again,” he said, his voice low, “I’m not sure I’ll survive.”

Before I responded, Damien collided with me.

All of him.

Six feet, four inches of solid muscle.

Our lips reunited as they had in the elevator, the same as they had during the years we were together. Body memory was a theory I learned about while working with Damien. It played a role in the research for the PTSD drug that brought Sinclair Pharmaceuticals fame and fortune. Body memory was the hypothesis that the body itself was capable of storing memories, as opposed to only the brain having that function.

That was what was happening.

It was the most likely explanation.

My body was on autopilot, flying me into the center of the Damien storm.

We sought one another in a frenzied dance.

Strong and possessive, his lips took mine. His body pressed against me, sandwiching mine between him and the wall—two immobile objects—as my fingers grasped for the lapels of his jacket, and the air around us filled with the primitive erotic sounds of two people starving for what the other had to offer.

I relinquished my mind to the passion my body sought, sensing the building desire in the twisting of my core and the sudden emptiness of my pussy. His kisses left my lips, skirting over my jaw, to the sensitive skin near my ear, and lower to my collarbone. I gasped as Damien lowered the zipper on the back of my dress.

As I met his clouded stare, he grinned. “I’ve wanted to do that since I saw you at the elevator with the drunk assholes.”

Reaching for his tie, I teased the knot.

Damien grasped my hands in his. “I’m all about consent. But if you don’t tell me to leave in the next five seconds, there’s no turning back.”

“One time,” I said, my voice cracking with the combination of my need and the weakness of my resolve.

“One *night*,” Damien corrected.

With my nod of approval, he spun me around, further lowering the zipper on my back. A hiss echoed as he realized not only did the neckline not allow for a bra but the way the material clung to my curves made me decide to go without panties. “Fuck, Ella.” He pushed the dress from my shoulders. The garment I’d carried through the airport so as to save it from wrinkling was now a puddle near my bare feet. He took a step back, his focus scanning from my head to my toes. “You’re even more stunning than I remember.” His grin

quirked. “You’ve gone natural.”

He was talking about the lack of waxing at my core.

Warmth filled my cheeks. “I wasn’t planning on...”

Damien shook his head. “I like it. I’m getting too old to fuck a bald cunt. I want a woman, not a child.” He met my gaze. “I want you.”

I knew who was in charge when it came to Damien and sex. Hell, when it came to Damien and anything—it was always him. And never had that been an issue. If he said kneel, I knelt. If he told me to spread my legs, I did. My obedience wasn’t out of fear or my own insecurities. No, my compliance was spurred by the reward I’d receive due to his unmatched capabilities.

The air around us thickened with anticipation, leaving me drunk from the expectation of what was to come. Now, standing completely nude in front of his fully clothed body, I sought the control I never had.

With a sly grin, I licked my lips before falling to my knees and reaching for Damien’s belt. His hands again grasped mine.

“Ella.”

The rough gravel tone spurred me forward.

“I want your cock, Mr. Sinclair.” I was keenly aware that I was playing with fire. The thing was that fire was essential to survival and maintaining life. It was the heat that saved us from freezing, the element that cooked our food, and the flames that stoked our desires.

In the cool of the air-conditioned suite, I unbuckled his belt, unfastened his pants, and lowered the zipper, each step sparked flickers igniting my circulation. As I pushed down the silk boxer shorts and released the beauty of his erection, the singe of the flames heated my skin.

“Fuck,” he mumbled, reaching for my head and entwining his long fingers in my hair.

After lapping the shiny tip of his penis, I opened my lips, straightened my spine, and offered my mouth for his pleasure. At the first lick, I recalled the uniqueness of his spicy and masculine taste.

My gag reflex hadn’t received the memo on body memory. His length and girth challenged my resolve. With tears streaming down my cheeks, I savored the power of my position. Yes, in the past, I’d fallen to my knees and sucked him at his command, but this wasn’t the same. I initiated the action. It was my doing. And every glimpse of his contorted handsome expression reinforced the knowledge that I was making the great Damien Sinclair fall apart. I was his undoing.

His thrusts quickened as he pulled tighter at my hair.

My jaw ached as his cock pressed against the back of my throat. And each passing second, my nipples hardened, and my pussy throbbed with need. His deep voice rumbled with the dirty talk he spewed at times like this. “That’s it. Take it deeper. You’re hungry for my cock. Look at you. Damn, you’re beautiful on your knees.” His breaths deepened and his praise began, “Fuck yes. Good girl.”

His words and phrases were demeaning and at the same time, they affected me like the striking of flint. A two-year near-drought left my body dry as kindling. His baritone words added fuel to the blaze. By the time he came, I swallowed with flames raging through my circulation. As I licked him clean and his praises continued, I was on the verge of orgasm.

Damien lifted my chin, bringing my face upward and my gaze to his. His smile grew. “Damn, first the lunch.” He offered me his hand to stand. Once on my feet, his lips met mine, his tongue seeking his own salty taste. My sensitive breasts flattened against his chest. “And now this.” His grin quirked. “This take-charge seductive side of you is fucking hot.”

“I wasn’t sure you were on board.” Sarcasm dripped from my response.

“What about you?”

“Me?”

“Are you hot, Ella? Will I find your pussy as warm and wet as your mouth?”

I nodded.

“Tell me what you want.”

“Right now, I want you, Damien.”

His intense stare held my gaze hostage as his grasp of my wrists tightened, holding my hands in front of me while step by step leading me backward into the suite. It wasn’t until we passed beyond the small living room through the open French doors to the bedroom that I realized our uncontrollable passion had exploded in the entry.

“Keep it up,” he said with a smirk. “Be specific, Ms. Crystal. What do you want?”

Prizing my gaze from his, I looked down to where our hands were—where mine were held—to the sight of his cock, springing monstrously thick and hard with each step. Looking back to his stare, I lifted my chin. “I want your cock, Damien. I told you I wanted it.”

“Is that all you want?”

“I could lie.”

“You won’t.” Releasing my wrists, Damien lifted me from the floor, cradling me against his solid chest. “You forget. I know you.”

In the security of his arms, with my hands free, I pushed against the shoulders of his suit coat jacket until it hung on his arms. Barely moving me within his grasp, Damien allowed one sleeve to fall and then the next, his suit coat falling to the floor. As he did, I loosened the knot in his tie and pulled the silk from around his neck. By the time he laid me on the bed, I’d released three buttons on his shirt.

Lying back, I continued my task until the shirt parted, revealing the six-pack of abs I’d also missed. My fingertips skirted over each muscle, sensing the warmth of his skin and definition of his torso. Placing my hand over his pecs, I splayed my fingers. “Your heart is beating fast.”

“It’s because I’m thinking about your request.”

“Undress first,” I said, knowing that disrobing was an issue for him. We’d probably dated for months before I saw him completely nude. He’d seen me. At the time, it seemed sexy and forbidden to be nude while he remained mostly clothed. There was nothing about his naked form that should remain hidden—he could double as a work of art, a Roman statue. Nudity was Damien’s barrier; one he held as a threshold to intimacy.

“Ella,” he said my name with a warning tone.

I scooted up the bed and leaned against the headboard. “Knowing goes both ways.” If asked, I’d admit to the satisfaction coursing through me as Damien kicked off his shoes, removed his socks, his pants, and finally after freeing the cufflinks, removed his shirt. The boxers were the last to go. In only the illumination coming through the large windows, the man before me was the perfect specimen of manhood—a Greek god come to earth.

“That was the last time for the night,” he said as he crawled toward me. From the end of the bed, he appeared as a predator playing with its next meal.

“Last time for what?”

Damien grasped my ankles and pulled me down the mattress.

I gasped as the ceiling became my view.

Lifting my head, I met his stare. “Last of what?”

“Oh, sweetheart, you’ve had your time. Like I said, I enjoyed your power play back at the airport and again here. Now I’m in charge.”

Chapter 09

Gabriella

*M*y body quaked and goosebumps scattered over my flesh at Damien's proclamation.

He'd allowed me to play my cards, giving me the illusion of control. As incredibly turned on as I was while exercising that fantasy, it was nothing compared to the rush of endorphins as Damien spread my knees and crawled between my legs. Goose bumps multiplied when he brought his lips to my stomach. A master at his task or a devil in disguise, Damien knew how to work my body, such as a musician caressing a fine instrument, twisting me tighter and tighter until my strings were taut and about to snap.

Lower down my body, his lips roamed, teasing and taunting.

"You're soaked," he murmured a millisecond before his tongue spread my folds and lapped my essence.

At the intrusion, I screamed out his name because no other came to mind. Even my brain knew that Damien was the only man who could bring me this kind of pleasure. My hips tried to buck from the bed, but I was held in place by his strong grasp.

Damien was a man starved as he devoured me, burying his face, spreading my legs farther apart, and teasing my bundle of nerves with his lips and teeth.

My body convulsed and perspiration coated my skin as he drained not

one, not two, but three orgasms from me. After the third, Damien kissed his way up my slack body, lingering on my ultra-sensitive breasts before reaching my lips. His tongue danced with mine, sharing my taste as I'd shared his.

"Pick a number between five and ten."

I opened my eyes wide to his blue stare. The man whose nose was touching mine and whose heated, hardened body was over my own demanded my attention. "A number?" In my defense, my mind was still mush and in recovery mode.

He kissed my nose. "Between five and ten."

I shook my head. "I don't know...seven."

"That's my greedy girl." In a flash, he was gone.

When I lifted my head, Damien was pulling his wallet from his pants pocket. With a smirk, he held out four condoms. "Probably good you didn't say ten."

"I don't..."

He threw the condoms on the bed and came closer. "You've already come twice. That means I have four condoms to get five more out of you."

Oh my God.

"Cocky much?"

He lifted an eyebrow. "Was it two times?"

"Three," I admitted softly.

Ripping the first packet, he laughed. "Confident. If the condoms run out, you can sit on my face."

I wasn't prepared to verbally spar like this. I'd forgotten how sexy and fun it could be—he could be.

Instead of giving him a comeback, I said, "I'm ready for sleep."

His finger and thumb lifted my chin. "No, Ella, you can sleep tomorrow."

"Four more times and I may not be able to move tomorrow."

Still standing near the bed, he replied, "Good."

I watched as he sheathed his large cock, jealous that he was holding it instead of me.

He looked back at me, his eyebrows arched. "Like what you see?"

"It's okay."

Damien offered me his hand. "I want you to remember tonight in each step you take tomorrow."

Placing my hand in his, I grinned as I stood. "I don't know if you've still

got it in you.”

He led me toward the tall windows. Beyond the panes was the sprawl of Los Angeles from twenty-seven stories in the air. “Put your hands on the glass, Ella.” His lips blew warm breaths near my ear with each word.

My pulse quickened as I obeyed.

“Wider and lower.”

I moved my hands down and farther apart as he trailed a ghostly touch down my spine, causing it to arch.

“Good girl.” He held on to my waist. “Now lift your right foot, to the windowsill.”

The windowsill was easily two feet from the floor. As I contemplated, he pulled my hips and butt toward him. “Damien.”

“Lift your foot.”

A shiver ran through me as I obeyed.

Damien’s hard cock ran along my core, teasing my folds and moving to my tight ring of muscles.

I sucked in a deep breath.

“Is that hole still virgin?”

I hated that he knew me.

Smearing my essence, he kept moving his cock from front to back and back to front, not penetrating. With each pass, my nerves electrified, detonations sparking from my scalp to my toes. I was so tuned into his movements, I forgot to answer.

A slap of my ass cheek stung, pulling me back to our conversation.

“I asked you a question,” he growled.

“Yes. I haven’t...I don’t...”

He was doing that thing again, up and down, forward and backward. So close to where I wanted him and yet not there. I pushed back, wanting what he had. My nipples grew impossibly harder and my foot on the sill began to bounce when all at once, Damien filled my pussy from behind.

I cried out as my entire being imploded. Falling forward, my cheek and breasts collided with the cool window. In one thrust—one deep thrust—I was coming, my core spasming around his huge cock.

His strong arm snaked around my waist kept me from falling to the floor or maybe from the height of the window to the ground below. With his chest to my back, Damien picked me back up, thrust after thrust, sparking nerves that by all rights should be burnt out.

Higher and higher, he took me. The suite filled with the slapping of his body against mine. It wasn't one-sided—I too was in the rhythm. His breathing labored as I once again found myself at the precipice. It was as his hand found my clit that we both jumped into the bliss.

His heart pounded against my back and his breaths were heavy in my ears. As our breathing slowed, Damien tugged my leg, lowering my foot to the ground and with us still connected, he spoke. The words rumbled from him to me.

“Were you imagining that all of Los Angeles could see us?”

I shook my head. “I was distracted.”

His fingers splayed on my stomach. “Look out there.”

I did, seeing the skyscape, the buildings, the lights, the cars moving on the streets far below.

“Lean your head back.”

I complied as his hand lowered.

“They can see how fucking gorgeous you are, Ella.” His fingers began a slow and steady rhythm circling my clit. “They want to see more. They want to see you come again. This is Los Angeles. Movie stars live here, and they're all enthralled with what they're watching.”

It was nearly impossible to concentrate on his words. Because as his fingers worked, his cock hardened within me. Small thrusts caused me to gasp.

“You don't want to disappoint our audience.”

It was impossible for me to come again, and yet there I was... “Damien...”

He held me to his chest as the orgasm shuddered through me. Once it was done, he took a step back. I immediately felt the loss and emptiness. It was the familiar need to be close to him—the sensation I only truly existed when connected to Damien.

That realization, that thought, scared the shit out of me.

Spinning, I looked up at Damien as he wrapped his arms around my waist, holding me to him, his still-erect penis probing my stomach.

“I can't do this.”

His lips quirked. “You've done it five times. Maybe you just need a moment to rest.”

I shook my head. “That's not what I'm talking about.”

Lowering his head, he kissed my forehead. “You said one night. The

night isn't over.”

“I said one *time* and it's been...” I swayed. “...six.” Swallowing the lump in my throat, I feigned a smile. “Thank you for your help at the elevator.” He'd said I wouldn't lie, but what if that was the only way to save myself?

If it was, I had to do it.

“You could have taken care of them, just like you could take care of Mr. Phillips.”

“Walter Phillips is a flirt. Those guys were—”

“They might have been intoxicated,” Damien said, “but they knew a beautiful woman when they saw one.” He ran his thumb over my cheek. “You're more than they saw, Ella. Tonight, at the gala...damn, you're spectacular to watch. You're a star.”

“Like the ones watching us?”

“No, like the brilliant light that shines through galaxies. That's who you are.”

“Damien, please don't call me when we're back home. I've worked hard to build a life—one that doesn't include you.” I inhaled and took a step away, freeing myself from his embrace. Although my eyes stung, I kept my voice strong. “I won't answer. Tonight was...” I couldn't read his expression. “Tonight was our goodbye. No more of this...”

His expression fell. “Fuck, Ella.”

I lifted my hand. “It was a mistake. I'd forgotten the passion. But now I remember how completely overwhelming it is. I'm drawn to you and when that happens—when we're together—I forget who I am. I can't do that again.”

“Sex...fuck, we're good together.”

I nodded. “We're great together. It can't happen again.”

Damien inhaled, his chest widening. “We could talk?”

I shook my head. Going to the closet, I pulled out the large white terrycloth robe with the hotel emblem. After freeing it from the hanger, I wrapped it around me and tied the sash. In the time it took me to do that, Damien had removed the condom, tied it off, and thrown it in the trash. Now, wearing his boxer shorts, he was stepping into his pants.

“Thank you,” I said.

“I don't want to leave.”

“I know that. I also know you will.”

Damien's shirt was on and unbuttoned. I wrapped my arms around my

midsection as he gathered his things. He had his tie and cufflinks stuffed into his jacket pocket. Once he collected everything, Damien walked to me, stopping mere inches away. “You’re wrong, Ella. This wasn’t goodbye.”

“Please.”

“I told you that you wouldn’t be a one-night stand.”

“I’m not. You are.”

His lips pressed together in a straight line. And even in the dim lighting, I saw the way his jaw clenched and a vein in his neck pulsated. Nevertheless, Damien didn’t say another word as he nodded and exited the suite.

I stood in place for a full minute.

If I peer through the small peephole, will I see him?

Or is he gone?

Shaking my head, I bolted the door and turned away without looking. I managed to keep the tears at bay until I stepped under the hot spray of the shower and let them flow.

“Not again,” I said between gasps for air. “I can’t be with him again.”

When I woke the next morning, my head ached from crying. Beyond the unhindered windows, the sun shone, breaking through the morning smog. From my angle I saw the smudge on the window from the night before. Turning my head left and right, I recalled exactly how it was created. It was a work of art. But like all masterpieces, the enjoyment of the creation can only be imagined by the beholders. Only the artists themselves understand the immense passion.

After calling for room service, I took another shower.

It was odd the way our senses retained stimulations.

Aroma.

Even after two showers, lotion, and a dab of perfume, I swore I could still smell the erotic and intoxicating scent that was Damien Sinclair.

Chapter 10

Gabriella

*H*olding my breath, I entered the airplane that would take me on the first leg of my journey back to Indianapolis. My muscles were sore in the best of ways—in ways they hadn't been sore in too long. My eyes were focused down the aisle, rolling my carry-on through first class. My palm slipped on the handle and the temperature inside the vessel seemed overly warm. I'd avoided the gate until I couldn't any longer. I didn't know if Damien would be on the same flight. This one had a layover. Nevertheless, I wasn't taking any chances.

I vaguely remembered Donovan Sherman saying something to Damien about coffee this morning. That was why I settled on room service. My avoidance had started early. Then I spent the early afternoon, hiding in plain sight. Not difficult to do in an airport the size of LAX.

It sounded childish, even in my own thoughts, but I couldn't face him today. My resolve from last night was spent. It had taken most of my supply when I asked him to leave and not call me. The final ounces were drained when I refrained from looking out the peephole.

If I had.

If he'd been waiting.

I didn't know what I would have done.

Apologize?

Ask him to come back inside?

Tell him I wanted the one orgasm he still owed me?

In the shower, after he left, I slid down the wall, sitting under the hot spray, holding my knees, and crying the tears I'd held back for over two years. That wasn't completely true. I'd cried my share when I first left him. Back then, my sadness morphed to resolve.

I vowed I would survive.

I vowed I would go on.

I vowed that I was strong enough without him.

Those promises to myself were why I asked him to leave and to not call.

After less than twenty-four hours in his presence, I felt myself slipping away. That was what he did. I didn't believe the effect was intentional on his part. It was simply that Damien was an irresistible force, and when near him, everyone was pulled into his orbit.

Just as one couldn't fault the sun for its gravitational pull that held our solar system in orbit, Damien wasn't at fault for the pull or the effect he had. The sun wasn't at fault. Nevertheless, I refused to go back to being a lesser mass.

I couldn't.

I wouldn't.

When I woke, I found my supply of resolve had just enough to get me back home and back to my life. There wasn't enough to face him, speak to him, or even entertain memories of our last goodbye.

Thankfully, I didn't see him in the rows of first class. Making my way back to row twenty-two, I found my seat. It was on the aisle with an older couple at my side. After stowing my carry-on, I sat and leaned my head back.

"Did you have a good trip, dear?" the woman asked.

It took me a moment to answer, to remember why I was in Los Angeles in the first place. The gala. Forcing a smile, I nodded. "It was a business trip, and yes, it was successful."

* * *

Monday morning, I was back to me, back to work, and seated at the conference table with coffee in hand. In the middle of the table was a large box of donuts from a local bakery. The conversation started light with

pleasantries and questions about the gala from those who didn't attend.

The purpose of this meeting, a follow-up, was to tout our accomplishments—the massive donations Beta Kappa Phi acquired. After a discussion with the nice woman on the plane, I settled in and compiled the numbers. Each representative had sent me their totals. The final number was even more than we expected.

The discussion took a turn when Niles mentioned Damien. Now, instead of receiving praise for a well-planned and successful gala, I was facing the ire of Kevan, the vice president of endowments.

“Ella, it's unfathomable that you would withhold this connection.”

Inhaling, I lifted the paper cup of coffee to my lips.

The seats around the table were occupied by the members of my team as well as Kevan Parkinson and Millie Barns, the executive director and the head of Beta Kappa Phi.

With all eyes on me, I set the cup next to my laptop. I chose to not address Kevan's condemnation and to instead focus on our accomplishment. “After compiling all the numbers, the gala exceeded our fundraising goal by twenty-five percent. Mr. Sherman's second donation came through this morning. He didn't simply match last year's sum—he doubled it.” I couldn't be certain the money was solely from Donovan Sherman. Since the donation came in two parts, I had the sneaking suspicion that someone else may be involved. That was the someone Kevan was talking about. The subject I didn't want to discuss.

Kevan cleared his throat. “Sinclair Pharmaceuticals is a local company that has recently skyrocketed in value. The possibilities are limitless if we could secure their sponsorship.”

“Niles,” I said, looking at my associate and friend. It was his comment that ratted me out. “Niles spoke with Mr. Sinclair. He can pursue this partnership.”

“I spoke to him,” Niles said, nodding, his hazel stare on me. “Sure. Yep. I can try to set up a meeting.”

“There,” I said. “It's settled. Now let's discuss the gala. What worked and what could be improved?”

For the next forty-five minutes, we stayed on task. Thankfully, the positives for our fundraising gala outweighed the negatives. The next hurdle was determining the site for next year's event.

“Why not here?” Millie asked.

“I like the travel time,” I said with a smile.

“It makes perfect sense. Now with one of our biggest donors from Wisconsin, I like the Midwest vibe,” Niles added.

Kevan looked at me as he said, “And if we can get Sinclair Pharmaceuticals in and they agree to a sponsorship, we might be able to work out something such as a tour of their facility.”

As others spoke, I made notes. “Conference space is definitely less expensive here than in California.”

“Or New York,” Rosemary, a member of my team added. We’d had the gala in New York City two years ago.

As the meeting was breaking up, Millie Barns approached me. “Ella, may we speak?”

Considering that she was our boss, I couldn’t exactly say no. “Of course.”

She looked around. “Come to my office. It will be more private.”

The small hairs on the back of my neck stood to attention like tiny lightning rods. “Is there a problem? The gala was a success.”

“No problem. I’ll see you in five.”

I waited until she was gone to gather my laptop and things. As I entered my office, I met Niles’s pleading hazel stare.

“Shit, Ella. I didn’t expect Kevan to go off like that. I’m sorry I mentioned Sinclair.”

Swallowing, I laid my things on my desk. “You can talk to him—Mr. Sinclair.” I clarified.

“You two seemed...”

“We’ve known one another a long time. When it comes to business, he’s one of the best. You’ve got this.”

“Why do I feel like you’re not being completely truthful?”

“Nothing I said was untruthful.”

“Okay, not completely forthcoming.”

Niles and I became quick friends when I started with Beta Kappa Phi. We hit it off with our shared love of Reba McEntire. Yes, most people think she’d left the scene, but that wasn’t true. In the last two years, I attended multiple concerts with Niles and his husband. In most things and on most topics, we were forthcoming with one another.

Damien Sinclair wasn’t a topic that I’d been forthcoming about to many people.

“Millie wants to talk to me,” I said with my eyes open wide.

“Shit, about what?”

I shrugged. “I’m hoping she wants to give me a private ‘atta girl.’”

My stomach twisted with the memory of Damien’s *good girl*.

“You’ve got this,” Niles said. “I am sorry I brought Sinclair up, and I’ll reach out to that handsome CEO today.”

“Thanks. We’re good.”

Leaving Niles standing by my desk, I brushed the front of my skirt and walked toward Millie’s office. There was that sensation of being called to the principal’s office even when I believed I’d exceeded expectations.

“Millie is expecting me,” I said to her secretary, Pam.

“Go on back.”

Millie’s office door was slightly ajar when I knocked.

“Come in, Ella,” she said.

Her office was at least twice the size of mine with a view of a pond and trees.

“Have a seat.”

“Is there a problem?”

“You tell me.”

My mind searched for an issue. “I don’t believe there is. The feedback on the gala was mostly positive. If the biggest concern is for more vegetarian hors d’oeuvres, I call that a win.”

“When you were hired, I called your previous employer.”

My circulation stilled as I sucked in a deep breath. “You called Damien... Mr. Sinclair.”

“I did.”

“So, you’ve known I knew him...since I started?”

“I didn’t think it was as big of an issue as Kevan made it out to be. I have wondered why you haven’t utilized that familiarity to benefit both yourself and Beta Kappa Phi.”

Shaking my head, I searched for the words to explain. “I don’t feel comfortable asking Mr. Sinclair for money.”

“Isn’t that your job?”

Clenching my teeth, I nodded. “Are there complaints about the work I do?”

“No, Gabriella. I must wonder if perhaps Mr. Sinclair would work better with you than with Niles.”

“Niles is capable—”

She lifted her hand. "I'm assigning you to Mr. Sinclair."

"No." I stood. "I can't." Twisting my body back and forth, I considered walking out on this meeting. "Why?"

"Because he called me Sunday."

What?

"He called you. At your home?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"He was exceptionally complimentary about the gala and about you in particular."

About the work at the gala or did he tell her I was a good fuck?

"Niles can—"

"Ella, please sit down."

Begrudgingly, I conceded.

"Mr. Sinclair suggested a sponsorship campaign unlike any we currently have or have had. It would essentially be a partnership within the framework of a not-for-profit structure. He informed me of a coalition that has recently been formed with Sinclair Pharmaceuticals, Wade Pharmaceutical in Chicago, and other smaller pharmaceutical companies in our regional vicinity. Their partnership makes their coalition a bigger player in lobbying the FDA as well as other benefits."

My thoughts were spinning. "What does that have to do with us?"

"Mr. Sinclair said he'd spoken with Mr. Sherman, and they felt that Beta Kappa Phi could benefit from the coalition more so than from each company separately."

"The two of them decided this?"

When?

I didn't ask that aloud.

Was it during their morning coffee, after I'd told him to leave?

Millie went on, "Since our conversation, not only have I given this proposal extensive thought, but I've also gone ahead and contacted legal." She nodded. "It is worth exploring."

"Legal? Good. There will be legal and ethical concerns...It would be a massive undertaking."

"That is why I want someone I trust to spearhead it." Before I can suggest Niles or even Kevan, she continued, "And that person is you."

Shaking my head, I replied, "I don't think it is—don't think I am."

"Mr. Sinclair specifically asked for you. You're to meet him at his office this afternoon at three o'clock."

“Millie,” I pleaded, “I still have obligations regarding the gala. And if we want to have it here in Indianapolis next year, I need to get busy...” My excuses came rapid-fire.

“For the meantime, Niles will take over your work. This prospect is too big to let slip through our fingers. Think of the good that can be done with this pharmaceutical coalition.”

“You knew about this opportunity during the meeting?”

Millie nodded.

“And you didn’t stop Kevan from belaboring the point.”

“It seemed moot, knowing what I knew. The idea of this campaign is in its infancy, but honestly, Ella, I think it could be a game changer.”

With the cups of coffee churning inside me, I looked down at my skirt and back to my boss. “*His office.*”

She smiled. “I have the address, but I doubt you’ll need it.”

“No. I know where his office is.”

“I’ll be anxious to hear how it goes.”

Shit.

It was the only word that came to mind.

Chapter II

Damien

“Darius Sinclair is on line one,” Johnathon, my assistant said, speaking through the interoffice intercom.

My gaze went to one of my computer screens preparing me for my upcoming meeting. I was concentrating on the business because if I didn’t, if I thought about the woman about to enter my office, my circulation would give me away. The last person I wanted to talk to was my brother. “Tell him I’m busy.”

“I have, sir. This is his third call.”

Shaking my head, I clenched my jaw. “Fine.” I pushed the button on the telephone and took a deep breath. “Darius, so nice of you to take time away from your golf game or was it sailing...whatever important thing you’re doing to call.”

My brother cleared his throat.

“What’s so important?” I asked before he could comment. “I recently returned to Indy, and my workload is overflowing.”

“Did you think I’d let the quarterly report go without discussion?”

“Consider yourself entitled that you’re still on the correspondence.” I looked around my office, the luxurious space, lavish furnishings, and beautiful view. This was my world. I didn’t start Sinclair Pharmaceuticals, I saved it. “I have nothing to discuss with you.”

“Dad isn’t happy.”

“Dad is retired. If he wants to talk to me, he knows my number. Everything is under control, and he knows that. I could explain the reasoning to you, but I have better ways to spend my time.”

“He *is* concerned. It’s stressing him out,” Darius said. “We spoke this morning. I told him I’d investigate. What’s with the decline in quarterly bonuses?”

That was the real issue. Darius lived on whatever he could suck from Sinclair Pharmaceuticals. Ten years my senior, the two of us shared a father, not a mother. When Darius was seven, our father married my mother and together they had two children, my younger sister, Danielle, and me. Nearly forty years later, my parents were still a power couple in their own right. Darius had his chance at running Sinclair. It wasn’t like Dad shut him out.

Darius failed.

He couldn’t handle the pressure.

Under his control, Sinclair was on the verge of becoming a footnote in a Big Pharma portfolio. Eli Lilly, another Indianapolis-based pharmaceutical company had been actively courting my father for a buyout. Dad was ready to retire. He and Darius were working together when it became clear that Darius wasn’t competent to take the helm alone.

I’d been with the company for a few years working my way up. I was the person who brought Sinclair its newest formula, the one that saved our company. I wasn’t the chemist, but I was the one who saw the potential in the new formula.

Nearly five years ago, I was named CEO. A year later, our father retired. Darius’s only claim to fame in the world of pharmaceuticals was that he retained stock in our private company. That stock allowed him information privy to our stockholders. It also afforded him stock options and bonuses.

It was the second that had him in a tizzy.

With the approval of the board, I’d decided to decrease the quarterly bonuses in favor of increasing our promotional spending. Getting word out to the doctors and facilities that prescribed PTSD medications was where we needed to spend our assets. That promotion was the impetus for my upcoming meeting.

“What’s the problem?” I asked. “Do you need a loan to cover your boat payment?”

“Fuck you. You can’t just decide to cut the shareholders’ revenue by fifty

percent.”

I leaned back against my chair. “Actually, I can. I had the executive board’s approval.”

“You couldn’t have given a heads-up?”

“You couldn’t make last quarter’s million-dollar payout last longer than three months? Obviously, money management is also not one of your strengths. Perhaps you should hire a money manager.”

“I called,” he said, “to let you know there is growing discontent on the board. As you know, you’re still in the probationary period. The board can still oust you as CEO.”

That was true.

The sixty-month probation period would end in another five months. Propanolol should have been enough to secure my position. The probation period was put in place after Darius’s failure. In five more months, I would be set in stone, barring some cataclysmic failure. There was a loophole that I’d explored that could give me the finalized status sooner, but the cost was too high. I would let the success I’d made since taking over speak for itself.

“And replace me...with you? Sorry, brother, that ship sailed.”

“I told Dad I wanted another chance.”

“Dad’s not in charge,” I said.

“Propanolol won’t carry us. We need—”

“There isn’t an *us*,” I corrected. “You are not part of the board or the executive management. Your bonus was decreased not because Sinclair is losing money, but because Sinclair has a mission that doesn’t involve keeping your wallet thick.” My gaze went to the antique clock in the bookcase, the one that belonged to our great-grandfather. “I don’t have time to continue this conversation. If Dad wants to chat, he can call.”

“Should I expect the next quarter to continue this downward trend?”

“Here’s a thought, make your own money, and quit being a leech sucking the blood from Sinclair Pharmaceuticals.”

“I recently spoke with Gloria Wilmott.”

Gloria was a senior member of the Sinclair executive board. She had been around since our father took over. That meant she had seen her share of ups and downs. In the grand scheme of time, Sinclair was in an up. While we didn’t see eye to eye on everything, Gloria knew that I was good for Sinclair.

“Tell Gloria hello.” I waited a moment. “Have a wonderful day, Darius.”

I disconnected the call.

Pushing one button, I called my assistant. “If Darius calls again, tell him I am in a meeting. Speaking of which, has my three o’clock arrived?”

It was only 2:45, but I was anxious.

“No, sir. I’ll let you know when she does.”

“Thank you.”

Leaning back, I inhaled as I spun my chair toward the window. Stories below was the front entrance to Sinclair Corporate Center. I scanned the brick circle, the large fountain, and the nearby benches. No sign of Ella.

I wasn’t worried.

She would arrive.

Chapter 12

Gabriella

Entering my credit card information into the parking meter, I hesitated, again questioning my sanity. Above the tall buildings, wisps of semi-transparent clouds floated in the blue sky. I lifted my face to the warm spring breeze and closed my eyes.

A quick glance at my watch told me I didn't have time to spare. The drive from Carmel to downtown Indianapolis took longer than I anticipated. I wasn't late for my three o'clock meeting—mandate—only precariously close. In hindsight, I probably should have parked in the adjacent parking garage. It was the same garage where I used to have a reserved space, next to the CEO's. The thought twisted my stomach.

I could only assume that Damien's newest assistant now enjoyed that spot.

I wondered what other perks she enjoyed.

No, I didn't.

I couldn't think like that.

To say my mood soured since my meeting with Millie would be an understatement.

Multiple times during my drive, I contemplated pulling over and calling Millie Barns with my resignation. During that same drive, I also argued with myself—sometimes audibly.

As I got closer to the city, I decided Millie wasn't the person who deserved a piece of my mind. That person was high above in an office with a spectacular view of the city and the Sinclair Corporate Center.

An odd mixture of sensations churned inside me as I entered a place I never planned to revisit—familiarity and at the same time, apprehension. Over two years ago, I walked beyond the large fountain in the courtyard, across the same pavers I was now stepping on, and away from the building before me. The glass front was exactly as I recalled.

Once inside, I stepped onto the escalator that would take me to the second level. Each elevation took me closer to the man I didn't want to see.

Whether it was body or brain memory, riding up to the next level, I recalled not only the sights of the corporate center, but the sounds and smells. All the sensations were coming back to me. The aroma of the coffee shop on the first floor. The clatter coming from the cafeteria on the second floor. And the memories of the deli, also on the second floor, the one open to the public. Remembering their chicken salad made my empty stomach growl with need.

My current sources of fuel were coffee, donuts, and rage.

That latter was the emotion I chose to tap into.

Turning the corner, I approached the security checkpoint. My flesh warmed at the welcome sight of Edgar Todd. My first thought was jubilation that he was still alive. The elderly gentleman looked sharp as ever in his uniform. In all honesty, the only person he could most likely stop from passing would be Walter Phillips. They were probably the same age. Edgar's claim to fame was that he had been with Sinclair since the Indianapolis corporate center opened—when Damien's grandfather was in charge.

At the click of my heels on the marble floor, Edgar lifted his face from a newspaper. In less than a second, his eyes sparkled and his smile formed, the fissures in his skin growing deeper. "Ms. Crystal." He stepped down from his stool and came around his desk. "I'll be." He stopped a few feet away. "I'd sure like to hug you, but they say we can't do that anymore."

Relieved by his gregarious greeting and honestly happy with the distraction, I smiled and lifted my arms. "Consensual."

Our embrace was sweet and short-lived. "Edgar, how are you? Why aren't you relaxing on some beach or playing golf?"

"Oh, Ms. Crystal. You know without me this building would be chaos, pure mayhem."

I started to reach for my badge—body memory—but it wasn't there. I

tilted my head. “I’m here for a meeting.”

Edgar shook his head as he walked back around the desk. “I sure don’t remember seeing your name.” He gave me a wink. “It would have jumped off the page.” He lifted a tablet and swiped the screen. “Who you seeing?”

“Mr. Sinclair.”

Edgar’s eyes opened wider. “Oh, let me look at *his* schedule.” A moment or two passed. “Yep, there you are. Didn’t expect to see you there.”

“That makes two of us,” I said with a shrug.

“It’s embarrassing,” he said. “I know who you are, but they make me scan your ID now days. Can’t be too careful.”

“It’s not a problem,” I replied as I opened my purse.

Edgar took the ID from my grasp and ran it through a machine. When he handed it back, he smiled. “I’ve missed your smile.” He began walking toward the bank of elevators. “Follow me now.”

I walked a step behind. “Thank you, Edgar. I’m happy with my new job, but I’ve missed you too.”

One of the elevators opened. Edgar stepped inside. “You tell Mr. Sinclair to hire you back. I can’t keep this place running for much longer.” He placed his badge over a sensor and hit the button for the top floor.

“I’m not looking for a job. And I know I couldn’t do your job—no one can.”

“You have a nice meeting,” he said as he stepped out of the elevator sending me into the sky.

“Thank you.”

Nice meeting.

Damn, it was as if Edgar was strategically placed in my path to lighten my mood. That was all right. It was a nice reprieve. Securing my satchel over my shoulder, I stared at my reflection in the shiny door. I wasn’t as made up as I had been in Los Angeles. My tan pencil skirt, cream blouse, and two-inch heels were what some would call business casual. My long dark hair was pulled back in a low ponytail, and my smile from the gala was MIA.

“Beta Kappa Phi,” I mumbled to myself.

The doors opened to the top floor. The name Sinclair was scrolled in large gold letters over the long receptionist’s desk. As I approached, I didn’t recognize either of the two women.

“May I help you?” one woman asked.

“I have a three o’clock appointment with Mr. Sinclair.”

“Mr. Sinclair is running a little behind. He asked if you could wait.”

I couldn't help but smirk. “Please tell Mr. Sinclair that I also have a tight schedule. If he isn't available, we can” —I started to say reschedule— “forgo this meeting altogether.”

The woman's eyes nearly popped from her head. “Excuse me?”

My smile grew. “I can wait five minutes.”

“Oh, okay,” she muttered while giving her coworker an expression that asked who the hell did I think I was, and did I know who I was speaking about.

I knew exactly who I was speaking about.

Lifting my chin, I walked to a cluster of chairs near a window. The view down below was of the large fountain I'd just passed. Farther, the Indianapolis skyline, complete with Lucas Oil, stretched on for a distance. I was lost in my thoughts and simultaneously pissed that Damien would pull a childish power play of making me wait when the second woman from the desk appeared behind me.

“Oh,” I exclaimed, reaching for my chest.

“I'm sorry to startle you, Ms. Crystal. Mr. Sinclair is ready for you.” She turned.

Standing near the door that I knew led to a hallway that would take me to Damien's office was a well-dressed younger man with strawberry-blond hair, green eyes, and a welcoming smile.

“Johnathon will take you back to Mr. Sinclair.”

“Johnathon?”

“Mr. Sinclair's assistant.”

Well, that was unexpected.

“Ms. Crystal,” Johnathon said as he opened the door. “Welcome.” The long hallway before us led to another set of glass doors. I wondered if my destination would be Damien's office or if he would park me in a conference room.

“How long have you worked for Mr. Sinclair?” I asked.

“It will soon be a year.” He lowered his voice. “I heard you once had this position.”

“He told you?”

Johnathon shook his head, his cheeks growing pink. “No.”

“Oh,” I said softly. “I'm a rumor.”

“A good rumor. It sounds like people were sad when you left.”

I couldn't think about that. It had been self-preservation.

Through the glass doors, Johnathon led me to Damien's office and opened the door. "Mr. Sinclair. Ms. Crystal."

I stepped into the doorway as Damien stood from behind his desk. Was it too much to ask for him to have contracted some flesh-eating bacteria in the last thirty hours? Maybe something that destroyed his handsome features, his thick hair, high cheekbones, firm lips.

Shit no.

He was as good-looking as he'd been Saturday night. The difference was that now he was clothed.

I wasn't thinking about that.

Is he?

Damien's gaze lingered on me for too long. The ensuing silence hung heavily in the air. Despite my scowl, Damien's smile was at full wattage, and his blue eyes shone with the arrogance of a man who snapped his fingers and made others jump.

"Okay," Johnathon said, a bit uncomfortably. "I'm going to..." He leaned away. "If you need me..."

Neither one of us spoke.

The door behind me closed.

Taking a step toward Damien, I kept my volume low but my tone strong. "Bastard."

His cheeks rose. "Technically, no. My father is known. He and Mom are living it up in the Villages. There's something about pineapples, but I don't want to think about it."

I shook my head. "Why?"

"They're my parents and well, you know?"

I exhaled. "I don't care about your parents. Why am I here?"

"That's a shame. They always liked you."

My frustration was getting the better of me. "I don't *not* care about them." I exhaled. "Answer my question. Why I'm here where I don't want to be?"

Damien came around his desk and gestured toward the conference table. "Shall we sit?"

At the sight of the table—at the entire office—I realized nothing had changed. Clenching my teeth, I closed my eyes.

His deep voice penetrated my thoughts. "If you're thinking about what we did on that table, so am I."

I opened my eyes. “I’m not.”

I was.

“I suppose we could sit over there” —he pointed toward a sofa and chairs — “but if you recall, there isn’t a surface in this room where you didn’t come.” His smile shone. “I have particularly fond memories of my desk chair. For the record, I told the cleaning crew I spilled something.” His lips quirked. “I wouldn’t allow them to clean it. Seeing the stain on the leather reminds me of you.”

“Damien.” My voice was now raised. “Stop.”

His smile quirked. “Oh, Ms. Crystal. May I take that to mean you’re not interested in small talk?”

“I’m not interested in this meeting—at all.”

He pulled out one of the leather chairs from around the conference table. “Please.” The spicy aroma of his cologne infiltrated my thinking.

Fucking gentleman.

Setting my satchel on the floor and hanging my purse from the back of the chair, I took the seat. “May we get this over with?”

Damien took the seat at the head of the table, the one to my side. Unbuttoning his suit coat, he leaned back. “Ella, you can be upset with me, but you have to admit, our idea will benefit Beta Kappa Phi.”

“Upset?” I slapped my hand on the shiny table. “Damien, I told you...I asked you not to call me.”

“I didn’t.” He reached for the phone in his breast pocket and lifted it my direction. “You may check, but the last call I made to you was Saturday night, or was it Sunday morning?”

Chapter 13

Damien

Gabriella's pink lips opened and shut.

I was fucking enjoying every second of her discomfort and planned to revel in it for a moment. "Since reminiscing is forbidden, let's jump into business. What did Ms. Barns tell you?"

"I don't remember. It all went fuzzy after she said that you called her, and she told me about this meeting." Ella pushed her chair back and stood.

She was a vision—beautiful, smart, and so full of life. My eyes followed her every step, drinking in her straight posture, soft curves, the way her skirt accentuated her waist and the neckline of her blouse dipped low enough to see the top of her round globes. Although her clothes were professional and nonrevealing, as I imagined Ella without attire my circulation readjusted its flow.

After the way things progressed on Saturday night, I couldn't walk away. I'd done that two years ago when she first left. I wasn't going to let her walk out this time, not without a fight. The two of us belonged together in every sense of the word. Saturday night was the best fucking sex I'd had since... her. There was no way she didn't agree. Six orgasms said she did. Her abrupt change of heart wasn't because we weren't good together.

Maybe it was because we were.

I cocked my head. "I didn't call you," I repeated. "That's what you

asked.”

She turned toward me, a pink hue moving up her neck to her cheeks. “No, you called my boss. You threw money at her and made yourself sound altruistic in the process.” She spoke and paced, spoke and paced. It was like watching a tennis match. “Millie said something about a coalition. Did you make this whole thing up, or did you and Mr. Sherman actually concoct it together?”

I smirked at the animated way she was speaking. “I would have Johnathon bring you a cup of coffee, but you seem to have too much energy.”

Ella spun toward me, her blue eyes blazing.

I lifted my hands. “No, your energy level is fine. However, if you want to burn some of it off, I can come up with a few options.” I lifted my hand palm up. “This table?”

Her arms flew out and then down, slapping her thighs with her palms. “I can’t work with you.”

“You can. It’s the only condition Van and I put on this venture.”

“I’m not doing that again.”

“There isn’t an again, Ella. We didn’t work *together* before,” I explained. “You worked *for* me. This will be different. You will continue to work for Beta Kappa Phi.” I shrugged. “It will just be here.”

“What?” Her eyes opened wide. “Here. No. No. Hell no.”

“Johnathon has your badge, and he’s secured you a parking spot on the first floor.”

She lifted the tips of her fingers to her temples. “Why, Damien? Why are you doing this?”

Because I could. I didn’t tell her that, but it was the truth. There was more to it. Watching her Saturday night at the gala, I knew she was what Sinclair needed. The fact I want her back in my life was bonus.

Pushing my chair away from the table, I leaned back and lifted my ankle to my opposite knee. “Ms. Crystal, as I explained to Ms. Barns, Sinclair Pharmaceuticals and Wade Pharmaceutical believe in Beta Kappa Phi’s objectives to promote the concepts of health, knowledge, and humanity.”

Ella reached for the back of the chair where she had sat for a moment, her fingers blanching as her grasp tightened. “You’re full of shit. Do you know that?”

“As I recall, you were the one who had problems with regularity when traveling.” I brightened my smile. “Me, on the other hand” —I gestured with

my hand slicing through the air— “clean as a whistle.”

She shook her head. “Fine. I’m here. If we talk, can this be over?”

“I’d like to talk.” I’d like to do more than talk, but it’s a start.

“Damien.” She sighed as she retook her seat, her expression sobering.

I didn’t want her melancholy.

Placing my foot back on the floor, I leaned forward. “I’m not giving up on us, Ella. Look me in the eye and tell me you didn’t enjoy being with me Saturday night, that the next day, you didn’t remember the way it felt to have me inside you, or that your body wasn’t so completely satiated that you slept like a baby.”

She fidgeted with her hands on her lap before looking up. “I didn’t sleep that well.”

“Neither did I, but it wasn’t because I didn’t just have amazing sex. It was because of the abrupt change in you.”

Ella shook her head and slowly lifted her beautiful blue eyes my way. “You don’t understand what you do to me.”

Good. She was talking.

“I know what you do to me,” I confessed. And if I were truthful with myself, it was happening now just being alone with her.

Her blue stare met mine. “Who are you when you’re with me?”

It was an odd question. “What do you mean?”

“Who are you?” she repeated. “Are you different when you’re with me than when you’re with other people or alone?”

“Is this about me, the things I say to you? Ella, I can’t forget our past, our closeness, and our passion. Those things affect who I am when I’m with you.”

“I’m not me when I’m with you.”

“You are.”

“I ended things the other night because I started feeling...” She exhaled. “I disappear. I’m obscured by the magnitude of you. It’s why I left you two years ago.”

“To make a life without me.” It was what she said Saturday night.

Ella nodded.

“You’ve done that.” It was my turn to stand. “Gabiella, you were astonishing Saturday night. Having the pleasure of watching you in action, the way you worked the room and the donors...” I turned to meet her gaze. “I was awestruck. Beta Kappa Phi has been good for you, and you have been

good for it. I have no desire to take that away from you.”

“Really?” she scoffed. “Because after Millie’s announcement about this meeting, I almost quit my job.”

“Fuck no. I meant what I said about you being a star. Not only in that window but doing your job. Ms. Barns explained to me that you had taken the lead on planning the entire gala.” I shook my head. “She had many complimentary things to say about you.”

“She was the person you spoke to after I left here, the woman who called you for my reference.”

“I told her,” I said, leaning against the table, “I never should have let you go—from Sinclair Pharmaceuticals.”

Ella lifted her fingers to her temples.

It was the second time she’d done that.

“Are you feeling all right?”

“Headache.” She scoffed. “I probably should have consumed more than coffee and donuts.”

“Let me have Johnathon get you something to eat. I remember you liked the chicken salad from the deli.”

Ella sighed. “How do you remember things like that?”

“Because, Gabriella Crystal, you are impossible to forget.” I walked over to my desk and pushed a button on the phone. Johnathon answered on the second ring.

“Yes, Mr. Sinclair.”

“Go to the deli on the second floor and get Ms. Crystal a bowl of chicken salad and a raspberry tea.”

“Would you like anything?” he asked.

“No. I’m fine. Bring the food in as soon as you have it. Also, cancel my four o’clock.”

“Yes, sir. I will reschedule.”

“That will be good.”

I hung up the phone and turned. Ella’s blue gaze was on me. No longer was she seated at the table, but leaning against it as I had, her arms crossed over her breasts.

“You are so confusing,” she said.

“What’s confusing about ordering you food? You’re hungry.”

“That was kind.”

“Again, purely selfish. I remember your headaches, and if I can help

before it gets out of hand, I want to do that. If you're going to bed in a dark room for the next few days, I want to be there with you."

"If you want to help Beta Kappa Phi, you can do it without my involvement."

"I won't," I answered matter-of-factly.

"That's why you're confusing, Damien. One minute you're summoning me here. The next you're ordering me lunch. Then you're back to being an asshole."

Asshole.

"Most people refrain from calling me an asshole to my face."

"That doesn't mean they don't call you that." She let her hands fall to her sides. "Do you want to tell me about this idea for Beta Kappa Phi, or was it all a ruse to get me here?"

"Not a ruse at all. Van and I met Sunday for breakfast..."

We both retook our seats at the table as I explained the premise of the coalition. The idea wasn't mine or Van's. It was his wife, Julia's, the CEO of Wade Pharmaceutical. Big Pharma had always been a danger to smaller companies. The sheer size made them less vulnerable and more influential. The coalition brought multiple pharmaceutical companies together in basically a super PAC. Combining our efforts gave us more clout.

In less than fifteen minutes, Johnathon arrived with Ella's chicken salad and raspberry tea.

I continued talking as Ella ate. "The best part of Julia's plan was not to combine competitors. The point was to bring in each company with a strong reputation in one or two particular drugs or pharmacological formulas, to work together in a non-competitive manner."

"Mr. Sherman's wife set up the coalition?" Ella asked.

"It was Julia's idea. Luckily, she happens to be married to one of the smartest and business-savviest men I know. Julia also brought some high-power hitters to the Wade executive board. Do you recall Lena Montgomery?"

Ella shook her head. "I don't recall her from when I worked here, but her name is familiar."

"Let's just say, she's right up there in the business savviness. Van and Lena did the legwork, but without Julia's idea, we'd all be worse off."

"It seems unusually generous. I remember things in the pharmaceutical sphere being more cutthroat. There was an issue with the local university

over the fight for a patent.”

I nodded at the memory. It had been a vicious fight. “That’s the thing about Julia—she’s as far from cutthroat as one could be. Honestly, she’s like you, good and kind. I’m not sure how Van convinced her that he deserved her.” I grinned. “I could ask for pointers.”

“Mr. Sinclair, you don’t need pointers. You do need restraint.”

“Oh?” I quirked an eyebrow. “I have some. Just not here.” I began to list my inventory. “Fur-lined handcuffs, silk ties, nipple clamps, blindfolds.” I grinned. “Those along with a few more toys are in a box in my closet.”

As a rosy hue filled her cheeks, Ella shook her head. “Restraint as in self-restraint in respecting other people’s boundaries. Like when being asked that you not make contact.”

“We’ve already established that you asked me not to call and I didn’t.” I looked at her nearly empty bowl. “Are you feeling better?”

Ella leaned back. “I am. Now that I understand the coalition, tell me about your idea for Beta Kappa Phi.”

A notification caused me to look down at my watch. As the words of an email I’d been awaiting scrolled across the screen, I noticed the time. “It’s nearly five. Johnathon has your badge, parking space, and office.”

“Office?”

I went on, “It will probably take him a little while to get you totally set.” I lifted my cheeks in a smile. “We can continue our meeting tonight at dinner.”

Ella shook her head. “Damien, I live in Carmel. I don’t have the energy to drive home and come back downtown.”

“I think you remember that I also live north. Since you just ate, after you meet with Johnathon, go home and rest. I’ll pick you up at seven thirty.”

“This is what I don’t want,” she said. “We can’t date.”

“Not a date, Ms. Crystal,” I explained. “There is simply more information to share and tomorrow my schedule is filled. The natural answer is to continue our meeting tonight.”

She sighed. “If I say no, will you contact Millie?”

“Only if it’s my last resort. I know what I want, and I want you here.”

She dropped her chin and lifted her gaze. “Tell me again why I need a Sinclair Corporate badge, parking space, and an office when I’m not working for Sinclair.”

“You, Ms. Crystal, are what we call an independent consultant. You will continue to be employed by Beta Kappa Phi. This structure is complicated.

Logistically, it makes sense for you to work in this building. You will be privy to information that should not be accessed in another location.” Before she could argue, I went on. “My legal department has been working with Beta Kappa Phi’s throughout the day. I just received the notification that the agreement has been reached.”

“You’re impossible.”

I stood. “I prefer resourceful.” I offered Ella my hand. “Do we have a deal?”

Chapter 14

Gabriella

Looking at Damien's hand, I smiled and shook my head. "No, Mr. Sinclair."

"No?"

"I've yet to hear the details of this proposal. I once had a friend who taught me better business skills than to agree too early."

"You don't trust the Beta Kappa Phi legal team?"

I trust them. "I don't trust you."

"Who did you learn your negotiating tactics from?"

"You."

Damien pulled back his hand. "This is a valid offer and one that will benefit Beta Kappa Phi." He grinned his sexy smirk. "I'll have to up my negotiation. Spend time with Johnathon now. Then the two of us will continue this discussion tonight at seven thirty."

Standing, I asked, "Why did you hire a male assistant?" The question slipped out before I could stop it.

"I hired a competent assistant," Damien replied smugly. "Gender wasn't a qualifying consideration."

"Listen to you," I mused. "You almost sound—"

"Don't let the façade fool you. I like control where I like it."

Tilting my head, I lifted a brow. I was experienced in where Damien liked

control.

He went on, “I’m a man who knows what he wants and how he wants it. I surround myself with the best individuals to accomplish those goals. You left an incredibly large void.” He reached for my hand. “I’m hoping we can work out a mutually beneficial agreement that will also accomplish my goal.”

Taking my hand back, I asked, “Do you think that we can keep it professional?”

“That isn’t part of my goal.”

Inhaling, I watched his smirk.

“That said,” he went on, “we can keep it both. I’m confident that we’re both capable of multitasking.”

“What if I were to say yes to the business” —because honestly, the coalition thing was impressive, and I was already thinking of ways to integrate Beta Kappa Phi— “but no to the multitasking? Will you accept my terms?”

“Of course.”

“You will?” I asked, surprised.

“If that’s the deal I can get, I’ll take it. And then I’ll work to prove to you that you truly *want* to multitask. I’ve been known to be both stubborn and persuasive.” He looked again at the table and lowered his tone. “For example, I could lift you to the edge of the table right now. Hike up that skirt...” His deep baritone timbre caused my breathing to hitch. “All you’d need to do is spread those sexy legs, and I’d take care of the rest.”

“Damien.” I wanted him to stop. At the same time, my mind filled with images of what he described. Looking up, I met his gaze. “Your question earlier?”

His brow furrowed as if he was trying to recall what he’d asked.

“About Saturday night,” I prompted.

“You didn’t sleep well.”

I lifted my chin. “I did enjoy being with you. Sex was never our problem.”

His eyes simmered like hot blue coals. “Perhaps we should concentrate on our strengths.”

The combination of the way he was looking at me, his raspy timbre, and memories of Saturday night had my insides twisting. Standing, I shook my head. “One negotiation at a time.”

Damien shook his head. “Success, Ms. Crystal, involves the ability to—”

“Multitask,” I interrupted.

He leaned closer. “Sweetheart, I smell your arousal. Multitasking could—in no time—get you the orgasm you didn’t allow me to give you the other night.”

Despite my tightening core and beading nipples, I pressed my thighs together and attempted to sound unaffected. “I would rather have you in my debt.”

“I doubt you’d *rather*. If I were a betting man, I’d bet your panties are wet.” He shook his head. “That’s a discussion for another time.” He gestured toward the door. “Are you ready for Johnathon?”

As the wanton fog of his multitasking surrounded us, we walked toward the door. My mind tried to filter all that had been said. I turned to him. “I can’t start working here tomorrow. I have an office and responsibilities.”

“We can discuss details tonight.”

“I would rather meet you. Text me the name of the restaurant.”

“Be ready at seven thirty.”

Everything from Millie’s announcement through this afternoon meeting was wearing me down. I didn’t have the fight in me to argue about a car ride. “I’ve moved. Do you need my address?”

Damien’s blue gaze shone as his firm lips formed a straight line.

Cocky bastard. “Of course, you don’t.”

Damien opened the door. “Johnathon, I’ll entrust Ms. Crystal to your care for the time being. Be sure she sees her new office.”

Johnathon smiled with a nod. “I have some paperwork and then we can...”

* * *

As soon as I got into the car, I called Millie Barns. Despite the time being nearly six o’clock, she answered her cell phone.

“How was your meeting?” she asked by way of a greeting.

“I don’t know, to be honest. The pharmaceutical coalition is fascinating.”

“Why haven’t you given Mr. Sinclair an answer?”

“You know I haven’t?” I asked, confused.

“Ella, do you understand how big this could be for the fraternity?”

Shaking my head, I caught a glimpse of the Sinclair badge lying upon my

passenger seat. “I felt I needed to talk to you first. Did you know he wants me to physically work from Sinclair Corporate Center?”

“He mentioned that it would make it easier.”

Make what easier?

I sighed as I gripped the steering wheel tighter. “Are you saying you’re all right with that? I won’t be working for him. I’ll still be employed by Beta Kappa Phi.”

“Yes.” She let the one-word answer hang in the air.

“You want me to do this?” I asked, feeling the pressure I should have expected.

“Ella, I’ve spent most of today on conference Zooms with members of our board. We all agree the benefits of this agreement outweigh the inconvenience.”

Inconvenience?

I live five minutes from our office. Sinclair Corporation Center is at least a thirty-minute drive, longer during busy times. “I’m the one dealing with the inconvenience.”

“Of course,” she replied, “and the board is prepared to compensate you for that. Mr. Sinclair made it clear that the only way forward is if you take the new position.”

“New position? Why would my title change?”

“Because your responsibilities will change. The board has a proposal. Come to my office tomorrow morning and I’ll explain better.”

I didn’t like the way this was making me feel. “Millie, who proposed a new title and compensation?”

Please don’t let it be Damien.

“It was my idea,” she said. “We have a strict structure we must maintain to keep our not-for-profit status. I realize that this is a big ask on my part. Your workload will increase. Your commute time will increase.”

“But...” I hated what I was thinking. “Without Damien Sinclair, you wouldn’t be offering any of this to me. I don’t want to receive a title or change in compensation because of him.”

“Come in tomorrow and we’ll discuss it.”

I didn’t respond as I merged into traffic. I was now driving on the interstate, headed toward the northwest side of the city. Thankfully, traffic had lightened since the five o’clock rush. The other alternative allowing me to stay off the interstate would have me in stop-and-go traffic up the center of

the city.

“Ella,” Millie said, “you’re correct. Without Damien Sinclair, we wouldn’t have the impetus nor the need to create this new position. If another person came to me with a similar offer, you would be on my short list of candidates for this position. Don’t undersell yourself. You’ve worked hard and your reputation precedes you.”

“What if it falls apart?”

“What do you mean?”

“What if we do this with the pharmacological coalition, and it doesn’t benefit Beta Kappa Phi the way we think it will?”

“We’ll cross that bridge. Not taking the chance would be considered failure. I’ll see you tomorrow. Please be in by nine.”

I didn’t have the chance to respond. She ended the call.

Nearing Carmel, my phone rang. The screen said Niles.

I hit the button on the steering wheel, my mind on Millie’s last comment.

“Hey.”

“You haven’t called. How did the meeting go?”

“The first thing I did was to call him a bastard.”

Niles’s laugh came through the speakers. “You really need to be more forthcoming—there is a history. I want all the dirt. How about meeting me for a drink? Jeremy is out of town, and I hate going home to an empty house.”

“I’d love to,” I answered honestly, “but my meeting isn’t over.”

“Calling that gorgeous man a bastard didn’t get you thrown out?”

“No. It earned me his infuriating sexy smirk.” I thought about the office Johnathon showed to me. The space was a beautiful office on the top floor. While there weren’t corner windows as in Damien’s office, it was nicer than I’d ever had. “Niles, Damien wants me to work from Sinclair Corporate Center. If I do, I won’t be down the hall from you.”

“That’s a definite deal breaker. Does Millie know?”

“She does. I’m going to talk to her more about it tomorrow. How about lunch?”

“It’s a date. Be prepared to be forthcoming.” He paused. “Wait, where are you? Are you still there, with him?”

“No. I’m on my way home.” I rolled my eyes. “He’s picking me up at seven thirty to continue the meeting.”

“Are you sure this isn’t a date?”

“Nope, not a date,” I answered. “Extended meeting.”

“Where is he taking you?”

“I didn’t ask.”

“I don’t want you working so far away,” he said, “but that said, I was able to dig into this a little today with Millie. The proposal to partner in a campaign with the pharmaceutical coalition is...well, for Beta Kappa Phi, it could be a move that will bring us even higher, increasing our visibility and power. I know we joke, but damn, think of the campaigns we could build and the people we could help. Millie was practically giddy.”

“No pressure.”

“She told me,” Niles said, “that he’ll only work with you.”

“Yeah.”

“Lighten up. This could be career changing.”

“Or it could be the end.”

“Never,” he said. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

“Don’t do anything you don’t want to do.”

“That’s the problem,” I said as I turned down the street to my condo. “I want to do things I shouldn’t.” I was also starting to feel that the decision was no longer in my control.

Chapter 15

Gabriella

Why didn't I ask where we were going to dinner?

As I stood in the middle of my closet, wrapped in a towel following a quick shower, I debated my clothing choices. I didn't want to be overdressed, but knowing Damien, it was more likely that I'd be underdressed. The man exuded sexiness no matter what he wore or didn't wear.

The clock on my dresser told me I had only twenty minutes to make a decision and turn myself into a competent woman, one continuing a meeting.

"What do you think, Duchess?" I asked my black cat sitting on the end of my bed with a bored expression.

"Black is a safe color."

Duchess didn't respond as I chose a black maxi dress. It was sleeveless with a scooped neckline. The bodice had built-in cups, taking away the need for a bra. Being that it was spring in Indiana, I also decided to add a cardigan. Accenting the ensemble with a long necklace and casual heels, I would fit perfectly into any dinner situation.

My long hair was flowing down my back in soft waves. As I put the finishing touches on my lips—pink, not too dark, the doorbell rang. Looking at my reflection, I thought this was all in vain. After all, this wasn't a date.

I would have worn the same thing to drinks with Niles.

As I took one last look in the mirror, I knew I was telling myself a lie. I would have gone out with Niles straight from work. There wouldn't have been a shower or a quick shave. For the record, I didn't go bald, but there was some trimming that needed to be done. Not that it would be seen. With Niles, I wouldn't have changed clothes or redone my makeup.

Other than all those things, it was the same as going with Niles for drinks. The doorbell rang again.

"Wish me luck," I said to Duchess, who was now curled into a circle near the end of my bed. She didn't even bother to open her eyes. "Thanks for the support." Shaking my head, I made my way down the stairs toward the front door. "I'm coming," I called.

Through the lead-glass transom, I saw Damien on my front porch. My steps slowed as I descended lower toward the first-floor foyer. While the image was distorted, as I neared, I realized I'd been mistaken. The person outside wasn't Damien. The build and strawberry-blond hair were wrong.

Opening the door, I met Johnathon's green gaze as his smile flashed. "Johnathon? I was expecting Damien...Mr. Sinclair."

"Mr. Sinclair asked that I pick you up and take you to the restaurant."

A chill ran over my skin. "Was there a problem?"

"I don't think so," Johnathon said with a chipper attitude. "You may call him if you'd like."

I'd deleted Damien's number years ago. However, his number reappeared on my phone Saturday night. It was still there. I opened the front door wider. "Come in. I'll go upstairs and call Mr. Sinclair." I feigned a smile. "I'm sure it was just a misunderstanding."

Johnathon was dressed exactly as he had been at the office, making me wonder if he'd had any break at all.

"Can I get you anything?" I offered before going upstairs. "Water?"

"No, thank you." He looked around. "Your place is nice."

I tilted my head toward the living room. "You're welcome to have a seat. I'll be just a minute."

As I climbed the stairs, I told myself that I'd spent nearly an hour with Damien's assistant this afternoon-slash-evening. I wasn't uncomfortable with him being present or as my chauffeur. It was the change in plans that had me uneasy.

Once in my bedroom, I shut the door. Duchess stretched, her eyes on me. Shaking my head, I removed my phone from my purse. The volume was still

off from my workday. That wouldn't have mattered. I didn't miss a call. It was a text message I'd missed, sent ten minutes ago. The screen read Damien. Inhaling, I swiped the screen.

"I've upped the negotiation. Call me."

"Bastard," I muttered as I hit the green icon.

"Ella," he said as he answered. "Did you finally see the text or is Johnathon there?"

"Both."

"And you are in the car?"

"No," I said in a hushed tone. "Damien, this isn't a business negotiation."

"It's multitasking. Here is what I'd like you to do to prepare for our meeting."

"Prepare? I'm ready to walk out the door."

"Where are you? Is Johnathon in the room?"

Duchess rubbed her forehead against my hip as I scanned my bedroom. Instead of telling him where I was, I simply said, "He's downstairs."

"Very good. While I appreciate his loyalty, no one else gets a glimpse at your beautiful pussy. Do you have any desire to continue these negotiations?"

What the actual fuck?

"Inappropriate."

"Tell me and I'll retract my offer."

Sighing, I sat on the edge of my bed. "You're asking me this now if I want to continue?"

Why didn't he ask this afternoon?

I would have gladly left.

"I'm waiting," he said, impatiently.

"Yes, Damien. I don't want to end them." It wasn't the same as wanting them to continue, but it was the closest to the truth.

His smirk was audible in his tone. "As you'll learn tonight, my offer is in good faith. To continue the negotiations, I'm asking you to do something in good faith."

"Shit, Damien. What?"

“Remove your panties.”

My heart rate intensified. “What the hell?”

His laugh rumbled through the phone. “I’ll see you soon. I’ve already ordered a bottle of your favorite wine. And if you don’t think I’ll confirm your good-faith effort, you’re mistaken.”

My teeth ached from the pressure. “I’m not doing this.”

“Will you be the one to call Ms. Barns and inform her that the deal is off, or would you like me to speak to her?”

I looked again toward my closed door and lowered my voice. “This is illegal.”

“I’d never force you, Ella. Oh, and now because I hear your arousal, I also want you to bring the panties you’re wearing. I can only imagine how wet they are.”

Before I could reply, the call ended.

“Damn you,” I growled as I tossed the phone onto the bed. Duchess’s green eyes were wide, looking at me. “He’s an ass.”

She lifted her chin, obviously a sign she agreed with my statement.

Closing my eyes and pinching my lips together, I fought the onset of another headache, while concurrently considering Damien’s request. Opening my eyes, I looked down at my phone, wondering what Millie would say if I called her and told her what Damien wanted. As that thought passed by, I recalled what Niles had said earlier.

He’d told me not to do anything I didn’t want to do.

What do I want to do?

Within my closet was a full-length mirror. Flipping the switch, a round crystal light fixture filled the space with illumination. I stepped inside. In the reflection, my face was flushed and my décolletage had a rosy glow. The buzzing in my stomach told me what I didn’t want to admit.

The sensation was the same as when I’d first spotted him at the airport bar, when he wanted to pay for my lunch. This was Damien’s game. Cat and mouse. He was the master and believed he made the rules.

Lifting the skirt to my dress, I seized the waistband of my panties and pulled them down my legs and over my heeled sandals.

Meeting my own gaze, my lips slowly curled. “Fuck you, Damien. I’ve played your games before. This time, I’ll win.” I quickly switched my handbag for one a little larger. Next, I went to the dresser and found a clean pair of panties, and because he was right about the condition of the ones I had

been wearing, I stuffed the clean ones into the purse.

As I descended the staircase and the air flowed beneath my skirt, I was thankful for the length of the maxi dress. Johnathon looked up as I turned the corner in the stairs. He was exactly where I'd left him, near the front door.

Once I reached him, I grinned. "You could tell me where you're taking me, and I could drive. Save you from waiting for our meeting to be done."

"I'm afraid Mr. Sinclair was very specific."

"How often do you fetch Mr. Sinclair's meeting guests for dinner?"

Johnathon opened the front door to the street and held it open. As I passed by, he answered, "I'm sworn to confidentiality, Ms. Crystal. I assure you, all secrets are safe with me."

"Yet today you told me I was a rumor."

"I apologize for that, ma'am. I'd rather you don't mention that to Mr. Sinclair." He opened the back door of a large black SUV.

"How often?" I asked again.

He stalled for a moment before answering, "You're the first."

"Your secret is also safe with me, Johnathon. Remember, I know what working for a man like Damien Sinclair can be like."

"I'm happy with my job." He closed the door.

Fastening my seat belt, I waited until Johnathon was in the driver's seat. "Where are we going?"

"Anthony's Chophouse."

Pressing my thighs together, I was acutely aware of my lack of undergarments. Nevertheless, Anthony's Chophouse was a popular restaurant in downtown Carmel. Damien could play his little games, but at a table or even a booth, surrounded by other patrons, tonight would be about verbal sparring and despite the small hint of a headache, I was ready to fight.

Chapter 16

Gabriella

Despite the fact that Anthony's Chophouse had opened a few years ago and it was close to my condo, I'd yet to visit the upscale steak house. If necessary, I could walk home.

Johnathon stopped the SUV near the front entry, came around, and opened my door. With a nod and a grin, he said, "Have a nice meeting, Ms. Crystal."

I stepped from the vehicle, the warm spring air billowing the skirt of my dress. I smiled at Johnathon. "If we're going to be working near one another...my name is Ella."

"Ella," he repeated.

Clutching my handbag, I climbed the steps to the front door. Large wooden doors flanked by glass created the sought-after atmosphere. Once inside, I waited for the hostess. As I did, I surveyed the luxurious spacious dining area, complete with guests and waiters. A fleeting look higher told me there were additional floors of seating.

I stepped forward. The hostess was young, younger than Johnathon, with light brown hair, wearing all black. When it was my turn, I said, "Gabriella Crystal. I'm meeting Mr. Sinclair."

"Ms. Crystal," the hostess smiled too big. "Please follow me."

I expected to be taken to a table or perhaps escorted upstairs. I

remembered reading about a rooftop lounge. However, instead of those options, the hostess led me to an elevator and to my surprise, pushed a button to go down.

“Where are we going?”

“Mr. Sinclair reserved our private dining room.” She smiled. “It’s beautiful and has a window into our wine cellar.” Her smile grew. “It’s much more secluded.”

With each word, my stomach twisted.

By the time the elevator stopped, I was on the verge of hitting the button to make it go back up. Biting the inside of my lip, I remembered my resolve.

Bring on the games, Damien.

The hostess and I stepped into a cooled corridor. Our shoes echoed off the brick walls as I followed to a closed door near the end. She reached for the handle and opened the heavy door. “Usually, this room has a table for twenty,” the hostess said as the room came into view.

The table for twenty had been replaced with a table for two. The arrangement was almost comical in the long room. As the hostess had promised, to one side was a window that offered a view of the large wine cellar.

As the hostess and I entered, Damien stood, his arrogant smirk in place, as his eyes scanned from my hair to my shoes and back to my eyes. His earlier suit was gone, leaving his long legs covered by dark jeans and his toned muscular torso covered by a black button-down shirt. The sleeves were rolled to near his elbows, and the top two buttons were undone. With the precision of a gentleman stalker, he walked to the opposite chair and pulled it back for me. Turning to the hostess, he kindly dismissed her.

I couldn’t be sure of his send-off because as I sat, the intoxicating scent of his cologne surrounded me. His lips blew warm breaths near my ear, and in a deep voice, he whispered, “You’re late, Ms. Crystal.”

My mouth went dry as his timbre and tone shouldn’t send shock waves through my body.

I didn’t want to react.

That didn’t negate the fact that I did. My body quivered all the way to my freshly trimmed and uncovered pussy. Thankfully, the cups in the bodice shielded my nipples from sharing my body’s unwanted reaction. Keeping my thighs pressed tightly together, I maintained my dignity, my neck straight and my chin high.

The door closed, leaving us alone in the cavernous underground room.

“I had an unexpected change of plans,” I explained as Damien walked back to the other wingback chair and sat.

“We can discuss tardiness at a later time.” He lifted the bottle of wine. “2018 Paul Hobbs Nathan Coombs Estate Cabernet Sauvignon.”

“I’m sure it’s delicious.”

“While I was waiting, I sampled it. You’ll find hints of baker’s chocolate and dark cherry to crème de cassis to tapenade.” He poured some in my wine goblet. “It’s both graceful and bold. The broad tannins balance the acidity, and you’ll taste the tension and freshness.” Damien lifted his glass. “To more negotiations.”

After tapping our glasses, I lifted the goblet to my nose and swirled the deep crimson liquid. “It smells nice,” I mocked before taking a sip.

Damn. It was delicious.

“I recalled you liking it.”

“I also like the giant bottle of Woodbridge I can buy at Walmart on sale for twelve dollars.”

Damien’s forehead furrowed in a scowl. “Self-deprecation isn’t a good look for you, Ella. You know how to enjoy the finer things in life. Perhaps you’ve forgotten.”

Setting my glass on the table, I looked around. “Restraint, Damien. Reserving an entire room isn’t restraint. It is narcissistic. I know you have money. I don’t need to be reminded.”

“It’s not about money. It’s about privacy.”

“We could have eaten carry-out and continued our discussion in your office.” I nodded toward his attire, thinking how we’d also matched at the gala. “Was there a memo to wear black?”

He grinned. “You’re lovely, as usual.” He leaned forward, his eyebrows raised. “I’m not going to ask about your show of good faith.” His lips curled. “If my senses are to be trusted, you complied. My sense of smell is rather acute. Your arousal is even sweeter than the wine.”

“Cabernet is known for its dryness.”

My rebuttal earned me a smirk and scoff.

Before our discussion continued, the door opened and two waiters entered, one pushing a linen-covered cart.

“Good evening,” the first man greeted. “I am George, and this” —he motioned to the second man— “is Benjamin. We are here for you this

evening.”

“Hello, George and Benjamin,” we answered in unison.

George was apparently the speaker of the two. “Is the wine to your liking? I would be happy to get you...” He went on and on...

Damien’s impatience began to show as George recited every special including the multitude of ways they could be cooked. It was as George was gilding the lily of the numerous side-dish options that Damien finally lifted his hand.

“Thank you, George. We will share tuna tartare. The lady will have your Mediterranean salmon with a Caesar salad, and broiled asparagus. I will have your Wagyu filet, nine ounce, medium rare, with lobster Maxwell and a wedge salad.”

“Very well.”

“Excuse me,” I said with a placating smile. “I’ve changed my mind.” Not that I’d ever stated what I wanted. I hadn’t even looked at a menu until George started speaking. “I’ll have the Wagyu filet also. Make mine the six ounce, cooked medium, but instead of lobster Maxwell, I’ll take mine with crab Oscar. And I don’t need a salad.”

George nodded. “Very well.” He looked to both of us. “Tuna tartare?”

We both nodded.

“We’ll serve the bread first. Is there anything else I can bring you?”

Instead of answering, Damien lifted a brow and tilted his head toward me. “Is everything to your liking—in case you’ve changed your mind?”

“Please bring two checks. Oh yes, now I think I’m good.” I opened my eyes wide. “I wouldn’t want to speak for you, though.”

His lips came together as if he were trying to suppress a smile. “I believe we’re good for now.” He lifted one finger.

George nodded.

When the door closed, Damien’s laugh filled the room. “What did I say Saturday about your take-charge sexy side?” He lifted his glass. “That’s right, I said it was fucking hot.”

“You’re mistaken. I’m not trying to be hot. We’re also not on a date. I am capable of ordering my own meal and paying for it. Now, talk to me about the campaign.”

“The details have been finalized with Beta Kappa Phi.”

Details regarding my assignment. “I’m the one you want working at Sinclair Corporate. Unless you plan on one member or all of the legal team

working there, they aren't the final word. Start talking."

His head shook only slightly. It was mostly visible in the way his dark blond hair moved. After a sigh, Damien refilled both of our glasses. "Here's the thing," he began. "The coalition consists of seven smaller pharmaceutical companies. In the two years since its inception, we've had continued success in our lobbying effectiveness as well as the ability to reach legislators who ultimately vote on our individual specialty drugs. Beta Kappa Phi can work as an adjunct, reaching people and organizations that we aren't able to reach."

"Are there any legal issues with this proposed campaign?"

"No." He hesitated. "What we've faced is more of an ethical dilemma."

"You want Beta Kappa Phi to breach ethical boundaries?"

"No. Think about your gala Saturday night."

I nodded.

"You worked the room. You exceeded your donation goal. Now, imagine doing the same thing, working not only donors, but the facilities and specialists who prescribe our formulas. Talk to them about Beta Kappa Phi's campaigns, those that assist with medical expenses, that work to improve access to care, hell...invent new campaigns. Then as you implement the campaigns, let the executive board or the officers of the facilities know that our coalition has made your work possible. Along the way, let them know about our different signature formulas. It's like the saying, I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine."

"You basically want me to lobby to the people we help?"

He shook his head. "The people the fraternity aids need your help. There are more people who could benefit from Beta Kappa Phi. That's where we, the coalition, come in. It's not the patients or clients who you will be lobbying. You will alert the administration of the facilities that your good work is made possible by the coalition. For example, if Beta Kappa Phi is helping to pay for treatment." He pressed his lips into a straight line. "For cancer treatment?"

I nodded.

"Beta Kappa Phi reimburses the facility, not the client, correct?"

"Correct. Different facilities work closer with us. The cost is prorated. And giving to the client would cause tax problems for many of them who can't afford that."

"Prorated," he repeated, "because you work with that facility."

"Yes."

“Ella, it’s the same thing. Your position will be as the program director over the coalition’s distribution campaign.”

Before I could respond, the door opened, and George returned with our tuna tartare.

As we started to eat, Damien asked, “Do you have any questions?”

The appetizer melted on my tongue. “I’m certain I will. I’m not thinking straight.”

Damien’s lips quirked. “Is it the wine, the tuna, or the company?”

“It’s been a long day.” I took another sip of wine. “Why can’t this work be done from my office, within Beta Kappa Phi?”

“Because you have a lot to learn about the seven different companies.” He lifted his hand. “I’m sure you were well versed with Sinclair, but we’ve made significant advancements in the last two years. Wade, Holston, McCree...they’re all different, and the same. I don’t believe even Julia or any other CEOs would be happy with you taking proprietary information about their companies to your office in Carmel. Hell, I don’t want Sinclair data there. They, the members of the coalition, have agreed to allow you access to their sensitive data in a controlled environment.”

I shook my head. “Is that what Sinclair Corporation is...a controlled environment?”

His blue orbs lightened like white-hot embers. “Control is one of my objectives.” He wiped the corners of his mouth. “Speaking of which...may I see your purse?”

“A purse is a rather personal collection of items.”

He lifted his hand.

Maybe it was the wine or the tuna. I couldn’t pinpoint the reason I handed him my clutch.

With a smirk, he unclasped the latch. With the innate sense of a bloodhound, Damien didn’t hesitate to dig his long fingers beyond my comb, phone, and lipstick. As the door opened again, he retrieved my panties, balled them into his fist, and placed them in the front pocket of his jeans.

With a grin, he handed me back my purse. “Thank you.”

Oh my God.

“If you need another tissue...” I said, fearing George was listening.

Damien smirked. “I’m not done. There are more answers to learn.”

While having George walk in on us was embarrassing, I was relieved that with the interruption Damien didn’t have the chance to examine the panties,

to learn they were clean or check to see if I was wearing any.

“Another time,” I said with a smile as George retrieved our appetizer plates.

“The night is young.”

Chapter 17

Damien

As I ate my wedge salad, Ella sipped her wine and asked, “Did you speak with Ms. Barns after our earlier meeting?”

“During...would be a better description. Or between. We are still meeting, correct?”

“Correct.” Her eyebrows came together. “Why?”

“Why did I speak to her? She’s the executive director of Beta Kappa Phi.”

“Yes, she’s also my boss.”

“I thought she should know the deal wasn’t yet complete. We would continue our negotiation.” I wiped my lips with the napkin as I tried to assess Ella’s expression. “Ms. Barns told you?”

“I called her after I left Sinclair Corporate. She already knew I hadn’t yet agreed.”

“What will you tell her in the morning?” I asked.

Ella leaned forward, offering me a nice view of the tops of her breasts. Perhaps I should institute a dress code, only low-cut necklines.

“Damien, are you listening?”

My lips quirked as my gaze met hers. “I was distracted. What were you saying?”

“I was saying that I am extremely interested in the campaign to partner

between our fraternity and your coalition; however, due to our history—our personal history—I don't believe I'm the best person for this position.”

“I disagree.”

Ella's pink lips pursed as she exhaled. “If you truly want the partnership, who the liaison is shouldn't be a factor.”

“Oh, but it is.” As I was about to retrieve her panties from my pocket, the door again opened. “Our meals are here.”

The Wagyu filet was tender enough to cut with a butter knife.

“This is delicious,” Ella said between forkfuls.

Simply having Gabriella across the table brought back a slew of memories I'd tried to tuck away, to forget. She might not see, or maybe had forgotten, the ways we were meant to be together, but I saw them. I remembered every one. Letting her go over two years ago was a mistake.

Mistakes happened.

I didn't get where I was today by making mistakes and not righting them.

The response—what occurred next after the mistake—was what separated success and failure. Successful people had the tenacity to continue a quest.

While Sinclair Pharmaceuticals was first started by my great-grandfather, the company was headed for extinction before I could get my hands dirty. Darius was not the man to replace our dad. The entire fiasco of my brother's short-term attempt at leadership left my father considering the eventual submission of Sinclair as a footnote of Big Pharma.

Not long after I began working at Sinclair, a newly hired chemist came to me with the news of a revolutionary chemical compound to treat PTSD. He was aware of the formula due to ongoing research at a local university. Appealing to my father, I went on the search for more information. The university's research hadn't reached the patent phase. Their findings were promising, yet not fully proven. While our new chemist was young and incredibly talented, he'd come across the research in a less-than-scrupulous manner.

Nevertheless, it was a breakthrough, and the university had not fully executed exclusivity. To claim the rights, Sinclair had to beat the university to the patent.

I convinced my father to pour more money into our own research utilizing the formulas that the university was testing. Even as small pharma, we had more financial resources than educational research. At the time, the market was wide open for such a medication.

As our research grew, the university abruptly shut theirs down. It was never determined why. Lack of funding and inconsistent results were listed publicly. The untimely deaths of key scientists involved in the department and the unexpected departure of others were no doubt key factors.

That was nearly five years ago—the cutthroat era Ella recalled earlier.

Today, my father and the other Sinclair shareholders were enjoying the fruits of my labor.

Despite the increasing threat of biotech, Sinclair Pharmaceuticals was growing more prominent in the world of medications. Our compound received its patent. The organic compound propanolamine, mutated at position one and three, was now available for prescription, recommended as an adjunct to therapy, not to be used without medical observation.

In the past four and a half years, under my control as CEO, the value of Sinclair Pharmaceuticals has tripled. Today, we're one of the most profitable small pharma companies in the country. I'd proven myself—but I needed to do more. We needed more facilities and doctors willing to prescribe our treatment.

Darius was jealous that I'd succeeded where he failed. In another five months, that wouldn't matter.

Tenacity.

I had it.

I'd succeeded because of it and planned to continue.

Staring at the beautiful woman across from me, I believed that tenacity would be the reason I achieved my goal of keeping Ella. She wasn't a prize or a patent. She was the vibrant, intelligent, sensual woman whom I knew without a doubt would complete me.

She'd said that sex was never our problem, and yet at the hotel, she'd said she couldn't do it again. I would convince her otherwise.

My intention was to accentuate the positive while pulling her into my sphere and giving her a place of her own where she could shine. Her potential was without bounds. Together we would be unstoppable.

Finishing our meal, Ella laid her napkin near her plate. "Thank you for a nice evening. I should be going."

I shook my head.

"What?"

"Our negotiations are not done."

"They are," she said with a soft smile. "I'm exhausted. I need to be to

work by nine.” She tilted her head. “I hope you truly want this campaign, Damien. I believe it could be mutually beneficial, and the idea of increasing current campaigns with the finances to accomplish more of Beta Kappa Phi’s goals, well, it’s enticing.”

“I’m committed.”

“Then the representative shouldn’t matter.”

“How can you say that?” I asked. “The person matters significantly. Van and I want to know the person in this position is capable, competent, trustworthy, open to learning, courageous...and exhibits integrity. That’s you.”

“That’s quite the compliment.”

I stood and offered Ella my hand. “Shall we continue the negotiations?”

Her blue eyes narrowed. “I’m done for tonight.”

“Trust me.”

As Ella stood, I noticed the slight change in her breathing, the way her breasts pushed against her dress. She tipped her chin up, meeting my stare. “I can walk home,” she said.

“Not alone.” I lifted my hands. “I wouldn’t be a gentleman or a friend if I allowed that.”

“Carmel is safe.”

My lips curled. “You can never be too careful.”

She reached for her purse. “Wait? What about the check?”

“I took care of it.”

She turned from side to side. “When? It never arrived. I planned to pay my part.”

“It was covered before you arrived.” My hand went to the small of her back as I splayed my fingers. “Come, I have a sweet dessert planned.”

“I couldn’t eat another bite.”

Leaning closer, I whispered, “I can.”

The turmoil in her orbs was enough to whet my appetite. “I haven’t yet confirmed your good-faith gesture.”

“I gave you—”

“They weren’t the ones you wore to the office.”

Ella’s eyes grew wide as we waited for the elevator.

“Which would not be in good faith.” I tilted my head. “Do you plan on arguing?”

“No. They aren’t the same because I took a shower.”

“They weren’t worn,” I said matter-of-factly. The elevator doors opened, and we stepped in. “Shame it isn’t a longer ride.” Once the door closed, I added, “Sweetheart, I smell you and that wonderful scent isn’t coming from my hand. If the panties in my pocket had been worn, I’d imagine I’d have twice the aroma.”

Pink flowed up her neck to her cheeks.

The doors opened.

We said good night to the hostess who opened the large wooden door. The night sky high above was dark and the air chilled. Lampposts illuminated circles of light upon the sidewalk.

“I don’t live far,” she said, taking a step away.

Her skin was pebbled with goosebumps.

“My car is at your condo. I’ll walk you home.” I wrapped my arm around her waist, pulling her close. “If I had a suit coat, I’d wrap you in it.”

“I meant to bring a sweater,” she said, not fighting our closeness. “I guess I was thrown off by Johnathon’s arrival. I expected you.”

“Was that all that threw you off?”

She craned her neck upward. “You know it wasn’t.”

That was good.

I wanted Gabriella to be thrown off, off-kilter, or more accurately, I wanted to be the one to steady her. Ella stopped as we turned the corner to her street. My Lamborghini Huracán STO was parked on the street a few doors down from her condo. Yes, I remembered that she liked this car. It’s a few years old, deep red, and sleek.

“How did I not see that before?” She turned to me. “Pulling out the big guns to impress, I see.”

I pulled her closer against me, shielding her from the cool night air. “In full disclosure, I’m wearing jeans to keep the big gun where it belongs...until it’s time for it to make an appearance.”

Chapter 18

Gabriella

“*T*hank you for walking me home,” I said as I fished the house key from my handbag.

Damien peered around at the other houses on the street. All of the condos were designed in the image of old brownstones, tall and slender, each one unique enough to differentiate where one ended and the next began. Trees with baby leaves rustled in the breeze. Distant sounds of televisions and music seeped from open windows that glowed with interior lights. Despite the cool temperature in this climate, this was the time of year when many opened their windows at night. The warm days could quickly elevate the temperatures on the second floor. Having an open window at night made for a fresh, comfortable, and cooler bedroom.

Placing the key in the pocket of my dress, I turned and leaned against the door.

Damien lifted one hand to the doorjamb, his body blocking me from the street. Heat radiated off him in intoxicating waves. His deep timbre caused the small hairs on my arms to stand to attention. “How well do you know your neighbors?”

I shrugged. “Some better than others.”

“How well do you want them to know you?”

Tilting my head, I pressed my lips together, uncertain of his meaning.

“You could invite me in.”

“Invite you?” My smile grew. “Tell me, are you now a vampire?”

His lips pursed and his eyebrows quirked.

“Vampires can’t enter a house without—” I shook my head with a grin. Ignoring the vibration within me, my mind overpowered my need for passion. “Never mind. I think it’s too late. Remember, I have a meeting in the morning, and to be honest, this day has been longer than I expected.”

His free hand came to my waist as he leaned closer. Millimeters separated our bodies. Our breaths mingled as he stared into my eyes. “I could lift this dress right here to find out if you’re sincere about the partnership.”

My breathing hitched. “Damien, no.”

“I won’t pull the dress all the way up.” His words and phrases created a mind-altering cadence. “In case you obeyed, I don’t want anyone else seeing your perfect pussy. I just need to lift it high enough to brush my fingers over your flesh and find out how sincere you are...”

I slid my upper lip between my teeth as my flesh warmed.

“Tell me, Ella, will I find your pussy bare? I hope you didn’t shave it bald for me. I meant what I said about fucking a woman, not a child.”

“Daaaamien.”

“I could stop there, just a brush over your sensitive cunt, or I could delve between your folds.”

The blue flames sparked to life in his orbs. His words ignited the kindling. I could be upset with Damien, but that didn’t mean I was unaffected. There wasn’t a repellent capable of shielding me from the passion he was capable of igniting or a cure to make me forget—I’d tried.

His deep voice reverberated through me. “If I spread you open, would I find your warm, wet pussy hungry for my fingers? One? Two?”

My breathing came faster as I clasped my thighs together, aware of the emptiness of my core.

“Would your walls clench around them like they do my cock? What if I swirled your clit? Is it enlarged and sensitive?”

He lifted his hand from my waist, teasing my lip free from my teeth. Slowly, he ran his thumb over my bottom lip. “These lips are magic.” I swore his eyes rolled to the back of his head as he reminisced. “The way you sucked me the other night.”

I parted my lips, sucking his finger.

The air filled with his guttural growl. His focus concentrated on my lips

until he leaned in, taking my mouth with his.

Despite my earlier determination, my body was a traitor. I was drawn closer, leaning into his frame and pushing my soft curves against his hard planes. All at once, his fingers encircled my neck, lifting my face and applying pressure to my throat. My pussy clenched at the aching emptiness as my mind concocted visions of all he'd described.

His tongue sought entrance as I opened my mouth, gasping for air.

The world around us dimmed. All that mattered was the two of us. Whether from lack of oxygen or simply Damien intoxication, I was only mildly aware that he'd begun to ball the skirt of my dress. Higher and higher the material rose. If not for the cool breeze, he may have succeeded.

Taking a step back, I panted, filling my lungs and pressing my lips together, pushed against his chest. "You're going to have to trust me."

Damien took my hand and pressed it against the front of his jeans. The large bulge beneath was rock hard, no doubt straining the zipper. "Fuck, Ella. This isn't about working together. It's about the way I feel when I'm with you. Multitasking. If I don't know the answer to my question, I won't be able to sleep tonight."

I wouldn't be able to sleep either, not without bringing out the vibrator from my bedside stand. Hell, I was so hot, it wouldn't take much to push me over the edge.

"Tomorrow," he said, "we'll start with a clean slate. Tonight, I want to touch you, taste you, and watch you come."

For a moment, I stared into his gaze.

Vibrator.

Damien.

Taking the key from my pocket, I spun until I faced the door. As soon as it was unlocked, I turned the handle and pushed inside. My invitation wasn't verbal as I reached for Damien's hand and tugged him inside the dark entry. The only light came from the kitchen, a blue glow from the panel on the refrigerator.

As the door closed tight, Damien reached for my shoulders, spinning us both until my shoulders collided with the door. Placing my hand over his chest, I felt the rapid beat of his heart seconds before his mouth again found mine.

Definitely not a vampire.

Damien was a hot-blooded, arrogant, sexy, impossible, handsome...did I

say sexy...male. I knew that to be certain. The erection currently probing my stomach was further evidence.

As my breathing labored, he took a step back, his cocky grin growing. In the dim lighting, his pupils dilated, making his eyes appear as black as his shirt. "Lift your dress and show me."

Show him.

My thoughts were obviously on display because Damien's smile grew even larger. "You don't want to show me. You want me to find out. You want my fingers in your cunt. Don't you?"

"Damien."

He lifted my chin and intensely focused on my eyes. The connection was electric and unbreakable. I couldn't look away if I wanted to. "Say it. Say what you want." His finger came to my lips. "Don't lie to me. I'll know if you do, and I don't like to be lied to." He lifted his finger. "What do you want? Be specific."

My mouth was as dry as the desert. I fleetingly considered telling him I wanted him to leave. That would be a lie.

"Ella, I'm not a fan of repeating myself."

I licked my lips. "I want you to find out. I want your fingers."

"Good girl. Lift your dress." He reached again for my chin. "Eyes on me. Mine will stay on you. I won't look. The only way I'll find out if you're covered is with touch. Can you do that?"

Nodding, I reached for the hem of my dress. Despite the freedom from his grasp, my gaze stayed focused on Damien's. True to his word, his stare never wavered, staying fixed on mine.

"Pull the dress all the way off," he said as the sound of a zipper filled the air.

A zipper.

My core clenched. I wanted to see what he was doing.

As soon as the dress was over my head, I tried to look down. Before I could, Damien seized my wrists with one hand, in an ironclad grip, and lifted them over my head. His cheeks rose. "I know you're gorgeous even without looking." Using the finger of his free hand, he ran a trail from my neck to between my breasts, lower.

His sexy growl ricocheted through me as his finger skirted over my trimmed mound. "Good girl."

I wasn't sure if the praise was for not shaving myself bald or for the lack

of panties.

A yelp left my lips as he teased my folds and plunged two fingers deep within me.

“So fucking wet.” He pulled his fingers away.

The immediate emptiness left my core clenching at nothing.

“Do you want to come?”

“I do,” I said, not caring that in only two words, the wanton need within me was audible.

Damien released my wrists.

Maintaining the eye contact, I shook my hands, returning circulation.

He pointed from me to him. “Don’t you fucking dare look away.” His arm moved and his expression shifted. “Touch yourself. Make yourself come.”

“I want you.”

“I’m busy.”

Oh my God.

He was pleasing himself.

Jacking off right here in my entry.

“Do it, Ella. I want to watch your expression as you come.”

My lips came together as with one hand I twisted a nipple. The other hand went to my core. My skin grew tight, dampening with perspiration. I didn’t need to penetrate to come. Pushing my clit in circles faster and faster, my breathing stuttered. The scene before me was erotic and intense. I couldn’t see Damien’s cock in his hand, but I knew what he was doing. I knew in the guttural sounds, the morphing of his features, and the way his neck strained.

We were both almost there.

The blaze in his orbs added to the roaring heat pulsating through my veins.

My knees weakened, my spine arched, and wetness coated my thighs.

At the same time, Damien’s roar echoed off the walls. Warm liquid spurted over my breasts and stomach. We both gasped for breath.

“Eyes on me,” he said.

I obeyed.

By the way he was moving, I knew Damien was putting himself back in his jeans while the evidence of our orgasms dripped down my skin.

The air cooled until he leaned forward, tenderly kissing my lips. “Thank you.”

My neck stretched as Damien's touch moved to my core, his finger swirling in my essence and then moving up my stomach, swirling in his. He pushed his finger into his mouth and sucked. The foyer echoed with a pop as he removed his finger from his strong lips. His gaze shimmered. "We taste fucking fantastic together."

Once again, his finger collected our nectar. This time he brought the concoction to my lips. I didn't need to be told to open. I did, taking his finger and sucking. Sweet and tangy. Salty yet sugary. I held tight to his hand with two of mine as I rolled my tongue around his outstretched digit.

The deep rumble in his throat made me smile.

Freeing his hand, Damien took a step back, turning and looking around. "I'll clean you. Where is a bath—?" He didn't finish his question. Instead, his focus went to Duchess who had been sitting quietly on the stairs watching our private performance.

"Duchess?" Damien asked.

I nodded. "Yes. She seems to have enjoyed the show."

Damien took a step toward her, crouched down, and reached out his hand.

Duchess stretched her neck, rubbing against his hand and accepting his pet.

"I think she remembers me," he said.

"You're the one who rescued her from the animal shelter." I reached down and gathered my dress. As Damien rekindled his friendship with Duchess, I pulled the dress over my head, aware that I was still marked.

Once the dress covered me, I saw that Damien was standing with Duchess in his arms. Her green eyes were closed.

"Traitor," I said to her.

Her purr was loud enough for me to hear.

I shook my head. "I'd tell you that usually she hides when anyone else is here, but I don't want to give you a bigger head than you have."

Damien looked down at Duchess with a smile that was different from the cocky grin he usually displayed. "I never was a pet kind of guy."

"Maybe you should tell her. She thinks you're a cat kind of guy."

"Just one cat," he said, scratching between her ears. His gaze met mine. "Just like only one woman." Gently releasing Duchess to the floor, Damien stood to his full height, his shit-eating grin back in place. "You didn't disappoint, Ella. Call me after your meeting with Ms. Barns."

I nodded, too exhausted and satisfied to argue.

“I want you in your office at Sinclair Corporate by next Monday.”

Today was Monday—or at least it was when I woke. That would give me an entire week. “I haven’t said yes.”

He didn’t respond.

Acquiescing, I nodded. “I think next week can be worked out.”

“Good night.” He leaned in, brushing my lips with his.

Standing with my hands behind my back, my gaze met his. “Don’t hurt me again.”

“I never meant to hurt you.”

“I need to keep me if there is going to be an us.”

He nodded. “I’m listening, Ella. I am.”

Taking a step back, I turned and opened the door. The sounds of the spring night filled the air as he walked down my steps. His broad shoulders, trim torso, and long legs moved gracefully. The car lit and an emblem appeared on the street as he neared.

As I closed and locked the door, Duchess came close, weaving around my ankles.

I lifted her to my chest. “What do you think? Is this a mistake?” Her purr was my answer. “I know,” I said, carrying her to the kitchen to check her food. “Damien’s impossible to forget.”

Chapter 19

Gabriella

Niles peered around the doorframe leading to my office. Today, his hair was down, the way I liked it, the tips curling toward his chin. “Are we still on for lunch?”

I looked up from the notes I’d been reading at my desk and lifted my fingertips to my temples. “Do people still take two-martini lunches?”

My friend flashed a smile. “If we can’t have a two-martini lunch, I’m game for drinks after work. I have two more nights of bachelorhood, and I’m not a fan.” His eyebrows rose. “Or are you having another *meeting*?” He used air quotes for the last word.

I shook my head. “My only meeting today is with Millie in a few minutes. I was just brushing up on some of the things Damien and I discussed.”

Niles’s eyebrows danced. “So, there was discussion?”

The clock on the bottom of my computer screen told me it was time to head to my boss’s office. Gathering my notes, I flashed Niles a grin. “Yes. We talked.”

He hummed. “I’m pretty sure lunch won’t be enough. We’ll need drinks after work for the full story.”

While I hadn’t been ready to discuss Damien with anyone before, maybe it would be nice to ask some advice from someone I trusted. I didn’t have

time to give that much more thought as I made my way to Millie's office. Pam's desk was empty as I passed through the front office. Reaching Millie's door, I knocked.

The door opened as Pam exited, a tablet in her hand. "Good morning, Ella."

"Good morning. Is Millie expecting me?"

"She is," Pam said with a smile.

I pushed the door open and stepped inside the executive office. It wasn't half as nice as the office Johnathon had shown me at Sinclair Corporate Center.

"Ella," Millie greeted from her desk. "Please have a seat." Laying her hands on the desktop, she waited. Once I was seated, she proceeded. "You and Mr. Sinclair met again last night."

It wasn't a question, but I answered. "We continued discussing the campaign over dinner."

"Did it go...well?"

Memories of Damien's cum coating my stomach and breasts caused my cheeks to flush. "I told him," I said, sitting taller, "the concept is truly a wonderful opportunity for Beta Kappa Phi."

She let out a breath. "I'm so happy to hear you say that."

"I also told him that due to the history the two of us share, I am probably not the right person for the position."

Exhaling, Millie sat back against her chair. "What history? The fact you've worked together makes you the perfect candidate."

My lips came together as I shook my head. Of course, Millie Barns wouldn't know our personal history. I never mentioned it, and graciously, Damien had given me a rousing recommendation.

"I quit Sinclair and came here."

"He knows that. He also said that the two of you work well together. Do you not agree?"

Without answering, I moved the conversation forward. "If I agree to take on this new responsibility, what would it mean for me exactly with Beta Kappa Phi?"

She sat forward. "You're still considering it?"

Remembering Damien's advice from long ago, I replied, "I need all the information before I can make a decision."

"Well," she began enthusiastically, "first, the board has approved naming

you campaign manager over the pharma coalition.” She grinned. “That’s the long and winded way to say this campaign would be your baby. At first, you would work alone. However, the board wants to reevaluate down the road. At that time, your position could and most likely would be elevated to program director of the pharma coalition. And if needed, additional staff would be allocated to handle the workload. This is a fluid endeavor and the board is willing to keep an open mind.”

I let out a long breath.

Director of my own division.

My forehead furrowed. “Who would I answer to as campaign manager?”

“Straight to me, the same as when you’re elevated to director. Of course, also the members of the coalition. This will be a balancing act with the different pharmaceutical companies.”

“I’ll be honest. I’ve been concentrating on Sinclair” —the devilishly handsome CEO— “and I haven’t given the other six companies a lot of consideration.”

“This must be a partnership with all seven companies. According to Mr. Sinclair, the other CEOs know that you used to work for Sinclair. That’s in your favor as you have experience in the pharmaceutical industry. It won’t be all new to you.”

That does make me a good candidate.

I hadn’t looked at the position from that perspective.

“Do you want to discuss salary?” Millie asked.

Do I?

Am I truly considering this?

“We can discuss it,” I replied.

“The board has approved a thirty percent increase in your salary.” Before I could reply, because honestly, I was computing the numbers in my head, Millie went on. “I know that may not be enough to compensate for the increased workload, but the board needs evidence that our donors’ dollars are well spent.”

I nodded.

“Along with your salary, effective immediately, each quarter you will receive a variable payment in arrears. That way you benefit when Beta Kappa Phi benefits.”

“The gala exceeded our goal by over twenty-five percent. If I were to use that guideline, what kind of a variable payment are we talking?”

Millie inhaled. “Your income could easily climb to the high six figures or possibly seven. It’s difficult to predict. I don’t want to get your hopes up, but there is potential.”

I wanted to think that I wasn’t easily swayed by money. Then again, the increase would mean I could pay off my student loans, maybe get a more fuel-efficient car for the commute, and up my investments.

Millie went on, “This will be a shake-up at Beta Kappa Phi for a while. I’d waited to talk to you, but if you agree to take the new campaign manager position, I’ve decided to offer Rosemary your current position. She’s worked closely with you over the last two years. I’m hoping Mr. Sinclair will agree to a grace period where you’re also available to Rosemary for guidance.”

“That won’t be up to Mr. Sinclair,” I replied. “It’s up to you. I’ll still be working for you.”

She nodded. “I don’t want to put you in a difficult position.”

You already have.

“Last night,” I said, “he asked that if I accept the position, I begin working from Sinclair Corporate Center next Monday. Do you think that’s feasible?”

“Is that a yes?”

“Shit, yes,” I said, my smile growing. “I think it’s a yes.”

“I couldn’t be happier.”

For the next thirty-plus minutes we discussed the structure, our communication while working in different offices, and what goals she and the board had set.

Once we were both out of questions, Millie stood and offered me her hand. “I’ll inform Mr. Sinclair and the board. Ella, I know you can do this.”

Shaking her hand, I pressed my lips together. “Thank you for believing in me.”

“I do.” Our handshake ended and Millie said, “I’ll contact HR and get the ball rolling on the details.”

“Rosemary?” I asked.

“Once this is approved, I will go to her.”

“What about Niles?” I asked.

“You and Niles have worked well together. What the two of you do is truly a two-person job. I don’t feel it’s right to ask him to do it alone.”

That made sense.

As I made my way back to my office, my mind was filled with all the

things I needed to prepare, the information I needed to glean. Millie had been right: I was familiar with the industry. I wasn't familiar with the other companies. That would be where I needed to start.

Sitting at my desk, I opened the drawer and removed my cellphone from my purse.

Two missed calls and one text message. They were all from the same number: *Damien*.

"I'm waiting for your call. I don't like to wait."

Chapter 20

Gabriella

“I’m waiting for your call. I don’t like to wait.”

Even Damien’s snarky text message couldn’t sour my mood. After closing the door to my office, I sat at my desk and hit the green icon, calling Damien’s private phone. After six rings, the call went to his voicemail.

Instead of leaving a message, I hung up and typed out a quick text.

“I’ve accepted the position. See you Monday.”

Sighing, I leaned back against my chair and turned from side to side, taking in the bookcases and furniture. While nothing within this room was spectacular, there felt a hint of melancholy at the prospect of moving on. When I worked for Sinclair, my final office was what was now Johnathon’s. It wasn’t truly my own space, but the gateway to the CEO. This room was my first real office. A place where I could shut the door and work undisturbed.

Behind my desk was a small window that looked out over green space. Again, it wasn't the best view in Carmel. Nevertheless, it was a view.

Sighing, I looked down at the notes I'd taken into Millie's office and the ones I'd made while with her. My first assignment was to learn more about all seven companies within the coalition. Three were located in Illinois: Wade, Holston, and Perry. One was in Michigan: Broche. Two were in Ohio: McCree and Moon. And only Sinclair was located in Indiana.

The rest of the morning was spent learning what I could from public sources. From what Damien had said, I'd have access to more information once I was relocated to Sinclair Corporate Center. This work would give me a head start.

At nearly noon, there was a knock on my door.

"Come in," I called, ready to go to lunch with Niles.

The door opened inward.

My breathing hitched as the dark blue stare met mine. "Damien, what are you doing here?"

"Since you wouldn't respond to my calls or text messages, I decided to come to you. Monday is much too far away. I'll take you to lunch."

I stood. "I have lunch plans."

Damien came closer. "Cancel them. I've met with Ms. Barns. We have celebrating to do."

"You met with her...in person?" My empty stomach twisted.

"I did."

"Is there a problem?"

His chiseled jaw was covered by a fine line of hair, the same color as the combed-back mane on his head. "Only that I couldn't reach you."

"I was working."

"Everyone deserves a lunch break."

As he spoke, Niles appeared in the open doorway.

"Niles," I said, causing Damien to turn. "You remember Mr. Sinclair? Damien, Niles."

Niles offered his hand. "I do. It's nice to see you again, Mr. Sinclair."

"Mr. Watson." Damien shook his hand and then looked from me to Niles and back. "Is this" —he motioned with his hand— "your lunch plan?"

Niles's gaze came to mine. "If you're busy..."

"Damien, I appreciate your invitation, but Niles and I have things to discuss from the gala."

Damien's smile was as gregarious as it could be, telling me that it wasn't sincere. "My invitation was a last-minute idea." His penetrating gaze met mine. "I'll be in touch."

"Monday," I said.

"We'll talk." He turned to Niles. "Enjoy your lunch."

It wasn't until Damien was gone that I let out the breath I was holding.

"He's intense," Niles said.

"He can be."

"How often do you think he gets turned down?"

Taking a seat at my desk, I opened the drawer to retrieve my purse. When I looked up, I shrugged. "Not as often as he should."

Niles's laugh filled my office. "Cafeteria downstairs?"

"No." I sighed. "It's a nice day. Let's get out of here."

"Muldoon's?"

"Oh," I replied ecstatically. "Do you think their sidewalk seating has opened?"

"Let's find out."

"They do have martinis," Niles whispered as we walked toward the stairs.

Ten minutes later, we were seated at a table under an umbrella on the sidewalk. The sun was high in the cobalt sky.

We'd already given the waitress our orders when Niles pursed his lips and tilted his head. "What is the history you haven't shared?"

"I haven't shared it with many people."

"Spill," he said.

"We dated."

His eyes opened wide. "When?"

"It ended a little over two years ago. I broke up with him."

"That gorgeous man. You left him." Niles scrunched his nose. "What was the problem? Is he bad in bed? You know, the ones with the looks don't always have the equipment."

I laughed and shook my head as the waitress set an iced tea in front of me and a diet soda in front of Niles. "So much for our two-martini lunch," I said, taking a sip.

"After work. Not impressive equipment?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Wasn't the issue," I admitted. "Very talented in that department."

Niles's smile grew. "How long did the two of you date?"

“Around three years.” I shrugged. “I made the mistake of falling for my boss.”

Niles made a face.

“I hadn’t seen him since I broke it off and quit Sinclair until the day of the gala.” I went on telling Niles about the issue with the flight, seeing Damien at the restaurant. Niles laughed when I told him about paying for Damien’s lunch. “As luck would have it, my new seat in first class was next to him.”

“You hadn’t seen him in two years, and you ended up sitting beside him for a four-hour flight. Damn, girl. That is definitely fate stepping in.”

“I don’t know if it was fate. I mean, the universe has bigger problems than my love life.”

“Since you’ve barely dated since we met, I’d say your love life is a rather monumental problem.” He lowered his eyebrows. “Has it improved?”

We stopped talking as our food was delivered.

As I cut the grilled chicken in my salad, I looked to my friend. “Will you do me a favor?”

“Anything.”

“Damien isn’t an awful man. Yes, he’s intense and manipulative, arrogant and cocky...”

“You’re definitely selling him.”

Grinning, I let out a breath. “The reason I left him two years ago was because after we were together for a while, I began to disappear.”

Niles pouted. “Honeeey.”

“I want you to promise me, if you see me disappearing, tell me. I pushed him out of my life and worked to make a life away from him. After having him back in my life for only a few days, I feel out of control and at the same time...I’m positively buzzing. His intensity is contagious.”

“Your smile at this moment makes me think that you don’t hate all those things you said about him.”

Inhaling, I lifted my face toward the sky. “This is going to sound stupid.”

“Let me be the judge of that.”

“Damien is like the sun—the center of the universe—the glue that holds it all together. His gravitational pull is impossible to resist. He shines bright, giving you what you need. And if this is going to work—him and me, not the campaign—then I need to learn how to be close without being burnt.”

“You took the campaign manager position, right?”

I nodded. "I did."

"Do you want it, or did you feel forced to take it?"

"I wasn't sure what I would do or how I felt. Even this morning, heading into Millie's office, I was still debating."

Niles's hazel eyes glistened. "Even after all your *negotiations* yesterday and last night?"

Warmth filled my cheeks as I nodded. "It was something Millie said that made it feel right. She said I was the right choice for the position because of my experience with Sinclair."

"Wait," Niles said with a grin. "She meant the company not the man, right?"

"Right. She doesn't know about the private side. It's why I've kept my connection to him quiet. And now I don't want people thinking I got the position because of my past relationship with Damien."

"But you're not working *for* him. You'll still be employed by the fraternity."

"Right. This will be different." I reached for Niles's hand. "You must come visit me. My office is to die for."

"If he isn't your boss, what difference does it make if you had a relationship? Or is it that you're now back in one?"

"That shouldn't matter."

"Are you back in one?"

Placing my elbow on the table, I leaned forward, holding my head. "I don't know what's happening."

"Is this when I need to remind you not to lose yourself?"

"Probably. You're the only one I've told other than Duchess."

Niles laughed. "That little molly doesn't like anyone. I'm a cat guy, and she runs from me."

"Damien was holding her last night. That little bitch was purring."

Niles shook his head. "Damn, that's a pretty strong recommendation. Next time I go to your place, I'm filling my pockets with catnip."

Pulling out my phone to pay, I saw Damien's name. I hit the text message icon.

"I hope you had a nice lunch. Call me."

I typed out a message.

“The last time I called you didn’t answer.”

My phone buzzed.

“I was busy.”

My core clenched as I recalled the last time he told me he was busy—the intensity in his ocean-blue stare as we both came.

Another vibration.

“Call me.”

When I looked up, Niles was smiling. “I’ll let you know if you disappear, but right now, you’re glowing.”

Chapter 21

Gabriella

Back at the office, I checked my emails and called Damien on my cellphone. Before it started ringing, Rosemary bounded into my office. She'd been with Beta Kappa Phi since graduating college two years ago, starting not long after I did.

"Have you heard?" she asked.

Disconnecting the call, I stood from my desk, met her halfway across the room, and wrapped her in a hug. "I'm so happy for you."

"Oh my gosh. Millie said you'll be gone after Friday." Her expression saddened. "I don't want you to leave."

"I'm not. I'm simply moving to a different office."

"And..." Rosemary bounced on her toes. "I'm taking over your old position."

"I'm so glad you agreed. I know all our hard work will be in good hands."

Rosemary reached for my hand. "I have so many questions and so much to learn. I seriously need every second of your time from now until Friday at five."

"You don't. You've been alongside me. You know what needs to be done. I have faith in you."

"Yeah, Millie said the same thing." She shook her head. "I'm talking intense one-on-one training."

“I’ll be glad to do what I can, but I think you’ll fill the role perfectly, and you’ll have Niles at your side.”

“I need to start working on next year’s gala.” Her eyes opened wide. “You’ll still attend, won’t you? Oh, I can’t schmooze those old guys like you can.”

“Just be yourself.”

Rosemary looked around. “We’ll start tomorrow morning at eight. I’ll bring donuts.”

“Eight?” I say, my eyes opened wide.

“Eight-thirty?”

I nodded. “No donuts necessary.”

“Thank you, Ella. For everything.”

Once I’m again seated at my desk, I reached for my cellphone. One missed call showed on the screen. It also showed my outgoing call. “Shit, my call must have gone through,” I mumble as I hit the call button.

“Ms. Crystal.” Damien’s tone was stern. “While I enjoy a game of tag every now and again, this inability to answer my calls or it seems to even be on the line when you call me is grating on my nerves.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. You see, I take my job seriously and turn off my ringer while at work. Also, I just accepted a new position, and, well, I’m very busy at the moment.”

“Movers will be to Beta Kappa Phi Friday morning to move your things to Sinclair.”

My smile faded. “Movers?” I hadn’t thought about moving everything. After all, this move of offices wasn’t permanent.

Is it?

“I don’t think that will be necessary. As we keep saying, I’m still employed by the fraternity.”

“The movers are scheduled. If you have any further concerns, call Johnathon. I’ll text you his number.”

Johnathon.

Right.

Damien Sinclair was too busy to deal with the mundane.

“Ella?”

“Yes?”

“Turn on your damn ringer. When I call, I want to be answered. No more fucking excuses.”

The rebuttal on the tip of my tongue stayed silent. Damien had already disconnected the call.

Shit.

I needed to talk to Millie.

* * *

“You’re just being an ass now,” I said into my phone as I hit the speaker and continued readying for bed. I’d just finished brushing my teeth and washing my face. This was the fifth call I’d received from Damien since he proclaimed my need to answer every call.

His deep laugh echoing through my bathroom was almost enough to forgive him. “What are you doing?”

“I’m getting ready for bed.”

“I like the sound of that. Send me a selfie.”

I met my own blue stare in the bathroom mirror. “My face is washed—no makeup. I’m wearing a camisole and short shorts. My hair is brushed and braided. I’m not exactly selfie-ready.”

“It wasn’t a yes-or-no question. It was a request, the kind you don’t refuse.”

“Damien, this is wrong. I can’t—”

“Not wrong. This isn’t about the campaign. This is about us. Send the damn picture.”

Us?

“Fine. I need to hang up.”

Disconnecting the call, I opened the camera on my phone and spun the lens toward me. As I pushed the button, I stuck out my tongue. No, it wasn’t a great picture. With a smile, I sent it to Damien.

Seconds later, my phone chimed. I hit the text message. “Oh my God.”

My skin warmed and core clenched as I looked at his picture. He also had his tongue sticking out. It wasn’t the picture that flooded my circulation with heat. It was the text message accompanying it:

“This is what I’ll be doing when you sit on my face, but my tongue will be covered with your sweet nectar and my ears will be filled with your screams

of ecstasy. I'm hard thinking about it. Call and we can come together."

Walking into my bedroom, I sat on my bed, his text message running on repeat in my mind. Lying back and against my better judgment, I hit the call button and brought the phone to my ear.

"I didn't expect you to call," he said with a chuckle to his deep tone.

"Are you saying those earlier demands are no longer in effect?"

"I'm glad you did."

"I called to tell you that you're inappropriate. I could take screenshots. HR would have a field day."

"You don't work for Sinclair," he reminded me. "What I am is hard. My cock is out, and I'm fisting it right now."

Warmth crawled up my neck to my cheeks. "Daamiien." His name came out with extra syllables.

"Join me."

"What? I can't." As I said the words, I stared up at the ceiling, trying to concentrate on the whirling ceiling fan. Instead, I was imagining what Damien was doing.

"I know for a fact you can."

I had, just last night.

Chewing my lower lip, I waited as the heat within me built. It was a fire that moments ago didn't exist and now, in mere minutes, was out of control.

"Talk to me, Ella. Tell me what you're doing," he demanded in a sultry tone.

"I'm going to bed. Just like I said."

"Do you have panties on under those shorts?"

"No," I admitted.

"Pull them down and finger yourself. Get your finger nice and wet."

I considered what he was saying. "Are you really...?"

"Fuck," he growled.

The images of last night became more vivid. I recalled the look on his face seconds before he came, seconds before his seed marked me. The primal beauty came back, the intensity of his gaze, and the way the tendons in his neck tightened. I pushed my shorts down and kicked them off.

"Talk to me, Ella."

"My shorts are off."

“Good girl. Is your finger dry?”

“Yeah...I haven't...”

His tone deepened. “I can imagine how beautiful you look with your knees spread wide. Spread those knees.”

Biting my lip, I did as he said. Each breath came quicker. My nipples beaded.

Damien's voice continued. “Put the phone on speaker. Lay it next to you. I want you to play with your perfect tits with one hand while you sink the fingers of your other into that pretty pink pussy.”

“Fuck, Damien,” I panted as my hands obeyed. “This is...” I was going to say wrong, but as his groans grew louder and my hands moved faster, wrong was far from the right word. My sounds joined his, a primitive serenade, two people finding pleasure together. I closed my eyes as the orgasm hit.

“Fuck,” he growled again. “This is what you're doing to me.”

“Me?” I wiped my hand over my damp brow.

Other than last night, I rarely made myself come without a vibrator. This was the second time in two nights.

“You,” he cooed. “Good night, Ella. Take care of that sweet pussy.”

Yeah. I just did that.

“Good night.”

“Make that my two favorite pussies. Tell Duchess good night.”

I shook my head. Sitting up, I looked around the bedroom. The lights were still on, and the blinds were lifted just high enough to have the windows open. Duchess lay on one of the sills. “He said good night.”

She looked my way, and I swear she smiled.

“Good night, Damien.”

Chapter 22

Gabriella

Niles gave me one of his looks, the kind that asked if I was all right. With Rosemary sitting across the table, I simply feigned a smile and nodded.

“Thank you for your time,” Rosemary said as she closed her laptop. “It’s good to know I have Niles here and you’re only a phone call away.”

“I am. You’re off to a roaring start.” The three of us had spent most of the week together, Niles and me filling her in on our duties. I wasn’t sad to pass off the new intern to her. He was more work than he was help.

Rosemary looked around my office as she stood and tucked her laptop under her arm. “Are you sure you don’t mind me moving in here?”

With a sigh, I leaned back and stretched my neck. “The movers are coming in the morning. It’s silly to let the office sit empty.” I thought the movers were still coming. Since our phone sex Tuesday night, I hadn’t heard from Damien. It wasn’t that I’d missed any calls or text messages, only that none had been sent.

“I’ll see you both tomorrow,” she said as she left the office, closing the door behind her.

As soon as we were alone, Niles’s hazel stare was on me. “Talk to me, Els.”

“Nothing to say,” I replied as I tried to swallow the lump that had been

forming in my throat.

“Still no calls?”

I shook my head. “Or text messages. I’ve had my ringer on day and night.” I let out a long breath. “This is what I was afraid of. He comes on all hot, heavy, and possessive, and then disappears.”

“Have you tried to call him?”

“No.” Pushing my chair back from the conference table, I stood. “I don’t know what’s happening. He said there was an us, but it’s not official. I don’t want to come across too needy. Besides, Damien said if I had questions to call Johnathon, his assistant.”

Niles scrunched his nose and crossed his arms over his chest. “Come home with me tonight. Jeremy will have dinner and the three of us can drain a bottle of wine...or two.”

The offer was inviting. “I should go home and keep working on learning more about the pharma coalition. I’ve spent every minute of the last week with Rosemary and you. I’ve let the preliminary research of my new position slide.”

Niles looked up from his phone. “Jeremy is completely on board. He’s making quesadillas. We could change wine to margaritas.” His smile was bright.

“You definitely know how to tempt a girl.” I shook my head. “Tell Jeremy thanks for the invite. I need to face the fact that this is a job. Me going to Sinclair is about Beta Kappa Phi, not some imaginary rekindling of a relationship with Damien.”

“Maybe he has a good reason why he hasn’t contacted you.”

“It’s the hunt. He wanted me to take this job. I did it. Now, he’s won, and he doesn’t need to prove anything else.”

“Won at what?” Niles asked. “You’re moving from this office to a fancy location downtown. Your salary is increasing. You will be eligible for variable payouts. Honey, you won.”

Swallowing, I nodded. “You’re right.” I looked around the room. Many of my books and files were already packed into boxes. The bookcase was empty except for the things I was leaving for Rosemary. “Promotion.”

“Damn right.”

“Millie said if this program meets its goals, I could hire additional people to help me.”

Niles’s lips twitched. “Are you offering me a position?”

“I don’t know. I have no idea of the pay or anything, but if it’s feasible, yes, I’d love to work with you in the future.”

“We can cross that bridge...”

“Okay, just don’t forget about me.”

“Never.”

When I arrived home, there was a delivery on my front porch with the familiar smile on the side of the box. I read the address, fully expecting it to have been placed at the wrong door. The tag had my name and address. Taking the box inside, I spoke aloud to Duchess. “I don’t remember ordering anything.” I smiled at her. “Did you?”

Inside was an automatic cat feeder, having the ability to program exactly how much food to dispense and when. “You did order this,” I said.

Duchess was less than impressed as I put the feeder back in the box. “I’ll return it tomorrow.” She rubbed her forehead against my hand.

A few hours later, the names of the CEOs as well as their signature drugs were settling into a fog within my tired mind. Taking a drink of wine, I peered around my living room and took a final look at the notebook beside my laptop. It was filled with notes I’d jotted down. Tomorrow, I’d make them into something more legible. I was contemplating going upstairs when the doorbell rang. Looking down, I assessed I could at least see who was outside. It was nearly nine at night and my work clothes were replaced by soft pants and an oversized shirt. I wasn’t exactly ready for guests, but whomever would arrive at this hour didn’t deserve the polished version.

My bare feet padded over the cool tile as I made my way to the front door. Flipping the switch to illuminate my front porch, I first noticed the red hair of my visitor. Shaking my head, I unlocked and opened the door. “Johnathon, what are you doing here?” Near his feet was a large suitcase on 360 rollers. “Why do you have a suitcase?”

“Mr. Sinclair wanted you to have this for your trip.”

Narrowing my eyes, I asked, “What trip?”

“Your trip tomorrow to Ashland. You’re meeting with the CEOs from the coalition.”

With a shake of my head, I open the door wider. “Come in.” As he passed the threshold, wheeling the large suitcase, I placed my fists at my waist. “I wasn’t told of a trip. I need to be at the office in the morning. The last I heard, the movers were scheduled.”

“Yes, they’ll be there by eight. Your new office should be ready when

you return.”

Waving my hands, the anger inside me began to boil. “You can take whatever is in the suitcase away.” I had a thought. “Did Mr. Sinclair send a cat feeder?”

“Oh,” Johnathon replied, relieved. “I’m so glad it arrived in time. Yes, since you’ll be gone all weekend.”

“I haven’t spoken to Mr. Sinclair since Tuesday. No one told me about the trip.”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Crystal—”

“Ella.”

“Ella,” he corrected. “Mr. Sinclair was unexpectedly called out of town. He should be back in time to fly with you to Ashland. If he isn’t, he said he’d meet you there.”

“He’s sending me to meet with the CEOs and he may not be with me?”

“If he can make it, I’m sure he will.” Johnathon tipped his chin to the suitcase. “May I leave this with you?”

“You may take it away.”

Johnathon’s lips pursed. “Mr. Sinclair was explicit in wanting you to have it—oh, and the contents.”

I shook my head. “Fine. Do you know what’s inside?”

“I believe it’s your clothes for the trip. He didn’t want you to have to pack.”

I lifted a brow. “He packed for me?”

“No, he had his personal shopper do it.” Johnathon smiled. “I believe you have everything you’ll need for the meetings and free time.”

“In Ashland, Wisconsin,” I said in disbelief.

Johnathon removed his phone from his pocket and after a moment, looked up. “I just sent you your itinerary. The Sinclair plane will be ready for you tomorrow at seven thirty.”

“You can tell Mr. Sinclair I can’t possibly go away for the weekend on such short notice.”

Johnathon’s smile dimmed.

“Never mind. I’ll tell him.”

“If you’d prefer, I can pick you up at seven. If you would rather drive, there is an attachment on the email with directions to the airport.”

“Has it changed?”

“Ma’am?”

“Is the plane at the private hangar near the Indianapolis Airport?” It was where it was when I worked for Sinclair.

“Yes. If I pick you up, you won’t need to worry about parking.”

“Parking?” My thoughts were scrambled. “Shit. I can’t get out of this, can I?”

“I’ll be back here at seven.”

I looked down at my watch. “Great, I’ll see you in ten hours.”

Johnathon nodded.

Opening the door, I said my goodbye before going back inside. Duchess peered around the corner, checking to see that Johnathon was gone. “Damien complains about communication. He’s the one who doesn’t communicate.”

Duchess approached the metallic rose-colored suitcase with caution, sniffing as she moved.

“Do you think we should look inside?”

Her round green eyes stared up at me.

In the middle of my foyer, I laid the suitcase down on the floor and unzipped it. I almost hated to disrupt the contents. Everything was folded precisely. “What the hell?”

Does Damien think I don’t own clothes?

There were two blouse-and-skirt combinations, a pair of wool slacks, blue jeans, and a few tops, including a soft sweater. There was also a long black dress. The label read Brandon Maxwell.

Okay, I didn’t own any two-thousand-dollar dresses.

Opening the other side of the suitcase, I found multiple pairs of shoes and a cosmetic bag. Inside the bag were all the cosmetics I used and others nicer than what I used. This felt wrong. If I was supposed to meet the CEOs, I shouldn’t do it playing dress-up.

Leaving the suitcase open by the front door, I went to my phone. As the screen lit, I saw a text message. “Sure, now you communicate.”

I opened the text.

“Just in case you were considering disobeying, I chose to dress you for our trip. Wear the navy skirt and blazer and white blouse to the plane tomorrow with the Louboutin pumps. You’re stunning, Ella. The clothes are only the wrapping. Knock them all dead with your charm, intelligence, and eagerness to make this program work.”

I hit the call button, unsure exactly what I wanted to say. The call immediately went to voicemail. Biting my lip, I waited for the beep. “This is bullshit, Damien. You can’t spring a trip on me the night before. I’m not your doll to dress.”

Chapter 23

Damien

“We could ask the board to convene for a vote,” Stephen Elliott, my father’s attorney and the head of Sinclair’s legal team, said, keeping his voice low. “There is always the loophole.”

I’d given the loophole consideration and decided to wait out my time.

Five months to go.

Looking around the drab kitchen, I noted the monotone palette lacked any appeal. The gray cabinets and dark countertop blended with the light gray walls. The fluorescent lighting did little to improve the atmosphere. The coffee pot on the counter seemed to have a never-ending supply of horrible coffee. I suspected the nurses kept it flowing though I never saw one of them making it. There weren’t any windows, but if there were, they would show us the night sky, tall lights, and palm trees.

I lifted the paper cup to my lips and made a face as the cool coffee passed over my tongue. “Five more months,” I said. “I’ve done more for this damn company in four and a half years than my father did in twenty-five.”

“Darius is the one who is sowing concerns in this last inning. The propanolamine has been a breakthrough, but Sinclair needs to increase sales if it is going to sustain us. This medication should be the first go-to for every facility and physician or psychiatrist in the world.”

“Things have changed. The free gifts, vacations, and shit Dad did in his

day to encourage doctors to write scripts is no longer legal.”

“If we call for a vote, there’s a better than fifty-percent chance, the board will approve you now and the probation will be over.”

“That means there’s a less than fifty-percent chance they’ll vote to remove me.” I slammed the cup on the table. “This is bullshit. I have a plan in action. In five months, we’ll see the increase in prescriptions, resulting in increased revenue.”

That plan included Ella making a convincing impression on the CEOs of the five companies who hadn’t yet met her. Van and I were convinced. Julia had gotten everyone on board with the idea, but this meeting would set the tone for what was to come.

Stephen lowered his voice to a whisper. “If Derek doesn’t make it, the board will be forced to move on his last wishes. It would be better to get the vote out of the way and secure it.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Gloria Wilmott will be a sure yes if you would change your mind on that stipulation—loophole.”

Fucking blackmail—that’s what that is.

“No,” I said with a shake of my head.

This new situation was because my seemingly healthy father suffered a heart attack early Wednesday morning. He woke with shortness of breath and pain in his shoulder. Because he was an obstinate ass, he chose to not tell my mom. Instead, he took their dog for a walk. About a half mile from their home, he collapsed.

The diagnosis was blockage of the left anterior descending artery. They called that blockage the widow-maker for a reason. Thankfully, my mother wasn’t a widow. Dad survived thanks to a neighbor who saw him fall and heard his dog barking hysterically. Dad underwent a five-hour surgery and was now in critical but stable condition.

“Dad isn’t going to die,” I said matter-of-factly. “He’s too stubborn to die.”

“Marsha said they warned her about the possibility of cognitive damage due to the lack of blood flow.”

“Mom’s stressed. Do you blame her?”

“Hey,” a voice called from the doorway.

We turned to see my sister, a tall, slender female version of myself. Like me, she’d flown down to Florida as soon as she got the news.

Her smile was forced, and lack of sleep showed in her blue eyes. “Is this a

private meeting, or can I sit in?”

Scooting to a side chair, I pulled out the seat where I had been sitting. “Have a seat. Stephen is trying to convince me to go ahead with a board vote on my status.”

“No.” Her eyes met mine. “In five months you’re set. Why call for a vote?” she asked as she sat.

Over the years, Dani’s blond hair had darkened to a light brown. While she didn’t participate in the day-to-day business side of Sinclair, Dani was the vice president in charge of research and development. With her background in chemistry and biology, she was more knowledgeable than most.

“Because if Dad kicks the bucket, his will says Sinclair is up for sale.”

My sister’s eyes widened. “No. Why would we sell? We’re doing better than we have.”

“Derek’s will is old,” Stephen explained. “It was made right before Damien was named CEO. Derek didn’t want to see the company get into the wrong hands.”

Dani looked at me. “Darius.”

I nodded.

Stephen, went on, “Derek also wanted to maintain the reputation he’d built.”

“Don’t you mean inherited?” I asked.

“But,” Dani said, talking to me, “if your probation is over and you’re the official CEO, can’t you stop the sale?”

“Yes, he could,” Stephen answered.

“If you call for a vote and you’re approved, it’s the same?”

Stephen nodded.

Dani squared her shoulders. “Then have the vote.”

I shook my head. “Darius has been sowing some bullshit with a few of the board members. The older ones know he’s full of shit, but there are a few newer members who missed the Darius shit show. And there’s Gloria. Darius said he’s been talking to her.”

Dani scrunched her forehead. “Seriously, Damien. Isn’t that over?”

“It is,” I confirmed.

“Gloria wouldn’t vote against you after all you’ve done,” she went on. “I can’t believe any members would vote to replace you.”

“If the vote occurred today,” I said, “it might be shaky. Sinclair needs an increase in scripts. Some of the facilities are leery of prescribing the

propranolamine, choosing instead to treat the symptoms, not work on the root cause, subduing the memories.”

“Moon Medical,” she said.

I nodded. “They have a new anxiety formula they’re pushing.”

She shook her head. “I worried about the coalition; having Moon Medical involved seems concerning.”

“Technically, we aren’t competitors. We don’t manufacture the same medication. We can treat the same patients.” I looked to Stephen. “Dad isn’t going to die. Once he’s better, we convince him to change the will.”

He should have done it before now.

“What if the doctors are right and there’s cognitive damage?” Dani asked.

“If he’s not legally competent, his will can’t be changed,” Stephen responded.

“Fuck,” I growled. “The man isn’t dead. He’s simply recovering from his surgery. The meds they have him on would make anyone squirrely. Stop making this into more than it is.”

Dani laid her hand on my lower arm. “Have you gotten any sleep?”

“Since I got the call...about five hours total.” Inhaling, I sat taller. “I have a meeting I need to attend this weekend, but I’m not leaving until I can speak to Dad.”

“Have you heard from Darius?” she asked.

“He called me on Monday with some bullshit about Dad being upset about the quarterly bonuses. He’s probably telling everyone the heart attack is my fault.”

Dani shook her head. “Dad wasn’t upset. He called me a few weeks ago to let me know it would be decreased. He’s proud of what you’re doing, Damien. No matter what happens to him, know that.”

“Basically, our dear brother called to piss me off.”

“I thought he’d be here,” she said.

I nodded. “I’m surprised he isn’t. Have you asked Mom if he’s called?”

Stephen spoke, “Marsha asked me to call Darius. I did. He seemed off, but I didn’t give that much thought.”

“Did he say he was coming down?” Dani asked.

“No. He just listened to what I had to say and thanked me. Then he hung up.”

“Un-fucking-believable,” I muttered.

With the ringer on my phone off, I was officially off the radar. Johnathon

had strict orders to handle anything that came his way. I was only to be contacted if there was an emergency. The vibration in my pocket alerted me to a possible emergency. Pulling the phone from my pocket, I read the screen. I had one missed call from Gabriella Crystal.

“I need to listen to this message,” I said to Dani and Stephen as I stood. “If you hear anything, come and get me.”

Dani nodded.

Out in the hallway, the waiting room was virtually empty. There was one small cluster of chairs where an older man and younger woman were watching television. I scanned the area for my mother. Although she’d spent the night in the surgical waiting room, now she was in Dad’s room—the one visitor he was currently allowed.

Stepping to a more secluded area, I hit play on the message. Ella’s voice came to my ear. “This is bullshit, Damien. You can’t spring a trip on me the night before. I’m not your doll to dress.”

The first smile to curl my lips in days lifted my cheeks.

I sent a text message to Allen, my pilot.

Take the plane back to Indianapolis. Ms. Crystal will fly tomorrow morning to Ashland, Wisconsin. I will charter a plane for my return.

Or fly commercial. That worked out quite well last time.

The quarterly coalition meeting would go on even if that meant it happened without me.

I didn’t want to miss the trip, but getting Ella in front of them was more important.

Come on, Dad. Wake up and talk to us—show us you’re still with it. I have a meeting I don’t want to miss. Mostly, I want to be there because with all that’s happened, I haven’t had the chance to brief Ella on the CEOs she was about to meet.

“Damien.”

I turned and met my sister’s stare. “Is he...?”

“He’s awake. Mom said we can go in for a few minutes.”

Thank fuck.

As soon as relief flooded my circulation, a new emotion emerged. Walking off the elevator was the last person I thought I'd see—Amber Wilmott.

Her green eyes met mine. “How is your father?”

My hands balled to fists at my sides. “What are you doing here?”

Amber looked at my sister. “Hi, Dani. I got the call and wanted to be here for you—all of you.”

My sister's eyes were wide, watching the two of us. “Who called you?” Dani asked.

“Mom.”

Her mother was Gloria Wilmott.

Dani nodded. “Of course, the board was notified.”

“Damien,” Amber said, “I know things are awkward, but I thought you might be glad to see me.” She looked around. “Is Darius here?”

“I'm not my brother's keeper.”

“It was nice of you to come,” Dani said in a pacifying tone. “But Dad can't have visitors who aren't—”

Who aren't family.

Amber isn't family.

“Go back to Chicago.” I took a step toward my sister. “We're not alone. Dad has his family here.”

Chapter 24

Gabriella

Traffic sped along the interstate as Johnathon drove me to the airport. Last night, I gave in and called Millie, informing her that I wouldn't be in the office today. My next call was to Niles. He promised to watch the movers and help Rosemary.

It wasn't Beta Kappa Phi that had my stomach in knots. It was the unknown of this upcoming weekend. Even though I'd left Damien a voicemail last night, I'd yet to hear from him. When I asked Johnathon what was happening, he was vague, as if he wasn't certain of Damien's location or else he'd been sworn to secrecy.

What did that mean?

Was Damien with another woman?

Why were my thoughts going that direction?

Damien had been many things when we were last together, but unfaithful wasn't one of them. That brought back the question I posed to Niles—are Damien and I back together?

When it came to my plans for the weekend, I had the detailed itinerary complete with notes for my predetermined clothing. Each notation was like an itch I couldn't scratch. The entire idea was ridiculous. I meant what I'd said: I wasn't a doll to be dressed.

At the last minute, I stripped out of the outfit Damien demanded I wear,

packing it neatly into the suitcase. If I was going to meet these people as Ella Crystal, I would do it in my own clothes. Besides, I hadn't heard from Damien since the ridiculous text. I didn't even know if he would be along on this trip.

If he wasn't present, he'd never know what I wore or didn't wear.

The spring sky filled with crimson and lavender hues with the rising sun as Johnathon's SUV entered the private parking lot near the personal hangars. Taking in the different planes through the windows, I remembered the feeling of boarding one of these aircraft.

Damien's words from the other night came back to me. "Self-deprecation isn't a good look for you, Ella. You know how to enjoy the finer things in life. Perhaps you've forgotten."

I hadn't forgotten.

I assumed that those finer things were no longer part of my world. I wasn't without fine things. It was that my things were more common. I bought my wine from Total Wine & More. I flew economy. My clothes came from the mall and while shopping, I looked at every price tag. Four figures for a dress was a waste of money. Hell, the Brandon Maxwell dress was probably worth one to two months on my mortgage.

And now, here I was.

Back in the world where I never truly felt that I belonged.

As Johnathon opened my door and I stepped out to the tarmac, I remembered what it was like.

The opulence.

The luxury.

The illusion of wealth.

That wasn't to say Damien didn't have wealth, but to say I didn't.

"I'll get your luggage stowed under the plane," Johnathon offered.

The stairs to the plane with Sinclair painted on the fuselage were down. Inhaling a deep breath, I lifted my chin and began the ascent. As I climbed the steps, the pilot, Allen, appeared at the top.

"Ms. Crystal, it's nice to see you again."

It was the same feeling as when I met Edgar at the elevators, a friendly face to calm my nerves. "Allen." I smiled and offered my hand. "I'm glad to know I'm in safe hands."

"Yes, ma'am. We're about ready to do our final checklist before takeoff. We should be in Ashland before nine o'clock, their time."

As I stepped inside the plane, a woman in a uniform appeared. “Hello, Ms. Crystal. I’m Angie. May I get you anything before we take off?”

“Coffee with cream would be nice.”

I turned toward the main cabin. The seats were all empty. This plane could fly up to twelve passengers. The seats were clustered in groups of four with a coffee/alcohol/ food bar. For a moment, I stood still, holding my satchel and looking around at the white leather seats, laminate woodwork, and shiny fixtures. Memories bombarded my mind, much as when I’d entered Damien’s office. The twisting in my chest made me wonder if I could do this—be the person for Beta Kappa Phi and work intimately with Damien.

“You may sit wherever you’d like,” Angie said as she poured coffee into a ceramic mug.

Nodding, I set my satchel with my laptop and notes on a seat near the window as I sat in the one to its side, facing the front of the plane. Closing my eyes, I tried not to think about the fact Damien wasn’t present. I would be all right. I’d met Donovan Sherman. This was my job. I didn’t need him to introduce me.

I watched as the airsteps moved upward, closing the entrance to the plane.

“I’m glad you decided to make it.”

Turning around, my breath caught in my throat. His voice and the scent of his cologne came to me simultaneously. I was wrong. I wasn’t the only passenger in this gilded plane. My gaze immediately met Damien’s. In the milliseconds that passed, I had the odd feeling that there was something off about him. That wasn’t to say he wasn’t handsome as ever in his suit. It was as if there were a cloud of discontent surrounding him.

As he came around the seat scanning me from head to toe, his blue eyes darkened, and his square jaw clenched.

“Have Johnathon bring Ms. Crystal’s luggage up here,” he said, speaking to Angie and moving to the seat across from me.

“Yes, sir.”

“Why do I need my luggage?”

My question went unanswered as the stairs were again lowered, a fresh breeze filled the cabin, and Damien sat. It was impossible not to skirt my focus from his perfectly combed hair to his custom suit and expensive shoes. The whiff of spicy cologne made my stomach do a flip-flop. “Damien,” I said, making eye contact. “I didn’t know if you’d be joining me. Johnathon

was evasive. Why did you send for the suitcase?”

“I can assume you received the suitcase. Johnathon took it to you last night?”

I nodded.

“And my text?”

“You know I did. I called you and left a message.”

Damien tilted his face slowly, contemplating his next move much like the predator I knew he could be. His gaze swept over me. The ensuing silence brought a chill skittering over my flesh. His firm lips pressed together in a disapproving way as his gaze returned to my eyes. His navy eyes stayed fixed on me.

This was about the clothes.

He was making more out of the situation than there was.

Finally, Damien spoke, his words cutting through the growing tension. “You were wrong.”

I sat straight, lifting my chin to meet his stare. “What was I wrong about?”

His finger blanched as his grip tightened on the arms of his chair. Though his volume wasn’t loud, his tone and timbre left little room for debate. “Your message. I will dress you. And since you chose not to do it correctly yourself, I will do it myself, right here.” He nodded. “That is why I called for your suitcase.”

Right here?

In the cabin?

“That won’t be necessary,” I said, keeping my tone firm. “I decided that I should meet the other CEOs as myself. That means wearing *my* clothes.”

His lips quirked. “The clothes in the suitcase are yours, Ella. They won’t fit me.” He shook his head slowly. “And even if they did, they were purchased for you.”

Johnathon entered the cabin with the large suitcase, slightly out of breath. “Here it is.”

“Thank you, Johnathon,” Damien said. “Continue to handle things here in Indy while I’m away.”

Johnathon nodded. “I will, sir. Have a safe trip.” His green gaze met mine with a smile and another nod.

Once Johnathon disappeared out the doorway, Angie hit a button to raise the stairs.

Damien stood and reached for the suitcase. I clenched my teeth, wondering if he would demand I strip right here. Instead, he grasped the handle and wheeled it toward the back of the cabin.

A flood of relief circulated through me as I craned my neck watching him and realized he hadn't meant I would change in the sitting cabin. Since this was the same plane that I'd flown on many times, I was aware of the sleeping cabin in the aft of the plane.

Looking from side to side, I didn't see Allen or Angie.

"Ella," Damien called.

With an exaggerated breath, I stood and made my way back to the doorway of the sleeping cabin. My gaze skirted the room, the built-in closets and drawers, the large king-sized bed, and a doorway to an attached bathroom. "I'm not going in there with you."

"You can change in the front cabin, but it isn't as private."

Shaking my head, I sighed out of exasperation. "What I'm wearing is fine. I don't appreciate you insinuating that it isn't."

The vein in his forehead pulsed. He spoke between clenched teeth. "Fine is not good enough." Leaving the suitcase in a closet, Damien came my direction, stopping millimeters away. His palpable discontent was audible in his measured words. "As I said in my text message, this meeting is about impressing the other CEOs." He exhaled. "I should have given you more preparation time. That is on me."

At least he could admit that.

He went on, "Let me make myself clear. By the time this plane lands, you will be wearing the outfit I chose for the occasion—either by your own doing or with my help." His lips quirked. "Yes, that idea is growing on me."

"Damien, I don't work for you."

"You don't. However, because I'm your connection to this coalition, you represent me. That means I have a say in the way you represent me."

I rolled my eyes. "You only wanted me for this position because you couldn't get away with this shit with anyone else."

"Shit?" His volume rose. "Purchasing thousands of dollars of clothes. Fuck, Ella, is that so terrible?"

Swallowing, I exhaled. "Not terrible. It's too personal." I pointed at the closet. "There is lingerie in there. I don't sleep in lingerie."

"I'm all right with naked."

"No," I said, "I'm not sharing a room with you on this trip. That is

inappropriate.”

He smirked. “I haven’t personally seen what’s inside the suitcase. I did choose each outfit online myself, including the lingerie. You may have noticed a lack of panties.” He lifted his hands. “I’m sure you’ll claim that’s inappropriate, but I couldn’t resist.”

“I did notice,” I replied, “and I added my own.”

Damien swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “We will be staying at a hotel in Ashland. I’ve stayed there before. It’s not the New York Ritz, but it’s not bad. You do have your own room, Ms. Crystal.”

“Thank you.”

“Julia, Van’s wife, has invited everyone from the coalition for our quarterly meeting. Each CEO hosts a quarter. There is usually work talk and socializing. The Shermans are hosting a cocktail hour and dinner at their home on Saturday night. Since the members of the coalition won’t meet again for another three months, this was the perfect occasion to introduce you.”

“And you didn’t think I needed more than ten hours’ notice?”

He nodded. “Again, my oversight. I’ve been a bit preoccupied. Communication will be easier when you’re physically working from Sinclair.”

“I’m a phone call away.” The irritation I felt was coming through in my tone. “You wanted to be damn sure I answered my phone and then you went silent for forty-eight hours. I don’t know what to think.” I let my arms fall and my palms slap my thighs. “What is happening?”

“Mr. Sinclair. Ms. Crystal,” Angie called from the front cabin. “Please take your seats. Allen is ready to take off.”

Damien’s eyes narrowed as he lowered his voice. “Say ‘Yes, Damien, I’ll change my clothes.’”

“It doesn’t seem as though I have a choice.”

“Oh, you do.” His hand came to my hip, turning me and leading me out to the front cabin. He lowered his lips to my ear. “Option B is that I get to undress and dress you.”

My core tightened at his threat.

Damn my traitorous body.

“Option A,” I said.

“I’ll take a raincheck on option B.”

I turned to meet his gaze. “Thank you for the reminder of what an ass you can be.”

Chapter 25

Gabriella

“*I* wouldn’t need to be an ass if you would do as you’re told the first time.”

Doing her best to not interfere, Angie nodded and walked toward the front of the plane. If my memories could be trusted, there was a third seat in the cockpit. On shorter trips with only two people manning the flight, the attendant often went to the front to give the passengers some space.

Damien’s dark blue stare stayed fixed on me as he buckled his seat belt, and I buckled mine.

“I wonder,” I said, “if this campaign isn’t a mistake.”

“It’s not.”

The plane began to move.

“I’m concerned,” I said. “What if it doesn’t work out the way you and Mr. Sherman think it will?”

“There is more riding on this than your position. I can’t think of anyone who is more capable than you.”

“Then I don’t understand the clothes.”

Damien sighed, uncharacteristic exasperation saturating his words. “They are just fucking clothes.”

“So are these,” I said, pointing to myself. “I don’t fully comprehend what you want from me, this position, or this campaign.”

He inhaled, his nostrils flaring as he gripped the arms of the soft leather seat. “I want Beta Kappa Phi to be the entity on the ground, talking to administrators and doctors about what our coalition has to offer. I want to increase our scripts and sales and, in the process, increase our donations to Beta Kappa Phi so that the fraternity can fulfill its objectives to a larger client base.”

That objective of being on the ground seemed redundant. “Sinclair...hell, all of the companies pay reps to go door-to-door who do the same thing.”

“The difference is that a rep is a paid employee of said company. You’re not. That gives your endorsement more weight, and Beta Kappa Phi’s reputation as an unbiased organization gives you the needed clout.”

“And at this meeting,” I began, thinking aloud, “I’m supposed to be who? Be your date? Assistant? Friend? Acquaintance?”

“The Shermans are good friends of mine. Van knows that we share a history. I would assume that means that Julia does also. The term *friend* works.” His lips quirked. “I wouldn’t have offered this position to an acquaintance.”

“Friends...” I nodded. “With benefits?”

“Those are two separate things. There is the campaign and there is us. What have you heard from Ms. Barns? What are Beta Kappa Phi’s feelings about this campaign?”

I knew where he was going with this. “I’m sure you’re aware. She’s in favor.”

“You’ve had time to consider what the position means. Do you regret saying yes?”

“I don’t know. The jury is still out.”

“Tell me why.”

I took a deep breath. “I don’t like the feeling that you offered this campaign to Beta Kappa Phi to get to me.”

He grinned, his stare softening as small lines formed near his eyes. “And they say I’m the narcissist.”

My eyes opened wider. “You didn’t?”

Damien shook his head. “You’re correct. I did. It shouldn’t be a secret, Ella. I want you back in my life. This idea presented the perfect opportunity. That said, know that I would never have proposed this position to the coalition—to my friends—if I didn’t think you were the best fit for the job. You have years of experience working at Sinclair. You were with me when I

became CEO. It would take time to teach someone all that you already know. On top of that, you have the people thing down to a science. You're going to knock their socks off."

A giggle bubbled in my throat. "I haven't heard that saying in a long time."

"You will blow them away." His eyebrows moved. "Speaking of blowing —"

"Damien."

He grinned. "Okay, different subject. Tell me what you know about the coalition."

I sat back. "I've only had access to public records..."

I went on discussing the seven pharmaceutical companies, the names of each CEO and the spouse's name. Two of the CEOs were women: Julia Sherman and Cynthia Broche. I recited each company's top formulas and the usage.

"What did you think when you learned about Perry?" Damien asked.

"I had a terrible time finding information."

Damien nodded.

"But I found them. Perry is the name behind *Body Kindness*, the health supplements. Their fortune is from over-the-counter health aids. I never dreamed that market was so lucrative." That made me think. "No facility will prescribe their formulas, and they don't have FDA approval."

"It isn't required. Their claims are carefully worded. The ownership is as well. It's one of the confidential aspects of the coalition."

"So how can I influence their sales?"

"If you saw a commercial for a health aid...say to improve sleep, would you buy it?"

I shrugged. "I might give it a try."

"If you took that same concern to your physician and he or she suggested a nonprescription alternative, would you try it?"

"I would."

"That is where you fit in. You speak with the physicians and facility administrators and advocate for Perry's products."

I nodded.

Angie appeared. "We're at cruising altitude. You're welcome to move about the cabin. Is there anything I can get for either of you?"

Damien's eyes met mine. "It's not a long flight."

“Fine,” I said incredulously as I unbuckled my seat belt.

“I love the enthusiasm,” he said.

Standing, I spoke to Angie. “I’d like another cup of coffee for when I return.”

“I’ll have it waiting.”

I didn’t stick around to hear what Damien ordered as I made my way back to the sleeping cabin, closing the door behind me. Removing the suitcase from the closet, I laid it on the bed and opened it. Being as I’d just repacked the outfit this morning, the navy jacket and skirt were on top of the other clothes.

It was as I was pulling my blouse over my head that I heard the door open. Bringing my blouse in front of me, I held the material against my chest and met the navy-blue stare. “Damien, inappropriate. I can dress myself.”

His smirk radiated in his orbs as he closed the door, remaining within the cabin, leaned against the wall, and folded his arms over his chest. “You see, I decided to make sure you followed directions this time.”

“This” —I motioned between us— “isn’t what friends do.”

“Two separate things. I told you that. There is our campaign and then there is us.” He tilted his handsome face. “Multitasking.”

“Maybe Johnathon could give me an itinerary on when we’re work friends and when we’re multitasking. I’m having a bit of a problem keeping up.”

“I’m not.” He smiled and his tenor dropped. “Drop the shirt.”

It wasn’t fair the way my body reacted to this man. If he were anyone else, I would give him a piece of my mind and call HR. Yet there was something about Damien that caused me to lose all my good sense. Dropping the blouse, I faced him in my bra and skirt. The shoes I’d worn were kicked off, leaving my feet bare. “I’m going to go out on a limb and say that meeting Julia Sherman, the CEO of Wade Pharmaceutical, freshly fucked isn’t a good first impression.”

Lowering his arms, Damien walked toward me. “Does that mean we can fuck again?”

“No.” I shook my head. “Yes. Why are you asking?”

“At the hotel last weekend, when you cut me off, you said ‘no more of this.’ I took that to mean intercourse. After all, you haven’t had a problem with what we’ve done since then. I would be perfectly happy to let you ride my face or suck my cock because your lips are heavenly, but if actual fucking

is back on the table, I want to know.”

“Shit, Damien,” I said, clasping my thighs together. My gaze narrowed. “Monday night, you didn’t push us farther or even touch me to make me come. That was because of what I said?”

He nodded.

“You actually listened?” I shook my head and walked a few steps. “I mean, you didn’t. I asked you not to call me.”

“I didn’t call—”

“Yes,” I interrupted. “You found a loophole. But the reason we were touching ourselves is because you were respecting a boundary?”

“Restraint,” he said with another smirk. “I want you. I know I can be demanding, but unlike last time, I want you to know I’ll try. I do respect you.” He lifted his cheeks into a full-wattage smile. “I also want to make you scream as I eat your delicious cunt.”

Warmth filled my cheeks. “I don’t know what to think.”

“It’s not complicated. I was a fool to let you go. I’ve made mistakes. This is a chance for me to prove to you that I’m sincere. And when I’m with you, I’m also hard as steel.” He ran his long finger over my neck, shoulder, and collarbone, down to between my breasts. “If you don’t think it takes restraint to not fuck you every minute, you’re wrong.”

My gaze followed his finger, and then I looked up. “Why did you disappear? You had me thinking there might be something between us. We went from an insane number of calls to you going MIA.”

Damien’s smile faded as he took a step back. “I wasn’t planning on talking about it.”

“If it’s another woman—?”

“I never cheated on you in the past. I sure as shit wouldn’t do that when I’m trying to win you back.”

“Then what?”

“My dad.”

My chest ached at Damien’s tone. “Your dad? Is he okay?”

“He should be. He had a heart attack. It was pretty bad. I flew to Florida.”

“Oh.” I took a step toward him. “I’m sorry. Is he still in the hospital? Why are you here?”

“I’m here because Sinclair is my responsibility. Do you remember when I became CEO—the probationary period?”

I thought back. “Yes. Isn’t that done?”

Damien shook his head. “Five more months. Dad is stable. Mom and Dani are with him. If I were in the hospital, even when I was a kid, and the great Derek Sinclair had a meeting, I could guarantee he’d take the meeting.”

I lifted my palms to his cheeks. “I’m sorry about your dad. I’m here if you want to talk.”

Damien shook his head. “I’d rather concentrate on Sinclair and you.”

“Me?”

“You make me smile, Ella.”

I tilted my head. “I’m sorry I didn’t wear the outfit. I was upset with your demands preceded by no other communication.” Lifting myself to my toes, I kissed his cheek. “I’ll change now.”

He reached for my cheeks and kissed my forehead. “I’m staying until you’re done.”

“Fine, but multitasking will have to wait.” I undid the zipper at the side of my skirt and let it fall to the floor.

The color of Damien’s eyes darkened as they focused on my bra and panties. “You have your own room, Ms. Crystal, but tonight, I’m going to be the one to remove those panties.”

A rebuttal was on the tip of my tongue. However, as I took in his stare and I recognized the sadness he was hiding, I knew that if given the chance, I would want to spend time with Damien, reminding him that he wasn’t alone.

Chapter 26

Gabriella

“*V*an sent his driver to meet us at the airport,” Damien said, sitting across from me as the plane came to a landing, gliding along the tarmac.

Beyond the small windows, the sun shone over the chilly northern Wisconsin scenery. Whitecaps on Chequamegon Bay glistened, and the deciduous trees swayed in a breeze, their limbs covered with immature leaves. Such as an oasis in a sea of gray, color also dotted the landscape. Trees and bushes contrasted the pale blue sky with their vibrant flowers, species that had bloomed a month ago in Indianapolis. With a shiver, I looked down at the clothes I was now wearing and smiled. “The blazer was a good idea. It looks cooler up here than it was in Indy.”

Damien nodded and lowered his voice. “If your nipples get hard, I’m going to tell myself it’s because of me.”

“Inappropriate.” A smile curled my lips. “If they do, you won’t be able to see because of the blazer.”

“I’ll know.”

“How?” I asked, lifting my chin.

“Oh, Ella, I know you. I see the signs, the way your cheeks take on a pink hue, your thighs clench, and you cross your arms over your sensational breasts.”

I shook my head, wondering if the warmth in my cheeks was alerting Damien of his ability to get to me. Pressing my lips together, I decided against a rebuttal, knowing that if I said more, so would he.

A few moments later the plane came to a stop and Angie reappeared. "I'll be right out with your luggage, Ms. Crystal and Mr. Sinclair."

Before I could comment, she was gone. I leaned my head back against the seat and sighed.

"Dollar for your thoughts," Damien said.

Dollar?

"Inflation is real."

Damien didn't speak, yet the way he was looking at me bid a response.

"When you and I were together...when I worked for Sinclair, somewhere along the line it became second nature to have other people do my bidding. I wasn't raised that way. I'm capable of getting my own suitcase. I didn't realize how accustomed to the servitude I'd become until I left you." I sat forward. "There is something rewarding in the ability to care for oneself—you should try it."

The way his square jaw clenched, I believed Damien was truly thinking about my comment. Finally, he spoke, "I'll only disagree with you on the characterization of servitude. The people who work for me are paid employees, well paid. If they didn't want to do the duties of the job, they have complete freedom to walk away. As for the rewarding aspect, you're right. There are many things I prefer to do for myself. Instead of thinking of the assistance of others as relinquishing your self-care, try to think of it as improving your ability, thus enhancing your self-care. When we step off this plane, we will first be taken to the hotel. During the next hour we will go to Donovan's office where you will meet Julia. Later in the day, more members of the coalition will arrive. Your thoughts should be on those meetings." He nodded toward my satchel. "The information about the coalition members you've gleaned from public sources and any tidbits I've shared. Having Angie retrieve your luggage simply allows you to concentrate on what's important."

"Is there more I should know?" I asked, fully concentrating on the upcoming meetings. "About the members of the coalition?"

Damien nodded.

"I'm all ears."

"Be yourself with the Shermans. They're sincerely great people. Julia

connected the various members of the coalition based on our similar size, geographic location, and belief that we were noncompetitive. If I had been the one to set up this alliance, I would have chosen a few different members.”

“Are there people you don’t like?”

Damien shrugged. “It isn’t about personal likes or dislikes. Because of the way this partnership was formed, I trust everyone’s business sense. I don’t want to poison your opinion. We can talk tonight after we return to the hotel. At that time, tell me your thoughts.”

While his comment made me a bit uneasy, I could do as he asked. Working a room of people was what I did. The difference with this coalition would be that instead of extracting donations, I would be their connection as they partner with Beta Kappa Phi.

Angie came from the aft of the plane, rolling my suitcase.

“Thank you,” I said, reaching for the handle.

“We can get it down to the car,” she offered. My gaze met Damien’s for only a moment, acknowledging that this was Angie’s job, one I was certain she was well compensated to do. That didn’t mean I couldn’t be appreciative. “Thank you.”

Cool air filled the cabin as the door to the plane opened and the stairs descended.

“I should have requested a coat for you,” Damien said. “If you’re too cold, you may wear my suit coat.”

“I’ll be fine,” I replied with a grin. “Besides, only friends...remember?”

“You should know me well enough to know that I wouldn’t let a friend get cold.”

Our seat belts were unclipped, and we were standing. In a cloud of his spicy cologne, I lifted my chin to meet his stare. “You’d offer Van Sherman your coat?”

He pressed his firm lips together. “Perhaps my kindnesses are most frequently bestowed upon friends of the female persuasion.” The intensity of his stare shone down on me. His focus momentarily going to my lips.

Perhaps it was because I wanted to know I had someone on my side as I entered the upcoming meetings. Or maybe it was simply lust over the man I’d tried to forget. No matter the answer, as we stood in silence, a familiar desire awakening within us and swirling around us, my nipples grew hard and my mouth went dry. Before I could say a word, Damien’s palms came to my cheeks, pulling my face upward as his kiss captured my phrases.

In mere seconds, my entire body was on fire, a blaze reignited that maybe never actually was fully extinguished.

Within his grasp, my heart beat quicker than it had a moment before. I pressed toward him, aware that the timing was wrong, and at the same time, unconcerned. Damien's tongue sought mine as his kiss grew more intense. It was as his hand wandered under the blazer and I felt the heat of his touch through the blouse that I took a step back, my hand pushing on his wide chest.

There was something I couldn't read in his blue orbs.

His regular smirk was absent as were his cocky remarks.

"I'm glad you're here," he said. Lifting the tip of his finger to my lips, he grinned. "I'll behave, Ella. Your lips are stunning when they're swollen." He looked up, focusing on my eyes. "It's a sight I love to see, but it's not for everyone. By the time we get to Van's office, no one will be the wiser." He dropped his hand.

I thought about what he'd said earlier. "You mentioned the probationary period as CEO. I don't remember the exact wording." My brow furrowed as I tilted my head. "You've done so much for Sinclair. You can't be concerned that the board would replace you. Was there some clause about Mr. Sinclair?" I was speaking of Damien's father, Derek Sinclair.

Damien's nostrils flared. "We can talk tonight."

When I turned toward the open door, Allen and Angie were there in their places, turned away from us. I lowered my volume. "They have the routine down pat, to turn away when Mr. Sinclair is making out with his guest."

Damien reached for my hand. "You, Gabriella. It's a rather tangled story, but to be honest, my personal life has been a shit show since you left me. I'd venture to guess they've witnessed more verbal disputes than make-out sessions. They're glad to have you back."

"What does that mean? A shit show?"

He shook his head. "It's time to concentrate on the present."

As we stepped from the airplane, my cheeks tingled from the cold wind, and I squinted my eyes at an onslaught of bright sunlight. A car was waiting on the tarmac with a tall man in a long coat standing by its side. Damien stepped forward, offering his hand.

"Damien Sinclair," he said.

"Michael Ricks, sir." The man turned to me with a nod. "Ms. Crystal and Mr. Sinclair, I'm happy to be of service to you while you're visiting

Ashland.”

Wrapping my arms around myself, I smiled. “Could you by any chance make it a little warmer?”

Michael laughed as he opened the back door to the car. “The heat is on inside the car.”

Quickly, I scooted into the back seat and Damien followed. A shiver ran through me as we settled inside. “It’s May,” I said. “Does it get warm here?”

Damien chuckled. “You’ll need to ask Van, but if my firsthand knowledge is correct, the short answer is no. The long answer is probably for a very short time in the summer.”

The city of Ashland, Wisconsin, was absolutely quaint. Not only were the buildings in pristine condition out of some 1960s movie, but many of the buildings had beautiful murals painted on the sides. Despite the cold, Main Street was lined with flowerpots filled with colorful and no doubt, hardy flowers. Michael drove us to the front of a large white hotel on the shore of Chequamegon Bay. Stepping within, we were met with warmth and the scent of burning wood. Tall wooden pillars, ornate trim, and charming antique furnishings added to the ambience, the sensation of stepping back in time.

When Damien gave the woman his name, she turned to me. “And you are Gabriella Crystal?”

“I am.”

“Just a moment,” she said as she concentrated on the computer screen before her. Soon, she handed me a keycard in an envelope. “Here is your key and room number. You’re in a king-size suite overlooking the lake.”

My lips curled upward. “Thank you,” I replied, accepting the key.

“And now for your room, Mr. Sinclair.”

As the woman took care of Damien, I walked near the fireplace, peering out toward what she called a lake view. I supposed Chequamegon Bay was part of Lake Superior. Instead of concentrating on the proper description for the body of water, my thoughts lingered on the reality that two rooms had been booked. That discovery reminded me of what Damien said about why we hadn’t—why *he* hadn’t—touched me like he had a week ago. Funny how the knowledge that he respected my boundaries made me want to change them.

Taking in the atmosphere, I made a complete circle, landing my sight back on the incredibly handsome man at the counter.

Damien turned, his smile on full display. “Ms. Crystal, our rooms are

near one another. Shall we take our luggage upstairs? And then we have one stop before we meet Van and Julia.”

As we walked toward the elevator, each pulling our own suitcase, I asked, “What is our stop?”

“The nice woman at the counter recommended a boutique in town.”

“For what?”

“To get you a coat.”

The elevator doors opened, we stepped inside, and Damien pushed the button to the top floor.

“I have plenty of coats at home. Maybe if I had packed for myself...”

“You would have thought of a coat for a late-May weekend trip?”

My smile grew as I shook my head. “In all honesty, probably not. So, you’re forgiven. I don’t need a coat.”

“I held your hand when we entered the car and felt how cool it was.” The doors opened to the top floor, and we stepped out. Damien again reached for my hand and leaned his forehead toward mine. “I’m not working this hard to win you back to lose you to pneumonia.”

“You aren’t always an ass.”

His grin quirked. “That’s good to know.”

“Sometimes you can be charming.”

“I shouldn’t be responsible for my behavior when we’re together.” He kissed my forehead, and his timbre lowered. “I’m intoxicated by your presence.”

Warmth bubbled within me, taking away the cold of the outdoors.

Don’t hurt me.

The words were on the tip of my tongue.

No matter what I told myself about having a life away from Damien, when I was with him, I wanted him. Each day, hour, minute, that hunger grew.

Was that what he meant by being intoxicated, the point when rational judgment leaves and desire takes over?

Swallowing my concerns, I forced a smile. “I’m going to my room and freshen up.”

His grasp of my hand lingered.

“Damien?”

A deep breath expanded his wide chest. “I’ll be to your room in ten minutes.” His cocky grin was back. “And no multitasking until tonight.”

“Can I trust you?”

“Probably not, but I want you to.”

Chapter 27

Damien

Holding tightly to Ella's hand, we hurried along the sidewalk as fast as the Louboutins would allow her to walk. While Michael had offered to drive, both the Union Boutique and Van's office weren't far from the hotel. Despite the chill in the air, it was a pleasant day. Hardy Wisconsinites were out and about up and down the city's main streets.

"Are we far from Mr. Sherman's office," Ella asked.

"No." I tilted my chin toward a three-story building with a brick façade. "It's right there."

She stopped walking. "Then I'm fine. I don't need a coat."

I tugged her forward, stepping in front of what had been a historical bank. "As luck would have it, we're at the boutique the hotel clerk recommended."

"I don't think—"

Pulling her closer, chest to chest, I leaned down. "I don't recall you being this impossible back when we were together."

"I'm impossible?"

"Good girl. Acknowledging our shortcomings is the first step." My lips quirked into a grin at her expression. Before she could argue, I said, "Now, let's see what they have."

A bell jingled as I opened the door, allowing Ella to enter before me. The hotel clerk said that the boutique was Ashland's newest clothing store. Two

women turned our direction and smiled.

“May I help you find anything,” a petite brunette said as she came our way.

Before Ella could tell the woman we were here by mistake, I spoke, “We’re in Ashland for the weekend. I believe we didn’t accurately check the weather. Do you by chance have any women’s coats?”

The brunette sucked on her lower pink lip as she turned toward the showroom floor. “I’m afraid we have our spring merchandise out.”

Technically, by the calendar it was spring.

The second woman, a redhead, came forward. “We have a few options in back.” She smiled. “If you like one, the good news is they’re discounted.”

I turned to Ella and lifted my eyebrows.

“Fine, yes,” she said. She spoke to the redhead, “If you don’t mind getting them for me.”

“Of course,” the redhead replied. “Give me a minute.”

“May I get you anything?” the first woman asked. “A glass of champagne or perhaps you’d like to browse.”

“It’s a bit early for champagne,” Ella replied.

“We’ll browse,” I said, hoping for some privacy.

As Ella walked away, I couldn’t help that my focus went to the way the navy skirt with the high waist accentuated her curves. The hem of the blazer was high enough to watch the sway of her round ass. And the heels made her shapely legs even sexier. She stopped at a long rack filled with blouses. Walking up behind her, I lowered my volume. “Thank you for not arguing with the woman doing her job.”

Ella spun toward me, her sapphire stare meeting mine. “My issue isn’t with the woman. Besides, she had me at discounted.”

“You know price isn’t an issue.”

“I’m paying for my own coat, Damien. It’s a coat I don’t need, but I can afford it.”

“Consider it a business expense.”

“Creative accounting is bad for business.”

The clip of the redhead’s shoes caused us to turn. Over her arm, she had a stack of different coats. Her smile grew as she came near. “I didn’t ask your size. I guessed and brought out what we had that would fit.”

Ella stepped forward and tugged on a bright pink sleeve. “May I see this one?”

The woman set the stack over a chair and began to dig toward the pink coat.

“Pink?” I asked.

Ella flashed me a stunning smile. “Exactly, not one you would choose.”

At first glance she was right. However, as the coat was lifted higher for viewing, I was sold.

The woman was speaking as she untied the sash. “...a Carolina Herrera wrap with a shawl collar, made with virgin wool in Italy. I believe the striking color will look stunning with your hair.” She held up the coat and Ella stepped forward, sliding her arms into the sleeves.

Walking to a three-way mirror, Ella tied the belt around her waist and pivoted from side to side. Sliding her hands into the pockets, she turned all the way around. Finally, her blue eyes met mine. “Do you hate it?”

I didn’t. “I thought my opinion didn’t matter.”

“If you’d like to try on any of the other ones.”

Ella shook her head, still wearing the bright pink coat. “Could you give us a minute?”

The woman nodded and stepped away.

With my hands on her shoulders, I turned Ella until she faced the mirrors and stood behind her. “It isn’t the one I would have chosen, but it’s stunning.”

Ella’s smile grew. “Do you really think so?”

“No.”

She spun back toward me. “Damien.”

“You’re stunning. The coat is lovely, and the color brings attention to you, the attention you deserve for being the smartest, the most informed, and the most gorgeous woman in the world.”

She turned back to the mirror. “I do like it.” Lifting one sleeve, she pulled out the price tag and her eyes grew three sizes.

I reached for her arm. “The price doesn’t matter.”

“Holy shit,” she stage-whispered. “She said discounted. It’s discounted to eight hundred dollars.”

“Not a problem.”

“I said I’m paying for it.”

“You can pay me back.”

“Damien, I have the money. It’s just that buying a coat for a weekend is unnecessary.”

Reaching for the belt, I leaned toward her ear and whispered. “Wear this coat to my room tonight with those heels and nothing more and your debt is paid.”

She sucked in a breath as her cheeks pinkened to match the coat. “Inappropriate.”

I lifted my brow and tilted my head toward the other coats. “I’m sure you’d look stunning in any of those.”

Ella snagged her lower lip with her front teeth. “It is warm.”

“Then your nipples aren’t hard.”

She smiled and lowered her chin.

“They are hard because you’re thinking of how brazen it will feel to walk to my room in nothing but this coat and heels tonight.”

Ella let out a long breath. “Fine, I’ll take the coat. Aren’t we late for our meeting?” She started to remove the coat.

Lifting my hand, I garnered the attention of the redhead. “We’d like the coat. May she wear it?”

“Of course.”

When I met the saleswoman at the counter, she continued speaking. “It’s a great deal, fifty percent off the original price.”

I handed her my credit card. “It makes her happy.” I was speaking of Ella. “For that, I would have paid double.”

As the saleswoman handed me my receipt, she whispered to Ella, “You’re a lucky woman.”

“I’m the lucky one,” I said, resting my hand in the small of Ella’s back and leading her out onto the sidewalk. “What do you think?”

Ella looked over at me through veiled lashes. “When I discovered my seat was beside yours on the plane, I thought my luck had run out. Maybe it didn’t.”

“Van’s office is right over there.” I took her hand and after looking both directions, led Ella across the street. Inside the seemingly modest building was a breathtaking brick entry, two stories high with a sign that read Sherman Corporation in large letters over a door mostly comprised of smoked glass. Reluctantly removing my hand from Ella’s back, I gestured for her to enter.

“Mr. Sinclair,” Connie, Van’s assistant, greeted as we entered.

“Connie, it’s nice to see you.” I tilted my head toward Ella. “Connie, this is my friend Gabriella Crystal. Ella, this is Connie, one of the women who keeps Van in line.”

Connie's laugh filled the front room. "I think Julia has a handle on that job. Let me tell them you're here." She turned to Ella. "It's nice to meet you. Mr. Sherman has told me many great things." Her smile grew. "I love your coat. You were smart to bring one. People forget how far north we are."

"Does it ever get warm here?"

"Oh yes. Our summers are lovely, all two weeks." She scoffed. "I'm kidding, but yes, it does heat up." Connie went behind her desk and made a call. When she looked up, she smiled. "I'll take you upstairs."

The elevator she led us to was old-fashioned, the kind with a cage instead of solid walls. Thankfully, it was motorized. With a push of a button, Connie took us to the third floor. Before the bars to the elevator opened, I saw Van and Julia. Her hand was in his as they watched our arrival. For a split second, a tinge of jealousy ached in my chest. I wasn't jealous of Van and Julia, but of what they represented—a happily married couple. I wondered if I hadn't screwed things up with Ella the first time, if we could be like them—holding hands, running companies, and raising children.

The door opened and Ella and I stepped out.

"Welcome to Ashland," Van said to me with a hearty handshake. He turned his attention to Ella. "It's good to see you again, Ms. Crystal."

"Ella, please."

Julia was more direct as she came up and clenched Ella's hands. "It's nice to finally meet you."

"Finally?"

"Oh, Damien has only been talking about you for years. He's nothing if not persistent."

Craning her neck, Ella flashed me a smile. "That he is."

"Where did you get that coat?" I heard Julia ask as she led Ella toward a conference room.

"You believe this will work?" Van asked as we stayed near the elevator shaft.

"Ella is good. You saw her at the gala. And with her experience with Sinclair, she is light-years ahead of most candidates."

Van lowered his tone. "You can thank my wife for getting everyone on board, but I want you to know, Dwain Welsh and Kendrick Cade were the most hesitant."

"I figured. Welsh knows that Moon Pharmaceutical is a thorn in my side. He's not exactly looking to help Sinclair. What's with Cade?"

“Same old story. Perry Drugs is the front name. It’s the same reason the Cades were hesitant to join the coalition. He’s concerned about Ms. Crystal’s confidentiality.”

“She’ll sign an NDA. It’s also why she’ll be working from Sinclair,” I said. “The information she receives will be held as confidential. It won’t be made public or even shared with others at Beta Kappa Phi.”

“I told him.” Van lifted his chin the direction the women went. “This is Julia’s baby, not mine. She has a real handle on the other CEOs, and she’s one hundred percent on board.”

“Speaking of babies,” I said with a grin. “How is it to be the father of two?”

Van’s grin grew. “Other than lack of sleep, I’m a fan. And once school is out in Texas, my niece, Brooklyn, will be staying with us for the summer.” He shook his head. “She’s fourteen now and loves the kids.”

“How does Julia do it?”

“She’s a superwoman without a cape. But I’ll have you know she doesn’t do it alone. If time has taught this old man anything, it’s when and what to delegate. Julia and I are both hands-on with the kids as much as possible. That doesn’t mean we don’t have help, but I’d walk away from Sherman Corporation before walking away from my family.”

Wow. That wasn’t something I expected to hear from a man like Donovan Sherman.

“That’s something,” I said.

“It’s the only thing.” His gaze narrowed. “If you’re serious about Ella, she needs to know that...that she’s the only thing that matters to you.” He shrugged. “I get if that’s not something you can commit to, but if you can’t, don’t expect her to commit for both of you. Think about what happened with Amber.”

Pressing my lips together, I shook my head, wishing Van and I hadn’t become as close as we had. The last two years were grueling in their own way. I probably overshared on occasion. No, with that remark, I definitely overshared. “Ella is different. She always has been. I need to make it through the next five months and then she can and will be my only thing.”

“I don’t know,” he said, “kids give you a different perspective. Five months is a lifetime.”

“This campaign with Beta Kappa Phi will help secure my position at Sinclair.” I exhaled. “My dad is facing some health issues. Darius is

poisoning the board. I can only manage so many fires at once.”

“Ella seems like a great woman. I remember your elevator pitch when you found out about the gala.” He lifted his hands. “Listen, I’m not an expert on the relationship thing. I fucked up more than I succeeded.” He tilted his head toward the conference room. “But damn, success makes all those failures worth it, and I guess I’d rather see a friend avoid the failures and enjoy the success, sooner rather than later.”

“Van,” Julia called as she stuck her head out the doorway. “You two can gossip later. Come in here and help me prepare Ella. I’m not sure of your plan, but I want her as ready as possible for this weekend.”

“Gossiping.” Turning to me with a grin, Van said, “We weren’t gossiping.”

“Hell no.”

Soon the four of us were seated around a long glass table.

“I’m not sure if this campaign with Beta Kappa Phi was Damien’s or Van’s idea,” Julia said to Ella, “but when I heard it, I knew this would work.”

“I hope you’re right,” Ella replied.

Julia looked over at Van and me. “Let’s be real, these guys can be pains in the ass, but they know their stuff, and they have made a fortune. A great businessman once told me that the only bad idea is the one you don’t investigate.”

Ella smiled. “Is that businessman in this room?”

“Yeah.” She turned toward Van with a grin. “I liked his advice so much, I married him.”

I decided I should give Van’s advice some serious consideration. If he can get a woman like Julia to look at him the way she does, he could be an expert on relationships.

Over the next three hours, we ate a lunch that Connie delivered to the conference room and discussed the finer details of the coalition and our expectations for the Beta Kappa Phi campaign. At about two thirty, Julia received word that Robert Ayers and Dwain Welsh had recently landed. Robert Ayers was the CEO of McCree Pharmaceutical and Dwain Welsh was my thorn, the CEO of Moon Medical.

I sat back. “They flew in together.”

“Plenty of time to talk,” Van replied.

Chapter 28

Gabriella

A fog of tension descended on the conference room with Julia's announcement followed by the men's assessments. My mind scrambled with all the new information recalling the two individual CEOs. Knowing names was as important in this new job as it was with the fundraising. Robert Ayers was from McCree Pharmaceutical; their most popular and lucrative formula was an ACE inhibitor that lowers blood pressure. Dwain Welsh was from Moon Medical, and their primary product was an anxiety medication.

I looked from Damien to Van and back. There were too many thoughts fighting for my attention for me to concentrate on the obvious one that was before me. Both Damien and Donovan were incredibly handsome men. Not only were they pleasing to the eye, but over the last few hours, they showed that they were genuinely knowledgeable and willing to help this campaign succeed. "Both men live in Ohio," I said. "Maybe that's why they came together."

Julia turned my direction. "I've spoken with all the CEOs. Everyone is onboard and extremely interested in this campaign. Don't let these men worry you."

I pressed my lips together and looked around the table. "Should I be worried?"

“No,” Damien said. “You’ve got this.”

“I feel like there are things not being said.”

Damien took a deep breath and leaned back. “I said I didn’t want to poison you on any members of the coalition. I meant that. What you’re sensing is a problem with me. Dwain Welsh and I are together in this coalition because of Julia, not because we are friends.”

I smirked. “Is that all?”

“Doesn’t that bother you?” Damien asked.

“No. When I worked at Sinclair, I dealt with people all the time who didn’t like you.”

Damien’s lips twisted into a smirk as Van’s laughter filled the air. “Ella, I like you.”

“Thank you,” I replied to Van with a nod. Addressing everyone, I asked, “Is there anything else I need to know?”

Julia’s eyes sparkled. “Eva Holston can be rude. Don’t let her get to you.”

“Now who’s gossiping?” Damien asked with a grin.

“It’s true,” Julia replied. “That means it’s not gossip.”

“Remember what you said about Perry Drugs this morning?” Damien asked, his question bringing back the fog.

While I felt like I was on a witness stand, I replied, “Yes, it’s a corporate front for Body Kindness.”

“How did you learn that?” Van inquired.

I shrugged. “I dug. It took some time, but I was coming up with very little on Perry Drugs. I followed the trail of money.”

Van grinned. “Damien didn’t tell you?”

“No.”

“Have you been given access to coalition information?” Julia questioned.

“No.” The small hairs on the back of my neck stood to attention. “Is it bad that I learned about Body Kindness?”

“Not bad,” Van replied. “Impressive. You see Kendrick Cade doesn’t want that connection made public, for many reasons.”

“It is. I found it,” I said.

“It’s because you’re good,” Damien said. “You’re better than good. The Cades don’t want that information to be common knowledge.” He tilted his head. “So don’t mention it tonight.”

Julia nodded.

“I don’t understand. It is a matter of public record.”

“They’d rather that Perry is solely named as the benefactor to the fraternity,” Julia said.

“And at the same time, they want me to recommend Body Kindness to facilities and physicians.” I didn’t phrase it as a question.

Julia nodded. “I’m sorry if that makes this complicated. I promise it’s legal.”

“I have questions, but I can hold off until we all gather to talk about the campaign.”

“Friday evenings are usually casual, a time to catch up.”

Casual.

Then why was I dressed in designer business attire?

At nearly six o’clock, the final members of the coalition arrived. Cynthia Broche and her husband, Ian Morrison, from Broche, a multigenerational pharmaceutical company out of Michigan that was best known for asthma and allergy health products and drugs. Such as with Julia and Wade Pharmaceutical, Cynthia was the Broche heiress. And unlike Van who wasn’t as involved in Wade, Ian had been at his wife’s side in the running of Broche for nearly forty years.

As more people arrived, our group outgrew the conference room and moved downstairs to a larger meeting room. As Julia had said, the evening was spent more as a reunion than a meeting.

At some point, Julia pulled me aside and whispered. “Despite what Damien said, this coalition has created a connection that goes beyond business. As I said, tomorrow we’ll get deeper to the campaign. And as I’m sure you were told, tomorrow night is a cocktail and dinner party at our home. Don’t worry if you didn’t plan on formal wear.”

“Damien warned me.” A smile curled my lips as I looked around the room. “Everyone seems to get along.”

“Oh, they do—to a point.” Julia shrugged. “That’s just business. I have a hard time being cutthroat, unlike a few people we both know.” Her smile returned. “I make a good buffer and honestly, this coalition has been good for Wade. I couldn’t be happier.”

Lauren Cade, who I’d met earlier in the evening, joined Julia and me. “Julia, at tomorrow’s business meeting, I’m going to move that you are only allowed to host this weekend during the third quarter. How do you stand the cold?”

Julia laughed. “Dear, this isn’t cold. You should be here in January.”

The polite and friendly conversations continued until seven when the twelve of us walked down the street to a local pub where a small private room was reserved. As we were led inside by the hostess, I had a flashback of Damien's private room at the steak house in Carmel. That room was twice the size of this one with only a table for two.

Damien's hand came to the small of my back. "You're a hit," he whispered.

I pushed my hands into the pockets of my new coat. "I think it's the coat."

"No, it's you." He kissed my cheek. "You radiate confidence, and that's what is needed with these kinds of people."

"People like you."

"You're an expert at handling me."

"That's a tougher job than them."

After I untied the belt, Damien helped me remove the coat.

Servers came and went as we all enjoyed our meal and drinks. Sitting at Damien's side I took in the faces around the table. The age range was significant. Julia and I were the youngest, and if I were to guess, the Holstons were the oldest. I'd researched the net income of each company as well as the administrators' salaries. Small pharma was a misnomer when it came to revenue. Add to that Donovan Sherman's wealth and this room was overflowing with money. Yet we were eating hamburgers, fries, and salads, and drinking a variety of drinks—regular people.

That wasn't completely true.

Tomorrow, these people would morph from who they were tonight into sharks, wanting to know what Beta Kappa Phi would and could do for them.

During the dinner, occasionally, Damien's hand came under the table and rested on my thigh. His touch was reassuring and supportive. While the table hid our connection, I suspected we weren't fooling the others with our characterization of friends. When I'd look at him, seeing his handsome smile, my heart would flutter. Were we fooling the others, or was I the fool for opening my life and heart again?

The Cades were the first to excuse themselves. Their departure opened the floodgates. Soon, I was standing, and Damien was helping me with my coat, and everyone was saying their good nights.

"Tomorrow, nine o'clock at Sherman Corporation," Julia said. "My husband has been generous with his office building this weekend."

Words of appreciation floated through the air.

“We’ll hit the ground running,” Julia said. “We have our business meeting, and then we’ll spend the afternoon with Ms. Crystal. Oh, and lunch is catered. There will be coffee and donuts at nine.”

Everyone nodded their agreement.

“We’ll see you tomorrow,” Damien said to the Shermans.

I reached for Julia’s hand. “Thank you for making me feel so welcome.”

Her smile beamed. “I’m not sure why, but Van likes Damien.” She laughed. “Okay, I do too. And after...” She shook her head. “Let’s say, it’s good to see him smile.”

After?

Damien’s hand was again in the small of my back. “Did you hear that? There are people who like me.”

“Miracles do happen.”

He leaned close and whispered, “I’m ready to be reimbursed for this coat.”

Warmth filled my cheeks as my core twisted.

“See you tomorrow,” I said to Julia as Damien and I left the private room.

Soon, we were back on the sidewalk. My face was down, and my hands were buried deep in the pockets as I braced myself for the walk back to the hotel.

“Mr. Sinclair.”

We looked up to see Michael waiting with his car. “Unless you’d like to walk?”

Damien and I looked at one another.

“Ella?” Damien asked.

“Oh, the car. My feet are killing me.”

Michael opened the back door and we both scooted inside.

Once the door was shut, Damien whispered in a deep voice. “Sorry that the shoes aren’t comfortable, but they’re part of the repayment plan.”

“You don’t actually expect me to do what you said, do you?”

Under the illumination of the outside streetlights, Damien’s blue eyes simmered with a spark that caused my blood to heat.

“Ms. Crystal, I’d hate to return to the coalition tomorrow and tell them you’re not a woman of your word.”

“I don’t recall agreeing.”

He laid his large hand over my coat-covered thigh. “You’re wearing the

evidence.”

Chapter 29

Gabriella

Damien walked me to my hotel room and said good night. There wasn't even a kiss or a grope. It was a professional parting of ways that, as I stepped into my suite, left me dazed. For a moment I stared at the door, wondering if this was a joke or if he would knock. If it weren't for his comments about the coat throughout the evening, I would assume that multitasking was off the table. Untying the belt, I slipped my arms from the coat and hung it up in the small closet. As I was about to take off the painful shoes, my phone dinged from the confines of my purse.

A concoction of emotions bubbled within me as I removed my phone and swiped the screen.

One message, from Damien.

“In case you’re having problems keeping up, the work portion of our day is complete. It’s time for multitasking.”

Relief and excitement simultaneously joined the already-concocted mixture of emotions.

Biting my lips, I recalled his words at the store. ‘Wear this coat to my

room tonight with those heels and nothing more and your debt is paid.’

Wear the coat with nothing else.

There weren’t other conditions.

Wear the coat.

My cheeks rose as I walked back to the closet.

Wear the coat.

I could do that.

It didn’t take long to strip out of the blazer, skirt, and blouse. Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, I eyed my bra and panties.

Why was this hard?

This was Damien Sinclair. The man liked to play games. I could play too.

Unclasping my bra, I hung it on the back of the bathroom door and pushed my panties down, stepping out of them with my heels in place. To be honest, I was afraid if I took the shoes off, they wouldn’t go back on, not tonight anyway. My hair was still pulled back and my earrings were in place. I applied a new coat of lipstick and smacked my lips together. “Yes, Mr. Sinclair, I can play your game.” With a grin, I went back to the closet, and donned the pink coat.

As I opened the door to the hallway, I felt the sensation Damien predicted. Not only were my nipples hard, but my pussy clenched at the cool air coming under the coat. A look to the left and one to the right confirmed my show of confidence wouldn’t be enjoyed by anyone else.

Standing straight, I knocked on the door.

A moment of terror struck.

What if this wasn’t his room?

The fright disappeared as the door opened and his panty-melting stare was focused only on me.

My breathing deepened and time forgot to pass as he stood in the doorway, his strong fingers gripping the trim, his bicep bulging beneath his shirt. His molten blue gaze scanned from my hair to the pointed tips of the shoes. I scanned him too, assessing the loss of his suit coat and tie.

“Ms. Crystal?” He gestured toward the room. “What a welcome surprise. Please come in.”

The subtle scent of his lingering cologne tickled my senses as I passed by, entering his room. I turned at the sound of the shutting door and watched as he secured the lock.

It was as he turned that I willed myself into confidence, flashed him a

seductive smile, and reached for the belt around my waist.

Damien lifted his hand. "Stop."

Stop?

My eyes opened in question.

In two long strides, he was in front of me, lifting my chin with his thumb and finger.

The temperature of the room increased as our stare-down continued. Though he'd only said one word since closing the door, within his stare was a symphony of thoughts and feelings. For seconds or minutes, I watched the energy in his eyes, the crackling of lightning in a summer sky or fireworks over a dry field, each spark both beautiful and dangerous, capable of igniting my world. As he'd done on the plane, Damien shifted his focus from my eyes to my lips. I came to his door to fulfill his request. Wear the coat and heels. However, as our breathing deepened, I wanted more.

I wanted him to kiss me like he'd done on the plane.

That wasn't all.

I was tired of walking this tightrope between what my mind thought was best and my body wanted.

Letting go of my chin, Damien inhaled and took a step back. "You should know you were perfect today."

Um. Okay. We're going to talk.

I shook my head. "Thank you. The Shermans are great people. As for the rest, tomorrow will be the big test."

Damien ran his hand over his hair. "You don't owe me for the coat. If you don't want to be here...if you want to sleep..."

What the hell?

"Don't you want me here?" I asked.

"More than air to breathe."

I narrowed my eyes. "Damien, I don't understand what's happening. One minute, you look at me like I'm your last meal and the next you're telling me to go."

"I didn't tell you to go. I offered. I fucking want you here, in this bed, all night long. In our bed forever." The tendons in his neck tightened. "I want to ravish you, fall into a sex coma, to wake and do it again. Rinse and repeat all fucking night long, tonight, tomorrow night, until we're too old to fuck." He shook his head. "One day at a time. I know. I want you here because you want to be here, not because of a debt."

I took a step toward him, my chin raised. “Then don’t offer me the opposite.”

His nostrils flared as he stared down at me. “It’s that.” He inhaled. “I respected your wishes, but if you don’t leave now...if you stay, we won’t be having a masturbation party. When you come, it will be because I allow it. I am the one that touches your warm, wet pink pussy. I’m the one who licks it, nips it, and fills it. I’m the one who brings you pleasure.”

Each of his phrases were sparks combining within me. From firecrackers to dynamite, my nerve endings detonated.

“And one more thing, Ms. Crystal, there’s no turning back. You won’t kick me out of my own room, and unless you do it now, you aren’t leaving.” He took another step back. “What is your answer?”

I pressed my lips into a straight line. “That’s a lot to think about.”

He shook his head. “No, don’t overthink it.” He came closer, lowering his lips to my jaw. A trail of kisses traversed my face, ear, neck, and lower, into the V of the coat’s neckline.

My breathing quickened as goosebumps materialized in the wake of his descent. I closed my eyes, savoring the warmth and desire in each action.

“Open the coat for me.” His deep voice left no room for refusal.

My mouth dried as my fingers fumbled with the knot.

When the wool gaped, giving him just a peek at my flesh, he growled, “Fuck.”

With a shrug of each shoulder, the pink coat fell to the carpeting near my shoes. Passion and desire like I’d tried to forget shone in his eyes as he walked around me, completely around me.

“You’re incredible.”

“My debt is paid.”

“It is, but mine isn’t.”

I tilted my head. “Yours?”

He stopped in front of me. “I promised you seven orgasms, and I didn’t deliver.”

He snaked his arm around my waist and lifted me from the floor. Cradling me against his muscular chest, he looked at my feet. “Are you ready to take those off?”

“Yes.”

Sitting me on the edge of the bed, Damien knelt before me, gently removing one shoe and then the next. I wiggled my toes at the relief of losing

the heels. “I’m not sure I will be able to walk tomorrow.”

“That’s my goal.”

I offered him my hand and watched as his long fingers encased mine. “I don’t want to leave, Damien. I’m scared, but I’m tired of fighting the way I feel. We shared a passion, one I tried to forget.”

He stood and tugged on my hand. I also stood, craning my neck and looking up at him. “I remember the passion, Ella. I remember everything about you. Give me a chance to help you remember.”

I lifted my arms to his broad shoulders and standing on my toes, I kissed him. My body melded against his as the intensity of our kiss grew. Damien’s hands fell lower until they lifted my behind. I wrapped my legs around him, pressing my heels into the small of his back. The hotel room lost focus as he turned and lowered me once again to the bed. I didn’t have time to move before his hard body was over mine. The gruff on his cheeks abraded my skin as his kisses descended lower without the impairment of the coat.

Chapter 30

Damien

*H*elp her remember.

Ella's fingers gripped the sheets as my kisses neared her core. Spreading her knees apart, I teased her warm, wet pussy with my tongue. As her hips bucked, I remembered the text message I'd sent. Moving my kisses higher, I climbed over her until our lips met. Her fingers weaved through my hair, pulling me toward her. We were two people hungry for one another.

Ravished.

Starved.

Ella was no innocent spectator in this tango.

Her passion knew no bounds as she reached for my shirt, hastily undoing the buttons. With the shirt gaping open, I leaned over her, bringing my nose to hers. "I remembered something else."

Her eyes opened, giving me a magical and quizzical view.

"What do you remember?"

"A text message I sent you."

Thoughts swirled in her orbs before Ella gasped and covered her eyes with one hand. "I can't do that."

She never had, not with me. Ella was good with me going down on her, but the idea of her sitting on my face had always been a bridge too far.

"You can," I reassured.

“I’m embarrassed.”

“My tongue was just in your cunt. I want it back there. It’s the same thing.”

“It’s not.” When I didn’t respond, she widened her eyes. “Damien...”

I cupped her cheek with my palm. “I remember everything. Let’s make new memories, too.” I saw the hesitation in her expression. “If you hate it, you can stop it.”

“If *you* hate it...”

A laugh bubbled from my throat. “I most definitely will not hate it.” Flopping on my back, I scooted toward the pillows.

Ella sat up and shook her head.

“You’re saying no?” I tilted my face with a grin. “You’re wounding my confidence.”

Her lips quirked, bringing the tips upward. “Your confidence is fine. I’m not saying no to...” Pink rose from her breasts to her neck and cheeks.

“Sitting on my face,” I said, offering her the rest of the sentence.

“Yes...to that. I’m saying it’s not happening with the gross inequality in our clothing.”

I liked the inequality. I could deal with her naked twenty-four hours a day. “I don’t need to be naked to eat you.”

“I want you naked.” She moved to her knees and crawled toward me.

Fuck, the look she was giving me was sexy as hell. Her hair tousled, swaying with each movement. With her swollen lips pursed, and a sultry gleam in her eyes, she was a seductress—a siren—calling to me. Unlike those of Greek mythology, Ella wasn’t luring me to my destruction. Even if she were, I’d never turn away.

I offered no resistance as she pulled my shirt over my shoulders and tugged at each arm. The belt joined the shirt on the floor, followed by my pants. It was as she reached for the waistband on my boxers that I stopped her. “I’m going to come if you do that.”

“Then I won’t...”

Her inability or unwillingness to say ‘sit on your face’ made me grin. “You will. After you scream my name and allow me to lick you clean, then the boxers will come off because I’ll be so damn hard, I will need to fuck you.” Laying my head on the pillow, I give her my best smile. “Come on, Ella. It’s time to come.”

She sucked in a deep breath and nibbled her upper lip.

Curling my finger, I bid her closer.

Reluctantly, she obeyed. It was when she placed her calves on each side of my face that I saw what I'll never forget. "Your pussy is beautiful from this angle." I held on to her legs, holding her in place as I waited for her to lower herself. Straining my neck, I ran my tongue between her folds.

"Daaaamien."

"Come down on me."

Though my patience was stretched, I continued to coax, wanting her to do this on her own. "You smell fucking delicious."

Releasing her legs, I slid my hand up her stomach, splaying my fingers. I did the same with the other hand on her back, feeling the way her spine arched. My touch moved upward, cupping her breasts, and tweaking her nipples. By the rapidness of her breathing and the soft moans filling my ears, I could tell my ministrations were effective.

"That's it. Let me make you feel good."

Slowly, she relaxed, easing her stance as I continued my caressing. When she was close enough, I parted her with my tongue. Her back arched even farther, her long locks swaying over my legs as her moans grew louder. Loving the noises she made, I did it again. This time I swirled her clit and gently nipped it.

Ella screamed as she reacted, her body shivering under my touch.

"Do you hate this?" I asked between sucking and lapping.

"God...no." Her body stiffened, and I realized she was sitting forward, gripping the headboard.

Holding her in place, I took over, virtually unaware of what exactly I was doing. I was too enthralled with the noises coming from above. It was as she called out my name and her legs trembled that I sucked, drinking her sweet essence. Finally, she fell to the side of me, still breathing quickly with her cheeks flushed. Lifting my face over hers, I smiled. "It was hard to tell. Did you hate it?"

She shook her head. "I'm...done—done for the night—and it's your fault."

"You're not done, and I take full responsibility. Rinse and repeat, remember?" Before she could answer, I tugged my boxer shorts off and made my way between her outstretched legs. "I'm fucking hard as a rock."

When I was over her, Ella's lips curled into a smile. "I know I don't hate this."

My eyes closed as I slid inside her. “Damn, you’re tight.” Inch by inch, her pussy hugged me. It was like trying to don a glove two sizes too small.

Her neck stretched as we became one, her breasts lifted to my lips. I sucked one nipple and then the other as I found our rhythm. Once she again began to respond, I pulled out and flipped her to her stomach. Lifting her ass in the air, I ran my finger from her cunt to her tight ring of muscles.

“Damien,” she scolded.

“You won’t hate that either.”

Ella craned her neck and met my gaze. “Let’s spread the new memories out beyond one night.”

Damn, she was gorgeous with her round ass in the air, her hair mussed, and red patches from my facial hair adorning her skin. I didn’t argue as I plunged deep back into her pussy.

“Fuck.”

“Yes,” she called. “Not hating. I’m so full.”

The position was heaven. My speed increased as I held tightly to her hips. The suite filled with the sounds of two bodies slapping against one another. Two pieces of a puzzle that fit together with perfection. Perspiration coated my skin as Ella’s cunt spasmed, strangling my cock. It was the striking of the match that resulted in an out-of-control wildfire. I couldn’t hold back any longer. Holding her with an iron grip, my balls drew tight, and I exploded time and time again, filling her with my seed.

It wasn’t until I broke our connection, fell to the pillow at her side, and pulled her warm body against mine that I realized I’d forgotten to wear a condom. We’d been skin to skin before when we were a couple. Maybe this was my subconscious saying I wanted that again.

I kissed her hair as she curled into my side. “I never forgot.”

Ella looked up at me. “Me either.”

Chapter 31

Gabriella

*M*y eyes opened in a dreamy haze as I instinctively curled next to the mountain of warmth at my side. Rolling to my back, I stared up at the ceiling and assessed my thoughts and feelings. A week ago, I told myself this couldn't happen—I wouldn't allow it. Now, I was waking in Damien's bed. My new coat was lost somewhere to the floor and other than my room key, all my personal possessions, including clothes, were in a room down the hall.

Light seeped around the heavy hotel curtains, letting me know that morning was near.

The bed shifted as Damien's large hand came to my thigh. Even first thing in the morning, his smile was radiant.

"Good morning." His deep baritone reverberated through the room.

"Morning."

The muscles in his arms and back flexed as he sat up near the headboard.

My core twisted at the memory of grasping the headboard.

The sheets fell to his hips as he stretched.

Rolling to my side, I met his gaze. "I'm not sorry."

He encouraged me to move closer until I was against his side with his arm protectively around me. "Good." He lifted my chin. "I'm not sorry either." His smile faded. "I never should have let you leave, Ella. We were

good together.”

I nodded. “We were good. I needed to leave. I needed to prove to myself that I could exist without you.”

“Is that what you want?”

Inhaling, I considered the question. “Maybe it’s *wanted*. Now I know I can.”

“You fucking did it.” His smile was back. “You not only existed, but you also flourished, grew, and succeeded.” He tilted his head. “You were a wonderful assistant—my best ever. Now, you’re more. I watched you last night talking to the members of the coalition. It was like watching you at the gala. Your confidence shows. It fucking radiates from you like a neon sign. You impressed them last night. I know today when we talk about the campaign, you will secure every person. Julia sold them on the idea. You will get them to sign on the dotted line.”

I moved until I was also sitting, feeling the ache of muscles I hadn’t felt in a long time.

Our first encounter last night wasn’t our only. We both woke one another for other rounds.

It wasn’t just sex.

What we accomplished throughout the night was the demolition of the walls we’d both constructed. Those walls were our protection—a fortress. I’d personally spent weeks and months laying each brick. Seeing one another again was the first attack, an arrow that chipped a bit of the mortar. Letting Damien in my room in Los Angeles was the first battalion, complete with military weapons. The last week of talking weakened what had been damaged. And last night was a total annihilation.

I heard the explosion of the dynamite, felt the rumble of the wrecking ball, and smelled the dust of destruction.

“You said we were going to talk last night about the members,” I reminded him.

Damien smirked. “It was my intention.” He reached for my hand, lifted it to his lips, and peppered my knuckles with warm kisses. “I was distracted.”

Leaving my hand in his, I asked, “What do you think I need to know before the meetings? I don’t want to disappoint you.”

“You could never disappoint me.”

“What about the Cades—Perry versus Body Kindness?”

“Reassure them and all the members that you will keep their information

confidential.”

“I’m assuming you want me to sign something. An NDA?”

He nodded. “It would make everyone feel more at ease in sharing information.”

“I can do that.” I looked at the watch on my wrist. “It’s nearly seven.” A smile lifted my cheeks. “I should go back to my room and shower.”

“Or you could shower here.”

“What time are we supposed to be to Van’s office building?”

“I need to be there by nine.”

I tilted my head. “We aren’t going together?”

“The morning will be the business meeting.”

“I thought I could sit in on it and learn more about each company and the dynamics of the coalition.”

Damien thought for a moment. “Fuck, you’re signing the NDA so I don’t see an issue. I’ll send Julia a text to make sure she’s okay with you being there.”

“If not” —I shrugged— “I could spend the morning napping. You see, someone kept waking me last night.”

His smile grew. “I’m not the only one who’s guilty.”

“No, you’re not. I wouldn’t have spent the night in here if I didn’t want to.”

“I’m glad you did.” He leaned over and brushed my lips with his. Keeping his nose close to mine, he lowered his tone and slowed his timbre. “Waking up to your hand on my cock was like a fucking dream.”

The memory flooded my body with endorphins.

“Oh, baby,” Damien growled as he rolled from his side to his back.

My hand moved up and down, feeling the way his cock hardened under my grasp. The dark room filled with a litany of cuss words and praises when I licked the tip, slurping the moisture from the end. It was as I climbed over Damien that his vocabulary became even more articulate and downright dirty. Positioning myself to take him for the nth time during the night, I eased myself down, stretching my muscles until I was as full as humanly possible.

My knees ached as I moved at a slower rhythm than was Damien’s normal.

Soon, his large hands encircled my waist, lifting and pressing.

I may have been on top, but there was no doubt who was choreographing the performance.

With Damien, there was nothing wrong with handing him the reins. The man was gifted at more than business.

My cheeks warmed. “You would think we would have been worn out.”

“If you’re willing to shower here, I can prove I’m not.”

“All my things are back in my room.”

He jutted his chin toward his lap, and I laughed at the tented sheets.

“You can’t leave me like this.”

“No one ever died of an unsatisfied erection.”

“Are you sure?” he asked. “This would be a bad time to learn it was fatal.”

I reluctantly pushed back the blankets and moved to the edge of the big bed, looking for my clothes. Shaking my head, I let out a giggle. “Oh my God. I don’t have any clothes here. Just the coat.” Standing, my body reminded me of all we’d done throughout the night. I picked up the pink coat.

“Best damn business purchase I ever made.”

As I wrapped the coat around me, the soft lining felt cool against my skin. Tying the belt, I looked over at the way Damien was watching my every move. “Lucky for you, it was fifty percent off.”

Damien stood, fully nude, his erection bouncing. “I’m going to have it dipped in gold and made into a statue in my house. Better yet, in the foyer of Sinclair. Everyone will see it and only the two of us will know its true meaning. We’ll tell them it was made by some famous artist, and I couldn’t resist it.”

I felt down in the pockets finding my key card. “Let me know what Julia thinks.”

He came closer. “I’ll call for room service and have breakfast brought to your room. Once I shower and take care of what you left unattended, I’ll come down.”

I shook my head. “Now I’m going to be thinking about you jacking off in the shower.”

His smile simmered as a gleam filled his blue orbs. “That’s exactly what I want you to think about.”

As I started to walk toward the door with my shoes in one hand, Damien grabbed my other hand and spun me toward him. I bumped against his solid chest. The wool coat shielded me from other protruding body parts. I stared up into the blue abyss. “Yes?”

“I want you to know—before we’re dressed and back to professional

mode—that while everyone else at today’s meeting will be thinking about what you’re saying, I’ll be thinking about how spectacular you were.” He lifted the hand he was holding. “How good this feels on my cock and the way your tits swing when you ride me.”

I closed my eyes for a moment before refocusing on him. “Are you trying to distract me?”

“I want you to understand that while no matter the tone of the room, I’ll be wearing a perpetual smile.”

He kissed me. The contact lingered long enough to twist my core, but not like we’d kissed throughout the night.

“Shower fast,” he said.

“Why?”

“I’m ordering breakfast, and I don’t want anyone else to see you without clothes.”

“Then hurry to my room and answer the door.”

Another quick kiss.

“I’d swat your ass, but I doubt you’d feel it through that coat.”

My smile grew as I left his room. By the time I was standing under the hot spray of my shower, my thoughts centered on what was happening in Damien’s shower. I cursed him as my nipples grew hard.

Chapter 32

Gabriella

The outfit Damien had chosen for today consisted of high-waisted wool slacks, a long-sleeve blouse with tight cuffs and flowing arms, and high-heeled boots, much more comfortable than yesterday's shoes. By the time our breakfast arrived, I was mostly dressed and fixing my hair. My degree of dress didn't matter because Damien was present to open the door.

Now, about seven hours later, I was standing before the coalition and rethinking my assessment of the boots. For the last three hours, I'd been the main speaker. I laid out the campaign objectives and my ideas for early results, and then spent most of the time answering questions.

"As we are all aware," I said, "This campaign is a new endeavor. As such, it's truly a fluid entity that will require constant assessment. Some of the ideas may fail. A great businessman" —my gaze went to Damien— "once told me that success isn't possible without failure. When that failure occurs, I'll reevaluate and make the necessary adjustments."

"What you have described seems like a lot of work for one person to take on," Cynthia Broche said.

I feigned a smile. "I agree. It is a lot, and I'm excited to get started. Especially now that I have faces to all the names. I'll keep you informed as to my connections and where I've promoted your respective companies. I'd like to be updated with the results you see on your end. It could be profit, but

there are many other measurable indicators, such as increased website visits, inquiries to your salespeople, and stock prices.”

“Cynthia is right,” Dwain Welsh said. “Maybe this is too much for one person.”

Julia was the one to speak. “I told you about Ella’s resumé, her background in pharmaceuticals. That gives her a head start.”

“With Sinclair,” Mr. Welsh said dismissively.

“I’m aware that you each have different products,” I said. “My time at Sinclair laid a groundwork that will help me understand your needs once I’m given more information.”

“How can we be assured you won’t share our information with a competitor?” Robert Ayers asked.

“Your success is Beta Kappa Phi’s success. And as I said before, I am willing to sign an NDA.”

“What if you decide you need help? Will that person also sign a nondisclosure?” Lauren Cade asked.

“If the campaign goes as we hope, I will need help,” I admitted. “And you can be assured that any Beta Kappa Phi representative will be thoroughly vetted by the fraternity and once the person is chosen, he or she will sign an NDA.” I took a breath, looking from Robert Ayers to Dwain Welsh, the two people with the most questions. I avoided looking at Damien because when I did, when I saw his grin, my focus faltered, thinking about what he’d told me he would be thinking about. It was nearly impossible to discuss the implementation plan and think about riding his cock in a dark room. When no one else spoke, I turned to Julia. “Thank you for inviting me to speak and for allowing me to sit in on your business meeting. I believe it has increased my understanding of this unique coalition.”

Julia stood. “If there isn’t any other business, I move we adjourn, spend a few hours enjoying the Wisconsin sunshine, and we will see everyone tonight at seven at our home. We promise all festivities are inside and you will stay warm.”

The room filled with soft laughter.

Once the room began to clear and I was with Damien, I whispered, “What did you think?”

His lips quirked to a smirk. “What was I thinking about? I could repeat it.”

“What *did* you think?” I repeated.

He spoke as he helped me with my coat. “You were fabulous.” Once we were out on the sun-drenched sidewalk, headed toward the hotel, he took my hand in his. “Welsh and Ayers were giving you shit because I brought you. You handled them perfectly.”

“I’ve had practice handling assholes.”

Damien shot a quick glance my direction. “Is that a reference to me?”

“If the shoe fits.” That comment earned me a sexy smirk.

“How do you feel about the campaign?” he asked.

“I’m even more excited about it now that I’ve met everyone. I truly see the possibilities for mutual benefits.”

“I like mutually beneficial endeavors.”

Inside the hotel, riding the elevator up to the fourth floor, I asked, “I take it that Mr. Ayers and Mr. Welsh aren’t married, or did their wives not want to join them this weekend?”

“Bob was married. I think she was number four.”

I scrunched my nose. “Four marriages?”

“If he starts looking at you for number five, I may have to violate the terms of the coalition and punch him.”

“Bob must be in his sixties.” I reached for Damien’s arm. “Besides, I’m not looking to be anyone’s number anything.”

He covered my hand with his. “About that?”

About what?

His blue stare swirled with deeper shades. “I had an idea while you were wowing the coalition.”

“An idea about...?”

“I’m still mulling it over in my mind.”

“If this idea includes me, I should be hearing it.”

“It does.” Before I could reply, he added, “Hear me out.”

I opened the door to my hotel room. “You better come in and explain.” As we walked through the threshold, it hit me how drastically things had changed in a relatively short period of time. A week ago, I was hesitant to allow him in my room. As I took off my coat and kicked off my boots, everything felt natural—a way I never thought I’d feel again, especially not with Damien.

Removing his jacket, he eyed my untouched bed. “I could explain in bed.”

Without thinking, I scanned from his brown loafers up his long blue-jean-

clad legs and higher to his light blue sweater—one that fit exceptionally well, showcasing his toned torso, wide shoulders, and muscular arms. By the time I made it to his handsome face, his smirk let me know he caught my gawking. My cheeks lifted as I grinned. “Why did you wear jeans, and I am your dress-up doll?”

Damien came close, snaking his arm around my waist. “Saturdays with the coalition are more casual.” Navy swirled in his blue orbs. “I like dressing you.” His eyebrows danced. “I prefer undressing you.”

There was a pair of jeans in the suitcase.

I laid my palms on his chest and met his gaze. “Talk to me.” Inside the little refrigerator was the ridiculously expensive drink options. Taking a step back, I pointed toward it. “Do we need a drink for this?”

Damien threw his suit coat on the bed and took a seat on the sofa. “I haven’t lied to you.”

My stomach twisted as I sat at the far end of the sofa. With one leg beneath me, I hugged my other knee. “That’s a rather frightening way to start a conversation.”

He shifted, turning toward me. “When I saw you at the airport, I almost didn’t believe it was you. I tried to move on—in all aspects of life—after you left, but Ella, letting you go was the worst decision of my life. There were so many times I’d dreamt of you. At first, seeing you take that barstool, I thought you were a mirage.”

I recalled that afternoon. “I thought I’d pulled one over on you.”

His lips quirked in a lopsided grin. “Until you walked on the plane.” He laughed. “Your expression was priceless.” He exhaled and laid his head back against the wall. “This is going to sound like an elaborate plan.” He lifted his head up and met my gaze. “It wasn’t. I didn’t even think of it until this afternoon.”

A sense of dread crept into my chest.

There was something in the way he was speaking—his tone or volume. It sounded uncharacteristically vulnerable.

What was he going to say?

This was why I didn’t want to renew anything with Damien. I didn’t want to end up hurt.

“What are you talking about?”

“On the plane, you asked if I was married, engaged, or seeing anyone.”

A knot in my chest twisted. I sat taller, my eyes opening wide. “You are.

You're what...which one?"

Chapter 33

Gabriella

Damien shook his head. “None. I’m not. In full disclosure, about a year after you left me, I started seeing someone.”

My mind was spinning. “And you’re telling me about her because you still love her? You’re not divorced. Oh, I know, you have a kid.”

“No, I’m telling you because the woman I was seeing is the daughter of a member of Sinclair’s executive board.”

Shaking my head, I said, “I’m lost, Damien. Why does this woman matter?”

“She doesn’t, the daughter doesn’t. Gloria, the board member does. Once Dad is off the high doses of painkillers, the doctors will be doing tests to determine if his heart attack affected his brain. Something about lack of oxygen. If it did—if he has cognitive damage, legally he can’t rewrite his will.”

“Is he okay?” I asked, genuinely concerned.

Damien sighed. “I spoke with him Thursday night for only a short time. He was still kind of out of it from the surgery and sedatives. His short-term memory was shit.”

“Why does he need to rewrite his will?”

“Do you remember when Darius nearly fucked up the entire company?”

“It was a little before I started working for you, but I remember the

ramifications.”

“Yeah,” he said with a daunting tone. “Dad was pissed. He didn’t want that to happen with me or with Darius or Dani.”

“That’s why he made the probation period as long as he did.”

Damien swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “Dad’s will states that if he dies before I or any CEO named during his life completes the probationary period—”

“Die,” I interrupted, scooting closer. “Jeez, Damien, is he that ill? Why aren’t you with him?”

“No, he’s not—I don’t think he is. The point is if he would, Sinclair is to be sold. He wanted to know he was leaving Sinclair Pharmaceuticals with a solid reputation.”

My eyes opened wide. “Fight the will. Could the board vote to end your probation?”

“They could.”

“Ask for it. I mean if your father is that sick, they’d understand.”

Damien took another deep breath. “I’m not sure the board would approve me. Darius has been sowing shit. He thinks he wants back in.”

I rolled my eyes. “The man is incapable.” I turned to Damien. “I’m sorry. I love your sister, but your brother is...I’m not a fan.”

Damien’s cheeks lifted with a smile. “See, Ella, you don’t just know me. You also know my family.”

Yeah, three years will do that.

Damien went on, “When I was seeing Gloria’s daughter, I learned something that no one else had told me.”

I scrunched my nose. “If it’s about sex, don’t tell me.”

He shook his head. “Gloria is one of the oldest members of the executive board. She has been there since Dad took over. As you know, Sinclair was started generations ago. Times have changed. However, unbeknownst to most people, there is an old addendum in the company bylaws. There’s a clause that would allow the appointment of a CEO if the candidate were married.”

“But...you’re the CEO and you’re not married.” I sucked in a breath. “You married that woman? You’re divorced? No, you said you didn’t.”

He lifted his hand. “I didn’t marry her. The addendum is archaic. It was written by my great-grandfather in the instance that a woman would inherit Sinclair. He didn’t feel a woman could lead without a man at her side. Darius was the first unwed CEO.” Damien shrugged. “He was actually co-CEO with

Dad. When I was appointed, my marital status wasn't mentioned. Nevertheless, the addendum is still there. Gloria told me about it. She wanted Amber and me to marry. She said if we did, she'd show the addendum to the rest of the board, and I could forgo the rest of the probation. I would be CEO, set in stone."

I swallowed, a sour taste bubbling from my throat. "Oh my God, Damien, she was bribing or blackmailing you to marry her daughter. That's illegal." I leaned closer. "Is this daughter so awful she needs her mother to blackmail a husband?"

Damien scoffed. "No. It was more about getting in on the Sinclair dynasty."

"Oh, you have a dynasty now. But seriously, report her and have her removed from the board."

"That would cause more problems. She tried," he said. "I didn't take the bait. And now, there's some bad blood between Gloria and me. If we took a vote now, she could convince enough of the others on the board to vote against me."

"And where would that get them? They'd not have a CEO."

"Darius."

Standing, I paced back and forth in front of the window. "You only have five months. In five months, if you've survived the probation period, there won't be a vote. You will automatically be the CEO in good standing." I hoped I was recalling the probation correctly. "I don't recall anything about marriage."

"You're right. I wasn't told about the addendum until Gloria..." He paused. "Amber."

Amber.

Am I jealous?

I was the one who walked away.

I tried to understand. "You're saying now with your dad's heart attack, you think it would be good to marry her?"

Damien stood. "No, forget Amber. She isn't significant other than because of her, I learned of the addendum." He came closer and reached for my hands. "Ella, I loved you. I *love* you. I tried to forget, but damn, with you here, I'm remembering everything. I'm certain there are a thousand reasons for me not to ask this, or for you to say no, but watching how amazing you were today... Maybe as archaic as my great-grandfather was, he was onto

something. Having someone at your side is important.” He fell to one knee. “I’m not prepared with a ring—”

I took a step back. “Damien, don’t do this.”

He stood, our chests touching. “Call it probationary. In five months, if you want a divorce, I’ll give it to you with a big payout.”

“I don’t want your money.” I backed away and turned all the way around.

Disappearing.

If I look in the mirror, will my reflection be absent?

“Ella.” He reached for my hands. “You’re pale. Is the idea of marrying me that awful?”

“No,” I said quickly. “Marrying you isn’t going to keep me visible—I’ll disappear.”

“Visible.” His volume rose. “Fuck, Ella, you are the focus of the room, the one standing in the spotlight. You’re all I see. You’re visible. I’d never try to make you invisible.”

“Your dad is going to be okay, so this is a moot point, right?”

Damien walked back and forth. When he stopped, he shook his head. “I don’t fucking know. A week ago, Dad was playing eighteen holes of golf and swimming laps in the community pool. Now he’s in a hospital bed. Mom called this morning and said he’s still in pain. They’re adjusting the medications.” He sighed. “Van said something yesterday that I’ve been thinking about. I mentioned the five months. He said thinking about his children, five months can be a lifetime. Five months is forever. Fucking life can change in a minute.”

A lump of emotions formed in my throat as I walked to him and lifted my arms to his shoulders. “You have a lot happening.”

He lowered his forehead to mine. “You’re the only one I have ever been this honest with—the only person I feel comfortable talking with.”

Vulnerable.

Damien rarely appeared less than in control.

I knew what he was saying was true.

Pushing up on my toes, I kissed his firm lips. What started sweet quickly escalated. An isolated spark that ignited an inferno. His fingers weaved through my hair and our faces turned one way and the other. My breasts flattened against his chest as our hearts beat in double time against one another’s. It wasn’t long until our tongues joined the tango.

I couldn’t think about his idea—about marriage—but I could do my best

to make him forget for only a moment or two about his father and company. My head rolled back as his kisses lowered down my neck and in the V of my blouse.

This was what I could do.

I'd been right earlier when I'd implied that Damien could be an ass. He could. That was a personality trait I was used to. Damien Sinclair was invincible. He took a risk with the propanolamine and made Sinclair Pharmaceuticals relevant. Confidence radiated off him in waves, washing others away.

That was probably why Mr. Ayers and Mr. Welsh had their issues. Damien was younger, and he'd accomplished great things.

Hearing the uncertainty in his tone made my chest ache.

As goosebumps scattered over my flesh, Damien began unfastening the front of my slacks. Not to be outdone, I lifted his sweater over his head and ran my fingers over his toned chest. My slacks fell to my ankles.

His gaze gleamed as he crouched down, dragging my panties down my legs. Placing his nose near my core, Damien inhaled. "You smell so sweet. I need to be inside you."

"I want you there."

In the hands of a master, I was putty, sitting on the revolving table, waiting to be molded. With my hands on the mattress, Damien spread my legs. I gasped as he separated my folds and plunged his finger deep within me.

"I love how wet you are." He laid his hand on my back. "Don't move. I want to fuck you from behind." This time he used two fingers, stretching me. "Your tight cunt is crying with need."

I heard the zipper of his blue jeans only moments before I felt his hard cock as he leaned over me. "Tell me what you want, Ella."

"You." My core clenched at the loss of his fingers.

I screamed as his hand landed on my ass. Like a lightning strike from my ass to my core, I felt myself grow even wetter. I bit my lip as his hand landed again and again. With each strike, my nipples hardened and my pussy clenched.

There were no more thoughts of his proposal as my wanton need consumed my rational thinking.

"Please, Damien."

"Your red ass is fucking gorgeous."

“Fuck me.”

I didn't need to ask twice.

He delved deep inside me, filling me and stretching me.

As the flames of our passion singed my skin, his hands were all that kept me from falling forward as he pounded, his body slapping against mine. The build within me was instantaneous as synapse after synapse exploded through my nervous system. My entire body tensed like a wire that was stretched farther than it was meant to be. The implosion was inevitable as my pussy convulsed, the epicenter of my undoing. Shock waves radiated in every direction.

The hotel room filled with Damien's deep roar as he too reached his precipice.

I fell forward on the bed, breaking our connection. My breasts rose and fell as I tried to catch my breath.

Damien lifted me in his strong arms and laid me on the mattress, only to follow to my side and cradle me against his warm chest. “That wasn't planned.”

“Impromptu afternoon sex is never a bad thing,” I said, running my finger over his cheek and basking in his desire-filled stare.

“What if I could add that to my proposal?”

“I'd want it in writing.”

He lifted my chin and brushed his lips with mine. “I have never lied to you. I was serious when I told you that I planned to propose in Aruba.” He motioned between us. “I'm not some random stranger. Consider what I said.” He smiled. “I can come up with a more romantic proposal, then give me five months to prove to you it was the right decision.”

“And secure your place with Sinclair.”

“Multitasking.”

Chapter 34

Gabriella

As Michael drove Damien and I up onto a wide driveway, the Shermans' home glowed with golden light, reminding me of a Thomas Kincade painting. The house spanned both directions, with a large entry in the middle.

Damien reached for my hand. "You're stunning in that gown."

He was dashing as ever in a custom tuxedo.

"Oh, this thing," I said with a smile. "Just a Brandon Maxwell I had lying around."

He kept his voice low. "You are gorgeous in nothing at all. The reason for the clothes was because I wanted to be sure that these people saw you as I do, a brilliant, competent, self-assured woman. You're not less than them because of their wallets. You're equal if not more. I know you have your own clothes. Thank you for letting me dress you."

My lips curled into a smile. "The clothes are beautiful." I looked down at the black fabric and back to his orbs. "Wearing them does add to my confidence. I'm sorry I was mad at you. I had no idea what you were going through."

He leaned closer and kissed my cheek as the car came to a stop. "You worry about disappearing, Ella. The truth is that all eyes will be on you." His smile quirked. "I'm damn lucky to have you on my arm."

"Friends, remember."

“No, you already showed them that you deserve to manage this campaign. We can come clean and let them know there’s more than friendship between us.”

The door to my side opened, ushering in the cool night air.

Quickly, we exited the car and made our way up the stairs to the front doors. Even before we reached the top step, another gentleman opened the door. “Please come in,” he said.

Through the first doors, the man helped me with my coat. It was as he opened the second set of doors—lead-glass French doors, that I saw the jaw-dropping beauty of the interior. Music filled the air. The tiled entry within gave way to glistening wood floors, rounded archways to both sides, and a large room beyond with pillars. The back wall was floor-to-ceiling windows. The staircase curved upward to the second-story landing and beyond to a third story. Both levels and the staircase had railings and a banister with a shiny wood handrail and wrought-iron railing spindles. A fire roared in a large glass fireplace.

“Ella and Damien,” Julia called as she came from another room. “Welcome.”

Julia looked amazing in a long blue gown, one that made her eyes pop.

“Are we the first to arrive?” I asked.

“No, Robert and Dwain are in Van’s office, and the Cades are in the kitchen.” She motioned us toward the kitchen. “Come, the bar is open.”

The grand piano caught my attention. “Do you play?” I asked Julia.

“Van does.” Her smile blossomed. “Maybe we can talk him into playing something tonight.”

As we followed her past the glass fireplace, the sound of other voices came into range. Soon I had a glass of cabernet and Damien had a tumbler of bourbon with a large round ice cube.

“I think Van has cigars in his office,” Julia said to Damien. “If you want to partake.”

Damien’s gaze came to me.

“Oh, I’m fine,” I said, “but I’m not a fan of the smell.”

“Do you remember where his office is?” she asked.

Damien kissed me on the cheek.

So much for only friends.

“I’ll be back.”

The Cades were dressed as elegantly as the rest of us. By the time the

Holstons arrived, the men had returned. Thankfully, the cigar aroma wasn't overpowering. Damien said Van had some expensive air filter that kept the smell to a minimum. Apparently, Julia made him install it when she was pregnant with their son.

"I was hoping to see the children," I said.

"They're spending the night with dear friends."

Dinner was served in the dining room as darkness filled the tall windows lining the back side of the house.

"In the daylight," Damien said, "you can see the lake. It's a spectacular view."

"You'll need to come back," Van offered.

As we ate, Damien seemed to tense.

I leaned over and whispered, "Is everything all right?"

"My phone keeps vibrating," he said through clenched teeth. "Johnathon knows I don't want to be disturbed."

Our afternoon conversation came back to me. "It could be about your dad."

His nostrils flared as he exhaled. Looking up, he said, "Please excuse me a moment."

The conversations continued, but instead of listening, my mind was busy fabricating possibilities of what Damien would learn. Chances were that it was something less important than his father's health. That didn't stop me from being concerned.

When he reappeared, I had the sinking feeling that my worries had been accurate. "Damien?"

He came behind me. "We need to leave."

"Leave?" Julia questioned.

Damien pulled my chair away from the table. "The dinner was lovely," I said as I reached for Damien's hand. At the slight tremor in his touch, my eyes met his. "It will be all right. Let's go."

He nodded.

"Could you please call Michael?" I asked.

"We'll need to get to the airport as soon as we can collect our things," Damien said.

Julia's expression displayed her concern. "If we can be of any help..."

"Thank you for everything," Damien said.

It wasn't until we were in the back seat of Michael's car that Damien

related the information. "Dad is back in surgery. He suffered another attack."

Tears came to my eyes. "He's alive."

Damien nodded. "I spoke with Dani." He clenched his jaw and turned toward the dark windows. "Allen can stop in Indy for you. I need to—"

"No," I interrupted. "I'm going with you. No stopping. Straight to your dad."

His expression crushed me as he laid his hand over mine. I lifted it, sandwiching it between both of mine. "You're not alone, Damien. I'll stay with you."

He shook his head. "I'm so fucking glad I flew commercial."

I forced a smile. "Tonight, private will be more convenient."

Chapter 35

Gabriella

Damien called Allen from the car. Thankfully, he and Angie had stayed in Ashland. He said he could have the plane ready in under an hour. The next stop was our hotel rooms.

“Don’t take time to change,” Damien said. “We can change on the plane.” Outside my room, I reached for his hand. “I’ll hurry.”

He looked at where we were touching and back to my face. “I don’t anticipate being great company. You might reconsider the stop in Indy.”

My lips curled into a smile. “You can’t scare me away after spending the last week trying to get me back.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed. “Thank you.”

Once the plane was in the air, we both changed from our formal wear into more casual clothes. This time we were both wearing blue jeans. Damien spent most of the flight between calls with his sister and calls with Stephen Elliott, an attorney I recalled from Sinclair.

With my legs curled beneath me in the seat, I sat watching the man I’d tried to forget, seeing him in a way that contrasted the reasons I’d left him. While I’d worked for him, I’d witnessed his anger. It wasn’t directed at me, but that didn’t mean I hadn’t heard his curses or seen the way his face could redden.

During the duration of the flight, there were bursts of cursing, yet his

deep baritone voice stayed resolved, as if he was preparing himself for the worst.

I thought about his offer or his proposal. It wasn't exactly the way a girl dreamed it would be. We weren't under the canopy of stars or in still water with a diamond ring. Although, according to him, that had been the plan.

"We're about to land," Angie said. "There's a car waiting to take you to the hospital."

"I'm going to get my purse," I said, standing and walking to the bedroom in the aft of the plane. When I turned, Angie was behind me. "I'll hurry."

"I wanted to thank you, Ms. Crystal. I don't try to eavesdrop, but I know Mr. Sinclair is worried about his father and about the company. I'm so glad you're with him."

I swallowed. "Me too, Angie."

The memory of Damien saying the flight crew had witnessed more verbal disagreements came back. "Did you meet Amber?"

"Ms. Wilmott," she said with a serious expression. "Yes."

"I know you can't tell me anything..."

Her smile returned. "I can say we're very happy to have you back. Take care of him."

Take care of Damien Sinclair.

"I will."

Damien was still on the phone as we exited the aircraft and entered the back seat of the waiting car. The cold breezes from up north were replaced with Florida's humid air. The spring flowers were replaced with palm trees.

"He finally showed up," Damien said into the phone. He looked at me and mouthed "Darius."

I inhaled, wondering what the confrontation would be. It was hard to tell with Darius.

When Damien finally tucked the phone into the pocket of his jeans, he reached for my hand and gave it a squeeze. "Dad's still in surgery."

I nodded.

"I could do this alone."

"You could. You don't have to."

Palm trees lined the streets and tall lamps illuminated the way. My skin grew tight as the car came to a stop in front of the hospital. Once out of the car, Damien placed his hand in the small of my back and led me through the large glass doors. Without a word, he guided me through the hallways, up an

elevator, and through more corridors.

Dani was the first recognized person I saw as we approached a small private surgical waiting room. She rushed from her chair and wrapped Damien in a hug.

“No word.”

With his lips pressed into a straight line, Damien nodded.

When Dani backed away, she turned to me. “God, I’m glad to see you.”

The two of us embraced. Truth be told, we’d met a few times for lunch over the last two years. It was nice to see her out in the open.

I retook Damien’s hand. “I’m glad I’m able to be here.”

Next stop was Marsha Sinclair, Damien’s mother. When her bloodshot eyes focused on Damien, she too stood and wrapped him in a hug. “Thank God you’re here.” She turned to me. “Gabriella.”

“Marsha, I’m so sorry about Derek.”

“Are you two...?”

Before we could respond, the sound of voices caused us to turn.

“Damien,” Darius said with a tall blond woman at his side. “We need to talk.”

Damien’s hand stiffened in my grasp. “I’m glad you’re here for Dad. Nothing else matters right now.” He stood taller. “Amber.”

Amber.

I tried not to react.

Darius was a little taller than Damien. While they were similar in appearance, Darius’s hair was peppered with gray. He held tight to Amber’s hand. “I have news to ease Dad’s stress.”

Damien inhaled.

Amber stared at where Damien’s and my hand were interlocked and up to our eyes. “You two are back together?”

She obviously had greater knowledge of me than I had of her.

Before either of us could answer, Amber lifted her left hand and showed us a diamond band. “Congratulate us, Darius and I are married.”

Damien and I turned toward Marsha who nodded.

“Do you know what that means, brother?” Darius asked.

“Nothing,” Damien replied. “I’m CEO. That’s not changing. Dad will be okay.”

“The addendum,” Amber said.

I took a step forward and offered Amber my hand. “We haven’t formally

met. I'm Gabriella, Damien's fiancée."

Thank you for reading **REMEMBERING PASSION**. Find out how Damien and Gabriella's story turns out in book two, **REKINDLING DESIRE**. I promise you're in for a bumpy and steamy ride.

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August 2020

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aleatha Romig is a New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today bestselling author who lives in Indiana, USA. She has raised three children with her high school sweetheart and husband of over thirty years. Before she became a full-time author, she worked days as a dental hygienist and spent her nights writing. Now, when she's not imagining mind-blowing twists and turns, she likes to spend her time with her family and friends. Her other pastimes include reading and creating heroes/anti-heroes who haunt your dreams!

Aleatha impresses with her versatility in writing. She released her first novel, *CONSEQUENCES*, in August of 2011. *CONSEQUENCES*, a dark romance, became a bestselling series with five novels and two companions released from 2011 through 2015. The compelling and epic story of Anthony and Claire Rawlings has graced more than half a million e-readers. Her first stand-alone smart, sexy thriller *INSIDIOUS* was next. Then Aleatha released the five-novel *INFIDELITY* series, a romantic suspense saga, that took the reading world by storm, the final book landing on three of the top bestseller lists. She ventured into traditional publishing with Thomas and Mercer. Her books *INTO THE LIGHT* and *AWAY FROM THE DARK* were published through this mystery/thriller publisher in 2016.

In the spring of 2017, Aleatha again ventured into a different genre with her first fun and sexy stand-alone romantic comedy with the USA Today bestseller *PLUS ONE*. She continued the "Ones" series with additional standalones, *ONE NIGHT*, *ANOTHER ONE*, *MY ALWAYS ONE*, and *QUINTESENTIALLY THE ONE*. If you like fun, sexy, novellas that make your heart pound, try her "Indulgence series" with *UNCONVENTIONAL*, *UNEXPECTED*, *UNFORGETTABLE*, and *UNDENIABLE*.

In 2018 Aleatha returned to her dark romance roots with *SPARROW WEBS*. And continued with the mafia romance *DEVIL'S DUET*, and most recently her *SIN* series.

You may find all Aleatha's titles on her [website](#).

Aleatha is a "Published Author's Network" member of the Romance Writers of America and PEN America. She is represented by SBR Media and Dani Sanchez with Wildfire Marketing.

