



A Second Scandal...  
Could destroy them both.

# UNTIL YOU

ZOE DOD

Until You

*A Billionaire, Best Friend's Brother  
Romance*

Zoe Dod

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*To Dawn*

*This one is for you.*

*To an amazing friend, who has supported me from the beginning. For all your messages of encouragement that helped to keep Christian, Isabella and myself on track.*

*Zoe xxx*

# Until You

A second scandal...  
...could destroy them both

# Chapter One

## *Christian*

The early morning sun glistened off the water, its gentle swell lapping against the shoreline. The sound merged with the flute-like notes of birdsong and rustling leaves from the surrounding trees. It offered a tranquil, almost ethereal setting. It fitted Lily perfectly... he could not have chosen better himself.

“I did it, Lily.”

Christian’s heart hammered in his chest as he uttered those words aloud. The past six years had been a minefield. He’d learned to play the game and had succeeded beyond expectations. There had been no option to fail. He, Christian Dupree, was stronger now. Never again would he be subject to someone else’s control.

Christian placed the pink and white dahlias down. His finger lingered on one bud. The florist promised the flowers would bloom in a few days, just in time for Lily’s birthday. Her dream had been to own a garden full of dahlias and peonies—*her picket-fence dream*, he had called it. Their intricate beauty and cascade of fragrant petals made them her favourite.

His mind went back to the day Lily had called him at work. She’d just received her first review.

**“Lily Roberts - The West-Ends New Up-and-Coming Star.”**

Her excitement had been palpable. Christian had filled her dressing room with dahlias. Lily called him crazy, with more money than sense, but for Christian, he’d never wanted her excitement to fade. From the moment he’d seen Lily Roberts, he could not resist her. She was like a light in the darkness. He, a wealthy playboy, and she, a West End actress. A

Hollywood style love story... a Cinderella retelling. But neither of them had foreseen the Shakespearean tragedy heading their way.

Christian's smile slipped, and his chest tightened. The dahlias were a sharp contrast to the cold, black granite headstone. It had been six years, but the suffocating pain remained.

**Lily Rose Roberts**

**25 Aug 1990 - 12 Oct 2014**

**Daughter, Sister, Mother of Skylar**

**Taken too soon - Fly with the angels.**

Christian ran a finger over her name.

"I'm free."

His eyes looked heavenward, a lump forming in his throat.

"It's time."

He drew in a shuddering breath before dropping his chin to his chest.

Silence surrounded him. He hesitated. What was he expecting? A sign? Lily was gone... taking with her the love, laughter, and teasing they'd shared.

For six years, he'd dedicated himself to rebuilding his family business from the ground up, working to regain control of his life. Despite finally finding the right path, he felt like an empty shell of his former self, with no way to make up for the past that haunted him.

He touched his fingertips to his lips, before laying them on the cold, hard stone.

"Until we meet again, my love."

Christian turned and walked away. The sound of the outside world came back into focus as each step took on a new meaning. His resolve hardened as he navigated his way

through the mix of ancient and modern headstones. By the time he reached his car, he knew what he had to do.

It was time to meet his daughter. He just had to hope it wasn't too late.



## Chapter Two

### *Christian*

#### *Twenty-six months later*

They left the meeting room in silence, no one daring to look at him.

He stood at the front of the room, waves of agitation rolling off him. Was it too much to ask? These were supposed to be competent businessmen and women, yet he had spent the last hour trying to understand what he was paying them for.

The last person exited, closing the door behind them.

“Well, that went well.” Sebastian’s sarcasm filled the silence.

“What did you expect me to say? Ah, never mind... I know you tried your best... losing that client is insignificant. Don’t worry. There are hundreds of multi-million-pound clients ready to sign with us.” Christian stopped and ran a hand down his face, his head pounding. “Damn it, Sebastian, The Bridgertons have been clients of ours for over twenty years. I only found out there was an issue after they signed with our competitor!”

Christian leaned on the ledge, gazing out the window. He ground his teeth, his muscles quivering.

“Perhaps this is *why* nobody dared to address it earlier?”

Christian spun around and glared at his friend. Sebastian was leaning back in his chair, his hands open as he shrugged.

“So *their* incompetence is my fault?”

“I didn’t say that. You’ve been snapping at everyone lately. You’re like a bear with a sore head. Everyone is walking on eggshells. No one wants to come within twenty metres of you. Let alone tell you something is wrong... they would’ve feared for their lives.”

“Now who’s being dramatic?” Christian said, raising an eyebrow.

“I wish I was. You’re my best friend, as well as my boss. If I can’t say this to you, no one can. This past month, you’ve been unbearable.” Seb stood up and walked towards him. “You run a tight ship. It’s how you’ve transformed this company in eight years, taking it into another stratosphere. But Christian... this level of stress, the pressure you’re putting on yourself and everyone else... it’s not healthy.” Seb’s hand came up to rest on his shoulder. “You are the only billionaire I know who doesn’t balance work and play. When did you last unwind and enjoy yourself?”

Christian moved to the table, collecting up the papers he’d scattered. He hated when Seb got all deep and meaningful. He knew his friend meant well, but what else was he supposed to do? His father had taken his eye off the ball and nearly destroyed everything. Christian sacrificed his future, dedicated his life to saving, then rebuilding the company... was it too much to ask for some respect?

He stopped and looked up. “So, what would you suggest I do differently?”

“Nothing... they needed to be pulled back into line. Fear at their level is *not* an excuse. They’re grown men and women.” Seb leaned back against the windowsill, his arms crossed over his chest. “Christian, you have some of the brightest minds in the city working for The Dupree Group. This...” Seb swept his arm around the room. “What happened today? It’s building a wall between you and them. But that’s not what worries me. You’re going to put yourself in an early grave. You have battled so hard for so long... this level of stress has become second nature. It’s like you’ve forgotten how to take your foot off the accelerator.”

Christian had to admit, his heart was still pounding and his pulse racing. But no one understood what it took to walk in his shoes.

“If you won’t think about yourself, think of Skylar, your daughter. She’s just turned eight. Only had you in her life for

eighteen months...”

Christian slammed his hand down on the desk, making Seb jump.

“Everything I have done has been for Skylar. Leave her out of this. You know that better than anyone.”

Seb stared at him for a moment before dawning spread over his face.

“Oh shit,” he said, stepping forward and stopping. “It’s today.”

“Irrelevant,” Christian said, but knew Sebastian saw through him.

“I’m calling BS. You should not even be here.” A furrow appeared between his brows. “You usually take the day off.”

“It’s been eight years. I can handle it without taking the day off.”

“After this meeting... I beg to differ.” Seb stepped forward and swept up the papers into a messy pile. “Come on, let’s get wasted... I’m not taking no for an answer.”

Christian let out a sigh. He needed to get out of there. He’d spent most of the previous evening on the telephone with Bridgerton’s CEO, trying to undo the damage caused. As a result, he’d missed half of Skylar’s ballet recital... sneaking in halfway through. Skylar had thrown herself at him. It still amazed him how she’d accepted him in her life. Within weeks of reuniting, it was as if his six-year absence had never happened. She was the only thing outside work that held his attention. The only thing that made him stop. The outcome of his call remained unchanged despite missing the first half of her recital. It was why he’d been so angry this morning. He had enough work without having to check every client’s offer. He employed people to do that.

“Come on... let’s have a drink... for Lily,” Seb said, squeezing his shoulder when he’d gone quiet.

Christian drew in a breath as they made their way back to his office.

“Lucy,” he said when his PA looked up. “Clear my schedule for the rest of the day.”

If he didn’t know better, he would have sworn Lucy looked relieved.

“Not a problem, Christian. I’ll get right on it.” She looked down at her desk before raising her head again. “Star called. She wanted to confirm that you’re still okay with taking Skylar to the British Museum this weekend? She mentioned that Andrew and Olivia would be happy to tag along.”

For the first time that day, Christian smiled. His close friend, Andrew and daughter, Olivia would definitely make the trip more enjoyable. He knew Skylar would love her best friend Olivia tagging along.

“I’ll call her. Thank you, Lucy.”

Seb was already in his office when he caught up. “Ready?”

“I just need to call Star. I need to confirm the weekend.” Christian waved his phone at his friend.

“I’ll grab my things... but Christian... we are leaving before you do any more damage.”

Sebastian left without another word. They’d been friends since age four, so he was the only one who could speak to him in that manner. They’d forged a lifelong friendship when Sebastian agreed to share his toy cars with Christian, after his father had confiscated his.

Christian dropped into his chair and dialed Star’s number.

She answered within two rings, “Hi, Christian.”

“Hi, Star... Lucy said you called.”

“I wanted to check you’re still okay for the weekend?”

Christian smiled. “I’m looking forward to it... I’ll reach out to Andrew, so we can set up a specific time and place to meet.”

“That’s great.” Star’s voice sounded tired, and Christian’s stomach sank. Today was hard for him, but he hated to think

how hard it was for Star, coping with the anniversary of her sister's passing.

"How are you doing?" he asked.

It was eight years to-the-day. Eight years since Christian had signed over all rights to his daughter, allowing Star to adopt her. Eight years since Lily, the love of his life, had died. A date forever ingrained in his brain.

The phone was silent. "Star?"

"Today's always hard... I'm taking Skylar to put some flowers on Lily's grave tonight. It's our yearly ritual."

"I'm sure she'll appreciate that." Unsure whether he meant Skylar or Lily. He hoped Lily could see the promise he'd worked so hard to uphold. His relationship with his daughter and Star had improved, although he'd never lost the guilt he felt over the past. As a result, Christian was cautious about overstepping.

"Give Skylar a big kiss from me... tell her she was amazing last night. I really am sorry I was late."

Star chuckled, "She was so hyper, she didn't even notice. Your presence at the end was what mattered. She was so pleased you made it. She loves spending time with you."

Christian's heart lurched in his chest. "Thank you. It means a lot."

"Christian... she..." There was a pause. "Lily would've been glad to see you back. You meant everything to her."

Christian rested his forehead in his hand. "I loved her," he said. "I will try to make amends for the past."

"I know... and she loved you too..." It pained him to hear her voice crack. "I'll let you go. Thank you for ringing, and we'll see you at the weekend."

Star disconnected before Christian could say anything else. He slumped back in his chair and closed his eyes. The company, his office, staff... everything had been for them. He'd battled hard, but it was now second nature. Seb was

right... he didn't know how to ease up... he wasn't sure he wanted to.

# Chapter Three

## *Christian*

“Daddy. Look!” Skylar said, grabbing his hand and pulling him towards the closest exhibit, her whole body vibrating with excitement. “We need a photo.”

Christian smiled, grabbing his phone from his pocket, before handing it to Skylar. Christian watched, his heart skipping a beat as Skylar’s tongue poked out from between her lips as she lined up his phone, ready to take the shot. Flashbacks of Lily, Skylar’s mother, pulling the same face, taking his breath away. Picture taken, she turned back, a look of pride on her face.

“Have you taken a photo of the label?”

Skylar gasped before directing her attention back to the cabinet and snapping another photo. She’d taken hundreds of photos already, and remembering all the details was going to be impossible. He was glad Andrew had suggested they come together. Andrew was the brains behind their information-gathering strategy. They’d met for coffee before entering the madness known as the Egyptian exhibit. Andrew had given him a rundown. All he needed to remember was to download all the photos and order copies. If not Star and her husband, Damian might skin him alive if Skylar didn’t have them for her project. Star had agreed to let him bring Skylar on this trip. She was trusting him and he wanted to keep that trust.

“How’s it going?” Andrew said, appearing by his side, an excited Olivia grabbing hold of Skylar and pointing to something on Andrew’s phone.

Both girls shrieked, causing both him and Andrew to grimace at the high-pitched sound.

“It’s good.” Christian grinned. “I think we’ve photographed every exhibit. Sometimes twice.” He looked down at his daughter, who was deep in conversation with her best friend. Both dads were now being ignored.

“If we get double copies, we should have everything covered,” Andrew said, plucking his phone out of Olivia’s hand.

“Good plan. I’ll make sure I order them tonight.”

Christian leaned forward and retrieved his own phone, which led to a scowl from Skylar.

“Pizza time!” he announced.

The girls whooped with joy.

They made their way out of the museum and onto the crowded street. It was amazing how many people visited The British Museum at the weekend. He questioned whether this was why Star was so insistent on him being the responsible parent. He couldn’t blame her. Plus, it was the perfect bonding time for them both. Christian held Skylar’s hand as they moved away from the entrance.

“Thanks for today,” Andrew said. “It’s more fun doing these things in groups.”

“I think it’s I who should thank you,” Christian admitted. “I would have definitely got it wrong. This world is unlike the one I usually inhabit.”

Andrew laughed. “I think you’ve taken to fatherhood very well,” Andrew said.

Christian watched as Skylar looked up at him. “You have Daddy. You’re awesome. Thank you so much for today. I’m going to miss you when you go away next week.”

With a quick bend of his knees, he scooped her up into his arms and held her close. Despite only having Skylar for one weekend a month, he attempted to visit her at least once a week, to take her out for pizza or pop around to Star and Damian’s.

“It’s okay, Princess. I won’t be gone for long. I’ll be back before you know it. If you’re lucky, I’ll bring you back something from Thailand.”

“Really?” Skylar squealed in excitement.



“Really. And you, Olivia,” Christian added, smiling over at Andrew’s shy daughter. “I will try to get both of you a traditional Thai outfit, so your next costume party is sorted.”

The two girls hugged in excitement before talking at one hundred miles an hour.

Andrew laughed, “You don’t need to buy Olivia something every time you get Skylar a present.”

Christian smiled, “I know. That smile on their faces...” He looked over at Andrew. “I didn’t expect to see that. If I can make her smile, even for a second, and if it also makes Olivia smile... I can’t put a price tag on that.”

Andrew nodded. He’d been a good friend to Star and Skylar, so Christian owed him.

It was not like Christian couldn’t afford it. He’d accumulated more money than he could spend in a lifetime. Who would he spend his money on if not those he cared about? It was all going to Skylar, anyway. Why not create memories with her now?

They entered a small Italian restaurant a few streets from the museum.

It was small and quaint. An Italian woman in her late fifties greeted them at the door. “Follow me,” she said, smiling at their two girls, who giggled behind her. She showed them to a cosy booth, tucked away in the corner. “Here you go,” she said, motioning for them to take their seats.

“Thank you,” the girls chimed, grabbing their menus.

The restaurant was bright. The walls were covered in photographs of famous Italian landmarks, transporting visitors to the heart of Italy.

“So when are you off?” Andrew asked.

“The end of the week. I’m meeting Henri, the US CEO and the new Asia Office CEO on-site. Sebastian suggested I take a break from the office. He said... quote, ‘as I don’t trust anyone else. I should go myself and oversee’.”

“Seb isn’t alone in his concern,” Andrew said to Christian, his gaze moving from Christian’s clasped hands to his eyes. “You work long hours. Your stress levels are through the roof.”

Christian shot a look at Skylar. His shoulders relaxed as he realised she was deep in conversation with Olivia.

“I run a billion-pound company. It didn’t become that way with me working nine to five.”

“Don’t shoot the messenger. As your friends, we’re bound to be worried. Me, especially. I’ve seen plenty of men your age in my clinic, Christian.”

“Hence the trip to Thailand. I promise I’ll grab a massage in the hotel spa, Doc.”

Andrew rolled his eyes but let it drop. They changed the topic to talk about their scheduled boys’ night, the evening of the Halloween party.

The afternoon flew by, and it was not long before they were parting company. The girls hugged while Christian and Andrew looked on.

“Thank you for suggesting today,” Christian said. “It’s been great to share this with her.”

“You’re welcome. I appreciate not being the only single parent on the block.”

Christian knew Andrew had done a lot with Star before Damian had reappeared and had appreciated the company. Now, she was married. He was happy to fill the gap.

Christian dropped Skylar back at Star and Damian’s, their weekend together over. They had spent their Saturday swimming in the apartment complex pool, followed by a Barbie movie Marathon with popcorn and chocolate. If only his employees could have seen him. His fierce, tyrant reputation would have been in tatters. The things he did for his daughter.

“Bye, Daddy. I love you,” Skylar said, wrapping her arms around his waist and squeezing him tight.

“I love you more, Princess.”

Skylar giggled as he squeezed her back before letting her run into the house.

“How was it?” Damian asked, leaning against the door.

“Manic,” Christian admitted. “But I wouldn’t have changed it for the world. I’ll order the photos when I get home and get them sent here.”

Damian smiled. Putting Skylar’s project together was going to fall to him. He was the chief scrapbooker, according to their daughter. “We’ll see you next week?” Damian said.

“You bet on it.”

Christian left, his heart heavy at leaving his daughter behind, but happy in the fact he knew the love she deserved surrounded her. He had no reason to complain. It was exactly what Lily wanted.

# Chapter Four

## *Isabella*

It was five AM when Isabella opened the door to the office. It was still dark outside. The air was calm, untouched by the day's rush. She could enjoy the low hum of nature and the far-off sounds of the local wildlife. She stopped and inhaled deeply, closing her eyes and enjoying the sound of the monkeys and insects as they called to each other. Savouring the peace before the human population drowned them out. Admittedly, it was the perfect way to start the day.

A bead of moisture ran down her forehead. Today was going to be a scorcher. The temperature was already on the rise. Isabella stepped into the office, only to be blasted by the flash of cold air from the air conditioning unit. Had she left it on?

“How did it go?”

Isabella jumped, her hand flying to her chest before spinning towards the voice.

“God, you scared me.” Isabella dropped herself into her chair before spinning around to face May, her friend and business partner. “You're up early.”

“You too,” May shot back. “I'm seven months pregnant. What's your excuse?”

“A seven AM class at The Resort and Spa,” Isabella said. “Ananya called. She's sick... again.”

A furrow appeared between May's brows. Ananya was an amazing yoga instructor and was popular with their clients, but recently, she had become more and more unreliable. With May's pregnancy in its final stages, they'd hoped to hold off having to make a decision. But despite the need for more interviews and staff training, they knew it was coming.

“Are you okay to cover?” May asked.

Isabella grinned. “More than you are.” Acknowledging her friend's ever-expanding stomach. “Our guests want to skip this

morning's class in favour of a trip to the market.”

Which could not have been better timed.

Resting back in her chair, May folded her arms, making Isabella groan.

“Come on, spill. I need to know... how did your date go?”

“Don't ask.” Isabella rolled her eyes. “And before you say anything. I tried,” Isabella added, as May opened her mouth to interrupt. “I've never been so bored. He sat and talked about golf all night, his handicap, his ranking in their group. Finally, he boasted about how jealous his friends were that he'd asked me out. He then asked me how flexible I am.” A shudder wracked through her body at the memory. “That was before he invited me to his room to check out his golf club... I faked a migraine.”

May coughed to suppress her laugh.

Isabella grimaced. “I don't know why I let you convince me it was a good idea.”

May smothered another giggle, but failed.

“I'm sorry,” she said, her amusement getting the better of her. “Admittedly, *Mr Golf Club* may not have been suitable, but he was attractive.”

“Good looking, but with no substance. If that's all there is on offer, I'm staying single. All I want is a man who shows a little interest in me—other than how flexible I am! Is that too much to ask?”

May stared at her for a moment. “Maybe you are expecting too much. You've been single almost as long as I've known you. Phillipe doesn't count, plus he was years ago.” Phillipe being a brief fling Isabella had when she and May had first started travelling together. Since then, her love life had been barren.

May tutted as she calculated on her fingers. “Six years—you seriously need to find your person.”

May was a huge fan of Grey's Anatomy.

“I have my person, people... I have you and Arkhom, and when your baby’s born, then I’ll have them to spoil.” Isabella ignored May as she went to speak. “I have our clients and friends...” Isabella trailed off at the grimace on May’s face.

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it,” she said. “Meredith Grey had Christina as her person, but she also had a hot bod in the form of Derek Shepherd to keep her satisfied. You need your own *McDreamy*. Someone who can hold you, love you... someone to share your life with, give you mind-blowing orgasms. You’ve hidden yourself away for long enough.”

Now May was married. It was easy to forget what a romantic she was... Isabella blamed it on all the romance novels their guests left behind.

“Been there, done that,” Isabella said. “I tried it once, and look where it got me.”

“Look where it got you?” May scoffed. “You tried it over eight years ago with one guy... plus you were young, too young.”

Isabella couldn’t deny what her friend was saying was true. She’d been engaged at twenty. Far too young in hindsight. Her engagement had happened while her life was in chaos, her father having died only months before. She’d clung to Edward, a close family friend, imagining herself in love. It was why she’d missed all the red flags...

May stared at her and changed tack, her small shoulders shrugging. “I’m not complaining. Splitting up with a jerk face brought you to me,” she added. “Look on the positive side. The experience has made you courageous and independent. Don’t generalise all men because of one bad experience. You’re lovable, loyal, and gorgeous; any man would be lucky to have you.

Isabella bit her tongue to stop herself from laughing at her friend’s name-calling.

“Maybe Mr Golf Pro wasn’t the one for you. But you need to open yourself up to the possibility of meeting someone. We

only get one shot in this life. Embrace it with both hands. You deserve happiness, my friend.”

May’s refusal to use Edward’s name ever highlighted her loyalty. Her accent and intonations added something special to her defence. Joking aside, Isabella knew she needed to put the past behind her, but if she was honest, she’d failed to meet anyone who even sparked her interest since Edward. Phillippe had been purely about sex, of wiping Edward’s memory away. Not that he’d succeeded, and she’d regretted it instantly. Her wounds were too deep.

“I know... I promise you, I am happy, May... My happiness doesn’t depend on having a man in my life.”

“A battery-powered friend cannot make you happy indefinitely. As humans, we need love, human touch.” May tutted.

“Maybe not, but at least my battery boyfriend doesn’t steal the covers.” Isabella winked, and May shook her head in despair.

“You don’t need covers. This is Thailand. It’s always hot!”

Isabella laughed. May always had to have the last word. “I’ve gotta go to work. I have a class to cover.” She got up and moved to the door before turning back. “I promise, I am happy. Happier than I’ve ever been. Being here... I’ve found myself. This is my home. What will be will be.”

She didn’t wait for May to reply. Isabella had to admit, finding her own *McDreamy* would be nice, but she didn’t envisage it happening anytime soon. She simply had too much baggage.

# Chapter Five

## *Isabella*

### *Seven and a half years ago*

*Isabella turned the key and walked into the apartment. Her heart rate lowered, and stress levels dissipated every time she walked in through the front door. This was her perfect home.*

*The building was a newly renovated conversion. It had been a warehouse in its former life until one of the city's biggest developers had bought up all the derelict dockside land. Exclusive designer apartments and a thriving community had grown out of the wasteland. She'd been unsure at the beginning, but Edward described it as the ideal location for a newly engaged couple with an active social life. Despite its extortionate price tag, Edward had his heart set on it. With their future in mind, she willingly paid the money. Edward couldn't help it if he'd tied all his money up in investments.*

*Isabella slipped off her shoes, walking past the master bedroom and towards Edward's office. He'd adopted the slightly smaller second bedroom as his office soon after they'd moved in. He often worked at home, so Isabella wasn't too concerned as she preferred working at the University Library, anyway.*

*Opening the door, Isabella saw the office was empty. A smile spread over her face. She'd obviously arrived home during his lunch break. That would give them some much-needed time together. Her dissertation having taken up most of her waking hours over the past couple of months. But she'd finally finished it. She only had her final exams, and then she'd graduate.*

*She shut the door and walked to the open planned room at the end of the corridor. It was a large space, housing their living room, and an open planned kitchen. Its main features were the enormous windows and exposed brickwork, a beautiful reminder of the original building. It was this space*



*that Isabella loved. Its high ceilings and rustic character, helping to centre her after a busy day.*

*As she reached the door, it surprised Isabella to hear voices coming from the living area. Edward hadn't mentioned having a business meeting today. She paused, her hand on the door handle, an icy shiver taking over her body as she listened to the grunts and moans echoing through the door. The sound of flesh slapping made Isabella aware of what awaited her. A tightness gripped her chest. Should she leave? Forget what she heard? Maybe she was mistaken. Isabella's father had taught her to stand up for what she believed in, however painful it was.*

*She pushed open the door. The two people bent over the sofa, completely unaware of her presence. Isabella took in the sight. Her best friend, Victoria, braced over the back of the sofa, while her fiance, Edward, thrust in and out of her at piston speed. Victoria's moans and grunts echoed around the room. Isabella watched as Edward's hand came down hard on her friend's ass, the cheek flaming under his hand as she let out another enormous moan.*

*Isabella's eyes caught on her friend's naked breasts, crushing the back sofa cushion beneath her weight. Isabella shuddered. They'd only bought it two weeks earlier. Did she have no respect? Isabella stepped forward. She was going to damage it if she didn't stop. It was then her brain stepped in.*

*Storming forward, Isabella grabbed Edward's shoulder, his head turning towards her, his eyes wide in shock. He stopped still, his body still embedded in the woman in front of him. She turned her head towards them, her question stalling on her lips as she locked eyes with Isabella. She let out a shriek, pulling away from Edward, leaving him bobbing up and down as her body no longer held him.*

*"What the hell are you doing home?" Edward turned to face her, his hands on his hips.*

*"What the hell am I... I should ask, what the hell are you doing having sex with my best friend?"*

*Isabella glared at Victoria, who had silently scurried around the sofa. Her moans were now silent. She refused to look at Isabella. Instead, she focused on grabbing her clothes and pulling them on.*

*“What did it look like?” His voice pulled Isabella’s attention back to him, his lips curled in a snarl. “I was getting off... getting off with someone who knows how to please me.”*

*Victoria left without looking back. Isabella knew her friend had a voracious appetite for sex, but the last thing she’d expected was to find her banging Edward. What about the girl code?*

*“How long?” Isabella asked, trying to ignore his body, stiff and glistening with another woman’s arousal. He hadn’t even thought about her safety, having unprotected sex with someone else.*

*“What? Victoria?” Edward shrugged. “Since we were fourteen. She knows how to please me.”*

*Isabella could not believe his lack of remorse. Where was the kind, caring Edward who’d held her while she wept after her father died? The man who’d rescued her, supported her as she finished her degree? He told her he loved her and said her father would have been happy they found love. How it would strengthen their families business - the children of the founders, marrying and running it together. What a crock!*

*Isabella mentally shook herself. She needed to clear her thoughts. “So why bother proposing to me if you love Victoria?”*

*“Love Victoria?” Edward let out a harsh laugh. He laughed until tears ran from his eyes. “Oh, naïve little Izzy. Victoria isn’t marriage material. She’s a good lay but too promiscuous. Plus, she comes from nothing. You, however...” Edward stepped forward and ran a hand down her cheek, making her flinch. “Marrying you... It will solve all my problems. Daddy’s inheritance, all those millions. It’s worth putting up with your frigid little body for that alone.”*

*Isabella stepped back. “You’re mad. We’re done. Get out!”*

*She spun away from him, only to have him catch her arm. "I want you gone by the end of the day," she hissed.*

*"No, my darling fiancée. We're done, when I say we're done!" A chill ran up Isabella's spine at the venom in Edward's tone. Her heart stalling as his grip tightened. "Plus, this place..." He waved his other arm around the room. "It's ours. You forget, my love... My name is on the deeds."*

*It was then Isabella realised her mistake. Edward had never cared... she was his means to an end. But why? He was as wealthy as she was...*

*With her eyes locked on his, she pulled out her phone, hitting the button that automatically dialled the emergency services.*

*"Emergency? How can I help you?"*

*Isabella raised her eyes to Edward's, her heart racing as she wondered if he was going to call her bluff.*

*"Yes, hello," Isabella said. "My boyfriend is threatening me, and I may need help."*

*"Okay. Are you currently safe? Can you give me your address?"*

*Edward stared at her, a vein throbbing in his forehead. Isabella held her ground as she rattled off her address, pulling her arm free from his grip. Edward let go before scrambling for his clothes.*

*"You. Will. Regret. This," he hissed, walking out of the room.*

*Isabella breathed a sigh of relief as she heard the front door slam.*

*"It's okay, he's gone," she said to the woman at the end of the phone.*

*"Are you safe? I've notified the police. They're on their way."*

*"Thank you," Isabella said, dropping onto the sofa before remembering.*

*That was where Edward and Victoria had just been exchanging bodily fluids. The sofa would need to be burned... Damn, she loved that sofa, and it had taken her months to choose it.*

*“I’m alone now. I think it’s safe,” she sighed.*

*“Does he have a key?” the woman asked.*

*“Yes.”*

*She hadn’t considered that.*

*“I’ll arrange for the officers to come by. You’ll need to arrange for a locksmith.”*

*“I will.” Isabella walked to the front door and slid the chain across. That would keep him out, at least temporarily. “I’ve put the chain on.”*

*“Okay, I will leave you for now. Take care. The officers will be with you shortly. Please call back if anything changes.”*

*Isabella disconnected the call and walked back into the living room and the open-plan kitchen. She looked at the sideboard. Everything would need to be sanitised. She doubted the sofa was the only surface they’d had sex on. Edward liked the variety.*

*Isabella had not been innocent when they got together. Her experience limited to a few unsatisfying encounters during her time at Sixth Form College and her early years at University. Edward’s sexual skills were something Isabella had chosen not to dwell on until now. She’d simply appreciated it, would even admit it was one reason she’d fallen for him.*

*But he was right. She agreed to add Edward’s name to the deeds, even though she’d paid for the apartment with her mother’s inheritance. Looking back, she’d been a fool—Edward had decided where they would live—it needed to be near the social scene he was part of and his office. Isabella wanted to please him, even if it meant she had further to travel to University. Her argument being, once she graduated, they’d be working in the same place, so it didn’t matter. After what she’d seen, Isabella wanted to leave the family’s home and get away from her stepmother.*

*The police had come and gone. There was nothing she could do. He hadn't committed a crime. Having sex with someone else might be ethically wrong, but it didn't carry any weight in the eyes of the law. All she could do was change the locks, bag up all Edward's belongings, and hope he accepted her wishes.*

*For three weeks, she heard nothing. Choosing to stay in and lick her wounds, throwing herself into her revising for her finals. She heard through friends Edward had gone away with Victoria. So much for her not being good enough for him. Good luck to them both.*

*During the third week, their friends staged an intervention. "Show Edward what he's missing, let your hair down... go out, have fun... life isn't all work and no play."*

*Isabella used her spare time to revise for her finals, but her exams were still a couple of weeks away. When two of her friends turned up on her doorstep, wine, makeup and outfits in hand, she'd thrown open the door. Maybe it was time to go out and have fun. They spent the evening getting ready before hitting the local bars and heading to the VIP room of one of the local nightclubs.*

*Isabella awoke the next morning with a raging hangover. How did she get home?*

*A thundering knock at the door had her scampering out of bed. She staggered, a wave of dizziness hitting her. Wow, it must've been a good night. Isabella grabbed her dressing gown, pulling it over her wrinkled clothes. She hadn't even bothered to get changed. How much had she drunk? Peering through the peephole, she saw her stepmother, Danielle, her eyes bloodshot.*

*Throwing open the door, Isabella found Danielle, her father's business partner and Edward's father, Pierce, along with two other men.*

*"I'm sorry, Isabella, but this is for the best."*

*Danielle was openly crying.*

*The two men stepped forward and took her arms. Isabella froze before struggling in their grip.*

*“What the hell?” she asked, staring at Danielle.*

*Danielle’s cries turned to sobs, Pierce taking her into his arms, soothing her. The sight making Isabella’s already tender stomach turn violently.*

*“Just go with them... They can help you, Isabella.” Pierce stared at her but could not meet her eyes. “We failed you. Failed to see the pain you’re in.” His body sagged. “Edward explained everything. He’s been out of his mind with worry... your drug problem... The pictures...”*

*Isabella froze. “What... What pictures? Drugs?” she asked before resuming her struggles. “Let me go... get off me... Danielle, Pierce, please... we need to talk about this...”*

*Pierce and Danielle turned away. Danielle, burying her face into his chest. It was then she spotted Edward with a sly smirk on his face. She froze, the men using that opportunity to pull her towards the lift.*

*Edward’s face hardened as he stepped past her and into the home they’d shared. “I tried to warn you...”*

*A dawning realisation hit Isabella as she bit down on a sob—someone had set her up. Whatever they thought they knew... it was all lies.*

*Isabella sank into the grip of the two men who held her arms as they led her away. Edward had played her and won.*

# Chapter Six

## *Christian*

Christian turned over once more before rolling onto his back and switching on the bedside light. Grabbing his phone, the time flashed up.

**05:00.**

Ouch, three hours sleep. The air in the room was thick and stifling, a sheen of sweat having formed on his bare chest. Maybe turning off the air conditioning before going to bed had not been the best of ideas. But he'd needed silence, and the hum had annoyed him. He loved Asia, but it always took him time to acclimatise to the temperature and humidity.

His plane had landed early evening. He spent most of the flight engrossed in work, pouring over documents and finalising his presentation. Upon arrival at the hotel, he ordered room service and spent several hours emailing documents and answering questions. Before he knew it, it had been two AM.

He was a control freak. Sebastian was right, not that Christian would ever admit it. The day he'd taken over the company, he swore never to make the same mistakes his father had. If that meant firing off emails in the early hours or taking a few phone calls, that was fine. Better than the alternative. Plus, the time difference already meant his internal clock was out of whack.

Christian got out of bed and padded across the cool tiles towards the en-suite. His computer was set up in the living area of the villa. There was a seating area with two cosy sofas covered in scatter pillows on one side and a big dining table and sideboard made of hardwood on the other. The villa had a small office, but Christian preferred the table, where he could look out onto the private courtyard and pool. He always stayed in this hotel. Its private villas offered the peace and space he liked when travelling. Each villa, in its own space, and far

enough away from the main building that there were no interruptions from other guests.

After grabbing a shower and some water, Christian logged onto his computer before logging off again. His mind raced. Dropping his head back, he stared at the vaulted ceiling, the overhead fan circling the fast-cooling air. At home, he would hit the gym. Maybe that's what he needed. A hard workout to help clear his head. He wasn't due to meet Henri and Patrice, the American CEO and his wife, until seven thirty, so he had a few hours to kill.

The spa and gym were in the main building. Christian breathed a sigh of relief as he entered the air-conditioning. The cold air meant the gym lacked the usual scent of sweaty bodies and overused trainers, commonplace in most public gyms. It was one reason he'd installed his own state-of-the-art gym in his penthouse, the other being, he didn't like to wait.

Christian had to admit, the hotel gym was pleasant, the air holding a fresh lemon scent that refreshed rather than repelled him. The gym was full of modern and well-maintained equipment. Polite notices asked gym guests to clean down the equipment after use, but the staff seemed to take it upon themselves. Christian walked towards a set of six running machines and six rowers. Each positioned in front of a large window that provided a panoramic view of the hotel gardens.

He stepped onto one of the running machines, setting his usual pace. He needed to rid his body of the jet lag he knew would kick in shortly. The sun was rising, a mix of reds, oranges and yellows lighting up the horizon, offsetting the bushes and plants in the beautifully manicured garden. Christian spotted a group walking to a wooden pergola across from the window. Someone had laid out mats on the pergola. Each took their place as they listened to whoever was giving them their instructions.

Christian's eyes wandered over the group. Although yoga was not something he'd tried, he found himself drawn to them as they began their practice. Christian's eyes locked on one participant. His heart stuttered. He could not look away. She was breathtaking. Her movements were powerful as her body



rippled and flowed from one position to the next. She was tall and toned, her long red hair plaited down her back. Christian was too far away to see her face, but he felt an instant pull towards her. He continued to run, ignoring the burn in his chest and legs, his fascination with the class complete. He only slowed when he saw them lie down. From where he was, it looked as if they'd all gone to sleep, so Christian began his own warm down, realising he'd been running solidly for forty minutes. He needed to get changed and showered. The workout had achieved its goal, jet lag now a thing of the past. His mind instead focused on a certain red-headed yoga instructor. Maybe he would take her class tomorrow.

Christian showered and changed in record time, ditching his sportswear for jeans and a polo shirt, glad he'd thrown them into a bag before leaving his room. His jeans would be hot and uncomfortable in the heat, but the hotel was air-conditioned, so he was fine. Christian moved towards the spa reception, ready to return his locker key. Would he ask about the yoga instructor? Maybe he could find out if she was holding any more classes? It had been a long time since anyone had actually piqued his interest. His *sex* life was simple. The relationships he engaged in were of the casual, mutually beneficial kind. All the women he dated knew that he was not the marrying type. He'd been there, done that, and had no intention of ever repeating the exercise. Some women had tried, and they parted company. Those happy to accept his offer of dinner followed by uncomplicated sex were fine.

Yet Christian wanted to meet this yoga instructor. Not that he was looking for sex while he was here—he was very clear about keeping business and pleasure separate. Henri was bringing Patrice, and he did not think Henri's wife would appreciate him *tom-cattin*g around with a local. But, for the first time, he found himself with an overwhelming desire to seek someone out...

Christian drew up short as the reception desk came into view. She was there. Her back to him while she spoke to the girls behind the desk. One of them said something, and she laughed, throwing her head back, the sound sending a warm flush to his groin.

Who was this woman?

He still could not see her face, but her body was even more impressive up close. She had a zipped-up sports top over her yoga pants and sports bra, but there was no mistaking the strength her body held. He could appreciate the amount of effort and dedication it must have taken to sculpt her muscles that way. Before he could think, Christian stepped up to the desk.

“Hello, Mr Dupree,” one girl on the desk said as he approached. “Is there anything I can help you with, Sir?”

The woman turned, and Christian felt the breath leave his lungs.

“Isabella?” he heard himself say.

“Christian? Christian Dupree?”

The sound of joy that came from hearing her say his name floored him. Next thing, Christian caught her as she threw her arms around his neck, hugging him tight. His own arms snaked around her body, enjoying the feel of her pressed against him, her floral scent enveloping him.

Isabella stepped back, holding onto his upper arms. “Oh my gosh, I can’t believe it’s you... What are you doing here? When did you arrive?”

It had been six or seven years since Christian had last seen this woman. His little sister, Scarlett’s best friend.

Isabella was tall, although she only reached his shoulder. She was makeup-free. Her large green eyes and dark lashes stood out against her porcelain complexion. Her eyes twinkled with mischief as she looked up at him. She’d been a permanent fixture in his house growing up. Their mothers, best friends. Two women with husbands working long hours, supporting each other. They’d all been inseparable until Isabella’s mother had died suddenly.

Scarlett and Isabella had remained firm friends, at least they had until Scarlett moved to America. After that... were they still in touch? He’d never thought to ask. Little Isabella King had only ever been his little sister’s best friend... Until today.

“Little Isabella King. What are you doing teaching yoga in Thailand? I thought you were living it up in London, enjoying London’s social scene.”

Christian heard himself ask this before giving himself a mental shake. He’d just admitted to watching her lesson. What would she think if she knew he’d just spent the past hour fantasising about her?

Christian watched her smile slip.

“Change of scenery,” she said awkwardly, clearly wanting to change the subject.

His gut tingled a sense he relied on heavily when doing business. It had never let him down yet. There was a story here. Did the hotel not realise they had a millionairess, one of Britain’s gentry, teaching yoga to their guests?

The girls behind reception were silent, clearly listening to their exchange. This seemed to make Isabella uncomfortable.

“Do you have time for a coffee?” Christian asked, looking at his watch.

He had an hour before he was due to meet Henri and Patrice for breakfast.

“I’d love to.”

Her face broke into a dazzling smile. A flood of desire exploded in his chest and stomach. He really needed to get a grip.

Isabella faced the girls at the reception. “Ananya should be back tomorrow to cover. If not, I’ll find a replacement.”

Both girls smiled their acceptance before wishing them a great day. Christian noted their interested gazes as they watched him and Isabella head towards the stairs leading back to the main reception area.

Christian followed Isabella to the hotel terrace. He tried to avert his gaze from her toned rear, his thoughts about her far from appropriate. She was Scarlett’s best friend. Isabella moved to one of the inside tables, directing Christian to sit.

“It’s still early, but soon it will be too hot to sit outside.”

She looked at him mischievously as she noticed his jeans.

Isabella King had clearly not changed. The mischief she and Scarlett caused was legendary.

“So, what are you doing here?” Christian asked, having ordered them both coffee.

“I live here,” she said. “I run a wellness retreat with my friend and business partner. It’s been nearly six years.” Her voice filled with pride.

“Six years? I didn’t realise you’d left.” Was it surprising? Scarlett had moved to the US eight years ago. It had seen an end to Isabella’s visits. “I would have thought this a little far removed from the London party scene for your taste.”

Christian regretted his comment as soon as he saw the pained expression on her face. He’d not meant to make her sound shallow, but it had been true. Both she and Scarlett had enjoyed London’s social scene.

“We all grow up.”

Christian hid his grin as she put him in his place. Until he realised her eyes were no longer twinkling. He was taken aback when he apologised for his mistake.

“I apologise. That’s not how I meant it... You and Scarlett enjoyed the social scene. We all did.” Christian said, changing the subject. “Did you come straight to Thailand?”

Isabella sighed, breaking eye contact to glance at the hands she clasped in her lap. “No... I took a year travelling. I ended up in India... Goa. I took a yoga course, and that was where I met May, my business partner. The business—that came later. We made that decision on the beach at sunset.”

Christian admired her, stepping away from the comfort of her family’s wealth. It could not have been easy. But there she was, doing something for herself. Her family’s expectations hadn’t trapped her. For that, he could only envy her.

They paused as the server delivered their coffee. Isabella smiled up at the member of staff, addressing them by name

and in Thai. Christian stared at her, wanting more of her genuine warmth. Her smile could light up the room.

“So, what brings you here?” Isabella asked when they were alone.

“The Dupree Group is opening an Asia office. I’m here on business, as you can probably guess,” Christian said, shaking himself out of his trance.

It was at that moment Henri and Patrice, his wife, entered the terrace. Silently cursing their timing, he stood, waving them over.

“Henri, Patrice,” he said, greeting them both. “I’d like to introduce you to an old family friend. Lady Isabella King.”

Henri and Patrice both greeted Isabella. Patrice stepped forward and kissed Isabella on both cheeks.

“Lovely to meet you, Lady Isabella. Are you here on holiday?” Patrice asked, taking in Isabella’s gym clothing.

“Please, Isabella is fine,” Isabella said, laughing. The look of pure displeasure she shot Christian, making his heart sore. “I live here, in Chiang Mai. I run a wellness retreat just outside the city. We also run classes at the hotel. I just finished teaching a yoga class when I ran into Christian.”

Christian’s attention locked on Isabella as she talked to Patrice.

“Oh, how lovely? What a small world. Did you say you teach yoga? I love yoga.” Patrice’s hand shot out to Henri’s in excitement. “Will you be teaching any more classes? I’d love to catch one while we’re here.”

Isabella gave her a genuine smile. “I won’t be tomorrow. I have classes booked at The Retreat. However, one of our practitioners will take the sunrise class tomorrow. You’re welcome to join a class at The Retreat if it’s too early.”

Christian turned to see Henri watching him, his eyes alight with mirth.

Henri’s gaze moved from Christian to Isabella. “Isabella, will you be joining us this evening?”

“Er...” Isabella’s eyes flashed to Christian’s.

“I’m sure Patrice would love to have some female company. Christian and I get caught up talking business when we get together,” Henri added.

The sly old dog, Christian thought.

Christian’s heart sped up as Isabella’s cheeks flamed with colour, her gaze never leaving his.

“Fabulous idea, Henri. What do you say, Isabella? Are you free to join us for dinner this evening?” Patrice linked her arm through Isabella’s as if they were old friends. “We can have a delicious meal while you tell me about the area and The Retreat. I plan to do some sightseeing while Henri is working.”

Isabella’s eyes widened, shooting Christian a silent question. He smiled, ashamed he’d not thought of it himself.

“Isabella, are you free to join us for dinner this evening? If you are, we would love the pleasure of your company,” he said. “We can continue our catch up, it’s been too long.”

“As long as I’m not imposing,” Isabella said, turning her attention back to Patrice. “That would be lovely. Thank you. I can definitely give you some pointers as to the places you should visit. I can also help with organising them if you would like. With my business, I know a lot of the tour guides and companies.”

“Fantastic,” Patrice added, her delight clear. “Shall we say pre-dinner drinks at seven-thirty?” Patrice looked at her watch, shooting them all a look of apology. “It’s been a pleasure meeting you, Isabella. I must go as I promised our children I would call when we arrived. You would think they were the parents now they’re in their twenties.” Patrice laughed as she rolled her eyes. “See you later, Christian.” Turning to Henri, she raised herself up and dropped a kiss on his lips, his hand dropping to her waist. “I’m going to go to our room, darling. I’ll see you later.”

Henri stroked a finger down his wife’s nose, giving her a smile that screamed at the love the two of them shared.

Christian envied them, their relationship, and their closeness. They'd been together for over thirty years. Their relationship was the strongest Christian had ever seen. Something he had briefly touched before it had been cruelly ripped away.

Christian watched as Patrice gave Isabella's arm one last squeeze before she turned away. Her twinkling eyes locked with his, letting him know she was far from innocent in her administrations for that evening. Christian smiled back and raised an eyebrow. It was clear his friends were trying to match-make, not for the first or the last time.

They all stopped as Patrice walked away.

"I hope my wife and I have not inconvenienced you?" Henri said, waiting until Patrice was gone to speak. "My wife is..."

"A force to be reckoned with," Christian added dryly, "It's a shame she refuses to work with us."

Henri smiled, his lips lifting at the edges. "It is."

Christian watched as Isabella looked between them. He saw the moment she decided she wanted to be part of that evening, as her body relaxed. With a smile, she added, "I'm looking forward to it. Thank you for inviting me." Glancing at her watch. "I'd better be getting back to The Retreat. I must be there to greet our guests upon their return. It was lovely meeting you, Henri."

Isabella lay a hand on Christian's arm, tiny shock waves rippling from where they touched. "It was great seeing you again, Christian. Until this evening."

Christian watched as Isabella headed towards the entrance.

"You're welcome," Henri said, clapping him on the back. "She's exquisite, my friend."

"It's nothing like that. She was my neighbour... my little sister's best friend," Christian said, knowing he was protesting too much. He dragged his gaze away from Isabella's retreating figure and returned his attention to Henri.

"Whatever you say," Henri said, laughing.

Christian scowled at Henri's smug smile, making him laugh even louder. "Come on. Let's grab some breakfast before we head into the office."

Christian shook himself off as they headed towards the dining room. He needed to get his head in the game. He didn't need to be distracted by sexy, red-headed yoga instructors and a friend of his sister.



# Chapter Seven

## *Isabella*

Isabella stared at her open wardrobe and sighed. Sliding items of clothing backwards and forwards, she frowned before discarding yet another outfit onto her single bed. Why did she say yes to dinner? She knew why... Henri and Patrice's invitation had taken her by surprise. Not that her heart had been beating a hundred miles an hour since bumping into Christian at Reception.

Isabella growled at herself. Congratulations... Not so cool, calm, and collected? She couldn't deny it... *she was a hot mess, worsened by her lengthy dry spell.*

Isabella smiled. She had to admit, Christian Dupree was not someone you could easily shut out, and he had lost none of his earlier sex appeal. As soon as Christian had reached maturity, he'd turned heads at every social event he attended, and had women of all ages hanging off his every word. The day his father announced his engagement, mothers throughout society had gone into a decline, sobbing into their china teacups. He was the bachelor every mother wanted to snare for their daughter. Not only for his family name, but for the natural air of power he exuded. Even his playboy ways hadn't deterred them.

Isabella huffed and wiped her brow. Of all days for her air conditioning unit to pack up, it had to be the day she was having dinner with a seriously gorgeous man. Her ceiling fan was usually ample, but today it was doing little to move the stifling air, or stem the tingling in her ovaries at the mere thought of him. How on earth was she going to survive dinner and drinks in his company when her brain had sunk below her waistline? Wasn't that supposed to be a male problem?

A knock sounded, and her door opened.

"Wow, what happened?"

Isabella turned to find May standing in the doorway, taking in the carnage that littered the wooden floor and bed.

Isabella let out a huff, throwing another item of clothing over her shoulder.

“Hey, what on earth did your wardrobe do to deserve this level of abuse?”

May carefully navigated her way through the mess to sit on the *clear* side of the bed.

“I give up,” Isabella said, throwing her hands in the air. “Why on earth did I agree to go tonight? I have nothing to wear.”

“Stop... Back up... Where are you going?”

“I bumped into an old friend from London. He invited me to join him... no scrap that. His business partner and his wife invited me to join them for dinner this evening. I have absolutely nothing suitable to wear to a business dinner.”

Isabella turned to face her friend and scowled at the mess she'd created.

“Where are you eating?” May asked.

“The hotel. I bumped into him after the sunrise class, and we went for coffee. His colleague turned up. One thing led to another, and now I'm supposed to meet them for dinner.” Isabella ran a hand over her face. “I'll just cancel. It's not like Christian invited me. He'll probably be more than happy for me to cancel. It was all very embarrassing.”

“I don't blame you. Who wants to have dinner with some stuffy old businessman?” May said.

“Oh, believe me, he's far from stuffy or old,” Isabella answered before realising what she'd said. She turned to face May, who was sitting grinning on the bed.

“Not stuffy? How not stuffy? Are we talking not stuffy, or smoking hot, not stuffy?” May asked, her eyes alight with mischief.

“He’s my best friend’s brother. He’s off-limits. *But in terms of full disclosure.* I’d go with ‘smoking hot, not stuffy’... But, if you repeat that... I will deny ever saying it.”

Isabella fell back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. She didn’t need to see May’s face to know her friend’s brain was working overtime.

“Scarlett’s brother, who is smoking hot, is your dinner date for the evening... well, we definitely need to find you something super sexy to wear.” May pushed herself awkwardly off the bed. “Your fairy godmother has arrived. You can thank me later,” May said, picking her way cautiously towards the door. “Be at my place in twenty minutes. I maybe three inches shorter than you, but I’ve more than enough clothing. We will definitely be able to find you something to wear.”

With that, May left, leaving Isabella to stare at the destruction she’d caused. Bending down, she began picking up her clothes, rehangng them in the wardrobe. Isabella knew May wasn’t joking. She often attended events with her parents, and as a result, her wardrobe was vast. The old Isabella loved fancy clothes and had a wardrobe filled with designer labels, such as Prada, Versace, and Balenciaga. This new Isabella had abandoned those trappings when she had turned her back on that life. But somewhere deep inside, that old Isabella, the one she’d suppressed for so long, was waking up.

Twenty minutes later, Isabella entered May’s townhouse to find a rack of dresses waiting for her, and May waving a feather duster.

“Your fairy godmother to the rescue.”

Isabella laughed, unsure how she’d got herself into this situation. Over the past twenty minutes, however, her anticipation had turned to excitement. The past was not something she thought about anymore, but the idea of catching up, having a night out, and reminiscing... Isabella wanted to dress up, to look nice.

“We need to make you classy and desirable.”

“This is a *business* dinner,” Isabella said.

“A business dinner, but then there is *after* the business dinner...” May added, waggling her eyebrows.

“Christian is my best friend’s brother. There will be no after-the-business dinner,” Isabella added unconvincingly.

“Is he married?”

“Divorced,” Isabella answered.

“Engaged?”

“He didn’t mention anyone.”

“Then you’re not hurting anyone if you partake in a little fun...” May added, stroking her chin as she gave Isabella the once over. “If you get lucky, he may pop your six-year-dry-spell-cherry.”

“Don’t even say that! Scarlett would have a fit!” Isabella said in horror.

It was not like she’d never imagined getting down and dirty with Christian Dupree. He’d been her and every other girl she’d ever met—teenage sexual fantasy. But Isabella could still remember Scarlett’s horror when she’d said Christian was good-looking. After that, she’d curbed those thoughts, at least out loud. Her head, however, had been in a completely different place.

“What happens in Thailand stays in Thailand,” May said, grinning.

May had a point.

No, stop!

What the hell was she thinking? She would not sleep with Scarlett’s brother. That was how she would think of him... not the hot, eye candy... Damn, she needed to clear her sex-deprived thoughts. How had her mind gone from a boring business dinner with Christian’s colleagues to her getting down and dirty with him? Oh hell, she’d need to look Christian in the face later when they met for dinner. She

couldn't have her thoughts consumed by his naked form and the flavour of his lips. She needed to shake herself out of this.

Isabella groaned at her friend. "You're being very presumptuous," Isabella added. "Who said he's even interested in me?"

May looked at her, her mouth wide open. "Have you looked at yourself recently? You, my beautiful friend, are gorgeous! The man watched you bend yourself double. He'll be interested in you."

Isabella felt the colour rise in her cheeks, her hands flying up to cover them.

May gave her a sly smile. "Let's make you *even more* gorgeous. The rest will fall into place," she said, waving her duster over Isabella's head.

# Chapter Eight

## *Isabella*

Three hours later, Isabella entered the hotel lobby. Even she had to agree. May had waved her magic wand, and she really did feel like Cinderella about to go to the ball.

They had found a full-length dress of May's that hugged Isabella's curves like a glove. What was full length on May ended three-quarters of the way down Isabella's legs, exposing her shapely calves and slender ankles. May had done her hair and makeup. When she had looked in the mirror, she had barely recognised herself.

For the first time in eight years, Isabella felt like her old self. Not the broken young woman who had left, seeking an escape. Tonight reminded her of the Isabella, who'd loved to dress up and attend parties. Life had been so different before her father's death. She'd loved wearing makeup and making an effort.

Isabella made her way to the reception desk.

"Sawasdee," she said in Thai, "I'm here as a dinner guest of Mr Christian Dupree."

The girl at reception looked up and smiled, recognition lighting up her eyes.

"Sawasdee, Isabella. You look very beautiful," she said. "Mr Dupree is in The Lounge waiting for you."

"Thank you."

Isabella smiled and bid her goodbye as she made her way to The Lounge.

The hotel lounge was a large, open space with windows overlooking the gardens. It had a traditional wooden bar on the far side, lined with bar stools. The main floor held clusters of lounge chairs grouped together around circular drinks tables. The room was quiet, only a few of the tables housing guests.

Christian was sitting nursing a drink, his gaze staring out of the windows onto the beautifully lit hotel pool and palm trees.

Isabella stopped, taking him in. He was wearing a tailored shirt that outlined and hugged his broad shoulders. His blond hair, styled in a relaxed way. His high cheekbones and square jaw, those of a model, rather than a corporate big shot. As if sensing her eyes on him, Christian looked up. His eyes roamed her body, setting tiny sparks of desire flooding her system. Isabella registered his initial look of shock... an unexplained warmth settling in her chest, before Christian quickly schooled it with a smile. Isabella found she liked the idea that she'd surprised him.

Christian rose from his seat, his hands resting on her forearms as he drew her in for a kiss on the cheek. His lips sent ripples of awareness through her, where his mouth touched her skin.

"You look stunning, Isabella," Christian said, pulling out the chair next to him and gesturing for her to sit down.

"Thank you," Isabella said, taking a seat, careful to smooth her dress down.

"Can I get you a drink?" Christian asked, already motioning for the waiter.

"A lime soda, please," Isabella said as their server approached.

Christian raised an eyebrow at her request, and Isabella had to smile.

"I run a yoga retreat. My party-girl days are behind me. I'll have a drink with dinner, but with the humidity here, I've learned the importance of staying hydrated."

Christian nodded, taking another sip of his drink.

"This is quite a change from the life you and Scarlett lived," Christian said as Isabella's drink arrived.

"Times change. When Scarlett left for the US, life and friendships were never the same. My engagement... when that

ended... Let's just say it was easier to pack up and reset. With Dad gone, there was nothing keeping me there."

Christian's face fell. "I was sorry to hear about your father. Dominic was a good man. I had a lot of respect for him... I'd heard you were engaged. I'm sorry it didn't work out."

"I'm not," Isabella said, taking a sip of her drink.

Unsure why she'd even raised Edward's name. Maybe she wanted to know what Christian knew.

"My life after your father died was a little crazy," he added cryptically. "I was fighting to keep The Dupree Group afloat. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you."

Isabella leaned forward and touched his arm, shards of awareness shooting through her hand.

"Thank you. What is it they say? What doesn't break you makes you stronger?"

It was certainly true for her.

Eight years had passed since her father had been ripped from her life. Dominic King had liked to keep himself fit. He'd always said his early morning walks allowed him to clear his head before he went into the office. The morning of his death, a car careened across the road and mounted the pavement. Its driver suffered a heart attack at the wheel. It had been a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Both her father and the driver had died on impact.

Isabella breathed a sigh of relief as Henri and Patrice entered the bar area, making their way over to where they sat.

Isabella and Christian rose to greet them, Patrice taking Isabella into a hug. "You made it. Wow, you look beautiful... doesn't she, Christian?"

"I've already told her as much," Christian added dryly.

"Thank you," Isabella said, taking in the older, beautiful woman with the twinkling eyes.

She knew she was going to enjoy this woman's company.



Henri and Patrice ordered drinks, and the four of them made small talk until their table was ready.

The dining room was beneath The Lounge. The ceiling was double height, with wooden beams crisscrossing the area. Rectangular tables of varying sizes adorned the space, each beautifully made up with crisp white tablecloths lit by hidden ambient lights. This was nothing like the plastic tables at the local Hawker centre. An indistinct murmur of voices filled the room from the few guests who were already seated. The sound of light music filtering into the room was the only other noise. The manager showed them to their table. They opted to sit outside on the terrace. The midday heat had dropped, the air temperature now an embracing warmth. Like the restaurant, the terrace was lit with discreet lights, making it warm and inviting.

The men pulled out the chairs for the women. Patrice sat herself down next to Isabella. While Christian sat opposite her next to Henri.

Dinner went by without incident. Isabella had to admit, Patrice was great company. The men sat and discussed business for a portion of the meal, but they had then joined the women in their discussion. From what Patrice told her, the current CEO of Asia had resigned suddenly, and Henri, as CEO of the US and Christian CEO of Europe, were there talking to his replacement. They had shortlisted the candidate. They were there to dot the *Is* and cross the *Ts*, before he took charge.

“So, you said you run a yoga retreat?” Henri asked.

“I do, with my best friend May. She is Thai. We met in India where we did our training. She invited me to come back with her, and open a business. That was nearly six years ago.”

“It sounds ideal, and this area is beautiful,” Patrice added. “An amazing place to practise.

“Whether I’ll be able to make any of the classes after tonight, we’ll have to see. I’m not as young as I used to be, and jet lag...”

“No need to explain. I get it.” Isabella returned her smile. “Tomorrow morning may be slightly painful for me too. I’m usually in bed by nine.”

“Not a party girl, then?” Patrice asked. “Christian said your father was a Lord.”

A look of horror must have crossed Isabella’s face because Patrice gripped her hand and squeezed.

“I’m sorry if I overstepped,” she said, her voice remorseful.

“No, it’s okay,” Isabella stuttered. “I keep my old and new life completely separate. I left that entitled part of my life in England. It’s not something that holds any weight here in Thailand. Here I am, Isabella King, and that’s how I like it.”

Very few people knew about her past other than May. She’d told May, which was why her friend had offered her Thailand as an escape.

Patrice squeezed her hand.

The two women shared a glance before they fell back into lighter conversations. Patrice told her about their children, who were both of University age and studying in America. Patrice and Henri had moved from Paris when Henri had accepted the role of American CEO with The Dupree Group. She had learned to adapt, although she missed Europe, and made plenty of trips to and from Paris to catch up with old friends.

After dinner, they made their way back to The Lounge. It was nearly midnight.

Isabella tried unsuccessfully to stifle a yawn. “I’m so sorry,” she said, the colour rising in her cheeks.

Christian smiled at her, his eyes twinkling. “We are in a mixed time zone, you are not.”

“True. Plus, I have to teach sunrise yoga in the morning to my guests. I’d love to stay, but I really do need to get some sleep. Thank you so much for a wonderful evening.”

Patrice stopped and pulled her into a hug. “I’ll be in touch,” she said.

“I’d love that,” Isabella said, returning the other woman’s hug. They’d exchanged telephone numbers and email contact details earlier in the evening.

Henri kissed her hand before taking Patrice to move further into The Lounge and grabbing a table.

“I’m sorry if tonight has been boring. Henri and I are terrible when we get together,” Christian said, his voice apologetic.

Isabella smiled. “I’ve had a wonderful night. Patrice is a lovely woman. I think we’ve exchanged our life history, as well as contact details.”

As they made their way through reception, Christian rested his hand on her lower back, an unfamiliar warmth flooding her body.

“Taxi?” the doorman asked as they approached.

“Please,” Isabella said, waiting while he called for one.

They stood in silence, his hand sending lightning bolts of heat through her.

“Thank you for a lovely evening,” Isabella said, looking up into Christian’s face.

She’d never felt this awkward at the end of an evening. What was the protocol?

“Can I see you again tomorrow?” Christian asked, surprising them both.

Isabella’s eyes locked on his. His hand swept up and over his hair, an ache forming from the loss of his touch. “We didn’t have time to catch up tonight. I’d really like to have the chance to do that, while I’m here,” he explained.

Before she could think, Isabella agreed. She wanted that, too.

Giving Christian a small smile. “That would be lovely.”

“How about dinner in my suite tomorrow? I have a private pool. We can talk undisturbed.” Christian’s eyes widened at his words. “Sorry, that sounded wrong.”

Isabella loved that fact. He looked awkward. It was fun seeing someone as put together as Christian Dupree... out of sorts.

Isabella could not help the giggle that escaped. "That would be great. A private dinner would be preferable, as I know so many of the staff here."

Before Christian could say any more, her taxi arrived. The doorman stepped forward and opened the door, waiting for her to get in.

"Until tomorrow night then," Christian said as she climbed in and the door closed.

Christian remained standing where she'd left him as the taxi pulled out of the hotel drive, only turning and reentering the lobby when the taxi turned onto the street.

Isabella sat back and stared at the scenery, her heart pounding in her chest. She'd just agreed to meet Christian Dupree again... alone. It was true. They hadn't had a chance to talk, but a private meal in his suite? She hadn't lied when she had said it was preferable. She had a reputation to uphold and didn't want or need any drama. The life Christian led was alien to her now and was not somewhere she ever wanted to return to.

# Chapter Nine

## *Christian*

An hour later, Christian found himself back in his suite, having finally said goodnight to Henri and Patrice.

The day had been an unexpected success. Their meeting with Richard, the new CEO of Asia, looked promising. Their meeting had gone better than he expected. He'd made all the right noises, and matched Christian and Henri's vision for The Dupree Group. It was a shame he'd been unable to join them for dinner, but it was his daughter's birthday, and he'd wanted to get home, something Christian understood all too well. Christian liked him the same way he had when he'd first met Henri. They had a similar work ethic and vision for the company, which helped settle his unease at handing over control. Expanding the business into Asia was a bold move. Handing over the reins to someone else was terrifying.

Christian dropped onto the large settee and picked up his laptop. He'd not known what to expect when Henri and Patrice had invited Isabella to join them for dinner. Since his divorce, he'd been on the end of their matchmaking attempts more times than he cared to remember. But he found he'd enjoyed having her tag along. She'd been beautiful in her yoga outfit, but when she'd walked into the bar, she'd taken his breath away. But something had puzzled him. Isabella had been open about her current life but had changed the subject whenever her past had come up.

Christian opened his browser, typing *Lady Isabella King* into the search engine.

***The Missing Heiress. Drugs and alcohol - The downfall of society's princess***

Christian's gut tightened as he read the headlines from eight years ago. His body recoiled as he read article after article. Isabella being sectioned, Isabella being placed in rehab for drug and alcohol abuse. Her sex addiction... they went on and on. The final article said she was missing. How had he missed

this? Had he been living under a rock? No. He'd been going through his own *shit*. After losing Lily. Signing over custody of Skylar. His brief marriage to Lindsey. As well as fighting to keep his family business from being declared bankrupt. There'd been no time for anything else. He, Christian Dupree, had been a wreck.

Christian continued reading. Isabella's stepmother had reported her travelling. Her fiance, Edward Lebroc, had declared himself heartbroken at how far she'd fallen. How he'd tried to save her, but she needed to save herself. Christian felt sick reading their words. Instead of helping Isabella, it looked like those who should have loved and supported her had thrown her to the wolves. At twenty, why had no one helped her? The broken girl in the pictures seemed far removed from the woman he met this morning.

Christian glanced at the clock—it was three thirty in Los Angeles. Picking up his phone, he dialled Scarlett's number.

“Christian, I thought you were in Thailand.” His sister's voice came over the phone.

“I am.”

Scarlett was always cheerful, the polar opposite to him, and the rest of their family. If she didn't look like him, Christian would have questioned whether someone had switched her at birth. Even with a six-year age gap, they were close. Christian knew they'd do anything for each other. It hadn't always been that way, but it was now.

“Oh... it must be late. Is everything okay?” she asked, her concern apparent.

“Everything's fine. I bumped into an old friend of yours today.”

There was silence. “You bumped into Izzy?”

“You didn't mention she was here. Are you still in contact?” Christian knew he was fishing for information.

“Yes. I speak to her at least once a month.”

Scarlett sighed. Christian sensed his sister didn't want to talk about her friend. That shocked him. Scarlett talked to him about everything.

"You sound like you don't want to discuss Isabella. What's going on?"

Christian assumed Isabella had cut all ties with the UK, but he'd been clearly mistaken.

"Christian, I know when you're fishing. Izzy had a rough time. She doesn't need you raking up the past."

Christian fell silent. "How is seeing me going to change that? "

"It's not... I'm sorry, Chris. After everything that happened... I'm just very protective of her. Izzy left to escape all the drama. You, my dear brother, are a press magnet." Scarlett sighed. "What I'm trying to say is, Izzy has carved out a new life for herself. Please don't ruin it for her."

Christian's heckles rose. What did she think he was going to do? Give a press conference. Christian hated all the unwanted attention his position and status gave him, and it got worse after he'd joined the rich list. He didn't court them, he never had. It didn't mean he wasn't on their radar.

"I'll be careful," he said.

"Does that mean you're seeing her again?" Scarlett asked.

"We're having dinner tomorrow night... Scarlett, how did I not know what was going on?"

His sister let out a huff of air that echoed down the telephone. "Don't believe everything you read in the press... you of all people should know that. All I'll say is, remember the Izzy we grew up around. Not everything is as it seems. If you want the details, you'll need to ask Izzy... but Christian, don't push her. She went through a lot. She's moved on... she doesn't need the past raked up."

Christian was unused to his sister begging, and it weighed heavily on his chest.

"How can dinner hurt?"

A crash sounded in the background, and he heard his sister muffle the phone.

“Look, I’ve got to go... Ignore me. Enjoy dinner with Izzy and tell her I said hi.”

“Okay. It’s only dinner, Scarlett... nothing more. I’ll catch you when you’re back in London.” Christian said before adding, “We’ll grab dinner.”

“I’ll look forward to it. Love you, big brother... Got to fly.”

Christian chuckled as the phone went dead. Typical Scarlett, always embroiled in some drama at work.

“Love you too,” Christian said to the dead line.

Sitting back, he stared at his laptop. What was the truth? The Izzy he knew had been anti-drugs. She’d enjoyed a drink. What teenager didn’t? Having himself been on the receiving end of several salacious articles, he knew the public loved real-life drama. It’s what sold tabloid newspapers. Truth or lies, whatever the cost, it looked like Isabella had paid a high price.



# Chapter Ten

## *Isabella*

The day flew by. Isabella had been up before the sunrise. Ananya had returned to work, so she hadn't had to cover the hotel's classes but had covered their guests. Sunrise was Isabella's favourite time of day, and therefore, she loved these classes the best. Mornings were a magical time, allowing her to feel at one with nature. As the sun came up, she relaxed into the moves, balancing her for the rest of the day. Today, she felt different. Unable to centre herself, her mind kept wandering to the previous evening and the night ahead.

Christian was her best friend's brother, but she'd always harboured an enormous crush on him. Christian had never shown any interest in her. Instead, he and his friends had surrounded themselves with models and beautiful women. To Christian, she'd always been his annoying little sister's, equally annoying friend. He'd been out of her league then and always would be. But that didn't mean she couldn't enjoy his company and daydream, especially now Scarlett wasn't around to watch.

Isabella entered the office to find several dresses hanging on the coat hook. Her eyes flew to May's.

"What?" May shrugged. "You told me you were seeing him again tonight, so I brought your second, third, and fourth choice outfits over. Your poor wardrobe did not need another airing so soon."

Isabella grinned. "Thank you," she said, running her fingers over one dress. It had tempted her the night before, but it would be ideal for this evening, with its fitted bodice and flared skirt. The dress was versatile, suitable for any occasion... stunning. It would instil her with the confidence she needed.

"What are friends for? If not to help one another," May added, pushing herself out of the chair, stomach first. "Now

I'm married and heavily pregnant. I must live my life vicariously through you."

Isabella laughed. May would be extremely disappointed. Isabella's life could not be more tame or boring if she tried. Looking at her friend, she couldn't believe how large her tiny friend had got in the past couple of weeks. Her perfect stomach looked like she was holding a basketball in her dress.

"You need to take it easy," Isabella said. "Why don't you head home and put your feet up? There is nothing here I can't handle."

May smiled gratefully. "Thank you." May looked down and ran a gentle hand over her extended belly. "Seven weeks and counting. I can't wait. I'm tired of looking like a beached whale."

Isabella moved forward and stroked her friend's stomach. It rewarded her with a kick to her hand. "You, my little button, need to let Mummy get some rest," she whispered, stroking her thumb over the tiny foot that was pressing out against her friend's skin.

Isabella was as impatient as May. She couldn't wait for cuddles or the chance to spoil the new arrival.

Isabella's phone pinged with an incoming message as May headed to the door.

"You sure you'll be okay?" May asked.

"Absolutely fine. You go," Isabella said, smiling and waving her friend out of the door before grabbing her phone.

***SCARLETT:*** *Heard you bumped into my big bro?*

Isabella shook her head. So much for Scarlett not finding out.

***ISABELLA:*** *I did. We're having dinner tonight.*

Isabella watched the three dots appear, letting her know her bestie was typing. What was Scarlett going to say? Although they'd never discussed it, she had a suspicion Scarlett had been very aware of Isabella's slight obsession with her brother, even though she'd tried to hide it. Would she warn her off?

**SCARLETT:** *Have fun.*

That was it? Have fun? Maybe she was overthinking things. Christian had clearly spoken to her. Undoubtedly, he told her they were simply old friends catching up. Nothing romantic about it. Isabella drew up short. Why had her mind gone to romantic? It wasn't a date. They were merely old friends catching up!

She'd definitely been celibate for too long. She needed to get her head out from between her legs... oh no, that was not a good analogy, as her mind instantly imagined Christian's head between her thighs. His lips, tongue...

Stop!

May's comments had struck a nerve. No way was she, Isabella King, going to end up in bed with Christian Dupree, or with his head between her legs... that was *not* on the cards.

# Chapter Eleven

## *Isabella*

Isabella arrived at the hotel at seven. She'd grabbed her swimming costume, not that she anticipated swimming, but Christian had mentioned it the night before.

Christian was waiting for her in The Lounge. He grinned with affection as she approached, the twinkle of appreciation in his brilliant blue eyes causing her breath to catch. Isabella had to admit he looked much more relaxed this evening. A navy polo shirt hugged his broad shoulders and chest, while his designer jeans fitted him like a second skin. From his physique, it was clear Christian liked to work out, and that was something Isabella could appreciate.

Christian walked towards her, kissing her cheeks in greeting, his hands enveloping hers. Shivers of electricity pulsed across her skin where his hands and lips touched. It was going to be an interesting evening. She needed to get her libido under control.

"Evening, Isabella. You look beautiful," Christian said, stepping back without breaking their contact.

"Thank you. You look rather *dashing* yourself," Isabella said, shooting him a cheeky grin.

Christian laughed, and Isabella wanted to hear more of that rich sound.

"Would you like to stay here for a drink, or shall we return to my suite? I thought that way we could have dinner undisturbed."

Isabella smiled up at him. "We can go to your suite. I've heard a lot about them. I hear they're exquisite."

Christian looked at her, his eyes furrowed in shock. "Haven't you seen one?" he asked.

Isabella laughed, "Christian, I work here... occasionally. Staff don't get to roam around the equivalent of the

presidential suite.”

“But...”

“Here I’m Isabella King. No more, no less. I wasn’t joking when I said I’d left that part of my life behind.”

Christian appeared to comprehend, but Isabella was uncertain. How could he?

Her father had tied her money up in a trust fund. When he’d died, she’d been barely twenty. His will had made it so she could not access the full entirety of her trust fund until she was twenty-five. After everything that happened, it triggered a clause in the will, making thirty, the new twenty-five. What no one had considered was her inheritance from her mother’s estate. Despite using half to buy an apartment with Edward, she’d been living off the remainder of it for seven years. Her father’s money was sitting in the UK, invested, waiting until she reached thirty. Not that she cared. She was self-sufficient and living her best life. She didn’t need or want the money or toxicity that went with it.

Isabella followed Christian through the grounds of the hotel to his private villa. The door opened into a small hallway, separated from the main room by a privacy screen. Walking around it, she stepped into a large sitting/dining area. A large dining table, with a beautiful centrepiece filled with fresh local fruit, sat to one side. While the other side held two large sofas with hundreds of scatter cushions. The ceiling was a crisscross of large wooden beams showing off the vaulted ceiling. The room was lit by a combination of wall and hidden beam lights, giving off a relaxing and tranquil atmosphere. Isabella saw why this hotel was one of the most popular in the area.

“This is beautiful,” Isabella said on a long exhale.

A glass window made up the far wall, overlooking a private garden, terrace and lap pool. Floodlights illuminated the area, making the outside blend with the inside. Trees surrounded the villa, offering the resident complete privacy. This was its own tranquil paradise. Isabella walked into the room, made her way to the double doors, and went out to the patio.

She felt rather than saw Christian appear at her shoulder.

“This is why I love Thailand,” Isabella said, dropping her head back and closing her eyes, letting the music of the nature surround her.

“I’m understanding its draw,” Christian said, his voice huskier than usual.

Isabella opened her eyes and turned to face him. Christian’s eyes were on her, two glasses of champagne in his hand.

Isabella smiled, taking one off of him and raising it up in a toast.

“To friendship,” she said, clinking her glass to his, before taking a sip and grinning. “Ooh, the proper stuff. It’s been a while.”

Christian returned her smile, his eyes never leaving hers. Isabella turned away when the intensity of his gaze became too much.

Slipping off her shoes, Isabella walked forward and dipped her toe into the pool. She let out a low groan, the water temperature perfect.

“You can take a dip before dinner if you like,” Christian said, coming to stand next to her. “Although it might be better if we order our food now, I can always delay its arrival.”

Isabella smiled at his thoughtfulness.

“It’s fine. Let’s eat and talk,” Isabella said.

She wasn’t sure she could hide her desire if she were to strip down into her swimming costume. Being this close to Christian was playing havoc with her libido.

Returning to the living area, Christian handed Isabella the menu. Once they’d decided, Christian rang it through to the villa’s private butler.

He motioned for her to take a seat on one of the large sofas.

“The Retreat? It was a surprise. I remember your father telling me how well you’d done during your placement year

and how much he looked forward to you joining the firm once you graduated.”

Isabella curled her feet under her and grabbed one of the scatter cushions, holding it in her lap. Her heart hurt at the mention of her father, but it didn't surprise her that Christian wanted to know. His own family firm was his life.

“That was then... sometimes life changes even the best-laid plans. Yes... The Retreat, my sanctuary... and sanity,” Isabella laughed.

“Yoga and meditation seem far removed from socialite, party girl.”

Isabella looked at Christian and drew in a deep breath.

“It is. But it's been my saving grace. After Dad died... I take it you're aware of my spectacular fall from grace?” Isabella said, squeezing the cushion she was holding, her eyes never leaving Christian's.

“I wasn't. Until last night. I have to admit, I searched you up.”

“Christian Dupree. You, above all, should know better than to believe anything you read in the gossip columns.”

Isabella raised a questioning eyebrow, her heart sinking at what he might've uncovered. What would he think of her?

“I admit. I rang Scarlett... but she told me to ask you. It's your story to tell.”

Isabella's spirit lifted. Trust her friend. She'd never been a gossip. She hated that part of their life. They both had.

“After Dad died, then the scandal... there was nothing left for me. Who wanted a university dropout, drug addict, with a broken engagement at the helm of a million-pound business? In one night, I'd lost all credibility. Past dreams—died alongside my father. This... this is my new reality. I found an alternative path, a path I never knew I wanted...”

Christian lent forward and refilled her glass.

“Is it enough?” he asked.

Isabella smiled over at him. “Is it where I saw myself at twenty? No.” She couldn’t help but chuckle. “Is it where I see myself now, at twenty-eight and beyond... completely? I’m living a life I never knew I wanted. I live in the most beautiful country, surrounded by wonderful people, doing a job I love. It may be a far cry from running my father’s multi-million-pound empire, but I’m running my own business and proud of everything I’ve achieved... I haven’t strayed too far. I’m still in hospitality... that will always be in my blood. But this... The Retreat, is for me. Would I trade it for my old life? Go back in time? Not in a million years.”

Isabella looked at Christian, who was resting his chin on his steepled fingers, watching her.

“How did you end up here?”

“After rehab, I needed to regroup, get away. I told my stepmother and Pierce I was going travelling. They tried to talk me out of it, but I was adamant. At twenty-one, they couldn’t stop me. Plus, I had my mother’s inheritance to finance it.”

“That’s how you ended up here, in Thailand?”

“Partly. I met May at a yoga training school in Goa. We hit it off and continued our travels together. Her father is a minister in Thailand. When our year was up, she invited me to come back with her. We made the decision to set up the business, and the rest is history.” She needed him to understand. “I’m grateful for all the good things that have come my way. The Thai people have welcomed me with open arms. This is my home. I don’t want to return to The City and wear an ill-fitting mask.”

Isabella swore she saw understanding in Christian’s gaze. Maybe she wasn’t the only one tired of the rat race.

“Enough about me. You’re now CEO of the family business... divorced... a billionaire. You’re not the only one with the internet.”

Isabella smirked.



Christian gave a hollow laugh before taking a large sip of champagne.

“What can I say? I’ve sold my soul.”

“But you’re successful. You clearly have the Midas touch... Scarlett told me. You made the Rich List, both in the UK and across the pond. Congratulations.”

“Yes, I’m officially a billionaire. I can afford anything I want...”

Her muscles tightened.

“Except... that statement sounds hollow,” Isabella probed, wondering if maybe she wasn’t the only one harbouring secrets.

A tightness appeared around his eyes. “Am I that obvious?”

“You wear the mask well. But then it takes one to know one... But, if you don’t enjoy it, why do it? Why not hand it over to someone else, give it all up and run away?”

“If only.”

Christian’s smile failed to reach his eyes, and it touched something in the centre of Isabella’s chest. This man was hurting. The saying ‘*money can’t buy happiness*’ seemed to be very prevalent at that moment.

Christian looked up. “I have a daughter,” he said, his eyes coming alive.

Isabella felt her heart sink. Was Christian in a relationship? Scarlett hadn’t mentioned Christian having a child.

“Skylar... She’s just eight.”

Isabella’s confusion must’ve shown on her face. “I didn’t think you and your wife had any children?”

“Correct. Lindsey and I were purely an arranged marriage. We lived very separate lives. Skylar is my daughter with a woman named Lily.”

Realisation hit... Rumours had it he was in love with a West End actress named Lily, but then suddenly announced his

engagement to Lindsey. She'd been finishing her placement. Scarlett had just left for America, and then her father died. So that was all she'd heard.

"Are you with Lily now?" Isabella asked, unsure she wanted to hear the answer.

Christian shook his head, his eyes dropping to the ground in front of him. "No, she died eight years ago, not long after Skylar was born. Her younger sister, Star, adopted Skylar."

One look at Christian told Isabella all she needed to know. Christian was hurting. Moving the cushion to one side, she uncurled her feet and lent forward before resting her hand on top of his. His gaze moved to where their hands touched.

"I've been back in her life for the past year," Christian added

Isabella squeezed his hand, drawing his attention once again to her face.

"Do you have any photos?" she asked, wanting to help pull him out of whatever hole his memories had dropped him into.

Isabella was relieved when Christian gave her a genuine smile before pulling out his phone. He went to his camera roll and flashed a whole reel of pictures of the most beautiful little girl Isabella had ever seen.

"Oh, Christian, she's beautiful."

"She is. She takes after her mother," Christian said, smiling down at his phone. "I've been lucky. Star has let me be a part of her life."

Isabella squeezed his hand again, the connection feeling right.

"That little girl is lucky to have you in her life. Any mother would see that."

"Life is not always what it seems," Christian added cryptically. "Star had every right to keep Skylar away from me. I've been far from an angel..."

A knock at the door broke them apart.

“Ahh, dinner is served,” Christian said, getting up and moving to the door to let the butler in.

Isabella excused herself while Christian oversaw the setup of their dinner. Upon her return, a beautiful banquet was laid out on the table, and the butler had left.

“This looks and smells amazing,” Isabella said, moving towards the chair Christian was holding out for her.

Once seated, Christian opened the wine and filled her glass.

“A toast... To brighter futures,” Christian said.

Isabella smiled across at him. “To brighter futures.”

Isabella could not fault the food or the company. She’d forgotten how entertaining Christian was, or maybe she’d never had the chance to realise. She and Scarlett had always been on the outside with him and his friends.

As the night went on, their conversation moved on to the London scene, although Christian was clear that it no longer held the draw it once had.

“This really is delicious. Thank you for this evening. It’s been wonderful catching up.”

“Do you have a boyfriend here?” Christian asked.

Isabella chuckled. “No. The business is my boyfriend.”

Before Christian could say any more, his phone rang.

“Christian,” he answered, mouthing an apology for the interruption.

They’d all but finished their meal, so when Christian got up and walked away from the table, Isabella set about clearing away their plates. Her stomach hardened as she watched his demeanour change. He rubbed the back of his neck as he cursed. It was evident that the person on the other end of the phone was the bearer of bad news.

Not wanting to eavesdrop, Isabella made herself scarce, returning to the garden and sitting with her feet dangling into the pool. The water was the perfect temperature, having been heated by the Thai sun.

Closing her eyes, Isabella let her surroundings ground her. All the talk of the past had thrown her off balance, and she wanted to recenter. It was something she had learned early in her transformation. To enjoy the moment, let herself become one with nature. Learning mindfulness alongside yoga changed her life. She now took the time to appreciate each moment, savour it, instead of living for what was coming.

She sensed when Christian came and sat down next to her. He remained silent.

“Is everything all right?” Isabella asked, opening her eyes and turning her head to face him.

She could sense the restlessness coming off him.

“It will be,” Christian said, sighing. “I fly home tomorrow. I’ll deal with it then.”

Isabella placed a hand on his thigh, feeling the muscle contract.

“It must be tough. Having all that responsibility,” Isabella said.

She knew how she felt about her own business, its staff, and clients. She could not imagine the weight Christian carried.

“It has its moments. At least it’s expanding. There was a time...” Christian stopped.

Isabella could feel the tension running through his body. She wondered if he was even aware of the stress he was carrying. He’d looked relaxed earlier, but he was far from that now.

Isabella moved behind him, her hands going to his shoulders, her thumbs digging into the tense muscles. Christian let out a groan as Isabella continued to knead his shoulders and back.

“Come,” Isabella said, grabbing Christian’s hand and leading him to the large day bed that sat under a pergola next to the pool. “Take off your t-shirt and lie on your stomach.”

Isabella disappeared into the villa. Locating the bathroom, she picked up some of the hotel’s moisturiser. It was expensive and may not be oil, but it would work. Isabella returned,

amazed to find Christian lying face down on the bed, as she'd asked. His exposed skin was a smooth, golden brown.

Isabella crawled up onto the bed next to him, drawing her skirt up around her thighs to allow herself some movement. Pouring the moisturiser onto her hands, she warmed it before smoothing it over Christian's skin and beginning work on his knotted muscles.

"You're very good at this," Christian said quietly.

"I live in Thailand, Christian. It's the best place to get a massage and to learn to massage." Isabella said, laughing, working her elbow into an incredibly stubborn knot, making Christian groan in a combination of pleasure and pain.

"I wish I could bottle you up," Christian said, making Isabella's heart beat a little faster.

Eventually, Isabella slowed her hand movements. She had loosened some of his tension. It would take more than one session to ease his stress.

"There," she said. "You should survive another meeting."

Christian rolled over and pushed himself up on one elbow. His gaze locked on hers.

"Thank you," he said, rolling his shoulders and neck.

Isabella drew in a sharp breath as his hand accidentally touched her leg. She watched in fascination as his pupils dilated.

Drawing her bottom lip into her mouth, she swallowed back a moan as Christian's hand began drawing lazy circles against her exposed skin. Goosebumps broke out over her thigh, tingling pulses dancing along her nerve endings, settling in her core as his hand moved higher. Isabella was not sure who moved first. Their mouths collided, Christian's tongue tracing the seam of her lip, demanding access, she was happy to give. Isabella let her hands slide up and over his naked chest, her fingers digging into his broad shoulders, as she held on for dear life. No one had ever kissed her so thoroughly before.

Christian's hands wound their way into her hair, dragging her closer, pulling her forward and off her knees until she was lying across him. Their tongues continued to dance as they explored each other's mouths.

Isabella felt the zip of her dress give. Christian's hands snaking through the gap, leaving warm trails on her skin. Isabella's moan of pleasure was all the encouragement Christian needed. Pulling back, he drew the dress over her head, throwing it to one side before taking her now exposed nipple into his mouth, lathering it with his tongue. Isabella cupped the back of his head, her fingers raking through his hair. Her back arched as butterflies erupted in her chest as he sucked and nipped. She'd never felt this turned on.

What was he doing to her? Another groan vibrated through the silence, Isabella unsure where it had come from.

"What are we doing?" she gasped.

"Do you want to stop?" Christian asked, looking up at her through hooded eyes.

"Hell no," Isabella said, grinning at him, pulling his face to hers.

Christian seemed only happy to oblige as he took control of their kiss.

Isabella's hands dropped to his trousers, her hand cupping his impressive arousal through the material. It left no doubt in Isabella's mind their desire was mutual. Christian nipped her bottom lip, making her squeal, before pulling back and kicking off his trousers, freeing himself to her gaze.

Wow, Christian was... She licked her lips as she stared down at him... impressive.

"Like what you see?" Christian asked.

He was a beautiful specimen of a man, and Isabella couldn't believe her luck. Her six-year hiatus was about to end, with a sex god!

Not waiting for an answer, Christian grabbed her and rolled them. Isabella was now under him, her legs on either side of

his hips, her panties the only thing separating their bodies.

“Hmm,” Christian said in appreciation, his forehead resting against hers, as he rubbed himself over her core through the material.

“Who would have thought...” Christian never finished his sentence.

Instead, rotating his hips, the sensation driving her own hips up and off the bed. Isabella’s head fell backwards as pleasure swarmed her system. Christian’s mouth latching onto her exposed throat. It had been way too long, and the feel of Christian’s hips and chest against her skin was almost enough to send her over the edge. May was right. Her battery-operated friend was no match for someone like Christian.

“Stop teasing me,” she groaned. “Show me what you’re made of...”

Christian’s hand snaked between them, sliding down the front of her panties and finding her throbbing centre. She should have felt embarrassed about how much she desired him, but instead... The first touch of his fingers had Isabella bucking off the bed. As if sensing her desperation, Christian dropped featherlight kisses to her lips, soothing her, slowing the pace, and letting her catch her breath.

His fingers once again circled her swollen, wet folds, before sliding one, then two fingers deep inside. Isabella wasn’t the only one to groan as her body welcomed him. Her eyes closed as waves of pleasure crashed over her, sending tiny ripples through her system, her body clenching around the intrusion. She began to move against Christian’s hand, pulling his face to hers, demanding his lips.

“Christian, I don’t want to wait. I need you...”

She was past the point of embarrassment, and Christian seemed to need no further encouragement. He stood up and grabbed his wallet, pulling out a strip of condoms before throwing them on the bed. Tearing one off, he sheathed himself in record time before crawling back up towards her. Isabella helped him shimmy off her panties, exposing herself

to him, all thought of self-consciousness gone, replaced by pure need.

Christian dropped a kiss between her open legs. This morning's fantasy became a reality as he began licking her most sensitive spot, tasting her. He inserted a finger, finding that sweet spot on her front wall, as his tongue continued to tease and stroke.

Isabella had felt nothing like it, it was as if Christian had complete control over her body.

“Come for me,” he demanded.

Isabella's body detonated. Ripples of desire catapulted her into another world. It had taken very little effort for Christian to make her come, all she could do was lay back and enjoy the tremors that continued to rock her body as she came down from the most powerful orgasm she'd ever experienced.

Christian moved up her body, taking her mouth with his. She could taste herself on his lips as their tongues tangled and danced.

He moved back between her thighs, her legs spreading wider to accommodate his hips. She could feel him at her opening, his swollen head requesting entrance.

It was Isabella's turn to flip them. She pushed Christian onto his back as she straddled him. Her hands gripped his broad shoulders. Rising, she aligned her entrance with the tip of his erection before gently pushing down. She waited as her sensitive body stretched to accommodate him. A groan rumbled deep in Christian's chest, making her heart skip a beat. She loved he was as affected as she was. It gave her courage.

Isabella sank further down until she was fully seated, a rush of heat flooding her core. What was this man doing to her? She could not remember sex ever feeling like this. If it had been, there was no way she'd have been able to abstain for six years. Tonight, however, was one night. She needed to make some memories. Tomorrow, Christian would fly back to the UK, and she would remain here, in her Thai hideaway. But



that did not mean she should refrain. Instead, she should enjoy every moment his body offered between now and then.

Christian stared up at her. Isabella smiled down at him, his eyes closing as she began to move. Her body took on a slow rhythm. Rising and falling, rocking, twisting. Christian's hands moved to her hips before taking control of the pace. They moved together in perfect harmony, her back arching at the telltale pressure building low in her body. Christian filled her up, touching her most sensitive places and driving her desire higher. She felt him harden, the additional swell sending her shooting over the edge once more. Stars flashed before her eyes as she threw back her head and let out another low moan. Her body clamped around his as her orgasm went on and on. Christian sat up, pulling her body towards his, taking her breast in his mouth, biting down on her nipple, as her legs wrapped around him. He pulled her down onto him, as he continued to move deep within her body. his deep breathing and quickening pace conveying his desire for her. She felt him swell and jerk deep within her, growling his release against her chest.

They remained clutching one another, their breathing short and ragged. Isabella's hands stroked Christian's hair as he rested his forehead against her neck. Their bodies were slick with exertion in the Thai heat.

Isabella pulled back, Christian grabbing the condom to keep it in place as she moved off him.

"Wow," Isabella breathed, stepping off the bed.

Christian lent back, clearly comfortable with his body, as he rested on his elbows. His eyes never left hers.

Grinning at Christian, she turned and jumped into the pool. She wasn't sure how to take this turn of events, having just had sex with her best friend's brother. Unable to decipher the look on Christian's face, she'd needed to lighten the mood. She did not want to ruin the aftermath of the best orgasm of her life with serious conversation. There was no tomorrow, only the present moment. Christian had just lived up to, and

exceeded, every teenage fantasy she'd ever had, and she wanted nothing to spoil the moment.

Christian joined her in the water. His arms snaked around her waist, pulling her back against him.

“Trying to get away from me, little minx?” he asked, his lips trailing a path down her neck, kissing and lapping at the water.

Isabella squirmed against him, aware his body was already hardening. This man was insatiable. Spinning in his arms, she wrapped her legs around his waist, her hands gripping his shoulders.

“Nope, I just needed to cool off for round two.”

Isabella wasn't sure where this newfound confidence was coming from. She was clearly on an orgasm high.

“Is that so? Round two?” Christian said, the corners of his lips tipping up.

Isabella tilted her head to the side, one hand sliding down his chest and between them, grasping him in her hand.

“The night is still very young... and I've a lot of making up to do.”

Christian tilted his head, a furrow appearing between his brows. “What do you mean by that?”

A rush of heat flooded Isabella's cheeks. “Er... I haven't had a partner in six years. My sex life...” She screwed up her face and glanced at him.

He gave her a wolfish grin. “Really?” His tone incredulous.

Isabella dropped her head to his chest, her hand slowly massaging him.

Isabella couldn't believe she'd admitted to Christian, she'd been celibate for so long. But she found she didn't care. Her body felt amazing... alive.

Isabella squealed as Christian sank them below the water, his mouth capturing hers as they resurfaced.

“What am I going to do with you?” he said, moaning against her mouth as she continued her exploration of his straining member.

“Another orgasm would be perfect.”

Her sex throbbed as his hands roamed and explored her body.

“I’ll try not to disappoint.”

With that, Christian lifted her onto the side, spreading her legs open to his gaze. Starting at her ankle, he kissed his way up the inside of her legs, his eyes never leaving hers until his mouth reached her swollen folds. Oh boy, Isabella dropped her head back as Christian worked his magic. It looked like tonight, she really was going to be making up for lost time.

Later, Christian dried her off with a towel. His care and attention played havoc with her already tender heart.

“Will you stay the night?” he asked, wrapping his arms around her waist before dropping a kiss onto her shoulder.

“Would you like me to?” Isabella asked.

They’d had fun. The telltale soreness between her legs let her know exactly how much. But she understood what this was, and she didn’t want to presume. That just made for awkward conversations, and she didn’t want that. This was Christian, a lifelong friend. She wanted this to be the perfect fantasy. She closed her eyes as Christian continued to nuzzle into her neck, his grip tightening.

“You wanna cuddle, Mr Dupree?” Isabella teased, before turning in his arms, her own snaking up and around his neck.

“Yes, Lady King. I would very much like to cuddle you for the rest of the night.”

He rested his forehead against hers, his hands on her waist.

Isabella rose on her tiptoes and dropped a kiss on his lips. “Then... let’s cuddle.”

She took Christian’s hand and led him into the bedroom. She had an early start, but she didn’t want this evening to end.

Christian was returning to the UK in the morning. What were a few more hours of bliss before normality struck?

# Chapter Twelve

## *Christian*

Christian awoke the next morning, alone. He had a vague recollection of Isabella getting up and kissing him goodbye. Jet-lag, wine, and a late night, filled with incredible sex, had made it impossible for him to pull himself out of his slumber.

He had shocked himself, asking Isabella to stay. He never did that. His usual *modus operandi* was to have sex, satisfy his partner, and leave. Post-coital cuddling was not something he engaged in—ever. Well, not since Lily. It felt invasive. Christian loathed having people invade his personal space. He wanted zero misunderstanding of his intentions. Sex was sex... he wasn't looking for a relationship... cuddling gave the wrong impression.

Last night, he'd wanted to hold Isabella. Their conversation, telling her about Skylar, he'd opened up. The evening had not been what he'd envisaged when he'd invited her to dine with him. He certainly hadn't foreseen the mind-blowing sex they'd shared. When she'd massaged him, it had been like she'd set off tiny detonations throughout his body. As she'd broken down one set of tension, another had grown, quite literally. When he'd rolled over and seen her sitting there, he'd had to touch her. She was the north pole to his south. If he was truly honest, he'd felt their attraction from the moment he laid eyes on her teaching her class, before he even knew who she was.

Christian had not wanted the evening to end. After sinking into her body, he'd wanted her to look at him. To see her eyes glazed with passion, again and again. Perhaps the romantic setting, the private dinner, or the enchantment of Thailand created the feeling? He'd asked her to stay, and she had. It was the first time in years he'd felt this relaxed or slept so deeply.

Christian picked up a note left on the desk.

*Christian*

*Thank you for a wonderful evening.*

*I had to leave as I have an early class.*

*Safe travels.*

*Isabella xx*

No, see you later, call me... Christian wasn't sure why that left a hollow feeling in his chest. He ought to feel happy. There had been no awkward goodbyes or empty promises this morning. Isabella was, after all, one of his sister's best friends and still in contact with her. Scarlett would hang him up by his short and curlies if she got to know about this. She'd all but warned him off when they'd spoken on the phone. But then Christian had to admit, Isabella had been a very willing partner. Christian gasped as his body hardened at the memory. He was acting like a sex-starved, pubescent teenager, not a thirty-five-year-old, successful businessman with a healthy sex-life.

Christian headed for the shower—the setting switched to cold.



As Christian checked out, he was regretting letting Henri take point with Richard and the Asia Office.

With Skylar in his life, he was actively trying to reduce the time he spent travelling. But the thought of not having an excuse to come back was leaving him with a feeling of emptiness in the pit of his stomach.

Christian grabbed his bag and made his way to the entrance. He stopped abruptly in front of the concierge desk.

“Mr Dupree. Is there anything I can help you with, Sir?”

“Yes, there is,” Christian said, turning fully towards the desk. “I'd like to arrange for some flowers to be sent to a friend of mine.”

“Of course, Sir. I can arrange that for you.” Christian watched as she brought up some details on her screen. “Who would you like to send the flowers to, and where?”

Christian gave Isabella's details.

"Would you like to include a message with the flowers, Sir?"

Christian thought for a moment. What was he doing? He mentally shook himself... he was sending flowers to a friend... a friend he had spent a very enjoyable evening with. As if sensing his unease, the concierge passed him a small card and envelope.

"If you would like to fill out the card, I can ensure they include it with the delivery."

"Thank you," Christian said, breathing a sigh of relief.

*Isabella*

*Thank you for a fantastic night.*

*We should definitely meet up when I'm back in town.*

*Christian*

Christian made sure he sealed the envelope before passing it back. Isabella worked with these people, and he didn't want to fuel the gossip mill. Scarlett's words came back to haunt him. That would be unfair. God only knew the woman had suffered enough at the hands of the gossips if what she'd told him last night was anything to go on. Was he being rash and making a promise he was going to regret? It didn't feel wrong. Isabella was safe. She lived several continents away. She could not misunderstand his intentions. They were both limited in their ability to demand more from each other. Geography saw to that. She'd made a life for herself here and had no desire to return to the hustle and bustle of London. She understood his life was firmly entrenched in the UK. He could not presume she'd even want to see him again or that she'd still be single. For some reason that thought did not sit easily in his stomach.

His life wasn't in Thailand. It never would be. He needed to get home to put out the fires that had ignited while he was away. That, and see his beautiful daughter. She had a Halloween party to attend, and he'd already missed far too many things in her life. He definitely wasn't missing any more.

The porter took Christian's bag as he headed for the hotel entrance, where a driver was waiting for him.

What happened in Thailand, stayed in Thailand. As the car drove out of the hotel, he looked back. Then why did his heart feel so heavy?



# Chapter Thirteen

## *Isabella*

Isabella was sore. A six-year hiatus would do that to anyone. She and Christian had spent the night enjoying each other, and Isabella was now on a post-orgasmic high. Every one of her teenage fantasies about Christian Dupree had come true, and her face was now stuck in a Perma-grin. The man knew his way around a woman's body, that was for sure.

"Someone looks pleased with herself," May said, coming to stand next to her.

Isabella stooped before hanging out the next item of clothing on the washing line.

"Why do you say that?" Isabella asked, playing dumb.

"You have a silly grin on your face, and you are walking like *John Wayne*," May said.

"I am not!" Isabella said, horrified.

May began to laugh, grabbing hold of her swollen stomach as tears streamed down her face.

"No, but the look on your face is an absolute picture. I take it last night went well?" she said, waggling her eyebrows. "Living vicariously, remember?"

Isabella rolled her eyes. "It went very well. I had a lovely evening with Christian."

"And..."

Isabella knew May was fishing. She could keep their night a secret, but she desperately needed to talk to someone. And she definitely couldn't ring Scarlett!

"It was amazing," Isabella said, unable to calm her smile.

"You... you...?" Then in a very theatrical whisper, added, "You slept with Christian last night?"

“I can’t say there was much sleeping,” Isabella added with a wink before going back to hanging up her washing, knowing it would wind her friend up.

“Oh my God. I can’t believe it,” May said, staggering over to the garden bench before falling back and fanning herself dramatically.

“It’s not that big-of-a-deal,” Isabella said, joining her.

“Not a big deal. You have been celibate for six long years. This is a big deal. Did you even remember what to do, and what goes where?”

Isabella scowled at May.

“So... are you seeing him again?” May asked.

Isabella paused. “Nope. He’s flying back to the UK this morning, and we didn’t discuss what happens next. Last night was a one-off. An amazing sex-fest. One I shall remember for the rest of my days.”

“That good, huh?”

“Better than good. But that’s all I’m going to say on the matter.”

They looked up as a delivery van pulled into the drive. The driver got out and grabbed something out of the back. Both women were shocked by the size of the bouquet the guy was carrying.

“Isabella King?” he asked.

“That’s me,” Isabella heard herself say, staring wide-eyed at the flowers the guy was carrying.

“These are for you.”

Isabella opened her arms to accept the enormous bouquet. It was so big, she could barely see around it.

“Er, thank you,” she added as the guy walked away.

“Well, someone clearly made an impression,” May said, coming to stand next to her before reaching up and grabbing something from inside the flowers. “Ooh, there’s a card.”

Isabella placed the flowers on the bench and took the card from her.

May read Christian's message over her shoulder, while Isabella's heart stalled in her chest.

Christian wanted to see her on his next trip to Thailand. Her heart sped up until reality set in. Only the heavens knew when that would happen. Did he want her to be his Thai bootie call, or had he been affected by last night as much as she was?

Holding the card to her chest, she was unsure what to make of it. The flowers were beautiful, and he didn't need to send them. She'd left before he'd woken up. Not wanting to ruin their night with awkward goodbyes or empty promises. What she hadn't expected was... this.

What was she supposed to make of his note? Last night was supposed to have been one night. Now, Christian had muddied the waters.

As if sensing her anguish, May stayed silent, instead wrapping an arm round her waist.

"It's impossible, May," Isabella whispered, a painful lump forming in her throat. "He lives in the UK, and I live here."

"Nothing is impossible."

Isabella hid her trembling chin in the flowers as she carried them inside. She *would not* over think this... a kind gesture from a thoughtful man. She'd see what the future held. Christian was on a plane flying away from her, and she didn't expect to see him anytime soon. She would not... could not, put her life on hold.

# Chapter Fourteen

## *Christian*

It was nearly Halloween, and Christian had promised Skylar he would come to her after-school Halloween disco. She and her best friend Olivia were dressing up as their favourite characters, and she'd been bubbling with excitement. He'd agreed to meet up with Andrew and Damian for a drink before they braved the school gym.

Damian was already there when he arrived.

"How was Thailand, old man?" Damian asked as he took his seat at the table.

"Problem averted. The new CEO will start within the month. The GM is overseeing everything until then, and I trust him. He's worked for the company for years."

"That's very trusting and completely unlike you," Damian teased.

Christian ignored him. "I would've given him the CEO role, but he turned it down. He wants to spend more time with his family and is happy with his current position and responsibility."

Samuel, turning down the role, had initially disappointed Christian, but he couldn't blame him. He knew better than anyone what happened when you sold your soul to the devil, his life no-longer his own. He envied Samuel the choice.

"How are Henri and Patrice?" Damian asked. "I take it you saw them while you were there?" Damian had spent years working for his family's marketing firm in New York, so knew Henri and Patrice well.

"They're both fine. Patrice was enjoying the sights. I don't think travelling there will be a hardship for Henri."

Patrice's love for Chiang Mai had pleased Christian. She intended to travel with Henri, now their children had grown up. As Henri had agreed to help support the new CEO, it

would mean spending a fair amount of time travelling back and forth between New York and Thailand... It had been the perfect solution. But now Christian found he wanted an excuse to go back. Whether it was the red-headed beauty who had snuggled so well, or the fact he had felt so at peace there. The trip had thrown him off his game.

“Is everything okay?” Damian’s brow furrowed as he stared at Christian.

“Everything’s fine,” Christian said.

Happy to see Andrew had turned up and was about to become the perfect distraction.

“Part-timers,” Andrew grinned as he sat down at their table.

Christian smiled and pushed a pint across the table at him. “What good is it if you own and run a multi-million-pound company and can’t make it to the pub early on a Friday night?”

Andrew shrugged and nodded in agreement.

“No Star?” Andrew asked Damian.

Damian grinned. He *always* grinned when anyone mentioned Star.

“Laura roped her into helping on the sweet stall at school. A downside to your best friend being a teacher... so it’s a boys-only night.” Damian said, raising his glass.

Christian had to admit, it’d been a while since they’d got out on a boy’s night.

“How was your trip, Christian?”

Christian found himself unable to meet Andrew’s gaze. Out of his two friends, Andrew was the most astute and would realise something had happened in Thailand. Christian wasn’t ready to talk about it. Isabella hadn’t been a simple conquest. He didn’t want to sully what they’d shared by *laughing* with the boys, but there was nothing happening. He hadn’t heard from her... it was impossible to label.

“It was fine,” he said, not wanting to expand.

Damian laughed, “I’ve been trying to get out of him how it went since we arrived, but he’s giving nothing away.”

Christian grimaced. He wanted them to drop it. It was awkward enough discussing sex with these guys, especially when he’d only just come back into Skylar’s life. His relationship with Star had improved during the past year, but he wanted nothing to undermine the progress they’d made. Star had every right to hate him for what he’d done to her sister. The last thing he needed was Damian going home and making a joke or flip comment about Christian’s sex life, and it offend her.

Christian breathed a sigh of relief as Damian turned to Andrew.

“How’s it going with the new nanny? I hear she’s made the most amazing costume for tonight’s party, and got you out of a heap of trouble. She’s apparently causing quite a stir in the playground, from what I hear.”

Christian’s mind wandered as the other two continued their conversation. He needed to get his head back in the game. He’d been home almost a week, and his dreams were being plagued and his mind going places it shouldn’t. His hand had undergone quite a workout since he’d arrived home.

“I’m happy for you,” Damian was saying to Andrew. “I know Olivia’s had a hard time. Skylar has been worried about her.”

“I thought my relationship with Skylar was complicated,” Christian added, taking a large swig of beer as he realised he’d missed a chunk of what they’d been talking about.

“Now you have the perfect babysitter. You need to get out and meet someone. That will make your mother happy, and you. You’ve been on your own way too long,” Damian said. “You both have.”

Andrew rolled his eyes, his gaze locking on Christian’s before a frown appeared between his brows.

As if sensing his unease, Andrew deflected. “Just because you have the perfect relationship.”

Damian scowled at Andrew. “You know my relationship has been far from easy. Relationships aren’t, they take work. But unless you try, you won’t ever find someone.”

“True, but you and Star had history. We are starting from scratch and the thought of having to get to know someone, work out whether I even like them. Then, if I want to introduce them to Olivia, to only have it go wrong. I’m not sure I have the energy. I barely get a minute to myself with the hospital and television work as it is. How am I supposed to fit anyone else into our lives and hope to make it work without affecting Olivia?” Andrew sighed.

Christian knew Damian meant well. He was happy, and he wanted his friends to find that same happiness. Christian had had that. He had everything he had ever wanted and more, with Lily, Star’s sister. But she was gone, and he had broken her heart.

Damian shook his head. He was not dropping it. “Just think about it. We’re not designed to be alone. Being with someone else, sharing your hopes and dreams. It’s worth the pain. Not to mention the sex.”

This was not a conversation Christian wanted to get into right now. He needed to get out of there. “I’ve got to go.”

He knew it was too early, the look on the other’s faces was one of confusion, but he couldn’t worry about that now. He needed some air. Standing up, he grabbed his coat and didn’t hang around, heading straight for the door. He would pop into the school and catch Skylar in her costume. She’d been messaging him and sending him pictures all week. He would not, could not, ever let her down. She was all he had left of the love of his life. The one person he’d promised never to hurt and instead had destroyed. A ball of emotion formed in his throat, almost choking him. He needed to see his little girl, to hug her, and then everything would be all right. Then, he would once again ask Lily for her forgiveness.



“Daddy.”

Christian caught his daughter as she flew at him, pulling her in for a hug.

“Hey, Princess,” Christian said, holding her hand and having her do a twirl in her costume. “Wow, I love your costume.”

“It’s really cool, isn’t it?” she said, giving him another twirl. “Olivia’s costume matches. Ana, her new nanny, made it for her.”

“I heard,” Christian said, smiling at the little girl behind Skylar. “Hi, Olivia. How are you?”

“I’m good, thank you,” Olivia replied.

“I need to go home and do some work, but I wanted to come and see your costume. Where’s Mummy?” Christian said, hating that he was lying to his daughter but needing to get away.

“Mummy’s serving sweets over there,” Skylar said, pointing to the far corner of the hall. “She’s banned us from eating any more.”

Skylar’s lips went down in disgust, and Christian had to swallow his grin. His daughter’s face was incredibly expressive. No surprise, with a mother who was an actress. A pang of regret and loss speared his chest. Lily would have loved these moments with Skylar. Life was unfair.

“I’m going to pop over and see Mummy,” Christian said.

“Okay.”

Skylar wrapped her arms around his waist and gave him a quick squeeze before grabbing Olivia’s hand and heading back into the throes of the party.

Christian made his way over to the table, where Star and Laura were busy serving sweets to a mass of children. They would all be going home on a serious sugar high.

Star looked up, her face brightening when she saw him. Christian still could not believe they’d become such good



friends over the past year. Star moved around the table before reaching up and giving him a kiss on the cheek.

“Where are the others?”

“I left them in the pub,” Christian said, although something must’ve shown on his face as Star quirked an eyebrow. She never missed a thing.

“I need to do some work,” Christian said, replying to her unasked question.

“Sure you do... What were they talking about? Dating by chance?”

How was this woman so astute?

“Maybe.”

“Ignore Damian. He’s into playing match maker. It seems to be his life’s mission to make everyone happy.”

Christian watched Star’s eyes soften as she spoke about her husband. He’d known from the moment he saw them together they were destined to be a couple. He remembered Lily talking about Damian years before, although he’d never officially met either of them before Lily’s death. The one time Star had seen him with Lily was not a time he wanted to recall.

Christian waved a hand as if brushing aside her concerns.

“Am I okay to collect Skylar tomorrow?” Christian asked.

Star smiled, “Of course, she’s looking forward to it. She loves spending time with you...” Star turned and looked at the growing queue of children behind her. “I’d better get back, otherwise there’s going to be a riot.”

Christian handed over some money and grabbed a selection bag of sweets. Star rolled her eyes and smiled.

“What? Isn’t that what dads are for?”

“Go,” Star laughed. “I’ll just make sure I send her to yours with a large supply of sweets and see how you like dealing with an eight-year-old on a sugar high.”

Christian grinned and went to find Skylar and Olivia. He handed over the bag to squeals of delight.

“Thank you, Daddy.”

“Thank you, Christian,” Olivia said, accepting the sweets and grinning at him.

“You’re both welcome. I’ll see you tomorrow, Skylar.”

He stooped down and gave Skylar a kiss on the head. As he headed out, he bumped into the other two, who were walking in.

“Is everything alright?” Damian asked, his face a mask of concern.

“It’s fine. It’s been a long week, and what with jet lag...”

Damian slapped him on the back.

“Have a good evening, and we’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you both.”

With that, Christian left. Star had told him to ignore Damian. She clearly didn’t want him taking her husband’s advice. Why would she? He’d been a shit to her sister. He was working hard to make it up to Skylar. But Star had spent her adult life giving up things to raise his daughter. Why should she not expect the same from him? Skylar had to be his priority now. No one could replace Lily. His life was fine as it was. Casual sex, with no strings, and a life where he got to see his daughter. Who needed added complications? There were more than enough demands on his time. He was married to his business. He didn’t have time for anything or anyone else.



Christian let himself back into his penthouse, the large glass window framing The Thames and the city of London at night. It was a living, breathing picture and never failed to take his breath away.

He poured himself a large whiskey before opening the door and stepping out onto his wrap-around balcony. Leaning against the railing, he nursed his drink. This was a far cry from the greenery and humidity of Thailand, but it was beautiful in its own right.

His phone pinged.

**UNKNOWN:** *Thank you for my beautiful flowers.*

Christian's heart rate picked up, and he felt himself smile. He'd not expected to hear from her, especially after a week. It wasn't like they'd exchanged numbers. He tapped the number and saved it to his contacts before answering.

**CHRISTIAN:** *You're welcome. I'm glad they found you.*

**ISABELLA:** *They did and set a few tongues wagging. Mainly my partner.*

Christian could just imagine Isabella's eye-roll.

**CHRISTIAN:** *Did you tell her all the sordid details?*

There was a pause, and Christian wondered whether he'd overstepped. They'd had one night together, and two dinners... maybe he was being too forward. Isabella might not be comfortable in the cold light of day. She'd disappeared before he'd woken up.

Three dots appeared, and Christian breathed a sigh of relief.

**ISABELLA:** *I've been grilled. But a girl has to have her secrets.*

**CHRISTIAN:** *And what are those secrets?*

**ISABELLA:** *A girl doesn't kiss and tell.*

**CHRISTIAN:** *Isn't it a man shouldn't kiss and tell?*

Christian found himself enjoying their banter.

**ISABELLA:** *We live in a modern society. Are you a caveman, Mr Dupree?*

Christian laughed. He could just picture Isabella biting her lip, a smirk on her face.

**CHRISTIAN:** *Guilty as charged, especially in bed.*

**ISABELLA:** *I'm fanning myself here.*

**CHRISTIAN:** *Good.*

**CHRISTIAN:** *I missed you when I woke up.*

**ISABELLA:** *I know, I'm sorry. I had an early class. Also, morning after...*

Christian drew in a breath. Had she left because she had thought he might regret it and hadn't wanted to see his face?

**CHRISTIAN:** *Did you roll over, take one look at me in the cold light of day, and run for the hills?*

**ISABELLA:** *Laughing here - as if...*

**CHRISTIAN:** *I had a great night.*

**ISABELLA:** *Me too.*

**CHRISTIAN:** *I don't know when I'll be back*

**ISABELLA:** *No promises. We had fun.*

**ISABELLA:** *Did you get your problem sorted?*

Ah, she's changing the subject, moving onto safer ground. Christian smiled.

**CHRISTIAN:** *I did. It was someone being a muppet.*

**ISABELLA:** *I'm picturing you surrounded by furry hand puppets.*

**CHRISTIAN:** *You'd be surprised.*

Christian looked at his watch. It was seven, meaning it was one AM in Thailand.

**CHRISTIAN:** *It's late where you are.*

**ISABELLA:** *It is, but I wanted to say thank you. I wasn't dragged up, you know. When a man sends you flowers, you must say thank you.*

**ISABELLA:** *Plus, it took this long for your sister to send me your number.*

**CHRISTIAN:** *I did wonder. So it's my sister I have to blame for my sexy stalker.*

**ISABELLA:** *I like the sound of that.*

**CHRISTIAN:** *Sexy stalker - it has a certain ring to it.*

**ISABELLA:** *Well, this sexy stalker needs her beauty sleep. Good night Christian.*

**CHRISTIAN:** *Good night Isabella. Sleep tight.*

**ISABELLA:** *xx*

Christian found himself smiling down at his phone. Heading inside, he picked up a note from his housekeeper and retrieved his dinner from the oven. Jet-lag and the stress of the day had lifted. Christian noticed Isabella had had that effect on him in Thailand, but he'd assumed it was their location. Maybe it was more than that. She had a calm demeanour, more than anyone he knew. It wasn't how he remembered her. His memories of Isabella were her running around screaming with Scarlett, getting on his nerves. The woman he met in Thailand was so far removed from that girl, it was scary. His response to her, even more scary.

Picking up the Financial Times, he spread it out in front of his plate. He needed to get his head back in the game and stop daydreaming about something that could never be. Especially when that someone lived nearly nine thousand kilometres away.

# Chapter Fifteen

## *Isabella*

### *Five months later*

May entered the room carrying a sleeping Kalaya in her car seat. “What time is Christian’s plane landing?”

Isabella grabbed the car seat from May and placed it on their low coffee table. A small smile formed on Kalaya’s lips as Isabella ran a finger down the sleeping baby’s cheek. She had fallen hopelessly in love the moment Kalaya had entered the world. She was her favourite little human and brought such joy to their world.

Kalaya had arrived four months earlier. A month after, Christian had departed, and a month earlier than anyone expected. Their lives had changed overnight. For Isabella, Kalaya’s arrival had been the distraction she needed for her wayward heart, allowing her to become an honorary aunt. She was grateful her friend let her share in the joy of her baby and returned the favour often by looking after Kalaya, so May and Arkhom could still have their date night. As she’d pointed out to her best friend, someone may as well get to enjoy a date. She failed to find love before Christian, and after him, no other man compared. She was doomed!

Despite Kalaya’s early arrival, May had taken to motherhood like a duck to water. Isabella admired how her friend managed her home, new baby, and business with ease.

“What time is his flight getting in?” May asked again.

Isabella’s heart rate picked up. She’d been trying to ignore the butterflies that had taken up residence in her stomach since she’d received Christian’s message telling her he was coming back for the official office and factory opening that weekend.

Isabella’s phone had pinged just before a class, and she’d made the mistake of checking it. They messaged for months, but his return wasn’t mentioned until that day. Her subsequent

class had been a disaster. Not for her guests, but for Isabella. As much as she tried to stem her racing heart, no amount of deep breathing or meditative thoughts could calm her brain or stop it from returning to that night.

“His flight gets in around seven,” she said as May opened her mouth again.

“Are you picking him up from the airport?”

“No, he said the company driver is collecting him. He asked me to join him for dinner,” Isabella said, her cheeks burning.

May grinned and waggled her eyebrows. “We are all aware of what happened the last time you two dined together.”

Isabella dropped her chin. Was she building herself up for a fall? She didn’t want to get her hopes up. Yes, there’d been flirty texts exchanged over the past few months... even engaged in phone sex... once. Although they both agreed it had left them more hot and bothered than satisfied. That was their problem. Their night together had raised the bar. Did she want to be his Thai bootie call? Who was she kidding? She would give her body to Christian for the weekend, even if it was just to prove it wasn’t a dream.

“The cogs in your brain are crunching,” May said. “Stop over thinking. It will send you to an early grave.”

“I don’t want to assume anything,” Isabella said.

May placed a hand on Isabella’s shoulder. “The man’s been messaging you for five months. I think it’s safe to say he wants to see you. He contacted you to let you know he was coming back. You didn’t ask him.”

“I know, but it’s awkward. Of course, he was going to be here for the opening. Maybe he felt he had to let me know he was coming. My mind is in a tail spin. Last time we were together everything was... so spontaneous... amazing. I just don’t know how I’m supposed to act this time around. What if he looks at me and thinks - what am I doing here?” Isabella said, sighing.

Isabella looked down, focusing her attention on Kalaya. Dark brown eyes opened and a cherubic face smiled up at her.

Isabella bent down and unclasped the car seat straps, lifting her into her embrace. She inhaled deeply, Kalaya instantly snuggling into Isabella's shoulder, the tiny noises she made and her baby scent soothing Isabella's inner turmoil. This is what she needed: unconditional love.

"You'll want a muslin on your shoulder," May warned.

Isabella turned her head and kissed the gurgling baby's cheek. "What's a little upchuck amongst friends, ay, Kalaya? Aunty Izzy will not worry about a little baby vomit."

May laughed. "No, but Christian might not appreciate his date stinking of baby sick."

Isabella held Kalaya a little tighter. "I'll have plenty of time to go home and get showered." Especially when home was a mere two-minute walk from their main yoga studio.

When they'd first opened The Retreat, Isabella had volunteered to live on-site. It wasn't like she had anywhere else to go. It had helped she was present to oversee the construction, and then once guests had begun arriving, they'd found it useful to have someone around to answer questions. It was then, Isabella opted to stay. Tucked away from the other buildings, her one-bedroom villa was her castle. Allowing her to enjoy the peace and quiet of the land.

"Can you keep an eye on Kalaya while I set up for the next class?"

"Need you ask?" Isabella laughed, hugging the little bundle tighter.

May shook her head with a smile.

May's mother and baby yoga sessions were a huge success. Who knew mothers and some fathers would be interested in yoga with their baby? There were so many benefits. Babies were more relaxed, and it allowed the mothers to rebuild their pelvic floor muscles while strengthening the bond with their baby. Feedback had been positive, and they were receiving more and more inquiries.

Ten minutes later, May returned.



“Now you get home. You need to pluck, wax and do whatever else you need to do ready for your dirty weekend.” Her nose turned up at the baby drawl all over Isabella’s top. “I told you to use a muslin.”

“Never,” Isabella said, handing over Kalaya and giving the giggling baby a kiss on the cheek. Uncurling her hair from Kalaya’s grasp, she headed for the door.

“Isabella... I’m taking all the weekend classes. You’re taking a holiday,” May called after her.

Isabella nodded and kept walking. Her friend was the best.

Was she jumping the gun? Who knew? But she couldn’t wait to see Christian again. Had she built up their attraction in her mind? Was it an illusion? If it was, she needed to see him again to set her body and mind straight.



Three hours later, Isabella walked into the hotel. The Reception staff all acknowledged her. The classes they ran were a tremendous success, and Isabella had become a regular visitor. She’d been unsure how her visit as a guest would be perceived, but when she informed the manager that she and Christian were long-time family friends, he welcomed her with open arms. The fact Christian Dupree was a billionaire who stayed in their presidential villa clearly had nothing to do with it.

“Hi, Aom,” Isabella said, approaching reception. “Has Mr Dupree checked in yet?”

“Let me check for you, Isabella,” Aom said, typing Christian’s name into the system. “He hasn’t arrived, but he said you can enter his room and asked if you could order dinner?”

Isabella’s phone pinged.

**CHRISTIAN:** *Hi, just landed. Will be with you soon. Can you order us dinner?*

Isabella smiled and nodded at the girl. "I've just received my orders," she said, laughing.

"I'll call a porter to show you the way."

Aom picked up the phone and called for a porter.

"Thank you. See you later," Isabella said, saying goodbye to Aom.

The young man led Isabella to the same villa Christian had stayed in before.

"Can I help you with anything else?" he asked, showing Isabella how to work the air conditioning.

"No, everything's fine. I will ring our food order through. Thank you."

The guy left, and Isabella wondered through the villa, a sense of déjà vu hitting her. What was she doing here? Was she making a mistake? She had enjoyed the past five months of friendly banter between her and Christian, but was she reading too much into it?

Isabella picked up the food menu and ordered the same food they had before, along with a bottle of red wine.

Checking her appearance in the mirror, she jumped when she heard the lock click, her heart rate picking up.

Stepping out of the bathroom, she saw Christian tipping the same porter before closing the door.

Isabella leaned against the door frame as Christian turned to face her.

"Hey," he said, a slow smile forming.

"Hey yourself," Isabella replied, not sure what the protocol was for this sort of thing.

If they were just friends, she would approach him, air kisses, a hug. But five months ago, she got to know this man and his body intimately.

As if sensing her unease, Christian dropped his case and walked towards her. Isabella stood still, feeling like prey

caught in the eye of a predator. Standing before her, Christian raised his hands and cupped her face, his eyes never breaking contact with hers.

“Hi,” he said, running his thumb down her cheek.

“Hi,” Isabella replied, rolling her lips between her teeth.

Christian’s gaze dropped to her lips and back again. The heat radiating from his eyes caused Isabella’s heart rate to spike.

Christian gave a sexy smile, causing her tongue to snake out and moisten her lips. Dropping his mouth to hers, his tongue slowly slid through her parted lips. Isabella didn’t hesitate, relaxing into his kiss and allowing his tongue to dance with hers. Christian’s hands dropped to her lower back, pulling her hard against his body. And that was how they stayed until a knock at the door had them jumping apart like naughty schoolchildren.

“Wow,” Christian said breathlessly, his forehead resting against hers.

The knock sounded again.

Christian looked down at his trousers and smirked.

“Maybe I should get that,” Isabella said, her eyes following his to where his desire was very evident.

“I’ll grab a quick shower and wash off the flight,” he added before making his way through the bedroom and into the bathroom.

Isabella headed for the door and opened it. A private butler stood at the door, a trolley holding their dinner to the side of him. Isabella recognised him from around the hotel and smiled.

“Come in. Christian is just getting washed up after his flight,” she explained unnecessarily.

She must look a sight, her hair messed up and lips swollen from their kiss. What must he be thinking?

“Thank you,” he said, wheeling the trolley in and setting the food up on the table, along with the correct cutlery. “Is there

anything else? Would you like me to come back in an hour and clear up?"

"No, that's fine. We can put the plates back on the trolley and put it in the kitchen."

Isabella hoped Christian wouldn't mind. She was no longer used to people jumping to her tune. She was more than capable of clearing up after them. If she was honest, she wanted no more interruptions.

"Thank you," he said.

"Oh, hold on," Isabella said, grabbing her purse.

"No, no," he said, holding up a hand. "Mr Dupree is very generous at the end of his stay."

Isabella smiled and watched as he closed the door. The fact this man said Christian was generous with the staff caused a fluttering in her stomach.

Speak of the man. Christian reappeared freshly showered, his blond hair damp and messy on top, a towel tied loosely around his waist.

"Dinner is served," Isabella said.

"I forgot my clothes," he said, grinning.

"Don't mind me," Isabella said cheekily, her eyes taking in his broad chest and toned abs.

Christian grinned back. Isabella realised how much younger he looked when he genuinely smiled. She'd seen him smile, but this reached his eyes and made him look mischievous.

"I'm hungry, so I better grab some clothes. Otherwise, I might sample dessert before I eat my main course. That is something my mother always told me off for."

Isabella laughed.

"Mine too."

Although there was a pang of sadness that went with that. Isabella had lost her mother when she was ten to an undiagnosed heart condition.

Christian tilted his head, acknowledging her pain. "I'll only be a minute."

He grabbed his suitcase and headed into the bedroom.

Isabella walked out into the private garden while she waited for Christian to get dressed, her lips and body still tingling from their earlier kiss.

She sensed Christian appear, his hands sliding around her waist, his lips peppering kisses along her neck. Isabella tilted her head away, allowing him greater access.

Christian's stomach growled, making Isabella laugh.

"Sorry," Christian said, drawing back and taking Isabella's hand, leading her back into the villa.

"Don't apologise. I'm surprised you're still standing. It's a long flight."

"I slept for most of it," Christian admitted sheepishly. "Hence, I missed dinner."

"What, no work? Who are you, and what have you done with Christian Dupree?" Isabella asked.

She had to admit, this Christian seemed more relaxed than the man she'd met five months before.

"Ha, ha," he said, as they took their seats at the table, and uncovered their food.

"You remembered," Christian said, looking at his food and the wine.

"I remember a lot about that night," Isabella said coquettishly. "It's ingrained in my memory."

Christian looked pleased at her words, pouring them a glass of wine.

"Mine too," Christian admitted. "I'm glad to be back."

He raised his glass in a toast, clinking it with hers. "To a wonderful weekend."

A warmth spread through Isabella's body at his words. Was Christian feeling their attraction as strongly as she was? Not

that it could go anywhere. Their lives were a million miles apart... not just in distance, but their worlds. Christian was a billionaire businessman, working in The City, travelling all over the world. Isabella, yes, she was a millionaire and extremely wealthy in her own right, or at least she would be when she hit thirty and inherited her family's wealth. But that meant nothing to her anymore. Her life was in Thailand, with May, Arkhom, and Kalaya. Her business may be small, but it was her success. She'd proved to herself she wasn't the airhead socialite they'd portrayed her as in the press. She was a person with her own dreams and aspirations. Dreams she was now living.

"I'm glad you're back, too." Isabella raised her glass and took a sip.

They spent dinner catching up on the past five months. Isabella knew some of what Christian had been doing, as he'd kept her up-to-date in his messages. It felt good to talk about their experiences out loud.

When they finished eating, Isabella began clearing their plates back onto the trolley. Christian joined her, she was pleased he didn't question why she was doing it. Maybe she'd read him wrong. Christian wheeled the trolley into the private kitchen and through another door.

"A villa secret... that way the monkeys won't have the plates and leftovers all over the path. Tom can collect it without disturbing us," Christian explained.

Monkeys... Isabella remembered how she'd turned up for an early morning class and watched two monkeys devouring the leftover takeaway a guest had put on their balcony. They had no fear.

Christian grabbed her hand and pulled her into his body, refocusing her attention. His hand sliding up and along her jaw.

"What have you done to me, Isabella King?"

"I could ask you the same question," Isabella said, sliding her hand up his chest and resting it above his frantic heartbeat.

Raising herself up on tiptoes, Isabella placed her lips against his, her tongue sweeping into his open mouth and letting him know she was with him one hundred per cent.

Christian swept her body backwards, pinning her against the wall, his hand sliding down her thigh and raising it before wrapping it around his hip, allowing her to feel the strength of his desire. Isabella moaned into his mouth, their kisses becoming more desperate.

Christian's hands moved to the zip of her dress, lowering it before pushing it down to her hips, not once breaking their kiss. His hands moved behind her, making quick work of her bra, before dropping it to the floor. Isabella drew in a sharp breath as he cupped her breasts, his thumbs teasing the pebbled peaks.

Ripples of pleasure fired low in her belly as Christian let out a low moan. He tore his mouth from hers, his lips travelling down her throat, across her chest, before drawing one of her full breasts into his mouth. Isabella's head fell back against the wall as she let the pleasure of Christian's touch wash over her. She thought she'd imagined the power this man had over her body, but his touch was firing up her memory and bringing it back to life.

Isabella clutched at his head, drawing him closer as he lavished attention on first one, then her second breast. Christian made his way lower, trailing kisses over her stomach, his fingers pulling her dress down over her hips and dropping it to the ground until she stood in front of him in only her tiny lace thong.

Christian looked up at her, his eyes reflecting the passion Isabella herself felt. He locked their gazes before leaning forward and dropping a kiss on her panties. He held her gaze as his hand travelled up the inside of her thigh in sweeping circles, moving closer, then further away from her pulsating centre. Isabella bit her lip hard as she felt his finger reach the edge of her thong, teasing. Christian's eyes twinkled as his finger swept under the lacey material, causing her hips to buck.

He moved his head forward, his finger pulling her thong to one side, his mouth fastening onto her most private place. Isabella let out a shuddering breath and watched as Christian closed his eyes. The sensation of his tongue, lips, and teeth devouring her, sent her arousal spiralling out of control. With minimal warning, her orgasm slammed into her, making her knees buckle. What was this man doing to her? He had scarcely touched her, yet she was putty in his hands.

Christian caught her, sweeping her into his arms, carrying her to the bedroom. He placed her gently on the bed before stripping off his clothes. Isabella looked on, taking in the beauty of the man before her. He had the body of a god, and he was clearly comfortable in his own skin. Isabella pulled herself up, crawling to the edge of the bed, as Christian stepped forward, his arms encircling her.

“You are so beautiful when you come,” he said, dropping a kiss on the end of her nose. “I’ve been looking forward to getting my hands on you all day.”

“Only all day?” Isabella teased.

“More like the past five months. One night was definitely not enough.”

Isabella’s heart clenched, her throat tightening. How was she supposed to deal with statements like that? She slid her hands up his chest to grip the base of his head, drawing his lips to hers. Their kiss became desperate as their hands explored each other’s bodies. Isabella sank back onto the bed, pulling Christian down with her, wrapping her legs around his waist and feeling his erection hard against her stomach. She whimpered against his mouth as his body connected with her centre. She was drowning in a sea of ecstasy, her body on fire with need.

Christian leaned over and grabbed the strip of condoms he’d thrown on the bed during his striptease. Sheathing himself, he pushed forward, his body entering hers in one thrust. Isabella’s body arched, as it stretched to accommodate him in the most delicious way. Christian gave out a low, guttural moan as he seated himself inside her body. He pulled back his head,



resting his weight on his forearms, and stared down into Isabella's face. Looking up, she was mesmerised by the flood of emotions she saw in his eyes. Isabella raised a hand and ran it down his cheek and over his full lips.

"You feel so good," she whispered, gently tilting her hips, driving him deeper.

Christian's eyes fluttered closed, a look of agony passing over his face. Dropping his head to her neck, Christian suckled, sending shivers of desire south, her body clenching around his. Isabella moved her hips off the bed, causing Christian to pull out slowly before driving back in. Isabella bit her lip hard to stop herself from crying out, her fingers digging into the muscles of his shoulders. This was pure torture. She needed more.

"Hold on," Christian said, his lips crashing down on hers, his body taking over, withdrawing before plunging back in, over and over.

When she thought the pleasure could not get any higher, his hand moved between them, finding her hidden ball of nerves, sending her once again crashing into the abyss. Christian froze as Isabella contracted around him, his own body jerking as he too found release.

Christian rolled off Isabella, disposing of the condom before returning to the bed and pulling her into his arms. Dropping a kiss to her forehead, he nestled her against his side.

"I didn't think that could live up to the memory," Christian said, kissing her hair.

Isabella snuggled deeper. Christian was a cuddler, and she loved it. Her hand drew lazy circles on his chest as she turned and kissed the skin above his heart.

"You're very good," Isabella said, not wanting to lie.

The man had just wrung multiple orgasms out of her in under an hour. She chose not to think about how he'd got so experienced. She'd just count herself lucky. Her two orgasms had drained her, but in his arms, she felt safe and wanted.

Christian squeezed her but said nothing. She realised he must be exhausted.

“Sleep,” she muttered, closing her eyes. “We have all weekend.”

# Chapter Sixteen

## *Christian*

Christian awoke feeling more relaxed and refreshed than he had in years. He hadn't slept this well... since he'd last been here. They'd made love multiple times during the night. His body seemed to crave her, it was not something he recognised in himself. He was usually more of a give and take, a thank you for a lovely evening, kind of guy. Not that any of his partners complained. Many were friends who understood the rules.

Isabella was different. Was it because he was in this magical place? Nine thousand miles from his reality. Was that why he could let himself go? Or was it more than that?

He enjoyed the time they spent together. She was interesting. She listened, and when he said that, he meant she really listened. She teased him about his life and his money. Isabella had enough of her own. Her father had been a successful businessman before his untimely death. Their parents had been friends. His wealth meant nothing to her, and he found that refreshing. He could be himself. He could be Christian, not Christian, the CEO of Dupree Group or Christian the billionaire.

He sat up when he realised the bed next to him was empty.

Where was she? It was then he heard humming coming from the main area.

Christian grabbed his boxer shorts from the floor, pulling them on, before heading into the sitting area.

He stopped as he watched Isabella in the tiny kitchen, studying the coffee machine, her brows pinched in frustration. His eyes took in her body. She was wearing his t-shirt from the night before, her smooth, endless legs on display.

He stepped forward and moved behind her, his arms wrapping around her waist, his palms flat on her stomach.

“Morning, beautiful,” he said, dropping a kiss on the exposed skin above his t-shirt collar.

“Morning,” Isabella said, her hands dropping to cover his, her neck tilting to give him greater access.

“Hmm... that feels wonderful,” she said breathlessly.

Turning in his arms, she raised her hands, sliding them around his neck, her fingers stroking the short hair at the base of his head. Her eyes locked with his, and she smiled. A smile that seemed to send a thousand-watt charge straight through his chest.

“I was hoping to wake you up with a coffee... however, this machine requires a post-grad degree in order to operate it,” she added, screwing up her face.

Christian dropped a kiss on her wrinkled nose.

“Thank you,” he smiled. “I would rather have woken up with you curled into my side.”

He could not believe the words were coming out of his mouth. Not only had she stayed the night, and they cuddled. He wanted more of her.

“Well, you had rather a busy night, and jet lag, of course...” she said, winking and giving him a cheeky glance.

“I did. A siren lured me under her spell. What was I supposed to do? As for plans. I have the day today. I’m attending the opening dinner Monday evening and was hoping my said siren would like to attend with me as my plus one?”

“Siren, eh? You have heard me sing, right?”

Christian’s mind went back to the computer games that required them to sing for points. Scarlett and Isabella had been huge fans. Christian groaned at the memory as Isabella laughed. Her laughter left him with a warm feeling.

“Okay, wrong pet name. I’ll stick with beautiful.”

Isabella went up on her toes and kissed his lips. That was a name she could live with. Christian deepened the kiss until they were both left breathless.

“I think I can live with that,” she added, smiling against his lips.

“So, what are your plans for today?” Christian asked, fishing.

“I am completely at your disposal,” she whispered, her lips millimetres from his.

Christian caught her bottom lip between his teeth, sucking on it. “How can a man turn down an offer like that?” Before deepening their kiss.

Isabella pulled back, Christian already missing their contact. “How much of the area have you seen?” she asked.

If he was honest, he’d seen very little of the area. He usually arrived, attended a meeting, and then flew out again. His trips were not about sightseeing or even relaxing.

Isabella’s eyes widened, and she pulled back, staring at him.

“You come to somewhere as beautiful as Thailand, and you don’t see any of it? Mr Dupree, I’m horrified! You really are all work and no play.”

Christian raised an eyebrow, grinning, when Isabella gently smacked him on the arm.

“I wasn’t talking about *that* kind of play.”

She grinned, her cheeks taking on an adorable, rosy glow.

“We need to get out and see the sights. Visit the Doi Inthanon National Park. It’s beautiful. The perfect place to connect with the land and rest the soul,” Isabella said.

Christian pulled a face. He had never been one for sightseeing, but Isabella was so enthusiastic. Plus, if he went along, he may get brownie points, and he wanted to earn lots of brownie points.

“It sounds like... fun,” Christian said.

Isabella shook her head and laughed at him.

“I know one of the tour guides. His wife comes to our local yoga sessions.”

“Local sessions?”

“Yes. Our *give back to the community*. We do free maternity sessions for new mothers and their babies. We are also starting kids’ yoga. The earlier someone starts, the better,” Isabella added, her tone filled with pride.

This woman was full of surprises.

“Well, May is covering my classes for the weekend, so I am free,” Isabella said, throwing her arms out and smiling. “I do, however, need caffeine.” She glared at the coffee machine.

Isabella squeaked as Christian swept her up and set her on the sideboard next to it. Stepping between her legs, he lent to one side and flicked a few levers, setting the coffee machine into action.

“Your wish is my command,” he said, returning his attention to her.

“My hero,” Isabella added cheekily, kissing his cheek.

“Is that all your hero gets?” Christian asked.

Christian watched as Isabella’s eyes darkened with desire, her hand snaking down his chest and cupping him through his boxers.

Christian watched as Isabella licked her lips, pushing him back as she slid off the side and dropped to her knees, her eyes never leaving his.

“My hero,” she said, kissing his growing hardness through the material.

Christian’s hand went to the back of Isabella’s head, his fingers curling into her long, red hair.

Isabella’s hands slid into the waistband of his boxers, inching them down until he sprang free. Christian stared down, his breath frozen as Isabella gripped him with one hand before running her tongue up his length.

“My hero,” she muttered before she took him deep into her mouth. Christian’s eyes fluttered closed.



Christian had to admit their trip to the Doi Inthanon National Park was everything Isabella had promised. She'd been right. His body felt energised and refreshed. He was beginning to understand how she'd come to settle here. Her love for this country and its people shone out of her like a beacon of light, drawing people to her. Their guide was more than happy to include them on his tour. His enthusiasm when he saw Isabella was clear, especially when he began talking to her in Thai at high speed. Christian had to admit Isabella's knowledge of the language impressed him.

They visited local villages and explored two beautiful waterfalls. Most of all, he'd enjoyed their closeness. The laughter and jokes, the way they kissed and held hands. He felt freer than he had in years.

"When you said you had left your old life behind, you really meant it," Christian said as they drank cocktails in the hotel lounge.

"It wasn't hard," Isabella said. If he had blinked, Christian would've missed the sadness that flashed through her eyes before being replaced with a grin. "This place is my heaven on earth. I love it. I would never have dreamed this would become my home."

Christian's chest tightened at her words. The thought suffocating. The longer he spent with her... this was temporary, their lives worlds apart. He was there for the weekend, and then he'd return to normality, a world he was familiar with.

Christian pushed his feelings aside. He would not ruin what time they had together with thoughts outside the here and now. While he was there, he needed to enjoy Isabella and the time they shared in whatever way he could.

"The new office and factory official opening is on Monday," Christian said. "The other CEOs and their wives are getting

together for a celebratory dinner in the evening. Would you join us? Nothing fancy.”

A warmth flooded his system as Isabella smiled. “I’d love to, thank you. It will be fun to catch up with Patrice and Annelise.”

Isabella laughed. Christian realised his mouth had fallen open. How did she know Richard’s wife? As if sensing his question.

“Patrice brought Annelise with her to The Retreat. She’s been coming to my classes for months now, has even begun training as an instructor. We often go out for a drink together.” Christian nodded, his mind in a spin, as Isabella continued. “Annelise didn’t know anyone when she arrived. I introduced her to the ex-pat community here. We’re a close-knit community. I recommended their Thai teacher.”

Christian was in awe. This woman did not know she’d saved the day. Richard had been unsure whether they could stay, as Annelise had been struggling to settle in. Then one day, everything had changed. He now knew Isabella was the catalyst for the dramatic turnaround.

“Thank you,” Christian said.

“What for?” Isabella asked, her furrowed brow making Christian want to lean over and smooth it out.

“For being you,” he said.

Isabella’s cheeks darkened at his compliment. “I didn’t do anything. Annelise is a wonderful person and has fitted in well. Everyone loves her.”

She’s not the only one, Christian thought. “Thank you anyway. I know it’s meant a lot to Richard that Annelise has found her feet.”

Isabella acknowledged his thanks with a nod, clasping his hand and squeezing it. When she went to let go, he clasped it tighter.

“Room service?” he asked, his eyes darkening.



“I thought you’d never ask,” Isabella said, standing up, pulling him with her.

# Chapter Seventeen

## *Isabella*

Isabella lay on her side and watched the beautiful man next to her sleep. She couldn't recall feeling this relaxed with anyone except May and Scarlett. Their time together had been perfect. Their conversation had been fun but intelligent. Discussing everything from politics to their favourite TV shows. They'd held hands and kissed. He'd held her close as they stared at some of the most romantic settings imaginable. When they'd returned the night before, Christian had taken her in his arms, and their lovemaking had taken a different turn. Instead of frantic and desperate, it had been slow and tender. She felt something snap inside her, and knew something had changed permanently.

Christian's eyes fluttered open, and a slow smile tweaked the corner of his mouth.

"Morning, beautiful," he said, his head resting on the arm curling under his head.

"Morning," Isabella returned, mirroring his position.

"What are our plans for today?" Christian murmured, his hand sliding under the covers and up and over her side before reaching and cupping her cheek, his thumb drawing circles where it touched.

Isabella closed her eyes for a moment at the intensity of her feelings. She needed to regain control. He was departing in two days, and she didn't know if or when they would see each other again.

Taking a shuddering breath, Isabella opened her eyes and smiled into Christian's deep blue eyes.

"I thought we'd cook."

"Cook?" Christian said, his brows furrowing.

Isabella grinned. "Yes, cook. The hotel offers a local Thai food cooking course. We buy produce at the market and learn

to cook it here. Take a little piece of Thailand home with you as a memory.”

Isabella squeaked as Christian rolled her onto her back, settling himself between her legs. She stared up into his face, unable to decipher the look she saw there.

“I think I’ll have plenty of memories of Thailand to sustain me.” Isabella held her breath as Christian stared down at her, his thumb brushing over her bottom lip. “Plus all the souvenirs we picked up for Skylar yesterday.”

Isabella felt her nipples tighten at his weight and touch. Unable to help herself, she wrapped her legs around his waist, feeling his desire slide against her core.

“That may be true,” she gasped, “but cooking and the scent of food evoke memories like nothing else.”

“Is that so?” Christian smiled against her lips, before taking them in a gentle kiss. “What are the perks of cooking?”

Isabella raised her hips, rocking against him, making them both groan.

“The memory of me in an apron, cooking up a storm,” she whispered mischievously against his lips.

“Hmm. But you won’t be naked beneath your apron... Maybe I need to make some more memories,” Christian said, deepening their kiss, grinding himself against her.

Sometime later, they emerged from the hotel villa. Isabella was excited that Christian agreed to spend the day with her doing something together. They’d had fun the previous day. It felt like she’d known Christian for years, not as Scarlett’s big brother, but something more. She’d never felt this connected to anyone... not even Edward.

Isabella drew in a deep breath, worried her plan for today would not live up to the hype. Luckily for them, they’d awoken early, meaning the chef had not yet left for the market. Grabbing Christian’s hand, she pulled him towards the minibus.

“Come on,” she grinned. “Time to see how us mere mortals shop.”

They took the hotel minibus to the market with some of the other guests. The chef told them what they needed to buy and how to choose the tastiest ingredients. It surprised Isabella how focused Christian was. He did nothing by half, from business, to buying the best vegetables, to making love. This man was driven.

Once they’d collected their produce, they still had time to explore the market. Christian took her hand as they walked among the stalls, her step light and bouncy as they laughed and teased each other, chatting to the stallholders. Christian was the perfect partner, as he leaned in towards her, showing appreciation for her world.

When they finally made it back to the hotel, the chef took them all into a large kitchen area set up with individual cooking stations. Each had a set of knives and cooking utensils, a gas stove, and everything else they could possibly need. The chef demonstrated how to prepare each vegetable. Isabella smiled at the intensity with which Christian watched. She squeezed his hand, and he turned and smiled down at her. Her heart melted at the soft look in his eyes.

Adorning their aprons, Isabella snapped a picture of Christian before taking a selfie of the two of them together. She wanted to remember this moment and replay it when their time together had passed. She pushed down the hollow feeling that threatened to swallow her whole. There was no time for that... not yet. She wanted to cherish their time together. She refused to let melancholy take over their final hours.

After two hours, they had finished cooking their food and were ready to eat.

Christian took a mouthful and grimaced. “What on earth?”

Isabella sent him a questioning glance.

“This is disgusting...” Christian spluttered.

Isabella took a mouthful of her own dish, the fine mix of herbs and textures exploding on her tongue. “Oh,” she said.

“This is gorgeous.”

Christian wrinkled his nose. “How can you say that?” he said, looking at his dish in disgust.

Isabella smiled sympathetically. “Thai food can be an acquired taste,” before taking a clean spoon and tasting his dish. Her eyes opened wide before she grabbed her napkin, spitting it out. “Ew,” she said, grabbing her water and taking a large gulp. “What did you do?”

Christian looked at her in horror before grabbing her bowl and tasting the dish she’d prepared. “Oh,” he said. “This is delicious.”

With a mischievous grin, he added a portion of her food to his rice.

“Excuse me,” Isabella said, holding out her hand for her meal.

“Sharing is caring,” Christian fired back. “Plus, this was your idea. The fact I can’t cook is not my fault. Do you want me to starve? Waste away?”

Isabella laughed as Christian gave her his little boy lost gaze.

“We can’t have that,” she said. “I have to ask—what did you do? That’s really bad.”

She wrinkled her nose to hide her grin. They’d found something the perfect Mr Dupree was not good at.

The chef came over to join them.

“How are your dishes?” he asked.

Christian and Isabella started laughing. The chef looked on, confused, until Isabella pointed at Christian’s dish, tears now rolling down her cheeks. He nodded in understanding, taking a clean spoon and tasting the dish for himself. His horrified expression made Isabella and Christian laugh harder.

When Christian finally got his breath back, he looked at the chef and added, “I think I’ll stick to business.”

Isabella wiped her eyes on her napkin. She couldn’t believe how well he’d taken it. The chef nodded before patting

Christian on the shoulder and moving to the next table.

Isabella looked up, her heart catching in her throat.

“Thank you,” he added, taking her hand over the table.

“What for?” she asked, her brain foggy from the look he gave her.

“For this weekend. I haven’t felt this happy and carefree in a long time.”

Isabella’s features softened as she stared back at him, turning her hand over and squeezing his back.

“Me too,” she added, knowing she’d lost her heart to this man.

“Shall we get out of here?” Christian asked, his eyebrows raised, his eyes darkening.

“Most definitely.”

Isabella grinned back, her pulse racing in anticipation.

They made a hasty goodbye to the other members of the group before racing back to the villa like teenagers, laughing and talking non-stop about their morning. Isabella realised she had never been so at ease with someone else before. She didn’t want their time together to end, but that was the problem. Their time together was due to expire. Life would return to normal after he left, but Isabella was unsure what that normal would look like.

Isabella pushed all thoughts aside as they entered the villa, and Christian once again pulled her into his arms, his lips descending on hers.



Isabella left Christian’s room early the following morning. He had to work, so she headed back to The Retreat. It wasn’t fair to leave everything to May. Their magical weekend was over, and reality was about to set back in.

Today was the official opening of The Dupree Group Asia's factory and offices. Isabella used her job at The Retreat as an excuse for not attending the opening ceremony. In reality, she wanted to ensure she stayed out of the limelight. This was where she lived. She didn't want to be seen as a billionaire's plaything. She'd already taken an enormous gamble being seen out with him over the weekend, but Isabella knew today would be different. A global press presence was expected at the opening. Christian's picture would undoubtedly be in every local and international newspaper from tomorrow. They would need to be more cautious.

The opening was a big deal for the business world and their local community. Christian, Henri, and Richard were hot property. She couldn't resist his invitation to join the other CEOs and their wives for a celebratory dinner, especially knowing he was still there, if only for one more night. It had taken all her willpower to leave that morning. He was fast becoming her addiction. One she knew was going to leave her with horrendous withdrawal symptoms. Christian promised the celebrations would be in the hotel and a private event. When she raised her fears, May told her to live her life and enjoy each moment. Maybe she was right. Life was too short to worry about things outside her control. Plus, she was looking forward to catching up with Annelise and Patrice. Whatever else happened, those ladies would be around, and may help her pick up the pieces of her broken heart.

# Chapter Eighteen

## *Isabella*

The meal was amazing. Christian hired a private dining room in the hotel, allowing everyone to talk and laugh uninhibited all evening. Isabella could not remember a time when she'd had so much fun. This evening had topped off what had turned out to be a magical weekend. The memory of their first night being overwritten with not just mind-blowing sex, but the wonderful person Christian was. A heaviness formed in her chest when they finally called it a night. The end of the evening was so much more than a simple goodbye. Isabella knew she was being silly. Richard and Annelise were her neighbours, and Patrice would be back within a month or two... but she couldn't shake the hollow feeling deep in the pit of her stomach. She knew the cause. When she next saw them, there would be a piece missing. Christian's departure was imminent, leaving no certainty of his return.

Annelise pulled her in for a hug. "I'll see you in a couple of days... hang in there," she whispered in her ear as she kissed her goodbye. "We'll have dinner soon."

Isabella smiled. It was never a hardship to spend time with Annelise and Richard.

Next, Patrice pulled her in for a hug. "You'll be fine," she said, kissing Isabella's cheek and holding her forearms. "He'll be back. It will be impossible for him to stay away."

"Am I that obvious?" Isabella asked.

If she was, she needed to school her features fast. The last thing she needed was to appear as a desperate woman. Nothing would put him off faster.

"No, but it takes a woman in love to recognise it in another," Patrice said, smiling kindly.

"I'm not..." Patrice squeezed her arm to silence her as Henri stepped up.



“See you soon,” he said, kissing her cheek and wrapping his arm around Patrice’s waist. “Come on, we have an early flight, and we still need to finish packing.”

Isabella and Christian walked Richard and Annelise to the entrance and waited while a taxi was called. As their taxi drew out of the hotel, the pain in her chest grew, and she was not sure how long it would be before it burst free. May had appointments with Kalaya in the afternoon, so Isabella needed to return to The Retreat. It would be the perfect excuse, no long, drawn-out goodbyes.

“Are you going to come back to my room?” Christian whispered, his lips grazing her ear as he slipped his arm around her waist and hauled her back against him. There were only a few staff milling around, all the other guests having called it a night.

A shiver rippled through Isabella’s body.

“Would you like me to?” she asked, pivoting in his arms, her hands weaving their way into the short hair at the nape of his neck.

So much for leaving!

“Hmm,” he said, trailing kisses down her neck, his lips sending electrical pulses straight to her core.

He was going to be the death of her. He played her body like a finely tuned instrument.

“Yes,” she murmured, capturing his chin in her hand and lowering it so she could stare him in the eye. “Yes, I’ll stay tonight.”

As he looked at her, Christian’s face lit up with a familiar boyish grin, the one she’d come to know so well over the weekend. Had he been unsure of her answer? Despite their brief time together, Isabella couldn’t deny the intense emotions she felt for the man standing before her. Was it because she’d always harboured a crush on him? She understood that her heart would break in the morning when they said goodbye.

Taking her hand, they walked through the garden. Isabella giggled as Christian stopped them for the fifth time, pressing

her against a tree and devouring her with his mouth and hands. Maybe she wasn't the only one who didn't want their connection to end. By the time they reached the Villa, Isabella's heart, head, and body were spinning out of control. He pulled her into his arms once more, pressing her up against the door before opening it and hauling her up and into his arms. Christian swept them both into his room, their walk having ignited a raging fire between them. An inferno replaced the slow and tender. They shed each other's clothes, hands and mouths everywhere. It was as though they were trying to merge into one being, unable to be apart. Isabella was unsure where she ended, and he began. If this was the end, they were going out with a bang.

Christian withdrew his body from hers, leaving them both breathing hard. As he pulled her close, she could feel the frantic beat of his heart against her cheek.

"I want to see you again," he said.

Isabella could hear the words vibrating through his chest.

She propped her head up on his chest, resting her chin on her hand.

"Christian..." she said.

They'd half discussed this over the weekend. Because of commitments, he didn't know when he'd be able to fly back, and she couldn't visit the UK without risking her current life.

"I..."

"I know... I haven't felt like this in a long time, Izzy. I can't just walk away," he said, using her childhood nickname.

"I'm Izzy now, huh?" she said, absently stroking his chest with her fingers. "This is one of those hopeless affairs. You're there, I'm here. I can't go back, and you can't give it all up. I have my life here. You have a daughter and a company. Your life is in the spotlight... somewhere I cannot face being again."

Christian ran a hand down her face, his thumb resting on her lips. "Can we just see where this goes? No promises? I'll try to get back over more regularly."

Isabella dropped her forehead to his chest, unable to look at him. Her heart exploded with hope... she wanted to beg him to do this, but her logical brain told her she was simply prolonging the pain. While Christian was still in her life, she would never look at another man, fall in love, or have her own family. There would only ever be him.

But instead of saying what she knew she must, she dropped a kiss above his heart.

“Okay, let’s see what happens.”

Christian didn’t wait for her to say any more. Instead, he pulled her up, his lips crashing against hers as he showed her again what she did to him and how wonderful they were together.



Isabella choked back tears as they said goodbye. She’d made a speedy escape after their first night of passion. This time, she’d stayed. After a weekend of fun, laughter, and lovemaking, the thought of him leaving again was tearing a hole in her chest, the pain suffocating.

They’d agreed to say goodbye at the villa in case any press were hanging around. Christian grabbed his bag and headed for the door. He stepped outside before turning back to face her. Isabella was still in a hotel robe when he opened his arms. She ran to him, throwing herself into his embrace, her tears finally escaping.

“I promised myself I would not cry,” she mumbled against his neck.

Christian captured her face in his hands, looking down at her. She looked up and saw her own pain reflected back. Christian blinked and lowered his mouth to hers, stealing her breath with the passion of his goodbye.

“This is not the end... I promise, Izzy,” he said eventually, his forehead against hers. “I’m coming back.”

“I know, but it hurts,” Isabella admitted, taking his hand and placing it over her heart. “I’m not sure what you’ve done to me, Christian, but our time together will not be something I forget easily.”

Christian tilted his head. “Good,” he said, his finger tapping the end of her nose. “I don’t want you to forget me. This isn’t over, Isabella. I’ll organise another trip as soon as I get home. I’m going to come back.”

Isabella broke his gaze, resting the top of her head on his chest as his hands massaged her shoulders. She wanted to believe him, but she knew the life billionaire Christian Dupree lived. The meetings, the business travel, his family commitments. It may not be now, but she knew in six or twelve months, it would become too much. But for now, she’d accept their relationship and enjoy it while she had him.

“I’ll wait for your dates,” she said, reaching up and kissing him, silencing his promises.

“I have to go,” Christian said, reluctantly pulling back before pulling her in for one last kiss. They were standing outside his villa in the gardens, the setting beautiful... perfect. A memory she would cherish.

“Safe travels.”

Isabella stood and watched Christian leave before reentering the villa and gathering her bits and pieces. She had plenty of memories to sustain her until the next time. She rubbed the ache that had become a permanent fixture in the centre of her chest. Staring out at the pool and daybed where the dream had begun. She knew she needed to fortify the walls around her heart. Otherwise, the pain Edward caused her would be a mere scratch in comparison.



Twenty hours later, chaos hit.

“Lady King... a few words. Is this where you’ve been hiding for the past seven years? Is it true you’re in a relationship with

Christian Dupree?”

The questions went on and on. Isabella held up her hand, shielding her face from the cameras that continued to snap pictures of her. She knew better than to run, so instead, she walked towards her and May’s office before unlocking the door and walking in.

“No comment,” Isabella said, closing the door and pulling down the blinds. She sank into her chair, dropping her head in her hands. “Shit!”

Isabella picked up her phone and dialled May’s number. She was covering for her today, and the last thing Isabella needed or wanted was May walking into this chaos. Her friend and business partner did not deserve it, and the last thing Isabella wanted was for Kalaya to become distressed.

May answered on the third ring.

“They’ve found out... the press are here... they ambushed me as I left home... they’ve found out about Christian and I...”

“Slow down... don’t move... stay put,” May said with her usual efficiency. “The local police are on the way. Call our security team. Get them off the property. They’re trespassing.”

Isabella breathed a sigh of relief. One thing, with her father’s contacts, May could get things done.

“Thank you,” she said.

Isabella stopped as her friend paused. “Isabella, have you seen them?”

“Seen what?” Isabella asked, a sense of dread flooding her system.

May drew in a sharp breath. “The photos. You’re all over the internet. There are pictures of you and Christian together... Someone must have been in the hotel gardens. Oh, boy! You know when I said living voraciously... you’ve been holding out on me!” May said, clearly trying to lighten the stress.

Isabella moaned, dropping her head into her hands. She knew exactly what the photographs portrayed. They shared a

burning desire they struggled to contain whenever they were near each other. That final night, they'd stopped fighting it... Now, it was out there for the entire world to see.

Could this day get any worse?

"There are pictures from the night before, and you wearing a hotel robe on the villa doorstep yesterday morning," May added.

There was a loud knock, making Isabella jump. Her eyes stared at the door.

"Ms King... Mam?" Isabella recognised the voice as Banyat, one of their security team.

"Hi, Ban." Isabella opened the door to a sheepish-looking man.

"I'm so sorry. They registered as guests last night. We did not know."

Isabella held up a hand. "It's okay. This is not your fault."

"We've removed them, but they were interviewing some of the guests."

Isabella's heart sank. So much for a wellness and Yoga Retreat. How could they advertise this as peaceful with the press camped outside the door?

"Isabella?"

She looked down at her phone, remembering that May was still connected.

"Hi, May, I take it you heard Ban?" Isabella said, her voice dejected.

"I did. Look, I'm on my way in. Arkhom is taking Kalaya. We will sort this out. Stay on the grounds. Run the morning class, apologise, but say nothing else. And Isabella... I love you, my friend."

"I love you too," Isabella said, her voice choked with emotion.

What had she done to deserve such an amazing friend?

Her thoughts went to Christian. He'd still be in the air, having had a stopover in Singapore. Isabella wrapped her arms around her middle. She yearned for him to hold her tight, to feel the strength of his arms around her, telling her that everything would be alright. Despite her attempts to convince herself otherwise, Isabella knew deep down that she was lying to herself. Her secret was out, and life would never be the same again.



“Oh my,” Mrs Davenport said. “He’s a total hottie. That body and face... plus all that money. No wonder our lovely Isabella’s head was turned.”

Those were the first words Isabella heard as she entered the yoga studio for that morning’s class.

“Apparently, she’s a millionairess herself... and a lady, no less?” one of the other women added. None of them noticed her arrival.

“Yes, ladies. I am a lady. My name is Lady Isabella King. I’ve known Christian Dupree for many years. Our mothers were best friends. Any questions?” Isabella said, trying hard to keep the snarky tone out of her voice. “I’d like to apologise for any disruption you may have experienced. We do not intend to have our guests hounded by the press.”

If she hadn’t been so irritated, she’d have laughed at how the women jumped and spun to face her.

Mrs Davenport stepped forward. “We’re sorry, my dear. We didn’t mean any offence. It’s just at our age, we don’t get to engage in salacious gossip.” She shot Isabella a sheepish look. “Not that we should. We all know better. We apologise. You and May have been wonderful hosts, and we’ve enjoyed our stay.”

The other women nodded in agreement. Isabella drew in a deep breath. This was supposed to be her sanctuary. In only a

few hours, the tranquillity she and May had strived to create had been shattered.

“I can only apologise. For years, I’ve strived to keep my private life out of the press.”

Isabella could not have been more surprised when the ladies crowded around her and pulled her in for a hug. They were all in their sixties, enjoying a women’s break while their husbands were off at a local golf resort.

“It will sort itself out,” Mrs Davenport said before winking, “He’s quite the hottie. If I was a few years younger.”

She fanned herself dramatically.

Isabella couldn’t contain her giggle. “He’s quite something, isn’t he?” she heard herself say before clamping a hand over her mouth, which made the older ladies cackle even louder.

“Come on, let’s stretch,” Mrs Davenport said, patting Isabella on the shoulder before moving back to her mat.

Isabella threw herself into the yoga class. She needed to clear her mind. Thanking the ladies for their understanding, she apologised once more for any inconvenience they’d experienced.

May was in the office when she returned.

“The street outside The Retreat is full of news vans, local, and international press. The local police are keeping them off the property, but Ban and the others are working double time to keep them out.”

“May, I’m so sorry.”

The tears she’d been holding in all morning finally gave way.

May swept her into her arms and rocked her as she would Kalaya. “This is not your fault.”

“How can you say that? Of course, it’s my fault. I was careless. I grew up around the press... This is only the beginning...” Isabella stared wide-eyed at May. “What is your father going to say when they drag up my sordid past? The



press are not going to leave that alone. They're like a dog with a bone. I've been off their radar for seven years... I'm the missing heiress, according to the internet. The press in the UK are having a field day."

"Have you heard from Christian?" May asked.

"No. He had a meeting in Singapore before flying back to London. He'll still be in the air." Isabella stared at the clock. She dreaded to think what would await him when he got off the plane.

Isabella's phone rang. "Lady King..."

Isabella cut the call off. She'd lost count of the number of missed calls she'd had while teaching.

"They've been blowing up the reception line too," May said, looking as lost as Isabella.

The office door opened, making them both jump.

"Gosh, Annelise," May said, clutching her chest. Annelise pulled Isabella into a bear hug.

"Come on," she said. "We need to get you out of here. You can come back to our house. The grounds are secure, and so is the house."

Isabella extracted herself from Annelise. "I can't do that to you," Isabella said, overwhelmed by everyone's kindness.

Annelise and May both huffed. "Of course you can," they both said together.

It was Annelise who spoke up. "Christian would never forgive Richard or me if we didn't help. He's still in the air. Richard has tried to contact him."

"I know, but I can't abandon May," Isabella said, sinking back against the desk. Her eyes flew to May's. "I don't know what to do." Her mind and body were racing. She could no longer think straight. "I know I need to leave. If I don't, everything we've worked for will be destroyed. You can't have a Mindfulness Centre and Yoga Retreat with the world's press camped outside. Our guests come to get away from the

daily grind of the world. The last thing they want is it camping on their doorstep.”

The look in her friend’s eyes told her she could not disagree, even though she wanted to. This was their livelihood, and it was under attack. Isabella was the prey. Like any mother, she needed to draw the vultures away from the nest.

Turning to Annelise. “If you’re sure it’s not too much trouble...”

Isabella’s heart was beating double time as the enormity of the situation set in.

“Get your stuff. I came in one of our staff member’s cars, so it won’t be recognisable. We’ll endeavour to get you out, and then May can announce you’ve left the building.”

Isabella knew Annelise was trying to lighten the mood, and she appreciated it. The problem was she’d been down this road before. The press were relentless, and she had no desire to go there again. She was mentally stronger than she had been at twenty, but having her private life on a plate for everyone to pick at... still hurt. She was a private person. The photos of her and Christian... They’d been private, treasured moments... not a sideshow for the entire world to debate. It dirtied the memory of their beautiful weekend.

She left the office and made her way to her room, grabbing as many of her things as she could fit in her oversized rucksack. She closed her eyes, drawing in a deep breath and exhaling, repeating it over and over again until her racing heart and mind calmed. Giving her cabin a final once over, she closed the door. Unsure how long it would be before she could return. The press could become bored within a week or make the whole thing drag on. Whatever happened, Isabella knew in her heart that her life would never be the same.

Making her way back to the office, Annelise and May were deep in discussion. They paused as she reentered the room. Her face must have spoken of her devastation as both women pulled her into a group hug, squeezing her tight. “Everything will be okay,” May said, muffled against their bodies. “We will get through this.”

Isabella nodded, not feeling the same level of confidence her friend had.

“Let’s go before someone gets wind of who I am.”

Annelise donned a hat and dark glasses. Isabella bit her tongue to prevent herself from laughing. May, however, was not so successful.

“If this wasn’t so serious,” May said, choking on air, before her giggles turned into hiccupped sobs.

Isabella pulled her best friend for the past six years into a hug. “I will see you soon,” she said before turning and following Annelise out of the door.

# Chapter Nineteen

## *Christian*

“Christian... How long have you known the whereabouts of Lady Isabella King? Are you in a relationship? This is the first woman you’ve been photographed with since your divorce. Is it serious? Is Lady King going to return to the UK?”

Christian pushed his way through the crowd of journalists, his security team stepping in to clear the way.

What the hell had happened? His heart sank. Isabella must hate him. She’d done everything in her power to prevent this kind of circus. What had he done? He’d delivered it right to her door.

Sebastian was in his office when he entered.

“How bad is it?” Christian asked, swiping a hand through his hair in frustration.

“There are pictures of you together... They really captured the mood and the moment,” Sebastian said, his grin fading as he took in Christian’s scowl.

“Sorry.” He held his hand up in apology. He never truly knew when to curb the jokes. “There are pictures of you and Isabella together. Pictures from the weekend, you walking hand-in-hand, kissing. Then there are pictures from the night before you left. You and she are in the gardens of the hotel, and then her in a hotel robe the morning you left. Someone was obviously hiding on the grounds of the hotel.”

Sebastian dropped a pile of newspapers in front of him. Their private moments splashed across every front page.

Christian slammed his hand down on the desk before hitting the intercom. “Lucy, get me Richard on the phone.”

“Straight away,” came the reply.

Christian turned towards the window and stared out across The City, only spinning around when the phone buzzed. “I

have Richard for you on line two, Christian,” Lucy said.

“Thank you, Lucy,” he said before hitting a button to connect Richard.

“Richard.”

“Christian,” Richard said, seeming unsurprised by his call.

“I take it you have seen the news? I need a security team organised for Isabella.” he said, trying hard to hold a lid on his rising temper.

“It’s already done. Annelise collected her from The Retreat while you were in the air. She’s staying at our house. We thought it was the safest place for her.” Richard paused. “The press overran The Retreat. The police and security intervened and removed them. They’d booked into rooms to gain access.” It surprised Christian how angry Richard sounded. But then Isabella had that effect on people. Those who met her fell under her spell. “Our house was the only safe place we could think of. Isabella refused to risk taking the press to her business partner’s door, especially with her father being a Thai Minister. “

Christian sank into his chair, his head in his hands. “Thank you, Richard. I appreciate your help. I’m sure Isabella does too.”

“Annelise would not have it any other way. Isabella’s been a great friend to her since we arrived. We would not turn our backs on her for any reason.”

“How bad is it?” Christian whispered.

Not sure he wanted to know, not when he was here, and she was there... alone.

“I’m sure it will blow over. You’re hot property, and so is Isabella. She’s been off the radar for seven years. How she’s managed it is amazing... She’s scared, Christian. She fears her drug scandal will damage her business if the press rake up her past.”

“Can you get her on a plane out of there?” Christian squeezed his eyes shut, his heart racing. What had he done?

He'd single-handedly ruined everything she'd worked for—had spent the past few years building. For what? A night and a weekend of amazing sex. His heart told him it had been more than that, but he didn't want to unpack it. He couldn't. How did Isabella feel? He knew she'd wanted to call time on their relationship before he left. He'd talked her out of it. And what about him? He didn't do relationships. He had Skylar to think about. Oh hell, his daughter was going to be privy to the photos. So was Star...

Christian refocused on Richard's voice.

"Christian, I'm not sure how Isabella is going to feel about that. Her life is here. I think she's going to want to stay and wait it out," Richard said quietly.

"Give her the option." Christian sighed. "I've caused this problem. She can come here. We can fix it together." The strength returned to his voice as clarity took hold. They could hit this head-on, together. He would not unpack how his heart rate increased at the thought of having Isabella in his space. "Hopefully, if we work together, it will blow over, and her life can return to normal... As it stands, we have a media circus, and they're out for blood. They will not care what happens in order for them to get it."

"I'll speak to her, but I'm not sure she's going to listen. She's annoyed and in shock. Have you spoken to her?"

Christian had sent her a message as soon as he landed, but he'd not received a reply. He'd assumed she was teaching until he'd exited the airport into a media storm. Now...

His eyes flashed to Sebastian's. She must hate him. "I messaged her when I landed."

"She's switched off her mobile. Her number was on The Retreat website. They've been blowing up her phone. Call my home number. You can reach her there."

Richard's answer helped settle his nerves.

"Thank you, Richard. For everything."

Christian sank into his chair.

“You’re welcome. You take care.”

With that, Richard rang off.

“Welcome back. I take it from the photos you had an enjoyable weekend?” Sebastian said, a small smile gracing his lips.

Christian glared at his friend. “You should... Yes. I did. The best...” he said before picking up the phone and dialling Richard’s home number. It was only when he heard the click of the door he realised Sebastian had let himself out.

# Chapter Twenty

## *Isabella*

A knock on the door had Isabella looking up.

“Come in,” she said.

Annelise popped her head around the door and waved a phone in her direction.

“Christian’s on the phone.”

From the look on her face, she did not know whether that was positive or negative.

Isabella smiled at her friend. “Thank you,” she said, taking the phone.

“I hit mute,” Annelise said, pointing to a button before leaving.

The thoughtfulness of her friend warmed her heart.

“Hi,” she said, after hitting the button Annelise had pointed out, as she dropped back onto the bed.

“Hey, how are you?” Christian asked quietly.

“I’ve had better days,” she replied, trying to lighten the mood.

“I’m sorry. Is there anything I can do?” Christian asked.

“Apart from taking me back to the beginning of the weekend for a do-over?” she said with a dry laugh.

Silence filled the gap. “Is that what you’d wish for?”

She realised how it must have sounded. “I’m sorry... That sounded wrong.” Isabella said with a sigh, “It’s been a really long day. How was your flight?”

“Damn it, Isabella, don’t go all polite on me. Scream, shout, cuss me out... anything, but please... don’t be polite. I screwed up.”

Christian’s voice was loud and strained.



“No, Christian. This is not on you.” She lay back on the bed and stared up at the ceiling. “I wanted to spend the weekend with you. I knew the risks. The office opening here is huge. I was stupid and naïve, and now I’m paying the price. The fact I’ve stayed out of the limelight for seven years... it was bound to end at some point. I’ll weather this storm the same way I did before.”

“Scarlett warned me... you told me yourself...”

Isabella smiled to herself. He was beating himself up when he’d given her so much more than he could ever know.

“Christian, stop. It should be me apologising to you. I know you value your privacy. If anyone else was in the pictures with you, they would have ignored it.”

They both knew it was true. This was a shit show, and there was nothing either of them could do about it. They’d have to weather the storm.

“Come to England.”

Isabella sat up, almost dropping the phone. “What?” she said, choking on the air she’d swallowed.

“You heard me. Come to England. We can weather this together. Put an end to the rumours. Face it head on... no more running.” he said, his tone growing in strength. “Richard told me The Retreat is under siege. If you leave, May can get back to running it.”

“I can’t leave May to run the business on her own. She has a four-month-old baby, and we’re fully booked for the next few months,” Isabella snapped. “I’m not doing that to her.”

“Annelise has offered to help behind the scenes while you’re gone.” he put in, unfazed by her mood.

“Are you trying to take over my life, Christian? If so, stop it right now... This is my home. My life. I can’t simply walk away.”

A hot flush spread throughout her body, her stomach tightening.

“If you stay, you may not have a business left,” he added, his temper rising.

“And whose fault is that?” Isabella spat.

All she could hear was their heavy, angry breaths. Isabella knew Christian was only trying to help... but running away? She couldn't do that to May.

“I need to go,” she said.

“Izzy, no...”

Isabella disconnected the call. It rang again, but every time, she disconnected until Christian finally gave up. She picked up the phone and dialled May's mobile.

“Hello?” May answered, clearly not recognising the number.

“May, it's me,” Isabella answered, her voice catching in her throat.

“Oh, hon. How are you?”

The sympathy in May's voice nearly tipped her over the edge.

“I just had a row with Christian,” she admitted. “He wants me to go to England so we can face this together. He clearly doesn't think it's going to blow over. I agree with him, but this is my home.”

“Oh, my love,” May said, her voice resigned. “If you want my opinion. I think you should go. Annelise and I have just spoken. She's willing to help me here. You need to get things sorted out. If not, the press will continue to hound you.” May sighed. “You have done well. You've flown below their radar. But now the floodgates have opened, and you risk going from one story to the next. You're hot property.”

“But I don't know how to live that life anymore...” Isabella's voice cracked.

“When we first met, you were heartbroken and alone. You'd run away from your troubles, turned your back on your past, and I couldn't blame you.” May sighed. “But Isabella, you're not that young woman anymore. You're strong and

independent. You've built a new life and have something to fight for. Go back to the UK. Set the record straight. Face your past... then, when you're ready, you can come home to us. Free to embrace a future you want. No more hiding, my beautiful friend."

Isabella could not stop the sob that escaped her. "When did you get so smart?"

"I haven't. I just have my moments." May chuckled before her voice caught. "Isabella, I will miss you, but you need to do this. I spoke to Dad. He can get you into the airport and on a flight to the UK."

Isabella wiped her cheeks. "I don't want to leave you. You're my family," she said.

"And we always will be. We'll be waiting for you." May coughed. "You're older and wiser, plus you have a very sexy man on your side. Own your past, free your future."

May's tone allowed for no argument. Who knew her fun-loving friend could be fierce?

"Okay. You're right. It is time I took charge. A life in hiding is not what my father wanted for me."

The tension loosened in her shoulders as she accepted what she must do.

"You go, girl. Call Christian back. I'll call Dad and move things along. I love you."

"I love you too. You've been a loyal friend since the beginning. Thank you," Isabella said, overcome with emotion. "I'll speak to Annelise."

Isabella disconnected and redialled Christian's number from the call history.

"Christian Dupree's office, Lucy speaking. How can I help?" an efficient voice answered.

"Hi Lucy, this is Isabella King. Can I speak to Christian, please?"

"Oh, of course, Ms King. I'll put you straight through."

Isabella waited until she heard the phone click.

“Isabella?”

“I’m coming.”

Silence greeted her. “I’ll send the company plane,” Christian said.

“No. May’s dad will get me on a flight tonight. He can get me into the airport and through customs quietly. He’s helping to smuggle me out under the nose of the press.”

“But...”

“No buts. I’m doing this on my terms. Any journalist with any sense is going to track your plane’s flight plans for exactly this reason. Hopefully, this way, I can get out of Thailand and back on British soil before they’ve even realised I’m gone. May will then announce I’ve left, and hopefully, business can return to normal.”

“I would prefer you take the company plane,” Christian interceded.

“You might, but I need to leave tonight. As May pointed out, this is not about us, or this weekend. That was merely the catalyst. In reality, this has been seven years in the making. Coming back to the UK is about me taking control of my future... this cannot happen again... I’m going to put all the rumours and lies to bed, once and for all.” Isabella stopped. “I’m not the same scared young woman I was when I left. It’s time to own my life. Past, present and future.”

Christian grunted, clearly not accepting but also not willing to fight her on it.

“I’ll send a car for you when you land. Let me know the flight details.”

Isabella laughed. “They can intercept emails. I’ll see you when I get there. Don’t worry, Christian, I’m a big girl. I can handle the press. This is not my first rodeo, and it won’t be my last.”

“I don’t like it, but I’ll accept your choices. Safe travels, Isabella. Let me know when you land.” There was a pause

before he added, “I need to see you’re okay.”

“Stop worrying. I’ll see you soon.”

Isabella disconnected their call, a warmth spreading through her body at Christian’s words. Heading downstairs, she went in search of Annelise. She’d heard the front door, so she knew Richard was home. Was she making the right decision? She didn’t know, but what May had said made sense. She needed to take charge of her life. If she didn’t, she’d always be looking over her shoulder, always be a victim. If the past seven years had taught her one thing—no one could make her a victim unless she let them, and she was sick of running. It was time to face the past head on.

# Chapter Twenty-one

## *Christian*

Christian left the penthouse, using Sebastian's car, and headed to Star and Damian's house. He wanted to see them face-to-face and try to explain. The last thing he needed was to invite trouble to their door or that of his daughter. He had spent years working hard to prevent that, but it had blown up in his face this time. Star was super protective of Skylar. She would let nothing happen to her, even if that came from him.

Star opened the door as soon as his car pulled into the drive. The look she shot him, telling him she was about to rake him over the coals. Not that he didn't deserve it. He should've known better, been more cautious. His life wasn't his own, and he had forgotten that as he'd become caught up in the moment.

"Christian," she said, leaning up and giving him a kiss on the cheek. "Come in."

"Thank you," he said, stepping around her and into the hallway.

The house was private, surrounded by a high wall and fence, electric gates keeping out nosy neighbours and the press. The house was a modern building. They'd bought a rundown bungalow and levelled it, building instead a beautiful home that met their specifications. Specifications that were about to change.

"How are you feeling?" Christian asked, following a pregnant Star into their open-plan kitchen.

"I'm good. This little monkey isn't keeping me awake all night yet, but I don't think it will be long. Then again, I still have three months to go. There's time." She turned to face Christian. "What can I get you?"

"Daddy!" a yell came from behind, and he turned just in time to catch the flying tornado heading straight for him. He let out a grunt as her head connected with his stomach, her

arms wrapping themselves tightly around him. “I’ve missed you,” she said, looking up at him.

Christian bent down and pulled her into his arms, hugging her back. He needed this. “Not as much as I’ve missed you, Princess.”

Skylar pulled back and stared at him. “Who were you kissing in the paper? Tommy, in my class, said his dad said she was hot or that it looked hot. I can’t remember which.”

Christian groaned internally. Great, his daughter’s friends were talking about almost x-rated photos of him and Isabella together. Not what a father wanted.

“Isabella is a friend,” Christian said.

“Is that her name, Isabella? That’s really pretty. Will I get to meet her?” Skylar asked.

Christian’s brain was in a spin as he tried to keep up. He glanced up at Star, pleading with his eyes.

“I don’t know. Would you like to meet her?” Christian asked, not wanting to guess either way.

Star coughed. “Skylar, honey. Why don’t you get your project? Then you can show Daddy. I’m sure he’d love to see what you’ve done with all the photos and information you gathered together.”

Skylar jumped back, her smile blinding. “Oh yes. The photos were amazing. Thank you for getting them printed, Daddy. Daddy Damian has been helping me stick them into my scrapbook. He’s really good at that.” Then she gave him her most conspiratorial look. “I think he likes scrapbooking. I’m going to suggest we create a scrapbook for my baby brother or sister when they arrive. We can keep all their information there. Like the one I created.”

Christian rested his hand on her head, thankful his daughter had Star and Damian in her life. If Star hadn’t agreed to adopt Skylar, she’d have been lost to him forever. He could not go there.

“I think that would be a fabulous idea. I also know you’re going to be the best big sister ever.”

Christian watched his daughter’s chest puff out with pride before turning on her heels and heading off to collect her scrapbook.

Christian turned to face Star.

“Is it wise?” she asked.

“What wise?” Christian replied, confused.

“For her to meet Isabella? I don’t want her to meet a string of different women, Christian. I know that hasn’t happened to date. You’ve abided by my wishes and kept her protected. But this is bigger than anything before. Isabella is big news. It’s bad enough Skylar came home having heard Tommy’s father’s comments. I’m thankful it’s nearly the weekend, and half term next week. There haven’t yet been comments about Isabella’s shady past... Drugs, drink, and sex. Did you know about this when you got involved?”

Christian’s heckles rose. Star didn’t know Isabella, but he couldn’t blame her for wanting to protect Skylar. She was making assumptions. Assumptions based on what she’d read in a newspaper.

“You of all people should know not to believe everything you read in the press,” Christian said, trying to keep his voice calm.

“I remember the original scandal. I saw the photos. It was the same time Lily... died,” Star said, her hand moving to her stomach, rubbing soothing circles.

“It was,” Christian said. “I’ve known Isabella for most of my life. She’s one of Scarlett’s best friends. Our mothers were close until Isabella’s passed away.”

Christian sank onto one of the bar stools. Damian entered the room and moved to stand next to Star.

“Hey, Christian,” he said, wrapping his hands around Star’s waist before dropping a kiss on her shoulder.



Christian watched as Star dropped her head back against him as if absorbing his strength.

“It’s not what it seems,” Christian continued. “We spoke about it. She told me they set her up. She has no reason to lie. We were together in Thailand. It was never supposed to be more than that. But Star, I can’t turn my back on her. This isn’t her fault.”

Christian dropped his chin to his chest.

“She’s the one,” Damian said quietly.

Christian raised his head and stared at his friend.

“She’s the one, at Halloween. When I spoke about relationships. She’s the reason you left.”

Christian forgot how perceptive Damian was. Whether because he’d learned to read people and the room so well in marketing or he’d somehow given it away. But Christian knew there was little point in denying what was true.

“It was. We met up by chance and hit it off. I haven’t seen her in five months, although we’ve spoken on the phone.”

“I’m sorry, Christian. But I can’t do this... I’m sorry.”

Christian watched in horror as Star’s eyes filled with tears, and she left the kitchen.

Damian lent forward, both arms on the counter in front of him.

“Oh shit,” Christian realising what he had just said. “I need to apologise.”

“Give her time,” Damian said through tight lips.

Christian ran a hand through his hair, stopping and pulling the roots in frustration. What must Star think? He couldn’t turn his back on her. But to Star, that was precisely what he did to Lily, her sister. A woman he’d professed to love with all his heart, who was carrying his child—his daughter. He’d stood by and done nothing while his father called her a lying, filthy whore before slamming the door in her face. Christian felt a lump form in his throat. The painful memories of that day, like

a vice on his chest. Even after all these years, the memory physically hurt. Something had snapped inside him. Driven by his desire to take control of his life and rebuild the business. A part of him had remained broken... until his visit to Thailand five months ago.

It was at that moment Skylar came running back into the room, freezing at the doorway, sensing the tension in the air. Both Christian and Damian gave her a strained smile. A look of confusion crossed her brow. She was not a baby anymore. She was eight.

“Where’s Mummy?” she asked, looking around for Star.

“Mummy had to lie down, Munchkin. The baby is making her tired,” Damian said, trying to put her racing mind at rest.

Skylar nodded, although she shot Christian a concerned look. His daughter was incredibly perceptive.

Christian held out his hands for the book she was carrying. He wanted to distract her, then get out of their hair. He needed to give Star some space. She’d opened her and Skylar’s life to him, and he’d just stamped all over her feelings.

Skylar spent the next twenty minutes going through her book. Christian had to admit the pictures they’d taken were good. The work Damian had done with Skylar showed the deep affection he had for his stepdaughter. She was a very loved little girl.

As soon as Skylar had finished showing him her book, Christian made his excuses.

“I’m sorry, Princess, Daddy has to finish some work. You’ve done a wonderful job on your project.”

“But Daddy, you’ve been away.”

She knew how to tug at his heartstrings.

Damian stepped in. “Come on, Munchkin, you know that’s why Daddy has to go. You can catch up with him in a few days. You break up for half term tomorrow. There’ll be plenty of time.”

Christian shot Damian a grateful look as Skylar gave him a reluctant hug and a kiss goodnight before running upstairs to her room.

“Please tell Star I’m sorry. It came out wrong... as I told her last year, I’m not the same man. I’ve changed. There’s so much...”

Christian stopped himself. There *were* no excuses for his past behaviour. What did the truth really matter? It changed nothing. It wouldn’t bring Lily back.

“Give her the space she needs. Star knows you loved Lily, and that Lily loved you. Everyone needs to move forward for Skylar’s sake. She knows you’d do anything for your daughter, and that’s what matters to her. Star wants you to be happy, Christian. We both do.”

Christian dropped his chin, his heart heavy at his friend’s words. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“Bye, Daddy,” Skylar said, reappearing and giving him one last hug before he dropped himself into his car.

“Bye, Princess. Be good for Mummy and Daddy,” he said before driving off.

Could his life get any more complicated?

## Chapter Twenty-two

### *Isabella*

Isabella's flight back to the UK was long, but uneventful. As promised, May's father had got her into the airport and through customs with the minimum of fuss. A simple case of who you know, not what you know. Isabella had splashed out on her ticket, flying first class for the first time since her father had passed. She'd hidden in the corner of the first-class lounge before boarding and kept her head down before take-off.

Several glasses of champagne later, and with a proper bed, Isabella had managed to get some sleep. It had been a crazy twenty-four hours since the story had first broken, and Isabella was surprised by the number of people who'd appeared out of nowhere to gain their fifteen seconds of fame. These were people Isabella couldn't even recollect, let alone the stories they were weaving. It made Isabella even more determined to stand her ground—look forward, not back. As she'd said to Christian, May, and Scarlett, she was no longer that frightened young woman who'd fled abroad. It was no longer just about her and Christian. It was about her disappearing, about the scandal she'd run from, and until another scandal erupted, she was going to be caught in its wake. If she didn't put it to bed, every time the news items dropped, she would be fair game. She'd seen it happen too many times to be that naïve to think this was going away anytime soon.

The only downside with any flight was all bags came into the same area, irrespective of class. Isabella noticed the stares as soon as she arrived at the baggage hall. She'd decided against the dark glasses or baseball hat. If anything, that drew more attention. However, mobile phones appeared, and people began nudging each other. Isabella grabbed her bag as soon as it arrived and made her way through customs. As soon as the sliding doors opened, Isabella froze. She realised she probably shouldn't have been quite as stubborn where Christian's offer of the company plane was concerned. Cameras flashed, and people started shouting questions at her.

Welcome Home Isabella.

Two men flanked her. “If you’d like to follow us, Lady King, we can get you to safety.”

Not thinking, Isabella stood between them, letting them guide her through the hoards of travellers and journalists.

One man spoke to the air, “We’re coming out. Bring the car round.”

Isabella could not believe Christian had been so thoughtful, especially after all the grief she’d given him for trying to take over her life. Without him now, she’d be in dire straits.

The men stopped next to a Bentley with blacked-out windows. Opening the door, he ushered Isabella inside before stepping back and closing it behind her.

“Isabella, it’s good to see you.”

Isabella’s eyes flew to the voice on the opposite seat. One she’d not heard in seven years. “Danielle,” she said. “I wasn’t expecting to see you here.”

“Clearly. It’s quite the storm you’ve incited. You never were one to do anything quietly, always our little drama queen.”

Isabella smarted at her stepmother’s words. Nothing could be further from the truth. She’d always toed the family line until her father’s sudden death. Then, her life had come crashing down around her. Her father had been her world. Even after he’d married Danielle, he’d always made time for her. Not once had she felt her stepmother had replaced her, or her mother, in his affections. His love was infinite. Danielle had been a different phase in her father’s life, but as he’d promised before he’d married her, nothing would change, and he’d kept that promise.

“I thought you’d be ecstatic I’ve stayed silent and out of your hair for so long. Left you to get on with whatever you wanted... see whoever you want.”

“Happy? I knew you’d be okay. You are your father’s daughter, after all.”

“Then why are you here?” Isabella asked.

She was perplexed. Why had her stepmother taken the time and effort required to come and collect her? Isabella was no longer a child, desperate to win over the woman her father loved.

“No, Pierce or Edward?”

“Why would they be?” Danielle sounded genuinely confused. “I’ve been worried about you. I wanted to check you were okay. Know why you’re back? What you hope to achieve?”

Isabella laughed. Typical Danielle.

“Don’t worry. I’m not here to evict you. I want nothing to do with you. I’m back because that hole I disappeared into is no longer the tranquil place I want it to be, and I refuse to damage those I love... I’m here to set the record straight.”

“What record? Isabella, what happened, happened. You left and disappeared. I don’t see how dragging up the past...” Danielle murmured.

“No, you wouldn’t. You weren’t interested in the truth... only too happy to get rid of me. I want to set the record straight and to move on with my life. When I’ve done that, I’ll be gone again. You don’t need to worry,” Isabella said.

She wasn’t sure how she was going to achieve that yet. Her word may not be enough. She just had to hope. A long-buried pain flared in her chest as she turned back to stare at the woman next to her.

“Was it all a lie?” Isabella couldn’t stop herself from asking.

Danielle looked flustered as she reached out a hand, an awkward silence filling the car.

Isabella shook her off and stared out the window, unable to face her. She could not face the truth. She’d loved this woman. It was too raw. The car slowed as the driver pulled up at a set of traffic lights. Isabella took a split second to decide before opening the door and getting out, slamming it shut as her stepmother called her name.

Isabella ran across the road, through the stationary traffic and into a crowd of pedestrians. The vast population of London and tourists had their uses, and allowing one to disappear into a crowd seemed at this moment to be a benefit. Isabella had no intention of letting her stepmother, Christian, or anyone else dictate her life. She was a grown up and successful businesswoman who'd managed on her own for seven years without interference. She was not letting anyone tell her what she could and couldn't do.

Isabella walked for what felt like hours. The sun was shining, and the cooler breeze of Spring was refreshing against the heat and humidity of Thailand. She enjoyed the familiar sights of the city she'd once called home. A nameless face in a mass of people, those around her were too busy with where they were going to pay much heed to the young woman walking among them.

Isabella looked up and realised where her wanderings had taken her. Across the street was the Dupree Group building. She ducked into an empty coffee shop and took a seat in the window. She noted the number of people waiting on the pavement outside the building. It was experience that let her know they were press, not bystanders. Christian was also under siege. They'd know by now she'd touched down and were waiting to see where she resurfaced. She kicked herself for leaving her bag and phone in her stepmother's car. At least she had her purse in her pocket. Ordering herself a coffee, she sat and planned her next move.

# Chapter Twenty-three

## *Christian*

“**W**hat the hell do you mean you lost her?” Christian said, trying hard not to yell down the phone.

Screaming at his security team would not help, however frustrated he was.

“We were waiting as you asked, Sir. Another security team swept forward and escorted her out of the building and into a waiting car. They’d pulled away before we could reach her.” He could hear the remorse in his head of security’s voice. He’d failed him. “You’ll have my resignation by the end of the day.”

Christian didn’t stand for failure. With security, he couldn’t. It could mean the company coming under attack, or worse, someone in his family suffering. He was a billionaire. There was always a risk, and something he’d had to agree with Star and Damian, although their two teams now worked in tandem to ensure Skylar’s safety. Doug, however, was the best of the best.

“That won’t be necessary. But Doug...” Christian said. “I want her found.”

A noise at the other end of the phone let Christian know someone was passing information to Doug. “The car was a Bentley. Registered to Ms King’s stepmother, Danielle King.”

Christian breathed a sigh of relief. At least Isabella was with family. Maybe she’d asked Danielle to collect her. Christian smarted at the idea, but he couldn’t blame her. It wasn’t as if their relationship was all roses. Since the story broke, Isabella had been incredibly defensive whenever they spoke. Christian had to admit, in hindsight, he may not have handled the situation as well as he should have. He’d treated it like a business problem, throwing resources at it. Isabella had fought him tooth and nail until she’d refused to take his calls. He could only communicate with her via Richard and Annelise.



“I’ve got to go, Doug. Good work in tracking the car. Keep me informed.”

Christian looked up at the ruckus happening outside his door.

“I don’t care what he’s doing, Lucy. He’s my brother, and I’m going to see him.”

Christian walked towards the door, trying to keep the grin off his face. His little sister was a firecracker when she wanted to be, but he wouldn’t expose Lucy to her wrath when it was directed at him. Opening the door, Christian held up his hand. “It’s okay, Lucy. Come in, Scarlett.”

Christian stepped back as Scarlett stormed past him and into his office before turning to face him. He shut the door and walked further into the room.

“It’s good to see you, Scarlett,” he said, dropping a kiss on his sister’s cheek.

“Don’t you... *it’s good to see you, Scarlett* me, Christian Dupree. I warned you not to mess with her,” she said, her hands on her hips, her eyes shooting flames in his direction. He’d only ever seen his sister this angry once before, and he’d been the cause of her rage that time, too.

Christian held up his hand. “Scarlett, calm down.”

“Calm down?” she practically spat. “I’ve just flown from the States. I’m supposed to be choreographing a pop video, and instead, I’m here trying to clean up your mess. My best friend is out there all alone because my big brother couldn’t keep it in his pants!”

“Did Isabella call you? Ask you to come?” Christian asked, ignoring her comment about his relationship.

“No,” she said, taking a deep breath, “Of course we’ve spoken. She’s my best friend, and she’s in trouble. Where else would I be?”

Christian watched his sister deflate and drop onto his sofa, her head dropping into her hands. He sat down next to her, drawing her against him.

“It’s not fair, Christian. Why couldn’t they leave her alone? Why couldn’t you? Did you have to sleep with my best friend? Oh ew! I don’t even want to hear you admit it. Seeing the pictures of you together made me vomit in my mouth.”

“Thanks for that visual, little sis,” Christian added. “It wasn’t on purpose. We just happened.”

“Sex doesn’t just happen. It’s a conscious thought, a choice. Your penis did not just accidentally find its way into her vagina!”

Christian barked with laughter at his sister’s words. He could always trust Scarlett to lower the tone. “True, but it also wasn’t something contrived. I like her…”

Scarlett’s eyes flew to his, as if she was checking out the validity of his words.

“Oh,” was all she managed, a look of confusion crossing her brow.

Christian pulled back. “Our relationship is complicated. This wasn’t supposed to happen. If I could change it, I would. Isabella is an entity all on her own who is currently in free fall. All I can do is to be there and catch her when she lands.”

“We will, together,” Scarlett said. She stood up, staring down at him. “I’m going to go. I’m not heading back to the US until I’ve spoken to Izzy. Cara is taking over the video shoot. The dances are all choreographed, and the dancers know what they’re doing. It can run without me. This is more important.” Scarlett headed to the door. She turned to face him, her eyes locking with his. “I’m here for you, too. You’re my brother, Christian, and I stand by you. Even if I’m mad at you.”

Christian stood up and moved to his sister, pulling her into his arms, her head resting on his chest. “I love you too, little sis. We’ve got this. We’ll get Isabella through this. She has us, and we’re stronger together. We just have to convince her she’s not alone.”

Christian felt Scarlett’s head move against his chest.

“Now get out of here. I have a business to run and a woman to track down. If you hear from her, call me immediately,”

Christian said, stepping back.

Scarlett nodded and walked out. He smiled as he heard her apologise to Lucy. Typical Scarlett. He was glad she'd followed her dreams and entered the music business. Dance and music had been her passion since being a little girl. Their father had tried to curb her dreams, but when Christian had taken over the company, he'd wanted her away from the toxicity of the family business. To ensure she was safe, he'd enrolled her in a US dance academy. It had taken her away from Isabella and her friends, but he'd known she was out of harm's way. He would always do that. Now she was doing what she loved, and he couldn't be happier.

## Chapter Twenty-four

### *Isabella*

Isabella was on her second coffee when she saw Scarlett leave Christian's office. Her friend scowled at the reporters, who had clearly asked her something. Instead, shutting them down and marching off. Isabella left her coffee and set off after her friend. Careful to keep her head down and away from the prying eyes that were clearly focused on Christian's building rather than the surrounding area.

She spotted Scarlett, waiting at least three streets away before finally catching up with her.

"Scarlett," she said, her voice slightly breathless from running the final few metres. She had misjudged her friend's pace, especially when agitated.

"Izzy?" She squealed, spinning around and pulling her into her arms. Isabella almost groaned at the amount of attention her friend had just drawn their way. "Oh my god, you're safe," she said in a whispered hush. "We need to get you out of here."

Without waiting another minute, she pulled Isabella towards the curb and hailed a passing taxi, which, by some miracle, stopped instantly.

The look on Isabella's face had Scarlett grinning.

"The joys of living in New York for years. You get pretty good at hailing cabs."

Isabella didn't argue. She simply climbed into the taxi behind Scarlett, who was busy giving the taxi driver her address. Scarlett scowled as the taxi driver gave Isabella a double take, glancing at the newspaper on the seat next to him and back again.

"There'll be a large tip if you keep your eyes forward and your mouth closed," Scarlett said.

“No tip needed,” he said, smiling at Isabella. “Your destination is safe with me. I have enough famous people in my taxi. The things I see and hear.”

He said no more. Instead, he pulled out into the flow of traffic and switched off the comms between them.

“Well, it’s too late even if he doesn’t,” Scarlett added. “You really have created quite the storm.”

Isabella grimaced at her words.

“My brother... really!”

Isabella knew her cheeks had turned a darker shade of puce under her friend’s scrutiny.

“If it was anyone else, you’d know I’d want all the details... but we are not going to go there. I love you, but... no.”

Isabella smirked until she could no longer hold her laughter in. It was not long before they were both laughing so hard, the tears started to roll.

“I always knew you had an almighty crush on him,” Scarlett said when she had finally got herself under control and had wiped away the tears.

“It just happened. We didn’t plan it,” Isabella said.

“Now you sound like Christian,” Scarlett said, trying not to laugh again. “My two favourite people. Whose side do I take if you fall out?” She groaned as if the dilemma was too big. “Don’t fall out!”

“You don’t need to worry. There is no us. We were only ever an item in Thailand. What happened in Thailand was supposed to stay in Thailand. I refuse to pull Christian any further into my dramas.”

“Don’t you dare let my brother off that easily! If he was an average Joe and not some hot-shot billionaire, you wouldn’t have been photographed with him. If he’d kept his hands to himself...” Scarlett scoffed, raising an eyebrow. “I hate to break it to you, Izzy, but if you think Christian is leaving you to face this alone, you, my dear friend, are sadly mistaken. My brother is on the warpath.”

Isabella fell silent as they pulled up outside Scarlett's flat. She'd never been there, as Scarlett had bought it as a UK bolt-hole when she returned from the US. She had, however, been given the tour when they'd had a video call when Scarlett had first purchased it.

Scarlett gave the taxi driver a tip, even though he tried to reject it. Only accepting it when she told him he should take it for being one of the most ethical people they'd met. He smiled, winding down his window as Isabella passed. "You take care of yourself, young lady. I drove your dad many years ago before he died. He was an upstanding bloke. Few like him. You look after yourself. Your secret is safe with me."

Isabella drew in a deep, shuddering breath. Her dad had been amazing. He'd never used his status or wealth to belittle those around him. It warmed her heart to hear someone remind her of that.

"Come on," Scarlett said. "We need to get you out of sight so I can call Christian and let him know where you are. He's tearing the city apart trying to find you."

Isabella was impressed with her bestie's pad. Everything associated with Scarlett exuded elegance while still maintaining a cosy feel. Scarlett's parents raised her in a place that felt like a mausoleum. Her mother had been warm and welcoming, but Scarlett and Christian's father had been cold and aloof. Isabella always felt he'd tolerated her presence in his home rather than welcomed her.

"Christian, I have Isabella here... Yes, she's fine... She found me... Look, it may be easier if you speak to her."

Scarlett rolled her eyes as she passed Isabella the phone.

"Christian," Isabella said.

"Izzy, are you okay?"

The concern in Christian's voice took her breath away and set butterflies dancing in her stomach.

"Yes, I'm fine," Isabella answered.

"Why didn't you call?" Christian asked.

Isabella could almost picture him running his hand through his hair, falling back into his chair. She smiled at the thought.

“Calm down,” she whispered. “I’m fine. I promise. I don’t have my phone, otherwise, I would have. My stepmother has my bag, and I put my phone in the side pocket.”

“Why does she have your bag? I heard she collected you. I had my men waiting, but they got to you first.”

Isabella’s heart sped up. Christian had been there for her. How she wished his men had been the ones to collect her. “I decided I’d listened to enough of her drivel as we drove through London, so I hopped out at a set of traffic lights and left her behind.”

Christian chuckled. “I would love to have seen the look on her face.”

“So would I. But I shut the door on her before she tried to stop me. I promise, though. I’m fine. Scarlett is making me a cup of tea,” Isabella said, shooting her friend a look that had her disappearing into the kitchen.

“Let me come and get you. You can stay at my place. The penthouse is secure.”

“No, Christian. I’m staying here. If I come to you, all it will do is feed the gossip mill. You have got caught up in this because of who I am.”

“I think that’s the other way around. If it hadn’t been me, no one would have found you.”

“Neither one of us is that naïve. Someone would have found me eventually if they looked hard enough. It’s two years earlier than I hoped, but it was always going to happen. Once I took control of my trust fund, my life was always going to implode.”

Christian went silent for a moment. “You don’t know that. Izzy, you’re not alone in this,” he added.

“I know and appreciate everything you’ve done. I’ll never forget our time together. But Christian, I have to stop running. I appreciate you standing by my side, but you have your

company and daughter to think about. Let me have this time to catch up with Scarlett. I need this.”

Christian mumbled something that Isabella couldn't quite catch. She was sure he was probably cursing her and his sister. “Okay. But if you need anything, Scarlett has my number, at least until I can courier you over a new phone.”

“Christian. I'm more than capable of getting myself a new phone,” Isabella said, once again finding herself totally exasperated with this man.

“I beg to differ. Explain how you're going to do that without leaving the house?”

Isabella bit her tongue. He was right, and she couldn't ask Scarlett to go out and get her one, just to prove a point.

“That would be kind of you, thank you,” she said.

“See, that wasn't too hard,” Christian said, and she could almost see the smirk on his face.

“Don't push it,” Isabella said.

“I'll speak to you later. I have a phone to order. And Isabella?” Christian said.

“Yes?”

“Try to stay out of mischief. I know what you and my sister are like when you get together.”

“Goodbye, Christian,” Isabella said, trying not to laugh as she disconnected.

She had to admit he wasn't wrong. She and Scarlett had been little terrors growing up, but it had all been aimed at winding him up.

Scarlett entered the room, a grin on her face. Maybe some things never change, she thought as she looked, not at the tea but at the two very large glasses of wine her friend was carrying.



# Chapter Twenty-five

## *Isabella*

Their taxi driver kept his promise. Isabella had been staying with Scarlett for several days undetected. The press had been unable to track her down, which was fuelling the media frenzy, with the stories being released becoming more and more outrageous. Isabella woke up to slamming doors and angry voices, assuming it was another typical day in London. Scarlett groaned on the bed next to her, throwing an arm over her face as if to block out the noise and light. Catching up after seven years face-to-face had involved a few long and boozy sessions. There was no awkwardness or pretence. She'd missed her friend more than she realised.

Scarlett's flat was a one-bedroom in Notting Hill. Beautiful but compact. It suited her friend perfectly. But as besties who'd spent much of their lives sharing a bed, when it came to calling it a night, they'd fallen asleep next to each other rather than pulling out the sofa bed.

"What the hell?" Scarlett said as someone began hammering on her front door.

Isabella rolled over and snatched the hoodie Scarlett had loaned her off the floor. Pulling it on over her leggings, she made her way towards the incessant noise.

"Hold on," she said, undoing the chain and opening the door.

"Oh, you're not Scarlett," an elderly voice said.

"Er, no. I'm her friend. Scarlett is..." Isabella never finished as Scarlett appeared dishevelled and hungover behind her.

"Mrs Craven," Scarlett said, squinting at the woman on the doorstep.

"Is this your doing? All these press outside. I could barely get in through the front door. I had to prod one bugger with my umbrella when he tried to follow me in." Isabella tried hard to smother the giggle that threatened at the old woman's words.

Mrs Craven was about five feet two inches, with snowy white hair and immaculate makeup. No hair or nail out of place. Her words, however, seem to have woken Scarlett up with a start.

“Oh damn. I’m sorry, Mrs Craven. This is my friend, Isabella,” Scarlett said, leaving them both on the doorstep and peering cautiously through the closed curtain and down onto the street below. “That lying taxi driver...”

Isabella looked at Mrs Craven awkwardly, only to notice the old woman squinting at her.

“Ah, you’re the missing heiress who’s all over the paper,” she said, before adding. “It wasn’t a taxi driver. It was old Bernie, in number three. He saw you come in a couple of nights ago and was gossiping with the other neighbours. It’s not the sordid love affair he originally thought... He’s always reading the gossip rags and finally put two and two together. You can never get a decent conversation out of him.”

Scarlett had returned to the door. “I’m so sorry, Mrs Craven. Thank you for the heads up. I’ll sort this out. Hopefully, once we’ve gone, the press will leave,” Scarlett said, her face a little pasty.

“Oh, it doesn’t really bother me, love, but it’s not the safest building to keep them out.” She turned to Isabella. “Good luck to you, my dear.”

With that, she turned and left them, leaving Scarlett to close the door and lean back against it.

“I’ll call Christian. He may be right. His penthouse is at least in a secure building. No one will get in there, not with the doorman and Christian’s added security.”

Isabella groaned. This was what she’d been trying to avoid. She was less worried about the press and more worried about her heart. How could she protect herself if she was living under the same roof as him? She needed to stay away from Christian Dupree, not add fuel to the fire they’d ignited in Thailand. Her only other option was to go back to her stepmother... which was a hard no. If that was the case, she was out of options.

“Okay. But I’ll call him.”

Isabella picked up the mobile phone Christian had delivered and pulled up his number. Christian had preset it with numbers for himself, his PA, his security team, and Scarlett. The man was nothing if efficient. Entering Scarlett’s bedroom, she sank back onto the unmade bed.

Christian answered within two rings. “Isabella, is everything okay?”

“Morning... oh, it’s afternoon,” she said, looking at the clock on the bedside table.

It had gone twelve.

Christian chuckled, “I take it you had another good night?”

He’d called every day to check on her, but respected her boundaries, and she felt grateful for that.

Isabella groaned, her head pulsating at her temples, highlighting how dehydrated she was.

“I was just heading over to see you,” Christian added.

“Don’t,” Isabella said, more sharply than she intended. “The press are camped outside,” she said apologetically. “Coming here is a really bad idea.”

Christian went silent for a moment. “You can’t stay there, you know that,” he said.

“I know,” Isabella sighed. “Scarlett has convinced me your place will be my best option, at least until I have time to decide what my next move is.”

“Finally,” Christian muttered as if she’d suddenly seen sense.

“This is not what we signed up for, Christian. Great sex is one thing. Me, dragging your name through the press is a whole other ballgame.”

“When will you see we’re in this together? You’re being unbelievably stubborn about this.”

“No. I’m thinking about you and your daughter,” Isabella all but shouted at him.

“What has Skylar got to do with this?” Christian asked.

“Everything,” Isabella said. “I remember how it was when my dad met Danielle. It was all over the press. *Sir Dominic King of Ringwood dating Topless Model*. People turned up at my school. Every time we left the house, there were photographers. Other children in my class pointed fingers and told me what their parents had said. I don’t want that for her. You being seen with me, when you usually keep your private life, exactly that, private. It makes a story. Skylar doesn’t need to be exposed to my sordid past or have her friends’ parents gossiping about the woman photographed with her father.”

Scarlett had entered the room and slipped an arm around her. Only then did she realise she was crying.

“I don’t want that for her,” she whispered.

Christian remained silent before adding in a hushed tone, “Put Scarlett on the phone, Isabella.”

Isabella could only hear the odd word as brother spoke to sister. Scarlett grunted in agreement. “Okay, we’ll be ready in fifteen minutes. Christian, I’ll pack a bag with a few items of my clothing, but Isabella left her bag with Danielle. Can you arrange for Lucy to get some clothes sent to your apartment?”

Christian must have agreed, as Scarlett signed off before pulling Isabella into her arms for a hug.

“Hey, it’s okay. You’re not alone. The most amazing people surround my niece. No one will let anything bad happen to her or anyone hurt her. Believe me, Skylar is far from a shrinking violet. She’s a chip off the old block and is more likely to flatten anyone who says anything negative about a friend of her fathers, than she is accepting it. Star, her mum, is also an incredibly strong woman. She fought hard for that little girl. She’ll not put up with any nonsense.”

Isabella nodded, her breathing shallow, as tremors shook her body.

“Izzy, you’ve got this. We have ten minutes before the extraction team arrives,” Scarlett said, standing in front of her, her hands gripping her shoulders, giving her a gentle shake. “I need you to wash your face and clean your teeth. I’m going to throw some things into a bag, and we’re going to get out of here. We will regroup at Christian’s and come up with a plan.”

Isabella looked up at her friend, her face slowly coming back into focus. Swiping her hand across her eyes, she gave Scarlett a weak smile.

“I’m okay,” she said, using the back of her hand to wipe her damp cheeks.

“Good, then let’s move. We’re on a countdown.”

The pair sprang into action. True to his word, fifteen minutes after Scarlett ended the call to Christian, someone banged on the door.

“Ms Dupree?” a powerful male voice called.

Scarlett threw open the door, revealing two giants standing on the doorstep.

“Are you ready to go, mam?” the taller of the two said. “I’m Stuart, and this is Ian. We’re part of Mr Dupree’s security team. He said you’d be expecting us.”

“Yes, thank you, Stuart. We’re ready. We have a couple of bags,” Scarlett said, pointing to the two gym bags she’d thrown together.

Ian stepped forward and snatched them up, both bags looking tiny on his shoulders. Isabella hid her smirk as Scarlett turned and gave her a wide-eyed, *that-man-is-sexy* look.

“The plan is to get you downstairs and through the group of journalists camped outside. We have two cars. There are more men outside who will create a corridor for us to move through. I would suggest you put up your hood to cover your face. Don’t stop, and don’t answer questions. Once we have you inside the car, we’ll head straight to Mr Dupree’s building and take you to the private underground car park, where you’ll be hidden from view. Any questions?”

Isabella couldn't help it this time, letting out a little giggle.

"What has my life come to?" she said, relieved when the serious Stuart, instead of scowling, smiled instead.

"Hopefully, this is temporary. Your life will return to normal. We're just here to help get you somewhere you can regroup. Are you ready?" he answered.

"Let's do this," Isabella said, grabbing Scarlett's hand and giving it a squeeze.

She'd inadvertently drawn her friend into her chaos, not that Scarlett would want to be anywhere else.

As promised, Stuart, Ian, and the rest of the team got them out and into the waiting cars with the minimum of fuss. Isabella stared out of the blacked-out windows as the car sped away, camera lenses pushed against the windows, trying to catch a photograph.

"You'd think I'd committed a murder," Isabella mumbled, almost to herself.

"You've created intrigue, and everyone loves intrigue. You've stepped away from the norm and no one can understand that. How a woman with millions can disappear and make a life for herself teaching yoga when she could walk the red carpet and sip champagne every night? You, my dear friend, are an enigma, and that is why you're interesting."

# Chapter Twenty-six

## *Christian*

Christian made it back from the office in record time. The call he received from Isabella had shaken him up. She couldn't seem to catch a break. The press were determined to hound her until they got something. Isabella needed to decide what she wanted to do, what her plans were. Maybe she already had one. There were several days in Thailand before Isabella flew to the UK to decide her next steps. He knew she had been protecting May and the business by leaving, but Isabella had no base to hole up in. Her family home still housed her stepmother, and from what he could gather, that was strained, and not somewhere she'd want to end up.

Stuart and Ian delivered Isabella and Scarlett to the door.

"Thank you," Christian said after the girls had entered his apartment.

"You're welcome. I've stationed men in the lobby and car park should anyone try to breach the building." Christian had liked Stuart and Ian from the moment he'd met them. They'd been part of his security team for the past two years. "We'll be going, but if you need anything, call."

Christian watched as they entered the lift before following Scarlett and Isabella into the apartment. Christian was proud of his home. On one end of the vast space was a well-equipped kitchen, while the other end boasted a large dining and seating area. The floor was hardwood throughout, with a selection of rugs to break up the areas. The front of the building was a wall of glass with a wrap-around balcony overlooking London and The Thames. His soft furnishings were warm and rich in colour, contrasting with the furniture's stainless steel and cooler colours. A few toys lay scattered about from Skylar's last sleepover. He found he enjoyed having reminders of his daughter in his living space and had stopped tidying them away after she left. A large staircase led up to the upper level

and bedrooms. Off the living area was a corridor that housed his office, home gym, and guest bathroom.

Isabella was standing at the window, her gaze locked on the view. Christian's gaze flew to Scarlett's, but his sister was little help. She shrugged and motioned that she was going to go upstairs. Christian moved forward, not sure how to respond. He was navigating uncharted waters, unsure which way to turn for fear of slamming into the rocks. Isabella's reflection made her look so young and lost. His heart broke a little for her. Wrapping his arms around her waist, he pulled her back against him. She froze before relaxing against his front, her head tilting back until it rested on his shoulder.

"How did life get so messed up?" she whispered, her voice catching. "This is not where I expected our nights together to lead."

The warmth of her body against his made Christian feel alive as he planted a kiss on her neck. "Maybe not," he murmured against her skin, pleased when her eyes fluttered closed, and she relaxed further into his hold. "Sometimes life gives you lemons..."

Isabella's head shot up, and she turned it to face him. "Are you really going to quote a meme at me?" she asked, her eyes twinkling, giving him hope.

"Well, you could always throw them at the press hounding you, or better still... make lemonade." He was unsure where this playful side was coming from. His weekend had been less than stellar after his meeting with Star, but Christian wanted more than anything to remove the hollow look from Isabella's eyes.

Isabella turned in the circle of his arms, her own snaking around his waist. Her forehead dropped to his chest. "Somehow, it doesn't feel so bad standing here with you. I shouldn't say that. It's not fair."

"You're not alone. We're in this together."

Christian surprised himself by realising he meant it. His life had changed since Isabella appeared. It was richer, had colour.



Something he'd all but lost after Lily had died. His life had been about rebuilding the company, making it so that no one could ever take his freedom of choice away again. Skylar had brought some colour, but Isabella had completed the picture, and he found himself not wanting to lose that.

A cough sounded behind them as Scarlett reappeared. Christian felt a surge of happiness when Isabella pressed her lips against his chest, hidden from Scarlett's view, and remained in his arms.

"I've put your bag upstairs," Scarlett said. "Who wants a coffee?"

Christian, took Isabella's hand and led her into the kitchen, pulling out two stools for them. He watched as his sister made herself at home, switching on and using his coffee machine like a pro. After a few minutes, she had three steaming hot lattes on the counter before them.

Scarlett groaned in delight as she sipped her drink. "I need one of these. My next Christmas present, brother dearest," she added. "The best hangover cure," she said, adding some caramel syrup she'd found in the cupboard.

Isabella grinned at Scarlett before holding out her cup.

"How much did you two have to drink?" he asked, wishing he'd been a fly on the wall.

Had they discussed him? As if sensing where his mind had gone, Isabella squeezed his thigh, sending darts of lust straight through him.

"It's fine. Your prowess is safe. There was no way we were discussing you," Scarlett said. "Ew!" Her nose wrinkled at the sheer thought. "Our conversation was a catch-up. I could fill Isabella in on all my sexploits, but as her love life has been as barren as the Sahara until you... then no offence, dear brother, but I did not want to hear anything about what you're like in bed."

Christian groaned. His sister had never been one to beat around the bush. Isabella blushed beautifully next to him. She did not want to discuss their sex life. He lent down, his lips

brushing her ear. Isabella's eyes fluttered shut before she remembered where she was. They flew open in horror as she became aware of being lost in the moment. The look on Scarlett's face was one Christian wished he could frame.

"Ew, stop! She was my friend first. Leave her alone," Scarlett growled at him. "Or at least in my presence. When I'm gone, you can do what you like." Then she pulled a face when she realised what she'd given them permission to do. She waved her hands around as if trying to remove the visual.

Isabella laughed. Christian watched as some of the stress left her shoulders.

"So," Christian said, pulling her into his side. "Have you decided what you want to do?"

Isabella pulled away, which Christian did not like, but he couldn't force her to remain attached to him. Her eyes flicked between them.

"I've decided to give an interview," she said, taking a deep breath before continuing. "I spoke to the doctor at the rehab centre. He'll go on record to say there were no drugs found in my body when I was admitted. It was within a timescale where any drugs other than GHB or something similar would have shown up." Isabella took another deep breath. "I'm happy to share with the world the journey I've been on. I spoke to May. I can talk about The Retreat and how yoga and our wellness program have helped me find myself... It will be hard, but I want to talk about the loss of both my parents and how that affected my mental health."

Scarlett moved around the island and pulled Isabella into a hug. A burning sensation started up in his chest as he realised they'd clearly discussed this. Not that he could blame Isabella. Scarlett was her best friend. She'd chosen to stay with her and not him.

"You need to control the narrative. They're going to ask some tough questions. There was a lot of photographic evidence that will dispute what you're saying."

Christian had already spoken to his publicist about this, especially as it had impacted him.

“Christian!” his sister barked, her eyes shooting him daggers.

“No, Scarlett, Christian is right. There’s no point going into this blind. I spent too much time being naïve, and this is how I ended up here. My only option is to tell my side of events. People will either believe me or they won’t. Sadly, I can’t prove they drugged me that night. I can only prove I’m not the addict they accused me of being.”

Scarlett looked at Isabella, her face a mask of sympathy, a half smile on her lips. “I’m with you,” she said, pulling Isabella in for another hug before turning to Christian. “Have you spoken to Andrew? Maybe he could arrange for someone to interview Isabella? The breakfast show would be the perfect platform.”

Christian smiled at his sister. “Interesting you should say that. I’ve invited him round tonight with Ana, his girlfriend. He called earlier.” Christian turned to Isabella. “The final decision is yours, Izzy, but the studio will not want to irritate Andrew, and he’s always advocated that they’re good people. They’re thorough in what they do and the stories they tell.”

Isabella looked between the two of them. “I’m in. In many respects, I’d rather do something on television. That way, people hear my words and not whatever spin the journalist decides will sell.”

“That’s settled then,” Scarlett said. “I’m going to head back to my place. Tell the vultures to get lost, if they haven’t already. You have my number if you need me. Don’t let this big bully get away with anything,” she said, shooting him her serious look before turning back to Isabella and pulling her in for another hug. “Sorry, I can’t seem to leave you alone. My body is telling me I can hug the stress out of you. It’s the industry I’m in. Everyone hugs and kisses, even if they can’t stand one another.”

Isabella laughed at Scarlett’s verbal tirade.

“Okay, I’m out of here,” she said, snatching up her bag and dropping a kiss on Christian’s cheek. “Look after my girl.”

“Is there ever any doubt? Stuart or Ian will drop you home. They should be in the office in the lobby,” Christian said, loving his sister but wanting some space to breathe and check on Isabella without her input.

Christian saw Scarlett out and returned to find Isabella out on the balcony, looking out over The Thames.

“It’s beautiful,” she said, not turning around.

“It was the reason I chose it,” Christian replied, coming up behind her, his arms encircling her waist, his chin resting on her shoulder.

“I can see why.” Isabella turned and stepped out of his arms, making Christian stand and face her. Her hand rose, and she cupped his cheek, her face filled with regret. “I can’t do this,” she murmured, biting her lip, her eyes so forlorn Christian wanted to scoop her up and carry her upstairs... But he could see that was what she was working against.

He turned his head, kissing her palm before taking her hand in his and squeezing it.

“It’s okay. There’s no pressure. I won’t lie. I want nothing more than to take you upstairs, spread you out on my bed, and make love to you until you can think of nothing but me.”

Isabella tried to pull her hand away as she let out a low moan at his words. A warm feeling spread through his chest. There was still hope.

“However, I understand this is not what we expected. I won’t pressure you into anything you don’t want. I’m here for you, and we’ll get through this. What we decide to do at the end—well, that’s up to us,” Christian said as he took a step back, his hands clenched tightly at his sides. “Let me show you around. Then you can have a shower or a bath and freshen up. Lucy will be here soon with some clothes.”

Christian took her hand, giving her a quick tour of the downstairs before leading her upstairs and showing her the bedrooms. He led her into his room and through to his en-

suite, where a large bath sat in front of the window overlooking the water. “The window is tinted so no one can see in, but you can still enjoy the view.” Christian grabbed her some clean towels and a fresh towelling robe. He grinned as she raised an eyebrow. “It’s Scarlett’s. She comes and stays when she’s home, especially if Skylar is here. My sister and Skylar are very similar in mental age. Plus, Scarlett likes to teach Skylar dance routines.”

Isabella said nothing, rising on her toes and kissing his cheek.

“I’ll leave you to it. If you need anything, just shout,” Christian said, backing out of the door before he made the wrong move.

He’d promised she was in charge, and he would keep that promise, however difficult it would be and how much his body was crying out for hers.

“Thank you, Christian,” was all he heard as he shut the bathroom door.

## Chapter Twenty-seven

### *Isabella*

Christian's ensuite was something else. The tinted windows looked out over The River Thames, and Isabella could see the boats moving up and down, like staring at a living picture. A claw tub bath sat in the window next to the largest walk-in shower Isabella had ever seen. With his and her sinks, sunk into a marble countertop and a wall-length mirror. This was luxury at its finest. An archway separated the toilet from the rest of the bathroom. At least if someone was in the bath or shower, the other occupant could use the toilet in peace. Isabella chuckled. Had Christian or the designer thought of that? It made her wonder how many women had used this bathroom. Maybe she didn't want to go there.

Isabella ran a bath, using some of the bath salts she found in the cupboard Christian had pointed out. Sinking into the water, she groaned as the tension of the past week began to ease away. Lying back, she looked out of the window, appreciating the view. This modern luxury was something else. She'd grown up in a manor house outside London. Yes, they'd had the city apartment, but it had been somewhere her father and Danielle stayed when they were in the city. Isabella watched as boats sailed up and down, allowing her breathing to take on a slower, more rhythmic pace as she found her centre, allowing her body to go into an almost meditative state. Her daily yoga routine had suffered over the past week, and she could feel the effect. Constantly being on the run, she could feel her muscles tensing up, and that was never a good sign. From the plane journey until now, she needed to stretch.

Refreshed, Isabella climbed out of the bath and pulled on the leggings and a t-shirt Scarlett had packed for her. Heading downstairs, she could hear Christian on the telephone. Did the man ever stop working?

Isabella headed to the gym Christian had shown her. She'd noticed a couple of yoga mats rolled up against the wall. The set-up that Christian had created impressed Isabella. No

wonder the man had the body he did if this was where he worked out. One wall held a floor-to-ceiling mirror. Mats partially covered the floor, while the outside wall was all glass, with a door leading out onto the balcony. Although it was not as hot as Thailand, Isabella felt the draw to the outside. She always preferred running through her routines in the fresh air. Unrolling one mat, she let herself onto the balcony. Laying it out, she started her yoga routine, the burn of the stretches helping to centre her more than even the meditation had. This was what she needed to regroup herself. Engrossed in her set sequence, she only became aware of Christian leaning against the wall and watching her after she'd finished.

“Feeling better?” he asked, his eyes locked on hers.

Isabella pulled herself up onto her feet, re-rolling the mat. “Yes,” she said, offering him a genuine smile. “I didn't realise how much I needed that.”

“It doesn't surprise me. It's your life, your safe place. We all need to go to our safe place sometimes.”

Isabella stared at Christian. This man had many hidden depths she hadn't realised.

“Where is your safe place?” she asked before she could stop herself. Christian's face dropped. This was not a subject he wanted to discuss. “It's okay, you don't need to tell me.”

Isabella watched him drop to sit on the weight bench, his eyes glazed as he looked at her. “No, it's all right. You'll just think it's odd.”

“Nowhere is odd if it makes you feel safe,” she said, dropping onto the mat in front of him, her hands resting on his knees.

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “Nope, I think most people would find my safe place odd.” He paused as if weighing up whether he should divulge his secret. “I go to Lily's grave and talk to her.”

He breathed the words little more than a whisper.

Isabella could not stop her hand from cupping his cheek, bringing his eyes to hers. “You really loved her, didn't you?”

“I did, and I broke her heart. For that, I can never forgive myself. But...”

“Being near her offers you comfort. I can understand that,” Isabella added.

Her heart broke for the man and the woman he’d lost. It left a tightness in her chest. What would it feel like to be loved by Christian?

“I was weak... I swore never to be in that position again,” he added, squeezing her hand and standing up, pulling her to her feet until they were standing toe to toe.

Christian looked down at her. Isabella watched his pupils dilate. He desired her, but she needed to get her life on track. Their attraction in Thailand was undeniable, but she understood that acting on it here would only add another layer of complexity to their relationship. They needed to resist, even though the temptation was intense.

Christian drew in a breath and stepped back, his hand ruffling his hair.

“Andrew and Ana should arrive in half an hour,” he said. “Lucy dropped some clothes off for you while you were in the bath.”

She smiled up at him. “Thank you. I can’t thank you enough.”

“You don’t have to thank me.”

Christian took her hand, entwining her fingers with his, before pulling her out of the gym. Tiny shocks of electricity pulsed up her arm where their bodies touched. Living under the same roof as Christian would stretch her willpower to breaking point.



Isabella would need to send Lucy a huge thank you. The clothes she’d delivered were beautiful and fitted perfectly. Christian had pulled a face when Isabella had asked him to



send her the bill, so instead, she'd accepted his generosity. She'd find some way to repay him. Christian needed no more money, but she knew he supported several charities, and through those, she could repay him. Maybe donate in his name to a cancer ward or a neonatal unit.

The doorbell chimed, and Isabella heard Christian greet their guests. With all the crazy goings on of the day, they had opted for take-away, which was winging its way from Christian's favourite Chinese restaurant.

"Hi," Isabella said, stepping forward and greeting Andrew and Ana.

"Hi. It's so nice to meet you." Andrew said, stepping forward.

Christian had updated Isabella on their guests. Andrew was a cardiothoracic surgeon and a TV presenter. Ana was his ex-sister-in-law and nanny. Andrew had a beautiful little girl called Olivia, who was best friends with Christian's daughter, Skylar. Ana was younger than Andrew and exquisite. She was dark to his blond, and together, they made a stunning couple. Their love for each other was obvious.

Andrew kissed her cheek and stepped aside to introduce Ana. Isabella felt an instant connection with the younger woman. They moved further into the apartment, heading for the balcony.

"How are you holding up?" Ana asked when Andrew moved to help Christian with the drinks.

"So-so," Isabella answered honestly. "I'd got used to the privacy, so being thrown back into the limelight with all eyes on me... has been a little disconcerting. Hopefully, the press will find some other scandal to pique their interest, and they'll get bored with me."

When Ana smiled, Isabella realised this young woman was older than her years. Christian and Andrew took that moment to return with their drinks.

"Christian was telling me you're thinking of giving an interview?" Andrew said, his attention focused on Isabella, but

his arm was around Ana's waist.

"I'd prefer my own words to be heard instead of a retelling. I hope that way I can control the narrative," Isabella said, her eyes turning to Christian's. "But I want Christian to speak to Star first. I don't want any comeback on Skylar."

Ana moved forward and clasped her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. "I think that's admirable. Knowing Star, she'll appreciate your thoughtfulness."

"Once Christian has spoken to Star. I can arrange for the breakfast show to facilitate an interview, if that's what you want. The reporters are sensitive, and no one there will want to trip you up. Christian was saying you have proof the drug's allegations were false. That's great news, as it will close that line of questioning pretty quickly."

Isabella smiled at Andrew, who then continued. "The segment I present is about keeping people's hearts healthy. Maybe we can link it in with The Retreat. Mindfulness and yoga practice, its benefits. I can try to ensure I'm there for additional support."

"Thank you. That's so thoughtful. I apologise. I'm in a bit of a daze. There is so much to think about and do."

"No need to apologise. We are all friends and would like to help if you let us."

# Chapter Twenty-eight

## *Christian*

The evening with Andrew and Ana went well. Andrew followed Christian into the kitchen area, leaving the girls chatting on the balcony. The temperature was dropping, but Christian had fired up the heaters, which kept the area perfect.

“She’s lovely,” Andrew said.

“She is. It’s unfair what she’s going through. Her ex-fiancé is now creating waves. I’ve tried to keep her away from the papers and the things being said, but it won’t be long before she looks at her phone and gets an update.”

“When will you speak to Star?”

Christian groaned. “I’m not sure. I made a monumental error and hurt her.”

Andrew raised an eyebrow. He was very protective of Star.

“I told her I couldn’t abandon Isabella... which is exactly what I did to Lily and Skylar.”

Andrew pursed his lips.

“Oh,” he added. “Star will understand. You’re not the same man you were then.” Christian heart pounded as Andrew looked down at the ground before looking straight back up at him as if making a judgement call. “But then you never were...” Andrew stepped forward and paused. “I know you visited Lily every night in the hospital.” Andrew’s gaze held his. “The anonymous donation for the new cancer wing... that was you. Christian, the staff never got over the man who loved someone so deeply he spent every second he could with her, then got up, went to work, only to repeat it the next evening... the fact everyone was sworn to secrecy... you became something of a romantic legend among the staff.”

Christian rested his forearms on the kitchen counter and dropped his head until he felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Your secret is safe. They mentioned no names. It was only when Star mentioned the hospital and that Lily had been there. The timeline and the rumours. It wasn’t difficult to put two and two together. Am I wrong?”

Christian kept his head down and shook it, his heart thundering. “Does Star know?”

“No. It’s not my place to say anything, especially as it was speculation. Why haven’t you said anything?” Andrew asked.

“Why rake up the past? We’ve tried to put it behind us. Lily asked me to keep our visits a secret. She wanted Skylar to go to Star. She wanted her kept as far away from my family as possible, and who could blame her? Lily was worried. If Star knew I was interested in them, she may have tried to allow me access to Skylar. Lily didn’t want that for them, while my life was so unsettled. She was worried they would use our daughter as a pawn.”

“I don’t understand... I know your dad’s not a good man, but to keep a child from its father?”

“Lily knew my family was being threatened. My father had got into bed with some pretty shady characters. My ex-wife’s father, agreed to bail us out, providing I married her to protect his investment. A bastard daughter was not acceptable. The people to whom my father owed money threatened Scarlett. There were photos highlighting her vulnerability... After an unknown assailant attacked my mother. I had no choice but to walk away from Lily and my daughter and marry Lindsey. My only stipulation—my father had to stand down and appoint me his successor... I sent Scarlett to America to dance college to get her out of the way.”

Christian looked up as a gasp escaped Isabella. His heart sinking... How much had she heard?

Her eyes locked with his, and she stepped forward, wrapping her arms around him, squeezing him tight as if offering him her strength.

Christian dropped his head onto her shoulder before straightening up. He looked at the three people staring at him

and continued. “When Lindsey heard about Lily and Skylar, she made it possible for me to visit Lily. Lindsey’s a good person. Her father had forced her to leave the man she loved for our marriage. It’s why, as soon as I’d made enough money to repay her father, we divorced and went our separate ways. As far as I know, she’s back with the love of her life.”

Christian took a deep breath as his voice caught on the few last words. Isabella squeezed him tighter.

“Why not tell Star now?” Andrew asked, his confusion clear.

Christian stared at both Andrew and Ana. “Star is to never know I saw Lily before she died. There were months when I didn’t, when she went through anguish and pain thinking I’d abandoned her. I can’t take that pain away. Star lived through that. My last couple of weeks with Lily were nothing in comparison. I’ve no right to any form of forgiveness from Star. She’s already been more than generous, and it shows what a beautiful spirit she has. To let me be a part of my daughter’s life, I can’t ask or expect any more from her. I really wouldn’t have blamed her if she turned her back on me.”

The room was silent as everyone absorbed what Christian had divulged.

It was Ana who spoke up. “I don’t know everything that went on. But I think you’re mistaken. The Star I know has an enormous heart. I think she’d want to know all the facts.”

Christian shook his head, “I know. But this is likely to hurt her. I beg you, forget what you’ve heard and leave the past alone. If Lily had wanted her to know, she’d have told her.”

Andrew and Ana looked at one another and then back at Christian. He knew in that moment that he could trust his friends. They wouldn’t say anything. He’d speak to Star in the morning, try to clear the air, before putting Isabella’s question to her. The fact Isabella was willing to stay quiet for the good of his daughter showed she also had an enormous heart. What had he done to warrant such amazing women in his life?



Christian called Star the following morning.

“I’m sorry, Christian. I’m an emotional wreck, overly sensitive... I knew what you meant. I just...” Star said in a gush.

“You don’t need to apologise. I didn’t think before I opened my mouth.”

His heart pounded in his chest. She was one of the last people he would ever want to hurt.

“We will agree to disagree,” she said.

Christian could hear the smile in her voice.

“Okay.”

“We’re heading into the city later, and Skylar was wondering if we could stop by to say hello,” Star asked.

“Of course... Isabella is staying here,” Christian admitted.

He’d chosen to spend a few days working from home.

“I guessed as much. I saw Scarlett’s flat was under siege as they came out with Stuart and Ian. I assumed they were heading to yours.” Star said before pausing. “Is Isabella happy to meet Skylar?”

Christian was a little taken aback by Star’s question. He hadn’t thought about it. “I haven’t really asked. She’s more concerned about how you feel about everything,” he admitted.

“Then we’ll be with you later this morning,” Star said. “And Christian, just so we’re clear. Skylar is your daughter. She loves you. Having you in her life has been the best thing for her.”

There was silence before Christian mustered the strength to speak. “Thank you. We... see you later.”

Star really was Lily’s sister in more ways than one.

# Chapter Twenty-nine

## *Isabella*

Isabella had risen early. Christian had set her up in his spare room. Another lavish room, with spectacular views over London and the most comfortable bed Isabella had ever slept in, or at least would have had she been able to sleep. With the curtains open, Isabella had stared out at the city lights. Sleep was something she was struggling with. She'd been tempted to crawl into bed with Christian, knowing she would have slept in his arms. Never had she felt so safe or relaxed sleeping next to someone. But she'd set the ground rules, and she'd done that for a reason. Her heart was already fragile. She was unsure how much more it could take... so instead of listening to her heart, she used the time to meditate. When that hadn't worked, she had got up and moved to the gym. It had been too cold to move onto the balcony, so instead, she'd run through her favourite practice in the centre of the gym, pushing her body through a variety of poses, testing her flexibility and strength to the limits, before finally calming her mind and body down with some slower paced movements. She moved to sitting and into more restorative yoga poses—the gentle twists, forward folds, and back bends, the perfect antidote to the stress that had been flooding her system for days. Finally unfolding herself and moving to Savasana, she found her mind was finally clear. That was how Christian found her.

Isabella opened her eyes at the sound of the door opening, her body feeling refreshed yet tender. She caught sight of the clock and realised how long she'd lost herself in there. No wonder her body felt well used.

“Are you feeling better?” Christian asked, as if aware she'd been in here for hours.

“I am, thank you,” she said, giving him a warm smile and grabbing the water bottle she'd brought, drinking half of it in one go.

“You found the blocks and bolsters,” Christian said, pointing to the items Isabella had found and made use of. It had impressed her to find the gym stocked with the bolsters and blocks, especially when Christian said he did not practise yoga.

“I did,” she said. “It surprised me to find them here.”

Christian smiled. “I ordered them as soon as I knew you were coming. I hoped you’d get to use them.”

His thoughtfulness took Isabella aback. “Thank you.”

A flush crept across his cheeks, which was cute for such a successful businessman.

After Christian’s confession the previous evening, Isabella had found her mind racing, wanting to know more about the man she’d found herself so drawn to, a man who set her body on fire like no one before. When they’d been in Thailand, they’d been in the moment. Their pasts had not mattered. But there, in Christian’s city, surrounded by his friends and family... it seemed much more prevalent.

As if sensing her discomfort, Christian moved back towards the door. “Breakfast is ready when you are.”

“Great,” Isabella said, tucking her arms into her side, using her hair to hide her face.

She watched Christian, his hands shoved in the pockets of his jeans. Maybe she wasn’t the only one trying to navigate their relationship now, it wasn’t based in the bedroom. The tension between them was palpable. All she could hope was that it would ease as time went on.

“I’ll grab a quick shower, then come down.”

Christian nodded before heading back into the main area. Isabella followed him before taking the stairs to her room. Closing the door, she leant back against it, her heart racing. Making her way to the shower, she needed to stop the butterflies twisting and raging in her stomach. She had not suffered from anxiety in years. The city was playing havoc with her equilibrium. Yoga and meditation were helping, but the stress of the outside world was taking its toll.



Before heading downstairs, Isabella called May, easing the tightness in her chest.

“The press have finally given up camping on the doorstep. I’ve either reimbursed our guests or offered them a discount on their next stay. Most have taken the discount,” May said happily. Isabella breathed a sigh of relief as it showed the intrusion had not impacted their overall experience. “I gave the interview to the local paper. The journalist was interested in our plans for The Retreat and how it will help support the local community, and bring tourists into the area... The article has gone down well, which is positive for our expansion plans.”

Tears welled up behind Isabella’s eyelids. “I’m glad.”

“Hey, what’s wrong?” May asked. “You know you can always talk to me.”

“I told Christian I want us to be friends,” Isabella confided in May.

“Friends with benefits? Or friend, friends?” May asked.

“Friend, friends,” Isabella said firmly.

“Something in your voice is telling me that will not be as easy as it sounds?” May mused. “Why do you need to be only friends?”

“I don’t need to complicate things,” Isabella admitted.

“Oh,” May said, as if the penny had dropped. “You’ve fallen for him,” she added, telling more than asking.

“I don’t know...” Isabella stated honestly. “It’s like I want to throw myself into his arms and ask him to hold me until this all goes away. But May, that’s not fair to Christian. He didn’t ask for this when we got together. I was supposed to be some light relief. It was fun... That fun has become more complicated.”

Isabella sighed.

“Have you actually spoken to Christian about it? The last time I saw you, you weren’t a mind reader. Christian may be looking at this differently. You’ve drawn battle lines on the

ground. Maybe you've put him on the wrong side," May whispered.

"I don't seem to know where is up and where is down anymore," Isabella admitted.

"It may be *a married with a kid* thing," May chuckled. "But I think you grow up quickly and look at things differently. Don't write off anything between you and Christian. Don't put words into his mouth or assume you know what's best for him. Follow your heart."

Isabella grunted, not sure she could do what May was suggesting. Instead, they said goodbye, and Isabella promised to call her in a few days.



Christian was sitting on one of the large sofas, working on his laptop when she came down the stairs. He looked up and smiled, Isabella's heart melting on the spot. His pupils dilated as he took in her skirt and top. Lucy had excelled herself.

"How was your shower?" he asked, dragging his gaze away.

"Fabulous. I don't think I've ever experienced such a luxurious shower in my life," she admitted, moving to sit opposite him.

"Do you want some breakfast?" Christian asked, moving his laptop to one side.

"Please," she said, following him to the kitchen.

Christian grabbed a pan and poached some eggs, adding bagels to the toaster. Isabella worked the coffee machine the way she'd seen Scarlett do the day before.

"How did you sleep?" Christian asked, turning and leaning against the kitchen side.

"I didn't," Isabella admitted, stopping and looking at the floor before looking up and smiling, "Hence the mammoth yoga session."

Christian smiled back at her, making her stomach flip. “I wondered.”

They both stood staring at one another until Christian opened his arms. Isabella stepped into them, loving the feel of his strong embrace, her head resting over his heartbeat.

“It’s okay, you know. You don’t have to be strong all by yourself.” He murmured into her hair. “I know I keep saying it, but it’s the truth.”

“I don’t know how to do this. I’ve been on my own for so long. It’s like... this isn’t what we were,” she admitted against his chest.

“Maybe not,” he said, pulling back and tilting her chin until she was looking at him. “But who gets to say what we are? Let’s just get through this.”

Isabella gave him a small smile and nodded as she submitted to his request.

“I spoke to Star this morning,” Christian added, making Isabella freeze. “It’s okay. She wants to meet you. She’s bringing Skylar around this morning.”

“Is that a good idea?” Isabella said, stepping back and wrapping her hands around her waist.

Christian stepped forward and unwrapped them, taking her hands in his and squeezing them.

“It’s the perfect idea. You’ll like Star, and I want you to meet Skylar... If it’s any help, Scarlett is also coming. She’s never been able to resist seeing Skylar, and she’ll give you some moral support.”

Isabella’s heart rate picked up. Christian’s offer of support could be over in one breath if Skylar or Star disliked her.

She was a ball of nerves, picking at her breakfast and drinking far too much of Christian’s rich coffee. By the time Star and Skylar arrived, she was pretty wired.

Star was beautiful. She had long dark hair, with enormous eyes and a very large pregnancy bump. She entered with a man Christian introduced as Damian, her husband. Together, their

presence changed the atmosphere in the room. They exuded strength and power as a couple, evident in their obvious love for each other.

Isabella held out her hand, only to have herself pulled into an awkward hug, Star's bump colliding with her stomach.

"Sorry, you'd think I was used to carrying a beach ball in front of me by now," Star apologised.

"Please don't apologise. My best friend and business partner in Thailand has just had a baby. Kalaya is four months old. I watched May navigate the world with a bump."

Isabella smiled, finding herself instantly at ease.

Star stopped when a small body came up and held her hand, looking up at her. Isabella watched as Skylar tugged on Star's arm.

"Oh, sorry Skylar... Skylar, this is Isabella. Isabella, this is Skylar, Christian's daughter."

Isabella looked at the young girl. She'd been held up somewhere else as she'd not entered with them. Skylar was the spitting image of Star. Her looks were clearly her mother's, except instead of being dark, she was fair, like Christian.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Skylar," Isabella said, holding her hand out.

Skylar took her hand and tilted her head as if appraising her.

"You're beautiful. I love the colour of your hair," Skylar said, staring at Isabella's hair.

"Thank you. I take after my mother. She had red hair," Isabella replied.

"I look like my mummy, but my hair is the same as Daddy's," Skylar said, her words sending a lance of pain through her chest. "It also means I look like Mummy Star, as she and Mummy Lily looked the same. Did you know my Mummy Lily? I know you're friends with Aunty Scarlett. She told me you were friends growing up and how you knew my daddy."

Isabella's eyes shot up and met Scarlett's. She'd just entered through the door, and it explained why Skylar had not come in with Star and Damian. Christian stepped forward, but before he could say anything, Isabella spoke up.

"No, I didn't know your Mummy Lily. But Aunty Scarlett is right. I grew up knowing her and your daddy. Our mums were best friends, and we lived next door to one another."

Isabella's words seemed to pacify Skylar, who moved over to Christian and threw her arms around him.

"Daddy! Mummy said we could visit. Can I go upstairs and play with my dolls?"

Isabella's heart melted as Christian knelt down and kissed the top of her head before sweeping her forward into a bear hug. "Is that all I'm good for? Somewhere to house all your dolls?" he asked, tickling her until she was squealing for mercy.

Isabella looked over to Star and Damian, who were smiling at Christian's interaction with their daughter. This had to be the strangest, yet best co-parenting she'd ever seen. Skylar certainly seemed to thrive under it.

Christian finally released Skylar after she begged for mercy, and Scarlett stepped forward to rescue her niece. Skylar was still breathing hard and giggling as she ran upstairs, holding Scarlett's hand.

"She's beautiful," Isabella said without thinking.

"Thank you," Star said, smiling and taking her arm, moving them both towards the sofa. Using her free hand to rub her lower back.

"Sorry, I need to sit down."

"Of course," Isabella said, moving them both to sit while Christian went to the kitchen to make some drinks. Damian hovered before Star shoed him away.

"How are you holding up?" Star asked, turning on the sofa to stare at her.

"I'm sorry," Isabella said.

Star raised an eyebrow. “What are you apologising for? How is any of this your fault? Christian said you wanted my opinion?” Star said. “My opinion doesn’t matter. If I’ve learned one thing in this life, you have to do what’s right for you. If you constantly worry about everyone else around you, you’ll never move forward. I appreciate you’re thinking about Skylar and how this affects her, but it’s unnecessary.”

Isabella stared, open-mouthed. She wasn’t sure what she’d expected, but it hadn’t been this.

“I didn’t mean for any of this to affect you.”

“Can I be honest? It’s clear Christian cares about you,” Star said, holding her gaze, and before Isabella could say anything, Star continued. “The pictures spoke a thousand words.”

Isabella felt the colour rush to her cheeks. “Oh god,” she said, making Star laugh.

“Yes, well...” Star giggled. “Probably not what you wanted all your friends and family to see spread all over the national press. But those photos showed how close you are.”

Star’s eyes shot to where Damian was talking to Christian in the kitchen. He looked up, his eyes locking with his wife’s. Isabella could feel the air as it sizzled between them.

“Wow,” Isabella said before she could stop herself.

Star looked over and smiled.

“We’ve had more than our fair share of problems, but that’s a story for another day. It’s been quite the journey to get where we are, but I wouldn’t change it for the world.” A small smile graced her lips as she smoothed her hand over her swollen stomach. “What about you? What are your plans?”

“I need to take my life back,” Isabella said honestly. “Remove this constant fear of looking over my shoulder. I want a life without dirt being slung my way.”

“It’s none of my business, but where does Christian fit in?”

Star’s eyes flicked to the men and back again.

Isabella looked at the floor, her hands clasped in front of her. “We made no promises. We live different lives in different countries. When we’re together, it’s perfect. But we want, have different needs... I can’t believe I’m telling you all this,” Isabella said, finally looking up and staring at Star.

Star smiled. “Don’t overthink it. Take it from someone who spent her whole adult life overthinking every move she made. Sometimes, we just have to go with the flow and see what life has in store... where it wants to take us. It’s not always what we think or envision.”

Christian and Damian took that moment to reappear. Star didn’t say anymore, instead, she leant forward and squeezed Isabella’s hand, as if trying to reassure her. Isabella watched Christian’s eyes clock the motion, and he raised a questioning eyebrow at Isabella.

The rest of the afternoon they spent talking about Isabella’s plans for her interview. Christian and Isabella made lunch for everyone, and Christian said he would speak to Andrew and get the ball rolling. Skylar had rejoined them, along with Scarlett. She had sat down next to Isabella and had asked her about Thailand and her job as a yoga instructor.

“We had a yoga lady come in and give us a lesson for PE. It was really fun. A lot of the boys couldn’t balance when we did *downward dog*, and *dancers pose*. The lady said they had to...” Isabella held her breath, not wanting to talk over Skylar, who was clearly trying to share her knowledge with her. “Do you know?” she eventually asked, pointing towards her stomach.

“Strengthen their core,” Isabella answered. “It’s like dancers,” she added, looking over at Scarlett and smiling. “Yoga is all about building your strength and flexibility.”

Skylar practically bounced on the spot. “That’s what she said. Apparently, I have a strong core, so does my best friend, Olivia. The yoga teacher said that it’s because we take dance classes. Can I do some yoga with you?”

The openness of the little girl took her aback. Isabella had been shy and reserved at eight. Star had brought Skylar up to

be confident in her own skin and around adults.

“Skylar...” Star said.

“Sorry, I’m just really excited to meet you. I also enjoyed the yoga class... but I should wait to be invited.”

Isabella watched as Skylar dropped her shoulders, her heart sinking.

Touching Skylar’s arm. “I’d love to teach you some yoga. Providing your mummy is happy with it,” Isabella said, shooting a look at Star, not wanting to overstep.

“She’s all yours,” Star said, laughing. “I’ll leave the bending and stretching to you.”

“Yoga’s good when you’re pregnant. If you’re interested, I’m fully qualified. I run pre and post-natal classes in Thailand.”

Isabella stopped herself, realising she may have overstepped.

The look on her face may have clued Star up. “I may very well be interested,” Star said. “I’m due a checkup in the next couple of days. I’ll check with my doctor, and if he agrees, then maybe we can arrange a session together.”

Isabella grinned. She liked Star. If she’d been staying in the UK, she could see them becoming close friends. She was warm and open. She could see why Christian felt lucky to have her in his life.

“Can I?” Skylar burst in.

“Yes,” Christian added. “You’re staying next weekend. I’m sure Isabella would be happy to give you a lesson then. As long as you promise to do everything she tells you.”

Skylar’s face showed her disappointment. A week was a long time in the life of an eight-year-old. Isabella got up and held out her hand. “We’re going to take a quick trip to the gym,” she said, winking.

Skylar was already in leggings and a t-shirt, so some light stretching would not hurt.



Scarlett and Star got up and followed. Star perched herself on the weight bench while Scarlett joined Isabella and Skylar on the gym mat. Isabella got Skylar to show her what she'd learned at school. It impressed Isabella how much she'd absorbed, especially when she corrected herself when she felt herself out of position. They spent half an hour with Skylar and Scarlett, learning a few new moves before Christian and Damian reappeared.

"Someone has school tomorrow, we need to get her home," Damian said.

"Oh, Daddy," Skylar moaned.

"Not, oh Daddy. We've been here all day. Daddy and Isabella have things they need to organise," Damian added firmly.

"Thank you, Isabella," Skylar said, throwing her arms around Isabella's waist, making Isabella's heart race and her throat close.

"You're welcome, and I look forward to seeing you next weekend," Isabella said, smiling down.

"You promise to be here?" she asked.

"I'll be here," Isabella said, walking them all to the door.



"Skylar is beautiful," Isabella said after they'd all left. "I really like Star and Damian. All your friends are lovely."

"You made quite the impression," Christian said, coming up and standing next to her. "Thank you for showing her some yoga moves. I don't think Star would have heard the end of it all week."

Isabella grinned. "She was the perfect pupil."

"Star's done a wonderful job raising her," Christian said, sadness tinging his voice.

Isabella wrapped her arms around his waist before she could stop herself, wanting to comfort him.

“She seems like a wonderful woman, mother,” she said, her head resting over Christian’s heart. His arms tightened around her, his heartbeat picking up under her ear.

“What are we doing?” Christian asked, the sound of his voice rumbling through his chest.

“I don’t know,” Isabella added, honestly, looking up into his eyes.

They both froze for a moment. “I haven’t felt like this in a very long time,” Christian said, resting his forehead against hers.

“I’ve never felt like this,” Isabella replied, biting her bottom lip.

Christian’s thumb rose, freeing the abused skin, his thumb rubbing over her lip.

Fireworks started low in her stomach. Her body was in a constant state of alert when Christian was around, but when he touched her, her body was no longer her own, instead, a slave to the desire he invoked. She knew in her heart she should turn and walk away, but then Star’s words came back to her. She needed to live for the moment. Who knew what tomorrow would bring? It wouldn’t be long before she was on a plane flying back to Thailand, away from Christian and this life. Why should she deny their feelings when she could embrace them during the time they had together? Leaving Christian was going to break something inside her, whether she slept with him again or didn’t. At that moment, she decided. Rising up on her toes, she lay a kiss on his lips.

“Make love to me,” she whispered.

Christian let out a low groan before dragging her against his body, his hand tangling in her hair as his lips descended on hers in a frenzied tangle of tongues and lips.

Isabella sighed, pulling him closer as if wanting to climb under his skin. It had only been a week since they’d been together, but it felt like a lifetime.

Christian swept her up, placing her down on the kitchen island, his mouth never leaving hers. His hands snaked under her skirt, finding her already wet and wanting. Isabella groaned into his mouth as he pulled her panties to one side, his fingers gliding over her sensitive skin. This man was dangerous. He had control of her body in minutes. He only had to touch her. Christian's fingers continued their path of ruin while his mouth commanded hers. Reaching between them, Isabella made swift work of undoing his trousers, pushing them down on his hips with her feet. He pulled back long enough to free himself from his underwear, his hard length standing between them.

"What are you doing to me?" he said in between frantic kisses.

"Whatever it is, it's mutual," Isabella said, dragging him back towards her, her hips pressing forward. "I need you now," she added, taking him in her hand and positioning him at her entrance.

"Condom?" he asked.

"I've only been with you in six years," Isabella said, not having the patience to wait.

"I'm clean. I got checked before I flew to see you."

Isabella groaned once more, angling him at her entrance, and pushing forward, drawing him in. Deepening their kiss, Christian moaned as he sank into her. Their laboured breathing was the only sound to be heard.

"This is not how I wanted our first time in my apartment to be. I had a whole romantic night planned," Christian said, struggling to catch his breath.

Isabella pressed forward, her lips touching his, the movement rubbing him against her G-spot.

"Oh," she said, her head falling back as Christian latched his lips onto her throat, raining kisses on the sensitive spot beneath her ear. His hands snaked under her skirt and to her bottom. Lifting her into his hands, he began moving them. Isabella clutched onto his shoulders, enjoying the sensations

flooding her system. Christian's pace sped up, the sound of their bodies coming together filling the air.

He lifted her off the side as if she weighed nothing. Still joined, Isabella clutched his shoulders as he moved to the sofa. Sitting down with her straddling his thighs, he continued to move, his thumb snaking under her skirt, finding her sensitive nub and skyrocketing her into the orgasm that had been building from the moment he'd kissed her. Christian swallowed her scream as her body clenched around his. His movements became more frantic until he too froze, his body releasing his desire deep inside her. Isabella dropped her head forward, her forehead resting on his shoulder, as his hands rubbed soothing patterns on top of her shirt.

"Wow," Isabella said, trying to catch her breath. Her core still contracted around him.

She felt him smile against her cheek. He pressed a kiss to her head before she let out a squeak as he swept her up in his arms and made his way down the corridor. Kicking open the door to the gym, he walked inside, lowering her to the mat.

"I've been fantasising about this since watching you this morning. I could think of nothing more than taking you from behind as you bent over."

Isabella's core quivered at the thought. Others had commented on her yoga flexibility before, but hearing it from Christian turned her insides to jelly. Her body reacted instantly, craving his attention.

"First things first. I want you out of those clothes."

Isabella's heart rate quickened at Christian's tone. Oh boy. Isabella stripped in record time, stepping back into his arms as he showed her precisely what he'd been fantasising about all day.

# Chapter Thirty

## *Christian*

Christian struggled to drag himself out of bed, especially with Isabella curled into his side. Looking down at her sleeping form, he had to admit he could get used to having her next to him every night. The more time they spent together, the more unquenchable his desire for her. It had moved beyond mere physical attraction. He could let his guard down and feel at ease when she was around.

Christian's mind went back to the day before when he'd heard Isabella talking to Star. Hearing her talk about the fact her life wasn't here and never would be was like a punch in the gut. His head told him he needed to enjoy their time together for however long it lasted, but his heart... First, he needed to help her sort out her life. It had only been two weeks since the office opening and they'd parted company. So much had changed. Neither of them had foreseen what was to come. Christian was not sorry. The gossip in the press was vicious, and the last thing he wanted was for her to suffer. But having her there in his space felt right and he didn't regret it. He knew it was selfish of him, but every moment with her drew him out of the darkness and into the light. Christian dropped a kiss on her head, watching a small smile grace her sleeping lips. He knew at that moment he would do everything he could to help her, and then he would see what their future held.

Christian headed into the office, leaving Isabella a note to let her know he would be back later and to expect his housekeeper, Mrs Lewis. Sebastian was waiting for him in his office when he arrived.

“Good weekend?” Seb asked.

“Great,” Christian said, not looking at his friend, his attention focused on the letters Lucy had handed him as he came in.

“Oh, come on... spill,” Seb said, leaning forward in his chair.

Christian hid his smirk. One thing Seb hated more than anything was not being in the loop, and Christian had to admit he loved torturing his childhood friend.

“Why are you waiting in my office?” Christian asked, dropping the letters on his desk and looking at his friend.

Seb lent back and crossed his arms over his chest.

“The press officer called me this morning about a television appearance by Isabella. Is there anything you want to tell me?”

Christian brought Seb on board when he’d taken over the company, knowing he could trust his best friend implicitly, and he’d proven himself invaluable. For all his clowning around, Sebastian was an astute businessman with an incredibly high IQ. Seb was his right-hand man and The Dupree Group’s CFO. They’d been best friends since the age of four when Seb had shared his cars with a sad-looking Christian on his first day of school, and that was not the only time Seb had rescued him.

Christian dropped into his chair and stared across the desk at his best friend. They’d spent many hours in these very same positions, managing crisis after crisis over the past eight years as Christian fought to rebuild the company from the ground up.

“Isabella has decided to give an interview on breakfast television. She doesn’t want to rely on a journalist not to put their own sensationalist spin on it.”

Seb shook his head, his face serious. “A bold move. How do we know they will not tear her apart? Rehash the old stories? It will not help you or the company if they rehash her drug and sexual history.”

Christian felt his blood boil at his friend’s words. As if sensing Christian’s shift in mood, he held up his hands. “Look, don’t shoot the messenger. The board will not like you being linked to her. I’m already hearing mutterings.”

“Then it’s even more important Isabella gets her story out,” Christian said, glaring at his friend and daring him to say anything else. “We can refute the drugs claim. Her doctor has

said there was no trace of drugs in her system when she was admitted to rehab. That was within twenty-four hours of the photos being released. If she'd taken any drugs, they would have shown up in her urine or blood. As for the board... if they're unhappy, then they can come and speak to me."

"I'm with you," Seb said, sitting back. "I remember Isabella. She was a good girl. Her dad died suddenly, leaving her an orphan. Who wouldn't go off the rails? Especially with a fiancé like hers and a stripper for a stepmother?" Christian stared at Sebastian, his eyes widening as he continued. "Danielle never gave me mother vibes, more take me to bed vibes. Even if she did try to make out she was the world's best stepmother... Rumour had it she was sleeping with his business partner before Dominic was even cold. If you want my honest opinion, I think she sent Isabella to rehab for her own benefit. She wanted a heartbroken twenty-year-old out of her hair."

Christian stared at his friend. "Back up... I hadn't heard that."

This was not something he'd heard before.

"Why would you? You were trying to rescue the company. You'd just lost Lily. Scarlett had moved to the US, and you were marrying Lindsey. I'm not sure anything would have registered on your radar, even if it had been right under your nose," Seb added, shrugging.

"Do you think Danielle and Pierce were sleeping together before Dominic died?" Christian asked, his brain whirring.

This was not good news. Both Danielle and Pierce were trustees of Isabella's trust fund. What Seb had just divulged pointed an arrow at something that had been niggling him since he had first spoken to Isabella all those months ago, but he needed to check it out before he said anything.

He just had to hope he was mistaken.

"Back to Isabella," Seb added, not knowing he'd potentially opened a can of worms. "The television station called. They want to set up a meeting with Isabella to discuss the interview."

They propose Wednesday when Andrew is there. Apparently, it's something he insisted on. It seems like Isabella has made quite the impression all round," Seb said, looking at Christian with a mischievous glint. "She is even more beautiful than she was as a teenager. I look forward to meeting her again."

Christian growled, making Seb laugh. He knew Seb was yanking his chain, but he couldn't help it.

"That gives us a day to get Isabella prepped and ready," Christian said, almost to himself.

"Don't worry, from what I've seen so far, she's no shrinking violet. She simply removed herself from the spotlight until she was ready. All she needs to do is keep her head and stay calm. They can only rattle her if she lets them."

Christian's stomach churned. He knew Isabella could handle this. He just wished she didn't have to.

"Give the television station the go-ahead. I'll be there with her. I'll have Lucy cancel or move any appointments. We will also need a full security team to ensure she gets in and out of the building with the minimum of fuss. I want additional security at Skylar's school for the next week. I'll notify Star and Damian about what is happening."

"I would suggest a press release to follow, highlighting the key points discussed," Seb added.

"I'll leave that with you," Christian said. "Although I want to check with Isabella that she's happy for one to be released."

Christian sat back, his fingers steepled under his chin as Seb left. Taking a deep breath, he called Isabella to update her. She had seemed relieved it would be sooner rather than later.

As soon as he ended their call, he dialled Toby's number.

"Tobias Grant," a voice sounded over the line.

"Toby, it's Christian Dupree."

There was a pause. Toby had lived and practically helped raise Skylar with Star after she was born. He was also married to Star's best friend, Laura. It had been Toby's father who arranged Skylar's adoption and Toby who had locked down



Christian's rights to Skylar when Star had agreed to let him back into their life. They were not friends, but Toby was civil when it came to Christian, finding it harder to forgive him over his betrayal of Lily, Star and Skylar than anyone else.

“What can I do for you, Christian?” Toby asked.

“I may have an issue for you to look into. It's going to require a gentle hand,” Christian said, holding his breath. “Danielle King and Pierce Lebroc...”

# Chapter Thirty-one

## *Isabella*

Isabella's heart was in her throat as the mic technician clipped a microphone onto her shirt and linked it up to the receiver clipped to the back of her trouser suit.

"Just speak normally," the woman said, smiling at her encouragingly.

"Thank you," Isabella said, her voice wavering.

"You'll do great," she added, giving Isabella's arm a gentle squeeze.

Everyone had been lovely since she and Christian had arrived. A runner had taken them to the green room where they'd been told to wait. The producer had come and introduced himself, explaining how the morning would work. The crew then took Isabella to the makeup room before fitting her with a microphone. Christian and Andrew had both been waiting for her when she returned.

Andrew came forward and gave her a hug. His smile was warm and welcoming.

"Ana sends her love and said to knock 'em dead."

Isabella smiled at his words. Ana was quiet, but by the time she'd left Christian's, the two had exchanged life stories. She could not believe how welcome Christian's friends had made her.

"How was it getting in?" Andrew asked, turning to Christian.

"It worked a charm," Christian said.

They'd had no difficulty in accessing the studio. The rumour had been that Isabella would do the interview via video conference. Only a few staff had been privy to the truth. As a result, it had been plain sailing.

Andrew had been there to greet them. He'd already done his Healthy Heart segment but was staying for moral support.

"Five minutes," someone said, approaching her, the makeup artist stepping forward and powdering her nose. Isabella felt hot and uncomfortable. She'd been asking herself all morning why she was doing this. Her past was her past, but then she thought about May and the business, Christian, and Skylar. It had turned Scarlett and everyone else's life upside down. As if sensing her raging thoughts, Christian stepped forward and lifted her chin with his finger, making her look at him.

"You've got this," he said, dropping a chaste kiss on her lips that fired up her blood.

She raised a hand to his cheek, cupping it as the floor manager approached.

"We're ready for you, Isabella," he said, leading her towards the desk where the two anchors were sitting. The rest of the country had gone to a commercial break, so it was just them.

"Hi, Isabella, are you ready?" Eleanor, the lead reporter, asked, holding out her hand in greeting.

Isabella's stomach turned over, but she managed a small smile. "No... but let's do this."

The smile Eleanor sent her was one of sympathy. If she'd made the wrong choice, it was too late to back out now. Who knew what they were going to throw at her when they started? She took a deep breath as one of the crew began the countdown.

"We're back. With us this morning, we have *The Missing Heiress, Lady Isabella King*."

Isabella greeted the presenters, and the questions started thick and fast.

"So where have you been hiding and why? We know you want to tell your side of the stories that have been released."

"As most people know, I've been living in Thailand. I run a mindfulness and yoga retreat with my Thai business partner, May."

“Quite a different lifestyle than the one you left behind. What made you choose that path?”

They had already prepped Isabella with the questions that they were going to ask. It had been one of Christian’s stipulations.

“After my stint in rehab. I needed to get away. We all know what happened with the press and the stories that were circulating about me. I went travelling. I wanted to step away from the life I was living and sort myself out.”

“The stories that circulated? You’re talking about the photos of you linked to drugs and a sex orgy?”

Isabella cringed. Could they even ask that question when there might be children watching? Isabella could only hope Skylar wasn’t, or any of her friends.

“Yes, those would be the photos.”

“You claim to have no knowledge of how they were taken? Surely, that cannot be the case.”

Isabella smarted at the woman’s tone. She saw Christian take a step forward, his face a mask of thunder. Andrew grasped his arm.

“I don’t know where those photos came from.”

The woman looked at her notes. “We have a sworn testimony from your specialist at the rehab centre where you were sent by your stepmother. He claims there were no traces of any drugs in your system, either in your urine or your blood.”

“That’s correct. They took the blood and urine samples within forty-eight hours of my lost evening,” Isabella said.

“Why do you call it your lost evening?”

“I went out drinking with friends. My engagement had just ended, and my friends were helping me commiserate. I was at a club, and that was the last thing I remember.”

“It’s confusing, as some of your friends state they saw you taking drugs that night, that you went off willingly with a

group of guys. Someone is lying. Why would your friends have lied?"

The woman was relentless. Isabella's eyes flashed to Christian, who had been approached by one of the team. He looked to be deep in conversation.

"I can't answer that," Isabella said sadly.

"We're going to a break. We'll be back shortly to continue our interview with Lady Isabella King."

The interviewer looked over. "I'm sorry. If I'm not tough, they won't believe me. You are doing great. Something has happened, and we need to talk to you."

Christian and the man he was talking to approached the desk.

"Isabella," Christian said. "Victoria has called in. She says she has proof that night was a setup. She's emailed in photos and video footage that show you being manhandled unconscious and photos being taken. There are no visible faces apart from yours, but it's clear you are not compliant."

Isabella's heart moved to her throat, memories of Victoria and Edward together, rising like a tsunami... as their bodies moved together. Her stomach repelled, her hand flying to her mouth, and she ran from the studio. Luckily, she'd spotted the toilets outside the studio as she entered. Throwing open the stall door, she bent double as she lost her breakfast. She'd always known she was innocent. Even at her most drunk, she'd been aware of what she was doing, but that night had always been a blank. Now, she knew what she had always feared. She'd been drugged and set up, but why?

Christian and Andrew entered behind her, their faces a mask of concern. She sat back, resting her head against the side of the stall, her body feeling hollowed out, her chest tight.

"Are you okay?" Andrew asked, crouching down next to her.

Isabella turned her head and stared at him, her eyes watering from being sick.

"Not right now," she answered honestly. "But I will be."

Isabella got to her feet, staggering a little.

“I’m taking you home,” Christian said, holding her arm.

Isabella looked at him, giving him a half smile, her protector.

“No,” she said, placing a hand over his. “I want to continue. I came here for a reason, and I’m going to see it through. This circus has to end.”

Andrew stepped forward, handing her a glass of water.

“They’ve moved to the next segment until you decide what you want to do. They’re happy to stop and update the public with the new findings. You can reschedule or go back on before the end of the show.”

“Can I see the tapes?” Isabella asked.

It was the producer who stepped forward this time. The ladies’ bathroom was getting a little crowded. “Of course. If you want to come with me.”

Isabella swilled her mouth out and thanked one of the production team, who had retrieved a toothbrush to enable her to freshen up. Leading her into a side room, Isabella sat down and was shown her worst nightmare. The only saving grace, being she knew now that no one had violated her while she’d been in that state. She recognised the voices, people she thought were friends, laughing and joking as they hauled her around and positioned her like a mannequin. Christian held her hand the entire time, giving her the strength she needed. The more she watched, the angrier she got. She’d done nothing to deserve this sort of treatment. It was Edward who’d been unfaithful, but she was the one who’d been punished. She’d loved Edward, or at least thought she had.

Edward had been so convincing after her father had died, comforting her, telling her he loved her. Pierce and Danielle had both encouraged their relationship, telling her how happy her father would have been to see them together. What was Victoria’s game? Why did she have this information? Isabella had done nothing to her apart from unknowingly getting engaged to the man she loved.

“What does she want?” Isabella asked, turning to the producer while squeezing Christian’s outstretched hand.

“She said she wants to right a wrong.” The producer looked at her. “What do you want to do?”

“Can I speak to her?” Isabella said.

“Of course. I’ll get her patched through.”

The producer left, returning when the phone on the desk rang. He gestured for Isabella to pick it up.

Isabella took a deep breath and listened to the woman she’d once called a friend apologise for and make excuses for the horrors Isabella had endured.

The producer stepped forward. “I’m sorry to rush you, but you need to decide before we go off air. Are we going to run with this thread?”

Isabella took a deep breath. “What does that mean?”

“We can connect her live on the telephone. Include her in the interview.”

Isabella’s heart was racing. She closed her eyes, too many scenarios flashing through her mind.

It was Eleanor who spoke up, having entered the room. “I can introduce her, let the country know what she’s called in to say before we put her live. Then if she changes her story...” The threat hung in the air.

“Okay. But no names,” Isabella said, watching as everyone looked at her in amazement. “No more casualties. What Victoria is doing is brave. She’s trying to help. I do not want her to be hounded the same way I have been. We are both victims.”

“Fine,” the producer said, clearly wanting to move things along. “You’ll need your makeup touched up, but then we should be good to go.”

Isabella nodded as he left to get the whole process running. Christian stepped forward. “Are you sure about this?” he asked, his eyebrows drawn together, his eyes locked on hers.

Isabella stood and faced him. “More sure than I probably should be. I want this over, and if she helps put this to bed, then I won’t complain.”

Christian nodded, taking her hand and leading her from the room and back towards the studio. One of the makeup artists appeared and repaired her makeup.

“Beautiful,” she said, smiling kindly. “Knock ’em dead,” she added, squeezing Isabella’s arm.

“So, are we doing this? We need to go back on air,” the producer asked, his face now turning red with the stress.

“We’re doing this.”

Isabella stepped forward and into the studio lights.

Isabella sat back and listened as the interview changed. The anchor explained to their viewers that while they had been on air, new information had been called in. Isabella confirmed she knew caller X and then Victoria was live. They showed redacted video footage and photographs to back up Victoria’s story. Isabella could not believe how quickly the team had turned the footage around and made it suitable for morning television. Isabella was glad they had not named Victoria, as the anchor tore her to pieces in her interview.

“I would just like to say how sorry I am. I did not mean it to go that far. The photos were supposed to remain private. They took the photos as a joke,” Victoria said as the interview ended.

Isabella knew Victoria was lying to cover up the real reason. Edward wanted to blackmail her into keeping quiet about his affair and force her to go through with their wedding. Victoria said to her privately he’d involved too many people, and the photos got leaked. Isabella wasn’t so sure. She knew Edward for the control freak he was. He’d always intended for those photos to be published. She just didn’t understand why.

The anchor turned to Isabella. “Is there anything you want to say to caller X?”

Isabella closed her eyes for a second. “I just want to put this behind me, and go back to living my life. I would like to thank



caller X for being brave enough to come forward. It can't have been an easy decision."

The anchor stared at Isabella open-mouthed.

"That's incredibly gracious of you," she said finally. "They drugged you as a young, innocent girl and set you up. They tried to ruin your life. You left your home and your family."

Isabella tilted her head.

"That's true, but one thing I've learned is not to dwell on the past. I have a wonderful life. I have amazing friends and a fantastic business. What happened seven years ago was traumatic. But it also showed me a different path. I got the help I needed and went on a journey of self-discovery." Isabella stared at Eleanor and smiled, knowing she may never understand. "Will I ever regret that? No."

Victoria could be heard crying on the other end of the line. Isabella held up her hand before the anchor could say anything else.

"It's taken a lot of courage for you to come forward and say what you have. We were all young and naïve, and people we loved played us. Thank you. This has not been easy for you."

"I'm sorry, Izzy," she said before the line cut off.

Isabella wiped her face as she felt the first tear fall.

The camera moved to give her some privacy, returning to the anchor. "Lady Isabella King has a more forgiving heart than most." The anchor glanced over at her, and Isabella nodded. She could finish this.

"Isabella, considering this new information, what are your plans?"

"I don't know," Isabella answered honestly. "I'd just like to be left alone to get on with my life. Seven years ago, I stepped away from the limelight. I put society behind me. I would like to do that again and move forward."

"Does that life include Christian Dupree?"

“My relationship with Christian is private and will remain that way. We have been friends for many years. Our mothers were best friends, and I’m very close to his sister. That’s all I have to say on the matter.” Isabella shot her a look, warning her to drop the subject. She’d already got enough to shoot the station’s ratings through the roof. This was going to be replayed morning, noon, and night.

“Well, thank you for joining us this morning. Next up is...”

The producer came and walked Isabella off set. The mic tech removed her microphone and as soon as they entered the green room, Christian pulled her into his arms, squeezing her tight.

“I’m so proud of you,” he mumbled into her hair before tipping her head back and claiming her mouth with his.

“Well, that was not what I expected,” Isabella said, glad Victoria had remained anonymous.

This needed to be put to bed. It would do nobody any good raking it all up again.

“It’s not over yet. They will still want blood. It just won’t be yours. There’ll be a lot of questions asked. I’m just sorry you had no one in your life to stand up for you. I wish I’d been there,” Christian added.

Isabella cupped his face in her hands. “You’re here for me now, and that’s all I could ask. On air, I said I have a fantastic life. Those were not lies. It has turned out to be the best thing that could have ever happened to me. If it hadn’t happened, I’d probably be in an unhappy marriage, attending lunches. Instead, I’ve travelled the world and been allowed to find myself. How many people get the chance to do that?”

“You really are something special, Isabella King,” he said, smiling down at her before dropping a kiss on her nose.

“That’s Lady Ringwood, to you,” Isabella said, grinning before taking his hand. “Let’s get Andrew and get out of here. I’m starving, and he told me he’s taken the morning off work. If he’s not due at the hospital, then the least we can do is treat the *heart doctor* to a greasy fry-up.”

“I’m in,” came a voice behind them. “Let’s get out of here.”

# Chapter Thirty-two

## *Christian*

Christian saw the success of Isabella's interview as both a blessing and a curse. A blessing because he saw the return of the carefree woman he'd met in Thailand, who was quick to laugh and full of mischief. The black cloud had lifted, and he was thankful. It was a curse because he knew it was only a matter of time before she packed her bags and left.

The press was still hounding for more interviews. The marketing department, which also housed the media team, filtered all requests. A switch occurred with people interested in discussing her life in Thailand. It was not every day a multi-millionaire gave it all up, walked away and set up a yoga retreat in another country. That was now the news. Isabella knew it would be good for business, but she did not want what she and May had worked so hard to produce to become a sideshow for news-hungry tourists rather than genuine guests.

"What have you decided?" Seb asked, dropping himself into the chair opposite Christian.

Christian scowled at him. It seemed to be his favourite place at the moment.

"Decided?" Christian said.

"You and Isabella. Are you going to ask her to stay?"

Sebastian was never one to beat around the bush.

Christian ran a hand through his hair. "I can't do that."

"Why not? I've never seen you this happy, at least not since Lily... Isabella makes you happy. Don't let that go... at least, not without a fight," Seb said, leaning forward.

"It's not an option, so just drop it."

What could he offer her? Isabella was a free spirit, who'd given up this life and created a much better one for herself. She'd shone when he'd first seen her. A beacon calling to him.

The positive energy she exuded was addictive. Christian knew he could never ask her to give it up. It would destroy him to watch her learn to resent him, become smothered under the corporate umbrella of his life. He worked long hours, and played hard when he had the time, but that was it. When he wasn't working, he devoted all his energy to Skylar. He had nothing left to offer anyone else. Isabella did not deserve to be an afterthought. He'd already destroyed one woman's life. He would not risk doing it to someone else.

"You're a fool, my friend," Seb said, frowning. "You get one chance. When happiness comes your way, you need to grasp it with both hands and take it."

"Say's the playboy," Christian said, looking at his friend. "This is like a cannibal offering advice on vegan food. You've never been with a woman and wanted to keep her. You love them and leave them. I'm not sure you're the best person to offer me advice."

A pained expression passed over Seb's face, making Christian want to take back his words. Was he wrong? Had his friend?... no, he would have known if his friend had met someone.

Seb sighed and looked away. "Sometimes we make mistakes we live to regret. I don't want you to fall into that trap. Anyone can see you have powerful feelings for Isabella. Don't throw it away without at least talking to her."

Seb got up, his hand resting on the back of the chair.

"Seb?" Christian asked, perplexed at his friend's speech.

Seb turned, his smile not quite reaching his eyes.

"I'd better get back to some work, and so had you. You have someone to get home to, and I've got a *hot* date tonight."

With that, Seb left the office. Christian wondered if he knew everything there was to know about his friend. Had he been in love, and Christian missed it? No, that was impossible, but then Christian thought back to all the things he'd overlooked in the past eight years as he focused his attention on rebuilding The Dupree Group. But that had been his life, was his life.

After Lily had died and he had signed Skylar over to Star, The Dupree Group had been all he had left. If that had gone under, it would have all been for nothing. Even Scarlett had gone. He'd sent her away for her own protection. Seb knew that. He'd been the one to take her to America. The only person he trusted with his sister's safety.

Before he could think twice, Christian picked up the phone and hit dial.

"Hey," Isabella's voice came over the phone. "Is everything all right?"

Christian dropped his chin to his chest. What was he doing?

"Christian?" Isabella asked.

"Yes, sorry. Lucy just popped her head in... I wondered if you fancied going out for dinner tonight?" he asked, thinking on the spot.

When had he needed to hear someone's voice? Seb had messed with his mind.

"I won't keep you. Yes, dinner would be lovely. Do you want me to book somewhere?" Isabella asked.

Her voice sounded so light compared to the past couple of weeks. He liked it.

"No, that's fine. I'll book it," he added. "Sorry, I need to go."

Christian didn't wait for an answer, putting the phone down before she could say anything else. He spun on his chair and stared out the window at the city below. He'd always loved this office, often visiting with his mother. His father had been a different man then, before he'd dropped the ball. The decisions he'd made had repercussions that had affected everyone around him. The man Christian had once hero worshipped, he could barely bring himself to look at anymore.

*"Dad, I've met someone," Christian said, walking into his father's home office. The engagement ring he'd bought burning a hole in his pocket. He was going to propose that weekend. Whisk Lily away on a romantic getaway. Rome seemed like the ideal place. She loved history. Maybe he could*

*get down on one knee in the Sistine Chapel or while they looked around the Colosseum.*

*Christian drew up short. His father was sitting behind his desk, his face unshaven, his hair mussed. His clothes looked like he'd slept in them. When he looked up, his eyes were wide, and unfocused, his muscles tight and clenched.*

*"Dad?" Christian said, entering the room and closing the door.*

*He knew something was wrong. His father was clearly hiding, plus he always kept business away from his mother. She was a society queen, a lady who did lunch and raised her children. Business was for the men.*

*He stepped forward. His father's desk was covered in photographs. Photographs of his mother and sister. There were even photos of himself and Lily. Well, it was clear his father was already aware of the love of his life. That should make this conversation easier.*

*His father dropped his head onto the desk, shuddering sobs wracking his body.*

*"I've ruined everything," he said.*

*The anguish in his voice tore at Christian's chest.*

*He approached, lowering himself into the chair opposite.*

*"What's going on?"*

*It had been then, Christian had seen. These were not ordinary photos. They had been doctored, drawn on. He leant forward and picked up a letter crumpled to the side.*

*The note was brief, but the threat was clear.*

*"What have you done, Dad?" Christian asked.*

*He worked at the company. Was working his way through the various departments, had been since leaving university. His father had always said the best way to manage was to know the business from the ground up. So that's what he'd done.*

*His father sat back, his eyes bloodshot. Christian noticed the brandy glass next to him.*

*“I’ve made some terrible decisions. We’re going to lose it all.”*

*“What do you mean?” Christian asked, his stomach roiling as a sour taste filled his mouth.*

*“I owe too much money.” He shook his head frantically, his eyes still wide and manic. “The Dellaway deal was a sure thing... there should have been no issues. I borrowed in good faith.”*

*The Dellaway deal had been a new shopping complex. It was going to be the first of its kind, bringing jobs to a deprived area. But it had been blocked. They’d found the land they’d purchased was polluted and the cost to clean up too much. Christian had thought the bank had loaned the money.*

*“They want their money back. If I don’t pay it... they’re threatening to hurt Scarlett or your mother,” his father said, running his hands down his trousers over and over, his complexion more sickly than it had been when he’d first walked in. “The business, it will be gone. We’re on the verge of bankruptcy. That’s why I borrowed the money. The bank refused to loan us anymore.”*

*Christian sat back sharply. How was this the first time he was hearing this? The Dupree Group was growing. It had been looking to expand overseas. Their business was sound. Their beverage company alone was a market leader.*

*Christian spent the rest of the day sobering up his father until he could finally get the truth out of him. The businessmen his father had joined forces with were threatening him. They had got close enough to Scarlett that one of them had asked her on a date to show how vulnerable she was. They wanted their money back, and they weren’t joking. The problem was - that money was gone... invested in a multitude of poor business deals. Christian had left his father and headed to the office. The more he looked into the company finances, the more he uncovered. It became clear his father had taken his eye off the ball and made some very poor business decisions over the past couple of years. Those decisions were coming home to roost. The problem was bankruptcy was not an option.*

*These businessmen wanted their money and would get it any way they could.*

*A week later, his father called him to his office. The man he saw was a complete contrast to the one he'd walked in on the previous week.*

*"I've sorted it," his father said, beaming.*

*Christian's heart rate picked up. He wasn't sure his father was in the right state of mind to act rationally.*

*"Douglas Preston is going to bail us out."*

*Douglas Preston was new-money. He'd been skimming the outskirts of society for years, trying to get a foot in the door. Why would he be interested in coming to his father's rescue?*

*"How much of the company does he want?" Christian asked.*

*"That's the beauty of this deal," his father said, the gleam in his eye, setting Christian's nerves on edge.*

*"If not Dupree... what does he want?" Christian asked, his heart rate picking up. His father was looking too smug.*

*"He wants a merger. Our family with his," his father said.*

*"Scarlett's too young to get married," Christian said, instantly coming to his sister's defence. She was barely twenty. There was no way he would let his father sell off his little sister for his mistakes.*

*His father let out a dry laugh. "No, not Scarlett. You, dear boy. He wants you to marry his eldest daughter, Lindsey. It will guarantee his entry into places that have so far been beyond his reach."*

*Christian's heart pounded in his chest. "Impossible. I'm about to propose to my girlfriend," Christian said, watching his father's face harden at his words.*

*"What? That two-bit actress whore you've been hanging around with? That will never happen."*

*Christian turned away from his father, drawing in a deep breath.*



*“How dare you! Lily is no whore. She’s the woman I love. I am going to marry her, with or without your permission,” Christian said firmly.*

*His father could have many things, but his freedom would not be one of them.*

*“Well then, your sister or your mother’s death will be on your hands.”*

*It was then Christian realised his mother was sitting silently sobbing on the sofa behind him. Her arm was in a sling, her face bruised.*

*“What the...” Christian said, moving to his mother’s side.*

*“That was a warning,” his father said, his voice at sub-zero temperatures. “If I do not deliver their money by the end of the week, they will go after Scarlett, and it won’t be pretty.”*

*“Have you contacted the police?” Christian asked, running his hand gently over his mother’s bruised face, wiping away her tears. “They will do something.”*

*Christian spun round to his father, his mother catching his hand, her eyes pleading with him.*

*“It’s too late for that. They’re above the law. Plus, if I do that, The Dupree Group goes under. The workforce will lose their jobs. The company that has been in our family will be torn apart.”*

*“Please, Christian. You know I would never ask.” It was his mother who spoke up. “Don’t let anything happen to Scarlett. Protect her.”*

*Christian’s head was spinning. His little sister at the hands of these monsters. Who had his father partnered with? Whoever they were, they were not to be messed with.*

*As for Douglas Preston, Christian knew the old boys’ network was tough on new-money. They did not open their doors to anyone, but to give up his freedom... The financial state of The Dupree Group was critical. If the company went under, it would have a far-reaching effect. They employed thousands of workers, not to mention the companies that*

*supplied them. Without a word, Christian turned and left. He needed to think.*

*He ignored his father and mother's attempts to contact him. Instead, he'd gone to Sebastian, his long-term friend and confidant. Together they'd downed most of a bottle of whiskey. He knew what he had to do... everything for the family. Lily had been blowing up his phone over the past week. He'd cancelled their trip to Rome, sighting business reasons. He had nothing left to offer her. His life was in a tailspin. Lily told him she needed to see him, but he'd blown her off yet again. What was he going to say?*

*The following day, he returned to his family's home. His father had been a little more contrite, having the wind knocked out of his sails the day before.*

*"I'll do it," Christian said. "On the proviso that I take over the company. You're going to retire and hand the reins to me. I'll marry Lindsey, but it will be in name only. I'm not selling myself for you or anyone else."*

*The doorbell rang, and their butler had entered. "There is a Ms Roberts here to see you, Sir," he said, looking at Christian.*

*Christian's father had beaten him to it. Lily had looked at Christian, her eyes pleading with him as she announced they had created a child together. That was why she'd been so tired and under the weather. She was pregnant. Christian had simply stared at her... He loved her so much. How had his life gone so wrong? He needed to talk to her, explain. Instead, while his head and thoughts had been firing in all directions, his father had slammed the door in her face. Christian had moved to go after her, but his father had blocked him.*

*"You need to let her go," he said. "You have to be cruel to be kind. She isn't that far along. She can terminate."*

*Christian blanched at his father's words. Before he knew it, his father was flat on the floor, his lip bust open.*

*"For this, I will never forgive you. I'll do what you ask, save our company, and rebuild. But you're dead to me... For The company and our workforce, I will marry Lindsey Preston. But*

*this is the last thing you will ever ask of me. I'm sending Scarlett away. I want her as far away from your toxic reach as I can get her. I know she's been looking at dance schools in America. She'll go there. I expect your resignation with the board at the end of the week, and my position as CEO of The Dupree Group finalised."*

*Christian had turned and walked away, leaving his father where he'd fallen.*

*That night he'd gone to Lily's flat, but her flatmate told him she'd left and would not be coming back. Something died inside him that evening. He had stood by and watched as his father wiped the floor with the love of his life, and now she was gone. He could not even explain to her why.*

*It had taken him months to track her down, and when he had, his world had imploded. Cancer wracked her body. Her heavily pregnant stomach looked obscene against the rest of her frail frame. They had admitted her to the hospital so they could monitor her. The cancer was progressing too fast, and they feared for her and the baby. Lindsey had found him at home, lost in a bottle of brandy. He'd told her the whole story. She'd convinced Christian to see Lily and explain what had happened.*

*Initially, Lily had sent him away. He'd not wanted to upset her further in her weakened state, but eventually, she had called him. From that moment on, Christian had worked all day and spent every evening in the hospital, making large donations to ensure they kept his visits quiet. At thirty weeks, Lily gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. Christian had cried when he saw their daughter, her tiny frame hooked up to so many machines. He could not have loved Lily more. But time was not on their side. Lily was terminal. The pregnancy had taken every ounce of strength and energy she had left.*

*After Skylar had been born, Lily told him of her plans. He was to let their daughter go. Forget she existed. She wanted Star, her younger sister, to raise her in a house filled with love, not obligation and duty. Christian had explained what had happened with his father and the company, and she'd said she*

*understood, but she also knew he was still fighting to keep the family business afloat and would be for many years to come.*

*“I do not want our daughter raised by a fleet of nannies or a stepmother who might resent her. I want to know she’s loved. Star is my little sister. She already loves Skylar with all her heart. I beg you, Christian, if you ever loved me, you won’t fight me on this. I want you to walk away. Leave our little girl to be happy and loved.”*

*Christian had known what Lily was saying was true. Seb was taking up the flack while he was there. The company was draining his energy, but he could not turn his back on Lily, not now he’d found her again. So he’d agreed to sign away his rights to his daughter and allow Star to adopt her legally. That day would forever be ingrained in his heart. He’d gone to the solicitor’s office in the morning. He couldn’t look at Star, who was so young herself. But Lily trusted her with their daughter, so he would too. When he’d gone to the hospital later that night, Lily’s bed had been empty. One of the nurses, who often saw him on the night shift, had taken him into a room. Lily had passed away peacefully that afternoon. Christian had staggered out of the hospital, his body cold and numb. She was gone, the one person who understood him. He’d sealed his heart away that night. They had paid the company debts. The threat diminished, but the person he lived for was gone, as was their child. Christian had stood by The Thames and looked out over the water. His goal, to take back control. Rebuild the company for his daughter, so no one could ever force him or her to do anything ever again.*

## Chapter Thirty-three

### *Isabella*

For the first time in years, Isabella felt free. She had not realised how much the past had overshadowed her life. She thought she'd left it all behind when she'd gone travelling and moved to Thailand, but what she realised, was she'd been hiding. Hiding from the truth. She could see now how controlling Edward had been. Too devastated over the loss of her father to care, she'd wanted to feel something other than the numbness of her loss, and Edward had done that. He'd made her get up in the morning, go to university, and socialise with his friends. It was only now she realised he'd isolated her from her own friends and ensured she was only surrounded by his. Scarlett had already left, accepted into a prestigious dance school in the US. There had been no one.

Isabella moved across the apartment as her phone rang.

"Hello?" she answered, not recognising the number.

"Isabella?"

Isabella's heart stuttered.

"Danielle," she said.

She'd not spoken to her stepmother since their eventful car trip after she landed.

"Isabella. I wanted to say... I'm so sorry."

The shock of those words could have knocked Isabella down with a feather. It had been hard the year after her father had died. She and Danielle had always been friends. Danielle being like an older sister to her rather than a mother figure. After her father had died, their relationship had become strained and fraught.

"Are you there?" Danielle's voice came again.

"I'm here," Isabella said, not knowing what else to say.

“Good,” Danielle said, her voice quiet. “Could we meet up for lunch? There seems to be so much to say. I want to apologise for not believing you.”

“It’s unnecessary,” Isabella said, not wanting to dredge up the past.

“Please,” Danielle pleaded. “It will be the last time you hear from me. If not for me, for your father’s memory.”

Isabella sighed. “That’s low even for you.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m desperate. I haven’t been sleeping since I heard your interview. I need to talk to you. Please... half an hour?”

Drawing in a deep breath, Isabella weighed up her options. She would be heading back to Thailand soon. She could walk away, ignore her. Leave her with her guilt. But then, this past was unresolved. Maybe speaking to Danielle was one more box she could tick off and put behind her.

“Okay, but I’ll come to you. I don’t want any restaurants where the press can take photos. If that is what you’re hoping for...”

“No, it’s not. I promise. I just want to talk. How about lunch tomorrow?”

“All right, I’ll see you tomorrow at one.”

Isabella jotted down Danielle’s address, surprised she wasn’t living in the penthouse she’d shared with her father. Looking at the address, it was only a short distance from Christian’s. Both she and Danielle had been living in the family home when she had left. Danielle had clearly moved out later.



When Isabella arrived at Danielle’s apartment, the doorman showed her up. The apartment building was modern. Lots of glass and marble, a large chandelier hanging from the triple-height ceiling of the foyer.

Danielle's apartment was not what Isabella had expected. Like Christian's apartment, the main living area was mainly open plan, with stairs once again leading to a second floor. Unlike Christian's home, Danielle's was filled with knick-knacks from the house. All the little bits Danielle had collected over the years... and photographs. Not just a few. Hundreds of photographs of them together as a family lined the walls. It was not what Isabella had expected, and as a result, she found herself drawn to them, taking them in. So many wonderful memories.

Danielle came to stand beside her, her finger trailing over a picture of the three of them at a campsite.

"I don't think your father ever forgave me for that trip," she said, a smile gracing her lips.

Isabella laughed. "I think you're right. The millionaire businessman in a tent, sleeping on the floor."

The camping trip had taken place the summer after Danielle had come into their lives. Isabella had been twelve, her mother having died two years before. Danielle had suggested a bonding trip. Isabella had initially pulled a face when her father had suggested it, but it had turned out to be wonderful. She and Danielle bonded over her father's disgust at traipsing through the mud to shower in the communal washrooms, especially when the British weather had shown its true colours, and it had rained for much of the week, flooding their tent. The trip had been the first of many, although her father had purchased a top-of-the-range caravan for future years. He admitted he liked the camping experience but wanted to sleep in a comfortable bed. Neither she nor Danielle complained. The camping trips were some of the best memories Isabella had. They had just been happy to spend time together.

They stood in silence, staring at the wall.

"Something smells good," Isabella said, a delicious smell filling the air from the kitchen.

"I made your favourite," Danielle said, holding out her hand, ushering Isabella forward.

Out of habit, Isabella worked alongside Danielle in the kitchen. Danielle had laid the table up on the balcony. The sun blazing down with early summer heat.

“You have a beautiful home,” Isabella said as they carried the food to the table.

“Thank you,” Danielle said. “I couldn’t stay in the house. Not without your father... and with you gone. It was just too empty. So I packed up my memories and brought them here.”

Isabella nodded. The house hadn’t been the same once her father died. It was as if something had ripped its heart and soul out, leaving only bricks and mortar.

They sat in silence for a few moments before Danielle put her knife and fork down and looked across at Isabella.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you after your father died. I’m sorry I sent you to rehab. I’m sorry for everything.” Her voice broke, Isabella, watched as she forced herself on. “I have no excuse. I loved Dominic, and I loved you. I wasn’t myself after your father died. You shut me out, and I didn’t know how to help you. I know I should have tried harder.”

“Is that why you slept with Pierce?” Isabella asked.

She’d never let on to her stepmother that she’d seen Pierce creeping out of her bedroom one morning. His hair messy, his shirt untucked. He’d smiled at her as he walked past, wishing her a *good morning*.

Danielle’s eyes shot to hers. Isabella watched in horror as they filled with tears.

“Oh God,” Danielle said, grabbing her napkin and swiping angrily at her face. “I never wanted you to know. It was a one off... I swear. I loved your father. After he died, Pierce was so kind. He was always there to help. He was so understanding having lost Dorothy. You had started to see Edward.” Danielle looked down at her lap. “One night, you were out. I was going through my phone voicemails. Your father had left me one the morning he’d gone for his walk. I was in shock. Next thing I know, Pierce is at the door. He saw I was distressed and came in to comfort me. Then it was morning... I was horrified. I



told him he needed to leave and that it would never happen again. We could only be friends.”

Danielle looked up, her hand snaking across the table, grabbing Isabella’s.

“I promise it was only the once.”

Danielle’s distress was clear. Isabella believed her. Both Pierce and Danielle had been grieving the loss of her father. She had fallen into a relationship with Edward for exactly the same reason. They’d always been there. The pair of them, helping, supporting.

“I’m sorry I didn’t believe you over Edward,” Danielle said quietly. “Pierce was so convincing and I had no reason to doubt him.” Isabella watched as Danielle fought with the memory. “Then, when the photographs came out, it seemed like everything they’d told me was true. They said we all needed to protect you. It was our duty, now Dominic was gone. That rehab was probably the best place for you to get the help you so desperately needed.”

Her eyes locked with Isabella’s, the sadness radiating from them enough to make Isabella catch her breath.

“We weren’t talking. You’d turned away from me...” Realisation shone from her eyes. “That was when you saw Pierce leaving my room. That was when we stopped talking.”

Isabella dropped her gaze. It was true. She’d not been mature enough to confront her stepmother with what she had seen. Instead, she’d closed down and shut her out. As far as she was concerned, Danielle could not have loved her father if she was jumping straight into bed with his best friend and business partner.

“So it was Pierce’s suggestion to put me into rehab?” Isabella asked.

She had to know. She’d broken up with Edward, had been about to graduate. She would have been going back to King and Lebroc as soon as she finished. It had been their father/daughter dream, to work together at the family firm. Edward was there with his father, and she would work

alongside hers. Instead, it had all gone wrong. She'd ended up turning her back on everything she knew and left. Their actions had meant she could not even access her trust fund, although that had been the least of her worries at the time.

"I won't blame him. I could've said no. I was so worried I'd let your father down I wasn't thinking straight. Dominic was always so proud of you. He loved you so much."

Danielle was now openly crying. This was not the cold woman who had picked her up from the airport. This was the Danielle she remembered, who'd been there during her teenage years. The woman who had eased her through her first period, who'd talked to her about sex, had held her when she cried over her first teenage crush... this was the woman she remembered.

Isabella stood up and moved around the table, pulling Danielle into her arms, rocking her, as Danielle had done so many times for her.

"I miss him so much," Danielle cried into Isabella's stomach. Isabella felt her eyes fill up as the two held each other and cried over the years that could have been and what they'd both lost.

Isabella stayed for several hours. She and Danielle catching up. Isabella had not realised how much she'd missed her stepmother. It was only when she was leaving that Danielle stepped forward and pulled her into her arms.

"I hope you won't be a stranger?" she said before stepping back and taking Isabella's face into her hands.

Isabella smiled. "Never. I've missed you," Isabella said, finding she really meant it.

"Not as much as I've missed you. You were my daughter, maybe not by blood, but in my heart. I'm sorry about the airport. I think I was in shock that you'd reappeared."

"Let's put the past behind us. I know it's what Dad would have wanted. He loved you, Danielle. You made him happy. You brought light back into our house when it had all but died with my mother. I will always be grateful for that."

“And Christian...?” Danielle’s eyes sparkled. “You always had an enormous crush on him growing up... your father would be thrilled. He thought the world of Christian. It doesn’t surprise me he’s been as successful as he has.”

Isabella’s vision blurred. Would her father have been happy with her choices? They hugged once more before Isabella left and made her way back to Christian’s apartment. The sun was still shining, the beauty of the long summer nights.

“Hi,” Christian said, coming up and taking her into his arms as she let herself into the apartment.

“Hi, you,” Isabella said, smiling up at him.

“How did it go with Danielle?” Christian asked, dropping a kiss on her upturned mouth.

Isabella smiled up at him, “It was good, and I’m glad I went... we cleared the air. I’d forgotten who she was to Dad and me. She wasn’t the money grabber everyone accused her of being. She was a genuine woman who fell in love with a wealthy man and took on his daughter, showering her with love. Somehow, that got lost,” Isabella said wistfully.

Isabella wrapped her arms around Christian’s waist, resting her head on his chest. The strong beat of his heart comforting her.

“I may be wrong,” Isabella said, drawing her head back and looking up at Christian, “But I think Pierce was up to something. I’m not sure what game he played, but somehow, I think I walked straight into his trap. Things Edward said when I caught him with Victoria, and the events that occurred afterwards... maybe I’m being paranoid.”

Christian tipped her chin up, concern flashing through his eyes.

“One thing I’ve learned in business. If your gut is telling you something, then you should listen, or at least check it out... I’m not sure what Pierce would have gained by what happened, and your father spoke very fondly of him, but park the knowledge. Has he been in touch?”

“You sound like my father. He always used to talk about following his gut. The answer is no, Pierce hasn’t tried to contact me. For how close my father and he were, it’s strange. But then again, maybe he’s embarrassed. We didn’t exactly part on the best of terms,” Isabella stepped back. “Perhaps I should visit him. Go into the office, see some of the old faces. It is my family’s business as much as his.”

Isabella watched as Christian’s business face fell into place. She’d seen this many times over the past couple of weeks since moving in. His brain was churning, running scenarios.

“Will you hold off? At least until I can...”

Isabella stepped forward, placing a finger against his lips. She was falling in love with this man.

“Of course. I need time to think. I won’t jump in until I know where I’ll land. That is something else my father drummed into me,” she said. “The things Danielle said have set off warning bells. I won’t ignore them. They may be nothing, or they may be something. I need to tread carefully.”

She wanted Christian to know she was not some naïve child. Throughout her life, her father raised her in a business environment, and she attended many of his business meetings to prepare for her future. She’d honed her skills within her own company.

“Enough of the business talk. I can think of something else I’d much rather be doing.”

Her hands moved to the top button of his shirt, her lower lip catching in her teeth.

Christian’s pupils dilated, and he stepped into her space, scooping her up.

“I couldn’t agree more,” he said before heading for the stairs.

## Chapter Thirty-four

### *Christian*

The next couple of days flew by. Christian had done as Isabella requested and dropped the issue of Edward and Pierce. Although his gut was screaming, there was more at play. He just couldn't work out what. Pierce was as wealthy as Dominic had been, probably more so, since he had taken over the company. As far as the business gossip mill was concerned, King and Lebroc were a thriving firm, so apart from keeping Isabella out of the business, what other motive could he have?

Lying in bed, Christian watched as Isabella turned in his arms, resting her chin and hand on his chest as she looked up at him.

"I'm going to sort out my trust fund before I return to Thailand. I may as well get the paperwork sorted before I leave."

A sharp pain radiated through Christian's chest at her words, but he swallowed it down and smiled at her.

"That makes sense," he said, almost choking on the words.

Isabella put her head back down, resting her ear over his heart. He'd got used to her sleeping next to him. It had been six weeks since she'd arrived back in the UK. Six weeks of her being with him should have been smothering. Instead, he enjoyed her filling his space with her calming presence. She even got on with his daughter, something he'd never envisaged he would let happen.

"Do you know a solicitor?" Isabella asked, looking up once more. "I want to keep this quiet."

Christian raised a brow. They'd not discussed her trust fund. He only knew about the clause that had prevented her from taking control of it on her twenty-fifth birthday. It had been invoked after her father's death, when she'd been admitted to rehab.

Isabella rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling, turning her head as Christian rolled onto his side and propped himself up on his elbow. “It sounds silly, I know, but I really want to keep my life out of the press,” Isabella said.

“It’s not silly. No one wants to have their life paraded for the entertainment of others. I’ve strived to keep my personal life out of the public eye. Who I see, and what I do, they’re my business,” Christian said.

“So, can you help me?” Isabella asked, giving him a coy smile as she turned to face him and hooked a leg over his thigh.

“I can,” he mumbled, dropping his lips into the crook of her neck. “Tobias Grant, Star’s best friend and a first-class lawyer. He’s also part of the family. He helped raise Skylar with Star and his wife, Laura. If you want to trust anyone. Tobias is the man.”

Christian continued to trail kisses up Isabella’s neck before wrapping his arm around her waist and pulling their lower bodies together.

Isabella groaned, a sound he was growing to love.

Isabella squirmed against him, positioning him at her entrance. He thrust into her. Her body accepted and welcomed him home. They moved together, kissing and touching until their bodies shattered around one another. Isabella lay in his arms, her eyes closed, her breathing soft and even.

Christian kissed the tip of her nose. “I’m going to miss you more than you will ever know,” he whispered before gently extracting himself from her arms and tucking her in. It was time to get to work and call Toby.



Christian’s phone buzzed, snapping him back into the present.

“Hi, Lucy.”

“I have Tobias Grant on line one,” Lucy said.

“Great, put him through,” Christian said, his heart rate picking up.

“Christian,” Toby said.

“Hi Toby, thank you for calling me back.”

He’d called Toby as soon as he reached the office, but according to his PA, Toby was in client meetings all morning.

“What can I do for you? This is becoming a habit... Don’t you have a ream of solicitors at your disposal over there at The Dupree Group? Or is this about Skylar?”

Toby’s voice changed at the mention of Skylar’s name. Toby and his wife Laura had played an integral part in Skylar’s early years. She’d lived with them until Star and Damian had rekindled their romance. Toby had been the male role model and father figure in her life until that point. It had been Toby Christian had turned to, when he wanted to set up regular payments to Star for Skylar. It had horrified his lawyers the money he was signing over, but to Christian, that was all it was, money. He’d used Toby because, unlike his lawyers, who would have written any agreements to fall in his favour, he knew Toby would do the opposite and ensure it left Star with all the power in their relationship. That was exactly what he’d done. Christian had wanted his daughter to have everything she needed, and that included the woman who’d given up everything to raise her. Christian hadn’t been able to fault Toby’s professionalism. He’d turned the documentation around within record time, with additional clauses that protected Star and Skylar should their relationship sour. Everything Christian hoped for.

“Not about Skylar, but I do require discretion,” Christian added.

“Ahh. Isabella King,” Toby said, making a leap and hitting the mark.

Christian wasn’t surprised, not after their previous discussion. Plus, Toby and Laura would have heard all about

Isabella from both Star and Skylar. She'd made quite the impression.

"How can I help? Is this about..." Toby asked.

"Isabella wants to sort out her trust fund before she returns to Thailand. She wants to tie up any loose ends before she goes."

"That's late for a trust fund. She must be in her late twenties. Most trust funds mature at twenty-five," Toby said.

"It is," Christian added. "Her father included a clause in his will. Its aim was to protect Isabella's wealth from external forces. Being sent to rehab triggered the clause to be activated, stopping Isabella from getting her inheritance until she turns thirty."

Toby was quiet as Christian's last statement sank in.

"I'll need to speak to Isabella. She'll need to instruct me if that's what she wants."

Christian paused. "Let me talk to her. She wants to keep this quiet. She's had more than enough press coverage to last a lifetime, and she doesn't want to reinvigorate any press interest. Can we come and see you?"

"How about I come by on my way home?" Toby said. Christian heard him clicking in the background. "I have a late meeting tonight. I can call in after that. That way, I can keep this off the books until it becomes official."

"That sounds perfect. What time should we expect you?"

"My last meeting is at six. I should be done by seven. I can be with you shortly after."

They said goodbye, and Christian breathed a sigh of relief. He and Toby had not always seen eye-to-eye. However, Christian knew he could trust him. He would never do anything to hurt Skylar or Star.

○○○○○



Christian got home at six thirty. He'd called ahead to let Isabella know Toby would join them.

Toby arrived on time. The desk called up to let them know he was on his way. The doorbell chimed, and Christian answered.

"Come in," Christian said, stepping back and letting Toby enter.

"This really is something," Toby said, his eyes catching on the view over London. "Star has always said I should come and see it for myself."

Christian chuckled. "You, Laura, and little Catherine will have to come over for dinner with Star and Damian one night," Christian said.

"That would be great," Toby added with a very non-committal tone.

Maybe he didn't believe him, or maybe he wasn't interested. Christian made a note to make sure he at least put an official invitation out. Isabella appeared behind Toby. She'd changed out of her gym wear into a knee-length dress that hugged her curves.

"Thank you for coming and for giving up your evening," Isabella said.

"It's not a problem. Christian said you wanted to keep this meeting quiet. This was the best option. You could have come to our house, but we have a nearly two-year-old, which is not conducive to a quiet environment. When I get home, I'm Daddy. I'm not allowed to work," Toby said, smiling.

"As it should be," Isabella added before walking Toby over to the sofas and offering him a seat.

Christian grabbed everyone a drink and joined them, taking a seat next to Isabella.

"I know Christian gave you a brief update earlier. What can you tell me? What should I be doing?" Isabella asked.

Christian listened as Isabella took charge of the meeting. It was the first time he had seen this side of her, a side that was

definitely her father's.

"I looked at your father's will. I think we can get the clause overturned if you wish. I know it expires in eighteen months, but the reason behind it is no longer valid. It means you can take control of the trust now," Toby said.

Christian watched as Isabella shook her head. "I've no need for the money," Isabella said. "I don't lead a lavish lifestyle. My business is sufficient, and I have the inheritance my mother left me. It may not be of the same scale as my father's, but I'm more than comfortable."

Toby flashed a look at Christian and then moved his gaze back to Isabella. "The choice is yours, but I would advise that you at least inquire about your trust fund. Find out its value, ensure that it's being managed properly. You can decide who else you would like to appoint as trustees, or you may wish to keep your current ones on. It will be easier to sort this out before you return home. You can get all the *Is dotted and the Ts crossed*. If you sign the paperwork now, it will save you returning later."

"And you can do that for me?" Isabella asked.

"Yes, I can collate all the relevant information, and you will at least have an up-to-date portfolio," Toby answered.

Christian breathed a sigh of relief when Isabella's eyes met his. She raised a questioning eyebrow.

"The choice is yours, but there's no harm in looking into it," Christian added.

Isabella nodded and smiled at Toby. "I'd like to appoint you as my solicitor."

"Great. I'll get onto this in the morning."

Toby pulled out the relevant paperwork and went through it with Isabella. She signed, and at the end of the meeting, they both moved to the door.

"Thank you, Toby," Isabella said before leaving Christian to walk Toby to the lift.

Toby stood with a silly grin on his face.

“She’s a keeper,” he whispered. “Never thought I’d see the day a small fiery redhead would bring Christian Dupree to his knees.”

“I’m only going to let you get away with that comment because my daughter adores you,” Christian growled.

Maybe he wouldn’t issue him an invitation. He was not sure he could cope with his smug persona.

The lift arrived, and Toby slapped him on the back before he entered. “Tell Isabella I’ll be in touch.”

Christian forced a smile as the lift closed on Toby’s grin.

He walked back into the apartment. Toby wasn’t wrong. A fiery redhead *had* brought him to his knees. He just didn’t know what to do about it. He knew Isabella was anxious about what Toby might uncover, although they were all at a loss about what that could be. Christian understood why Isabella had kept quiet about her concerns. She did not want to influence Toby’s work. He, however, didn’t do coincidences. Not when people like Pierce and Edward Lebroc were involved.

# Chapter Thirty-five

## *Isabella*

After her meeting with Toby, Isabella pushed hard to put the niggling feeling in the back of her mind. She spent time with Scarlett, had lunch with Star, who was getting bigger by the day, and even popped in to see Danielle. Nothing like healing old wounds to enable you to move forward. It also helped to open the doorway to memories she had suppressed—memories of her father and the things they had done together, the plans they had made for the future. Plans that had died the day he had.

Before Isabella knew it, it was time for Skylar's career week. Skylar had asked that she come in and discuss The Retreat and what they did there. That wasn't a problem. It was a small business, and Isabella had done her degree in business and marketing. Skylar had also begged her to do some yoga with the class. Isabella had the impression Skylar was more interested in the yoga teaching aspect than the business side. But as Christian pointed out, by showing both, she was pointing out to the children how a passion or hobby could be turned into a career. Isabella had never thought about it like that, but when he said it, she used that as her tagline to hook the class in.

Skylar was so excited when Isabella and Star turned up. Star agreed to accompany Isabella to the school. Laura, Toby's wife, and Star's best friend, was also Skylar's teacher. Star had introduced them as soon as Isabella had agreed to participate in career week, and Laura had thought it would be a wonderful idea if Isabella gave the class a yoga lesson and talk. Especially as mindfulness and well-being were becoming such an important part of the curriculum.

When Isabella walked into the classroom, all the children were sitting on the carpet at the front. The tables had been pushed to one side to make some space. Skylar stepped up to the front, clasping Isabella's hand and grinning at her.

“This is Isabella,” Skylar said, introducing her.

“Is she the lady your daddy was kissing in the paper?” one boy asked.

Isabella felt her cheeks redden. Maybe this hadn’t been such a good idea. How could she have forgotten about that?

Skylar was unfazed. Instead, she shot the boy in question a look that could kill before smiling sweetly at him.

“It is. And she’s awesome. She runs the best yoga retreat in Thailand and has been teaching me yoga. So be quiet and listen.”

Skylar’s hands were now on her hips. Isabella’s eyes flicked to Star and Laura at the back. Star was looking at the ground. Her bottom lip caught between her teeth as she tried not to laugh. Well, if Star wasn’t concerned, then she wouldn’t be. The boy who had spoken up had gone silent under Skylar’s stare before shrugging and looking away.

“Hello, everyone. My name is Isabella King, and I’m pleased to be here to talk to you about my job. As Skylar said, I’m a yoga instructor. I run a yoga retreat in Thailand where people come and practise yoga and meditation with myself, my business partner and our team for their holidays.”

The class sat and stared. Skylar stood next to her.

Taking a deep breath, she continued. “Has anyone here heard of yoga?”

Two children raised their hands. “What do you think it is?”

The children gave her some answers. She loved it when the boy raised his hand and told her his mum did yoga in front of the telly, in her yoga pants, another telling her that some poses had animal names.

Isabella felt her body relax. The children were just smaller versions of the guests that stayed at the retreat. They talked about yoga coming from ancient times when people were looking for ways to calm their minds in meditation. She showed them Pranayama, and got them to practice some of the

breath regulation techniques they used, before they practised some of the meditation chants she used.

“Take a big breath in through the nose, then imagine you are blowing out candles or blowing bubbles,” she said, amazed even the boys seemed engaged.

It was Laura who spoke up. “I can see this breathing being really useful if you’re stressed or angry.”

Isabella nodded at her. “It is. If any of you feel angry, this breathing technique is perfect.”

Before she left, she spread the class out to try some of the yoga poses themselves. The children were amazing. Like Skylar, their bodies were naturally flexible. Isabella moved between them, careful to not touch but to tell each child how they could improve their position. Before she knew it, the hour session was over.

Laura stepped forward and reclaimed the class.

“Can we all say a big thank you to Ms King for giving up her afternoon and coming to see us?”

All the children let out a cheer. Skylar threw her arms around her waist. “Thank you, Isabella,” she said. “Can we do some more yoga next time I come to stay?”

Isabella smiled down at her, “Of course we can. You’re a natural.” Skylar beamed from ear to ear. “I will see you soon. Goodbye, everyone.”

Star and Isabella left the classroom and made their way to the front of the school.

“Thank you so much,” Star said. “Having you come in meant the world to Skylar. You’ve made quite the impression.”

Isabella felt the colour rise in her cheeks. “She’s an amazing girl. A credit to you.”

“Thank you. As you saw, she has a strong sense of right and wrong,” Star said, clearly pointing out the opening comment the boy had made.

Isabella grimaced. “I’d not thought about that. I’m sorry if it was awkward.”

Isabella was a little taken aback when Star laughed.

“Please don’t apologise,” she said, holding her bump as she laughed. “Skylar and I invited you. Skylar is very protective. I always knew she would close down any comments. She’s well respected in her class. No one was going to try anything. I think the comment was more out of interest.”

Isabella smiled back at Star. If she wasn’t worried, then who was she to overthink it? The last thing she wanted to do was embarrass Star, Skylar, or Christian. She was only here temporarily, that thought, leaving a heavy feeling around her heart.

“Shall we grab a drink? There is an amazing coffee shop around the corner,” Star asked suddenly.

“That would be lovely,” Isabella said.

She enjoyed spending time with Star. She was not who she’d expected in the beginning, instead she’d been warm and welcoming.

They decided to walk.

Star had been right. The coffee shop was close to the school. Isabella got their drinks, making Star sit down. Her bump was getting bigger every time she saw her.

“Only two months to go,” Star said when Isabella finally sat down. “I can’t wait to meet this little bundle. He or she is determined to keep me up most of the night.” She complained, but her eyes sparkled. “Skylar is so excited, I think she’s fit to burst. She wants to be a big sister so badly.”

“It’s an exciting time for you all,” Isabella said.

“I’m going to be nosy,” Star said. “What’s the latest?”

Isabella sat back. “I’m still waiting to hear from Toby. Hopefully, once he gets back to me, we can get the ball rolling, and life can return to normal.”

Isabella watched as Star stared down at her drink, her finger circling the top. “That wasn’t what I meant... but is that what you want? Life to go back to normal?”

Isabella stared out of the coffee shop window. What did she want? She’d never felt so connected to another person as she did to Christian, but he’d never asked her to stay. If he did, would she want to? She had a life in Thailand. She ran a business, one she loved. Her life wasn’t in London anymore. Christian had replaced all her negative memories of the time before she left, with new, shiny ones. But could she give up all she’d achieved? Did she want to?

“I don’t know,” she answered eventually. “My life is in Thailand. My business is there.”

“What about Christian? You and he seem to be very close.”

“We’ve been together for seven weeks,” Isabella said. She was aware of how little time it had been, although it felt like she had known him a lifetime. “I’ve no idea what the future holds. My life is in Thailand. I’m not sure how we could work, even if we wanted it to.”

Isabella could not believe she was having this conversation with Star. She was the sister of the woman Christian had been in love with. The woman who still held his heart.

“When you know, you know,” Star said cryptically before changing the subject.

They spent the rest of the afternoon before pickup time discussing post-pregnancy yoga and baby clothes.



“How did it go?” Christian asked as soon as she walked through the door.

Isabella jumped up to greet him, unable to keep the goofy grin off her face. She’d had so much fun.

“It was brilliant. You were right. Even the boys loved the idea of setting up their own business with something they



loved doing. Skylar may just have a class of entrepreneurs with her.”

Isabella melted against him as he took her in his arms. Kissing her head. “Thank you, I know how much it meant to Skylar.”

Isabella looked up at him. “It was no trouble. I really enjoyed myself. It also reminded me how much I love my job.”

A strange expression passed over Christian’s face before he schooled his features, plastering a smile on his face.

“Confirmation you’re doing the right job is always important,” he added before untangling himself.

# Chapter Thirty-six

## *Christian*

Isabella had been up before Christian. He'd awoken to find himself in an empty bed, his body alert to her absence even before his brain was fully awake.

He padded downstairs to find Isabella in a deep, meditative state. Her body radiated a level of calm and peacefulness he could only aspire to. Not wanting to disturb her, he turned and left, making his way back upstairs to get ready for work.

As he stepped into the shower, his mind returned to the night before. What had begun as great sex had migrated and become something more. Something had snapped in his chest as he looked at her. His heart had taken over, and he'd worshipped her with his body for much of the night. When they'd finally separated, they'd fallen silent. He had been lost for words. It had appeared Isabella had felt the same. Instead of talking, Christian had wrapped himself around her and waited for her breathing to even out before he'd allowed his own brain to shut down. This morning, he was still lost. Isabella was like a drug, one he was not sure he could live without. But as he'd said to Seb, he could not ask Isabella to give up the life she'd carved out for herself any more than he was able to walk away from his own commitments. It looked like life once again had its own ideas for Christian Dupree, and they did not involve a happy ending.

When Christian came downstairs, Isabella was waiting for him in the kitchen. She looked up as he reached the bottom of the stairs, her smile taking his breath away.

"Good morning," she said, handing him a freshly brewed cup of coffee and a bowl of porridge covered in a citrus salsa, and topped with nuts and seeds.

He'd initially pulled a face when Isabella had served it, but then he'd tried it. He had to admit, it sustained him for longer than any of his previous breakfasts, and that was when he'd

even bothered to eat. Sometimes, he would send Lucy down to the canteen to grab him something if he got hungry, but now...

“Morning,” he said, putting them both on the side and pulling her into his arms. “I missed you this morning.”

He watched a flush spread over her cheeks, her hand resting on his chest. “I woke up and made the most of the early morning,” she said, almost wistfully. “Talking to the children yesterday reminded me how much I have let my practice slip since being here.”

Christian felt a wrench in his chest at her words. “Don’t let me stop you. Maybe you should show me... Skylar seems taken with it.”

Isabella looked up at him, her eyes wide. “Really? You’d try?” she asked.

Christian baulked a little. What had he just agreed to?

“Why not? I keep hearing all the benefits, and according to Star’s text message this morning, yoga is good for me.”

Isabella laughed. “It is, but it’s not just the moves. It’s a freeing of the mind as well. Meditation is a huge part of yoga. Letting your mind and body relax. Can you do that, Mr Dupree?” she asked, her hand coming up and cupping his cheek.

“I won’t know until I try,” he added, sweeping up his breakfast and moving to one of the stools.

If he didn’t move away from her, he was likely to be late for work. She was like a magnet, his attraction growing daily.

Isabella went back to finishing her breakfast. She prepared the food the night before. There was no excuse then.

“Have you heard from Toby?” Christian asked.

It had been a week.

“No, but I expect to later. He left a voicemail while I was at school. He said he should have more details today.”

“Call me when you hear from him,” Christian said, placing his cup and plate in the dishwasher.

Isabella had that effect on him. His housekeeper probably wondered what he employed her for. There had been nothing out of place since Isabella moved in. The washing up was done, and everything was clean and tidy.

“I will. Now you need to get to work, or you’ll be late.”

She came around and placed a kiss against his lips. Christian pulled her close, his tongue teasing, demanding entrance. Isabella moaned as their tongues finally met, her body moulded against his. He could feel every contour of her body.

He finally dragged himself away, leaving them both breathless.

“I need to go,” he moaned. “I will see you later.”

Isabella grinned as she looked down, clearly pleased with the effect she had on him.

“Have fun,” she said before adding, “I’m having lunch with Scarlett today.”

“Say hello to my sister from me, maybe invite her over one evening. It would be good to catch up,” Christian added.

There may be six years difference in their age, but they’d always been close growing up. Yes, he’d not always enjoyed having a younger sister, especially when she’d followed him and his friends around, but he had always been the protective older brother. Only he’d been allowed to pull a face. He was grateful Scarlett hadn’t resented him for sending her overseas. She’d seen it as a great adventure. Unaware, at the time, of the real reason she was being sent. He’d been determined she would not be a pawn in anyone’s game.

“I will do. She will like that,” Isabella added before shooing him towards the door. “You are going to be late.”

Christian dropped another quick kiss on her lips before making his way, laughing to the door. As he got into the lift, he stopped as he caught his smiling face in the mirror. Who was this man staring back at him? He barely recognised himself, didn’t think he had laughed or smiled this much in years.



“Hi, Lucy,” he said when his intercom buzzed.

“Ms King is here to see you,” Lucy replied. “And your three thirty has called and cancelled.”

“That’s great. Please send Isabella in.”

Christian got up and moved around his desk. The door opened, and Isabella entered, wearing one of the summer dresses Lucy had picked out for her in the beginning. Christian stared in awe. She was so different from most of the women he knew or had become accustomed to. Even with all the money she had at her disposal, she refrained from splashing out on a new wardrobe or expensive clothes. She’d bought the odd outfit if they’d gone out for dinner, but she’d explained to him she had little use for designer labels in her life, especially at The Retreat.

“This is a pleasant surprise,” he said, stepping forward and dropping a kiss on her lips.

“Scarlett and I met up for lunch around the corner. I haven’t seen your office, so I called in on the off chance you were free,” she said, moving towards the window and staring out over the city. “This is quite something.”

Christian’s office wasn’t overlooked. His building higher than those surrounding him.

“How was your lunch?” he asked.

“Delicious,” Isabella said, turning to face him. “I heard from Toby, as well.”

“And?” Christian asked.

“Apparently, White and Partners would like a meeting to go over the paperwork. Toby seems to think this is all perfectly standard, and if that’s the case. I should have everything wrapped up by the end of next week.”

Her voice sounded light, but there was an underlying tone that tugged at the centre of his chest.

Christian sat down in his chair and pulled Isabella towards him.

“Do you want me to come to the meeting with you?” he asked.

Isabella ran her hand over his hair.

“You don’t need to,” she said. “You’ve done more than enough. This should be straightforward... but thank you. You don’t know what it means to have you in my corner through all of this.”

Christian looked up, cupping her head in his hands, drawing her lips to his. Their kiss intensified. Isabella lowered herself to her knees in front of him.

“Maybe there is a way I can say thank you,” she said, a mischievous twinkle in her eye, as her hands went to the button of his suit trousers, popping it open and lowering the zipper.

Christian groaned, his eyes flying to the door.

“It’s all right,” Isabella said. “I flicked the lock when I walked in.”

Christian’s eyes opened wide. This was going to be a first for him. His office had always been a place of work, never play. Play was something he kept very separate.

He watched as Isabella freed him from his boxers and licked her lips, her tongue running up the underside of his growing erection before using it to swirl around and over the top, lapping at the beads of excitement leaking from its tip. Christian dropped his head back against the chair, his eyes never leaving the woman on her knees before him. He couldn’t believe the look of pleasure radiating from her eyes as she guided his length deep into her mouth and throat. Her gaze never leaving his as she moved him in and out. He moaned, low and deep. A sound echoed by Isabella, the vibrations against him, causing his toes to curl.

*This woman!*

Before he lost total control, Christian gripped Isabella under the arms and lifted her effortlessly onto his desk, kicking his chair out of the way. Sliding her dress up around her waist, he slipped his hand into her panties, finding her hot and wet. She had clearly enjoyed what she had been doing to him.

“Hmm, I don’t want to waste a moment. This is a first for me,” Christian admitted. “But I’ve always fancied sex on my desk.”

Isabella raised an eyebrow, the look on her face one of amazement. “You’ve never had sex in your office? I thought that was what all billionaire businessmen did.”

Christian choked. “What gave you that idea?” he said, his fingers thrusting deep into her body, making her back arch and her breath catch.

“Well, they do in all the books,” she said breathlessly as he stroked the inside of her channel, making her body quiver with the need for release.

“Well, this billionaire has spent the past eight years making his billions. Not having sex in his office,” he said, his thumb flicking over her swollen bud, making her body shudder.

Pulling her panties to one side, he lined himself up at her entrance. “So this is very much a first for me,” he said as he slowly entered her, feeling her body stretch around him, her arousal drawing him in.

“Oh gosh,” Isabella gushed, her eyes rolling back in her head.

Her toned legs wrapped themselves around his waist, pulling him closer.

Christian pulled back before slamming back into her.

“I’m never going to look at my desk in the same way again without seeing you spread out, your body welcoming me.”

His words seemed to turn Isabella on, her channel quivering around him.

He leant forward, capturing her mouth with his and drinking down her moans as he pushed forward again and again until

the telltale pressure built low in his stomach. Using his thumb and forefinger, he pinched at Isabella's clit, her body almost rising off the desk as her orgasm detonated, her inner walls squeezing him tight in this position. He clamped his mouth on hers, swallowing her scream. He continued to move, drawing out her orgasm before his own body shuddered and jerked as he emptied himself deep inside her.

Isabella leant back on her elbows, a huge grin on her face, their bodies still joined. "Maybe I should come and visit you more often."

Christian groaned, pulling back before cleaning Isabella up with a tissue. "I would like nothing more," he said. "But I'm not sure how much work I'd get done."

Isabella leant forward and kissed his lips. "I wanted to make up for this morning," she said, her hands sliding down his body as she readjusted him back into his boxers before zipping up and re-buttoning his trousers.

Christian watched as she adjusted her dress, letting it fall just above her knees. Apart from her flushed cheeks, no one would know she'd just come apart on his desk. She made her way to the door and gently flicked the lock.

"I'll see you at home later," she said, sending him a cheeky wink over her shoulder.

Christian dropped back into his chair and ran a hand through his hair. What had just happened? Oh, he knew, he'd just had a mind-shattering orgasm in his office, at his desk. This woman was turning his life inside out and upside down. The more he thought he knew her, the more she surprised him. She kept him on his toes. The past seven weeks had been heaven, but he knew the drop was going to be hell. He might as well enjoy every moment of her while he could. The meeting about her trust fund was the last thing keeping her in the UK. Once that was finalised, she would be leaving. He just had to prepare himself for that. He would not kid himself that their relationship would work long distance. However much someone tried, it was impossible. They may only have days left, but he would make the most of it. He was falling in love



with Isabella King. Maybe he'd been in love with her since that first weekend. She'd certainly made an impression. But love was not always enough. It was Isabella's free spirit he loved. What was the saying? *If you love someone, set them free.* That was what he would do. He loved her enough to watch her fly away.

# Chapter Thirty-seven

## *Isabella*

Isabella's heart was in her mouth as she entered the law firm she'd frequented with her father as a young girl. Mr White, her father's lawyer, had long since retired. Isabella looked around. The offices that had once been filled with antique wooden furniture were now all glass and stainless steel. The only throwback that remained were the large bookcases that housed all the old law books Mr White had collected. It was clear time stood still for no one. It had been out with the old and in with the new. That left a hollow feeling in her chest.

Toby was already waiting for her in reception, on one of the brown leather sofas, positioned for client comfort.

"Hi," Isabella said, stepping up and holding out her hand to Toby.

"Hi," he said, getting to his feet, shaking her hand. "Are you ready?"

"As I'll ever be," she said, trying to force a smile.

She'd been unable to shake the deep feeling of unease building over the past couple of days, and this morning, no amount of meditation, breathing, or yoga practice had managed to shift it.

Toby stepped up to the reception desk and introduced them. The receptionist smiled warmly, buzzing through and announcing them. They had not even had a chance to reseal themselves before a middle-aged man in a wrinkled suit appeared through the doors.

"I'm pleased to finally meet you, Lady Ringwood," he said, stepping forward and offering her his hand. "I am Randolph Gough, senior partner."

Isabella took his offered hand, trying hard not to grimace at the clammy palm gripping hers.

“Please call me Isabella,” Isabella said, hating the use of her formal title. “May I introduce my lawyer, Mr Tobias Grant.”

She directed his attention to Toby so she could wipe her hand down her trouser suit.

Isabella watched as he stepped forward, shaking Toby’s hand.

“Pleased to meet you. Your reputation proceeds you, Mr Grant,” he added, causing Toby to shoot Isabella a quizzical look.

Before Toby had the chance to reply, Randolph had turned on his heel and was moving back towards the glass doors.

“If you’d like to follow me, we have set up in one of the meeting rooms.”

Toby held the door as Isabella walked through. Someone had completely remodelled the offices. Outside rooms were now glass boxes filled with conference tables and whiteboards. The centre of the office was a hive of activity as lawyers and their assistants went about their business. The business had expanded greatly since Isabella’s last visit, just after her father’s death.

She’d felt dizzy as she’d listened to Mr White go over the terms of her father’s will. Danielle sobbing into her handkerchief while comforted by Pierce. She’d been numb, her body flooded by thoughts of the past. Of playing on the carpet, as her father had discussed business issues with Mr White. Of the cookies and toys Mr White had stashed in his cupboard for when she visited. It had been many years since they’d been out. The last time Isabella had been there, had been during her placement year, as she shadowed her father, learning the business. They’d talked excitedly of her working alongside him, of it becoming a true family business. She and Edward taking over from him and Pierce. It had been her father’s dream.

Isabella snapped herself out of it as they entered one of the conference rooms. Toby shot her a look as Randolph introduced her to three other lawyers, who were already sitting

at the table. They each stood up and introduced themselves. Isabella's heart rate shot up.

Was this normal?

It seemed like overkill for a handover. A quick glance at Toby told her he was thinking the same thing.

"Shall we get started?" Randolph said, pushing forward copies of the paperwork they had in front of them. "Before we start, I just want to say, we're looking into this. We did not want to keep you in the dark. Transparency is of the highest importance to us."

Toby spoke next, having opened the file they'd been given. "What the hell... This can't be right?"

"Unfortunately, it appears to be correct," Randolph said, his face going grey.

Isabella was too busy reading the body language of those around her to look at the paperwork. She knew there was an issue. She'd learned to read people over the years. In some ways, she was pleased she'd not lost that particular skill. Her father always complimented her on her intuition.

"How the hell have you lost one hundred and fifty million pounds?" Toby said, his eyes glaring across the table.

Isabella's heart sank. She knew her trust fund was substantial, but she'd been so devastated after her father's death she'd not really paid much attention. When Pierce and Danielle had denied her access, she had ignored it. Deciding to forge her own way,

"Lady Ringwood, sorry, Isabella," Randolph stuttered. "Am I correct in assuming from what Mr Grant has told us, you have requested no funds from your trust fund over the years since your father's death?"

"That's right," Isabella said. "I've been living off the inheritance I received after my mother's death. That was substantial and more than I needed."

Isabella had received ten million from her mother's estate on her death. Her father had invested it for her. By the time

Isabella left home, it had been a very substantial pot of money, more than enough for her to live on over the years. It was how she'd managed to pack up and leave without a backwards glance.

“We have a problem then.” Randolph sighed. “There have been multiple withdrawals by trustees, supposedly in your name.”

“Who?” Toby asked, his expression doing little to hide his displeasure.

Isabella could almost feel the rage oozing out of him.

Every face on the other side of the table blanched, “The trustee signatures belong to Mr Pierce Lebroc and Mr Carl Danvers.”

“Who’s Carl Danvers?” Toby asked, flicking through the paperwork in front of him before his eyes shot to Randolph’s. “He was yours?”

Randolph blanched, his eyes dropping to the table. “Carl Danvers was the solicitor put in charge of the trust fund on our behalf.”

“Where is he now?” Toby asked. “Why isn’t he in this meeting?”

“He was disbarred six months ago for unethical conduct. He’s moved abroad.” His voice was barely above a whisper. “We assumed it was unrelated, but maybe we overlooked this. We assumed Mr Lebroc and Mrs King... it requires two signatures to access the funds.”

Isabella watched as a stony mask of professionalism descended over Tobias. This was the lawyer Mr Gough had heard about.

“We will see you in court,” Toby said, gathering up the papers in front of him.

“Excuse me, gentleman,” Isabella said, resting a hand on Toby’s arm as he went to stand. “Can I have a word with Mr. Grant alone?”

Toby shot her a questioning look but sat back down, his eyes cold as he stared across the table.

Randolph and the others got up and left the room. You could almost hear their collective sigh of relief as they exited. Isabella could not blame them. The atmosphere was thick with tension. She needed a moment. If they left now and this went to court, the media frenzy that followed would shoot her back into the stratosphere.

Adrenaline flooded her system. The fear of losing her freedom again to the press was worse than the missing money she'd lived without for the past seven years.

Yes, the money was hers. Her father had worked hard for it and left it to her, but the thought of the media circus, the missing millions, was going to fuel, made her want to empty her breakfast into the waste bin in the corner.

When the men had left, Isabella stood up and walked to the window. She needed to move. Breathing deeply, she calmed her racing heart as she stared out over the city below. Once the tingling in her chest had passed, she turned and faced Toby, who was sitting patiently, waiting for her to speak.

“There can be no court case,” Isabella said.

Toby opened his mouth, but Isabella held up her hand. “We have to find another way.”

She walked towards the table and rested her hands on the wood, her head dropping, the stretch on her neck comforting.

“Pierce will not get away with this,” she said, raising her head and staring directly at Toby, letting him know she meant it. “However, the thought of having the press shadowing my every move again, my personal life on show. I cannot go through that again.”

Toby nodded, tapping his pen on the table, the motion helping him process his thoughts. “Okay. We’ll look to see if there’s another way. The choice is yours. I can only advise you.” He looked up, his eyes locking with hers, a twinkle appearing. “I’m not sure Christian will agree, but I’ll leave you to talk to him.”

Isabella moved back around the table, making sure those outside the room could not see her expression. “Let me handle Christian. He’ll support me,” she said, knowing those words to be true.

“I’ve no doubt... It’s interesting to see this side of Christian Dupree. I’m just saying he’ll want blood,” Toby added.

“That has to be the last resort. Pierce was my father’s best friend and business partner. He was like an uncle to me. I want to find out why. What if we’re missing something?”

“You’re taking this remarkably well. He’s stolen one hundred and fifty million from your trust fund. That’s no small amount,” Toby said to her, as if trying to get the response out of her he was expecting.

Isabella knew no one could understand. She was a lady, a multi-millionaire, even without her father’s money. What Toby was missing were the sights she’d seen as she travelled the world. The poverty people lived in, but the happy and fulfilled lives they lived. Over the past seven years, she’d seen and learned that there was so much more to life than money. She donated so much of hers every year to local charities. Instead, choosing to live on her wages from The Retreat. Her life was rich and full. Her father had accrued an obscene amount of wealth. He’d worked hard, yes, devoted his life to his company, but at the end of the day, when the car had spun out of control and hit him, all the money in the world could not save him.

“Ok, let’s call these guys back in. Let me do the talking... I’ll make sure there are no leaks.”

Toby called the others back into the room. Although, by law, none of the lawyers could discuss what they knew, Toby was careful to reiterate it. This was not to get out into the press. If it did... he left the threat hanging. Toby would work with them to discover where the missing millions were. They needed hard facts and an understanding of what the money had been used for before they could endeavour to recover it.

Another hour passed before they were ready to leave. Isabella looked down at her phone and saw twenty missed

messages from Christian. Toby grinned when he saw them.

“If you need me to come and discuss anything with him, let me know.” His face became more serious as he added, “We will sort this out, Isabella. Pierce will not get away with it.”

Isabella found herself liking Toby more and more. She liked his approach and knew her father would have done too. He’d been willing to listen to her rather than make demands. She had a feeling if anyone could help her understand whatever was going on, it would be Toby.

Isabella looked over as Christian’s driver pulled up to collect her. She fired off a message as soon as she got into the car, telling him she would update him later. There was no point in stirring up a hornet’s nest while he was at work. He’d already done so much for her. She knew she’d need all the backup she could get if she was going to see her missing trust fund, but not at anyone else’s expense.



Isabella walked into the apartment and sank down onto one of Christian’s sofas, her elbows resting on her knees, as she buried her hands in her hair.

What a mess!

She spent the entire journey trying to understand why Pierce would have stolen from her trust fund. Happy that Danielle had nothing to do with it. She could not have coped with that betrayal, especially after they had reconnected.

What was she missing? There had to be more to Pierce’s involvement. It was not like he could get away with it. Misappropriation of a trust fund was theft. He could go to prison if she pressed charges. He could lose everything he owned in order to pay it back. It made little sense. One hundred and fifty million was not a small sum either. More than a few seven-star holidays or fast cars.

What was she going to do? She could stay and fight this out, or she could just pack up shop and go back to Thailand and



take control of the fifty million left in the fund. It was more than she would ever need in her lifetime or that of her children. Should she ever be lucky enough to have them? A twinge pulled in the centre of her chest when she thought about children. Her mind going to Kalaya. She would be getting so big. Then there was Skylar. She'd developed a bond with Christian's daughter. She hoped Star would let him bring her to visit her once she returned home. Maybe Star and Damian would come too. Who was she kidding? Once she left, their romance was over. They'd need to cut ties. A long-distance relationship would be impossible to sustain when she felt as strongly as she did. Somewhere in their time together she had fallen hopelessly in love. That love, would eventually wear her down and destroy the inner strength and self-worth she'd spent years building. If Christian cared about her too... there was no easy solution.

Isabella looked up as the front door clicked. Christian was home? How long had she been sitting there?

"Hi," Christian said, his brows furrowing when he saw her. "Is everything okay?"

She got up and walked towards him, wrapping her arms around his waist. His arms automatically encircling her. It was amazing how safe she felt locked in his arms.

"What happened?" Christian asked.

"Pierce has misappropriated my trust fund. He and one partner at the law firm," Isabella said, looking up into Christian's face.

The furrow between Christian's eyes deepened. "The law will make him pay it back."

Isabella stepped back, taking his hand and leading him to the sofa.

"One hundred and fifty million pounds," Isabella said, her voice sounding tired even to herself.

"One hundred and fifty million pounds?" his voice incredulous. "What... What the hell has he spent a hundred and fifty million pounds on? What about the third trustee at the

firm?" Christian's jaw was slack as he took in the amount she was telling him.

She sat down next to him, resting her head on his shoulder. "The firm trustee was disbarred. They did not look into my trust fund as they assumed Pierce and Danielle were legitimate. As for Pierce, I've spent all afternoon trying to work out why he would do this?" Isabella sat up and faced him. "I just don't understand. But I can't face having this dragged through the press or courts. I've told Toby we need to find a solution that works without this becoming another circus. The money is not my life. I don't want my finances spread out for everyone to see... to scrutinise. I live a simple life."

Christian cupped her face, his thumb wiping away the tears trailing down her cheeks. "You may lead a simple life, Izzy." He held up his hand, interrupting her before she could speak. "But, you cannot allow him or this other man to get away with this. Are you happy for me to speak to Toby?"

"You can speak to Toby. I'm grateful for any input. I'm also aware you have more than enough on your plate with your own company. But Christian, the final decision has to be mine, and I'm asking now, begging that you respect my final decision."

Christian leaned forward and dropped a chaste kiss on her open lips.

"You're one of the strongest, most independent women I have met. The decision is yours. I just ask that you let me try to help find a solution. I care about you Izzy... and many heads are better than one. Let me do some digging and see what I come up with. Would that be okay?"

Isabella smiled at him, her heart pulling tighter at the look in his eyes. What had she done to deserve a man like Christian in her corner? She wished he could see how wonderful he was.

"Let's go out and grab some dinner," Christian said, standing up and pulling her with him. "There's a family-run Italian restaurant around the corner. I often go in there when I've had

a late meeting. Let's get out of here. You look like you could use a change of scenery."

Isabella squeezed his hand.

"We can do nothing tonight. Tomorrow, we start our offensive." Christian squeezed her hand back. "You're not alone."

"Thank you," she said as Christian led them both to the door.

Maybe going out was exactly what she needed.

# Chapter Thirty-eight

## *Christian*

Christian had held his temper as Isabella told him about Pierce stealing from her trust fund. Pierce had been Dominic's friend, and that meant something, or at least it should have. Their friendship was like his and Sebastian's. They'd been friends for years, had each other's backs. Pierce should have had Isabella's by default, although Christian was starting to wonder if, the triggering of the clause in Dominic's will, Isabella's engagement to his son, everything, had been all part of some warped plan to get hold of Dominic's money and Isabella's trust fund. If it hadn't been proven that Dominic's death had been a tragic accident... The man driving had a fatal heart attack at the wheel of the car... No, he had to stop thinking like that. Getting wrapped up in his fury at how Isabella had been treated by the people who were supposed to love and care for her the most made him sick. But then that made him a complete hypocrite. He had done exactly the same thing to Lily. As penance, he would help sort out Isabella's problems and enable her to return to the life she loved so much.

"Tobias Grant is on line one," Lucy said.

"Thank you, Lucy," Christian said, clicking the button and connecting with Toby.

"Hi Toby, any news?"

It had been a week since Toby and Isabella had visited White and Partners. Christian had spoken to Toby the next day, with Isabella present, and they were all currently on a fact-gathering mission. It was a lot of money for one man to have stolen. It was a mystery as to what he had done with it.

"Hi, Christian. I've just spoken to Isabella, and she asked me to fill you in."

"What's the latest?" Christian said, sitting back in his chair.

“I have spoken to White and Partners. The money was transferred to several accounts. It looks like Mr Danvers was paid a share, which we had all assumed would be the case. There had to be something in it for him to get him to sign the papers. That portion, however, is relatively small in comparison. About eight million. A million per transactional year.”

“Okay, so we are saying Pierce took the rest?”

“It looks that way. What makes it trickier? It looks like an account was set up in Isabella’s name. I have my private investigator looking into the account as we speak. Isabella says it is not an account she recognises. The PI and Isabella will be visiting the bank and seeing what information they can glean. Pierce wanted to make it look like Isabella had requested the money and that it had been paid to her. We just need to follow the trail, although I’m not sure how easy that will be if it was taken off-shore.”

“Is there money in the account now?” Christian asked.

“Until Isabella can get access to the account and prove she is its rightful owner, it’s hard to tell. My gut tells me the money will have been sent here and moved directly out.”

“Keep me informed. I have been looking into King and Lebroc Group’s finances. There have been rumours of bad business decisions since Dominic’s death, but nothing ever materialised, other than rumours.”

“Are you thinking Pierce used Isabella’s money to cover up bad business decisions?”

“It’s a possibility. Edward became CFO on Dominic’s death, while Pierce took over Dominic’s role as CEO. Dominic was the driving force behind the company. He had an amazing business brain. He helped me a lot in the early days. Gave me some great advice.”

Christian’s memory went back to a time when he was no longer even speaking to his own father. Instead, he had turned to Dominic.

“If that’s the case, then Isabella needs to decide what she wants to do. She is a majority shareholder in the company. King and Lebroc Group is her legacy. She was telling me how she had done her placement there, learning from her father. She’d had every intention of going into the business before her father’s death. She may still have done it had it not been for the press scandal. You may want to talk to her, Christian. If Pierce has stolen her money and invested it in the company to keep it afloat...”

Christian ran a hand over his head and down his face. Whatever the outcome, this was not looking good. Pierce was the CEO of the group, and he had stolen funds. Whether it was to reinvest or not. He could not stay at the head of the company. Could Edward take over and step into his father’s shoes? After his treatment of Isabella, Christian’s muscles quivered at the sheer thought. There was no way Edward was innocent if his father was guilty. As CFO, he would have had to have known where the money was coming from.

“I’ll speak to her. Isabella leads a very different life now, but this was her father’s business, after all. She is going to have to make some hard decisions whether she goes public or not.”

“You’ve changed, Christian,” Toby said.

“No. I haven’t changed. I’ve just made sure, no one other than myself will ever have a say or control over my life. I want to ensure the same for Isabella. She needs to have options that allow her to live the life she chooses, not one that is thrust upon her.”

There was silence for a moment before Toby added, “She’s lucky to have you in her corner.”

“I’m the lucky one,” Christian added. “Thank you, Toby. I’ll speak to Isabella.”

Toby ended the call, leaving Christian staring at the phone. Picking it back up, he dialed Seb’s extension.

“Hey, Stranger,” Seb said, his lighthearted nature coming through the line.

“Are you free?” Christian asked.

“I’ll be straight down.”

Christian knew he was going to regret this conversation, but he was out of options. This might be the only way he could ensure Isabella didn’t lose everything she had achieved.



Christian was exhausted by the time he got home that evening. Henri and Richard had been on the phone regarding issues within the Asia office. One of the suppliers had failed to deliver, and now there was a holdup in production. Not what they needed within the first few months of setting up.

“You look tired,” Isabella said, handing him a chilled glass of wine as he entered the apartment.

“Thank you,” Christian said, taking the glass from her. “We have a few teething problems in Asia. I’ve spent the afternoon on the phone with Henri after spending the morning on the phone with Richard.”

“Dinner is ready,” Isabella said. “Why don’t you go and get out of your suit?”

Christian headed for the stairs. He was bone weary. Between speaking to Richard and Henri, then Toby and Seb, his head was spinning with facts, issues and potential solutions. He needed to stop. He took another sip of wine before heading into his walk-in wardrobe. Grabbing a pair of jogging bottoms and a t-shirt he headed back downstairs to Isabella.

They ate in relative silence. The first time since she had moved in. Usually, they chatted about their days. He told her about the business, and she told him about all the things she had got up to. Today, it was like she sensed he needed to stop thinking. He had so many things he wanted to ask her after his phone conversation with Toby, but he couldn’t create a rational sentence.

“Come with me,” Isabella said, taking his hand. “I know what you need.”

Isabella led him up the stairs and into the bedroom.

“Isabella...” he said.

He wasn't sure he had the energy to worship her the way she deserved.

Isabella placed a finger on his lips. “Not what you think. I want you to lie down on the bed.”

He raised an eyebrow but did as he was told, his body sinking into the mattress. He swallowed a groan as his muscles cramped before beginning to relax.

“Close your eyes and listen to my voice. I want you to do everything I say.”

Christian closed his eyes and listened, the sound of Isabella's voice helping to chase away the stress of the day...



Christian awoke the next morning feeling refreshed. He couldn't even remember falling asleep. He remembered Isabella talking to him through a breathing technique, and then she had said some other stuff, and that was all he remembered.

He rolled over and realised the bed next to him was empty. Grabbing his phone, Christian saw it was seven-thirty.

What?

He'd slept eleven hours... he never slept eleven hours, five if he was lucky! Throwing himself out of bed, he rushed into the bathroom. Damn, he was going to be late for work.

After his shower, Christian made his way downstairs. Isabella was standing dancing in the kitchen, ear pods sticking out of her ears. Christian watched as she started rocking backwards and forwards, playing her own air guitar. He could not help himself, stopping and watching her, a smile spreading over his face. She had not looked this calm and relaxed in a while. She stopped, her eyes locked on his. A blush spread over her cheeks.

“Don't stop on my account,” Christian said, stepping forward.



Isabella pulled the ear pods out of her ears and put them on the side.

“Sorry, I didn’t want the music to wake you. You looked so peaceful.”

Christian stepped forward and dropped a kiss on her mouth. “Well, I need to be up and in the office.”

“Er, no, you don’t. I spoke to Lucy. I told her you were sleeping.”

Christian pulled back and stared at her. “What?”

“Christian, last night you were exhausted. Not just physically but mentally. You need to rest. You cannot take on everything. There will be consequences.”

“That’s not your call to make, Isabella. I run an international company. It cannot and does not run itself. My father made that mistake...” Christian said, trying hard to keep a rein on his growing temper.

Who did she think she was?

“Forgive me for caring. But Christian, you are not your father,” she said, walking away from him.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Christian asked, following her.

“I am not arguing with you over this,” Isabella said, spinning around and facing him, her hands on her hips. “When you slept through your alarm, twice. I decided I’d call her. Whatever you tell yourself, Christian. You are not superhuman.”

“What the hell did you do to me last night?” he asked.

He never slept through his alarm.

“Nothing. I simply helped your mind and body relax with some guided meditation and breathing exercises.”

“Not to the point I can’t do my job,” Christian said. “I need to go.”

Christian turned on his heel and made it to the door before stopping, his hand on the handle. He turned to find Isabella standing in the centre of the room with a smug look.

“Tell me you don’t feel revitalised this morning,” she said, her hands on her hips.

Christian pursed his lips. He had to admit, he felt more energised than he had done in a long time, but he was damned if he was going to admit that to Isabella right then. Instead, he huffed and walked out of the door, Isabella’s laughter following him. Damn her. She seemed to know what he needed more than he did. He would see about that.

He’d send her some flowers to say sorry for being such a grouch. But he needed to get to work. Asia would not wait for anyone, and that problem still needed solving.

# Chapter Thirty-nine

## *Isabella*

Isabella sat opposite Toby in his office. Unlike White and Partner's offices, Toby's was still a much more traditional setting, and Isabella preferred it. The wooden furniture and leather chairs gave her comfort in the years-old traditions that was the law.

"Findings suggest that the money has been used for a number of things. There is evidence of some being transferred to Edward's personal account. The rest looks like it was filtered into the company. The PI did some digging, but without going through the company accounts in detail, it's hard to fathom the whole picture. There are however rumours, Edward has a gambling habit that has gone back years."

"He always did like to play cards. It was a *boy's thing*, he used to tell me. They played every Thursday night when we were together."

"Well, this *boys thing* involves the underground gaming halls. The stakes are high to get into those games, and it looks like Edward is not the world's best card player."

"So you think Pierce has been using my money to cover Edward's gambling debts?"

"Not all of it. It looks like Pierce has taken some gambles himself with the company. Investing in several schemes that have either gone bust, or never materialised."

"How have you found all this out?"

"It's amazing what you can uncover if you know who and what to ask. Pierce and Edward are not the most popular people. They've trodden on a few toes over the years. There are many people out there who've been burned by them."

"What do we do next? If the money was used to pay off gambling debts... then it's gone."

“We may be able to recoup some of the money. Pierce has a house that is worth ten million, a vineyard in Tuscany, and a flat in Paris. It won’t cover everything you’ve lost, but it will return some of the money he’s taken. The biggest question is, what do you want to do about the King and Lebroc Group?”

“You mean because Pierce and Edward currently run the company?”

“Exactly. If we go after him and ask for the funds to be returned from the company...”

“It will bankrupt. All my father worked to create over the years.”

“You need to think about what you want to do next.”

“I’m not going to take my money out of the company if that is what you’re suggesting. If Pierce had asked, I would have happily loaned it to him. This was my father’s legacy.” Isabella stopped. “If they go, who takes over? I know they can’t stay, but that company has always had a King or a Lebroc at the head.”

“Don’t overthink it right now,” Toby said, his voice calm against the racing of Isabella’s heart.

She knew what Toby was suggesting. He just hadn’t voiced it. Did Isabella want to take her rightful place at the head of her family’s company? Did she? It had been her dream to follow in her father’s footsteps, but then life had changed. Her dreams had changed. Did some part of her still want that? Had she suppressed it along with some of her other dreams? The board would never go for it. She had been twenty-one when she had last stepped into the office. It had been too long ago. Yes, she’d been respected because her dad had been the boss. There was no way they would let her take over now.

“I’ll speak to Christian,” Isabella said.

“If you need to discuss anything with me, I’m a phone call away. Take care, Isabella.”

“Thank you, Toby.”

Isabella saw herself out. She had a lot of thinking to do.



Isabella had just finished updating Christian with the information Toby had gleaned.

“I can see the cogs turning in your brain. Do you want to share?” Christian asked, refilling her wine glass. She’d opened a bottle, wanting to help drown the stress of the day. She knew meditation would be the best option, but even with all her training, she was struggling to calm her raging thoughts.

“My main concern is, what will happen to the King and Lebroc Group? Pierce and Edward need to go. There is no doubt in my mind about that. I’m sure the board will remove them once we give them all the facts. But the company has always been a family-run business. I care about the thousands of people it employs. If we cut the head off the dragon, what’s going to happen to them? Is there more they have done that we are not aware of?”

Christian rested his hand on hers. “Valid points, but your mind is racing with *what ifs*.”

Isabella closed her eyes and inhaled deeply through her nose before exhaling through her mouth. She repeated the exercise several times until her heart rate returned to normal. “You’re right. Do you have any suggestions?”

“Several,” Christian said.

Isabella watched his expression, but he was giving nothing away.

“Are you going to share?” she asked.

“First, you oust Pierce and Edward and take your rightful place at the head of the group.”

“That’s never going to happen. Even if I wanted to, the board would never go with that. I don’t have any experience running a multi-million-pound business. I didn’t even complete my business degree.”

“Maybe not, but you are your father’s daughter and have a vested interest in the firm. As for not completing your degree, you were two months shy of completing it. All the work was done. You just never made it over the finishing line. A degree means nothing. It’s your experience that counts, and you have set up and run your own successful business.”

“We cannot compare The Retreat and The King and Lebroc Group. They are two completely different animals.”

“Not really. Both are in the hospitality business. You took what you knew and ran with it. The board are still the same men and women who started the company alongside your father.”

“That will also make them loyal to Pierce and to Edward,” Isabella fired back.

“I doubt it when they realise how close he came to destroying it. Pierce doesn’t have the business head your father did.”

“I cannot run the company, Christian. I would not know where to start.”

“Then I will help you.”

“No,”

“Why no?” Christian asked.

“Christian, that is the most generous offer anyone could make, but I won’t add more to your daily workload. You’re already working twelve to fourteen-hour days. The King and Lebroc Group will require a firm hand if it’s to survive this. I cannot, and will not, let you do this. I love the fact you’ve offered, but that is not an option.”

Isabella sighed, not wanting to bring it up, but needing to.

“Plus, I have my own business and business partner, who I have currently left holding the fort. I love The Retreat. It is something I built that I’m proud of. I cannot just turn my back on that. I’ve already been away too long.”

“There is another solution,” Christian said, although his shoulders held a tension that Isabella couldn’t quite decipher.

“I’m listening,” Isabella said, flipping her hand over and squeezing his.

He smiled down at their joined hands, a tingle shimmying up her arm.

“Sebastian,” Christian said.

“Seb? Your best friend and CFO?” Isabella asked.

“Yes. Sebastian. He could take over as interim CEO until you and the board can find a suitable replacement. Seb’s more than qualified and has only stayed with me because of his loyalty. He has all the qualifications and the knowledge to run a big firm. He’s completely trustworthy. You will have the majority vote on who takes over. The benefit is, if you change your mind and decide you want to run the firm, Seb can be your guiding hand.”

“But you need him,” Isabella said. “Seb leaving will leave a hole in your organisation.”

“It will,” Christian said. “I won’t lie to you. But Seb has a good team working for him. He’s already suggested his replacement. If you do decide, you want to go with this option.”

“You’ve asked him?”

“I didn’t want to make a suggestion without asking the person involved. Seb is more than happy to step in, but if you’d rather he didn’t, he wanted to make it clear there will be no hard feelings.”

“Why would he want to help me? He hasn’t seen me in years.”

“No, but he still remembers Scarlett’s best friend. He also knows what you mean to me.”

Isabella dropped her head, not sure what to make of Christian’s last statement, so she ignored it.

“If I go with Seb, and the board agrees. What happens next?”

Christian went through his plan of action. Isabella listened in awe. This was how he became a billionaire in less than eight years. He left no stone unturned.

“The next board meeting is scheduled for a week next Wednesday. We have a little under two weeks to sort everything out and get you in front of all the main players.”

Isabella knew she was staring. She could not believe all the information Christian had just put forward. He would be a formidable foe. She was glad he was her friend.

“Two weeks...” she said slowly, taking it all in.

“Oh, we have dinner with Henri and Patrice and Richard and Annelise this Saturday,” he said, sitting back with a grin.

Isabella couldn't suppress her smile.

“Really?”

She knew her excitement sounded childish, but she had missed those women. They had become her friends over the past year. Annelise could also give her an update on The Retreat. From what May had said when they had last spoken, she'd been a godsend.

“Yes, really,” Christian said, reacting to her sudden mood change, his own smile widening. “I thought it might add a little light relief to the proceedings. As they are both in town this weekend, I thought it was the ideal time for us to get together.”

Isabella got up and threw her arms around his neck. He encircled her waist and pulled her down onto his knee before kissing her, with a passion that she was fast becoming addicted to. Isabella's fingers curled into his hair, pulling him closer and deepening their kiss. Christian's hands began a slow exploration. The stress of the past couple of hours melted under his touch, as it ignited a fire in her core, burning away any residual thoughts or fears and replacing them with pure desire.



# Chapter Forty

## *Isabella*

Isabella decided she wanted to bring Danielle into the know regarding the business, especially after having a long conversation with Seb. Danielle sat on The Board of Directors and had instant access to all the members. Isabella knew if she started communicating with them out of the blue, it was likely to reach Pierce or Edward, and that was not something she wanted. Christian had been sceptical, but had bowed to her logic. She was the one who knew Danielle the best and had spent time with her over the past few weeks.

Danielle had cried uncontrollably when Isabella told her what happened, and the money Pierce had stolen.

“I’ve let you down again,” she sobbed. “What must your father be thinking? I promised him I would look after you and look at the mess I’ve made.”

Isabella had spent fifteen minutes soothing her stepmother. There was little benefit in pointing the finger. What they did was done. They needed to rectify it.

Christian had come with Isabella, and they laid out their plans once Danielle was calm enough to listen. Danielle pressed her lips together, her jaw set firm by the time they had finished.

“Leave this to me,” she said, a sly smile gracing her lips. “I can get them here. Then the rest is up to you.”

“How will you do that without someone letting Pierce or Edward in on the meeting?” Isabella asked.

It wasn’t that she didn’t trust Danielle, but if Pierce had an inkling of what they were planning, he might try to cover his tracks or make a run for it.

“Believe,” she said, winking at Isabella before grinning. “It’s Pierce’s birthday in a couple of weeks. A big one. He’ll be

sixty. I can invite them for dinner on the proviso of arranging a company-wide celebration. That is one of my hats, after all.”

“But won’t they expect Edward to be in on it?” Isabella watched as Danielle pulled a face.

“Believe me, your ex-fiancé is not a well-liked man in the company. He has burned a lot of bridges over the past seven years. If it wasn’t for his father’s position, they would have kicked him to the kerb a long time ago.”

The look of disdain on her face was clear. The plot thickened.

By the time she and Christian left, they had set the trap. Danielle had crafted an invitation while they were there, sending it out. Several members had come back almost instantaneously. Danielle had giggled like a little schoolgirl. Apparently, her soirees were well known and always well-attended. Where Isabella had held doubt they could pull this off, now she had hope.

Christian hugged Danielle before walking to the car, leaving Isabella alone with her. Danielle’s eyes followed Christian.

“He’s a keeper, that one,” she said.

“Don’t get any ideas. It’s impossible. My life is no longer here. I have to go home once all this is resolved. Plus, that is not the relationship we have.”

Danielle stared at her wide-eyed before her lips parted in a wide smile.

“A man does not look at a woman the way that man looks at you without it meaning something,” she said, her voice thick with emotion. “Your father used to look at me that way. I know people thought I was a money-grabbing whore, but our relationship was so much more than that... I miss him every single day.”

Her hand came up and cupped Isabella’s face, her eyes filling with unshed tears.

Isabella stepped forward and pulled her into a hug. “I know how much my father loved you,” Isabella said against her ear.

“You made him so happy.”

Danielle pulled back and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “Thank you for saying that.”

Isabella smiled, her own throat tight with emotion. “It’s the truth.”

Danielle straightened. “Then let’s make him proud and get this S.O.B. for what he has done.”

Isabella looked her stepmother in the eye and smiled. “We will.”

She turned and made her way back to the car, where Christian was waiting for her. He opened the door and let her slide in, following her into the back seat before giving his driver directions. He needed to get back to the office. Isabella was very aware of how much time he was spending on her problems. He had been awake at two in the morning on the telephone to Richard and then to Henri. She needed this resolved. More for him than anyone, as he wouldn’t let it go until they had made Pierce pay. Danielle had given her hope. Together, they would set this up. Toby and Christian could then back her up when she addressed the board. This had to work, but if it didn’t, she was no better or worse off than she had been before.



Scarlett accompanied Isabella to buy herself an outfit for Saturday night’s dinner. She’d missed her friend over the past couple of weeks, after she’d travelled north to work on a music video. The artist and choreographer had suffered artistic differences in opinion. Scarlett had been called in by the record label to bridge the gap between the two, but when that failed, she took over the job.

“Two complete hotheads,” she scoffed. “Artistic licence, blah, blah, blah. In the end, he lost the gig, and I’m not sure it’ll do his reputation any good. Which is a shame. He’s an excellent choreographer, just green.”

“Have you spoken to him since you took over?” Isabella asked, sipping on her iced latte as they walked down the street towards their shopping destination.

“I’ve left him some messages. I’ve asked him if he wants to meet with me to discuss some projects we have on our books. I liked his style. His attitude, however, needs work. With a go-between, I think he could go a long way.”

“How many choreographers do you have working with you now?” Isabella asked.

Her friend had become one of the most sought-after choreographers in the music business, working with some of the major names in the music industry both on their tours and for their videos. Her time studying in America led to her creating many contacts. Those had led to recommendations. She’d been offered a back-up role on a major artist’s tour. Scarlett stepped in and saved the day when the head choreographer was taken seriously ill. She hadn’t stopped working from that moment on. Branching out on her own, she set up her company, employing up-and-coming choreographers, and had a hand in every project. Isabella couldn’t be more proud of her friend.

“If he knows what’s good for him, he’ll contact you,” Isabella said, linking her arm through Scarlett’s.

“My thoughts exactly. Anyway, enough about me. What’s the latest with you? When are you heading back? Or are you going to stay for a while longer and warm my brother’s bed?”

Scarlett pulled a face at the last part of her sentence, making Isabella laugh and smack her on the arm.

As they entered the store and began browsing the dresses. The sales assistant appeared almost instantly at their side.

“It’s fine,” Scarlett said to her. “We’re browsing. We’ll call you over as soon as we know what we want.”

The sales assistant smiled and melted back into the background, allowing Isabella to update her on the latest dramas of the past week. Scarlett’s jaw hit the floor, and

Isabella watched as her friend's face morphed from disbelief to complete outrage.

"So, what are you going to do?" Scarlett asked, holding up a floor-length gown for Isabella to see.

Isabella took the dress, holding it up in front of her.

"That is the million-pound question," she said. "Christian has made some suggestions. He wants me to approach the board members, let them know what has happened. My father left provision for me to enter the company. I was, after all, raised to step into his shoes. But I let him down. I walked away. It's been seven years since I last stepped through those doors. I need to stop Pierce and Edward. They've stolen from me... not just the money, but a chunk of my life. But in doing so, I refuse to destroy the company my father worked so hard to build."

Scarlett's eyes locked on Isabella's.

"You didn't let your father down, Izzy. He would have understood. Pierce and Edward saw a vulnerable young woman and took advantage. They need to be made to pay."

Isabella had never seen her friend look so fierce.

"What does Christian suggest? You can't tell me my brother doesn't have a plan."

Isabella rolled her eyes at her friend and smothered her giggle. "He suggested that I take over with a caretaker. He offered to be that caretaker initially." She watched Scarlett scowl at that comment, so she continued. "I declined that as an option. He has more than enough on his plate."

"Thank you," Scarlett said. "Thank you for seeing what most people don't. He has dedicated his life to The Dupree Group, sacrificed so much." Scarlett sighed, staring down at her hands. Isabella watched as her friend's chin trembled, wet eyes rising to meet hers. "He continues to do penance for what happened with Lily and Skylar. He continues to push himself harder and harder... It's as if..." Scarlett stopped choking back her words.

Isabella ran a hand up and down her friend's arm. "I know. It's why I said no. His other option was Sebastian."

Scarlett's eyes clashed with Isabella's, a flush creeping across her cheeks. "Seb?" Scarlett said, her voice a little wistful.

"Yes, Seb. Christian said he is more than capable of stepping into the CEO role in the interim until something else can be sorted out. I was worried about him abandoning Christian, but Christian said he needs to branch out on his own. It is something they have been talking about."

Isabella watched her friend shuffle her feet and fidget as she talked about Seb.

"Spill," she said eventually, unable to stand it any longer.

She couldn't remember a time when she'd watched Scarlett squirm so much.

"It's nothing," Scarlett said, avoiding eye contact. "I agree with Christian. Sebastian would be a brilliant choice."

Scarlett went to turn away, but Isabella caught hold of her arm.

"Did something happen between you and Sebastian?" she asked, the penny dropping.

Her friend had always had a soft spot for her older brother's best friend, a bit like hers for Christian. It had been said but never really discussed.

She watched as Scarlett's ears turned red. Oh, this was obviously going to be good.

Scarlett grimaced before taking a deep breath.

"Seb is the one who accompanied me to the US."

Isabella froze. She knew her eyes must look like saucers. She knew someone had gone with Scarlett when she had left. Christian would not let her travel on her own. It had been several years ago when Scarlett had finally admitted in a late-night drunken phone call she had lost her virginity to the person who had dropped her off, but she'd remained silent on

the who. She had made it sound like someone from the family's security detail, a drunken fumble. If it was Seb, then that put a whole different spin on the event.

"You mean?" Isabella stuttered. "Oh, my... why on earth didn't you tell me?"

Scarlett let out a large sigh. "Because I screwed it up, and instead of my teenage fantasies of us riding off into the sunset. He can barely bring himself to look at me."

"Oh honey," Isabella said, putting the dress down and pulling her friend into a hug.

Scarlett pulled back and wiped her eyes, giving Isabella a watery smile.

"Water under the bridge. It wasn't meant to be."

"I'm sorry," Isabella added, only to have her shrug.

"Come on, melancholy will not buy you a dress. One that will send my brother into a tailspin."

She watched as Scarlett's walls came up, and she brushed aside her show of weakness. They'd all learned early on to shield their true feelings, and Isabella knew not to push her friend. She wondered if Christian knew. She somehow doubted it. What could have possibly gone wrong? There was no way Seb would have risked his friendship with Christian for a quick roll in the hay.

Scarlett raised a finger, before smiling and pointing out five dresses to the sales assistant who'd reappeared as if by magic. The assistant grabbed them before making her way to the back of the store and the changing rooms. Scarlett linked arms with Isabella, her mouth smiling, but the twinkle that usually lit up her eyes was very obviously missing. Isabella went to open her mouth but paused. Her friend did not need her rehashing old, painful wounds. So, she'd let it drop, for now.

Letting Scarlett lead the way, she set about choosing an outfit. She realised she liked the idea of sending Christian Dupree into a tailspin.

# Chapter Forty-one

## *Christian*

Christian found himself looking forward to their evening out. His meals with Henri and Patrice had usually meant he was the third wheel. The last few times, with Isabella attending, he'd found himself enjoying his friend's conversation and company rather than dreading it. But then Isabella seemed to be having that effect on his life in more ways than one.

"Is it okay if I invite Scarlett to join us this evening?" Isabella asked as they were getting ready to visit Skylar.

"Of course, it's less of a business meal than a social get-together," he said.

He felt guilty for not making the time to catch up with his sister, especially since she'd dropped everything to help Isabella. It would be nice to see her. So far, it had been fleeting visits, with her having spent the afternoon with Isabella, disappearing when he got home, to give them space. Whether she found it awkward that he was in a relationship with her best friend, he didn't know. He couldn't imagine them discussing his and Isabella's sex life, or at least he hoped not. The thought suddenly filled him with horror.

"Do you and my sister... you know..." he asked awkwardly.

Isabella turned to him, a frown marring her brow, before clarity kicked in, and she smirked at him.

"What? Do Scarlett and I discuss your prowess in bed or compare your..." Isabella's laughter filled the air as Christian grabbed her around her waist, spinning her in his arms.

"Don't tease me," Christian growled, hugging her more tightly.

Isabella looked up, her eyes sparkling.

"You really don't need to worry," Isabella said, trying hard to get her giggles under control. "I think Scarlett would rather stick red-hot poker in her ears, than hear about her brother's



sex life, especially with me. Your sexual prowess is well and truly protected.”

“Good,” Christian heard himself huff.

It wasn't like he would want to hear about his sister's sex life, either. She would forever remain pure and innocent in his eyes. It was not something he ever wanted to think about. Christian watched as Isabella wiped the tears from her eyes. He loved how free and easy she was with life, even with all the stress she was currently going through. She could still laugh, joke, and tease him.

He'd asked her about the meditation technique she used when she had helped calm his racing brain. She taught him some additional breathing techniques and talked him through another guided session. He had to admit what he had thought to be a little *new age* for him was incredibly effective. The stretches she'd shown him to do after his workout sessions were also helping with his flexibility. It was one more thing for him to miss when she left in a couple of weeks.



Their afternoon with Skylar had been a blast. Christian couldn't believe how good Isabella was with his daughter. She'd been honest with Skylar about the fact she would leave soon, but she had promised to keep in touch.

Skylar had shown Isabella the journal she was keeping. Christian had watched from the sidelines as they bonded even more. He was clearly not going to be the only one who missed this wonderful woman.

“She has made quite the impression,” Star said as she came up to stand beside him in the park.

Her pregnancy bump appeared to have got bigger since he had last seen her.

“She has. It seems to be her talent. Henri's wife Patrice, and Richard's wife Annelise, are also really fond of her. We're all going out to dinner this evening.”

Star looked up at him, her eyes filled with compassion.

“Are you going to ask her to stay?” she said, never one to beat about the bush.

“No.”

Christian had never felt comfortable discussing his love life with Star. It was why it had always remained a private matter, especially after Skylar had come back into his life.

“Why on earth not? It’s clear you love her,” Star said.

“You need to leave it, Star. I won’t ask her to give up everything she’s worked so hard for, everything she loves. I can’t do anything different. I can’t change, so how can I ask her to? Not when she loves what she does and the life she leads.”

“You’ve changed from the man I met so many years ago. I’m glad you found Skylar again. Lily would be so proud of the man you have become.”

Christian looked down at Star, a lump forming in his throat at her words. She didn’t know what had gone on between him and Lily. Lily had sworn everyone to secrecy, and he’d paid a premium for that silence.

“Thank you,” he said. “That means more than you could know.”

“I still think you’re wrong. I made the mistake of not being honest about my feelings for Damian, and we wasted so much time.”

It was at that moment Skylar rode over, Isabella chasing her.

“Can you look after my bike? Isabella and I are going to see who can swing the highest.”

“Just be careful,” Christian said, as Star choked next to him as she tried not to laugh.

“What?” he said, firing her a questioning look.

“Now you’re sounding like me,” she said. “You’ve taken well to fatherhood.”

Christian rolled his eyes at her as he held onto Skylar's bike. Isabella seemed more of a natural parent than him, but he was trying and would continue to try. His daughter would always come first. He'd not had that luxury with her mother, but where Skylar was concerned, it was a no-brainer.



Isabella took his breath away when she stepped out of the bedroom. It was all he could do not to cancel their evening out and ravish her. She held up her hand as if sensing his thoughts.

“Don't even think about it. Your sister is about to arrive, and this,” she said, waving a hand in front of and around her head, “has taken too long to create. You can put it on ice until we get home.”

Christian groaned. Someone had clearly sent her to torture him or at least test his willpower.

Isabella laughed when he stated as much.

“It's good to practice restraint,” Isabella chuckled, giving him nothing but a chaste kiss on the lips so as not to smudge her lipstick.

Christian pulled her into him, his arousal straining against his trousers. “Tell that to my blue balls,” he murmured against her neck.

The doorbell rang at that moment, making Christian step back. “I'll be back in a moment,” he said. “You can let my sister in.”

“Good idea,” Isabella said, tongue-in-cheek as her eyes dropped to the front of his trousers. “I don't think your sister wants to be greeted by...”

Christian didn't wait for her to finish her sentence. Instead, he took the stairs two at a time, Isabella's laughter following him as he heard her answer the door to Scarlett. Why had he said yes to his sister joining them? They needed to go, and he needed to get his body under control.



When they arrived at Mount Crystals, the maitre d' showed them to their table. The restaurant was busy, as always, but the layout ensured every table received a certain amount of privacy. Robin Downsend, the owner, was an astute entrepreneur. He ensured exclusivity over numbers, offering first-class food and service to his clientele. Its art deco bar and private dining booths, set under ambient lighting, added to its charm. Christian knew Robin's staff were reputed for their discretion and top-notch service. It was Christian's restaurant of choice.

Henri and Patrice were already at the table when they arrived. Patrice stood up and swept Isabella into a hug as soon as they got close enough.

"What about me?" Christian asked, turning to her.

"You can wait your turn," Patrice said, turning back to Isabella and Scarlett, talking to them at a million words a second.

Christian smiled as he stepped forward to greet Henri.

"Don't mind her," Henri said. "She has been begging to see Isabella since we arrived. They formed quite the bond over the past few months. Patrice missed her when we visited Richard and Annelise. It's not the same."

"She seems to have that effect on everyone she meets," Christian said as he fell into an easy conversation with his friend and colleague.

It was Henri who looked up and smiled, beckoning to the new arrival.

"Seb, great to see you," Henri said, holding his hand out to Christian's best friend and biggest support in the office.

Christian had invited Seb after Isabella had invited Scarlett. It would give Isabella a chance to meet him again after all these years.

Christian turned to the women. Scarlett was scowling at Seb, and Isabella looked like she'd just sucked on a lemon.

"Seb, you know Scarlett, Henri, and Patrice. This, of course, is Isabella."

Was he mistaken, or did his best friend flinch when he introduced the ladies? No, he was mistaken. Seb had on his charm face, as Christian called it. As long as he didn't use it on his sister or Isabella, he would be fine.

"Sebastian," Scarlett said, nodding her acknowledgement.

"Hi, Sebastian, it's great to see you again," Isabella said, now smiling.

He had clearly been mistaken. His blue balls were affecting his brain function.

Richard and Annelise took that moment to arrive, and the women's excited meet and greet restarted before they settled on one side of the table, leaving the men on the other.

"It looks like we've been relegated," Richard said, watching the animated chatter on the other side of the table.

"I think so," Henri said, taking a drink.

An unfamiliar feeling settled in Christian's chest as he looked around the table. As if sensing his eyes on her, Isabella looked up and smiled. The warmth in his chest grew, his upper body relaxing.

It was Isabella who invited everyone back to Christian's penthouse at the end of the evening. No one wanted the evening to end. Isabella was deep in conversation with Annelise about The Retreat, after she'd taken over the day-to-day management when Isabella had left. From what he could glean, the press interest in Isabella had not affected the business. Her TV interview about the benefits of yoga and meditation had attracted many visitors. Meaning they were fully booked until early next year. Christian knew that May and Isabella had been in discussion about expanding the operation before everything happened. Building additional rooms to house more guests and expanding the services they offered. They'd even talked about creating an on-site spa, as

they were currently transporting guests to the major hotels for treatments like massages and facials.

Her excitement was palpable but created a pain in his chest, one he had not felt in a long time. Star had been right when she said he had fallen in love. He had. He wouldn't deny it to himself. There was no point. He had fallen head over heels in love with her, but that was not enough.

It had been the early hours of Sunday morning before everyone called it a night. Taxis were called. Henri and Patrice, Richard and Annelise, were staying at the same hotel, so shared a taxi. Seb and Scarlett also shared one. Christian watched in fascination as Isabella whispered frantically in Scarlett's ear. Nothing changed with those two. There was always some drama. He had to laugh.

"Thanks for a great evening," Seb said, coming up and shaking his hand.

"You're welcome. See my sister home safe," Christian said.

A strange look passed over Seb's features before it was quickly masked.

"As always," he replied before turning around and calling Scarlett.

Once they'd all left, Isabella moved to clear away the glasses.

"Leave that," Christian said, moving up behind her and wrapping his arms around her waist.

"You didn't tell me you had invited Sebastian," Isabella said, her tone a little too matter-of-fact.

"It was a last-minute decision," Christian said. "I thought it would give you time to meet him outside of the office. Even you said it had been years since you had seen him."

Her hand came up and cupped his cheek. "Thank you, that is very thoughtful."

"I know what would be even more thoughtful," he whispered against her ear, his breath causing her to shiver in his arms.

“What would that be?” she asked, tilting her head to one side and giving him access to her neck, her perfume invading his senses, making him instantly hard.

“Offering to help with my very blue balls,” he said, sucking in a deep breath as Isabella’s hand snaked down between them, cupping him through his trousers.

“Oh, I’m sure I can help with those,” she said, pushing him back on the sofa and dropping to her knees between his legs.

“Let’s see,” she added, unzipping his trousers.

Christian lost all rational thought as Isabella lowered her head.

## Chapter Forty-two

### *Isabella*

How Danielle had managed to pull it off, Isabella would never know. Her stepmother had really come through for her. The majority of The King and Lebroc board were set to attend her soiree later that evening. Isabella had spent the past couple of days, along with Toby, Christian, and Sebastian finalising the information they had uncovered and wanted to present to the board. Seeing the evidence together left Isabella cold. She could not believe someone who had proclaimed to love her father as a brother could do such a thing. But then again, money, especially large sums, made people behave out of character.

Isabella turned up at Danielle's apartment to offer her a helping hand. They'd spent much of Isabella's teenage years working together in the kitchen, cooking up a storm.

"This takes me back," Danielle said, smiling over as she passed another vol aux vent case to Isabella for filling.

"It does. We used to have so much fun," Isabella said. "All those times Dad would try to sneak in and help himself before we were finished."

"The worst was when I'd make scones. The moment they were out of the oven, he'd be in and lathering them with jam and cream. They'd be so hot, the cream would be melting in a puddle."

They both sighed at the memory. Although it felt good to be talking about him after all this time, there was something cathartic about speaking to someone who had known her father as well as she had.

Danielle stopped and turned to Isabella.

"What are your plans for this evening? Are you going to be here from the start?"



“I don’t know. I’m at a loss. What if they don’t believe me? What if they want to side with Pierce and Edward? It’s not like I’m asking to take over their position. I’m basically telling them the man at the head of their firm is a thief. For the first time since the inception of the company, it won’t have a King or a Lebroc at the helm.”

Danielle stepped forward and wrapped her arms around Isabella, pulling her in for a hug like she had when she was a little girl.

“You have nothing to lose,” she whispered against her hair. “Your father would be so proud of you, and I think the rest of the board will be too. Remember, they all loved your dad. What is the worst that can happen? They stick with Pierce. If they do that, however, he will have the whole board watching his every movement. He won’t be able to get away with anything ever again.”

“Am I wrong, though? Am I wrong not wanting to step up and take charge?”

“Only you can answer that question,” Danielle said, cupping her cheek, her eyes shining with the kindness Isabella remembered growing up. “You have a new life. If that makes you happy, then that is what your father would want for you. He only ever brought you on board with the company because it was what you wanted at the time. All you spoke about from the time I met you... But Isabella, things change, people change. What was right for you then is not necessarily right for you now. You probably know that better than anyone.”

Isabella squeezed her stepmother’s hand. “Thank you. I think I needed to hear that.” She turned back to the counter and rested her hands on the top, dropping her chin. “Whatever happens tonight, it’s a step forward. I feel like I’m treading water, not sure whether to go forward or back.”

“You have to follow your heart. Your head can offer you a rational solution. As George Michael sang about in *Kissing a Fool*..”

“You did love George Michael,” Isabella chuckled.

Danielle had always had Wham! and George Michael songs blasting out whenever her father was out of the house.

“Almost as much as I loved your father,” she added, grinning. “Now, let’s get this show on the road. I still need to get ready, and they’ll be arriving in two hours.”



Isabella decided to be there when everyone arrived. The board, most of whom she had known since childhood, were pleased to see her, asking all about her life and what she was doing now. Of course, most of them knew about the scandal that had enveloped her life after her father’s death, but most were either too polite to say anything or mumbled how they were pleased all that rubbish had been sorted out.

Danielle was the perfect host. The alcohol and the food flowed freely, although she was careful that not too much was passed around. It would not do any good if the board members were too drunk to listen to what Isabella had to say.

Danielle clinked her glass, and everyone turned to face her.

“I do love how that works,” she said. “I’d like to welcome you all back to my home and also welcome my beautiful stepdaughter Isabella back.”

Everyone raised a glass to toast Isabella, who was feeling decidedly sick at that point. She wished she’d let Christian come with her. He was waiting in the wings for her call. It had been decided that she would give out the initial information, and then they would come in and back it up with facts and figures if they needed to.

“I have called you here under false pretences,” Danielle said, causing a muttering of voices to echo through the open-plan apartment. “I’ve called you here because Isabella has some information that she wishes to share with you. Please get comfortable, ladies and gentlemen. Isabella, the floor is yours.”

“Thank you, Danielle,” Isabella said before a voice echoed from the back of the room.

“What’s going on, Danielle?”

“If you listen, Bob, then Isabella will explain.”

Isabella took a deep breath. She had rehearsed this over, and over, but the words were currently stuck in her throat. It was at that moment Christian stepped out of Danielle’s office to stand next to her, taking her hand in his.

“You’ve got this,” he whispered.

“Thank you, everyone...” Isabella proceeded to tell the members of the board what had gone on with her trust fund and Pierce. There were gasps of shock when Isabella mentioned the figure that had been misappropriated.

“According to the bank records we have, it looks like the money has been filtered into The King and Lebroc Group.”

The room erupted in conversation.

“The company will never be able to repay that kind of money,” one person could be heard saying. “It will sink us.”

Isabella raised her voice over the crowd, “If you would listen. I’m not looking for the company to repay what has been stolen. At least not straight away. I need to know how much has been put into the business and how much has been personally stolen.”

“I know Pierce doesn’t have the same business brain your father had, but I cannot believe he would be that stupid or naïve. Where is your proof?”

Toby appeared then, carrying a box filled with the documentation they gathered.

“This is Tobias Grant. He is the solicitor who has helped me uncover all of this. He has had a PI working on it for me. We have collated our findings so far. Please feel free to take a copy and look through it.”

“Have you spoken to Pierce? It seems wrong for you to come to us behind his back if you haven’t even given him a

chance to defend himself?”

It was Danielle who spoke up, her voice cold.

“I think Isabella has shown you more courtesy than you deserve with a statement like that, Curtis. Pierce is the man who got Isabella sent to rehab. It was Edward who staged the photos that made her look like a drug addict. He has stolen one hundred and fifty million pounds from her trust fund. The man should be in prison! If I was Isabella, that is what I’d be aiming for. However, she doesn’t want to incite another scandal. She is well aware of what that will do to both herself and the company. Isabella’s aim is to get Pierce to stand down and walk away. Repay any money he has stolen personally without threatening him with jail. You should be thanking her, not slinging mud.”

“Is this your idea, Dupree? Are you trying to take over our company?”

Isabella felt Christian squeeze her hand. “I can promise you, there is nothing further from my mind. I am here to support Isabella. As some of you know, Dominic King was my mentor, and I have the utmost respect for him and his daughter.”

“But you can’t deny it would be a boon for The Dupree Group. The hotel industry is one area you have yet to branch into,” another voice piped up.

“That is true, but that is not why I’m here. I’m happy to leave. If my presence here is muddying the waters, that was not my intention,” Christian said.

“Christian stays,” Isabella said, her voice firm. “He is the only person who has stood by me through everything.”

“I want to look through The King and Lebroc financials. We have the dates. I want to see what matches up,” Curtis grumbled.

Isabella breathed a sigh of relief. Finally, someone who was thinking with their head and not their heart.

Someone from the back pushed his way forward.

“Jonas?” Isabella said, stepping towards one of her father’s oldest and closest friends.

“I think you will all find Isabella is telling the truth. I know Pierce made several large cash payments into the company.” Jonas sighed. “I am so sorry, Isabella. I thought they were personal payments from him.”

“Jonas, would you like to explain?” Curtis said, his face a puce shade of red.

Jonas sighed. “Edward embezzled money a few years back.”

A collective gasp went up, voices rising as questions flooded out of the other board members. Jonas held up a hand and waited for silence.

“I found out by accident. Pierce was in his office late one evening. He didn’t know what to do. Isabella is right, Edward has a gambling problem. When I met with Pierce, Edward had taken money and was using it to either gamble or pay off his debts. Pierce wasn’t sure which. He tried to blame the stress of his broken engagement.” He threw Isabella a look of apology. “It looks like from the information you shared with us this evening, that is not the case, and this is a much older problem.”

“Why on earth didn’t you tell someone, Jonas?” Curtis asked.

“We had just lost our CEO. Dominic had only been gone eighteen months. Pierce told me he had everything under control and he would repay the money out of his own savings. He called me into his office and showed me the money transfer. He also told me he had restricted Edward’s access and that he was getting help for his addiction.” Jonas sounded broken. “I am so sorry, Isabella. If I’d known. But Pierce had been my friend for as long as Dominic. I’d already lost your father...”

Isabella stepped forward and hugged the man, looking down at the floor, his shoulders hunched.

“So, what are we going to do now?” Curtis asked. “It is clear Pierce and Edward have to go. Although I am not sorry about

the latter.”

Mumbles of agreement echoed around the room. Edward was clearly unpopular with the board.

It was Tobias who stepped forward and explained the legal aspect and options they had.

“But who will take over? Isabella, are you thinking of coming back and stepping into your father’s shoes? We’re getting too old to want to take on the pressure of the CEO, especially with all this hanging over our heads.”

It was Rhonda who spoke up.

“No, I have no intention of coming back. This is not where my path lies currently. I have a business in Thailand that I need to get back to. However, this company was my father’s baby, so I will always be here to give my opinion and help if needed. What I suggest is an interim CEO until you can find a more permanent one.”

“Who? Is that going to be you, Dupree?” Curtis muttered.

Isabella rolled her eyes and looked at Christian before holding up her hand. “No, Christian offered, but I turned him down. He has more than enough on his plate running his own multi-million-pound empire. We would be lucky to have him, so I think you should cut the attitude.” Isabella was getting a little sick of Curtis and his jibes at Christian. “I am suggesting Sebastian McCarthy.”

“As in The Dupree Group CFO?” Rhonda said. “Would he be willing to step in?”

Isabella turned to Rhonda. “Yes. I’ve had several conversations with Sebastian. He is more than qualified. He also specialised in hospitality and hotel management when he did his masters in business and economics.” Isabella turned to the rest of the room. “I understand tonight you have received a lot of information. I’m happy for you to go away and absorb it. Investigate our findings yourself. I would like to attend the next board meeting.” Isabella took her time and looked at every member of the board present in the room. “I want to do this with the minimum of fuss, both for myself and my father’s

memory. However, let me be very clear... I am going to take down Pierce and Edward Lebroc. They tried to ruin my reputation and stole from me. I won't let that lie. The board has a choice. It can either stand with me or against me."

Isabella had decided at that moment she was out for blood if she needed to be. It was what her father would have wanted. He had always told her, *if you put yourself down as a doormat, people will walk all over you*. That stopped now.

Danielle came up and placed a hand on her shoulder in support. Isabella looked over at Christian, whose eyes were radiating pride. He smiled, inclining his head in acknowledgement. She was going into battle. All she needed to know was whether her army was behind her or if she was on a suicide mission.

Curtis stepped forward. "We've heard a lot. You are your father's daughter, Isabella. He would be very proud of you for standing up for yourself. Out of respect for your father and Pierce, and our history, I would like to spend some time looking into the accusations you laid out this evening."

"I can ask and would expect nothing more," Isabella said, stepping forward and shaking his hand.

Danielle clapped her hands then. "There is far too much food left over. Please, everyone tuck in. Isabella, Christian, and Tobias are happy to answer any of your questions."

The night seemed to stretch on. One thing was clear. Pierce was not as popular as her father had been amongst the board. There appeared to be several members unhappy with the direction he'd taken the business. Their hands had been tied, keeping them silent until now. When the business decisions Pierce had pushed for failed, some had raised their hands. But when no money had been lost, they had fallen silent... how could they complain? It was beginning to dawn on people that they hadn't lost money because Pierce had been bailing himself out using Isabella's trust fund.

By the time everyone left, Isabella's voice was hoarse from all the talking.

“I think they were beginning to see the bigger picture,” Toby said as they walked back to Christian’s apartment.

“I hope so,” Isabella said. “I don’t want to go nuclear, but after tonight and everything I’ve heard... I’m not letting them get away with all they have done.”

Christian chuckled and pulled her to his side. “That’s the Isabella I want to see.”

Isabella looked up at him. “I still must go home, but I will fight him if I have to. It has become a matter of principle. He’s lied and conned too many people. People who’ve trusted him.”

“He has. You have our backing and our support.”

“Do you think they will go with Sebastian?”

“I’m not sure. They could do a lot worse. It will depend on Curtis and how many people he can convince I’m about to swoop in and take over the business,” Christian said.

His voice was calm, but Isabella couldn’t help but notice the way his jaw clenched as he said the words.

“It’s not your fault. I’m glad you were there to support me. I could’ve done none of this without you,” Isabella said, stopping and pulling him around for a kiss, her hands massaging the tight muscles in his shoulders, as her lips caressed his.

Toby coughed. “We are nearly back at yours. Can you halt the PDAs until then?”

Christian laughed, swinging Isabella around before looking at Toby. “You’re one to talk. I’ve heard all about your PDAs from Skylar.”

Isabella looked over at Toby, who she could have sworn was sporting a rosy glow.

“No comment,” he said, letting out a huff as he continued walking.

Isabella felt Christian grab her hand. “I’m proud of you,” he said.



“You can show me how much, when we get home,” Isabella added, taking off after Toby.

# Chapter Forty-three

## *Isabella*

Over the next week, the board members all contacted Isabella. The meeting at Danielle's apartment had been a success. Each member had done their due diligence and found that what Isabella had said was the truth. By the time the board meeting came about, Isabella knew Pierce and Edward would be voted out, and a new CEO voted in. Most of the board were happy to accept Sebastian as their interim CEO with the option of making it permanent should it work out. Isabella had spoken to Seb at length. He was ready to leave Christian's organisation and branch out on his own, but there was always the option to go back if it didn't work out.

"You need to stop worrying," Seb told her, squeezing her hand. "I've got this. Once I'm in, they won't be able to resist my charm and brains."

Isabella rolled her eyes at him. "You're more than qualified for this. I know that. I just don't want them to be prejudiced against you because of Christian."

"What will be, will be. Having you agree to stay on for a couple of months to help me get to know these people and bed in... That will be priceless. When they see the daughter of the man they looked up to working by my side, they will forget all about Christian. Together, we will show them what we are capable of," Seb said, his eyes gleaming.

Isabella paused. "I'm not sure about priceless, it's the least I could do after all you're giving up. I don't think I have said thank you. You're turning your life upside down to help me."

"No, I'm not. It is not every day a man with my experience gets the chance to take over a large company without having to build it from the ground up. I've stayed with Christian longer than I should've done. He's told me as much. But I care about him, and I stayed to ensure he doesn't work himself into the ground. But with this opportunity, it's a sign."

Isabella flinched. “Who will keep an eye on him now?”

“I was hoping it was going to be you,” Seb said honestly. “But I think we’ll manage. We can continue to keep an eye on each other. Scarlett is moving back. She’ll keep her brother in check.”

Isabella raised an eyebrow and watched Seb grimace.

“I know Scarlett told you about us. I also know you haven’t told Christian, as I’m still breathing.”

“Scarlett is a grown woman. What the two of you did or do is nobody else’s business,” Isabella said. “And Seb, Christian can’t talk. He slept with his sister’s best friend. Remind him of that if it ever comes out.”

Seb’s smile grew. “I like you, Isabella. I wish you were staying.”

Isabella inhaled deeply. “This is not my home. I have a business that I need to get back to. May is holding the fort, but she has a young baby. It’s not fair. She has been amazing, as has Annelise covering for me. Annelise has agreed to stay on until I get back, but that isn’t indefinitely. Even if I wanted to, I have commitments.”

“If you didn’t... have commitments, I mean. Would you stay?”

“I can’t even let myself go down that path. It’s not an option.”

The sinking feeling she’d been experiencing recently was getting stronger the more she thought about leaving. It was probably why she’d jumped at Seb’s suggestion to stay on for a couple of months. Any excuse. When she’d mentioned the possibility to Christian, there’d been no doubt in her mind he was happy for her to stay. The bottle of Cristal Champagne he’d opened and the way he’d worshipped her body had told her all she needed to know. May and Annelise had told her to take as long as she needed... but that time would come to an end.

“Anyway, enough of that. I’m here for at least two months, and we need to get through the next couple of hours.”

Seb had agreed to accompany Isabella to the board meeting. Christian was staying out of sight. They didn't need to let the press get wind of this unless it was absolutely necessary. The aim was for Pierce to go quietly, retire and appoint Sebastian as his replacement.

That was the plan, anyway.



Curtis greeted them at reception, taking them to his office to prepare for the meeting. Isabella could barely hear anything over the beating of her heart.

Over the past week, Curtis had gone from being Sebastian's biggest adversary on the board, to his staunchest supporter. The more Curtis had uncovered, the angrier he'd become. It was all Isabella could do to prevent him from storming into Pierce's office and demanding he tell him what he'd been doing.

The board meeting was scheduled for two o'clock. Isabella called on every ounce of her breath training to help calm her nerves. Seb squeezed her elbow as they entered the room before making his way to a seat set up for him in the corner. Isabella had a seat at the table. Her father had seen to that, so she moved forward and took her rightful place and waited.

Pierce and Edward were the last to arrive. Pierce pulled up short as he entered and saw her sitting at the table.

"Isabella. What a lovely surprise," he said before his eyes darted around the table.

Isabella watched his shoulders and torso loosen as he took a deep breath and moved forward, inclining his head in greeting to the other board members.

"What's she doing here?" Edward asked. "This is a closed board meeting."

It surprised Isabella when Pierce rounded on his son.

“Enough!” he said, his voice cutting. “The game is up, Edward, or are you too blind to see?”

Edward looked at his father, taking a step back. Isabella doubted Pierce had ever raised his voice to Edward.

“Take a seat,” Curtis said calmly. “A few things have been brought to light over the past couple of weeks...”

He didn’t get to finish what he was saying before Edward jumped in.

“Whatever that lying bitch has told you, it’s not true. Isabella’s trying to get back at me for those photos and breaking off our engagement.”

“Edward!”

Pierce’s voice cut across him, but the damage was done. Edward’s future had been cemented. He’d just admitted to the photos that had destroyed her reputation. The board were aware of Isabella’s findings, but if anyone had been sitting on the fence, they had their proof.

Edward lunged across the table, aiming for the paperwork that sat in front of Isabella. His eyes were wide, his pupils dilated. It was then she realised Edward’s drug problem was not something he’d overcome, but an ongoing issue. Seb appeared behind him and helped Pierce restrain him while Rhonda requested security attend the boardroom. Edward struggled in vain against their grip, spittle flying from his mouth as he continued to hurl abuse at everyone in the room.

When security finally burst through the door, Pierce spoke to them quietly.

Two men restrained Edward, removing him from the room.

“I’m sorry about that,” Pierce said, straightening his suit jacket before he took his seat at the end of the table. “I take it you are asking for my resignation?” he asked, holding eye contact with everyone around the table.

“Are you disputing the information we have heard?” Rhonda asked as his gaze met hers.

“I’m not sure what you’ve heard,” he said. “I take it you have visited White and Partners.”

Isabella nodded, a tightness clenching at her throat and lungs.

“Then Isabella has uncovered I stole from her trust fund.”

A collective gasp echoed around the room. No one had expected him to admit what he’d done. Even Isabella had thought he’d deny it. Her eyes locked with Seb’s, and he sent her a supportive smile.

Pierce looked at the table and fiddled with the paper in front of him.

“I’d like to talk to Isabella alone if that’s possible?”

“No way,” Seb said from the corner.

Pierce’s eyes flew to his. Even though Seb had helped him restrain Edward, it was clear he had paid no attention to who the person was.

“Ah,” Pierce said, a small smile gracing his lips. “My replacement, I take it? I know Isabella is dating Christian Dupree, but as he’s not here. Sebastian McCarthy.” His smile grew. “A great choice. You have a good business head. Christian will miss you, but his loss will be King and Lebroc’s gain.”

Isabella looked around the table. There was obvious confusion on the face of every board member. Pierce sighed before walking to the window. He turned and faced the room.

“I’ve been expecting this for many years. It’s a relief.” He turned to Isabella. “Your father was the business brain. He was my best friend and wanted someone to join him on his journey. He made me a lot of money. But I’m a fake and too old. I lost control of Edward. I’ve tried to help him.” His eyes filled with tears. “I’m sorry, Isabella. I can’t replace the money I took. I’ve used it to bail him out over the years. His drug and gambling habits have exceeded anything I can handle anymore, but I couldn’t let them kill my only son. That was not an option.”

“You were quick to send me to rehab,” Isabella said quietly.

“I was... I honestly thought I was doing the right thing. Edward convinced me you had a problem with drugs that had started when your father died. He said he’d tried to help you, but it was more than he could cope with. I’m sorry, Isabella. If I’d known he was dating you for your trust fund...” Pierce held her gaze, returning to the table and taking his seat. “When you caught him with Victoria, he knew the game was up. There was no way you would take him back. I didn’t know at the time he was already in debt for tens of thousands of pounds. After you left, he came to me... desperate. They’d shattered his arm as a warning.” His gaze dropped to the floor. “I was only going to borrow the money and put it back...” Pierce ran a hand through his hair. Isabella saw the pattern. “The next time I found out Edward had used his position to steal company funds... we were about to be audited, so again, I dipped in and used your fund to cover the money he stole. After the first couple of times, it was easy.”

“But you needed two signatures to access the trust fund?”

It was Danielle who spoke up.

“I did. You, my lovely Danielle, are too good a person and would have done nothing to hurt Isabella. It devastated you when she left, but Mr Carl Danvers was more than happy to oblige for his own minor cut.”

The room had fallen silent.

“Are the police on their way?” Pierce asked, his gaze once again locking on Isabella.

Isabella stared at the man she’d spent her life looking up to, her father’s best friend. Not recognising the man he’d become.

“No. You’re going to retire and appoint Sebastian McCarthy as your successor. Edward will leave with you and will be admitted to rehab immediately. If not, I will press charges against him and make sure he gets a prison sentence for all the crimes he committed. I’m leaving the money you put into the firm where it is. My father worked hard to build this company up. I want it to survive, and a scandal of this nature will

destroy it. You will repay the money you used to pay Edward's debts. I know you are mortgage-free, so you never used your own money to help Edward. Therefore, what is yours will now become mine." Isabella stared at the man her father had called a friend. "The only reason I've not called the police is I didn't want my name dragged through the press again, but I've changed my mind. You have a choice. Do what is right. If not, I will go after you with everything I have, and you will spend the rest of your days in prison."

Isabella watched a knowing smile form on Pierce's face.

"Dominic would be so proud of you. You are *definitely* his daughter."

Isabella felt her face harden.

"I never want to hear you mention my father's name or refer to him again. He trusted you. I trusted you, and you stomped on that trust. I'm just sorry I let you get away with it for so many years. But that stops now. A car is waiting, as it did for me, to take Edward to rehab. I expect you to sign the papers to have him committed. As for you, security will escort you back to your office to clear your desk. The company will make an announcement about your retirement. You will stand next to Sebastian when the time comes and tell him you could not be happier. You are then going to retire to your villa in Majorca, which I will own, and you will spend the rest of your life there. This is because my father loved you and for no other reason. Go against me and see what happens."

Pierce's lips formed a thin line as he stood.

"I really am sorry," he said, looking around the room. "It has been a pleasure. I will have my lawyer contact yours."

Two security guards met him at the door. When he'd left, the room fell silent. It was Sebastian who spoke up. "I want to make this transition as painless as possible. However, I think everyone has had more than enough for one day. I would suggest we reconvene in twenty-four hours. Isabella and I will work with marketing to draw up a press release notifying everyone of Pierce's retirement and my appointment."



Isabella stood and greeted each of the board members one by one. Jonas and Rhonda had tears in their eyes and told her how much like her father she was. Isabella's heart swelled at their words. For the first time since he'd died, she felt in control. It was as if her soul had stopped hiding... or maybe that was her backbone snapping back into place.

Sebastian exhaled loudly after the last member left.

"Wow," he said. "You really know how to kick ass. Remind me never to get on the wrong side of you."

Isabella couldn't help herself, laughing at the expression on Sebastian's face.

"Thank you. You helped give me the strength I needed. I'm sorry it came to this, but I'm glad Pierce will not fight us, or at least I hope he doesn't. I don't want to drag this through the courts if I don't have to, but if he pushes me, I will."

"I think he got that message loud and clear. As did the rest of the board. They've all sat back and let this happen. No one in this room was guilt-free. They have rested on their laurels, and that is going to stop now. I will repay the money taken from your trust fund, even if it takes years."

Isabella's heart swelled at his words.

"Just keep my father's company afloat. The rest can wait. It's not like I need it, and I can't think of a better place for the money to be invested."

They made their way out of the building. Security had notified Isabella, Edward, and Pierce were now on their way to a rehab facility outside London. Phase one looked to be complete. She just had to hope that Pierce was going to be sensible. Somehow, she knew he would. He knew he had got off lightly.

# Chapter Forty-four

## *Christian*

Christian watched Isabella blossom in front of him. It was as if, over the past month, stepping foot inside her father's business had unlocked something inside her, finally allowing her to make the ultimate step in becoming the woman she was always meant to be, and she took his breath away.

He struggled as he watched his best friend form a bond with the woman who had become such an integral part of his life. She was still set to leave, but he was holding onto every moment they had while she was here. Now, he was sharing her with Seb and the other board members. He was no longer the only one receiving late-night work calls.

So far, Pierce had kept his word. On his sixtieth birthday, he'd given a press conference announcing his retirement and Sebastian's appointment in his place. When questioned about Sebastian's appointment over Edward, Pierce had shocked everyone by announcing Edward was currently in rehab, undergoing treatment for mental exhaustion and that they would appreciate privacy while he recovered. He told the press Edward's place at the table would wait for him when he got better, which was, of course, an outright lie, but it had stopped further questioning on the matter.

Isabella had left Tobias to deal with Pierce's lawyer. They were looking to transfer all Pierce's property into Isabella's trust fund to replace the assets he had stolen. It was more complicated than Christian wanted to think about, but that was what White and Partners, Toby and Pierce's solicitors were being paid for.

"What does Skylar want to do this weekend?" Isabella asked, dropping onto the sofa next to him and kicking off her heels.

It was strange seeing her in a suit as opposed to yoga pants.

"She wants to see the new Disney movie."

He'd asked Skylar what she wanted to do earlier that day. Apparently, Disney was releasing their latest live-action and she *must* see it. As Skylar and Olivia usually always watched Disney movies together, he had called Andrew. It was Olivia's eighth birthday in a few days, her party was scheduled for the following weekend. As it was Star's weekend with Skylar, she and Damian would attend, although Andrew had told him he was more than welcome. He knew he was, but he hated to overstep. So instead, he had suggested Andrew, Olivia, and Ana, his new girlfriend, go to the cinema with the girls, along with Isabella and himself. They would no doubt go out for a kid-friendly dinner afterwards, and then Skylar would spend the night at his apartment.

"I love Disney movies," Isabella said.

Christian grinned at her excitement.

"That's good news. You'll join Skylar, Olivia, and Ana in your joy. Andrew and I will just be there to keep you company."

Isabella looked pleased when he announced they would not be alone. She seemed to have hit it off with all his friends, become part of the crowd. He had a feeling he wouldn't be the only one who'd miss her when she was gone. She had a way of impacting the lives of those around her. It had devastated Skylar when he told her Isabella wouldn't be staying. She'd sobbed and begged him to make her.

"Make her stay, Daddy," Skylar's voice was desperate.

"I can't do that, Skylar. That's not fair to her business partner and all Isabella's friends in Thailand. They all love and miss her as much as we will." It had been hard seeing his daughter so upset, but it had been inevitable from the start. A twist of fate had brought her into his life, but her life was going to take her away from him. "Sometimes we have to let the people we care about go. It's not like you'll never see her again. You can come with me and visit her when I go on business trips, if it's in the holiday."

He made that promise, but he wasn't sure he would be able to see Isabella again once she left. She had ingratiated herself

into his life. It was like she had become a part of him. He had never slept so deeply, eaten so healthy, loved so well. When she left, he was going to need to cut ties. Long distance would never work for them. What they had was too strong. A clean break was probably for the best. But he would discuss that with Isabella nearer the time. They still had a month... and if that was all they had, he sure as hell was going to make the most of it.



The phone rang at seven AM. Christian was already up and dressed, ready to depart for the office.

“Star has gone into labour,” Damian’s flustered voice came over the phone.

“Great news,” Christian said.

His mind went back to when Lily called him to say she would give birth to Skylar later that day. He hoped Star was more relaxed.

“We’re heading to the hospital now. My parents have Skylar. We thought it was easier for you and school. She’s staying the weekend with you, but Star wondered if you would bring Skylar to the hospital later to meet her baby brother or sister?”

Christian squeezed his throat to help remove the lump that had formed. The fact they were asking, when he knew how excited Skylar was...

He coughed.

“Of course. Just let me know what time. We can come whenever. Let me know when Star has the baby, and Isabella and I can bring her up. There’s no way I would keep Skylar from her sibling. I’m just grateful you are still letting her stay with me this weekend.”

It was Damian’s turn to be silent, he heard some mumbling and what sounded like the phone being dropped.

Star's voice appeared on the line. "Skylar is with you, Christian. It will help no end if you have her stay with you. She wants to see her baby brother or sister, but she is also incredibly—Awww, sorry, another contraction," she said breathlessly. "Damian will call you later. We need to go... and Christian, thank you."

"You're welcome. Now concentrate on you, and we will see you later."

Christian ended the call and looked at Isabella, who was staring at him, having just entered the room.

"I'd better get a baby gift today by the sound of it," she said, grinning. "I remember when May went into labour with Kalaya. I paced the floor more than Arkhom." The look Isabella gave him let him know she had seen straight through him. "Skylar is going to be very excited. I'll get her a teddy to take. I'm sure Damian and Star have something for her to give the baby, but it will be nice for her to arrive with a gift."

Christian walked towards her, wrapping his arms around her waist, his chin resting on the top of her head. "Thank you. I'd appreciate that. But if it is too much. I can get Lucy to arrange something."

Isabella tilted her head back and scowled at him. "Lucy can arrange for some flowers to be sent to Star and Damian's home when they leave the hospital. Presents, however... no, I'll arrange those." As if to take the sting out of her words, she went up on her tiptoes and placed her lips against his. "But in the meantime, I have an important breakfast meeting with your best friend, who is also a slave driver."

Christian knew Sebastian was taking his new role incredibly seriously. From what he had gleaned from Isabella, he was impressing the board with his work ethic and the ideas he had for strengthening the business and helping it grow in the future. Christian had known his friend would be up for the job, therefore, this news had not surprised him.

"Go," Christian said, swatting her behind as she moved to go past him.

Isabella wrapped her hand around the back of his neck and pulled his mouth to hers, her tongue snaking between his lips and tangling with his. It was over as quickly as it began, with Isabella laughing all the way to the front door.

“That can sustain you until this evening. Now get your arse in gear if you want to share your driver. I cannot be late.”

Christian gulped down the last dregs of his coffee, a smile gracing his face as he followed her out of the door.

Life was good.



Theodore Lucas Hunt made his debut at two-thirty that afternoon. Christian had gone to pick up an excited Skylar from school, only to be accosted by Laura, Skylar’s teacher, and Star’s best friend. She’d run up and hugged him, excited her best friend had given birth. She handed him a small box for Star, telling him he had to give it to her. She wouldn’t intrude on their family night as she remembered how tired she had been after the birth of her daughter, but she would visit in a couple of days when Star was home.

Christian had held Skylar’s hand all the way in the car, listening to her chatter. Damian had called the school earlier to speak to Skylar and let her know she had a baby brother.

“I am so excited, Daddy. It’s going to be so much fun having a baby brother. I’ve promised Mummy and Daddy Damian that I’ll help with his bath time and changing his clothes. I’m not sure about nappies yet.”

It was all Christian could do not to laugh at his daughter’s wrinkled nose. She looked so like Lily when she pulled certain faces. Lily might no longer be there, but she had definitely left a huge part of herself in their daughter.

“I think maybe mummy will have to do the nappies first,” Christian said.

“Oh no, she’s told Daddy Damian that he will be very hands-on with changing nappies. I heard her tell him a baby is not all

cuddles and feeding. What goes in must come out.” Skylar looked at him and gave him her best stage whisper. “I think she was talking about poo.”

Christian whispered back. “I think you might be right.” Before swallowing back his laugh.

He doubted Damian would complain. He was looking forward to this baby as much as Star, and would be a brilliant father if the way he treated Skylar was anything to go on.

Isabella met them at the hospital. It looked like she had bought out half the clothes and toy store, looking at the bags she was carrying.

“Isabella,” Skylar shouted, running and throwing her arms around Isabella’s waist.

Christian raised an eyebrow at the bags she was holding, and it was her turn to look sheepish.

“I love babies and, well, everything looked so cute.” She bent down and fished a beautiful lamb teddy out of the bag. “Daddy and I got this for you to give to your baby brother,” she said, handing the teddy to Skylar, who grinned in delight.

“Thank you, thank you,” she said, clutching the lamb to her chest. “He will love it. I know he will.”

“We also got you a matching pony.” Christian watched Isabella open the bag, letting Skylar peek inside, before looking up at him and mouthing, “I didn’t want her to feel left out.”

A warmth spread through him at her thoughtfulness.

Together, the three of them made their way to the maternity ward. Star was in a private room, as Damian had wanted privacy for himself and his family. No prospect of the press getting pictures of their newborn. The midwife at reception showed them the way before Christian knocked and waited.

A grinning Damian opened the door, and Christian shook his hand, offering their congratulations. Skylar ran past him, throwing herself at the bed and Star, the stuffed lamb clutched in her hands.

Christian watched in fascination as her face filled with awe at her baby brother lying asleep in Star's arms. Star looked amazing for a woman who had just spent hours in labour. It was clear motherhood agreed with her. The tranquil look on her face and the sparkle in her eyes highlighted the fact.

"Look what Daddy and Isabella bought for me to give to baby Theo," Skylar said, waving the teddy in Star's face.

Star looked up to where they stood in the doorway and smiled. "Come in," she said. "Come and meet Theo."

Isabella held back. It was clear she felt she was intruding on a family moment. Damian, however, was having none of it.

"Come in, Isabella," he said, ushering her forward before closing the door.

"Thank you," Star said, tilting her head towards the teddy.

"Not my doing," Christian admitted, watching the blush spread over Isabella's cheeks.

"Only because I said I wanted to," Isabella jumped in, stepping forward and placing an array of bags on the chair. "I got a little carried away. If there is anything you don't like, the receipts are in the bag."

"Thank you, to both of you," Star said, her eyes flitting between Isabella and Christian. "Skylar, would you like to hold your baby brother?"

Skylar squealed, causing little Theo to screw up his face. Skylar's hand immediately slapped over her mouth, her eyes worried.

"It's okay," Damian said to her, scooping her off the bed and sitting her in a nearby chair. "His hearing is a little sensitive. Sound was muffled in mummy's tummy, and now the big wide world is here. It's very loud."

Skylar nodded at Damian, and Christian watched his daughter and her stepfather interact, Damian placing his newborn son in her arms. Christian grabbed his phone, snapping pictures of the two of them together. He would send them across later. Memories like this needed to be cherished.



Skylar's eyes flashed to his, and Christian's heart melted. He couldn't believe he was getting to share this moment with them. Theo might not be his flesh and blood, but he was part of Skylar's life, so there would always be a connection.

They stayed for an hour, Skylar so excited. It was only when Star started to wilt and Theo grumbled he needed a feed, Christian took the executive decision that they would leave.

"But, Daddy," Skylar said.

"Mummy needs some rest, and Theo needs some food," Christian said. "We can come back in the morning before we go to the cinema if you would like."

"Can we?" she said, gulping down her excitement.

"Of course. But remember, we're meeting Olivia for your cinema date. Unless you want me to cancel it?" Christian asked.

He watched his daughter mull over the idea.

"No, Olivia wants to see the film. Everyone is watching it this weekend, so we'll miss out if we don't go," she added dramatically.

Christian was sure not *everyone* was watching the movie that weekend, especially when Star grinned and rolled her eyes at her daughter's words.

"How about you come and see me after the movie," Star said, offering Christian an out for a morning visit. "We'll be at home then. I only have to stay in overnight. We go home in the morning."

Skylar tilted her head as she pondered over Star's suggestion. The movement reminded him again how much like Lily she was. Star must have seen his expression as she shot him a knowing smile.

"That sounds like a plan," she said. "Then I can tell you all about the movie, so if anyone asks, you know the story, too."

"Perfect," Star said. "Is that okay with you, Christian?"

“Fine with us. I think she may want to stay home after that,” Christian admitted.

Although it hurt, he would lose time with his daughter, who was he to stop her spending time with her new brother?

Star sent him an appreciative look.

They eventually herded Skylar back to the car and home. She talked non-stop about how she was going to help do everything, including changing Theo’s nappy. It was clearly love at first sight for Skylar. No one else had got a look in. She’d held him and cooed at him the whole time they were there.

“They look so happy,” Isabella said, taking his hand in hers, as they watched Skylar run upstairs to her bedroom. “It’s kind of you letting her go home tomorrow.”

“It’s what she’ll want, and I will never stand in her way. I promised Lily that. Star is her mother and Damian, her father. The fact they share her with me, I’m blessed,” he said, meaning every word.

“I think they see you as part of their family. You are a blended family, and it works. The give and take, that’s part of it. It’s why your relationship is so harmonious. I’m sure when you have more children, Star will do the same thing.”

They sat down and Isabella placed a hand on his thigh.

A sharp pain lanced through his chest at her words. He knew children would never be on the cards for him. He didn’t deserve that kind of happiness. He had his chance and blew it, so he remained quiet. When Isabella left, his life would return to the way it had been before, casual hookups with no commitment. He knew the pain he would feel when she finally left, would be the same as when Lily had died. It was not something he would ever choose to experience again. It was then he realised fate was having a laugh at his expense. He’d fallen head over heels in love with someone who was going to leave.

# Chapter Forty-five

## *Isabella*

Isabella enjoyed their afternoon with Andrew and Ana. She loved watching Skylar and Olivia interact as Skylar told Olivia all about meeting baby Theo the night before. The two girls were quite a pair. Skylar the more outgoing, while Olivia was a little more reserved. She'd only met Ana a couple of times, but the younger woman was someone Isabella felt she would develop a close friendship with if she was to stay. However, that was off the cards, and time was counting down to when she would pack her case and leave for good.

"I spoke to Star this morning," Andrew said. "She said everything went well."

"I bet he's gorgeous," Ana said, her eyes misting a little. "I look forward to meeting him."

"He is very cute. I think Skylar would have brought him home with us, given half the chance. We're dropping her home after dinner. I think she wants the chance to play real-life dolls with him," Christian said.

Isabella watched as Andrew gave his friend a knowing look. The dynamics of this group were strong. Everyone respecting the other.

When it was finally time to say goodbye, the two girls hugged, like little ladies. Skylar promised to video call when she was with Theo and introduce her friend to her baby brother. Olivia left happy, and Skylar skipped between the two of them as they made it back to the car.

It wasn't a long trip back to Star and Damian's, as they'd chosen the cinema nearby rather than travel further into the centre of London.

Star opened the door to them, Skylar throwing her arms around her waist. "Hey, Munchkin, I missed you," Star said, stepping back and ushering them all into the house.

Isabella looked around. Their home was beautiful. The detached house, was closed off from the street, with a large laurel hedge and tall wooden electric gates. Although a new build, it had two enormous bay windows, that spanned the upstairs and downstairs rooms at the front of the house. They entered a large hallway in the middle of the house, with the rooms spreading off it. Star directed them to the left and into a large living room where Damian was lying on the floor next to a play-mat that housed a sleeping baby boy.

“Don’t mind us, although if you want a drink, I would suggest helping yourself,” Star said, laughing, before motioning for them all to sit down.

Isabella sat quietly in the corner of the sofa, while Christian and Damian headed off to the kitchen, clearly to make some drinks. She would have offered, but having never been to their house before, it was a little impossible to make that offer.

“Would you like to have a cuddle?” Star asked her, scooping up a newly woken Theo.

Isabella felt her colour rise. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all. There will be plenty of time for cuddles later when everyone has gone.”

Star placed Theo in her arms, and her breath caught in her throat. His eyes blinked up at her, his little nose scrunching up as he got ready to yell. Isabella lifted him up, placing him over her shoulder as she had done so many times with Kalaya before rubbing soothing circles on his back. He instantly settled.

Isabella looked up to see Star smiling. “You’re a natural.”

Isabella grinned back. “No, I’ve just had plenty of practice with Kalaya, May’s baby. She didn’t like to sleep, so I would take her for a few hours after she was born to let May get some rest. Arkhom worked long hours, and he needed his rest when he was home.”

“You’ll make a great mum,” Star said.

“I think I’m resigned to being a great aunty,” Isabella said, absorbing the feel of the baby in her arms. She knew when she

returned to Thailand, the chances of her meeting anyone were slim to impossible. No-one would be able to compete with Christian. She knew he had ruined her for all other men. But there was no option to stay, and that sat heavily in her heart. London was no longer her home, but she had a strong feeling, Thailand was no-longer going to be the paradise it had been, without a certain someone there.

“You’re only twenty-nine,” Star said. “You have plenty of time yet.”

Isabella smiled. “Maybe.”

She wouldn’t go into the hopelessness of her current situation with Star. It didn’t seem appropriate.

Isabella breathed a sigh of relief as Damian and Christian took that moment to re-enter the living room.

“Ahh, a natural,” Damian said, looking over at Isabella holding his son.

“If she wasn’t leaving, I think we would have the perfect child sitter,” Star said, laughing.

Isabella couldn’t bring herself to look at Christian. Her leaving was not something they had discussed, both of them distracting the other with mind-blowing sex instead. Why discuss what they could not change and sour the mood?

They drank their drinks and left Skylar with Star and Damian. Star once again thanking Christian for his thoughtfulness. She also thanked them for all the gifts they’d brought the day before. Isabella couldn’t hide her blush. She knew she’d gone a little overboard but had been unable to help herself. As she said to Star, she really didn’t think she would be a mother herself, so she took every opportunity to spoil everyone else’s babies.



The next month went by in a flash.

“Are you sure you have to leave?” Seb said as they drew their final meeting to a close.

They were sat in her father’s old office, and it only seemed right, Seb should use it. Isabella knew her dad would have loved him and would be happy with his vision for the company.

“Yes. I am.” Isabella’s heart clenched, but she forced a smile. “I’ve been gone too long, and May is going to run out of patience if I don’t get back.”

“You’re going to be missed,” Seb said, getting up and pulling her in for a brotherly hug. “And not just by me. Everyone has loved having you here. You seem to make quite the impact wherever you go.”

They’d developed a strong bond over the past two months, as they fought to rectify the mess Pierce had left behind. Sebastian was now just one more person Isabella would miss when she got on that plane tomorrow. In the time they had been together, Seb had become like an older brother, helping her navigate the company as they both found their feet. Together, they’d made a great team, but all good things had to come to an end. She had promised May she would only stay two months, and that time was up. She’d booked her plane ticket for the following morning.

She had already said a tearful farewell to Skylar. That had been one of the hardest things she had ever had to do. She’d grown incredibly fond of her in the time she’d lived with Christian, and she promised to keep in contact. Star had thanked her for all she’d done, questioning once again whether she had to leave. But as Isabella’s chest had felt like it was being ripped in two, she explained how her stay had only ever been temporary. Even after her father had died and she’d left England, she had never felt the sense of loss that seemed to envelop her now.

“Hey,” Christian said, coming up behind her and wrapping his arms around her. His lips trailed up her neck, stopping just under her ear. “Are you all packed?” he asked, nipping her earlobe and sending shafts of pleasure straight to her core.

The man was addictive, and he set her body on fire with every touch.

“I am,” Isabella said, swivelling in his arms, her arms snaking up over his shoulders, before her hands buried themselves in his hair. Neither one seemed to want to mention this was her last night. Treating it like a routine business trip made it easier for her. Anything else was simply too painful.

“Then we have the rest of the night?” Christian asked, dropping light kisses at the edge of her mouth. Pulling her into his body. Isabella could not mistake the hard presence of his arousal against her stomach. How would her battery-operated friend ever compete with the likes of Christian Dupree?

She melted against him. She was going to make the most of their last night together. Make memories that would last her lifetime. Neither of them had spoken about what the future might hold, but somehow Isabella didn't think fleeting weekends would cut it any longer. Now they had both experienced so much more.

Christian's hands cupped her face, his eyes staring into hers. “I'm going to miss you,” he said, his voice huskier than Isabella had ever heard it before.

She placed a finger on his lips, “Shhh...”

Christian stared at her for a moment longer, before his mouth crashed against hers, a sense of desperation building between them, their tongues duelling, teeth nipping.

Isabella moaned against Christian's mouth as he deepened the kiss before sweeping her up into his arms and depositing her on the sofa.

“I want to remember you everywhere,” he said, stripping off their clothes until they both lay naked. He was like a marble statue, all muscle and smooth skin. She loved running her hands over his body, and had done since that initial massage, which had started them on this journey together.

“We've had sex everywhere in your apartment already,” Isabella gasped as Christian drew her nipple into his mouth before biting down on it.

“That maybe so, but I want to cement those memories, so be prepared for a long night,” he said, kissing his way down her stomach and settling himself between her thighs, the breadth of his shoulders forcing them wider.

“That’s fine... I can sleep on the plane.”

Isabella groaned loudly as his tongue swiped a path through her folds from entrance to clit. Circling and withdrawing until she was a writhing mess beneath him, her fingers locked in his hair.

“Ahhhh,” Isabella screamed as the first orgasm of the night hit her.

Christian refused to let up, continuing his assault on her senses until he had wrung every drop out of her.

“You’re going to be the death of me,” Isabella said as she fought to catch her breath, her voice hoarse from all the screaming. She was glad Christian’s penthouse was soundproofed.

“I doubt it. I’m sure you have a few more I can wring out of you before the night is up,” he said, moving up her body and replacing his mouth with his fingers.

Isabella’s already sensitive body clenched around him, her hips moving of their own accord as he slid his fingers in, finding and curling against her most sensitive spot. Christian had learned how to play her body like a finely tuned instrument over the months they had been together, but then so had she.

Isabella’s hand snaked between them, her fingers beginning their own torment of Christian’s body. It was Christian’s turn to gasp, his head dropping back as she pulled back his foreskin and teased his sensitive tip. Two could play at this game. She rolled Christian onto his back. Her eyes locked with his as she lowered her head to take over where her hands had been. She loved watching his eyes shutter as he enjoyed her mouth - this successful and powerful man at her mercy. She would worship him as much as he worshipped her. Isabella shut off her thoughts, enjoying the feel of his warm arousal deep in her



mouth. She pulled away, replacing her lips with her hand once again. Straddling his waist, she looked down, her vision cloudy, as she lined Christian up at her entrance, nudging her opening with his tip before sliding home.

Christian leaned up, capturing her face in his hands, wiping her cheeks, smudging the tears she hadn't realised were falling.

"I love you," he whispered, capturing her mouth softly with his, drinking in her sobs.

Isabella's heart stalled at his words. How had this happened?

"I love you too," she said, melting into his tender kisses.

They continued on, their lower bodies rolling in sync, the sounds of their lovemaking echoing around them as their mouths teased and tormented until Isabella felt the pressure build once more.

"Come with me," she said, as her body shot over the edge, starbursts flashing in front of her eyes.

Christian didn't disappoint, his own body shattering as if on cue.

Isabella closed her eyes, a heaviness overtaking her. She was embarrassed about her breakdown. It was not quite the last night she had envisioned. Instead of leaving Christian with memories of her as a sexy siren, she was leaving him with memories of red eyes and puffy cheeks, while she had sobbed her way through their lovemaking. They lay silently on the sofa, still clasped in each other's arms, Isabella resting her head on Christian's chest, as he stroked and kissed her hair.

"I'm going to miss you," he said quietly.

"I know. I am going to miss you too," Isabella said, resting her chin on his chest and staring up into his pain-filled gaze. "How did we get here? Why does life have to be so hard?"

Isabella dropped a kiss onto Christian's chest, aware of his heart thundering under her palm.

"Maybe in our next life, we will get to be together."

Isabella watched Christian flinch, although he masked his features before she had a chance to read them. The pressure in her chest burned, but she fought against it. Christian pulled her forward, his lips meeting hers. She could feel his desperation. Silly Isabella. Christian said he loved her, and she believed him, but who was she kidding? In his next lifetime, Christian's soul would search for its soulmate. It would look to reconnect with Lily, not hers.

Isabella clamped down on her breaking heart and climbed off him. Holding out her hand to his.

“Let's go to bed,” she said, making a snap decision.

She could never compete with a ghost, but she could enjoy her final few hours with the man who was and would forever be the love of her life.

Christian smiled as he took her hand in his, pulling her into his arms.

“I haven't finished making memories. Let's shower...” he whispered in her ear.

Isabella squeezed his behind before pulling out of his arms and sprinting for the stairs. Who was she to say no?

# Chapter Forty-six

## *Christian*

It had been a month since Isabella had left. Christian had thrown himself back into his work, something he had neglected. While she'd been there, he'd stopped working fourteen-hour days, but that was no more. Lucy had commented that he should get a sofa bed added, then he would never have to leave. Making memories throughout the apartment had not been his brightest move. Everywhere he looked, he saw her. Not just her naked body but her smiling face, her company. Just having her there to discuss the day, even mundane news items. He had lost count of the times he had turned to tell her something only to be greeted by an empty room. So now, he tried to only go home when he was so tired, he could no longer think straight. When his head hit the pillow, he didn't want to think about how lonely it was or how the fresh sheets no-longer held her perfume.

Even Skylar had said the apartment felt empty without her, and that was coming from an eight-year-old girl. Instead, he found her on Sunday morning in his gym, going through the yoga routine Isabella had taught her over the weeks.

"I miss her, Daddy," Skylar said, pulling herself up onto the stool at the kitchen island.

"I know, Princess. I miss her too," Christian admitted, fed up with lying.

Especially when he knew he was doing a poor job of hiding it. Or at least that is what everyone was telling him.

"Do you think Isabella will come back?" Skylar asked, taking a sip of her orange juice.

"It's very difficult. I run my business in London, but Isabella runs hers in Thailand. She has commitments there. She can't just move here."

"But Uncle Seb works for Isabella's company too," Skylar said.

Christian and Seb had been talking about King and Lebroc on the speakerphone, and Skylar had overheard.

“He does, but that is a company that her daddy started. It is not Isabella’s company.”

Skylar screwed up her face. “But she could make it her company too and come and live here again.”

Christian drew Skylar into his arms and kissed the top of her head.

“Sometimes life is not that simple,” Christian heard himself say, although he wished it could be.

But he understood Isabella had worked hard for all she had achieved, and he couldn’t resent her for wanting to go back to it, even if his heart had been locked in a constant vice since she’d left. She could no more uproot her life than he could. Some things were never meant to be.

Christian took Skylar home later that afternoon after they had devoured a large batch of Isabella’s crepe pancakes.

“Christian,” Star said, opening the door, her eyes red and blotchy.

“Is everything all right?” he asked, ushering Skylar into the house, clasping Star’s arm.

“Oh god. I am so sorry,” Star said, a sob escaping her lips, her eyes flooding with tears.

“Star, you’re scaring me,” Christian said. “What’s happened?”

“What’s wrong with Mummy?” Skylar said, standing by Star’s legs, looking up in horror at her mother’s face.

It was at that moment Damian appeared down the stairs, clutching what appeared to be a newly changed Theo.

“Hi, Christian,” Damian said before noticing his wife’s tear-stained face. “Oh.”

“What’s wrong with Mummy, Daddy Damien?” Skylar asked him.

“Mummy was reading your Mummy Lily’s journals, and it made her sad,” Damian said, dropping down to look Skylar in the eye. “Having baby Theo has reminded Mummy of when you were born, which was a very happy and a very sad time.”

“Don’t be sad, Mummy. Mummy Lily is always looking down on us,” she said, squeezing Star’s legs.

“I’m fine, Munchkin. I just miss her sometimes.” Star knelt down next to her daughter and pulled her in for a tight hug. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too, Mummy. And you, Daddies. Can I go and video call Olivia?” Skylar asked.

“Of course. I want to talk to Daddy, anyway.”

They all watched as Skylar took the stairs two at a time.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Christian asked.

He’d only ever seen Star lose it once before, and that was when she and Damian had broken up.

“I need to talk to you,” Star said, wiping her cheeks with the back of her sleeve and taking Theo from Damian.

“I’ll make some coffee,” Damian said, leaving them standing in the hall.

Star turned and walked into the sitting room, placing a gurgling Theo in his bouncer before taking a seat on the sofa.

Christian moved to the sofa opposite, his eyes catching on something he thought he would never see again. Lily’s journals.

Star’s eyes followed his gaze. “After Lily died, the hospital bagged up her belongings for me. I was in no fit state, plus I was spending every waking moment with Skylar. They gave me her clothes and an envelope with her journal in it. The envelope was sealed, and I left it that way.” Christian watched as Star took a shuddering breath. He remembered the time well. Lily had often been writing in her journal when he turned up.

“Why didn’t you say something?” Star said, looking up at him, her eyes filling with more tears.

It was then Christian realised Lily must have written about his visits in her journal. He dropped his gaze and looked at the floor.

“Christian, I’ve said some horrendous things to you and none of them were true.”

Damian came into the room and placed the drinks down. He squeezed Christian’s shoulder, making him look up.

“You didn’t abandon her,” he whispered.

“Oh, I did.”

Christian would not let them think he was a saint. He had abandoned her. Let his father call her a whore. Yes, he’d visited Lily every night in the hospital, but it would never be enough. He hadn’t been able to save her.

“No, you were there for my sister when she needed you. She knew you loved her. That you loved your daughter. I know what she asked of you, Christian... Lily wrote me a letter. She explained everything.”

Christian’s breath caught at Star’s words, his heart hammering in his chest. He got up and walked to the large bi-fold door that overlooked their garden, staring out into the sunshine.

“It wasn’t enough,” he said, the emotion of the past month and his loss nearly nine years ago too great. His vision blurred.

Star came up behind him, her arms wrapping around his waist, her head resting on his back.

“Nothing could have saved her... but you being there... you made my sister’s final nights happy. She died knowing that Skylar was loved and that, although you couldn’t be there, you would be one day. Thank you for being brave enough to come back into our lives.”

They stood like that until Christian raised his head, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand.

“She left you a letter,” Star said, letting him go and moving back to the table, picking up an envelope and holding it out to him.

Christian inhaled deeply, his eyes catching on the swirling handwriting he never thought he’d see again.

“I would suggest you take it home,” Star said, giving him a knowing look.

He knew he must look a sight, his eyes red and blotchy.

Christian took the letter and placed it in his inside pocket. Letting out a deep breath, he opened his mouth and closed it again.

“It’s going to be okay. We’re family. We will always be family,” Star said, resting a hand on his arm. “I believe Lily helped us find our way back to each other even without her journal and letters. When Skylar is older, she’ll have all her mother’s journals to read so she can get to know her like we do.”

Christian didn’t trust his voice, so dropped his chin to his chest in acknowledgement. He liked the idea of Skylar getting to know Lily through her journals. Understanding the inner workings of such a special person. And Lily had been. Like Isabella, she lit up a room when she entered, drawing everyone to her. Someone had blessed him to have two such amazing women touch his life, even if for only a brief moment in time.

Star hugged him when he told her he needed to leave, and let Damian walk him to his car.

“It’s time for you to forgive yourself,” Damian said, resting a hand on his shoulder. “Despite everything Star thought you had done, she has always loved you like a big brother. I think Lily must have somehow left her a message when she realised she hadn’t got her written ones.”

Christian wasn’t sure he believed in spirits or ghosts. But in that moment, maybe her sheer force of spirit made it happen. When Lily wanted something, she’d made sure she got it. She wouldn’t have let their daughter grow up without him knowing

her. He thought back to the day at her graveside. Had she been listening? Paving the way?

He hoped so.

Christian stared at Damian, who smiled. “Stranger things,” he said.

“Stranger things,” he replied before getting in the car and heading back to his empty apartment.



# Chapter Forty-seven

## *Christian*

Christian used the heel of his palm to rub at the tightness in his chest as he stared at the envelope in his hand.

It was in perfect condition as if written yesterday, not nearly nine years ago. He raised it to his nose, but time had removed any scent it may have held. Did he want to read it? Reopen old wounds that had barely healed because if he was honest with himself, he had never gotten over her loss or what had gone before. Skylar helped. She had so many of Lily's mannerisms. It was like watching a mini version of the woman he had loved and lost. It was painful, but it also meant she had not completely gone. There was a part of her that lived on.

Christian picked up the decanter of whiskey he had placed on his desk, pouring himself a large measure of liquid courage, choking it down, savouring the burn.

"Oh, Lily," he said to the empty room, his voice thick with emotion.

He could do this. He owed it to Lily. His letter opener sat in the top drawer of his desk. He clasped it in his hand, sliding it through the envelope before he could change his mind. A single sheet of paper sat inside. He dropped his head back against his desk chair and closed his eyes. Was she going to blame him? He couldn't and wouldn't criticise her if she did. He'd spent years blaming himself, not for her cancer, but for everything else. His stomach and chest churned as he opened his eyes and stared at Lily's beautiful handwriting.

*To my darling Christian,*

*As I write this, you have only just left, having spent another night keeping my nightmares at bay and easing my pain. Thank you.*

*But the sun is coming up, and our magical time is over for another day. Words cannot convey what your presence has meant over the past two months. Our sneaking around has*

*added a little spice, excitement, and mischief to my life as it slowly ebbs away. Your clandestine visits in the dead of night have sent all the nurses on duty into a swoon. I think you have more than one or two fans on the staff. I'm a very lucky lady to have even been able to call you mine and to share in a part of your life. This time together, being able to hold you again, and now to watch you with our daughter, my dreams have become a reality.*

*I am writing this because I wanted to say I'm sorry. I saw your face as you left this morning, the pain you are feeling. I wish I could take it away. I'm sorry I have asked you to walk away from our little angel, to sign away your parental rights to Skylar. I need to leave this life knowing she will have a mother's love, and even as young as my sister is, I know that is something Star will always give her. Thank you for understanding, and for choosing what is best for our daughter. For putting our baby girl first.*

*I have never blamed you for the choices you've been forced to make, even though I know you blame yourself. You are facing an impossible situation, my love.*

*Thank you for the fun times and the laughter. Life isn't always sunshine and roses, and what doesn't break us makes us stronger, and all those other platitudes. Just remember, I love you.*

*You asked tonight how I'm feeling. I admit, I lied. I'm angry, so very angry. Angry I will never see our beautiful little girl grow up. I'm angry I will never get the chance to grow old with you, to experience all the things we talked about. My picket fence dream with a garden full of dahlias. Life is not fair, but my future is now set. Nothing can change that, however much we wish for it. For you, your father has asked so much, but I know you. There will be a time when you regain the power to live your dreams. Those dreams will not die with me. Remember them, Christian - make them happen. Embrace your life and live it for the both of us.*

*It breaks my heart to write this. I want you to find that special person, the one who makes your heart beat that little bit faster, who makes you laugh and smile in those serious*

*moments. When she appears, let yourself be loved and love in return. I promise she is out there, somewhere, waiting. I give you my blessing. Don't make me come back and haunt you. I know I'm going to leave you soon, so this is my last goodbye. I love you Christian Dupree.*

*Always in my heart*

*Lily xxx*

*P.S. When you sign your rights away later today, it will not be forever. Star has a letter too, but I've begged her not to contact you. I have told her you will find her when the time is right. When that happens, tell our daughter about us, about me. I will watch over you all. Until we meet again, my love.*

Christian held the letter to his chest as the words blurred. It was so Lily. He could hear her whispering the words in his ear. She must have written it the morning she died. He had signed the papers, and that night, she was gone. He had put her fears for their daughter to rest. He should be angry these letters had only just come to light. But Lily had always believed things happened for a reason. Maybe she was the one who had sealed her journal in an envelope, knowing Star would be too emotional to open it. She knew Star better than anyone. She trusted that even without knowing the truth, Star would never keep him away from his daughter, and she hadn't. Even when she hated and resented him for what she thought he had done to Lily, she had welcomed him into their lives for Skylar's sake.

Christian poured himself another whiskey and then another. The pain of the past month and the pain of the past nine years were too raw. He wanted a break, at least for a little while.

# Chapter Forty-eight

## *Isabella*

If it was possible for time to feel like it had dragged yet also flown by, that is how the past month felt for Isabella. She had arrived back to a fanfare. Her friends threw her a welcome home party at the hotel where the drama had unfolded. She had smiled through gritted teeth, her heart clamped in a vice that got tighter with every breath. Memories of Christian and their time together flooded her brain everywhere she looked. The only place she had any respite was in her room, a place Christian had never been, so that had become her sanctuary.

“You’re up early,” May said, stepping into the office.

Isabella bit her bottom lip and smiled. “I couldn’t sleep.”

“That seems to be a common occurrence,” May said, handing Isabella a sleeping Kalaya.

Kalaya was now nine months old. She’d been four when Isabella had left, and had grown so much in that time. She’d not remembered Isabella when she returned, so Isabella had spent as much time with the little girl as was physically possible. The perfect distraction.

She hugged Kalaya closer, closing her eyes and breathing in the child’s scent.

“You can’t hide forever,” May said, perching on the side of her desk, her arms crossed over her chest.

“I’m not hiding,” Isabella kept her eyes closed, knowing her friend would see straight through her lies.

“You *are* hiding. Annelise told me how happy you and Christian were when she saw you in London. Why are you here? Why are you not still there with him?”

Isabella opened her eyes and stared at her friend. There was no point in lying. “My life is here. My business. You are here, Kalaya, Arkhom, Annelise...”

“But he isn’t. Christian is in England... with your heart.” May held up her hand as Isabella opened her mouth. “I have known you for eight years. You’re my best friend. Only half of you came home on that plane.”

“My heart will mend with time. It did before. It will again,” she said, standing up and moving Kalaya to the cot May had installed in the office while she’d been away. “I have a class. I’ll see you later.”

Isabella closed the door on the way out, but not before she heard May on the telephone. “We have a problem...”

The last thing she wanted to do was worry her friends. She needed to snap herself out of it. It had been a month since she’d left. She and Christian had shared a few messages, but it hurt too much, so she’d asked if they could stop, at least for a little while. There was no point in drawing out the inevitable. Christian was a sexual being. He was not going to be able to sustain a long-distance relationship. Phone sex or video sex was not a substitute for having a physical body next to you. Isabella didn’t think she would cope with him telling her he had met someone new. No, it was better to make a clean break.

Isabella took her class, going through the routines that had become second nature. She talked their guests through a guided meditation, and they all thanked her at the end, but where she had once felt peace, her soul felt empty...lost.

Returning to the office, she found both Annelise and May waiting for her. She dropped her gym bag on the floor and flopped into her seat.

“Is this an intervention?” she asked, staring at the two women she knew so well.

“Of course,” May said. “We need to do something. It’s painful to watch the person we love in so much pain.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll try to do better.”

“No, that is not what we mean, and you know it. We want to help, but we don’t know how,” May snapped.

“Time is a great healer,” Isabella said. “All I need is some time. I’ll be back to normal soon. I just need to find out what

that new normal is.”

May stepped forward, pulling Isabella out of her chair, her arms wrapping around her. “I love you. I just want you to be happy. However, or whatever that looks like.”

Isabella squeezed her back. “I know. I am sorry, but my heart hurts. It needs time to heal.”

Annelise stepped into the hug, enclosing them both in her arms. “Talk to us, Isabella, please. We want to be here for you.”

“We know you love him. Why aren’t you with him?”

It was Annelise’s turn to ask.

“This is my home. It’s where I have made my life.”

“But circumstances change, situations change. Did Christian tell you he loved you, or is that the problem?... Because let me tell you, the man I saw in London was crazy in love. He couldn’t keep his eyes off you.”

“He told me he loved me...” Isabella’s voice caught in her throat.

She coughed before continuing. “But he never asked me to stay.”

“Did he know that was an option?” May asked.

“Me staying?”

Did he? She knew she talked about returning to Thailand all the time. She had referred to it as home, but he had not asked her if she would think about staying. They had only ever been temporary. Great sex, fun, and games. They were never destined to fall in love.

“Maybe, maybe not. Our relationship wasn’t long term.”

Both women growled, causing Isabella to look up.

“No relationship starts off with the finishing line crystal clear... well, that’s not entirely true, arranged marriages do, but I digress.” May waved her hands in the air, and Annelise stepped back. Isabella would have laughed, but her friend was

on a roll, and she didn't want to throw her off. "Relationships grow and develop. The day you first met Christian, it was two old friends meeting for dinner. You had no intention of jumping into bed with him... but you did. He left, you messaged. He came back... you got caught... drama. You moved into his world for four months. You lived together. Of course, your relationship changed. For someone who is incredibly intelligent, you are very dumb when it comes to relationships."

"Thanks." Isabella bit her lip to stop herself from laughing.

"This is no laughing matter. I am being serious. Did you or did you not let Christian 'hot stuff' Dupree know that staying in England was an option?"

May was practically shouting now.

"No, because I didn't think it was..." Isabella froze as she thought back to the night before she left. "Plus, I can't compete with a ghost."

Isabella filled May and Annelise in on what had happened. They both dropped in their chairs and stared at her.

"So, you see. Life is not always that straightforward. Christian will always love Lily. She is Skylar's mother, and I can't compete."

Annelise took hold of her hand and squeezed. "He will always love the mother of his child, but the heart is infinite in the amount of love it can give. Just because he loves or loved Lily, it does not mean Christian cannot love you as much, if not more."

Isabella's eyes welled. She wished that was true, but she'd already called a halt to their relationship. Christian had probably moved on. He had his life, and she had hers.

"Thank you, ladies. I love you both. You are wonderful friends," she said. "I'll think about what you've said."

Isabella watched her two friends offer her weak smiles. She needed to build a wall and get better at hiding her emotions.

# Chapter Forty-nine

## *Christian*

“What the hell?”

Christian raised his head off the desk at the sound of Seb’s voice.

What? Where was he? His eyes caught sight of the now empty whiskey decanter, and he grimaced. Memories of the day before flooded his memory. His visit to Star, the letter from Lily, Isabella telling him she wanted a clean break.

Christian watched Seb approach through half-closed eyes, his head pounding. Drowning himself in a bottle of whiskey had seemed like a good idea, but now?

“What are you doing here?” Christian croaked, his throat raw from the whiskey.

“You failed to show up for work yesterday. Lucy was worried, especially when you weren’t answering your phone again this morning.”

“But you don’t even work for me anymore? You work for Isabella,” Christian groaned as he moved his head.

“Maybe not, but that doesn’t mean I stopped being your best friend. Lucy also knows I have a key to this place.”

Christian looked around. His phone was nowhere in sight. As if knowing what he was looking for, Seb huffed and dropped into the chair opposite him.

“It’s on the sideboard in the kitchen,” he added, before motioning to the empty decanter and knocked over glass on the desk.

“What’s going on, Christian? Is this about Isabella leaving? Because...”

Christian sat up, wincing, before resting his head against the back of his seat and closing his eyes.

“No... yes... no,” he said.



Part of it was about Isabella, the rest was about his screwed-up past and the beautiful woman he had let down and how even in death, her warm heart still touched him and cared when he didn't deserve it.

"That makes no sense," Seb said.

"Isabella asked me to stop contacting her. She said we both need to move on with our lives."

Seb stared at him, wide-eyed. "Is that what you want?"

"It's not about what *I* want."

When would people start understanding that?

"Like hell it isn't. There were two people in your relationship. I saw you together. You were happy, Christian. Happier than I've seen you in... Is that not worth fighting for?" Seb threw up his hands.

Christian leaned forward, handing him Lily's letter.

"What's this?" Seb asked, taking the piece of paper.

Christian watched as the colour drained from Seb's face. "What?... Where?..." Misty eyes locked with Christian's. Seb had been a Lily advocate. He'd loved her too, like a sister. He'd beaten Christian black and blue when he had told him what had happened with his father, and Christian had let him.

"Star opened Lily's journal. She found some letters inside. Lily explained everything to her... about the company, the threats, how I had been there at the end. How she asked me to sign Skylar away."

Seb ran a hand over his face. "Oh man," he said. "How did Star take it?"

"She cried... had been crying."

"How about Damian?"

They both knew how protective Damian was over his wife.

"He told me Star loved me like a brother, that I needed to forgive myself."

Christian leaned forward and rested his elbows on the desk, cradling his head.

“You do.”

They sat in silence for a while. Christian could almost hear the cogs in his friend’s brain whirring.

“Come on, you need to get showered. This room smells like a distillery.”

Christian staggered to his feet, the pressure in his temples searing.

“Come on.”

Seb grabbed his arm to steady him, leading him to the bathroom in the gym next door. That was the wrong move. His stomach cramped. The gym was somewhere Christian had avoided since Isabella had left. It had been one of her favourite places. Everywhere he looked, he could see her practising her yoga, or meditating. Breaking free of Seb, he ran the rest of the way to the bathroom, dry retching over the toilet. His stomach was long empty.

“I’ll grab you some fresh clothes. You get showered,” Seb said from the doorway before turning and leaving.

Christian dropped back, leaning against the shower door. How had life got so complicated?



As he left the shower, Christian could hear Seb talking to someone in the main living area. Christian walked through, wearing the clothes Seb had delivered, to find his sister leaning against the kitchen island, scowling at his best friend.

They both looked up before Scarlett averted her gaze, a blush spreading over her cheeks, while Seb turned away, focusing his attention on the food he was preparing.

“Did I interrupt something?”

Not that he cared. It appeared even expensive whiskey could leave a nasty hangover if drunk in quantity.

“No!” they both said together, the sound of their voices making him flinch.

Scarlett moved to his side, handing him two tablets and a glass of orange juice.

“Here, you idiot,” she said. “This should help.”

Christian took the tablets together before collapsing on the stool next to the bar. At least it was only his best friend and sister seeing him in this state. That was a good point. What was his sister doing there?

“Why are you here?” he asked Scarlett.

“That’s gratitude for you,” she mumbled before adding, “Seb called. And before you say anything, I would have ripped him a new one had he not.”

He watched Seb frown and almost laughed. Scarlett had always followed Seb around when she was younger. Christian had called her, his *little shadow*. Unlike many of his friends, Seb had never excluded Scarlett. Instead, when she needed help, he’d always been the first to step in and fix her toy or reach for something she couldn’t. He’d stopped noticing their relationship when they got older. He supposed it was because Scarlett had moved away. Seb’s closeness to Scarlett was why he’d asked him to escort her to America to help her settle in. He was the only person he’d truly trusted to look after his sister. It was funny to see his friend scared of her.

Scarlett dropped herself onto the stool next to him. “Seb told me about the letter. I’m sorry, Christian.”

He turned his head towards her, as her hand came to rest over his, giving her a half smile. The letter was more of a relief than anything. Star and Damian knew the truth, and although that would help their relationship in the long run, it changed nothing. His daughter would still never be his. Lily was still gone. His life was empty, and he had now lost the one person who had made him feel something for the first time in too long. It wasn’t just the sex, which had been amazing. But it

had become more than that. Isabella understood him. Her presence had soothed him, made him laugh, she had shown him there was more to life than money and work. But he'd even messed that up... he had not been enough for her to stay.

Christian shrugged, as Seb slid a plate of food in front of him.

"Eat," he said before turning and staring at Christian's state-of-the-art coffee machine.

Seb grumbled and started pushing random buttons. Scarlett huffed before moving to stand next to him.

"Out of the way," she said. "It's not that difficult."

Seb stepped back as if Scarlett had burned him.

The three of them remained in an awkward silence as Scarlett prepared the coffee. The main buzzer rang, and Christian groaned internally. When had his apartment become a local meeting place?

Seb moved towards the apartment door.

"Is he here?"

"Hi, Star," Seb said. "Come on in. Let me take this gorgeous little man."

Seb lifted the car seat holding baby Theo, out of Star's hand, before shutting the door.

She looked embarrassed, her eyes flitting between Seb, Scarlett, and himself.

"I hope I'm not intruding. It's just I stopped by your office, and Lucy said you hadn't been in."

"Come in, join the party," Christian said, waving his hand at Seb and Scarlett.

"I'm sorry, I can leave," Star said. "I just wanted to check on you."

"Don't mind grumpy. He drank himself into oblivion and has a raging hangover," Scarlett said, dropping and cooing at baby Theo.

Christian jumped as Star's hand landed on his back and rubbed soothing circles. He looked over his shoulder at her, wishing his coffee was another glass of whiskey.

He gave her a half smile before returning his focus to his coffee mug. He wasn't sure what everyone wanted from him.

"Okay, this has to stop." Scarlett walked up and spun Christian's chair around to face her, her hands on her hips as she glared at him. "Sorry, Star, but I am sick to death of seeing my brother mope around. Chris, you need to get over yourself and move on."

Christian pushed off the chair and stepped past his sister. He didn't need to be having this conversation right now. He wanted to nurse his broken heart and his hangover in peace and quiet.

"Don't walk away from me, Christian Dupree. You need to listen."

"Scarlett."

It was Seb who tried to intervene.

"No Seb, this has gone on for long enough. I can't simply sit by and watch my brother self-destruct." Scarlett's voice caught.

"I can go," Star said, moving towards Theo.

"No," Scarlett said, rounding on Star. "You need to hear what I'm about to say, too. This involves you. It involves all of us."

Star stopped in her tracks and waited.

Christian watched as Scarlett took a deep breath. "I don't know what was in the letter yesterday, and I won't ask, but it physically hurts me to see you like this." Scarlett's eyes filled with tears. "For nine years, I've watched you work yourself into the ground for our family. You gave up Lily, married a stranger and signed away your rights to Skylar. You then single handedly rebuilt the company our father had all but destroyed. You not only rebuilt it, but you took it to the next level." Scarlett angrily brushed away the tears that had started

to fall. “Lily died, but it’s like you died with her,” Scarlett said, her tears now in free fall.

Seb appeared at her side and took her into his arms, her head nestled into his neck. Typical Seb, he had never been able to stand a woman’s tears.

Christian stood and stared at his sister. “What do you want from me?”

Scarlett looked up. “I know you loved Lily with all your heart. I know you love Skylar. But these past few months. I’ve had my brother back. You’ve smiled and laughed. You’ve left the office at a reasonable time, you’ve socialised, and you started to live again. Isabella, she made you live again. I’m scared, Christian. I’m scared that now she’s gone. I’m going to lose you all over again.”

Christian could not help himself. He stepped forward and pulled his sister in for a hug.

“You won’t lose me. I never left.”

Scarlett cupped his face. “But that’s where you’re mistaken. You checked out, Christian. You’ve been a working robot, not the fun-loving person you were before everything that happened. These past couple of months have been a reminder to us all how far you have fallen.”

“Isabella is gone. She left me. Not the other way round.”

Why was everyone blaming him for her departure?

“Did you ask her to stay? I know my friend. She was in love with you.”

It was as if the look Scarlett was giving him was burning holes in his chest.

“She had commitments in Thailand,” Christian said.

He was getting sick of explaining himself.

“Did you ever tell Isabella you wanted her to stay?”

There was a long pause. Christian sighed. He knew his sister well enough to know she would never give up.

“No, I didn’t ask her to stay.”

“Do you love her? Did you want her to stay?”

Christian could not prevent his eyes from moving to Star. Her face was a mask of sympathy. Christian watched as she stepped forward.

“I may be out of line here, but I think you may need to hear this from me.” Her eyes moved to her son, who, despite the drama, was still sound asleep in his car seat. “When Damian returned, I didn’t think I could love him, not the way he deserved. I’d reserved all my love for Skylar. As time moved on, I realised love isn’t finite. I love Skylar with all my heart, and that love or the amount didn’t need to change, as I let myself love Damian. Instead my heart and it’s ability to love simply expanded. Now Theo has arrived, it has expanded again. From Lily’s diary and her letter...” Star’s voice caught. “From her diary and letter. I know what you two meant to each other. You loved with all your heart. But Christian, by allowing yourself to love Isabella, if you do, that doesn’t diminish any of the love you felt for my sister. You can love Isabella too. The same way you love Skylar. The heart has an endless capacity to love. Lily is the last person who would want you to go through life not finding love again, and personally, I think. She would have loved Isabella.”

Christian watched Scarlett hug Star, her gaze locking with his over her shoulder.

“She left me,” he reminded them.

“For someone as intelligent as you are... you really are an idiot...” Scarlett said, shocking him.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Christian looked at his sister in shock. He’d never once compared Lily and Isabella.

Apart from the day Andrew and Ana had come around, they’d hardly spoken about her.

“I’m only telling you what May told me. Plus, you never asked her to stay.”

Scarlett shrugged.

Christian's hangover seemed to come back with a vengeance. Sharp pain shooting through his temples.

"When did you speak to May?" Christian asked, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"When she answered Isabella's phone. She's worried about her. She's moping about as much as you are... she's not eating, sleeping."

Christian stood tall at his sister's words and watched a smirk appear on her face.

"What? That doesn't mean she wants me."

Christian's gaze moved between the three people in front of him, who all let out a simultaneous groan.

"The woman's mad about you. As much as you are about her. I never thought I'd call you an idiot, my friend... but really." It was Seb who stepped forward. "Sleep off your hangover. We can make a plan of action when you get up. I think you've had more than enough for one morning."

Christian went to open his mouth to complain, but was shushed by everyone and ushered away. Deciding he could not face any more lectures, he did what they requested and made his way up to his bedroom. Not that his room was much better. His bed reminded him of Isabella. He hadn't wanted to change the sheets after she'd left and had been devastated when he'd come home to find his housekeeper had done exactly that.

Falling face down on the bed, he let his mind go. Imagining Isabella was there beside him, talking him through one of her meditations. He felt his breathing change and...



# Chapter Fifty

## *Isabella*

Isabella thought about her conversation with May and Annelise. Had she made the right decision? Her heart was hurting. It differed from when Edward had betrayed her, and she could see now she'd never loved him. He'd been there when her world had collapsed, and she'd mistaken his support for something else. For him, it had been a ruse to get his hands on her trust fund, and even though she'd thought herself in love. She knew now she hadn't been.

Isabella had taken the day off. She needed to get out and clear her head. She made a trip to the National Park and walked the route she and Christian had taken five months before. She pictured them together. Their relationship had changed that weekend. It had started as sex, but as they'd spent more and more time together, it had become something else. She had enjoyed his mind and his body. Isabella smiled as she thought about Christian's body. For a man in a suit, he was toned and fit, his body a sensual masterpiece. But it had become more than that... his mind was brilliant and she had grown to love his company. Leaning against the railing, she looked out over the view, and closed her eyes.

She knew what she needed to do. She may be too late, but she needed to try. Did she and Christian have a future together? She thought back to that morning and her conversation with May.

"I love you. You are my best friend. But you've run away *again*," May said staring at her.

"I haven't. I came back for our business." Isabella said, throwing her hands in the air. Why couldn't May see that?

"The business is fine. Annelise and I have seen to that. Admit it... you ran away."

Isabella had stormed out, pushing her way past Annelise and telling them she was taking a mental health day.

Opening her eyes, Isabella watched the couples and families around her. Was May right? Had she run away? She knew in her heart she had. What would she have done if Christian had asked her to stay? It did not take her long to work out the answer.

There was a puffing behind her. She turned and found a red-faced May with Kalaya in her pushchair.

“Thought I might find you here,” May said, pulling up next to her, Kalaya squealing in delight as she saw Isabella.

Isabella bent down and tickled the little girl’s tummy.

“Easy when you use a tracking app.”

It was one thing they’d always insisted on after becoming friends and travelling together. Neither seeing a reason to turn it off when they had set up their business.

“I’m sorry. I was hard on you this morning. I shouldn’t have pushed.”

May’s eyebrows were drawn together.

“You were right,” Isabella said, leaning back against the railing and staring out over the view. “I have run away, but not in the way you think. I’ve run to safety, instead of taking a leap of faith. We’ve not been together that long. Our relationship was intense. Yes, I love Christian. I have never felt for anyone what I feel for him... but what if it doesn’t work out? What if I’m a poor substitute for Lily, and he realises that?”

Isabella leaned her head on May’s shoulder as her friend wrapped her arms around her. “If you don’t give it a go, you will never know, and your life will become filled with what-ifs. Is that what you want? Or do you want to embrace the day and see where life might take you? I am not saying there won’t be issues ahead. Every relationship has its difficulties... even Arkhom and I.” May giggled as Isabella raised an eyebrow. “But it is not like The Retreat is going anywhere. If it doesn’t work out, you can always come back here. We will be here for you...”

“But that’s not fair to you,” Isabella turned to her friend. “I can’t leave you to run the business all by yourself.”

It was May’s turn to look sheepish. “Annelise wants to buy in. While you were away, she completed her training. She’s now fully qualified. She loves The Retreat, and is a whiz with the paperwork and bookings.”

A pang of pain lanced through Isabella’s chest.

“Don’t look like that,” May said, squeezing her hand. “The Retreat will always be *our* baby. But what this means is you don’t have to feel guilty... You can follow your heart and dreams without worrying... I believe everything happens for a reason... Christian coming last year, the original CEO leaving... Richard and Annelise. You having to go to England. The pieces have all fallen into place, perfectly... the only thing wrong is you are here and Christian is in England.”

“But what if he’s moved on...” Isabella could not help but voice her fears.

“Pah,” May laughed. “He’s as mopey as you, according to Scarlett.”

It was Isabella’s turn to look shocked. “When did you speak to Scarlett?”

May’s cheeks darkened. “I may have answered your phone when you were taking a class. She’s really nice. I hope I get to meet her one day.”

“But May, he said nothing. He let me walk away without even a backward glance. He told me he loved me, but that was where it ended.”

“Men!” May said. “From what I can gather, he doesn’t think he deserves you. Has some idea that he hurts those he loves and lets them down. He also thinks you want to be here... didn’t feel he had the right to ask you to uproot your life when he couldn’t offer the same.”

Isabella closed her eyes. Could this be true? She knew Christian’s past had left him with baggage, but he’d handled all her problems and issues like a pro. She would never have been able to do it without his help and support. He’d been

amazing. He certainly hadn't let her down. But then, had she told him that?

"I need to go back, don't I?" Isabella turned to her friend. "I need to know what he thinks. We need to have a proper conversation."

"You do... and before you overthink it. Everything here will be fine. Yes, I will miss you, but the idea of you being happy is..."

Isabella watched May's eyes mist over. Stepping in, she wrapped her arms around her friend.

"You've been the best friend a girl could ask for, and that will never change. Whether you are here or there. I'm only a phone call away. You just better holiday in Thailand, at least once a year. I'll need to see you." May whispered into her shoulder.

"That I can promise... this country will always hold a piece of my heart."

"Come on, we need to book you a flight to London," May said, linking their arms as they both pushed Kalaya down the hill.

# Chapter Fifty-one

## *Isabella*

“You have your passport... ticket?” May asked.

“I do.”

Isabella took a deep breath. Was she doing the right thing? Her heart was heavy at the thought of not seeing Christian, but the *what-ifs* were playing merry hell with her mental well-being.

“Stop!” May was facing her with her hands on her hips. “You need to stop with the self-doubt. Christian has already told you he loves you... he will never ask something of you that he cannot do himself. That is the kind of man he is. He cannot leave the UK and move here. His daughter prevents that, and I know you wouldn’t want that for him. You have to make the choice. Where is your heart currently?”

“You’re right. I left my heart in London. It’s just a lot...”

“It’s a leap of faith, but you’re ready to take it. I love you, my friend. Rip that bandaid off and get your man.”

Isabella smiled and pulled May in for a hug. “What am I going to do without you in my life every day?”

“Have lots of sex and call me... still living vicariously here... especially now I have a nine-month-old.”

Isabella pulled back from her friend and clasped her shoulders. “If you need me, ever. I will be back in a heartbeat. Promise me... I’m not happy about abandoning you.”

“You are not abandoning me. Now *go*. Before you miss your flight.”

Isabella pulled May in for one last hug before dropping and giving Kalaya a kiss on the cheek.

“Look after Mummy, and I’ll see you soon.”

It was Arkhom’s turn for a hug next.

“Follow your heart,” he whispered. “Thank you for everything. We will miss you.”

Isabella could barely see as she stepped through the gate. Her heart bleeding. She turned and waved. Arkhom had pulled May into his arms, her friend now openly sobbing. Dropping her hand luggage, she ran back through and flung her arms around them both for one last hug.

May wiped her eyes, “You mad woman... Go, or you’ll miss your flight, and I’ll have to do this all over again... my heart won’t be able to take it.”

Isabella laughed, wiping her own tears. Running back to her bag, under the glare of security, she wiped her face and grinned.

“I love you,” she shouted, before rushing down the corridor. She had a plane to catch, and a man to see.



It was early morning when the plane landed. Sebastian and Scarlett were waiting at customs with a large *Welcome Home, Isabella* sign, and balloons.

Isabella covered her eyes when she saw them, peeking through her fingers and laughing.

“Really... could you two be any more obvious? So much for cloak and dagger? What if the press had got wind?”

“It’s five AM... the airport is quiet,” Scarlett huffed, pulling her in for a hug.

It was then a man stepped forward with a camera and snapped a photo of them.

“Oh damn,” Seb said, chasing after him.

Isabella smirked, and Scarlett watched in horror as Sebastian caught up with him. He spoke to him for a moment, and the two walked back towards them.

Isabella tilted her head. What was he up to?

“Marcus and I have struck a deal,” Seb said, slapping the photographer on the back. “I’ve explained our plan and he’s agreed to keep quiet if he can take a couple of exclusive photos that he may sell in a couple of hours.”

Scarlett breathed a sigh of relief next to her. This was all getting far too complicated. Why she could not just turn up and say, Hi, I’m here, was beyond her. Scarlett wanted her to surprise her brother. At this point, Isabella didn’t care. She just wanted to see him. The past month had been painful. When the pilot had said they were coming into land, butterflies had taken off in her stomach, but the heavy weight she’d been carrying around in her chest had miraculously lifted.

“Fine, let’s do this... I really need a shower.”

They posed for several photos with the banner and balloons. Marcus thanked them. She didn’t miss the money Seb handed over, when he thought she and Scarlett weren’t looking.



“Welcome back,” Scarlett said as they got into Sebastian’s boy toy car. “Don’t comment about the car... he’s very sensitive.”

Isabella’s eyes flashed between them. There was definitely something going on. Her friend’s smirk and the returning look he gave her was... intimate. But maybe that was her own love-sick brain reading into things.

“Does everyone know what is going on?” Isabella asked as Seb drove them through the London traffic.

It seemed like all Christian’s friends were in on their escapades.

“Henri and Patrice are waiting on an update in New York. Star didn’t dare tell Skylar in case she spilled the beans to Christian... but yes, pretty much everyone, other than Christian, knows you’re on your way back,” Scarlett said, laughing as Isabella grimaced.

There were definitely a lot of people invested in her love life. Somehow, it didn't surprise her. They all loved Christian. It had been obvious when she'd first arrived. She didn't think Christian realised how much everyone cared. With all the planning, it was clear his friends wanted him to have his own *happily ever after*.

"Come on, let's get you to Christian's," Scarlett said, unable to keep the excitement out of her voice.

"He's going to have left for the office."

Isabella looked at the clock on the dashboard, her heart sinking.

"Sebastian may have requested a breakfast meeting at Christian's apartment. He will be waiting for him to turn up." Scarlett grinned as she turned in her seat, having called *shotgun* as they reached the car.

"Remind me never to..." Isabella bit her lip. "You two are lethal together... devious doesn't even come into it."

Isabella couldn't retain her laughter when they both thanked her at the same time.

It was then the phone system rang, Christian's name flashing up on the screen.

"Shhh," Seb said as he connected the call.

"I thought we had a meeting?"

Isabella's stomach fluttered at the sound of Christian's voice.

"We do... I'm currently stuck in traffic," Seb replied smoothly.

"Seb, you live around the corner... it was why we were having the meeting at my apartment rather than at the office."

Seb's eyes widened in panic before he smiled. "I got lucky last night... a mammoth session. I fell asleep. Woke up late."

There was silence on the other end of the phone. Isabella could sense Christian's shock at Seb's words. It was clearly not Seb's M.O.



“Just get here as soon as you can. I have another meeting at ten before my flight.”

The phone disconnected.

Isabella’s eyes flicked between Scarlett and Seb. Her best friend was looking out of the window, her demeanour remarkably quiet. Seb kept shooting her sideways glances. Were they holding out on her? Was something going on? Isabella shook her head, her thoughts returning once again to Christian. She had missed him so much, it physically hurt.

“Mr McCarthy, does this car go any faster?” Isabella teased. “I have somewhere I need to be.”

Seb grinned in the rear-view mirror. “At your service, Ma’am,” he said before turning out of the main traffic and taking the side roads.

Isabella couldn’t contain her grin.

Twenty minutes later, Seb pulled into Christian’s underground parking garage.

They all got out of the car, Sebastian lifting her case out and wheeling it to the elevator.

Scarlett pulled her in for a final hug, before pressing a keycard into her hand.

“Here. I’ll need it back when you get yours.”

Isabella squeezed her back. “I’ll see you later... sooner, if he decides I shouldn’t be here.”

Seb returned and grinned. “Never gonna happen... that flight Christian mentioned... that’s him coming to get you.”

Isabella’s heart stopped, her eyes filling. “Thank you... I needed to hear that.”

Squaring her shoulders, she walked into the lift. Turning around, her eyes locked on her friends until the doors closed, and it began its ascent.

The butterflies had started again as the lift opened. Christian’s front door flew open, and he stood open-mouthed.

Isabella could not prevent the giggle. It was clear he'd been about to rake his friend over the coals for keeping him waiting.

“Isabella?”

“In the flesh.”

She stepped out of the lift before the doors could close.

“What? I... I was coming to get you...”

“Well, I hope the ticket is refundable.”

Isabella made her way towards him.

She watched a smile break out over his face as his brain caught up. “It’s fine. I own the plane.”

Isabella rolled her eyes, stopping in front of him. “Are you going to invite me in?”

Christian stepped aside, his hand brushing hers as he grasped the handle of her case, electric shocks sparking all over her body.

She let go and walked ahead, listening as Christian closed the door.

“I don’t understand? Why are you here?”

Isabella turned, her hands clasping his face. The look of hope in his eyes, doing strange things to her heart.

“I realised I left something behind.”

Christian’s brows drew together.

“You... I also realised. I love my life in Thailand. But I’ve grown to love something else more... As they say. *Home is where the heart is*... Thailand doesn’t...”

Isabella didn’t get any further before Christian’s mouth crashed down on hers, his tongue demanding entrance. His passion stealing her breath.

When they finally broke apart, Christian rested his forehead against hers. “I take it I don’t have a meeting with Seb?”

“No... he and Scarlett...”

Christian’s brow raised.

“Dropped me off.”

Christian opened his mouth and closed it again. “I’ve always wondered...”

“Don’t wonder,” Isabella said, grinning and pulling his mouth back to hers.

She didn’t want him thinking too hard about his sister and his best friend. Not that he could talk.

“I need to grab a shower,” Isabella said before raising an eyebrow. “Care to join me?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” Christian said.

She pulled out of his arms before taking off towards the stairs, dropping items of clothing as she went. Christian hot on her heels.

She made it to the giant shower first, setting the jets going before stepping into the spray. Christian appeared behind her, crowding her, the water splashing over them both. His hands snaked up her front, cupping and caressing her breasts, warmth flooding her body, pooling at her core. Isabella dropped her head back against Christian’s shoulder as his lips sucked and nipped their way along her jawline and throat. Her hands snaked down and behind her, grabbing Christian’s hips and pulling him against her. His hardness and desire evident against her lower back..

They both groaned, Christian spinning her around, pushing her against the tiled wall, before dropping to his knees and hooking one of her legs over his shoulder.

“I’ve been thinking about you since you left. I can’t get you out of my mind,” Christian said.

He pressed his face between her legs, his tongue drawing circles over her sex, causing Isabella’s stomach muscles to contract. This man set her body on fire. She would never get enough of him.

She dropped her head back as her body flooded with emotions. She ached for his touch, her heart finally restarting after its heartbreak. Christian nipped her thigh, pulling her

back into the present before increasing the pressure of his licks and adding his fingers to fill and stretch her body as he knew she liked. Isabella's back arched off the wall, pushing herself into him as her desperation built. He replaced his mouth with his thumb, his fingers still working Isabella's body before sucking down hard on one of her nipples. Isabella detonated, a scream leaving her throat as she came hard around his fingers. Before she had time to think, Christian had spun her around. Then he splayed her hands against the tiles before entering her from behind, his hands firmly on her hips, guiding them as her body continued to contract around him as she came down from her high.

"I love you," Christian said, biting down on her earlobe.

"I love you too. So much..."

Isabella lost the ability to think as Christian devoured and used her body. His body moving as if trying to memorise every aspect. She felt the pressure of their desire build once more, Christian holding himself deep inside her as her body milked his, once again, causing his own to jerk in response. They were both breathing hard, as the warm water rushed over them.

Isabella felt Christian drop his head between her shoulder blades, his arms around her waist, as he slowly withdrew his body from hers. Isabella instantly felt his loss, turning in his arms, before clasping his face and kissing him, trying to show him what he meant to her. Her fingers slid once again into his hair, as they stood under the spray, their mouths devouring each other as their bodies had just moments before.

Isabella finally pulled back, the same look of completeness resonating in Christian's eyes as she knew shone in her own. It was Christian who moved this time, his lips meeting hers. Their bodies melting against one another as if trying to imprint on each other's memories. This time when they came together, it was a slow worship, their bodies and minds meeting as one, as they lost themselves.

While they were in the shower, Christian had received a message to say all his meetings for the next forty-eight hours

had been cancelled. He was contagious and needed to stay home. He had laughed when he showed Isabella Seb's message. A sound she had feared she would never hear again.

Lying with her head on his chest, she felt Christian's deep inhale.

"What happens next?"

Isabella rolled over onto her stomach and rested her hand and chin on his chest.

"I'll look for somewhere to live, then I'd like to see where this goes."

A furrow appeared between Christian's brow. "Why do you need somewhere to live? You can stay here..."

Isabella smiled. "There is something called an assumption... I've just arrived on your doorstep. I'm not going to assume you want me to stay with you."

The furrow deepened. "Hell, woman. You've left me for a month... there is no way you're stepping out of my sight. Of course you'll live here... with me..." A look flashed across his face. "If you want to..."

Isabella dropped her lips to his chest, just above his heart. "Of course I want to. There is nowhere else I would rather be. I love you more than words can say."

Christian's eyes closed as he breathed in deeply. When he opened his eyes again, they were misty.

"I love you. Until you came into my life, I thought my chance at happiness had died with Lily. You've reawakened a part of me that has been asleep for so long. It was why I was getting on a flight this afternoon. I couldn't be without you for a moment longer. I was going to beg if I had to."

It surprised Isabella when Christian's thumb caught the bead of moisture that had escaped her eye and was tracking its way down her cheek.

"Until you... I was lost... it's like I was waiting for you to find me."

Christian rolled her under his body, his lips catching hers in a kiss that left her breathless. Their bodies fitting together like a hand in a glove.

“And now we can spend the rest of our lives enjoying this new happiness.”

Isabella sighed... her chest expanding at his words... she had finally come home. They both had. The pain of their pasts forging the way to a brighter future.

# Epilogue

## *Christian*

Christian watched on as Isabella stared out at the crowd. He'd positioned himself at the back, away from prying eyes and the press. Today was about her, a celebration of all she'd achieved over the past three years.

The marquee they were all standing in was full. The turnout had surprised Isabella, although he wasn't sure why. His wife had a sharp business brain, and it hadn't taken him long to realise, when she set her mind to something, it was bound to be a success.

Christian watched as she chewed her lip, the only outward sign that let him know how nervous she was. Not that she needed to be. Everything was perfect.

"Isabella looks amazing."

Christian looked down at his twelve, nearly thirteen-year-old daughter and smiled. Skylar and Isabella had developed a strong bond and close friendship. He thanked his lucky stars every day Isabella had been the one to come into their lives.

A tapping sound came over the tannoy.

"Welcome, everyone," Isabella said into the microphone. "I am pleased so many of you could make it today."

Isabella smiled as she looked to her left, where May and Annelise stood grinning. May gave her a thumbs up. She'd been ecstatic when her two friends had arrived a couple of days earlier to be part of the opening ceremony. To Isabella, today was as much about her friends as it was her, and it was one more thing he loved about her.

When Isabella glanced to her right, he saw her lock eyes with Scarlett and Sebastian, who were standing side by side with some of the other board members of The King, Lebroc and McCarthy Group. Sebastian had permanently left The Dupree Group after being offered a partnership with The King

and Lebroc. He'd been voted into the permanent role of CEO after a mere six months. Christian had been happy for his friend.

Isabella continued with her speech.

“Thirty-five years ago, my father, Dominic King, and his best friend, Pierce Lebroc, had a dream. With that dream, they opened their first hotel. Over the next twenty-five years, that first hotel became part of a successful chain, which now has hotels around the globe.

It has taken three years to make my dream come true. A dream that began in Goa, India, twelve years ago when I was twenty-one. I'll save you the maths. I'm thirty-two now.” The crowd laughed. “It is somewhere I went to recover after the death of my father. Hospitality is in my blood, but while I was in Goa, I also realised the importance of mindfulness and taking care of the human spirit. It is with great pleasure that King, Lebroc and McCarthy have joined forces with the original Retreat owners to bring The Retreat II here. Today, we open and fulfil my dream. Thank you.”

There was a thunderous round of applause. The press stepped forward, asking for photographs of everyone together, after which several reporters fired questions for their articles.

The rest of the crowd entered the newly renovated building, leaving Isabella to stand, watching. She could not hide the enormous smile that split her face, her eyes twinkling.

Over the next couple of hours, hundreds of well-wishers surrounded Isabella, May, and Annelise as the doors to The Retreat II finally opened. He had lost count of the number of people who had congratulated him on his wife's success.

Christian entered the hotel lobby and stared at his wife, who was standing beneath the chandelier, staring up at the sweeping staircase that led to the guest rooms. A small smile graced her lips. He stepped forward and pulled her into his arms, his mouth descending on hers.

“You were amazing. I'm so proud of you,” he said, resting his forehead against hers, meaning every word. He still



couldn't believe the woman in front of him had chosen to be his.

"Thank you. But I couldn't have done it without your and everyone else's support. I can't believe so many people showed up." As with everything, Isabella took nothing for granted. A bright light shining in the darkness. She attracted people to her like a moth to a flame. She had certainly attracted and saved him, and he could not love her more.

"Why? You did it... you, May and Annelise," he said, stepping back, linking his fingers with hers. "Where are the other two?"

Isabella grinned. "They're showing our visitors around. I wanted a five-minute breather and to catch up with my sexy hubby."

She wrapped her arms around Christian's neck, his body responding instantly to her closeness. Her lips touched his, and he deepened their kiss.

"Get a room," an amused voice came from the doorway.

Christian pulled back and stared at his twelve-year-old daughter, who was standing grinning at them both. Christian held out a hand, and she ran into their embrace.

"Congratulations, Izzy," she said. "This is amazing. I can't wait to try out the new yoga studios."

Christian watched as Isabella looked down at his daughter, love radiating from her eyes. These two had developed a firm friendship, especially since Skylar had developed a love for yoga. A love that had either he, Star, Damian, or Isabella driving her all over the country most weekends as she took part in yoga competitions. Ranking number three in her age group.

A grumble sounded at his feet. Looking down, Christian saw movement in the pushchair. Skylar stepped back.

"Don't worry. I've got him," she said, swooping down and scooping her three-month-old brother, Harry into her arms.

She was the best big sister. The blanket next to him moved, another small leg kicking free, before a howl went up. “Looks like Amelia is awake.” Christian bent down and pulled his daughter out, snuggling her into his shoulder.

“You might want a muslin on your shoulder,” Isabella said, grimacing as milky bubbles escaped Amelia’s mouth, coating his suit jacket.

“What’s a little upchuck among friends?” Christian heard himself say.

He couldn’t believe the transformation his wife and children had invoked in him since their miraculous appearance.

“You sound like your wife when I first had Kalaya,” May said, stepping into the room before grabbing a muslin and draping it over his shoulder. “Baby milk doesn’t smell good after a couple of hours.”

“Thank you,” Christian said. He liked May, she was straight-talking, and he knew he had her to thank for helping to convince Isabella to give him a chance. He’d never felt worthy of the wonderful woman who now stood next to him and had agreed to share his life. But she had seen something in him, something that called to her as much as she called to him.

“Annelise wondered if Skylar wanted to join the class?” May said, smiling at his daughter.

“Really?” Skylar squealed, handing Harry over to Isabella before taking off down the corridor towards the studios.

Star and Damian stepped out of the way as Skylar ran past them. “Slow down... this is not...” Star said, but it was too late. Skylar had disappeared. “Teenagers!” she said, coming to stand next to them. “Is everyone congregating here?”

Scarlett and Seb appeared next, followed by Andrew and Ana. “It’s the entire gang... nearly...” Isabella said. “Only Henri and Patrice are missing.”

Christian knew Isabella was sad that their friends could not make it over from America. It was why...

“Surprise!”

Isabella squealed as Patrice stepped through the hotel doors. He'd sent the private plane to pick them up. Isabella needed her extended family around her. Patrice had also been instrumental in the project, coming out of retirement to help her female friends before slinking back into the background.

"You didn't really think we would miss this?" Patrice said, holding her arms open.

Isabella handed Harry to Damian before throwing herself at Patrice. Tears glistening in her eyes.

When she'd finished with Patrice, she turned to Henri, wrapping her arms around him too. "Oh, this day could not get any better. Thank you, all of you."

A waitress appeared behind her, carrying a tray of champagne. Star and Damian, Andrew and Ana, he and Isabella, even Scarlett and Seb... he still struggled with that idea, but as Scarlett had said to him... Don't think about it. His best friend, however, was an amazing man, and truth be told, he could not have asked for a better partner for his sister. They complimented each other perfectly, and now Sebastian was running King, Lebroc and McCarthy Group. He had gone from strength to strength.

"To my amazing friends. We've been on quite a journey over the past few years... but friendship and love have seen us through. I want to thank every one of you for making all my dreams come true. For encouraging me to follow my heart." Christian watched as she turned to him, his heart beating faster. "To Christian. I never thought I'd find a love like ours. I didn't think it existed. You have helped me, encouraged me to take chances, step out of my comfort zone. Who would have thought a sunrise yoga class would have led to this? Someone was looking down on us that day and helped us find our way to each other. I love you."

Christian's heart was in his mouth. He thought back to Lily's letter. Had she been looking down? Star was sure she'd helped her and Damian reconnect. Had she wanted Isabella for him and Skylar? He liked to think so. Looking heavenward, he sent up a silent thank you, just in case, before pulling Isabella into

his arms. Much to the disgust of Amelia, who was starting to fuss.

“Let’s get these two monkeys into the creche and then we can enjoy the party.”

Damian and Christian had arranged a child-minding service to come and look after everyone’s children. Their brood was growing—Star and Damian had Toby and baby Lily-Rose. May and Arkhom, had Kalaya and Aom, two incredibly gorgeous little girls. Andrew and Ana had Ethan, a spritely one-year-old, and of course, Olivia, who adored her baby brother the same way Skylar adored all her brothers and sisters.

The twins had been unplanned and were the reason The Retreat II had taken three rather than two years. Christian had cried like a baby the day Isabella told him she was pregnant. He cried again when they found out they were having twins and again when the twins were born and placed in his arms. It hadn’t taken Isabella long to realise her ruthless, billionaire businessman, now husband, was little more than a squishy teddy bear, or at least when it came to his children and family. He would forever be thankful for his second chance at happiness.



Thank you for reading!

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# Acknowledgement

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Finally, to you my reader. Thank you for taking a chance on me. I hope you've enjoyed reading Christian and Isabella's story as much as I enjoyed writing it. See you next time. xxx

# About The Author

## **Zoe Dod**

To sign up for Zoe's monthly newsletter; including deleted scenes, alternative POV's and new release information. Please subscribe on her website <http://www.zoedod.com>

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Zoe lives in The New Forest, England with her husband, two adult children and her four rescue furbabies.

Before starting her writing career, Zoe worked in The City of London as a Development Manager, before retraining to be a primary school teacher. She gave up her teaching career to spend more time with her family, and it was during this time she found a love for writing.

Aside from writing romance, Zoe loves reading, gardening, Zumba and walking her dog in The New Forest.

Zoe loves to hear from her readers. If you would like to drop her an email, you can contact her at [zoe@zoedod.com](mailto:zoe@zoedod.com)



# Books In This Series

*Forgive Me*

## **Always You**

Star and Damian's Story

## **Only You**

Andrew and Ana's Story

## **Until You**

Christian and Isabella's Story

## **Scarlett and Sebastian's Story**

Bonus Novella