



KARIN WINTER

**BE MY
GODDESS**

CITY OF DAYDREAMS BOOK ONE

Be My Goddess

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BOOK ONE

KARIN WINTER

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Luke is a jerk, but he grew on me.

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Foreword

This story is a steamy romance containing mature content. It touches on subjects that some readers may find triggering or hard. Those include drug usage, explicit bedroom scenes, and mentioning of non-consensual situations.

One



LUKE

Boom!

The ground beneath me trembles as a bomb explodes, sending a cloud of acrid smoke hurtling toward me. I signal to my cameraman, Paul, to capture the chaos unfolding before us. The cries of the nearby crowd grow louder, drowning out my words.

Paul strains to hear me over the deafening shouts of the protesters. I lead the way through the throng of bodies, pushing and shoving through the chaos. We need to find a spot where we can see what's happening, but the sea of people makes it impossible to move. The tension in the air is palpable, like a storm brewing, ready to unleash its fury.

The protesters' cries grow louder, turning into a deafening roar. They chant, "*Stop the Fighting!*" and "*Don't stay quiet!*" I catch a glimpse of a nearby protester's sign, painted in red, bearing the same words.

The crowd grows more frenzied with each passing moment, pushing and shoving to get closer to the action. Another explosion rocks the ground, this time farther away. I can't tell if it's the police using smoke bombs to disperse the crowd or something else entirely. But one thing is certain, this protest is rapidly spiraling out of control.

I hear the screams of panic nearby, growing louder and closer. People are running in all directions, trampling those unable to get out of the way. It's dangerous.

Damn. What's happening?

Paul and I are standing on the side of the road, somewhat out of the way, when I spot a large rock in a flower bed. I climb on top of it to see if the added height might help me understand where the screams are coming from. We can't miss this opportunity. As a journalist at the *New York Daily Publishing*, I need content for the main article to be published tomorrow.

I stand on the tips of my toes, stretching all six feet two inches of my height. Paul is next to me, also trying to stretch.

I turn and yell to him, “Do you see anything?”

He shakes his head.

Movement in the distance sticks out from the frantic crowd and catches my eye. “It looks like it’s coming from there!” I point in the direction of the noise. “Let’s move!” I take a step forward to descend from the rock and find myself flattened on the pavement.

I hear more shots around me, and it feels as though time has nearly stopped. Everything moves slower, and the air is thicker. Breathing is harder. Then it hits me, pain coming from my shoulder.

I don’t understand what’s happening. My vision turns blurry, and I struggle to stay conscious. Paul appears in front of me, a worried expression on his face.

“Don’t move,” he says. “It will be all right. Everything will be all right.” He looks at my shoulder, hesitates for a moment, then places both his hands around my shoulder and presses.

What is he doing? It hurts like hell.

Paul’s gaze moves above my head, and he calls to someone. I can’t make out the words. He raises one hand and starts waving it in the air as if trying to get someone’s attention.

Then I see it. His hand is covered in blood.

My blood.

Fuck! How am I going to spend another forty-eight hours doing absolutely nothing?

I stare at a piece of old cloth tied to the handle of the air conditioner installed on the white wall in front of me. The

cloth's movement shows me the A/C is working, despite the fact that I'm still too hot.

My fingers fumble on the remote control of the TV. Surely someone is bound to have captured the exact moment of my shooting in this digital age.

As second thoughts assail me, I reposition the remote control. I'll look at another opportunity, but not now.

The infinite beeping indicates I'm still alive, but what does that matter? Everyone can go fuck themselves. My life just ended. The group that will report on the war is leaving tomorrow without me.

Without me.

And this was my story. I was supposed to get a Pulitzer for that story. I was going to reach the top of my field and win a prestigious award before the age of thirty. And now, that arrogant and smug Thomas will fly out and steal *my* fifteen minutes of fame.

For the past two years, I've worked to reach this moment, to be the head of the team. And now, in one stupid moment, the opportunity was taken away from me.

And why him, of all people? Everyone knows I can't stand Thomas. Couldn't they have found someone else?

I try to push myself up from the bed, determined to escape this reality and get on that flight, but the pain is too much, and my vision blurs. I close my eyes, feeling the weight of the world crashing down on me.

"Luke." The sound of my name snaps me back to reality. "Hey. Did I interrupt your beauty sleep?" Connor smiles at me from the doorway. He's teasing, so I know he's concerned. I must look as good as I feel.

He approaches the bed and raises a hand as if to pat my shoulder like always but stops at the last moment.

"Son of a bitch," I say, seeing his guarded expression. "You could only wish to be beautiful like me. Came to see if I'm still alive?" I try to smile back, but it takes an effort.

“They gave me some good stuff. It was worth coming here just for that,” I add, trying to lighten the heavy atmosphere.

Connor takes the chair from the corner of the room, drags it next to the bed, and sits down next to me. “I see your messed up humor is still present. So, what happened exactly?”

“Paul and I... Do you remember Paul? The camera guy? I think you met him once. We went to cover the protest yesterday, and it got messy. You probably saw it on the news.” The news that I was supposed to cover. It’s likely Connor knows more than I do about what happened there. I don’t even have the courage to watch the newscasts.

“Yes.” He pauses, and I wonder what else he saw and is afraid to tell me. “There were some deaths at the protest, and the situation deteriorated quickly. You were really lucky you got out of there alive.”

Yeah. Lucky me.

“Do you remember how you got hurt?”

I can’t help but glance at my bandaged shoulder while wincing at the pain radiating through my body.

“I don’t, really.” I twist my mouth and struggle with a sense of confusion as I try to make sense of what happened. “It’s strange, but it took me a few moments to understand that someone shot me.”

“So you don’t know who shot you?”

“No. They think maybe one of the police officers who meant to shoot into the air accidentally hit the crowd. But right now, it’s not clear. Doesn’t matter, though. The outcome is the same.”

Connor nods. “How are you feeling?”

I reply with a chuckle, although it lacks even a smidgen of humor. “Like someone shot me. It hurts. Now that the pain medication from the surgery has worn off, it fucking hurts.”

“Be careful with the painkillers. You know you can easily get addicted,” he says with a serious expression.

Oh, come on. Now is not the time to scold me. Not while I'm stuck in the hospital. It's not like addiction is passed through your genes. “Yes. Yes, I know.”

“You really look like someone who got shot.” He tries to make a joke and looks me over. “Your hair agrees.”

I start to raise my hand to run it through my hair, but the pain stops me. Why does my other hand hurt too? In the movies, all the heroes catch bullets and don't even stop running. Someone shoots me in the shoulder, and I can barely move. I give Connor a blazing stare.

“Don't worry,” he says. “You're still able to charm the nurses here with your blue eyes. Just calm down.”

Me? Not calm? Well, maybe a little. Fragments of memories of doctors in gowns giving me no rest hit me, and I have no idea why. “Don't lecture me about women. When are you going to date someone seriously?” I ask, hoping to change the subject. “What happened to Barbara?”

“She was a good fuck, but not for me. Besides, I don't date. You know that.”

I shake my head, knowing this is a sensitive topic. No one seems to be right for him. But Connor doesn't like hearing about it, and now probably isn't the best time to nudge him.

“So, what about the flight?” he asks.

“Thomas is replacing me.” I try to hide the bitterness that comes out in my voice but fail.

“He's going in your place? Can't they delay by a few days?”

“Unfortunately, it's not a few days. The doctors told me to rest for at least a month.” I twist my mouth into a sneer. “Do you see me resting for a full month?”

“A month?” Now Connor is smirking too.

We both know it won't happen. I never take vacations. Work is my life.

“What are you planning to do?”

“I have no idea.” The gloom lands on me like a heavy cloud. “I really don’t. You know how much I worked for this. It was my chance, and I missed it. What’s the point, anyway?”

“Well, there will be more opportunities. You’ll get a second chance. After all, the offer didn’t just fall from the sky. You made sure it happened. So do your magic tricks again, and before you know it, another one will come your way.”

Yes, I worked for this. Hard. But war is not something that happens every year or even every two years. Which, of course, is excellent for most of the Earth’s population but less so for me. Who says there will be another opportunity like this during my career? Some journalists wait years and don’t receive breaks like that one. *Maybe I’ll go work for National Geographic. I’ll lie in the grass all day to photograph mating snakes.*

“Yeah, maybe,” I say, knowing full well my moment of fame is lost.

Connor is silent a moment, then asks, “Where’s your father?”

“I didn’t call him.”

“What? So he doesn’t know you’re injured? You have to tell him, Luke.”

“Why? Why do I have to? It’s not like he’s going to run here from Thailand. So what’s calling him good for? So I can hear his apologies on the phone about not being able to come?” I don’t need him here. Besides, it’s better if he doesn’t come. Every time I talk to him, it’s just a reminder that because of him, Mom is gone.

“I’m sure he’ll want to come. He worries about you.”

“If he was that worried, he would call more than once a year.” I turn my head toward the window, fighting back the emotion. It’s okay. I’m used to getting by on my own. I’ve been doing it for as long as I can remember.

Two



EMMA

Four hundred and eighty-five comments and forty thousand likes.

Ugh.

It's not good enough. A conversion ratio of one to ten at best.

Tony forbids me from reading them, warning that it will only cause me pain. But despite his advice, I do and can't help but feel like a masochist as I continue to take in every comment, unable to tear my eyes away from the screen.

I skim through the familiar phrases of "amazing," "stunning," and "what a body," but I can't stop the simulated vomiting sounds as I read the repulsive responses from men, describing their desires and body fluids.

Even though I've been in this world for over four years, I still haven't gotten used to it. How do people behind the keyboard allow themselves to write these things? Spewing every disgusting thought that crosses their mind, without giving thought to the individual behind the picture, that a real woman will read their vile comments.

"My brother and I will fuck you in turns," one user writes. *Great, where do I register?*

Reading on, one comment catches my attention and causes me to pause. "Ugh, she has cellulite." I enlarge the picture and examine it. *Where? What is she talking about?*

God, I work so hard on my body. I think I'm the only one in the industry who dares to upload photos that aren't completely mutilated in Photoshop. Sometimes a less-than-perfect picture sneaks in, but I've checked everything a million times.

The banana I just bit into a moment ago is looking back at me now and shouting, "Why are you eating me? You're fat!"

I frown as I bite my lip, feeling a sense of defiance. I refuse to let these comments cause me to doubt myself. I wish I could just focus on the business side of things and not let these comments affect me. But despite my best efforts, the constant barrage of objectifying and degrading words continues to chip away at my self-confidence.

I shake my head and remind myself that my primary goal is the success of the business. And I'm killing it.

With a quick glance at the computer screen, I see the number of orders that have flooded in since this morning, despite the negative feedback. I guess the picture isn't so terrible after all.

I forward the data to Tony, who will take care of the production side of things, then begin scrolling through my phone's calendar. My eyes land on the scheduled launch of Pegasus tonight and the reminder that I had promised Benjamin we would attend together. A wave of dread washes over me at the thought of having to endure another one of his tedious monologues about his fitness routine as if it were the only thing of any importance in life. I keep myself in shape too, but I don't feel the need to constantly talk about it. He's popular, though, and the paparazzi adore him.

I sigh. *Another delightful evening awaits.*

I slide open the door to my closet, and my gaze falls upon the left side, where an array of shimmering evening attire hangs at the ready. The sparkling fabrics alone could illuminate a small city.

On the opposite side of the closet are my daily clothes, made of soft and comfortable fabrics that I can snuggle up in. These are my favorite clothes, the ones I wear at night, when I'm alone, and when I go to bed. No one would ever catch me wearing these clothes outside of my home.

I reach into the closet and pull out the dress I previously chose for today's event, a gold-colored wrap dress with long sleeves, a generous neckline, and a short length. It cost a fortune, but I know, in my social circles, appearances are everything, and the price tag on this dress was just a small

price to pay to keep up with the status quo. Still, I can't help but feel a twinge of dislike for the pressure to spend exorbitant amounts of money on clothes.

I lay the dress out on my bed and sift through my collection of earrings to find the perfect match. Once the entire outfit is put together and organized, I take a moment to straighten the small succulent potted plant that sits next to my laptop and put the pen back in its place in the penholder in the drawer. I survey my desk, satisfied that everything is in its proper place.

I walk alongside Benjamin toward the grand hall adorned with the Pegasus logo, rolling my eyes as I take in his clothes. How could he possibly think it's appropriate to wear a tank top, something so casual, to an event like this? It's clear his priorities lie more in showing off the results of his gym routine than in making a good impression. Here I am in my elegant evening dress, and he's in rags. I can't help but wonder why I spent so much on this dress when tomorrow, in the gossip section, I'll be seen with him, looking like this?

I make a conscious effort to put some distance between us in an attempt to avoid being caught together on camera. Luckily for me, he's so preoccupied with striking poses and mingling with other guests that I'm the last thing on his mind.

Instead of joining the crowd on the dance floor, I make my way to the bar, pushing through the throngs of people to reach the counter.

"Red wine, please," I request from the bartender.

The woman standing next to me extends her hand in greeting. "Hi. I'm Nayla. I'm a fan of yours."

"Emma," I respond, turning to her and shaking her hand.

She appears young, around my age, with bouncy blonde curls framing her face and big dark eyes. She's a unique and striking beauty.

“Yes, I know,” she says, beaming a wide smile. “Don’t worry,” she adds. “I’m not a stalker. I have an invitation. I’m also a model. Not as successful as you, but I’m trying. I don’t understand how you’re so beautiful in real life. You look exactly like you do in your pictures. I always thought it was all photoshopped,” she says, babbling on, and I try to keep up with her.

“Oh, well—”

“I’m crazy about your swimwear line. I think I have at least ten. And it’s so great that they’re reasonably priced, so you can take them with you on vacation. It always makes an impression when you go out to the pool with a different swimsuit every day,” she continues, her enthusiasm for my brand clear in her words.

Wow. I don’t think I’ve ever come across someone so... energetic. She doesn’t stop for a moment. “I would love to give you one of my new designs as a gift,” I offer, smiling warmly.

“Really? You’re so generous,” she says, her eyes lighting up as she puts a hand on my arm. “I would love to be one of the first to post with it. I need a post that will bring me more followers. My agent is always on my case about getting more followers as if it’s that easy.” She frowns, frustration clear in her voice.

I take the glass of wine from the bartender and start walking into the hall with Nayla following me. “So you said you’re a model?”

“Yes, I’m saving money for studies. I really want to be a lawyer, but I don’t know if it will work out.”

“Why do you think becoming a lawyer might not work out?”

“I’m not sure if I’ll be accepted. My family doesn’t think it’s a suitable career for me,” she admits with a hint of uncertainty in her voice.

“I’m sure you’ll make it.”

“Oh,” Nayla stumbles and almost spills her drink. “I’m sorry, I keep running into things. When I was little, my parents took me for eye tests, but they found nothing.” She laughs.

I don’t know why, but something about her lightness appeals to me, and I find I like her more and more by the minute. She’s a happy sunshine type, taking life easily, as I wish I could do.

“You know what, Nayla? I’d be happy to give you my phone number, and we can coordinate about the swimsuit.” My offer is spontaneous and uncharacteristic of me, but it’s out of my mouth before I even think about it. We exchange numbers and chat for another minute or so before I go back to the party.

In the morning, I wake up later than usual and sigh. Maybe a few more minutes in bed? No, I have to get up and start shooting some more designs. I also need to go over the orders with Tony. I can’t let my laziness affect my work.

I head to the workroom, select a suitable background, prepare the camera and lighting and begin the photoshoot. I could hire a photographer, but I prefer to do everything myself. Some say I’m a control freak.

A few hours later, after I finish taking pictures, I roll up the poster of the Caribbean beach, put the lighting back in its designated spot in the closet, and return the swimsuits to their bags. Once everything is back in its proper place, I turn off the light, head to the living room, and collapse on the sofa, closing my eyes for a moment.

I hate modeling.

I call Tony as he’s not just my partner but also my emotional support.

“Sis!” he answers immediately. “What’s going on? The pink design is selling well.”

“Yes. Did you see I sent you the orders from this morning?”

“Clearly. Already moved into production as always.” He sounds happy this morning.

“I can always count on you, Ton Ton. I just photographed a few more designs to upload this week.” I sigh. “Remind me why I keep doing this?”

“Because you’re a masochist,” he jokes. “We can fly to Seychelles to shoot with other models. Last time was successful, in my opinion. And you can also take a photographer. It won’t kill you.”

“I’m not going to switch to one collection in a season like Milan.”

“*Ptui*,” he spits. “Don’t mention that name.”

I smile. “I need to photoshoot every other day. I don’t intend to fly every week or even every month. It’s too expensive.” Although we’re making substantial money at the moment, we shouldn’t be smug. Tomorrow it could all be over. Besides, I prefer to do everything myself. That’s part of the magic.

I won’t tell Tony what to do with his money, but I sure know what I’m doing with mine—saving aggressively—ready for any scenario. I’ll never let myself get into a situation where I have to depend on someone else for food and a roof over my head. I’ve been in that situation before, and I won’t go back there.

“Then take pictures here, but hire models if you hate it so much,” Tony suggests.

Hmmm... It will cost money. But I might consider it. “It’s not just the money. You know the brand is associated with my face.”

“Nothing that can’t be changed.”

“Well, we’ll talk about it more later. When are you coming here? I’m about to receive some of the new fabrics I ordered today.”

“The new fabric with the ice cream print?”

“I hope so.” I’m dying to see how the new design turned out after I worked on it for hours. I’m going to make some special designs out of it if it looks as good as I hope.

“Perfection. Let me know when the courier arrives, and I’ll come.”

“Come on, Tony. I need us to work on the cut of the attached bikini before we start sewing, I identified a problem there. And I’ve been begging you to come for three days now.”

“Sorry, Sis, I’ve been a little busy with Michael, but I’ll come today. I promise.”

“I’m glad you’re doing well with Michael, but it mustn’t come at the expense of the business. Even if the sex with him is a dream.”

“The sex with him is really dreamy,” Tony purrs.

“I don’t mind hearing your crazy sex stories every day, but it would be nicer if you came here to relay them yourself.” I roll my eyes.

“I know what you did just now. Even without seeing you, I know. I said I would come today. Okay? Oh, wait. I have an appointment for a new tattoo... So, tomorrow at the latest.”

“Okay.” He won’t be coming today. That’s pretty clear.

“Did something happen?” he asks, probably recognizing the melancholy tone in my voice.

“No. All is well. Just need a hug.”

“A hug is coming your way.”

I hang up and stare at the picture he sent me. I do need a hug right now.

Three



LUKE

The small white box of pills sits on my nightstand, taunting me with its silent presence. I swear it has eyes and a mouth, and it's calling my name. My shoulder aches, and I need something to relieve the pain, but I swore to myself I wouldn't touch those pills after what happened with my mother. I don't even take acetaminophen. But I can't just sit here. I have to work on an assignment, or I'll go crazy.

Maybe I'll cook something.

I get up from the sofa and head to the kitchen to prepare some food, but then accidentally move my shoulder the wrong way and groan in pain. Fucking shit.

If I take painkillers, it will help.

No. I'll just have to tough it out.

Using my healthy arm, I prepare lunch for myself. When I sit down to eat, I glance at the clock and see that only an hour has passed.

The thought of staying at home for an entire month is overwhelming. I can't just sit around doing nothing. Determined to find something I can do, I grab my keys and drive to work.

"Hey, Luke," Laura calls as I walk into the offices.

Dave, my investigator, rises from his chair when he notices me. "Luke, are you coming back to us already?"

I shake my head slightly but don't stop.

More voices call after me as I rush through the investigator's stations on my way to the editor-in-chief's office at the far end of the floor. *Raphael must give me something to do.*

If my arm wasn't in a brace and I wasn't in such terrible pain, I would wave hello to everyone like the Queen of England, but I just smile without answering.

I walk past Thomas' empty cubicle. That fucking Thomas. I know that makes me a bad person, but I can't help but feel envious of his success. I hope their trip is a failure.

Raphael is in his office, typing away on the computer. Even though the walls of the office are made of clear glass, he's so engrossed in whatever he's doing that he doesn't even notice me coming. I burst into his space without knocking, as always.

"Raphael." I know I startled him, but he's doing a good job of hiding it. *Reminder to self. Never play poker with him.*

"Luke. What are you doing here?"

"You tell me." I tilt my head in question. He obviously knows what I came for. What other reason could I have?

"Don't tell me you came to work? Hardly four days have passed since the incident. How did you get released so soon? When I came to visit you, they told me a week."

"I can be very persuasive. They released me yesterday. Now that I'm here, give me a story."

He shakes his head vigorously. "Definitely not. The doctors were very clear. You need at least a month of rest without straining so your shoulder heals properly. I don't need your disability on my conscience."

"Raphael, we both know that's not going to happen. If I have to sit around for a month doing nothing, I'll jump off the roof." And to do nothing while I look at the fascinating reports from Thomas and the team from the field...? Shoot me now. Oh, actually, someone already did.

"You're supposed to be on rest. Take off the time you deserve. You've earned it. I have reporters here begging for vacation." He drums the pen on the table.

Yes. He's close to breaking.

“Come on, give me something. Anything.” I fix my gaze on Thomas’ brown eyes. I rarely beg, but I’m desperate. This job is my whole life. What do I have to do at home, alone? I was even forbidden to play sports of any kind. I’m already out of my mind, and it’s been just four days.

“The only thing I can give you—”

“Yes! Come on, what do you have?” I feel the adrenaline rushing through me.

“The only thing I can give you,” he repeats with a reproachful look, “is an investigative mission.”

“No! A desk task? You’re sending me to do a desk story?”

“No, you sent yourself to the desk. Doctor’s orders, Luke. I’m sorry, but there’s nothing else you can do in this situation. You should be home resting.”

The disappointment is palpable in my voice as I let out a deep sigh. This assignment is not exactly the height of my ambitions.

“Look at my desk.” I point to my small office, which is next to his. “Do you see the awards on the wall?”

“Obviously.”

“These weren’t given to me for sitting at a desk. I’m not a desk journalist.” I hung them on the wall to remind myself what I’m fighting for here. I need to be at the top of my field.

I stare at Raphael, trying to gauge his determination. But his expression doesn’t change. He’s serious this time. But there’s no way I’m going to lower myself to a desk job. “I’m going home,” I threaten.

Raphael nods. “Please do. I’d rather you rest and recover.”

I turn and leave the newsroom. The thought of being stuck at a desk, making phone calls, is unbearable. I need to be out in the field, chasing stories, not stuck behind a desk.

I toss and turn in bed all night. There's no position that doesn't hurt, and when I wake up in the morning, I'm more tired than when I went to sleep.

I make myself a coffee and sink into the sofa, turn on the TV, and switch between the channels. I've watched more TV in the last two days than in the last two years, but nothing is interesting. *And to think, I would be in a war zone right now.* I imagine my fingers wrapping around Thomas' neck as I watch his face turn red, then blue under the pressure.

I'm losing it.

My phone blinks on the table with an incoming call.

"Hey, Laura. What's up?"

"I saw you in the office yesterday, but you didn't say hello."

"Sorry. I decided to go home. I'm still in pain."

"Didn't they give you something for the pain?"

"They did." But I haven't taken them.

"And you're still in pain? I don't understand why you came in at all. You can't push yourself too hard. Your health is more important than any story. I'm here for you, whatever you need."

She's right. There's truly no reason for me to suffer. Why do I insist on not taking them? I glance at the little box of pills again.

You know why.

"I asked Raphael to give me a story, but he only agreed to give me a desk job," I admit.

"And?"

"I refused."

"You know that's what I do, right?"

"Don't get offended. I just prefer fieldwork." We started working there around the same time, only Laura went one

way, and I went another. For me, sitting in the office all day is like death. I love the action.

“What’s the story?”

“I don’t know.”

“You refused without asking what it is? Maybe it’s interesting?”

“I don’t know...” I suppose I could ask Raphael again. It wouldn’t hurt to know. “Well, I’ll swing by again today.”

“And say hello this time. I want to see you.”

When I arrive at Raphael’s office this time, he looks at me with a hint of a smile. He knows I came to grovel.

“Okay. What’s the story?” I ask.

“Goddess.”

“What? What the hell is Goddess?” It already sounds bad. It doesn’t sound like something I’d want to write.

“It’s a swimwear company founded by a young model with another partner, and they’re gaining momentum quickly. So quickly, they’re already catching the attention of all their big competitors.”

I shake my head. Just as I thought. Bad. “No. Not a chance. Me and swimwear? I know nothing about that field. Give me something about current affairs.”

“Those are for reporters who can go out into the field. And I have enough investigators in current affairs. You want me to fire Dave so you can take his place? I’m giving you an actual story here. An article that you can prepare from the office without physical effort. There’s potential for an interesting expository article.”

“What’s so interesting about a bikini? Is it pink or blue? Come on, you must have something that suits me better. I was

supposed to be covering the war right now. You're putting me on a bikini?" He can't be doing this to me.

"I told you, it's either that or nothing."

I nod but don't hide my displeasure. "Fine, Did you say something about an exposé?"

"Have you heard of Milan Swimsuits? They've been dominating the market for over ten years now. And despite your disparaging tone, this is a market that turns over forty-six billion dollars a year. Milan has implied that Goddess is operating illegally, that something isn't right there."

"Implied? If they had evidence, they would have been in court long ago. Give me a challenge."

"This is a challenge. I think there's a story here. A young company that takes over a significant part of the market within three years? A large and successful company that claims that something there is questionable? Don't you see the potential?"

"So you want me to find the smoking gun?"

"Yes. If there is one, I want to know what it is. Find the story."

I still don't like the idea of writing about swimwear, but I can't deny the intrigue of uncovering a potential scandal. "Fine, I'll take the story. But I want to do it my way. And I want complete creative control."

"Of course, Luke. You always have complete control over your stories. Just make sure to get me something good."

"Okay." I leave Raphael's office with a heavy heart. Going from covering war zones to writing about swimsuits feels like a huge step down. The urge to lash out and break something rises within me. But what good would that do? After spending three days in the hospital and then at home, with nothing to do but stare at the white walls, I can't bear the thought of going back to that emptiness. Even an article about a bikini is better than nothing.

"Brant."

I raise my head. Paul is waiting for me at the office door. “Hey, Paul,” I say and walk into my office.

“How are you? I’m really sorry about what hap—”

“Why are you sorry? You’re not the one who shot me.”

“No, but we were there together and—”

“And you couldn’t have done anything to prevent it.” I sit down behind my desk and turn on the laptop. I don’t feel like going back to that moment and just want to change the subject.

“I wanted to come visit you in the hospital, but we were short-handed and, well... You know... And yesterday, I was told that they released you.”

“I was stoned on medication most of the time, anyway. Don’t worry about it.”

“So you’re not mad or something?”

“No, absolutely not.” I’m not mad at him. I’m not mad at anyone because I have no expectations of anyone. It’s been that way since forever.

I type on the computer with one hand, signaling to him that the conversation is over. He gets the hint and leaves. “Close the door,” I call after him, but too late.

I stand and go to close it, using the injured arm on instinct.

“Fuck!” I shout, and several heads turn. I see stars, and then everything starts to turn black. I rest my head on the glass all for a long moment and breathe deeply while waiting for the wave of pain to pass. *Okay. I can do this.*

I take a seat behind my desk again, and a wave of nausea washes over me. Maybe I can’t.

I stare at the screen. From war to bikinis. How did I get to this point?

Typing with one hand is more difficult than I imagined. Every few minutes, I absentmindedly start to raise my injured arm, only to be reminded of the pain and stifle a scream. Navigating the mouse with my left hand is clunky, and every movement I make feels sluggish. But I’m committed to

writing this article, and I refuse to simply give up and return home.

I type “Goddess” into Google, and I get Wikipedia entries about paganism and idolatry. I smirk. *I could prepare an article for Raphael about foreign gods. That would surely be a more successful article than one about swimwear.*

What? You said Goddess, didn't you? I imagine the funny conversation between us. Or, more accurately, I laugh, and he makes his usual grumpy face.

Back to reality.

I dig deeper into the information available about the company, but I don't find much. I can't understand how they operate. They barely even have an adequate website, and all the links lead me to Instagram, TikTok, and other social networks. A company that sells millions without even having a professional website? Is that even possible?

Half an hour later, I come across an article written by an investigative journalist. I click on it. Could it be that Raphael didn't notice that someone had already done an investigation on the company? No, he wouldn't have missed something that big. Did he expect me to find the article on my own?

I check the date. The article is from a little over a year ago. Okay, let's see what they wrote about them. I clumsily click on the link with my left hand.

Two entrepreneurs, Emma Woods, twenty-two years old and Tony Tanaka, thirty years old. Just like Raphael said. Both are relatively young and seem to have started from nothing. Kudos to them. I skip ahead to the spicy part.

Milan clearly implies that all of Goddess' success is fake and only thanks to stolen designs and financial irregularities. There are plenty of hints, but no concrete evidence is provided in the article. I go through the section again, searching for any clues but find nothing.

It appears that Emma, the young model, is being used as the public face of the company. It's likely that someone else is pulling the strings behind the scenes, using her image to boost

sales. It's also possible that she's being used as a shield in case any illegal activities are uncovered, allowing the true culprits to evade responsibility. She could be left to take the fall without fully understanding what's occurred.

I search for another hour and find no sign of Goddess ever responding to the article.

It's strange.

Most companies would jump at the opportunity to clear their name if someone falsely accused them of stealing designs and financial misconduct. Perhaps there's some truth to the accusations. Raphael was right. There's definitely a story here.

Let's see what they sell.

I open their Instagram account and discover hundreds of photos of a woman in an array of tiny bikinis in many shades and shapes. Is that the entrepreneur? A model in a bikini?

There's no doubt this is excellent material to masturbate with. Is this what women want? A bikini that doesn't hide anything?

I enlarge one picture. She has a million-dollar body, no doubt about it. And not a terrible face, either. But from the multitude of poses and the seductive looks she's photographed in, it's clear this is not a girl to bring home to the parents. I'm in doubt if she has anything beyond two brain cells. There's nothing on her account that shows any kind of intelligence other than the uncanny ability to pose with pursed lips and attend celebrity parties. If I had to guess, she's probably the beauty, and this Tony guy is the brains.

This whole glamorous world is so far from what I'm familiar with. I don't understand why anyone would want to be famous for their looks. You don't get a good-looking face with hard work; it's just luck. I know I'm good-looking. Women tell me that all the time. But I would never rely on my looks for a career.

My shoulder is throbbing with pain, and I try to adjust it by rearranging it in the sling. Fuck. I rummage through my bag and pull out the box of pills they gave me at the hospital.

Laura is right, I have to function, and I can't with this unbearable pain.

I take out two pills and place them in the palm of my hand. I shake them, noticing their weight is almost imperceptible. They're so small, and they look innocent and harmless. But I know the damage they can do. I know they tear families apart. I was there. *But I'm not my mother. I'll be fine.* I close my eyes, toss them in my mouth and swallow.

Getting back to work, I find Tony Tanaka's social media account and open it too. He's photographed at all kinds of parties, similar to the model. He also appears in some photos on her account. They seem to be close. I wonder if they're also a couple. It could add interest to the article.

"The cheating couple." I can imagine the shimmering title.

Unlike Emma's account, which contains almost only pictures of herself, his account also has other interests. Food from restaurants, even some books. I take notes on everything I discover about my subjects. Every piece of information could potentially be important, like where they hang out, what restaurants they go to, and even where they buy shoes. I understand nothing about fashion, but I know how to do an investigative piece.

I decide to start with her. She's probably the less intelligent of the two, and it would likely be easier to get whatever they're hiding out of her unintentionally.

I pick up the office phone and dial the number I find attached to the information sheet that Raphael gave me.

"Hello?" Her voice is soft and gentle on the phone.

"Emma Woods? Hi, this is Luke Brant. I'm editing an article about Goddess and—"

"No thanks." She hangs up.

With my mouth still open, I stare at the phone as if it could explain what just happened. I've never had an interviewee hang up before I could even explain what the article was about. I try calling again.

“I already said no thanks.” Her voice is no longer gentle, and she sounds irritated.

“But you haven’t heard anything yet. Let me explain first. I want to do an article about your meteoric rise. Our readers are interested in hearing about the path you took. How you became so successful. You can be an example for young entrepreneurial women.” I feel like vomiting from my own words.

“Be an example for women?” I detect a note of interest in her voice, and I mentally shoot myself a high-five. I’m heading in the right direction.

“Yes. Just think how hard it is for women to succeed in this world, you can give hope to every woman out there struggling with the birthing ropes of her business.”

“I’m not talking to journalists.”

“Why not? It’s free advertising for your business in a major newspaper. We’ll also be happy to include any photos you send us. You really shouldn’t turn down such a generous offer.”

“I said I’m not talking to journalists.”

“I don’t know a business that wouldn’t benefit from such publicity and exposure. I’d love it if we could meet, even just for an hour.”

“No.”

“But why?” Hell, I can’t seem to reach her.

“No, and please don’t call again. Not me and not Tony.” She hangs up again.

I call Tony right after.

“Hello, Tony Tanaka? Hi, this is Luke Brant. I’m writing an article about Goddess, and I’d really like your input for the newspaper.”

“Did Emma Woods approve?”

“Why does she have to approve?”

“I’m sorry. Talk to her first.” He hangs up, leaving me with the phone in my hand.

He won’t even say hello without Emma Woods’ permission? Looks like I was wrong in my assessment. She’s the decision-maker in their relationship.

What is this bullshit? A cheeky model and her partner think they’re on top of the world just because they have some company that sells a few pieces of fabric? Swollen like a balloon, one might think.

I didn’t even want this fucking article, and now I have to grovel? Fuck this shit. Raphael can forget about it. I’m dropping this.

I burst into his office for the second time today. “Raphael. She’s not willing to be interviewed. Neither is her partner. Get me off this shit.”

“What?”

“Goddess. I spoke with the two entrepreneurs, and they aren’t interested in being interviewed.”

“So?”

“So give me something else,” I demand, raising my voice.

“Luke, I told you before, and I’ll say it again. Take this article or go home. I have nothing else to give you that fits your current health...situation.”

“But they aren’t willing to be interviewed.”

“You’re a journalist, aren’t you? And you also consider yourself a good one, right? A negative answer has never stopped you before.” He tilts his head and raises an eyebrow. “I thought you said you wanted a challenge. That a swimsuit company wasn’t enough of a challenge. So here you go. Think of a way to talk to them. Bring me the story.”

Four



LUKE

How do I attack it? How do I get the story?

I pace back and forth in my small office, circling the desk, groping for hidden threads that will lead me to my goal. All the politicians I've dealt with to date have never refused to be interviewed.

I realize I need a change of scenery. I'm not an office person. Peace and privacy are what I need. I gather my things and go outside.

"Luke," Laura calls after me. "Wait a minute!"

I stop and watch as she makes her way through the maze of desks, her floral dress barely avoiding getting caught on a corner.

"Are you leaving already?" she asks in a pleading tone that I can't stand. "You didn't even come to say hello."

"Raphael gave me a story," I say, not wanting to give her any more information. I know she'll pry for more details, but I don't have time for that.

"Can I help? Join you on the story? I came to visit you when you were in the hospital, but you were asleep, and I didn't want to disturb you." She twirls a strand of hair around her finger.

"I don't need help with the article, but thanks for coming to visit. I appreciate it." I offer her a half-smile.

"But you're injured. How can you do it all yourself? You need to rest. Is it because of the delegation? Because of Thomas?" She whispers his name as if it were a secret. "Is that why you're straining yourself like this? You have nothing to prove. Everyone knows you're better than him. I'm sure you can ask Raphael for a few days off and rest. I can come help." She puts a hand on my arm. "I really don't mind."

“I’m perfectly fine.” Yes, now that the pills have taken effect, I’m great. “We’ll talk later.” I remove her hand, caress her shoulder and hurry to leave before she continues with her questions. The last thing I want to think about is Thomas.

My secret lookout on Connor’s roof always helps me focus. I wrote many of my best articles there, and that’s where I head now.

I stand on the rooftop, lean against the railing and take in the hustle and bustle of the city below. My mind races with ideas on how to approach this article and secure an interview with Emma Woods. As a seasoned journalist, I’ve interviewed heads of state, so why should a model and business owner be any different? Failing is out of the question. She’s just a model with a business. How hard can convincing her be?

One idea comes to mind. I could visit her at her home address. Perhaps, a face-to-face conversation will make it easier to convince her that I’m not the enemy. It’s a long shot, but it’s worth a try. I check her address in my research and head outside. I have nothing to lose.

As I make my way to her residence, I’m surprised to find that it’s located close to me. I had expected her to live in a fancy building in a more upscale part of the city. This is even more convenient for me, so I’m not complaining.

I sit in my car outside of Emma Woods’ building, unsure of how to approach her. I’ve been here for what feels like hours, but a glance at the time tells me it’s only been ten minutes.

Should I knock on her door? I’m worried she’ll turn me away just like she did on the phone.

I decide to go inside and look around. It’s strange to see a successful businesswoman living in a building without a security guard.

As I make my way up the stairs to the second floor while trying to come up with a plan of what to say to her, suddenly, a

courier rushes past me, carrying a large package. The package brushes against my shoulder, sending a wave of pain through me. I sit down on the stairs to catch my breath and try to control the pain. *Damn it.*

He rings a doorbell upstairs, and I realize at that moment that he's arrived at her apartment.

Shit. I rush back down, holding my shoulder. She must not see me like this. If she sees me lurking on the stairs, my chance with her is gone.

The delivery guy leaves and goes on his way on a scooter, and I continue to ascend slowly.

Her door is painted fluorescent pink. Fuchsia, I believe this color is called, or maybe it's bubble gum? Who the hell knows?

A huge sticker of a woman in a shimmering bikini protrudes from the center of the door with a sign that reads, "Emma Woods. You're welcome to knock if you dare." I turn up my nose at the choice of words. The package, which the courier brought a moment ago, is placed on her doorstep. I stare at it.

No.

I can't.

I can.

This is my chance to take a peek inside, to find out what she's trying so hard to hide. No one makes such an effort if there's nothing to hide. Raphael was right. There is a story here.

I take the package. *Nothing will happen if she doesn't get it until tomorrow. From me.*

I arrive back at the building the next morning and go up the stairs again, holding the package with my one good arm. Fuck, it's heavy.

The smell of vanilla rises in my nose as I approach and press the bell for the pink door while trying to balance the large box in one hand. Ugh, I love vanilla, and now it will always remind me of this disgusting place.

I pause for a moment, trying to gather my thoughts and compose myself. My shoulder is still throbbing with pain, and I haven't taken any more pills. I can't let her see me like this, looking weak and vulnerable. She hasn't responded to the bell, so I take a deep breath and knock on the door, trying to put on a confident facade.

"Just a minute," I hear a voice call from inside, and a moment later, the door opens.

Those eyes. They're a color I've never seen before. As she stands there, I can't help but stare into her eyes, mesmerized by the unique hue. The brown at the center, the turquoise green surrounding it, and the dark circle that accentuates the green. It feels as if she can see right through me, uncovering my lies and truths. I can't help but feel exposed under her gaze.

It's hard to believe the color is real. She must be wearing contact lenses or something. There can't be a person with such a color.

She's also tall, really tall. I'm used to looking down at women, but with her, I don't have to.

"Hey, I have—"

"Thanks."

I'm barely able to register that she's talking to me, and before I know it, the door slams shut in my face.

Damn it. She just slammed the door in my face. There was no time to say a word. I can't believe I failed so miserably. I stand there like a novice, staring at the door, my mind stuck on her mesmerizing eyes. How did I screw up like this?

Sure, she's a model, and she's more beautiful than I expected, but that shouldn't matter. I'm a journalist, and I can't let myself be swayed by something as superficial as appearance, no matter how beautiful she is.

Defeated, I walk down the stairs and head back to my car. Another failure, and now she also saw me as a courier, so I got burned. I can't help but scold myself for not thinking of a better way to get her talking. How can I make sure that doesn't happen again?

Five



EMMA

After making sure my satin robe is securely closed, I open the door, and the courier just stares at me. I can tell he recognizes me. It's not the first time this has happened. They always stare. Our eyes meet for a moment, and I can't shake the feeling that there's something more behind his blue eyes than the usual admiration. He's not like the models I'm used to being around, and I can tell he doesn't know much about skincare. I can't help but notice the messy stubble covering his hard jaw.

Well, he's just a good-looking guy, not someone I would date. I snap back to reality and reach out to take the package from him.

"I have—"

"Thank you." I slam the door with my foot and rush back to my studio, placing the heavy box that just arrived on the table after I move the binder a little from its fixed place in the center of the table to make room for it.

"Hmmm..." I narrow my eyes and study the fabrics standing in the room's corner, arranged like soldiers in piles according to color. I turn my head to the camera and lighting that's already set in place, waiting for me to return to take pictures in the other corner.

Do I have time to unpack the box?

I sigh. Does it matter if I have time? I can't go back to work with this box on the table. It will drive me crazy. I won't be able to take pictures until everything is in place.

I open the desk drawer and pull out the cutting knife from its designated compartment. The special light blue compartment, which I purchased from my favorite office supply store a few months ago. I can spend hours in that store, browsing through all the organizational tools and accessories. It's a dream come true for me, and I'm sure it's even better than sex.

I carefully cut open the box, revealing the ice cream print fabric that I expected to arrive the day before. It looks even better than I had imagined. I eagerly pull it out of the box to inspect it. The pastel colors are so delicate and beautiful, just as I had hoped. I twirl around the room, allowing the fabric to flow and fill the space. It's stunning. Along with the pastel fabric, a brightly colored version of the same print is included in the box. My upcoming collection will feature a mix of pastel and fluorescent hues. The other fabrics I designed, such as the ocean-themed and flamingo prints, will arrive soon. I carefully fold the fabrics and place them in their designated spots on the shelf.

I take off my robe and hang it up, then assess the new design on my body in front of the mirror. The side cuts were meant to be sexy, but something is off. It doesn't look how I imagined it would. I wonder where Tony is. He had suggested cutting lower, but I don't think that will solve the problem. The basic structure needs to be altered. Currently, the fabric is pulling down on my chest, which is the opposite of what's supposed to happen.

Anxious for Tony's input, I send him a text.

Are you on your way?

Tony

One minute.

Ugh, I can't afford to make any mistakes now. Not with Alex spreading lies about our company. Last time, he even suggested that I embezzled funds. This is my business. Why would I steal from myself? These reporters are a bunch of morons if they buy his bullshit.

The bell sends me running to the door.

"Finally." I open the door wide and pounce on Tony with a hug. "I can't believe we haven't seen each other for an entire week."

“Don’t exaggerate. It’s only been a few days. But it’s nice to know you missed me, Sis.” Tony is still holding me, and I surrender into his arms. “Do you always open the door in a swimsuit?” He pushes me away and examines my design.

“I knew it was you.”

Tony steps into my apartment. “Well, did you close the deal with Benjamin?”

“What deal?” What is he talking about?

“Did he open you? Take your flower? Teach you to be a woman?” he continues.

Oh, that. “Ugh, Tony. Disgusting. No. Absolutely not.”

“That’s the problem. You think it’s disgusting. Sex is just sex. And there’s nothing disgusting about it. Everyone does it. Maybe you should look at some porn?” He winks.

I stick my tongue out at him and give him a big grin.

“You’ve already gone out with him three times. I thought you liked him?”

“No. All the guy talks about is himself and his biceps. He asks nothing about me, and he doesn’t care to know. I don’t know where you get these types.”

“Then why did you go out with him three times? Oh, Emma. I thought I succeeded this time. You know you don’t have to marry him. Just sleep with him. If he looks good, that’s enough. And besides, it’s not like you leave me any choice but to choose for you. You don’t choose for yourself. And I thought he looked good.”

“I don’t know. I guess I thought I’d get used to him. That eventually, he’d want to get to know me.” As I grow older, my virginity becomes a burden, something that I’m embarrassed to talk about. No one expects the provocative supermodel to be a virgin. And saying it to a guy out loud...? Well, it’s just embarrassing. Tony is right. I should do it already. But not with Benjamin. Not with a guy who only loves himself. I just can’t.

“Do you want me to find you another date?”

“No.”

“But there’s an event soon, and you should go with a partner. Appearance—”

“Is important,” I say. “Yes, I know. All right. Fine. Find me a date for it.” As long as I don’t have to waste my time.

Tony raises his hand in a victory gesture.

“You have a scratch,” I say, noticing the thin red line on his arm.

Tony glances down at his arm before shrugging. “Just a scratch from the gym. Nothing serious.”

“What if it starts bleeding?”

Tony glances at his arm, then at me. “It won’t bleed. It’s already healing. And you need to do something about that blood phobia of yours. Is there no treatment for it?”

I huff and change the subject. “You bailed on me again yesterday.” I raise an eyebrow. “And from the look on your face, I can tell you don’t like the new design either.”

“Yeah, it’s not good. If it looks like this on you, how will it look on regular women?” He spins me around and inspects the back. “At least it looks okay from behind.”

“It pulls my chest down. That’s the problem,” I point out.

“Well, we’ll see what we do later. Want to show me the shipment first?”

It wasn’t a real question. He’s already halfway to my studio, so I follow him.

“Wait!” I try to get around him before he messes up my order of things but without success. He’s already spreading the fabrics on the sofa in the room. Gosh, I just put everything in place.

“Wow, you outdid yourself this time. It’s just stunning. Has the second pattern arrived as well?”

“No, the flamingo hasn’t arrived yet.” I update him before he turns over the entire shelf looking for it.

Tony looks at me critically, his eyes scanning my body as I stand in front of the mirror. “The connection between the top and bottom is too wide,” he says, adjusting the fabric slightly higher on my body. “You see how it looks better now?”

I nod. “Yes. I think I’ll leave the connection only in the middle, then it won’t pull. Bring me the scissors.” I point to the drawer.

Tony opens the drawer and examines the master arrangement critically. “Oh shit, Emma. I have the urge to mess it up a little.” He hands me the scissors.

“Order helps me think,” I mutter. Why am I explaining? What’s wrong with being a tidy person?

I cut the fabric directly on my body until the connection remains only in the center. On the sides are two triangular cuts. “Oh, wow.”

“It looks good now.” Tony nods in agreement and walks over to my binder. “What’s this cut number?”

“Eighty-nine,” I say and continue to tilt my body in front of the mirror. “I think I’ll also add some stones in the chest area.”

“Okay.” Tony sketches something in my notebook. “But I think the first design we should release is the multi-tie. It’ll be a hit with its versatility.” He flips through the pages, picks up the notebook, and points to the design.

“Yes,” I agree. “You know, someone wrote that I have cellulite.” I scrunch my nose in disgust.

“What? Are you kidding me? You don’t have a drop of body fat. Where do you have cellulite? In your chest?” He smirks. “What did I say about reading comments?”

I can’t help but feel embarrassed. Busted.

“You don’t have any cellulite. Not in your chest or anywhere else. Damn, you’re too thin for cellulite. Eat something. This self-doubt doesn’t suit you. You know better.” He gives me a stern look before heading to the kitchen. “Did

you even eat today? I can make you something. What do you want?"

"A reporter called me yesterday," I call after him.

"Oh, yeah?" He puts a cup in my coffee machine and takes the cookies out of the drawer, the ones I keep especially for him. "Maybe an omelet?"

I nod. "Why don't you sound surprised?"

"Because he called me too."

"Did you say anything to him?"

"Calm down. Of course not. I know how to deal with the media, remember? They're just looking for dirt because of the latest Milan shit. I told him that everything goes through you, and that's it." Golden liquid flows into the cup.

"Thank you, Ton Ton." I breathe a sigh of relief.

"Are you sure you don't want to do an interview? Clarify that these are all lies? It could work to our advantage."

"No interview." Better to ignore the rumors. As soon as there's a response from me, they won't give me a moment of peace. I'm not ready for them to dig into my life." I agreed to an interview once and learned my lesson. The media didn't let me be for months. My family history is not something I want to reveal.

"You know what they say? There's no such thing as bad publicity." He picks up his cup of coffee, takes a sip, then turns to get eggs out of the fridge.

"But there is."

The doorbell has us both jumping.

"Shit, I forgot I made an appointment with Nayla."

"Nayla? Who's she?" Tony widens his eyes. "A new girlfriend?"

"Something like that." I walk over and open the door, finding her in a tiny red dress, her curls even bigger than the first time I saw her. Her hair amazes me.

“Hey, Emma.” She goes straight to hugs and kisses as if we’ve known each other for years and not ten minutes. “Thanks for inviting me.”

She walks in and reaches out to Tony. “Hi, I’m Nayla.”

“Nayla, meet Tony, the managing partner of Goddess.” I introduce them, trying to keep a straight face as Tony rambles on about her hair.

He shakes her hand and glances at me. “Amazing. I’ve never seen a blond afro. Is it a natural color? And your skin is so pale. You and I could do a crosswalk together.” He stands next to her, “What do you think, Emma?”

Nayla and I laugh.

She wanders into the kitchen and runs her hand over the shiny counter. “So this is where you live?”

“Yes. Why?”

“It’s just... I thought you’d live in some huge apartment, like in the movies. Your company is really successful.” She smiles.

“Renting an apartment like this in Manhattan is not a cheap business, you know. Even if it’s small. I don’t enjoy spending money unnecessarily, and I don’t need a palace. I live here alone.” Why do I even feel the need to make excuses?

“So Nayla, how did you two meet?” Tony interjects.

“We met at the Pegasus party. I’m a model, or at least I try to be. I’m trying to save money for university, even though I’m not sure I’ll enroll at all. But I don’t get many jobs. Agents prefer smaller breasts, and I have a balcony.” She laughs. “But I’ve done a few campaigns. I’m not a complete failure.”

“Emma had that problem too.” Tony joins in, and they both examine my breasts.

I’m sure I’m blushing.

“Do you have a boyfriend, Nayla?” Tony asks.

“No, I don’t do boyfriends.” She looks at Tony with a hint of a smile, “Sorry, but all men are pieces of shit. I just use them for sex.”

Tony laughs. “My kind of girl. You know what, Nayla? You’ll make an excellent addition to Goddess. Would you like to model swimwear?”

“Tony.” I glare at him, trying to scold him without words. We didn’t talk about adding a new model.

“What?” He looks at me and shrugs. “You said you wanted to model less.”

Nayla’s face lights up. “Of course, I would. Can I model for Goddess? It would be a dream come true! How lucky am I?”

“Let’s see. Try on a few designs, and we’ll decide,” Tony says, leading her to my photo studio.

Six



LUKE

Either I'm extremely lucky, or this girl takes a million orders a day because the next morning, I catch another delivery to her address while I'm waiting outside. I didn't even have to bribe the courier. All I had to do was say I was the neighbor, and he let me take it upstairs for him, glad to save five minutes. A great way to steal packages. And an idea for a story.

I have to accomplish my mission.

I carefully climb the stairs, balancing the box with both hands. It's heavy. I have no choice but to use my injured arm, and all that remains is to hope that I'll reach her door without passing out on the floor.

I knock on the pink door, leaning the box against the wall for support. Fuck. I look at the pink door, inwardly cringing at its vulgar color. What horrible taste.

She opens the door, and our eyes meet again.

I can't shake off the strange feeling I had when I first saw her, but I push it aside and force a smile. "Your delivery."

She reaches out to take it, but I pull back. "It's really heavy. I'd better put it inside for you."

Hesitation flashes across her face for just a moment, but enough for me to see it. Then she moves aside, clearing the way for me. *I'm in. I did it.*

"Where do you want me to put it?" Damn, it's heavy. I need to put it down fast before my shoulder pops out of place. I'm just trying to look okay, but I'm really not okay.

"In the studio, please." She points to a hallway.

I take in the surroundings as I start in the direction she indicated. Her apartment doesn't look like I expected. There's nothing bright, fancy, or horrifying. Even the doors inside are painted white. The kitchen is off to the left and has a rustic

design, painted in a delicate light blue. A large wooden surface dominates the center. And the living room is also decorated in light colors and wood tones. It all gives off a warm and calm feeling. Everything is immaculately clean, too, with not a single glass or dish out of place.

She walks right behind me, not allowing me to linger and examine the surroundings beyond a first impression. But at least she can't see that I'm grinding my teeth from the intensity of the pain. When I took this package, I didn't think it through.

"It's the room on the left," she says, and I turn toward it.

As I step inside, I can't help but stare at the wall covered in an array of fabrics. They're neatly arranged on shelves, each one in its place like soldiers. It's like seeing a rainbow inside an apartment.

"On the table." I hurry to move the binder placed in the center and set the package down.

Finally, relief. I'm almost tempted to rub my shoulder but remember at the last moment to hold back. No need to arouse suspicion.

My attention turns to a binder on the table, closed and filled with what appears to be promising information. I consider my next steps carefully, trying to come up with a logical plan to obtain the information I need. *Maybe I can accidentally drop the binder?*

I wonder how she runs her business without a computer in sight and how she keeps everything so organized. Is she a robot or something? It would fit. An inhuman physique, unusual colored eyes, and an exemplary, organized person. A robot.

I glance around, half-expecting to see a book by Asimov or for her to suddenly have a third arm. But she's standing right behind me, and she still has only two arms.

It's now or never.

I knock the binder off the table with my hand, pretending to stumble.

“Oh, sorry.” I crouch to the floor, my hand reaching for the pages, for the treasure I so desperately need. I see a flash of color, numbers, and maybe of a contour drawing.

Her fingers lightly brush against mine. I pull away as if her touch burned me. My gaze meets hers, and her expression doesn't read like she caught me red-handed. She looks... embarrassed?

She didn't notice my fake stumble. I'm still in the game.

“Sorry,” I say again, my eyes locked on hers. Damn, those eyes. The sensation of her touch lingers on my skin, burning as if it's been scorched.

“It's okay,” she says, straightening to a standing position. Her eyes are fixed on me, studying my reaction. I try to compose myself but can't shake off the sensation of her touch on my skin. It's as if it left a mark, an imprint I can't ignore. I try to brush it off, to act as if nothing happened, but I can tell she felt it too.

I hand her the thick binder, noticing that it's labeled “designs” on the side. My mistake. These are not financial documents. This doesn't help me in my search. The information I need must be on a computer. It seems unlikely she could run a business without one. A phone may be enough for Instagram and photos, but preparing financial reports would be impossible without a computer. I wonder where it could be hidden in this apartment and how I can get access to it.

Perhaps my initial assumption was correct. Maybe someone else is in charge of the business. The partner, Tony? Although after more investigation, all the clues pointed to her as the entrepreneur and the managing partner. Still, it's possible I'm mistaken, and there could be another person involved. A third partner, perhaps, someone manipulating her and using her as the face of the business while they pull the strings from behind the scenes. Could there be a secret accomplice? But how the hell do I find him? So many questions and so few answers.

Is it just me, or is the elevator to the office taking longer than usual today? I left my pain medication in my office drawer, and the pain has become unbearable. Carrying heavy boxes so soon after being shot probably wasn't my best idea.

"Luke."

"Oh, hey Laura," I greet her as she intercepts me just as I exit the elevator. It's as if she has some sort of surveillance system in place, the way she always seems to know when I arrive.

"How are you? How's the injury?" she asks, concern etched on her face.

"Healing slowly, you know." I try to be evasive, but she follows me into the office.

"Raphael told me he gave you the article on Goddess."

"Yeah, right."

"So I thought maybe we'd work on it together? I—"

"I don't need help." I sit down behind my desk and search the drawer. Ah, here it is. I take out two pills and swallow them.

"What are you taking?" She looks at me, and I realize I did it in front of her without thinking. Why does everyone think they have the right to ask?

"The doctors gave me this for pain."

She nods. "You know, we could make a great team. Maybe we could go to dinner and talk about it?" She leans forward.

"No, th—" I blurt out almost automatically, as I hate to share stories, but this time I could actually use the help. I'm stuck, and she's a talented reporter. "Okay."

Her eyes widen. She didn't expect me to say yes, and I didn't expect to say it.

“So, how about six o’clock?” She smiles and runs a hand through her hair.

“Sure.”

Seven



EMMA

My hand jumps as the ringing of the phone disrupts my focus while I'm applying eyeliner. Damn it, now I'll have to start again.

"What?" I answer the call and put it on speaker.

"Hey, Sis. Did I step on your little finger?" Tony's voice comes over the phone as I search for the makeup remover wipes.

"No, I just ruined my makeup." I rub my eye to remove the applied color.

"Ah, the makeup. Do you need me to come over and fix you up?"

"It's okay. I'm fine." Tony knows my schedule better than I do. There's no way he doesn't remember that I'm preparing for Astral's launch today, especially when he's supposed to be there himself.

"Well, I don't know how to tell you this..."

"Spill already." I don't have time for his melodramas. I need to finish getting ready.

"Open the link I'm sending you." He remains mysterious.

I set aside the tissue and click on the link in the message, not sure what to expect.

I take a step back and sit on the bed. My knot design, the unique multi-tie, the one Tony and I decided to release first, is featured on the cover of the fashion section.

"Milan's new collection is going to knock your socks off!" says the teaser inside the small golden circle.

I gasp.

"Emma? Are you still with me?"

"No. It feels like I've died and gone to hell. I can't comprehend how my best design is being credited to Milan," I

scream into the phone, tears flooding my eyes. The eyeliner on my other eye is now smudged as well.

“I’m sorry, Sis. I don’t know how this could have happened.”

“What does it matter? How does this help me now, Tony? He stole my design. Again! How does he keep doing it? He will never leave me alone. What should we do?” I cry, my voice shaking.

“Get ready for the launch, and we’ll talk about Milan later. I know this wasn’t the right time to break this to you, but I wanted you to know before the event. I thought it would be better that you knew going in.”

Yes, he’s right. This was better than being ambushed with the news in front of cameras. This way, I have some time to calm the storm of emotions.

I hang up and try to avert the anxiety attack that’s about to come. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale...

After regaining my composure, I wash my face, remove all the makeup, and start the entire process over. The makeup must be perfect. They’ll photograph me from every angle, and I’m already running late. I’m wearing a Versace dress in metallic green and the Louboutin shoes I bought just this week.

I take a moment to examine my reflection in the mirror. I already arranged my long hair in soft waves, a vintage hairstyle that complements the dress. The green shade highlights my eyes nicely, and I add a little more mascara because there is never such a thing as lashes that are too long.

Not bad. My makeup skills have significantly improved, and I no longer need to rely on Tony to do me up. I think I’m on par with him.

My screen lights up with the message, and I let out a sigh.

Uriel

I’m waiting downstairs.

I had preferred to meet at the event, but Tony vetoed it. He said it's not good for the paparazzi or something like that, and we need to arrive together. I hope this one's not as self-absorbed as Benjamin was. I can't endure another evening with a man who's in love with himself. Not that I have much hope when it comes to models. They all seem to be that way. I've learned not to have expectations, though. When you don't hope, you don't get disappointed.

Whatever.

I step outside with a smile on my face, looking for Uriel, but he's nowhere in sight. After a few moments, I spot him inside the car, engrossed in his phone. I tap on the window, catching him off guard.

"Hey," he rolls down the window, glances up at me, and grins.

There's no denying that he's a model. His hair is perfectly styled, and his stubble looks more like a tattoo than a beard. Perhaps it is a tattoo.

"Come in," he says, unlocking the car door.

Okay, so he's not getting out. I walk to the other side of the car and cautiously get in. "Hi," I greet him.

He leans over and kisses my cheek. "You look great."

"Thank you," I reply, trying hard not to reach up and wipe the saliva from my cheek. I know I should make an effort to engage in conversation, but I don't have the energy. Why is it even necessary to show up with a man at these events? It doesn't hold any interest for me, and I'm not convinced it helps sales like Tony thinks.

"So, you have a clothing business?" Uriel asks as he puts the car in drive and takes off.

"Yes, I design swimwear."

"I saw your Instagram page. You look good. Really. Damn sexy."

"Thanks. You too." I never looked at his account, but he doesn't have to know that.

“I made a music video without a shirt. You won’t believe how many likes.”

“Yeah, sure, thanks for the tip.”

He laughs and parks the car near the venue. This time I don’t wait for him to open the door for me. I get out by myself. I straighten my dress and put on a smile. It’s showtime.

Uriel reaches out for my hand, leaving me no choice but to take it. We start toward the entrance, hand in hand, like a couple in love, even though I don’t know him at all.

The photographers close in on us, and the camera flashes blind me, making it hard to see. Still, I keep my facial muscles stretched in a practiced smile.

I remind myself why I’m here. The publicity is worth it.

“Emma! Emma! Look over here!”

“Uriel, how long have you two been dating?”

“Emma, is Uriel your new boyfriend?”

“Did you and Benjamin break up?”

“How long have you been going out?”

“Emma, when can we expect the new collection you promised?”

“Follow my posts,” I say as an answer to the last question and blow a kiss into the air.

Uriel tries to mumble something, but I take advantage of the fact that he’s still holding my hand and pull him forward. Part of the magic is keeping everything a secret. Curiosity does the trick. There’s no need to share anything with them.

Once inside, I spot Tony and immediately release Uriel’s hand to make my way over to my closest confidant, not caring if Uriel is following me or not. “Hey,” I say, tapping Tony’s arm to get his attention away from Michael.

“Oh, hi, Sis. You’re here,” he says and gives me a tight hug. “Where’s Uriel?”

“Hey, Emma,” Michael greets me with a smile, and I hug him too. They make such a perfect couple.

“Oh, he’s around here somewhere,” I say, scanning the room for Uriel. I spot him at the bar ordering a drink. “There.” I nod in his direction.

“He looks good,” Tony says with a nod. “Better than the pictures they sent me.” Michael punches him lightly in the arm. “What? I’m just saying.” Tony laughs.

“Yes, he’s a model, so of course, he looks good, just like all the others you set me up with. But who cares? The question is whether it will help to promote Goddess. Isn’t being single a better fantasy?”

“No. You sell to women, remember? You know how it works. You have to sell the fantasy. The way you look, the way you dress, and go out with the most desirable models. They want to be you. Give them the dream.”

“So you’re saying the dream is to date models? But they barely have brain cells. Why would women want that?”

“Why do you have such a negative attitude toward dating models? And do I need to remind you that you’re also a model? You’re certainly not brainless. They’re no different from anyone else, you know. Did you even give him a chance? Plus, you’re the one who complains about being alone all the time.” He halts. “Oh, hey, Uriel. Are you having fun?” Tony asks, and I realize Uriel’s behind me.

“There’s a lot of alcohol here, and I have a beautiful girl on my arm. What could be wrong?” He wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me closer to him, pinning me. I can barely stop my instinctive recoil.

Yuck. He’s one of those who like to touch. “Don’t forget you have to drive home, honey.” I give him a sweet smile.

“Yes, yes, don’t worry. A few drinks won’t do anything. Want one too?”

I shake my head, and he walks away.

“Michael, can you get us a drink?” Tony asks and waits until he moves away from us.

Tony raises an eyebrow. “So you don’t like Uriel either?”

“What do you think? I already told you I’m not looking for a boyfriend.” Goddess is all I need. I need to concentrate my efforts on the business.

“If you’d stop being so negative all the time, maybe you’d find someone you like? It’s not good to be alone. You need to trust again, Sis. Not everyone is a psychopath like—”

“I’m not alone. I have you.” A man will not put money into my business. “But seriously, now, before Michael comes back, where did Milan get my new design? How did they publish it? I didn’t show it to anyone. Did you let anyone see it?”

“Of course not.”

I lean in closer to Tony and whisper in his ear, “Michael?”

Tony jumps back as if a snake bit him. “No way. Michael would never do something like that. Besides, I don’t share anything about Goddess with him. You know that.”

I frown. “We need to figure out where this leak came from. I can’t afford to lose another design. And this was my best one.”

“Maybe I’ll go see Giselle? She can read—”

“Definitely not. What does a fortune teller have to do with the matter?”

“She can see in the coffee who stole from us.”

“I don’t believe that stuff, and you know what I think of you going there.”

He rolls his eyes. “Whatever you say, Sis. And you know what I think too. You need to confront Milan. Otherwise, he’ll keep trying to sabotage us.”

“Not a chance. I’m not ready for it.”

“Fine. But other than those options, I have no idea where the leak came from or how to find it.”

“The factory,” I say with a gasp. “You wanted it to be our first publication, so I sent it to the factory. They have the design.”

“Fuck. That must be it. What should we do?”

“We’ll go back to work as before.”

“I don’t understand.”

“We’ll eliminate the factory and sew at home.” The memory of time sewing at home feels so alive.

“That was a long time ago. We can’t sew such quantities at home. We’re too big now.”

“I only mean we’ll sew a small batch ourselves, the prototypes. We’ll advertise it as ours to prove it’s mine, *then* send it to the factory for mass production. That way, by the time it reaches the factory where others get access to the design, it will have already been advertised under my name. This will delay the initial delivery a bit, but the designs will be protected. No one sees them before they’re officially released.”

He nods. “Okay, that could work. Nobody but the two of us. But it will delay the delivery by a lot, not by a bit.”

I nod. “Yes, but I see no other choice.”

Michael and Uriel return to us with the alcohol, and I smile politely. “Let’s go mingle.”

Eight



LUKE

“Can I have another glass of wine, please?” Laura waves her glass at the server.

She hasn't looked me in the eye since we arrived. This meeting is going nowhere, and I regret agreeing to it. Laura has no new ideas for my story, and I'm not making any progress. I'm not sure why she wanted to meet here.

“What's going on, Laura? Are you okay? You've had quite a bit to drink.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” she mumbles, still not looking at me.

“Is there something you're not telling me?”

“Why do you think that?” she murmurs.

“Okay, Laura. Let's call it a night. You're already quite drunk. I think it's best to stop.”

“Not drunk enough.” She giggles. “Luke, do you want me to try talking to that model, Emma? Maybe she'll agree to talk to me.”

“No. I'll find a way to reach her eventually.”

“I won't take credit for your work, don't worry. You can write whatever you want,” Laura says, her lips pursed. “You have a crush on her, don't you? Of course, you do. Who wouldn't? She's beautiful. But just so you know, I heard she's a lesbian, and all these models she goes out with are just a facade. She's a lesbian, and her partner is gay.”

“I have no idea what her sexual orientation is, and I don't care. I don't write gossip. My job is to understand what's happening in their business.”

“I think you'll have better luck with her partner. What's his name? Anthony? I think you two would hit it off.” She laughs for no reason.

“Laura, you’re talking nonsense. Let’s go.” I can’t take it anymore. If we stay here another minute, I’ll lose it. And she still needs to be taken home.

“Okay, fine.”

I let out a sigh of relief as she agrees and tries to stand. She starts looking for her wallet in her bag, and I pull out my credit card. “This one is on me. Let’s go.”

I drive her home and park in front of the address she gave me. “Is this your house?” I ask her, but she doesn’t respond. Dammit, she’s completely drunk, and I can’t carry her with one arm. “Come on, Laura. Wake up.” I shake her until she moans and moves.

She leans in and tries to kiss me. I push her away. “Laura, stop. You’re drunk.”

Without little effort, I help her into her apartment and leave.

Once again, I intercept a package at the entrance to Emma Woods’ building. This is my chance to talk to her, to exchange a few words. But how?

All my online searches turned up nothing. She seems to have no hobbies or friends, just her business. Even during my brief visit to her house, I couldn’t see anything other than impeccable order. She’s like a billboard, a poster, not a person. Could she be that boring?

I’ll have to talk about fashion or fabrics, maybe even bikinis. I understand nothing about the swimwear business, but I can pretend. She just has to think that I’m interested.

I learned from last time and took painkillers before leaving the house to give them time to take effect before carrying any boxes. I thought the pain would be gone by now, but it isn’t.

“Hey again,” I greet her with a big smile as soon as she opens the door. “I have another delivery for you.” My phone

buzzes in my pocket, but I ignore it.

“Thank you,” she responds with a serious expression, but her eyes study me. She gestures down the hallway. “You already know where.”

I take the package into the room where she directed me last time. The apartment looks the same as then as if no one lives here. Still no computer in sight, too. Not that I’d know what to do with it if I found one.

I turn around and find her standing behind me. Not very trusting, is she? “Could I have a glass of water, by any chance?”

“Sure. Follow me.”

She walks into the kitchen, and I follow. Her hair is gathered in a high, taut ponytail. Tight. I always thought that the models in these pictures were photoshopped to death, but she looks perfect in reality. And she’s such a snob. She didn’t even smile back at me. *Can’t spare a smile?* Not at all the light impression I got from her colorful social account.

“Tell me, aren’t you that model?” I ask, trying to start a conversation. She could easily assume I recognized her, so admitting I saw her photos shouldn’t be a problem.

“Yes.”

Wow. Talkative. “Why do you order so much stuff?”

“I have a swimwear company. I order materials.”

“You have a company? Wow.” I fake admiration. “And you make money from it?”

“Yes.” She hands me a glass of water.

“Thanks.” I sip slowly. “Maybe you’ll teach me a little about business? I would love to earn more.” I smile at her. It’s not even a lie. Who wouldn’t want to earn more?

“Uh... I don’t think so.” She starts toward the door, hinting that my time here is up.

When I get there, the pink door slams in my face.

Well, that's a new level of snobbism. But she talked to me a little, at least. I'll just have to be more strategic in my approach and find the right angle to get her to open up to me and teach me more about the business.

My phone buzzes again, and I glance at the screen.

Raphael

Are you going to show your face in the office soon?

I'm on my way.

The boss doesn't text much, so I guess I should show up at the office. I tuck my phone back into my pocket and head to my car.

"Brant." Raphael waves his hand at me from the office at the end of the corridor. Everyone can see he's calling me into the office like a child about to be scolded. I glance over at Laura's desk but don't see her. One less thing to deal with.

"Hey." I walk in and close the door, just in case he really is going to scold me. I don't need everyone to hear.

"Goddess," he begins, getting straight to the point, and I nod in response. "It's been a few days already. When can I expect to see something written?"

I'm surprised by his impatience. He's never pressured me like this before. "I'm making progress," I tell him, trying to sound confident.

"Don't play games with me. Have you written anything yet?" he asks, his tone growing sharper.

"No, it's going to take some time. They're not very forthcoming with the media."

“You said it would be easy. What have you accomplished so far?”

“I’ve been to her apartment twice,” I say, hoping to pacify him. He raises an eyebrow.

“Is that it?” he asks, clearly disappointed.

“I’m working on it.”

“I hope you’re taking this seriously, Brant.”

I realize he thinks I’m not invested in this story, which isn’t true. I take my job seriously, always. “Yes, I am,” I answer, trying to keep my expression even.

The pain in my shoulder is back and getting worse. Carrying those boxes probably wasn’t the best idea. I consider going to the doctor but push the thought aside. I don’t want to be stuck in bed again.

I go into my office and start searching for my pain medication. Fuck, I can’t find the bottle anywhere. I empty my backpack onto my desk and finally spot it. I swallow two pills and sit back with a sigh.

A call from Connor flashes on my screen. I’m not a telepath, but he sure is. He must be calling to scold me about the pills.

“Hey, Connor. Can I get back to you later?”

“Are you screening me or something? I haven’t heard from you in a few days. You’re a journalist, after all. I’d expect at least some texts. You should know how to write.”

“Do you want to play my mom or something?” I spew venom that he doesn’t deserve. Not that I have any idea how she would have behaved.

“Hey,” he says, a surprised tone in his voice. “Everything okay?”

His tone, calm and concerned, shakes me out of this mood I’ve gotten myself into. He’s a friend.

“I’m fine. Just busy with work. Want to go for a beer tonight?” My desperate attempt to ease the atmosphere and

soften him seems to work. He agrees, and we disconnect.

Nine



EMMA

I stand before the cameras, my face strained from the forced smile plastered on my lips, my chin held high, and my hand resting on my hip, stomach sucked in.

Tony insists I attend all these boring events to stay in the public eye. But why should I go to this sneaker launch? How does it have anything to do with Goddess? And not only did he send me here, but he also left me alone to deal with Uriel. I'm trying to give the guy a chance like Tony asked, but I don't see a future here. This will be the second and last date.

"Emma! Emma, do you want to comment on Milan's accusations?" a reporter calls out to me, their voice piercing through the chatter of the crowd.

I stand still, my expression unchanging, as I try to process the reporter's words. Accusations? I'm caught off guard, unsure of what they're referring to. My thoughts race, wondering why Tony didn't inform me of this. I try to avoid the news as much as possible. All these reports do me no good.

"Hey sexy," I address Uriel in a pleading tone that makes me want to puke. "Can you take me home?" I have to get away and figure out what's going on before there are more questions that I don't know how to answer. I smile at him, hoping he won't ask to stay a little longer.

"Sure." He says and pleasantly surprises me. "I'd love to go somewhere else."

Uriel parks and insists on walking me to my door. Surprising in light of the fact that most of the time, he doesn't even bother to get out of the car. Maybe there is a gentleman in him after all? I stop at the entrance to the building and turn to him. "Thank you, it was a nice evening."

"You're not going to invite me up?"

Ah. So that's why he bothered to accompany me. For a moment there, I thought there might be potential.

"You haven't spoken to me for an entire minute since we met, and you want to come up? Why? What do you know about me?"

"We'll talk in your apartment." He winks at me. "Besides, what is there to talk about? I'm a man. You're a woman."

"Thanks, but I'm not interested."

"Are you one of those who play hard to get? I know you want to. Come on, we've already gone out twice. Why are you playing with me?"

So two dates mean I have to sleep with you? Interesting insight. "I'm not playing. I just don't want to."

"I wouldn't have wasted my time if you said it wouldn't happen. You're not playing fair."

"Wouldn't have wasted your time? You wanted to go out with me for publicity. The media would never have taken such interest in you if you hadn't accompanied me. You took advantage of me." I turn and open the door to my building.

"You're just a tease." He grabs my arm and pushes me into the lobby. "You're a whore like everyone else. Do you like it rough? I can do tough too. It's even more fun."

I try to shake him off but can't. He grips me like a pincher. My pulse goes up, and my palms begin to sweat. I try to pull the phone out of my bag to call someone. Tony, the police, anyone. But Uriel grabs the device and slams it to the floor.

"Leave me alone. Don't touch me!" I shout, not knowing to whom. The neighbor below me on this floor is an eighty-year-old man who can hardly hear. He won't be my salvation.

Uriel pushes me and slams me against the wall. He has one hand on my neck, and the other is already tearing off my panties. I try to fight him. I'm quite strong, and I won't give in easily, but he's stronger, and I'm running out of air. No one is coming to save me.

“Let me go. I can’t breathe...” I get out with difficulty, but he doesn’t seem to care.

When he lowers his head to unbutton his pants, he creates a tiny gap between us, a gap that allows me to move my legs, and I use the opportunity to drive a knee directly into his groin. My panties that are now below my hips don’t allow me full range of motion, and the blow isn’t very strong, but it’s enough to knock him over. He collapses in pain, and I quickly untangle my underwear, leaving them on the floor, as I run to the stairs, hoping to make it to my apartment.

“Help!”

I only manage a few steps before he grabs my heel and pulls. I fall, throwing my hands forward, trying to protect my face as I hit the hard surface of the stairs. The air is knocked out of me with the blow, and I let out a moan.

He lays on top of me, his mouth on my neck. His full weight is on me, crushing me against the stairs, and his cock is hard against my back.

“Do you want it from behind? I like anal,” he whispers in a voice that sends chills through my body.

How did this happen? How did I get into this situation?

He lifts the hem of my dress, and the only thing I hear is his heavy breathing and the zipper of his pants. I can’t move. I can’t even kick from this position. It’s going to happen. I’ve lost.

My brain disconnects, and for a moment, I seem to float above the situation. A gust of cool air hits my bare buttocks, making my skin shiver. I’m completely frozen, just like that time years ago. Nothing has changed. I lay on the stairs, helpless, exposed, and trembling. As if paralysis has gripped me. I bite the inside of my cheek, trying to cling to reality. This is not how I thought I would lose my virginity.

I close my eyes tightly and pray. *Make it quick, please make it quick.*

Ten



LUKE

“Emma! Emma, do you want to comment on Milan’s accusations?” I watch the video broadcast on social networks. Emma just smiles, but a few minutes later, the photographer takes a picture of her leaving the party.

I feel a sense of hopelessness, similar to when my mother left. I’m known for always having a plan, but now, I’m at a loss.

I narrow my eyes. It’s a live broadcast. She’s on her way home. I decide to take a chance and head out, hoping to catch up with her.

I rush to put on sports clothes, the ultimate excuse. *I was just running and bumped into you by accident.* She doesn’t have to know that I’m not allowed to run. I have no idea how I’ll convince her to let me in or even talk to me, but I tell myself I’ll figure it out.

I take my car, drive quickly, and park on the other side of the street, waiting for her to arrive. Then I notice a large black Jeep parked in front of her building, a car I haven’t seen here before. I’m struck by a sense of familiarity, and I pull up the video from the party again. Bingo. I see Emma getting into the same Jeep with a smooth-looking man.

Fuck. I’m too late, and he’s here with her. Images of him fucking her flash before my eyes, and I shrug. I don’t care who she sleeps with. I’m here to get a story.

I start the car, ready to drive home. I have nothing to look for here today.

“Help!” A faint cry comes from inside her building. I can’t make out the words that follow, but it’s clear to me that a woman is in trouble. I rush out, slamming the car door behind me and holding my shoulder as I run to the building that I’ve already gotten to know over the last few days.

As I reach the door and look inside, the sight before me is not something I will be able to forget anytime soon.

The man from the party is on top of Emma, his arm placed around her neck, preventing her from moving. With his other hand, he tries to pull his trousers down. I can hear her choking sounds.

I leap forward and grab the guy by his shirt, pulling him off her. Now I can see that her dress is pulled up, and his zipper is open. I catch her gaze for a brief second, and I will forever remember the look of horror on her face. I swing my good arm and send a well-aimed punch to the bastard's nose.

“You son of a bitch!” I spit the words as he falls backward, losing his balance and grasping for something to hold on to. “Feeling like a big man? Let's see you against me.”

I stand to my full height and puff out my chest. I'm not a small man. Let's hope it will be enough to scare him off. He doesn't need to know that I'm currently limited in my physical ability. The blow to his nose seems to have done the trick, as he whimpers like a wounded animal and doesn't even try to fight back. He runs away, holding his nose with one hand and the belt of his pants with the other.

Emma is still lying on the stairs, huddled and trembling. I reach out to offer her a hand to help her up, but she flinches, and I pull back immediately. “He's gone,” I say softly.

She turns to me, and I see the recognition in her eyes. “God,” she whispers, trying to stand, but her legs are still shaking, and she almost falls again.

I reach out and support her arm, stopping her from falling. She doesn't flinch this time, letting me hold her. I stare at the red marks on her delicate arms and on her neck, then at her amazing green eyes. Her lower lip quivers, and then she just collapses into my arms, sobbing. Her face is buried in my chest, and I can feel her tears wetting my shirt.

I stand for a moment without moving. I have no idea how to behave. I have never been in such a situation. Should I hug

her? Shit. “Come on, I’ll help you get home,” I say like some idiot, pulling her up the stairs.

“Where are your keys?”

She comes out of her trance and looks for the keys in her tiny bag. Her hands are shaking as she pulls them out, and I take the keys and open the door for her.

We go inside, and I help her to the sofa. “Water?”

She nods, and I rush to the kitchen to make myself useful. “Where are your glasses?”

“O—over the sink.”

I fill a glass with cold water and return to the living room.

She sips. “I’m—” She gulps in air and tries again. “I’m afraid he’ll come back. Do you think he’ll come back?” Before I can answer, she mutters, “I want to call Tony to tell him to come and be with me.”

“Okay. Where’s your phone?”

She moves her head. “Uriel threw it on the floor.”

So Uriel is the name of the scumbag? A fitting name.

“I’ll go look.” I rush back to the lobby, stopping only to take a deep breath after feeling like I was short of air inside.

I look for her phone, finally locating it in a corner. The screen is broken, and it doesn’t turn on. She won’t be happy to see that.

She takes the broken device from me and tries to revive it, but it doesn’t light up. I notice her hands are still shaking.

“Do you want to call from my phone?” I suggest.

She nods, then takes the phone from me and dials. It rings repeatedly, but no one answers.

“I can stay with you. Make sure he doesn’t come back.”

She raises those wonderful eyes to me, and her eyes widen. “Oh, I don’t know...”

She still doesn't trust me. "Okay, then I'll go." I stand, and she grabs my arm.

"No. No, don't go. I don't want to be alone right now."

"Sure. Just let me make a call and cancel my plans." Connor will understand.

"Oh, no, don't cancel plans because of me." Her face falls.

"No, it's perfectly fine. It's nothing important. I can stay." This is my entrance into her world. Although not under the best circumstances, an opportunity is an opportunity. Right?

I take a seat next to her on the couch, making my presence a fact. She doesn't object, so I assume I'm welcome to stay.

I send a text to Connor and sit there, not sure what to say. After a minute, she asks, "What were you doing near my house?"

"I was out for a jog. I live nearby and sometimes run in this area," I explain, gesturing to my athletic clothing and making it clear that I'm not a stalker waiting outside her house for an opportunity to pounce on her like that bastard did. "I heard a scream and came to check it out."

She nods, accepting my explanation.

"Thank you," she says in a weak voice, taking my hand in hers and giving it a light squeeze. "Thank you for saving me."

Her hand is warm and soft in mine, and I don't want her to let go. We sit in awkward silence, and I shift uncomfortably in my seat.

"I'm going to change clothes," she says, breaking the silence and gesturing to her shimmering dress.

As she gets up and walks away, I let out a sigh of relief. Her thanks fill me with guilt as she doesn't know that my intentions aren't pure. Fuck. I came here to spy on her, and I don't deserve her gratitude. If she knew my true motives, she would likely call the police.

I glance around. She invited me in to help her, yet here I am, considering taking advantage of her vulnerable state. As a

journalist, my priorities are clear, but I struggle with the morality of them.

I walk over to the retro bookcase, opening the drawers as quietly as possible. Inside, I find tablecloths and some books, but nothing that will help me with my investigation. I close the drawers, feeling uncomfortable with my actions.

I decide to lock the front door for her safety. I don't think the guy will come back after what happened, but I don't want to take any chances.

“Do you think he'll come back?”

If she had come out a second earlier... I finish locking up and turn around.

Damn. What the hell is she wearing? Short sweatpants that reveal her tanned and long legs and a wide t-shirt cut near the neck, showing a shoulder. It's the complete opposite of the fancy evening dress she wore earlier and somehow even sexier. She looks stunning. She looks like a million dollars. A million-dollar fuck.

“You should file a complaint,” I say, trying to keep a calm expression.

She shakes her head. “No. I don't need the media attention.”

“He almost fucking raped you on the stairs. How come you're not furious?” I ask, my annoyance growing.

“But he didn't. You came before he could.”

“And if I hadn't? He'll do it to other women,” I point out.

She's silent for a moment, pondering my words. “You're right. Tomorrow, I'll go. I just can't face the police right now.” She holds up her trembling hands as proof. “I don't even know your name.”

“Luke.” I almost say Luke Brant, but stop at the last moment. Hoping she won't remember our phone conversation.

“Hi, Luke,” she says, walking in my direction. “Thank you for staying here with me.”

She's so close now that her scent surrounds me. She smells of flowers, like in springtime. I take a deep breath.

Her eyes run over my face, examining me. "I don't think I'll be able to fall asleep anytime soon," she says. "Would you like to watch a movie or something?"

A movie? It's probably the last thing on my mind right now. "Sure."

"What do you want to watch? Anything but action movies. I can't stand blood."

I shrug and take a seat on the sofa next to her again, stretching out my long legs. "Then you choose."

Eleven



EMMA

As I scroll through the movie options, I pause on one in particular. I've been wanting to watch this one for a while, ever since Tony suggested it. "Me before you?"

"Okay," he says without looking at me.

I sneak a peek at his profile. I can sense that he's not entirely comfortable being here, and I can't help but wonder why he offered to stay if he didn't want to.

Because you told him you didn't want to be alone, you moron.

I press play and keep glancing over at him. He has a strong, straight nose, and his stubble is a little longer than it should be. It makes me want to reach out and touch him. I can't help but feel attracted to him, even though I'm surrounded by attractive men all the time and have learned to be indifferent to their appearance. Wisdom over beauty has always been my thing. So why do I feel that warmth in my stomach? Maybe it's just a side effect of the adrenaline.

I sink into the couch, keeping a safe distance between us. Without thinking, I blurt out, "So, do you like being a courier?" I immediately regret it, realizing that it sounds judgmental. It's none of my business.

"Do you like being a model?" he asks instead of answering.

"No," I answer with an honesty that surprises even me. I've never admitted it publicly, but I don't enjoy modeling. I don't enjoy the attention, the diet, or the surrounding gossip. I started modeling because I needed money, and I was born with the right body. Not because I like it.

He tilts his head, studying me. "No?"

I avoid his gaze, finding it hard to look into his piercing blue eyes. "I founded Goddess, and part of the business also

requires me to model.” I can’t help but wonder what it is about his eyes that makes it so easy for me to open up to him.

“You could hire a model, couldn’t you?”

“I could. I’ve done that before. But it didn’t produce the same results. People recognize the brand with me and expect to see me wearing the bathing suits. It’s just part of running my business. My body, my brand.”

He nods as if he gets it. “So, what do you love so much about Goddess if you don’t enjoy modeling?”

“I love running the business, being the owner, designing the products, and creating a plan that will lead to success. I love being in control of my destiny and not having to rely on anyone else.” As I speak, I can feel a smile creeping onto my face. My business is my baby.

“So the business is yours?”

“Well, not entirely. I have a partner,” I explain. “But he handles the operational side of things like production. I handle the planning, design, and management myself.” I feel a sense of pride when I say these words. It wasn’t an easy road, but I did it all by myself and at a young age. No one, not even Alexander Milan, can take that achievement away from me.

“Then why do you need a partner?”

“People often ask me why he’s a partner in my business if I do everything. You know, the design, the cuts, marketing, modeling. I could hire someone for operational matters, of course. I don’t need a partner. But our connection is beyond that. Tony’s my friend, my emotional support, and he’s also there to give me a hug when I need it.”

“Emotional support? What do you mean?” Luke asks with a curious look.

Tony and I have a history that goes back to the day he found me on the streets, but it’s something I don’t want to talk about, so I give a vague answer. “Running a business isn’t easy. I enjoy management and planning, but there are rivals who make things difficult for me with lies and false accusations.”

“I heard they even accused you of theft?”

I feel like I’ve said too much. I’ve revealed too much to a complete stranger. “It doesn’t matter. Let’s just watch the movie,” I say, facing forward and signaling the end of the conversation.

Tears stream down my face as the sad story unfolds on the screen. I can’t believe I picked this movie to watch right now.

I try to glance at Luke discretely. I can feel his eyes on me, witnessing my breakdown. Shit, this is so embarrassing.

He turns to me, his blue eyes meeting mine, and he gently wipes away my tears with his thumb. I can’t help but lean into his touch, relishing the feeling. But as soon as I realize what I’m doing, I pull away. “I’m sorry,” I say, wiping away the remaining tears with the back of my hand.

“Sorry for what?”

His voice is low and rugged, and my body reacts to him with annoying treachery. What am I really apologizing for?

I can’t stop thinking about him, wondering about him. The attraction I feel is overwhelming. I wonder what would happen if I gave into my desires and acted on the passion I also see in his eyes. This is the first time I’ve felt this way about someone, and in my line of business, losing my virginity is something I should have done long ago.

But I can’t bring myself to offer him that.

“Tea?” I offer politely, trying to distract myself.

He declines my offer, but I get up and head to the kitchen, thinking some physical distance would help, but it does nothing to ease my feelings. They hit me like waves during a stormy sea. I take out a coaster with a rose design and place my glass on it before returning to sit next to him. I fumble with the hem of my shirt, feeling embarrassed and flustered.

What should I do? My eyes meet his.

My thoughts of him turn into reality as his lips crash onto mine. He takes charge, dominating my mouth with a

possessive kiss. My hands move of their own accord, holding onto the back of his neck, pulling him closer.

This kiss is like oxygen to my lungs. His full lips explore mine as he pushes his tongue into my mouth. He groans as he pulls me closer, his hands roaming over my body. I lose track of time, and the kiss intensifies, slower, then faster. He tugs on my hair, tilting my head back.

I sigh, my tongue dancing with his, tasting the flavor of this man I barely know, but my body seems to have known forever. The wetness in my underwear confirms it. Where did you come from all of a sudden?

My hands wander down his chest, becoming bolder as I raise my arms and place them on his shoulders.

He inhales sharply and pushes me away, jumping off the couch as if he's been bitten. I lose my balance and fall to the ground. My fall causes me to bump into a table, and the cup of hot tea spills all over me. The shock and pain of the scalding tea and the unexpected rejection cause me to let out a cry.

He looks at me with wide eyes. "Fuck. I'm so sorry. Are you okay?" he offers me a hand to help me up, but I refuse and get up on my own, quickly heading to the kitchen to run my burning hand under cold water.

What the hell was that? My mind races with thoughts of rejection and embarrassment. He initiated the kiss and then regretted it? Am I not good enough for him?

"I'm so sorry," he says again, following me to the kitchen. "What can I do to help?"

I can't read the look on his face.

"I think you should go." I point to the door.

"I promised I'd stay to watch over you." He looks remorseful, and I almost give in. But I'm too embarrassed and humiliated by the rejection. No apology will be enough for me right now.

"I don't think he'll come back." I walk to the door and open it.

Maybe the sad movie was appropriate after all.

He leaves without saying anything more. I lock the door after him and fall onto the bed, face down. This is the first time I let myself open up to someone and give in to my desires. I was willing to give myself to him, but look where it led. I can't understand what went wrong. I sniff myself, finding nothing wrong. Men desire me. I'm a successful model. I didn't ask for a wedding or even a date. There's nothing wrong with me. Perhaps he has some performance anxiety?

I remind myself once again that there's no room in my life for a relationship. A good business plan and security are what I need.

Twelve



LUKE

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I stand outside her closed door, leaning my forehead against the wall. My head is spinning. Should I knock again and apologize? The hurt look on her face is still fresh in my memory. She won't forgive me easily. And to make matters worse, I don't even have a good explanation for what happened. *I'm sorry for pushing you on the floor and causing you to get burned. I was just shot at a demonstration I covered a week ago.* Yeah, that will go over well.

I'm such an idiot. Things were going so well, better than I had hoped. We talked, and I got to know her a little. I thought we might even see each other again. But what did I do? I kissed her, thinking with my dick instead of my head. It's so out of character for me. Why did I do something so impulsive? I'm not even interested in her. Well, maybe just for sex. After all, I'm a man with eyes.

She must be a witch or something. Her eyes are bewitching me. I can't explain what happened. I'm always so calculated.

And this damn injury. If she hadn't touched my shoulder, everything would have been fine. But the pain was so sharp and sudden that I reacted instinctively. This accident is ruining everything. My job, my future, and now this story. At this rate, Raphael will fire me. How can I fix this?

I rush out onto the street, muttering to myself like a crazy person, crossing the road to my car. It's not too late yet. Maybe I can still meet with Connor tonight. I need to talk and release all this pent-up emotion.

"Connor," I say as soon as he answers. "Are you still up for a beer?"

"Come on, two hours ago, you texted that you wanted to cancel. I've already stretched out on the sofa, and I'm comfortable."

“I’m on my way to pick you up.” I hang up before he has time to respond. I know he’ll be ready. We’ve known each other for so many years that I can anticipate his every reaction. He sends me an angry emoji, but I just smile.

On my way there, I reflect on the article I read about Goddess. The impression I got from Emma in the paper, a spoiled model who serves as a fake front for a company that someone else runs, differs completely from the impression I got from a few minutes of conversation with her. Something here doesn’t make sense to me. Did the reporter miss it? You can tell that she’s the lifeblood of the company, that she manages it all, even from the one simple question I asked. So why does the reporter think she’s just the front?

“Do you remember the story I told you about?” I say when the beers are placed in front of us. I take a few sips, then I allow myself to pour my heart out.

“What about it?”

“I got into Emma’s house.”

Connor gives me a puzzled look.

“You know, that model?” I add. “And she even answered a few questions for me before I messed up. But I messed up big time. I don’t know how to fix it.”

He raises an eyebrow and sips the beer. “How can you mess up that much in an interview? What did you ask?”

“So, it wasn’t really an interview. She thinks I’m a courier. And I saved her from some rapist, psycho guy and—”

He raises a hand, stopping my speech. “Wait. Stop. You what? A courier? A rapist? What the hell? I don’t understand. I need more details here.”

I briefly and quickly lay out all the details. How I started impersonating a courier and how I ended up inside her house,

bringing him up to the point just before everything went wrong.

“So she shared her story with you under the assumption that you were genuinely interested in her? And she has no idea you’re a journalist? Is that really ethical?”

I scowl, avoiding Connor’s gaze. “Well, not really. But I thought I could gather information, maybe gain access to her documents, and then verify it through other sources before publishing. I don’t even know if there’s a story to tell yet.”

Connor looks at me with wide eyes, his beer halted halfway to his mouth.

“I know, I know. It’s not my finest moment as a journalist,” I mutter, feeling a knot form in my stomach. How can I verify the information she’s given me later? She’ll never approve of my publication. I didn’t think that far ahead.

“Okay, so what happened next? Did she expose you?”

I shake my head. “No. Worse. I kissed her.”

Connor’s eyes widen. “You kissed her? So you’re interested in her? I can’t remember the last time that happened. Luke Brant is interested in a woman.”

He looks so pleased with himself that I feel like punching him.

“No, it’s not like that. We had a moment... I don’t know... I wouldn’t mind fucking her, obviously, but I’m not interested in her. Not in that way anyway.” I don’t want a relationship. An occasional sexual encounter is enough for me.

“It’s fine if you are. I’m the last to judge.”

“But I’m not.” My career is what’s important. The Pulitzer. That’s what I aspire for. Anything else will just stand in my way.

Connor laughs. “I still don’t understand what happened. Are you such a terrible kisser?”

“Hilarious.” I groan. “Do you want to listen or laugh at me?”

“Well, laughter is good for you.” He laughs again.

“She grasped my shoulder—”

“*The* shoulder?”

“Yep. And from the shock, I jumped back and ended up knocking her on the floor.”

“Ouch.” He twists his mouth. “And she didn’t know you were injured?”

“Of course not! What would I tell her? That I got shot at a rally? I’d be exposed. She’ll know I’m a journalist.”

“So, how did you explain what happened?”

“I didn’t explain. I tried to apologize, but she threw me out. And now I’m here.”

“Fuck.” He takes another sip. “You know, there are other ways to get hurt besides being shot. In fact, that’s about the last way I’d think of.”

“Yes, but nothing came to mind. You know, the blood wasn’t exactly in my head at this point. What am I going to tell her now in retrospect?”

“Make something up. You didn’t want her to think you were weak, typical shit like that. Women buy that.”

“So you think I should go back there? Keep lying?”

“No. Don’t dump your lies and deception on me. That’s on you. But you’re already three-quarters of the way through, so finish the story. Use your pretty face, but keep your distance. You can’t sleep with her, Luke.” He raises his hand and motions for the bartender to bring another beer.

I smirk. “I don’t think it’ll come to that. She’s as tight as a duck’s ass. You should see her apartment. I’ve never seen anything so organized and clean. It’s like a museum. I wonder if she’s that uptight in bed. She probably just lays there without moving, so she won’t wrinkle the sheets.” I grin and finish my beer.

We continue the evening talking about Connor’s latest dates. He certainly has a more interesting life than mine right

now.

“How can I date someone who puts the toilet paper facing the wrong way? You know it would drive me crazy for the rest of my life, right?” he says. “Not that I intend to stay with someone for life. That’s not my destiny.”

“Are you sure it was the toilet paper that bothered you?”

“You know Lori would never have put the roll on like that.” He looks at me with glassy eyes.

So we’re back to Lori. “Stop comparing everyone to Lori. It’s not a competition. You’re not giving them a chance.”

“I lost the love of my life, and there won’t be another chance for me. Besides, you don’t have the right to speak on this matter. Apart from sex, I haven’t seen you actually date anyone. And come to think of it, I haven’t heard you talk about sex lately, either. Are you even fucking, or have you become a monk?”

I know I touched his sensitive spot. Getting over the love of your life takes time. Although I must admit that Connor was always stronger than me. I would have collapsed if my fiancée had been killed like that, but he held on. He managed not to sink into the abyss as I did. “You know I’ve never been interested in a relationship.”

He snorts. “You’ve convinced yourself that you don’t care, but I don’t know anyone who wants to be alone all the time.”

“You do.”

“This is different. I had a relationship. I was there. You haven’t even tried.”

“I’ve been alone since I was ten. I don’t know anything else.”

I purchase one of the most extravagant bouquets from the florist, a mix of pink and white flowers. Despite not

recognizing most of them, the saleswoman assures me Emma will love it.

I need a grand gesture to justify the excuse I plan to give her.

I arrive at her door, holding the bouquet, and ring the bell, unsure of how this will all unfold.

“Hey,” I quickly greet her before she has a chance to slam the door in my face. I had anticipated this reaction and placed my foot in the door, preventing it from shutting.

“What do you want?”

“To explain what happened yesterday and apologize. I was stupid, and I was ashamed to tell you why I reacted as I did.”

She leaves the door open and looks at me with her piercing gaze, the dark ring around her iris appearing darker, accentuating their unique color.

“I was an idiot. I got into an accident while riding a scooter a week ago and hurt my shoulder badly. When you touched me there, it was so painful that I reacted instinctively and pushed you away. It wasn’t intentional. I didn’t mean to hurt you.” I watch her closely for a reaction, but her expression remains unreadable. I have no idea what she’s thinking.

“Why didn’t you just tell me that at the time?”

“Because I didn’t want you to know I was injured. I didn’t want anyone to know. At the hospital, they told me I should rest for a month. But I can’t be off work that long. I need the money. If the shipping company finds out that I work without insurance, they’ll fire me.” I try to make my explanation as convincing as possible. It’s the ultimate excuse because part of it is true.

She tilts her head, narrowing her eyes and studying me. I can see her mind working, trying to decide if she believes me or not. After a few moments of silence, she steps aside, opening the door wider and allowing me to enter.

She goes to the large bookcase, takes out a glass vase from the cabinet and accepts the flowers from me.

“Thanks for the flowers.”

“I hope that means my apology is accepted?” I ask.

“As long as you don’t push me on the floor when we kiss.”

Did the temperature in the room just go up a few notches, or is it just me? Is she thinking about kissing again? Because I am. I feel like stripping her naked and fucking her against the door. Now.

“I have no such intention.” I smile, suddenly realizing that I hadn’t thought about the story all day.

“I’m sorry, but you arrived at an inconvenient time. I have to leave in a few minutes, and I need to finish getting ready.” She moves toward the door, escorting me out.

“Wait.” I stop at the door. “I’d love to ask you out.” Fuck. Why did I say that? How does this relate to my investigation? And how do I go out with her without being photographed and appearing in all the newspapers?

I can already see the headlines. “Famous Model Dating The *New York Daily Publishing* Reporter.” And my cover goes down the drain.

Shit.

Thirteen



EMMA

“A date?” I don’t know what to say. I didn’t expect him to suggest that after we shared a passionate kiss, and then he ran away. But now he’s here again, asking for a date, like some lost dog returning home.

I study his face. There’s no denying he’s incredibly attractive, with a rugged, carefree look. I didn’t even know he was my type until I met him. But he’s a courier, not someone from my industry. Tony would kill me if I was photographed in public with him after all the work he’s done to establish me as a desired model. Plus, this guy left me feeling confused and hurt after he abruptly pulled away during our kiss.

On the other hand, he saved me from a potential rape. I owe him. So...

Who am I lying to? I want to go on a date with him. The thought of spending more time with him, getting to know him better, sends a flutter through my stomach. But my career is at stake. Being seen with him could harm my reputation and that of my business. I’ve worked too hard to let that happen.

“We don’t need to do something big,” he blurts out. “We can go on a picnic, just the two of us?”

Yes, a picnic could work. No one has to know. No public places, no paparazzi. At least until I understand where this is going.

“Okay,” I tell him, trying to sound nonchalant. “A picnic sounds nice.” I can’t help the way my heart races as he smiles, revealing dimples I didn’t even know he had. I’ll have to keep this secret, at least for now. But the thought of being with him, away from the prying eyes of the public, is too tempting to resist.

He leans in closer, his eyes locked on mine. I can feel the anticipation building as he inches closer to my lips. I tilt my head and close the distance to his lips. He takes his time, savoring my lips and exploring my mouth with his tongue. His

hands cup my face, gripping my hair, and I can feel my body trembling with need. I cling to him, wanting to feel him close to me. The ache between my legs intensifies as I feel his hardness pressed against me. He's just as aroused as I am, and the thought drives me even wilder.

I never want the moment to end, but he breaks away from me, and I rest my head on his chest, being careful not to touch his injured shoulder. My pulse is pounding in my ears, racing as if I had just finished a run.

"Fuck Emma, you are so delicious. I can't wait to taste more parts of you," he moans in my ear, and a wave of wetness flows between my thighs.

If I didn't have to go out now, I would agree to this invitation. Yes, I think I'm ready to try it with him. I'm going to give myself to him on our date.

"I have to go out, Luke. I need to get ready. Pick me up at seven." I steal another kiss from him and open the door. Quick, before I regret it and invite him to stay.

Minutes later, I'm ready to go. I take a deep breath to calm my still-raging heart, collect the bag with my fabrics and the binder I made, and leave.

"Hey, Sis." Tony kisses my burning cheek. Half an hour has passed, and I can still feel the effects of Luke's kiss. He left a trail of fire on my body and made sure I wouldn't forget him even when he's not here. How does he do it?

"Hey, Ton Ton." I walk into the apartment and sit on the couch with a sigh. "Where's Michael?"

"In the office." Tony stands in front of me, hands on hips. "What's different?"

"Nothing."

"Something's different." His eyes go over me like an X-ray, scanning me from top to bottom. If I was naked, it would

be less intrusive.

“Nothing,” I repeat, a blush burning my cheeks.

“You had sex. You got rid of it!” he screams.

“No,” I hasten to deny. “Definitely not.”

He bows his head. “Don’t lie to me. Who is he?”

I frown. “I didn’t sleep with him.”

“But there is someone. I knew it. I’m never wrong about these things. Wait, hold on to your thoughts. I’ll make us some coffee, and you can tell me all about it. Have you eaten today? Let me make you something.”

“I already ate, thanks.” I hesitate, unsure of how to bring up the subject of Luke. Tony and I have always been close, and there’s nothing he doesn’t know about me, but he’s also my manager and agent, and I know he won’t be thrilled about the idea of me dating Luke.

Tony returns with two cups of coffee and sets them down on the table in the living room.

“Tony, wait! The coasters,” I yell, but it’s too late. He’s already put the cups down without using them.

“We’re not in your house. I don’t care about coasters, and you know it,” he says with a shrug.

Tony watches me with a smirk as I shift in my seat, feeling uneasy. Eventually, I get up and head to the kitchen to grab some coasters. “What? You know me,” I mutter.

“I don’t care about those fucking coasters, but I do care about you. So who’s the lucky bastard?”

“I told you we didn’t sleep together.”

“But who is he?”

“His name is Luke. He saved me from the incident with Uriel,” I say, lowering my eyes. “What happened with Uriel was worse than I let on,” I admit, feeling a knot form in my stomach.

“Are you hiding things from me, Sis? What do you mean, he saved you? What exactly happened there?”

“Uriel tried to rape me on the stairs of my building. Luke was suddenly there, and he stepped in to protect me.” I look down at my hands and play with the fabric of my shirt.

Tony’s expression darkens as he processes this new information. “Why didn’t you tell me all of this before? I could have helped you. I’m always here for you.”

“I know, and I’m sorry,” I say, feeling guilty. “I just didn’t want to worry you. I knew you would be mad.”

“Of course I’m mad.” He stands. “I’m going to fuck that bastard and kick him out of every project he was ever accepted to.”

“I didn’t want you to go wild like that. Please don’t go near him. I don’t want you to get into trouble. Though I’d love to never see his face again.”

“I can’t believe you kept this a secret. You told me he was just trying to touch you, and you pushed him away. Are you okay? What did he do to you?”

“He mainly scared me, caused a few bruises and forced me down on the stairs. Luke stopped him before he could do anything more serious.”

“Son of a bitch.” Tony paces the living room, muttering his best curses. I thought I’d rather he didn’t know the details, but now I feel nothing but relief. Tony will take care of me. I always have a hard time explaining our relationship to outsiders. It might seem as if he’s taking advantage of me, getting a percentage of the company when I do all the work, but it’s exactly the opposite. He always has my back, he’s my support, and he’s my only friend.

“I’m fine,” I continue, “and I filed a complaint against him with the police.”

“A complaint will be difficult to silence in the media.” Tony pauses and looks at me.

“I know. But I did nothing wrong. And I won’t let him get away with it.” My voice is determined as I meet Tony’s gaze. “I can’t let him hurt someone else.” Luke was right. I couldn’t live with myself if I stood by and did nothing. I may have been too young and scared to speak out before, but not anymore.

Tony pauses and ponders. “Okay. I’m here for you. We’ll deal with whatever happens,” he says and resumes his seat. “So tell me about this Luke guy.”

“He stayed with me for a while after what happened. We watched a movie, talked and kissed, and today he invited me on a date. That’s it. Nothing else happened. I hardly know him.”

“A date?”

I can see the wheels turning in Tony’s mind as he thinks through the potential implications of my relationship. He’s probably thinking about where we should go on a date and which paparazzi to invite to take pictures. I quickly bring him back to reality. “He’s a courier, Tony, not a model.”

“A delivery guy? Like a package courier? You surprise me with that one, Sis. How am I supposed to pitch this to the paparazzi?”

“Don’t pitch anything. Please. I’d prefer if no one knew yet,” I explain, unsure if this relationship will even progress.

“But how? You’ll be photographed the second the toe of your Louboutin sets foot in a restaurant.”

“Easily. We won’t go to a restaurant.”

He snorts. “He will never agree to that. He’s probably just using you to get a campaign. Does he look good enough to model?”

He looks even better. “That won’t be a problem.”

“How do you know?”

“Because he suggested a picnic and not a restaurant.” Ha. What do you say about that?

Tony snorts again. “A picnic? So he’s broke.”

“No, he just wanted something romantic and intimate,” I say, although I really don’t know if he’s romantic. Maybe Tony is right, and he just doesn’t have the money to pay for a restaurant. “I don’t care about the money he has or doesn’t have, Tony. I know how to take care of myself.”

“I know you do. You’re too proud to take anything from anyone. No help, either. Thank God you at least allow me to help sometimes.”

“Well, back to the subject. I brought the new designs that need to be worked on. Will you help me cut?”

He sighs and takes the fabrics from me. “We’re back to the old days.”

Fourteen



LUKE

I carefully examine the contents of the picnic basket I've prepared for our date. Wine, cups, pasta, but what did I forget? Ah, forks! I hurry to put them into the basket. I scan the list in my mind, making sure I haven't missed anything important. This simple date is not so simple. It's taken me hours to arrange everything. Though I'm used to cooking for myself, it's nothing like the gourmet meals she's probably accustomed to. She seems high maintenance, and I'm sure whoever dates her regrets it after a few outings. I can't understand why I'm going through so much trouble for a fake date.

It still amazes me she agreed to a picnic and didn't insist on a fancy restaurant with three Michelin stars. I'm sure the idea of eating on the ground will disgust her, and she'll run away in horror.

As a precaution, I text her.

Wear comfortable clothes and no heels.

I don't want to deal with complaints about ruining an evening dress with sand.

She looks surprised when I knock on her door, and for a moment, I think she forgot we had a date, but she looks ready. She's wearing a lightweight white dress and flat-heeled sandals, just like I asked.

"Hey," she greets me, her voice soft. "I'll just grab my bag, and we can go. Are we taking your scooter?"

I shake my head. "No, I have a car." I momentarily forget my fake explanation for my injury.

We step out of the house and head to my car. I scan the area, making sure there aren't any photographers lurking

around.

She slides into the passenger seat and turns to me with a curious look. “Where are we going?”

I can’t help but wonder why she hadn’t asked that earlier. Perhaps I’m a kidnapper? Or a serial killer? She seems a little too trusting.

“The beach,” I reply with a smile.

Her mouth falls open. “The beach?”

Here it is. The complaints. *I don’t like the sand. I don’t want the wind to spoil my hairstyle.* “Don’t you like the beach?”

She laughs. “I have a swimwear company. Why would you think I don’t like the beach? I love it.” She smiles, and her green eyes sparkle.

Okay, this differs from what I expected.

I chose a secluded beach, further away from the city, where we can enjoy the privacy and the natural beauty without being recognized. As I look around, I see the beach is empty, and the darkness of the night makes it even more unlikely anyone will spot us.

I jump out and rush to open the door for her, bowing jokingly. “My goddess.”

She laughs, the sound like pleasant chimes to my ears. “I’m not a goddess,” she says.

I lead her to a secluded spot on the beach, where I’ve already set up a picnic blanket, surrounded by a few large rocks that would shield us from view. She looks around, taking in the sound of the waves crashing against the shore, the salty sea breeze blowing through her hair.

She sits on one side of the blanket, stretches her legs out in front of her, and rearranges her dress to cover her thighs.

God, she has such long legs.

“How tall are you?” The question comes out from me without thinking.

“Five feet ten,” she answers without hesitation. “Didn’t you search me on Google?”

I did. But her height was not on my mind. Theft and embezzlement were. “Not really.”

“And you? How tall are you?”

“Six three. What else do you want to know? I’m twenty-eight years old. I’m an only child.”

“I have a sister. An older sister,” she says but doesn’t add anything else. “Let’s eat?”

“I’ve prepared pasta primavera for us. It’s my specialty.” I take out the plastic containers from the basket and set them between us. I fill her plate and hand it to her before

eagerly digging in myself. I relish the delicious taste.

She glances at her plate, prods at it with her fork, and takes a few bites.

“Is something wrong?” I notice she barely touches the food, and I regret not asking her about her preferences beforehand.

She smiles hesitantly. “No, it’s really good. Thank you.”

“You haven’t eaten much. It’s all right if you don’t like it. I know it’s not as fancy as the restaurants you’re probably used to.”

“No, it’s delicious, really. But as a model, I have to watch what I eat and maintain a certain weight. So, unfortunately, I can’t have pasta.”

I can’t believe it. She’s so thin already. “Okay,” I say. “How about a glass of wine?”

“Yes, I’d love some,” she says with a smile. But I can’t tell if it’s genuine or if she’s just trying to avoid disappointing me. I pour the wine into our glasses and raise mine to clink against hers in a toast.

She raises the glass to her lips and takes a sip, sticking her tongue out to lick the remains off her lips. I inhale sharply. Fuck me. I want to fuck her right now.

“So your company is called Goddess, right?” I ask, my eyes still fixed on her lips.

“Yes.”

“And you always knew you’d start a swimwear company?”

She laughs. “Definitely not.”

Curious, I press on. “So, how did you end up starting one?”

“Well, I needed money, and I thought about becoming a model. But no agents were interested in me. So, I uploaded pictures of myself online to grab their attention. But what I found was that many of the comments were asking where they could buy the swimsuit I was wearing in the pictures.”

“And that swimsuit was one you designed?”

“Yes, it was. I’ve been designing clothes since I was ten. I remember asking my father for money for my birthday, so I could buy clothes like my friends. Instead, he gave me a *Burda Style* magazine.”

I furrow my brow, trying to understand.

“You see, we never had much money growing up. But I never gave up hope that one day I would have the same things as everyone else. That day never came, but thanks to that magazine, I taught myself how to sew. I’d collect old clothes people had thrown away or donated, unravel them, and use the fabric to make new clothes. I taught myself how to make patterns and designs by imitating the dresses of the other girls in my class.”

“Your parents didn’t have money to buy you clothes?”

“They didn’t have money to buy anything. Clothes are a luxury when you’re trying to keep your head above water. We only had basic food. I had two school uniforms, and I had to be very careful not to stain them so that no one knew I was always wearing the same set.”

“Wow, that’s impressive,” I comment, admiring her determination and drive to succeed despite her difficult

background. “So you taught yourself sewing and designing?”

“Yes. I had a few classmates who appreciated my designs and would purchase them from me. Every time I saved up a bit of money, I would buy another magazine to continue learning and improving.”

Her determination to succeed is evident as she recounts her journey of building her business from scratch. Growing up without financial resources is never easy.

“How were you able to achieve so much in such a short time?”

“It wasn’t as short as it seems,” she glances downward. “I started my business before I turned eighteen.”

“During high school?”

“You could say that. Let’s just say high school wasn’t on my mind.” She smiles bitterly. “So, enough about me. Tell me a little about yourself.”

“There’s not much to tell. I didn’t lack money like you did. Dad worked around the clock, and I didn’t see him much, but he brought money home.”

“And what about your mother?”

No one but Connor knows the story, and I’m not ready to tell it. Although time has passed, it still hurts. I still can’t forgive Dad for what happened.

“My mother died when I was ten.” Dead to me, at least.

“I’m sorry. So, who raised you?”

I try to play it off as no big deal, but the pity in her eyes makes me uncomfortable. “Dad hired all kinds of nannies until I made it clear to him I was managing on my own.” I omit the story about how I made one nanny run away.

“It can’t be as simple a story as you’re playing it off to be. Growing up without a mother and without a father present. You were alone.”

“It’s nothing. It’s in the past. I’m used to taking care of myself.” I’m supposed to get information out of her, not the

other way around.

The evening air coming from the sea is chilly, causing her to shiver, and her nipples are puckering through her light clothing. I try to avoid looking, but my gaze is drawn to them. She covers her chest with her arms, noticing my attention. I don't want to appear like all the other obnoxious guys who are just trying to get in her pants, as I'm sure she's had many of those before. I need her to trust me in order to get the information I need.

I take out the cheesecake I brought, trying to distract her. "So, you have to at least taste the dessert I made. I promise you won't get fat from one bite." In fact, she's so thin that another pound or even three wouldn't hurt her.

She agrees, and I smile, handing her a forkful of cheesecake. I watch as she takes the fork in her mouth, her full lips wrapping around it as she closes her eyes to savor the taste, and I stifle a moan.

Fifteen



EMMA

“Are you on good terms with your father?” I inquire, even though there are other things I want to ask.

He looks at me with an intensity that makes me feel like he wants to devour me instead of the cake. I’m used to receiving looks like this, but he’s the first one to make me wish he would follow through. If he keeps looking at me like that, I fear I’ll be set ablaze.

None of the dates Tony set me up with even came close to making me feel how I do right now. All those self-centered models didn’t even bother to ask how I was doing, let alone take an interest in me. No one ever asked me how I started the company except for him.

“He remarried and lives in Thailand. We talk about once a year.”

That’s sad.

“Do you have a good relationship with your parents?” he asks.

“No, not really. I mean, they live far away, too,” I explain. It doesn’t matter to me if they live in Jamaica or on the next street. Since that crucial day, I haven’t spoken to them. I can’t bring myself to see them.

“What about your sister?”

“We talk from time to time.” She really lives far away. Ran away as soon as she could and never looked back. I can’t blame her.

I glance back up at him, and it’s clear that he desires me. His gaze lingers on my body throughout the evening. The thought crosses my mind. What would it be like to give in to him? To finally be intimate with someone I’m attracted to?

I am seriously considering it. The tingling in my body excites me. What would it be like to sleep with a man?

I smile at him seductively. “Want to go for a swim?” I’ve never tried to seduce a man before, and I have no idea how to continue. I know how to take pictures in sexy poses, but in real life, it’s different. I feel so insecure, but I figure swimming is a good idea. If we do it in the water, he won’t notice I’m a virgin. The water will conceal everything, and he won’t be able to see any blood.

He raises an eyebrow. “Did you bring a swimsuit?”

I don’t need a swimsuit. I remove my dress and toss it on the blanket, revealing my lace bra and underwear. “Ready to join me?”

His eyes widen as he looks at my bare body. I don’t wait and run into the water, screaming as the cold water hits my body. I love the sea and am excited about what I hope is going to happen.

When I’m almost waist-deep, I turn around and am surprised to see him standing barefoot on the beach, fully clothed.

“Aren’t you coming in?” I shout.

“I can’t. My shoulder,” he shouts, pointing to his injury.

Shit. I forgot about it. I swim back, get out of the water, and stop within touching distance of him. Touch me, I beg with my eyes because I don’t have the courage to say it out loud.

He wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me closer. His hands feel like fire on my wet skin, and he presses me against his body, ignoring the water that dampens his clothes.

My bare skin is so sensitive right now that the t-shirt on his body feels like sandpaper. I feel the roughness of his jeans against my bare legs, and I long to feel the smoothness of his skin. I want to run my hands over his chest and pull off his shirt, but I hesitate to make the first move.

“Come,” he says, taking my hand and coaxing me back to the blanket.

It's going to happen. I'm ready. My palms feel sweaty. I don't know if a blanket on the beach is how I envisioned it, but it's as good as anywhere, I guess.

A gust of cool wind reaches us, and the dress I threw off earlier flies away.

"Oh!" I exclaim at the sight of my dress flying away in the wind. "I have nothing else to wear."

"Wait here," Luke releases my hand. "I'll go get it."

I watch him as he runs toward my dress, which is caught on a higher rock. Now that I'm wet, I'm cold and hugging my body to stay warm. He reaches the rocks and starts climbing to retrieve my dress. Shit. I hope he gets it before I have to walk home in just my underwear.

I observe him move forward, using his good arm to reach my dress. Yes! He prevailed.

He jumps back onto the sand and rushes to me.

He hands me the dress and sits down on the blanket, a look of pain on his face. I see blood on his foot as he looks at it. He must have cut it on the rocks.

Blood.

The world around me revolves.

"Emma! Emma!"

I try to open my eyes. Why is everything black? *Because I'm looking at the sky. That's why.*

"Emma! Fuck, answer me." The voice calls my name again, and I turn my gaze to the side to see Luke hovering over me.

"I'm fine," I moan and try to get up. "Sorry I startled you."

"What the hell happened just now?"

“You’re hurt,” I whisper, trying not to look at his foot again.

He glances down. “What? Do you mean the cut from the rock? It’s nothing.”

“There’s blood.”

“But it’s nothing.” He narrows his eyes. “Wait, you passed out because of the blood?”

I bite my lip. “Yes. Sorry. I faint at the sight of blood. I can’t control it.” How embarrassing. All the excitement flew away with the dress. Now I just want to go home.

“That’s so cute.” He laughs. “I’ve never known anyone who passes out from a little blood.”

“Don’t laugh at me.” I punch his chest lightly, and he feels so solid under my hand. I don’t want to be cute. I want to be sexy.

“What do you do when you’re on your period?” he asks curiously.

“That doesn’t bother me. It’s different somehow. Perhaps because it’s not from an injury. I don’t know,” I say. I never thought about it, but what if I pass out when I bleed during sex? I have no idea how I would react to it. It’s not like I’ve tried it before.

“Is your leg okay?”

“Yes, it’s nothing. Promise.”

I put on the dress he brought back. It’s not going to happen today, not after the mess I made. I feel so embarrassed.

“Do you want to stay?” he asks, sensing that my mood has changed.

“Can you take me home?”

“Sure.” He smiles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes.

“Well?” Tony walks into my apartment, holding two cups of coffee from Starbucks and a bag of cookies. For him, of course.

“Well, what?”

“How was the date with the beggar?” He says after placing the cups and cookies in the kitchen.

“He’s not a beggar,” I argue, jumping to Luke’s defense.

“Sensitive, are you? You really like him, huh?” Tony studies me and walks around me as if I’m wearing some new design.

I grimace, but it only makes him smile.

“You do. Well, have you done the deed yet?”

We haven’t exchanged any other words yet, and that’s what he’s asking. I scrunch my nose. “No,” I say, and not because I didn’t want to.

“What are you waiting for? If you didn’t like the guys I arranged for you, fine. But here’s one man you do like. I hate to tell you, Sis, but at this rate, you’ll have to say you’re saving yourself for marriage or something. Otherwise, it’s just weird.” He ponders for a moment. “Or you can be a lesbian. You can always join our ranks. You won’t have to deal with a cock.”

Like I don’t know that. Everyone around me talks about sex all the time, and I’m the only one who is silent as a fish because I have nothing to contribute to the conversation. But I’m not a lesbian or a prude. I just haven’t had the right opportunity.

“I considered sleeping with him,” I admit, seeing Tony’s eyes light up. “But then he cut his foot on a rock, and I passed out.”

“Oh, no.”

“Yes.” I admit defeat, take my cup of coffee, and flop down on the couch.

“What happened?”

“We were at the beach, and he was barefoot and stepped on a rock... I fainted in front of him and ruined everything.”

“Why do you think you ruined everything?”

“I lost consciousness because of a scratch in the middle of our date. He must think I’m pathetic. The most unsexy woman ever.”

“And I think you’re exaggerating as usual. You’ll see. He’ll call to invite you out again soon. Men don’t think like you do. I can’t believe you’re ready to have sex. Finally. You don’t know what you’re missing—”

“Yeah, I know. I hear your stories a few times a week.”

“Let’s ask Giselle.” He claps his hands.

“What? why?” Where did he get this far-fetched idea now? How is a fortune-teller even related to this subject?

“She’ll tell you if your relationship has a chance. I wanted a reading anyway. I have to get advice on how to market this relationship of yours. If you two continue to date, it won’t be easy,” Tony says.

“I don’t believe in that shit, and you know it.” Sometimes I hate my job. I want to date whoever I want without thinking so much about it.

“Every time I’m there, and I ask her about the campaigns, they always succeed. I don’t know if it’s the coffee reading, an alien from another dimension, or a talking cat, but it works.”

I shake my head. It’s a waste of time.

“Please. Do it for me.” He blinks dramatically and picks up the phone. “I’m calling to make an appointment.”

It only takes a few seconds before I break down. “Okay. And you owe me one.”

Sixteen



LUKE

Shit.

I couldn't sleep because of the pain, even though I had already taken the maximum amount of painkillers possible. As the pain in my shoulder intensified, I regretted not listening to my body's warning signals. I should have known better than to climb that rock, and now I'm paying the price. That entire date was a mistake, and now I'm suffering the consequences.

Perhaps, I should seek medical attention and have my shoulder checked again. The level of pain I'm experiencing doesn't seem normal after a week and a half. Maybe they missed something during my surgery, or maybe I'll just be told that running around, working, and carrying heavy loads was not a good idea. I close my eyes and release a groan as I try to endure the pain, but getting some sleep is impossible.

I head to the kitchen, retrieve a container of leftover food and open it. My hand is shaking, and the contents spill onto the floor. Shit, number two.

"Mom, is that you?" I call out as I enter the house after school, unsure of whether I want her to be home. The bags of groceries weigh heavy in my hands, but I don't mind.

"Luke," I hear her reply. She's home, and she's awake. "Where are you, my love?"

I find her lying on the couch.

"Get my pills from the room, Luke." Her eyes are bloodshot, and her face appears swollen. Her dark hair is messy around her face.

"How many pills have you taken today, Mom?"

"Don't argue with me!" she shouts. "Do what your mother says. I never dared to speak like that to my parents."

I reluctantly bring her the pills. The bottle is already half empty, and I know she filled her prescription only two days ago. I know what she's taken in those two days is not a reasonable amount. But if she doesn't get them, it will be worse.

She takes out three and swallows.

"Where's your father? What time is it?"

"He's at work, Mom, and it's noon. Do you want to eat?"

She doesn't answer, but I go to the kitchen, pull out a pan and start preparing the chicken I bought.

I make a plate for myself and one for my mother.

"Ew! What is this?" She shoves the plate off the table, causing the food to scatter on the floor. Some of the sauce splatters on the wall. Her eyes glaze over, and she slumps back onto the couch, remaining silent.

I grab a cloth and begin cleaning up the mess.

Beep.

I pick up the phone from the kitchen table and check my messages.

Laura.

I put the phone back. I don't feel like dealing with her right now.

What happened yesterday? How did I let things get out of hand with Emma? We talked, and she shared her thoughts and feelings with me, and her honesty surprised me. She answered all my questions. Then, she took off her dress, and everything went to hell. I completely forgot about the article I needed to write. If it wasn't for her fainting, there's a good chance we would have had sex on the beach. I'm certain of it. And that's all I wanted at that moment. I wouldn't have stopped. I didn't want to stop.

But nothing good can come from sleeping with the subject of my story. Only complications. I'd rather not go in that

direction at all. Sexy or not, seductive or not, I can get laid elsewhere and with fewer complications. My relationship with Emma should remain practical. She should remain only a research subject and nothing more.

Now that I've made up my mind, I take two more pills. There's just no other way I can get through this day. I'll be fine. I'm not my mother.

Laura is waiting for me in my office, sitting on my chair wearing a short skirt, one leg over the other, and is looking at the pages I assume she got from my desk.

I take a deep breath. I can't avoid her forever.

"Hey, Laura." I walk into the office. "You're in my seat."

She looks up at me. "You ignored my messages, so I had no choice."

Yes, I ignored them. Get the hint. "Sorry. I woke up late."

"Never mind." She shakes her head. "We need to talk."

"About what?" She continues to sit in my place, forcing me to stand. I close the door.

"About what happened in the restaurant. I'm sorry I got drunk."

"It's okay. Nothing happened."

She frowns. "Okay, Luke. What I came to say is that I don't quite remember what I did, so if I did something embarrassing—"

"Laura, everything is fine. Nothing happened."

"Oh, okay." She smiles, but the smile doesn't reach her eyes. "So, are we okay?"

"Sure. Friends, like always."

"You know, maybe we could go out again..."

"We didn't go out, Laura. It was a business meeting."

“Okay, but if you’re not dating anyone right now, I thought ___”

Shit. Is she trying to hit on me? I didn’t see this one coming. “I am. Dating someone,” I respond. Laura gets up and comes to stand close to me. I’m aware that my office is fully visible to others, and I take a step back. Whatever her intentions are, I’m not interested.

“You’re dating someone else?” She asks, her huge brown eyes studying me.

“Yes, and she’s amazing,” I say, remembering last night. Too bad it wasn’t real.

But it sure felt real.

“‘Amazing’?” she says, repeating my word. “Who is she?”

“That’s none of your business,” I respond firmly, making it clear that it’s not up for discussion.

“You son of a bitch.” A tear runs down her cheek. She rushes out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

I raise my hand and shrug at those who sit close to my office, apologizing for the noise. She’s right. I am a son of a bitch. Maybe if she realizes that, she’ll keep her distance.

I decide to call Emma and ask her out again. This is the only way to succeed and get the information I need. Son of a bitch or not, I’m, first and foremost, a journalist.

Seventeen



EMMA

“‘**Y**ou’re in love,” Tony screams in my ear, forcing me to hold the phone away.

“I’m not in love. It’s just a date.” I laugh. But I am excited. Very excited. This is the first time I’ve ever looked forward to a date instead of dreading it.

“So tell me, where are you going so I can harness my talent to help.”

“He wants to play Pool.” I couldn’t believe it. Of all the things he could have chosen, he picked this game. I wonder if he knew I had experience playing Pool. I didn’t tell him, and I’m sure no one has written this detail about me. An interesting coincidence?

“Pool? Was it your idea? Does he know you’re a champion at that game?”

“No. He suggested it, and I said yes. What’s wrong if I’m good? I can beat his ass. It will be fun.”

“No, you can’t win on a date. Are you mad?”

“What? Why not?” The image of my victory fades before my eyes.

“A man wants to impress on a date. If he invited you to play, he probably thinks he’s good at the game. If you beat him, it will humiliate him. Men don’t want women who are better than them.”

“That’s nonsense. Nothing will happen if I beat him. It’s just a game.”

“Trust me, Sis. You don’t want to beat him on a date if you want another one, and I think you do.”

I remain quiet, contemplating Tony’s words. Could there be something to what he’s saying? I like Luke. I don’t want to ruin my chances with him.

“All right, point taken. I’ll make sure he wins. Now come help me choose an outfit for my date tomorrow.”

“This is where Giselle lives?” I ask at the sight of the old building with peeling paint.

“Yes. Did you think she lives in a palace?”

I don’t know what I was thinking. But if she can predict the future, how come she’s not rich? Couldn’t she use her abilities to win the lottery or something?

I climb the stairs to the second floor after Tony, careful not to touch anything.

The woman who opens the door looks exactly as I imagined she would. She has curly red hair and is wearing a colorful dress. Chains of beads in all kinds of sizes dangle from her neck and more adorn her bracelets. She must be wearing at least two pounds of beads. It’s as if she saw a movie about gypsies and decided to dress like one.

I wonder if she’s trying to live up to our expectations or if this is her true self. Without hesitation, Tony enters and sits down in one of the mustard-yellow armchairs, leaving the other one for me.

I hesitate before sitting down, making sure the fabric is relatively clean. I take a seat carefully. The room is small but well-maintained, with an old-fashioned wooden chest against one wall and a low table in front of me, standing on a large rug that covers the wooden floor. Behind it is a small couch covered in a floral fabric, and I assume the narrow hallway beyond leads to the rest of the house.

“How are you, Tony? I see you brought a friend.” Giselle looks at me with interest. “A very beautiful friend.”

“Emma, this is Giselle. Giselle, Emma. Emma is my partner in Goddess and a goddess herself.”

“So this is your famous partner. Interesting... Interesting...” Giselle’s dark eyes study me critically, and I cringe. “Just hold on a moment. I’ll be right back with the coffee.” She disappears down the hallway, and I can hear the clatter of dishes.

“Are you serious about this?” I whisper to Tony, feeling like getting up and running.

“Shh... She’ll be right back.”

Giselle returns with a tray on which are two white mugs on matching saucers. The smell of the brewed coffee is strong as it hits my nose. Luckily, I like coffee.

She places the tray in front of us and sits down. I hesitate, unsure of what to do, as I gaze at the cup in front of me. Tony prompts me to take it, saying, “You’re first.”

“Three sips, please,” Giselle says, gesturing at my coffee.

I take the cup with both hands and look at the hot coffee. Well, what’s the worst that can happen? It will be a nice joke. I take three sips and put the cup back.

Giselle picks up the glass and spins it, tipping it on its side. Her expression is so serious that I almost laugh.

She twists the cup on my saucer, waits a bit, then twists back. I watch the ceremony with interest. I have no idea what each step means.

“What do you want to know?” Her strong voice snaps me out of my thoughts.

“She wants to know about relationships. About a guy.” Tony jumps in and answers instead of me before I can get a word out.

“Ahh...yes.” Giselle examines my cup. “I see you don’t have a significant relationship in your past.”

I raise an eyebrow. How does she know that? Well, I’m only twenty-two years old, and I appear on all the gossip pages. It’s easy to assume or find out.

She looks at me again with a piercing expression. It's so intense that I have to hold myself back from looking down. Maybe she is a witch who sees the future?

"I see a man in your future." She blinks, and her eyes roll. "I see his name... Yes... His name begins with the letter L."

She opens her eyes again. "Yes, L. And he's tall and handsome."

How does she know about Luke? No one knows I went out with him. Tony glances at me with a meaningful look as if to say, do you see? She's the real thing.

"...but to win his love, you will have to travel a difficult path. There is a curse on you."

"A curse?" Tony and I ask at the same time.

"Yes. You will never be happy in your relationship under this curse."

"And can this curse be removed?" Tony asks, his eyes wide.

"Yes. To remove it, submerge yourself in seawater ten times for three consecutive days. If you fail to do that, there will be a big betrayal, and you will break up."

"In seawater?"

"Yes."

"Ten times?"

"Yes."

"Is that all? Shouldn't I be eating a hundred-year-old egg or a dung beetle or something?"

She narrows her eyes. "Don't underestimate the virtues of the coffee. If you don't do what I said, there will be a big—"

"Big betrayal. Yes, yes, I got that."

She clucks her tongue and turns to Tony. "It's a shame that she's so dismissive. Talk to her later. Explain to her."

I open my mouth as Tony nods and agrees with Giselle. He can't actually believe there's any truth to what she's saying?

“I want to know if Emma’s new relationship will hurt the business and, if so, what I should do about it.”

“Mmm...” She observes my coffee cup thoughtfully. “I can’t see any correlation between the man and the business. Can you explain why you think their relationship could harm Goddess’ image?”

“Well, the public favors seeing her with famous figures, wealthy individuals, and models. This new man...? Let’s just say he doesn’t have a particularly successful career. It’s likely that there will be backlash and criticism.”

“Then maybe it’s not the guy I’m seeing here, the one you’re dating,” she says, looking at me. “Because I see he is very successful in his field of work.”

And maybe you’re just making this all up. “He’s doing well enough for my taste.” I give Tony an accusatory look. I don’t care what he does for a living.

“I also want to ask about the new campaign,” Tony says. “What should we do now that the multi-tie design was stolen from us. You remem—”

“No. The coffee has already spoken.” Giselle shakes her head.

“Just one question? But last time you allowed—”

“I’m sorry, we’re out of time. Come back another time and ask again.” She stands and waves her hands, signaling us to get up. We’re literally pushed to the door, and it slams behind us.

“What was that?” I whisper to Tony. “Why did she kick us out like that?”

“I don’t know,” he whispers back. “Maybe more customers are coming soon. Why are we whispering?”

I smile. “Because she must have ears in the walls.”

I feel a sense of relief as we step back onto the street. The atmosphere inside that apartment made me feel uneasy.

“So you’re going to take a dive in seawater?” Tony asks me on the way home.

“Not that I have any problem with taking a swim, but no. I don’t believe in this nonsense. I came here solely for you, and now you can rest reassured that Goddess will not be harmed.”

“I’m not so sure. She wasn’t sure it was Luke in your reading. She said he had an established profession. Maybe you’re going to date someone else soon.” Tony grins and winks.

“So he’s a courier. It’s as good as any other profession. Why are you making such a big deal out of it?”

“Are you serious? That’s a temporary job people do before or during college. Not something you do as a profession. Is he studying something? How old is he, anyway? Does he have ambitions for the future? How do you know he’s not after your money? Or that he just wants to get famous at your expense?”

“You are such a snob. A lot of people work as couriers. He’s twenty-eight years old, and I don’t think he’s studying anything. At least he didn’t mention it.” Too bad I didn’t ask. Maybe he’s studying medicine or something, and that will shut Tony up. On second thought, it will strengthen the words of this witch, and right now, I choose not to believe her. “I don’t know. I don’t know him that well yet, and I don’t even know if he’s interested.”

“Oh, he’s interested. No doubt at all. Wait and see.”

I just snort in response.

Eighteen



EMMA

I'm dressed in a short, flowy blue dress with a deep neckline and boat shoes. I still think it's excessive for a game of Pool, but Tony insisted that a sexy dress and showing off my cleavage is necessary if I want another date.

When Luke knocks on my door, I take a few moments to answer. Although I'm always ready on time, I don't want to look too enthusiastic.

I take a deep breath and open the door. The look in his eyes as he examines me has my stomach clenching in anticipation.

"You look amazing." He leans and kisses my cheek.

I breathe in his scent, a masculine combination of clean shower and lemongrass, and my skin tingles with excitement. Just being near him makes my whole body come alive as if I had been in a daze before. It's an incredible feeling.

We step outside, and I'm surprised to discover that we're walking to our date. "Is it close?"

He nods. "Just two blocks from here."

I take his hand, letting him lead the way. My mind is focused solely on the sensation of our hands touching and the connection between us. The rest of the world seems to fade away, and all that exists is this single, burning point of contact in the palm of my hand.

We reach the building, and he gestures to the stairs. There's no indication that this is a pool hall, just a plain building. I hesitate.

He stops and looks at me. "What's wrong?"

"What is this place?"

"It's an exclusive members' club. The place belongs to a good friend of mine. Only members know about its existence."

I follow him, unsure of what to expect. The building could be anything, even a torture cellar, for all I know. But, I suppose that if he had any intentions of hurting me, he would have done so already.

The club on the basement floor looks very luxurious. There's nothing fishy about it, as I feared. On the contrary, it looks almost unreal with splendor, somewhat out of place. It's hard to believe that such a hidden gem is located so close to my home. I'm glad that I took Tony's advice and wore a dress instead of jeans as I had originally planned.

Luke leads me in, and I note that the men here are dressed in suits and the women in elegant evening dresses. Luke, however, doesn't seem to be fazed by this. He confidently walks to the bar and orders us expensive whiskey. Without hesitation, he leads me toward one of the pool tables, which are separated by thin partitions for privacy.

Most of the tables are already occupied, but Luke walks straight to an empty table that I assume he reserved in advance. He definitely appears to know his way around.

"How are you a member of this place?" I ask in a whisper as I recognize some of the richest executives in the world.

Luke chuckles. "Like I said, the place belongs to a friend." He hands me a cue, and I take it. "Do you know the rules?"

I nod quickly, momentarily forgetting my elaborate plan to pretend I don't know how to play.

"You're first," I gesture with my hand to the table, preferring not to strike the break shot.

He arranges the balls and strikes the cue ball. One goes into a side pocket. "Is it good?" I ask with an innocent smile on my face.

He smiles back at me. "We'll see. Your turn."

I take my stance at the other end of the pool table and blow on the tip of my cue stick for luck. I position myself, making sure my cleavage is visible.

I gently hit the ball, and it barely moves. “Oops. Your turn.”

He knows how to play and is quite skilled. He successfully hits the ball off the wall and sinks it into a pocket. I would have managed to sink in two.

After a few failed attempts, Luke seems to have given up on me. I can't seem to sink any balls. One ball bounces off the table as I hit it too hard. I try to play it off with a smile and cover my mouth, but I'm not enjoying the game at all. I feel foolish.

I remind myself that winning isn't my goal for this date. I have other objectives in mind.

“Would you like me to show you?” he asks after another of my unsuccessful attempts. I nod, and he approaches, standing behind me. My heart races as he presses against me and places his hands over mine, guiding the cue stick. I take a deep breath, inhaling his scent, and my stomach tightens with a warmth spreading between my legs. I turn my head to him, but his gaze is fixed on the table, and he doesn't notice the effect he has on me. I can't help but imagine what it would be like to press my lips to the curve of his jaw.

He moves my arm and hits the ball. I have no idea what I hit because my eyes are fixed on him.

He steps back, and I gasp, my breath returning to me. The absence of his touch feels like a part of me is missing.

He turns his back to me and tugs on his pants.

I smile. It wasn't just me who felt it.

When he turns back to me, he says, “Want to try for yourself?”

The throbbing spot between my legs distracts me. I momentarily forget the pretense and shoot the ball into the pocket through the side without thinking.

Luke turns to me, his mouth slightly open.

Shit. I try to smile as the realization of what I just did hits me. “You explained really well.”

“Emma.” He approaches me, his blue eyes darkening. “It wasn’t a lucky hit at all, was it? You know how to play.”

I scrunch my nose. Busted. “Yes, I know how to play,” I confess.

He twists his mouth and moves away from me, running a hand through his hair. “So why? Why would you lie about it?”

“I wanted to let you win. I wanted this date to succeed.”

“And it can’t succeed if I don’t win?” He rubs his jaw at the spot I wanted to kiss. “Why would you think such a thing?”

“I was told... I thought you wouldn’t be attracted to me if I did better. Hell, I don’t know what I was thinking.” I shake my head. Now he’s mad. I messed up.

He draws me near and firmly grips my waist, pressing my chest against his shirt and causing my nipples to instantly harden. I’m aware he can feel it, just as I can feel the prominent bulge in his pants. I raise my gaze to meet his eyes, eager to see his expression.

“I don’t think attraction will be a problem,” he says in a hoarse voice.

The dark and intimate atmosphere raises my blood pressure, and I feel especially brave. I reach my hand to the back of his neck and pull him to me, pressing my lips to his, tasting him hungrily. His hand wanders from my waist to my thigh, then under the fabric of the short dress I’m wearing, coming dangerously close to my underwear.

“Ahem.” A voice behind me startles us. I hurry to break away from Luke, panting. I’m glad to see that he’s breathing heavily too. He wasn’t indifferent to what just happened, either.

“Your whiskey.” The server looks at us casually as if she saw nothing.

“Put it aside, please,” Luke says, moving his gaze to me. “And bring us another one.”

After she leaves, Luke turns to me again. “After being reminded that this is a public place, we should get back to the game.”

I nod. I would have let him do whatever he wanted to me if she hadn’t stopped us.

“I want to make something clear first.” He gently lifts my chin so I’m looking into his eyes. “I don’t want you to hide who you are when you’re with me. I’m confident enough in my manhood even if I lose to you.” He smiles. “And now, shall we try again?” he asks in a low voice.

For a moment, I’m not sure if he means our kiss or the game, but he turns to the table and arranges the balls in the starting position again. The hint of disappointment I feel surprises me. I’m falling hard.

I put in a good effort this time, giving him a challenging game, and find that he’s not an easy opponent. It’s difficult to defeat him.

I sink two balls and jump with excitement. He watches me with a hint of amusement on his face. I don’t know why I held back before, as I’m having a great time now. The game ends with my victory, but only by a narrow margin. It was a close match, and I’m grinning with happiness.

Luke laughs. “You certainly know how to play. It was worth letting you win just to get this smile.”

“You let me win?” My face falls. I thought I really did it.

“No.” He continues to smile. “You won fair and square. But now, do you understand how it feels?” He winks at me. “As the loser, I’ll pay for the drinks.”

I think about the expensive whiskey we drank and the amount he must be earning as a courier. “There’s no need to pay for me. I have money.”

He smiles again and whispers, “It was a joke. I don’t pay for anything here. I already told you the place belongs to a friend.”

Who is this friend?

We leave, and he walks me home.

“Would you like to come up?” I offer, my voice trembling. I’m ready. Today is the day.

“Not today Emma.”

Is he rejecting me?

He cups my face and looks into my eyes. “I would love to come up, but I don’t want to rush it. Not with you.”

He kisses me, and I watch him leave.

The second time my phone rings, I give up, reach out, and fumble for it in the dark on the dresser. Who could be calling so early?

“Hello?” I answer in a hoarse voice from sleep.

“Emma Woods?”

“Speaking.”

“Hello, this is Michaela Brown. I’m the production manager for Miami Swimwear Week.”

I immediately sit up. “Yes?”

“I’m happy to inform you that Goddess Swimwear has been chosen to appear on our stages as the breakthrough of the year. We looked at your application, and it caught our eye.”

“Oh, my God. Goddess was selected?” I can’t believe Tony applied without telling me.

“Yes. I’ll send you all the details right away. Fashion week takes place on July twentieth. If you would like to attend, we ask you to send photos of the collection in advance. There is, of course, a participation cost. Everything is covered in the email I’ve sent over.”

“Yes... Wow... It’s an honor for me to be chosen. We’ll be happy to participate.”

“Excellent. So read the terms carefully, sign them, and please send all the forms back. I must have your documents by the end of the week, or we’ll have to contact someone else to fill your spot.”

“Thank you so much. I’ll go through it immediately.”

“Don’t forget. Send them back by the end of the week, Miss Woods.” She hangs up, and I sit on the bed, stunned, with the phone still in my hand. Then I get up and start jumping like crazy. “Yes! Yes! Yes!”

I can’t believe this is happening. Maybe I’m still dreaming. I stand on the bed and open my email account on the phone. There it is, an email from Miami Fashion Week. It’s totally real. And that’s in just a month from now! They chose Goddess as the breakthrough of the year. My hard work is paying off.

I dial the first number on my mind.

“Tony,” I squeal when he answers.

“Sis, it’s not even eight in the morning,” he moans.

“You better get up for it,” I say excitedly, still standing on the bed. “We’ve been selected to appear at Miami Swimwear Week.”

“What?”

“Goddess has been selected as the breakthrough of the year. I can’t believe you didn’t tell me you applied. And it’s just one month away, Tony. One month! I need to prepare a collection, register and fill out forms, then find models. Help!”

“Are you kidding me?”

“Do I sound like I’m kidding?”

“No, you sound stressed.”

“Because it’s in a month, Tony! I’m losing my mind. Please take care of the registration. I’m sending you the email now. I need to go pass out for a minute.”

He’s laughing. “Okay. I’ll take care of all the details. Fashion week, here we come, baby!” he shouts before hanging

up.

I sit back on the bed, my hands shaking with excitement. I'm being recognized. Goddess is not just a small unknown brand anymore. I'm really being recognized.

I'm going to walk in a fashion show. And if we do it right, it can be a big step forward, a huge one even. I need to tell someone. I need to shout it from the rooftops. My finger hovers over Luke's number. I open and close my fist.

No, I can't call him. We just met.

I dial Jessica's number instead. I don't know why I'm calling her, she's always been opposed to my business, but she's the only family I have.

"Hey, Jess."

"Emma?" Jessica replies. "What's up?"

"I'm fine. Even more than fine. I'm going to show at Miami Swimwear Week in July."

"Really? Emma, that's amazing!"

"Do you realize how big this is? I'm going to be on the biggest runway at the most important event in the industry. Will you come with me?"

"Oh, I don't know..."

"Come on, Jess. I don't have anyone else."

"It's amazing, Emma. Really, I'm happy for you. But I can't come. I can't do it again. You know I've moved away from that world."

"You don't have to do anything. Just be in the audience." I'm not ready to give up convincing her, even though I know it's a lost battle.

"I don't know how you could do it, how you could go there when you know he'll be there. How do you stay in that world?"

"That's my job, Jess."

She sighs. “So...are you dating someone new?” She changes the subject, and I understand that the matter is closed. She won’t come.

“Yes.”

“I saw this model in recent pictures, the one with the tattoos. He has bad eyes, Emma, like Alex’s.”

Shit, she’s talking about Uriel. How did she see it so quickly when I didn’t? “No, I’m not dating him. That was a one-time thing. And you’re right. He’s terrible. But...” I hope the complaint doesn’t blow up because then she’ll know I didn’t tell her after I chastised her for the exact same thing.

“But?”

“I’m dating someone else,” I admit. “Though I’m not sure he likes me as much as I like him.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’ve had a few dates now, and all he’s done so far is kiss me.”

“Okay, and?”

“Why wouldn’t he want to sleep with me?”

“Do you want him to sleep with you?”

“Yes.”

“Wow, Emma, That’s big. And he knows it’s going to be your first time? This will be your first time, right? Nothing has changed?”

“It hasn’t. And no, he doesn’t know yet.”

“You have to tell him, Emma. He needs to know.”

“I know. I’ll tell him,” I mutter. Why is this such a big deal? I’m sure men don’t call it out.

“So what happened for you to think he doesn’t want to sleep with you?”

“I invited him up. What can I do more clearly than that? And he refused.”

“Maybe he’s playing hard to get.” Jess snorts. “And it seems to work well for him.”

“Ugh, talking to you isn’t helping me at all. Why doesn’t he want me?”

“I don’t know. He’s an idiot. And I’m not the right person to ask. You know what experience I have.”

“Maybe he just doesn’t like me enough. I’m the one who initiated the kiss on our date.” I fall silent.

“I’ve never heard you talk about anyone like this. You sound almost in love.”

“Maybe a little,” I admit.

“Then call him and check. Be direct. Just ask him what he wants. Don’t let him play games with you.”

Just ask. Yeah, sure. “Well, I’ll update you as soon as I have more details about the show.”

“Okay, honey. And good luck with this guy. I hope to hear from you soon.”

I can’t help but laugh. He hasn’t even called yet. “Bye, Jess.”

What do I do about Luke? Should I call him like Jess suggested? Send him a message? Wait? I have never been in this situation. I never cared before. But I think I’ve made my point clear enough. If he’s interested, he knows where to find me.

I scroll through the day’s headlines on the phone, and a black cloud descends on me, overshadowing the joy that surrounded me a moment ago.

A picture of me with Tony is spread all over the news.

“Tax fraud by Goddess Swimwear?”

“The IRS intends to start an investigation against the brand owners Emma Woods and Tony Tanaka on suspicion of tax evasion. The owners didn’t respond to the severe allegations, and we wonder, is there any truth in the case?”

What are they talking about? What tax fraud? What investigation? Is there an investigation against us? Shit. We didn't do anything. Is Alex stirring things up again? How can it be that six years have passed, and he still doesn't stop?

"Tony," I almost shout into the phone. "Tony, is there an investigation?"

"Shit, it's published," he grumbles and mumbles, the rest of his words incoherent.

"Did you know about this?"

"The IRS contacted me yesterday and asked for all our financial records. I submitted them, and I thought that was the end of the matter. Someone leaked this on purpose."

"But Tony, an investigation? What's wrong with our records?"

"There's nothing wrong. Everything is fine. They'll check and see that there's nothing. You have nothing to stress about."

"But an IRS investigation is serious. Alex is working so hard to ruin us."

"Do you trust me?"

"Of course—"

"Then let me do my job. Concentrate on the upcoming show. You have an entire collection to prepare."

I close my eyes. Why is it always like this? Good news alongside bad news. Fashion week and an IRS investigation. Why can't there be only good news?

"You remember there's a party tomorrow, right?"

No. "Whose party?"

"Holly and Rick."

They're important influencers. I must attend. "Okay. It's good that you reminded me. I'll bring her the pink bikini as a gift."

"Yes, that's a good idea. If she makes a post with it, orders will skyrocket. Are you taking Mr. Beggar?"

“Mr. Beggar?”

“Well, I don’t know what to call him.”

“His name is Luke. And no, he hasn’t called since our last date.”

“Seriously, Sis? He didn’t call?”

I can hear the pity in Tony’s voice. Come on, stick the knife in deeper. “No.”

“Where does he live? Shall I go beat him up?”

I smile. “No, don’t hit anyone.”

“Okay. So do you want me to fix you up for tomorrow night?”

I almost shout, no. No, I don’t want anyone else. I want Luke to call already. “Can’t I just come alone, please?”

“You can,” he says in a low voice.

“I can bring Nayla.”

“Nayla? So you decided to switch sides after all? Good for you, Sis.”

“She can come as a model for Goddess. It will be great to show her off before we upload the first campaign with her. A bit of a teaser.”

“Okay, good idea. Bring her.” He hangs up.

At least this time, I’m not going with some horrible guy. The traumatic experience with Uriel is still fresh in my mind.

But I want to go with Luke beside me. I guess it’s not uncommon to date someone a few times and decide they’re not right for you. I know I’ve done that in the past. We haven’t said anything yet about how we feel for each other, but I’ve never felt so free with a man, so...interested. What do I do if my heart has already crossed the point of no return?

Nineteen



LUKE

I crossed the line.

I crossed the lines of journalistic integrity. Posing as a courier was maybe in the gray area, but actually going on dates with her? Kissing her? I completely forgot about the story and enjoyed my time with her. Damn it. I have to stop this before it goes too far.

So why do I want so badly to see her again?

I shake my head, open my phone and go over the current affairs.

“David vs. Goliath? One hundred eighty-three children have been killed since the beginning of the war by Thomas Mayne.”

I read the title and move quickly to the next story. I don't want to read his articles. I don't want to know what I'm missing.

“Tax fraud in Goddess Swimwear?”

The familiar name stops me. Emma is being accused of tax fraud, and I had no idea. I've been too caught up in dating instead of paying attention to my job. How did I miss that? The IRS wouldn't have opened an investigation if there was nothing to it. I let myself believe these accusations were false. I didn't want to believe it, because I couldn't imagine she would do something like that when she's so gentle, so good, so beautiful...

I can't bring myself to fully believe she would intentionally commit fraud. I know her to be smart and savvy in her business dealings, but the thought of her purposely breaking the law doesn't align with the image I have of her. Still, I have no doubt that if there's any truth to the accusations, she's the mastermind behind it all.

I struggle to reconcile that with the model who is passionate about fashion and whom I thought I knew. Could

she be playing dumb and using her facade as a cover for illegal actions? I can't be sure. *Although she did trick me during our game of Pool...*

Maybe all of Milan's accusations of copying their designs are also true? Emma certainly is sophisticated enough to pull it off.

If all these things are true, then I have quite a story on my hands. A story that will bring down her company. And I can't keep seeing her, not if she's guilty.

But I just can't believe it. I don't want to believe it.

I don't want to because I want her.

The office is bustling with life as usual. No one looks at me strangely. No one knows what I did. It's not too late to get out of it. I collect some documents and glance across the hall to Laura's space.

I have to apologize to her. I was an asshole. A super asshole. And she didn't deserve it. I bite my lip over and over until I taste blood. I better do it now. Rip it like a Band-Aid, fast. But I can't find her in the office. She's out sick, they tell me.

I have nothing more to do in the office due to the fact Raphael is not giving me anything else to do, so I drive home. But somehow find myself parked in front of Emma's house again. I can't explain how I ended up here.

I rest my head on the wheel and exhale. Damn it.

The sensation of her soft skin under my fingertips, the way her hair dances in the breeze. The way she smiles up at me is mesmerizing. Her body so close to mine that I feel her breath on my skin and the scent of her filling my senses. Her alluring eyes captivating me.

The memories of the evening on the beach linger in my mind, and how my desire for her only intensified by the fiery

kisses we shared in the club. I need to uncover the truth to determine if she is truly implicated.

With a sigh, I turn off the engine and get out of the car to go up to her apartment.

“Hey,” I say as she opens the door. Why does she have to be so damn beautiful? So sexy?

“What are you doing here?” she says in a low voice.

I just can't believe these accusations, not when I see her here in front of me. It can't be that she can't leave a dirty glass in the sink but then turn around and deceive the IRS. It just can't be. She's not the type.

“I'm sorry that—”

“You're always sorry. I'm not looking for apologies, Luke. I don't want to play games. You could send a text to tell me it's not working between us.”

“What? No. Wait. That's not what I wanted to say. I like you.” What am I doing? “Come with me.” I take her hand firmly in mine. I can't wait any longer. I need to feel her close to me, to hold her in my arms. I can't explain the intense attraction between us, but I can't ignore it either.

“Come where?”

“Just come. Please.” I just know I have to be with her, and I know she feels it too.

“Wait,” she pulls her hand back.

Fuck.

“Wait, I just need to put on shoes.” She disappears into the house.

I stand at the door, my muscles trembling with a mix of excitement and anticipation. I no longer care what she did or didn't do. All I know is that I need to finish what we started on the beach. I haven't been able to think of anything else since then, and it's driving me crazy.

“Where are we going?” she asks as she fastens her seat belt.

“It’s not far. You’ll see soon.”

I can’t help but steal glances at her as we drive, watching as her fingers tap on her thigh. Is she feeling the same anticipation and excitement as I am, or is she feeling nervous? It’s hard for me to tell without being able to see the expression in her eyes, as she seems focused on the passing scenery outside the window.

When I pull up to the curb, she asks, “What is this building? Is this where you live?” She presses her face to the window and raises her eyes to the tower, where I’m parking the car.

“No. Just a little patience, and you’ll see.” I retrieve the blanket from the trunk that we used on our day at the beach and offer her my hand, both to touch her and to keep her from running away.

Her hand feels warm and soft in mine, and her body language reflects the intense attraction I feel toward her, raw and animalistic.

The elevator ride feels like an eternity, the tension between us thick and palpable. I can’t take my eyes off her, and she seems equally entranced by me. My thumb strokes her palm in small circles over and over. As the doors open, I lead her out, my heart pounding in my chest with anticipation. The attraction between us is undeniable, and I know this night will be one to remember.

Emma looks around in confusion, obviously trying to understand where I’ve brought her. But we’re not there yet.

“Come.” I pull her to the metal stairs that lead up to the roof.

“What is this place?”

“Trust me.” I lead her up the stairs, still holding her hand firmly, not wanting to ruin the surprise for her. I use my key to open the door and guide her inside. I’ve never brought anyone here before, and the look of surprise and wonder on her face as she takes in her surroundings is priceless.

“What is this place?” she asks again, daring to take a step forward, her hand touching one of the large leaves of the huge Monstera plant at the entrance.

“It’s like a secret oasis in the middle of the city. The owner wanted to bring a bit of nature into his urban life, and this is his sanctuary,” I explain as I turn on the lights, casting a soft glow over the lush greenery and creating a magical atmosphere.

“He built a garden on the roof of a building? I didn’t know that was even possible.” The smile on her face could light up a stadium. “This is amazing.” She turns in a circle, taking it all in before slipping her sandals off and letting her feet sink into the soft sand of the path.

“Everything is possible when you have enough money.” Well, that’s not true. He can’t bring back the dead. He can’t bring back Lori.

The way the plants are arranged, it feels like we’re the only two people in the world. The soft light, the sound of the water, and the gentle rustling of the leaves. It’s like we have our own secret garden. I can tell she’s mesmerized by the beauty of it all, and I can’t help but feel a sense of pride and satisfaction that I could share this special place with her.

We move along the path until the small pool is revealed. Connor designed it like a small lake to match the vegetation.

“There’s also a pool here? Hell, who is this friend of yours?” she asks with a laugh.

I hope you never meet. The thought jumps into my mind unexpectedly, leaving me shocked. Why did I even think that? I love Connor more than I do myself. Why wouldn’t I want them to meet?

I lead her to the observation deck. The exposed railing section behind the pool, from where you can see the city. The only spot on the roof that reminds us we’re not in the jungle. While she enjoys the views, I make my way to the secluded section of the garden, hidden behind a wall of foliage.

Knowing Connor as I do, I'm confident that he has a chilled bottle of champagne in the refrigerator there.

Yes, I was right. I retrieve the chilled bottle and return to Emma, who is still admiring the view while leaning against the railing. The evening breeze tousles her hair, and she looks like a true goddess. I begin to understand how her company got its name.

I set the glasses on the railing and pop open the bottle. "This friend of yours, won't he be angry that we're drinking his champagne? And an expensive one?"

"Oh, it's expensive?" I stop and look at the label.

"Even I know what Dom Perignon costs."

"I'm more of a beer guy." I pour the bubbly liquid into the glasses. "Does that impress you?" I have no idea how much this bottle costs, but if she likes it, I'll buy her another one.

"Impressed by your rich friend? Not particularly. I'm here with you, not with him. Besides, I prefer to make my own money." She raises her glass to me.

I like her answer.

I lay out the blanket I brought on the edge of the pool and sit down, placing the bottle on the side. She joins me, carefully adjusting her skirt as she sits. She mostly wears dresses and skirts. Great for a quick fuck, but I don't want it quick right now. I want it slow, long, and hot like every moment with her is. This fire between us has been bubbling beneath the surface and waiting to erupt ever since our first kiss.

I sip the champagne. It's fantastic, yet I'd take beer over champagne any day.

I don't wait long to make a move. We both know why we're here, and it's not for the wine. I move in closer and place my hand on her waist. I feel the electricity between us, and I know she feels it too. Her eyes sparkle in the dim light, and her lips part slightly as she leans in, ready for my kiss.

"I like the taste of your lips," I whisper to her between kisses, "and now I want to know the taste of your other lips as

well.”

Her pupils dilate, and she lets out a slight sigh, barely audible.

Twenty



EMMA

God, am I ready for this? Yes, I think so.

These things he whispers to me, I want to try them. To see how it feels. Things I've only heard about. A feeling of warmth spreads in my stomach, along with a slight wetness between my thighs. My body is definitely interested.

Damn, I'm so nervous. *Calm down, Emma, or he'll notice.*

I can't help but feel a rush of desire as his lips press against mine. The taste of champagne on his tongue mixes with my own. The thought of being intimate with him sends a wave of desire through my body, and I want him even more. I can't help but wonder what it would be like to feel him inside of me, to experience the pleasure he could give me. The thought alone is enough to make my heart race.

His body leans on mine, coaxing me to lie back on the blanket. His weight on me is pleasant. My heart pounds against my chest, and my pulse thunders in my ears. He must hear it too, and he hasn't laid a hand on me yet.

He starts unbuttoning my top, and I assist him by taking it off. He then removes my skirt while I help him take off his shirt. His shoulder is bandaged, but I don't have time to dwell on it as he's focused on me, leaving me unable to think of anything except his lips exploring my body.

"You're so beautiful," he whispers, his lips trailing down my neck, licking their way to my breast, and he pulls the bra cups down, exposing my breasts.

He gasps. "I knew you'd have perfect breasts." He lightly licks around the nipple. "So perfect."

He puts my nipple in his mouth and sucks hard.

My back arches as if begging for his touch. I want more of this. His other hand is already busy with my other breast, caressing and pinching, stimulating. Then he switches sides, paying the same attention to the other breast as well. He

unclasps my bra, and with a swift movement, he tosses it aside.

His hands are still massaging my tits, but his mouth is already making its way down, and a shiver goes through me as I feel his mouth *there*.

He kisses my thighs, making his way between my legs, softening me. I want him so much, but at the same time, I'm also so anxious. I was told it hurts, and I'm scared.

I open my legs, granting him easy access, and his thumb rubs against the lace fabric of my panties, stroking up and down. I'm embarrassed by how wet I already am. He removes my underwear and takes off his pants.

“You drive me crazy, Emma. I want to fuck you already. I have to be inside you. I can't wait to feel your pussy around me.”

I have to tell him. I know I have to tell him. It's time. My mouth opens, but nothing comes out except a moan as his tongue touches my clit. Oh my God.

His tongue twists, its moisture and pressure bringing an incredible sensation, then he adds a light suction with his mouth, and I squirm under him, losing control. The knot in my stomach gets bigger, my hips start shaking, and I push myself into his mouth.

More.

I didn't know it would be like this. Why did I wait so long? This is amazing. It's good, it's—

Oh shit, I think I'm about to come, and it's happening so fast. I moan loudly as the sensations churning in my body grow beyond my ability to hold back. My toes curl, and my muscles tremble as I try to hold on just a little longer. He uses his hands to secure me in place, not allowing me to escape the lashings of his tongue. I pull his hair shamelessly and scream as I explode around him in a massive orgasm, sounds and colors erupting before my eyes.

I gasp for breath as I try to get my emotions together from the mess they're in right now. With a hazy look, I watch him

remove his boxer briefs and look down at his penis. I've seen naked men before. I know what a cock looks like. But this one is going to be inside me. I swallow hard.

"Coming, baby," he tells me, misinterpreting my look, as his hand reaches for his jeans.

"Wait," I whisper when he holds the condom package in his hand. His hair is wild from my strokes, and his lips are swollen because... Because he just came down on me. I peek at his cock again, and my cheeks feel hot. What if I tell him and he doesn't want me? I heard some men don't want to sleep with virgins. Maybe he'll think there's something wrong with me.

"I just wanted to know you had a condom," I say. He doesn't have to know. It'll be fine. Nothing he has done so far hurt. How bad could it be?

He smiles, and his lovely dimples appear. He looks so sexy. I'm ready for him. I smile back, and he settles between my legs.

I feel his tip in my opening, and my muscles contract involuntarily. The euphoria I was in a minute ago has passed, and I'm almost shaking.

"You're so tight." He says as he tries to push himself in. I want to ask him to stop, I'm too scared, but he pushes himself in, piercing me.

I bite my lip, trying to turn my face to the side so he can't see my expression, but an unwanted sob breaks out of me. It burns so badly. My muscles lock up and contract in protest.

"Emma." He freezes, still inside me. I close my eyes tightly, holding back the tears. But he clasps my face and turns it toward him. "Dammit, Emma, look at me. Open your eyes."

I open my eyes slowly and catch his worried expression.

"What happened here just now, Emma?" His eyes widen, and he curses quietly. "Tell me you weren't a virgin?"

I bite my bottom lip, a tear rolling down my cheek. "I can't tell you that."

“Fuck, Emma!” He presses his forehead to mine. Breathing heavily. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Would you have done anything differently if you knew?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know. I mean, for sure I would have been more gently careful so that it would hurt you less. But now it’s too late for that.” He pauses and inhales deeply. “Do you want me to stop?”

“No. No, please, don’t stop.” I take a breath. The pain has subsided now that he isn’t moving inside me. Yes, it’s much better.

He nods. “Let’s take it slow.”

He pulls himself out slowly, and I grimace. It still burns, but far less than before.

“You still hurt. I’ll stop.”

“No.” I clutch his arm. “It’s okay. It’s getting better. Go slow, and I’m sure it will be fine.”

He continues, in slow, smooth motions, in and out. The effort it’s taking him is evident on his face.

I raise my head and look at our connection point. Watching how his cock slides in and out of me.

He rises on his knees, still inside me, and sends his thumb to my swollen clit.

The sensation of pleasure blends with the receding pain, creating a unique experience that starts to feel more enjoyable than uncomfortable.

He stares at me, his eyes glazed with desire, as he repeatedly thrusts into me, and I assume I must look like he does, wild and sexy.

He moans loudly. “I can’t hold back much longer, Emma. It’s too good.” I nod, and he picks up the pace, continuing to massage me with his fingers. I never thought I could enjoy my first time, but I am. I squirm, looking for my pleasure, climbing harder and harder until I explode again on his fingers.

His thrusts become stronger. He grasps my waist, pressing me to him and with a loud moan, he throws his head back as he comes inside me. I feel the tremor in his muscles, the heat of his body, and it all feels good. So good.

He pulls me into his arms, pressing my body to his, and kisses me as if his life depends on this kiss. After our breathing calms, he carefully pulls out of me, and I wince in renewed pain. Now that I've come down from Olympus, I once again feel that burning sensation.

I'm not a virgin anymore.

I did it, and it was nothing like I expected. It was much, much better.

We lie in silence, and the only evidence of time passing is his fingers drawing circles on my arm.

"What are you thinking about?" I dare to ask.

"Why didn't you tell me you were a virgin."

"Are you angry?" I ask, though by looking at his expression, I think he is. He's mad at me. But he'll get over it. It's not like he didn't want to do it. We both wanted to.

"Yes."

He stands. "I'm just going to get rid of the condom and get something to clean up a bit," he says to my questioning gaze.

He comes back, and I focus my eyes on his naked body. The body that just made love to me and made me come twice. He's perfect. He's so beautiful, his muscles move gracefully when he walks, and I try very hard not to look *there*. It was inside me just now.

I sit up and feel the burning between my legs more strongly.

He hands me a tissue. "Do you want to clean yourself?"

"How much blood is there?" I ask, not daring to look.

"Not much." He gives me a look that I can't read. "Do you think you'll pass out again?"

I peek and discover that there are only a few drops on the blanket and a little more between my legs. Similar to a period. Less even. I'm not dizzy, and I don't feel like I'm about to pass out. I breathe a sigh of relief, take the tissue from him and clean myself.

He picks up his scattered clothes and puts them on without looking at me. Suddenly the intimacy we shared has disappeared, and we're acting like two strangers. I feel very naked, and not because I have no clothes on.

I hurry to pull the shirt over my head, not even bothering to put the bra back on, then the panties and the skirt.

"Let's go." He throws the blanket into the trash by the pool without looking at me.

What is going on here? For a moment, Dr. Jekyll and now Mr. Hyde?

It's true I didn't tell him I was a virgin, but it's not some terrible crime. Why is he treating me like this?

I put on my sandals and rush after him despite the pain, feeling humiliated when he doesn't even look to see that I'm behind him.

Twenty-One



LUKE

Fuck, I screwed everything up. What did I do?

I can't even look at her because I'm so ashamed of what I've done. I'm a piece of shit. Not only did I sleep with the subject of my story, which is strictly forbidden, and lost all my journalistic integrity in the process, but she was also a fucking virgin.

I would never have done it if I had known. She deserves a better first time with someone who loves her, who wants more from her than a one-time fucking. With someone who isn't a liar like me.

I would have stopped. At least, I hope so because, at the moment, I'm pretty sure I might not have been able to. I was on the edge even before we started. But now it's too late for all that. It's done.

"I'll walk you to your door," I offer as we arrive at her apartment.

"Oh, so you can talk now?" she replies sarcastically, but I can see the glimmer of tears in her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Emma. I shouldn't have let things go this far. It's not you. It's me. I'm not the right person for you. You deserve someone better. Someone who can give you everything you need and deserve." I know she's hurt. But this is for the best.

"I don't need you to tell me who's right for me," she snaps, getting out of the car and slamming the door. She quickly enters her building, and I watch, waiting for the light in her apartment to turn on, ensuring she's safe.

I rest my head on the steering wheel. It's better this way. It will be easier for her to overcome what happened if she hates me.

I need to pass this story on to someone else. It's become too personal for me. It's obvious that I can't maintain

objectivity anymore. I've breached journalistic ethics. I just need to figure out how to tell Raphael without him firing my ass.

"Give me another one," I call to the bartender, raising my empty glass. So far, the alcohol hasn't helped. I still feel like a piece of shit.

"I think you've had enough," the bartender says to me in a low voice. "Maybe you should head home."

"Who are you to tell me when I've had enough? My money isn't good here?" I want to get home and pass out, forget about this terrible evening. But the alcohol haze isn't strong enough yet.

"I think you've had enough," the bartender repeats firmly, refusing to serve me another drink.

I shrug, unfazed. I'll just grab a bottle from home. I stand and fumble for the keys in my pocket.

"Wait," the bartender calls out. "You're not leaving here and driving. Hand over your keys."

I narrow my eyes. "What's it to you? I can take care of myself."

"I have a certain responsibility for my customers. I don't want you to have an accident and kill yourself or others. Give me those keys."

"No," I say, taking a step back as the bar stool falls with a loud thud, drawing the attention of the other patrons. This is attention I don't need right now. "I'm not giving you anything."

"Then I'll order you a taxi. At my expense, okay?"

"I don't need your charity," I snap. Maybe tomorrow I will after I lose my job.

“So maybe there’s someone you can call to pick you up? A girlfriend? A friend?”

Connor. Connor will come. But I don’t want to ask him. Only this bartender won’t let me go.

“Fine, I’ll call someone,” I grumble, pulling out my phone.

He stands next to me, making sure I follow through on my promise.

“Hey,” I say after Connor takes a long time to answer. “Did I wake you?”

“Yes.”

Shit. “Sorry, but I’m here at the bar, and this fucking bartender insisted I call someone to pick me up. Never mind. I’ll be fine.” I hang up.

Connor calls me right back. “Where are you?”

“It’s fine. I’ll call a taxi.”

“You already woke me. So tell me where you are. I’m coming.”

I give him the address.

“What’s going on?” Connor asks on the way home.

“I haven’t passed out yet, unfortunately,” I mutter, and now I have to answer questions.

“Is it your shoulder? Do you need a doctor?”

“No. I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine. You’re drunk. And you’re not the type of person to get drunk just for fun.”

“Leave me alone,” I beg.

“Fine, I’ll let it slide for now. But you have to stay with me until you sober up a bit. I need to ensure that you’re okay.”

I turn my head to the window. At least I won't have to explain to him now what I did, how I screwed up my life.

We reach Connor's apartment, the place where it all happened. The same location where I made the mistake of having sex with Emma, and now it will serve as a constant reminder of my stupidity every time I visit.

I stumble into the dark apartment. I shouldn't have agreed to this. What's wrong with my house?

"If you have to throw up, please try not to do it on the carpets." He looks at me, assessing my condition.

"I don't need to throw up."

"I'm going to sleep. You know your way around. We'll talk in the morning." He turns and goes to the bedroom.

He kept his word and didn't question me. I'm completely dizzy, and even though I really try, I can't form a logical plan in my head. I probably should get some sleep first.

For a moment, I debate whether to just flop on the couch, but finally muster the strength to go to a spare bedroom, where I land on the bed and don't even bother to take my shoes off before falling into a dreamless drunken sleep.

"You stink," Connor states as he opens the windows wide, letting in the morning light.

My head is pounding with pain as I sit up and rush to the bathroom, emptying the contents of my stomach. I sit on the floor, gasping for breath.

"Take a shower, and then let's talk. I'll be in the kitchen," he says, unfazed by my condition.

I step out of the shower and head to Connor's room, feeling refreshed but still groggy. I rummage through his drawers, searching for something to wear. Luckily, we're similar in size, so I grab a pair of his pants and a shirt, pulling them on quickly. I notice the pants are a bit short on me, but I

don't dwell on it. Knowing I don't have a choice, I make my way to the kitchen, ready to face whatever conversation Connor has planned for us.

Connor gives me a cup of coffee as I sit at the kitchen counter. I take a sip, grateful for the warmth and the caffeine. I can't help but feel a twinge of guilt for my behavior the previous night and for the fact that I don't deserve a friend as loyal and understanding as him.

“Well?”

“I screwed up my life.”

“How bad?”

“Bad. I think Raphael will fire me for this. I did something that shouldn't be done.” If anyone finds out, my career is gone. The most important thing in my life.

Connor raises an eyebrow. “Tell me you didn't sleep with her.”

“I did.”

“Fuck, Luke. It was dubious, to begin with. Why did you do that? It doesn't suit you.”

“Because I'm stupid! I don't know why. I'm madly attracted to her. Have you seen what she looks like? I thought with my cock. You know, all the clichés.”

“Are you sure it's just that? You're not in love with her or something?”

“No. It was just sex. That's it.”

“Okay, so maybe it's not such a big deal. Consensual sex between two adults. Was it like that for her too? Just casual sex?”

I stay silent.

“Luke?”

“She was a virgin.”

His eyes widen. “No. That can't be. I thought she was a supermodel or something. How could she be a virgin?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t expect that either,” I mumble. Really, who would expect a woman who looks like her to be a virgin? She must have had hundreds of suitors.

“And you screwed her, anyway? You couldn’t resist? You know that the first time with women is not the same. They have expectations.”

“I didn’t know she was a virgin!”

He looks at me with narrowed eyes.

“I didn’t! She didn’t tell me.” Though I’m not sure it would have ended differently if she had.

“Are you sure it was consensual?” He lowers his voice as if someone is listening to us.

“What do you mean? Of course, it was.”

“Maybe you didn’t understand her correctly? Maybe she didn’t want to? It’s strange she didn’t tell you something that important.”

“It was by full consent. She wanted it.” I knock the cup on the counter, and some of the coffee splashes around. “I’m not a rapist!”

“Okay, okay.” He raises his hands in surrender. “I believe you. But you’ve got yourself into trouble here.”

“I know that. What am I supposed to do now?”

“You can’t continue with the article about her when you’re emotionally involved. And you can’t tell Raphael. He’ll kick you to the curb for sure. I would kick you to the curb.”

“I know.” He doesn’t need to tell me the obvious. I know I screwed up. Big time.

“You could pass the story on to someone else. What about Laura? She’s your friend, isn’t she? Maybe she’ll agree to take it?”

“Laura and I haven’t been on such good terms lately.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Did you fuck her too?”

“Exactly the opposite.” Yes, I screwed that up too.

“Then you need to figure out a solution or find someone else to take on the article for you.”

“And how do I explain this to Raphael?”

“Maybe you can come up with a valid excuse. Maybe you have a conflict of interest with the company or something? The most important thing is that he’ll have his story, and you can distance yourself from it.”

If only I could find a suitable excuse.

“You’re worrying me, Luke. You’ve always been so professional and never let your personal life interfere with your work. Are you sure everything is all right? Can I help you with anything?”

“No.” I shake my head. “You’re right. I need to stay focused on what’s important. I let myself get sidetracked. It won’t happen again.”

Twenty-Two



EMMA

The pillow is wet from my tears.

They run down my cheeks as the reality of the situation sinks in. A lump forms in my throat as I think about the way he looked at me. Like I was a stranger.

I wrap my arms around myself, feeling small and worthless. He used me, and now he's done with me. How could he do this to me? I thought I meant something to him. The thought makes my chest ache with hurt and betrayal. I can't believe I was so naïve to think it was something more.

My heart aches as I relive the memories, the way he held me, the way he kissed me. It all feels like a lie now.

I wanted it, I say to my reflection in the mirror, but she doesn't answer back, just looks at me with puffy eyes. I trace the tears on my cheeks with my fingers.

He never promised me anything, never suggested that we be in a relationship, never even said he loved me. And I still wanted it.

I'm so weak. If he were here now, I would probably still be drawn to him despite the hurt. But my influence on him isn't as strong. I was just another conquest in his string of conquests, while he was my first.

At least I got rid of it. Even though he discarded me like a used tissue, the experience itself was better than I expected. Good, even in absolute terms. He made me come twice. The stories I've heard were nowhere similar to what I experienced. Sure, it hurt, but the pleasure outweighed the pain.

I head to the kitchen, wincing at the stinging sensation between my legs. The discomfort will fade, and so will the emotional hurt. Time will heal my wounds. Eventually.

By the time Tony arrives, I've already applied ice packs and a face mask to conceal any visible signs of my crying. Still, he takes one look at me and knows something isn't right.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?” he asks with concern in his voice.

I try to play it off. “Oh, just a rough night. I’m fine. Do you want some coffee before we start?”

“Now I’m sure something is wrong. You’re always worried about something. What happened?”

This one question is enough to break me.

“I slept with him.”

“Really? Wow. You finally did it. Well, that’s what you wanted, you should be happy. So why the sad face?” Tony’s words hit me like a ton of bricks, and tears well up in my eyes. I try to hold them back, but they spill over, streaming down my cheeks.

“Why are you crying? Was it that bad? Did he hurt you? I know women say it hurts, but that much?”

“No, he didn’t hurt me. Not physically.”

Tony spreads his arms and wraps me in a hug.

“That son of a bitch. I’m going to kill him. What did he do?”

“Nothing specific. I think I just over-hyped it in my head.” I should have told Luke it was my first time. Maybe that would have prevented all of this. Maybe he would have been more honest and stopped before things got too far.

“Forget that jerk. He wasn’t worthy of you, anyway. I’ll go beat him up. Just give me the address.”

I try to smile.

“Do you want me to find someone new for you for the party tomorrow? Hop back on the horse.”

I cringe at the thought. The idea of jumping back into the dating scene so soon makes my stomach turn.

“Sorry, I didn’t intend the double meaning. You don’t really need to ride him.” He laughs at the look on my face. “But find someone nice to show you what good sex is

supposed to be like. It's only going to get better from this point. I realize that the first time for a woman is pretty bad, but don't let that stop you."

He doesn't understand. It wasn't bad at all and not as embarrassing as I thought. It was actually great. And that's exactly the problem. I can't get Luke out of my head.

"Show him you don't care," Tony continues. "That you've moved on. Make him a little jealous, so he realizes what he's missing." Tony picks up the binder with the new designs.

Maybe he's right. Should I show Luke I've moved on? Make him jealous?

How did I get into such games? That's not me. If he doesn't want me, he doesn't deserve me. I'm not anyone's second option. If I need to play games to get him, then he's not for me. I'm worth more.

I wipe the tears and straighten, determined to move on and not let him control my emotions any longer. "I'll go with Nayla as I planned. I already have an outfit for her."

"Okay. Well, I have some bad news."

"What now?"

"They stole another design from us. From the neon collection."

I clench my hands into fists and put one in my mouth, stifling the scream. "Damn it." I pace back and forth across the room. "We haven't sent this collection to production yet. Nobody knows about it. Did you send it to the factory already?"

He shakes his head. "No. I have no idea how it got stolen."

"Our theory was wrong, then. We have to go back to the drawing board. This is a disaster. We have to figure out who leaked the information about the collection. We need to make a list of everyone who has had access to it. Anyone who may have heard about it, even if it was just in a passing conversation or at a party.

“I already told you I didn’t tell anyone. Maybe you told someone? Maybe after we delayed the factory, Alex sent a new mole. What about your boyfriend?”

“What are you implying? That I showed him my designs in the middle of penetration? He doesn’t even work in the fashion industry, and besides that hasn’t had access to the collection, and I never talked to him about it.”

“No, but he was at your house, and he came right after we decided not to send it to the factory, didn’t he?”

“Yes, but he was with me the whole time, and I didn’t tell him anything.”

“Me neither,” Tony shouts.

“Let’s calm down. We need to find out who leaked the information and fast. This could ruin our entire business.” I run my hands through my hair, trying to think of any potential leads.

He sinks into the couch, defeated. “I can’t think of anyone else. Maybe someone broke into your apartment? You keep all your designs here, and they’re not very well protected.”

“Someone broke in without me noticing?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. That’s a possibility.”

“I think we should hire an investigator. It’s time. We can’t handle this alone.”

“Okay. I’ll get right on it. In the meantime, let’s focus on the upcoming fashion week. I’ve been brainstorming, and I think incorporating some beachwear pieces into the collection could be a good idea. I have some thoughts on how to execute it.”

Nayla looks stunning in the outfit I designed for her. The metallic silver one-piece swimsuit with a high hip opening pairs perfectly with the white, wide-leg boyfriend pants, highlighting her bare skin on the sides. I’m also rocking a

green bikini top from the metallic collection, paired with a mesh top and black pants with the same cut as Nayla's. We're going to be unstoppable.

I study her as she walks in front of me and waves to the photographers.

As we pose for them, we take both solo and duo shots. Nayla winks at me and plants a kiss on my lips, catching me off guard. The shocked reactions and flashing cameras around us make it clear that this moment will make headlines.

I look at her with questioning eyes, but the smile is still on my face.

She playfully tugs on my arm, and I'm not entirely sure how I feel about her unexpected move, but I know it will bring us some much-needed publicity.

It comes naturally to her, the flirting with the photographers, unlike me, who has to have everything calculated and planned. If she can turn into the face of Goddess, and I can take a step back and stop modeling, it would be great. I can just do what I love and get out of the spotlight that I don't like. A dream come true.

Twenty-Three



LUKE

I ring the doorbell and wait.

She hasn't responded to my messages, so I've decided to visit her. I need to resolve the issues between us and apologize.

She opens the door, her mouth set in a tight line. This won't be easy.

"Hi, Laura," I greet her, trying to convey my apology through my eyes.

"What are you doing here?"

"You didn't answer my calls, and I owe you a huge apology. May I come in?"

She continues to block the entrance with her body.

I don't blame her. I messed up, and it will be hard to repair the damage. Somehow I missed the clues that she was interested in me, and I reacted badly. We continue to stand like this, facing each other, until she sighs and clears the way for me to enter.

I wait a moment, but she doesn't invite me to sit. That's how it's going to be from now on, I guess. Well, I deserve it.

Her apartment looks like her, decorated brightly with flowers everywhere and a red couch.

"I wanted to apologize for what happened in the office. I haven't been myself since the accident. I've been tense about all kinds of things that have nothing to do with you, and I've taken my anger out on you even though you didn't deserve any of it." I search my bag for the wine I bought but can't find it. "I brought you wine, but I must have forgotten it in the car. I can go get it."

Her eyes soften. "I don't want wine. The last time we drank, it didn't end well. Does your shoulder still hurt?"

I nod. I'm not entirely sure how much of my behavior is due to my injury and how much is just because I've been feeling out of control lately. I don't recognize myself anymore. I've never acted this way before, and I've recklessly thrown my career away without a second thought.

"I apologize if you misunderstood my intentions. I want to be your friend, but nothing more than that."

"If it's because we're colleagues, I can look for a job elsewhere. That shouldn't stop us—"

"No." I shake my head, considering my words carefully. "It's not that. I'm just not interested in more with you." I know it's hard to hear, but I want to be as clear as possible.

"Is it because of that woman?"

"What woman?"

"You told me you were dating someone and that she's amazing. So is it because of her? Or are you seeing someone else?"

"No. I'm sorry. I'm just not interested." It was a mistake to use excuses. From now on, only the truth. "But you're beautiful and talented and smart. There's no reason you shouldn't find someone who suits you. Someone better than me. Honestly, I'm not a catch. I've been ruining everything lately."

"I'm sure that's not true."

I nod. "Yes, it's true. I destroy everything I touch. Would you be willing to forgive me? Can we just be friends again?"

She tilts her head in thought, and I can see the struggle in her eyes as she tries to reconcile my story with the hurt I caused her. "I'm willing to believe your story about the pain and not being yourself, but I'm not willing to accept poor treatment from anyone, not even you. You hurt me."

"I know."

"If you do something like that again, don't bother coming here to apologize."

“It won’t happen again,” I assure her as I gently embrace her, careful to keep a distance between us to avoid giving her false hope for something more.

“I was in the middle of putting together a cabinet. Would you like to help me?”

Not really. “Yeah, sure.”

As we head to her bedroom, a twinge of uncertainty hits me that this is some ploy to get me in her bed. But upon arrival, I see that there’s truly a cabinet in the works.

I get down on my knees and look at the instructions.

“I’ve already done a lot, but it will be faster with two.” She looks at me.

Okay. If this is what I have to pay for her forgiveness, it’s a small price.

After spending several hours working on the cabinet, I leave her place feeling a sense of accomplishment for having mended our relationship. But there’s no way she’ll take my article anytime soon. She’ll likely suspect that my apology was just a means to an end. And that’s not the case. I want to be her friend again. She didn’t deserve the way I treated her, just like Emma didn’t.

Especially not Emma.

I destroyed what was between us, and I was her first. Her only one. I have to keep my distance from her. I must. There’s no point in apologizing to her because I can’t continue this relationship. Not when I’m going to write an article about her that will expose the thefts and frauds in her company. And for that, there will be no redemption.

So why am I parking in front of her apartment again? It seems I can’t get this woman out of my head. I just have to see her again. One last time.

I take the bottle of wine I planned to give to Laura and go up to Emma’s apartment. Her pink door makes me chuckle. I have no idea why it’s painted like that. It has nothing to do

with the woman who lives here. The smart and stunning woman who gave herself to me. And what did I do?

I ring the bell, but there's no answer.

"Emma! Open up, please. We need to talk. I need to explain."

Still no answer. Fuck. What should I do?

I sit down on the floor by the door. My shoulder is killing me again. I have to stop straining it all the time.

I rummage through my bag and pull out the bottle of pills, swallowing two.

I take out my phone and begin searching for her social media tags. It doesn't take long to find her. Her steamy photos are being shared like wildfire.

In one of the pictures, she's kissing another girl. My jaw drops as I zoom in on the image. It's undeniably alluring. I know she's not a lesbian, so is this just a publicity stunt? I can't say for certain, but I can't focus on that right now.

The next picture catches my attention. A man, who looks incredibly attractive, is shown in a tank top that accentuates his well-defined muscles. He appears to be whispering something in her ear, and she's smiling with her eyes half-closed, indicating that she's enjoying whatever he's saying. They seem to be very intimate.

Could it be that she's already slept with him? Right after me?

It doesn't seem logical, and I don't want to believe it.

I bang my head against the wall behind me.

She's allowed to date someone else. I had a one-time thing with her, and it's over. Right?

Right?

I close my eyes. Her face appears in front of me, the expression she had before she came, her eyes clouded with desire. The taste of her pussy.

I need something to drink.

I'm not going back to the pub from yesterday. I glance at the bottle in the paper bag. That will have to do.

I sit by the door, lean my head against the wall and sip directly from the bottle. The main thing is to get drunk and fast.

I try to push the images of her and that man out of my mind, but they linger, taunting me. The alcohol is not numbing the pain as quickly as I had hoped. I can't stop thinking about her, about the way she smiled in that picture. The way she looked so comfortable and happy with him.

I take another sip and let out a sigh. I know I have to let go, but it's easier said than done. She's under my skin, and I can't shake her off. I'll have to deal with it and move on. But for now, I'll keep drinking and try to forget.

"Get out of my head already," I yell into the empty hallway.

"Mom?" I call out as I enter the hallway, noticing her hair draped over the couch. She's likely already under the influence, as she doesn't respond to my call. I sigh, knowing she'll be unconscious for the next few hours. I occupy myself by starting a load of laundry and fixing a meal for myself, then eating it alone in silence in the kitchen.

The washing machine alerts me with its loud beep, so I grab a chair from the kitchen and bring it to the window to hang the wet laundry. The ropes are too high for me to reach as I'm quite short for a ten-year-old, but Dad assures me I'll grow taller. I carefully hang up his clothes, followed by mine, and as I reach for the far rope, the chair beneath me suddenly slips, causing me to fall forward.

I scream, closing my eyes, expecting to hit the ground with a boom. But nothing happens.

I open one eye to a slit, then the other, and see I'm hanging in the air between heaven and earth, my leg tangled in the

ropes, leaving me dangling, head down, five stories above the ground.

My heart races, and I try to steady my breathing. Sweat forms on my forehead as I try to reach for the ropes, but they're just out of reach. I try to pull myself up, but my arms feel weak. My leg begins to slip more and more, losing grip, the rope cutting into my skin.

The ground below me seems so far away, and a sense of vertigo washes over me. I try to scream for help, but no one answers. No one comes to rescue me. I'm paralyzed with fear, not knowing how I'll get out of this situation alive.

My head is heavy, and the floor beneath me blurs...

"Luke! Luke, where are you?" Dad yells again.

I open my eyes. It's already dark. "I'm here! I'm here! On the ropes!" I scream.

"Fuck. Don't move."

I'm not there. I try to shake off the memory of my near-death experience and focus on the present. I pull up the photo of Emma and that man on my phone again and stare at it, attempting to process the jumbled emotions inside me.

I don't care. I shouldn't care. I'm used to being alone, taking care of myself.

Shit, I don't feel so good.

I lift the bottle, but it takes me a few seconds before it reaches my mouth. I blink.

Every time I close my eyes, I see those green eyes. They haunt me.

I don't care.

I don't need anyone.

I'm a mess. Forgive me.

What did you do to me?

I need—

My phone slips through my fingers. Everything can go to hell.

Twenty-Four



EMMA

This party is a waste of time. Tony didn't come, and I'm missing my usual layer of protection. I spend all evening sending fake smiles to men who try to hit on me. I'm supposed to show interest in them, but I'm just nodding at the right moments. I'm not ready to start something new yet. Not when every step reminds me of what I did just the other day. It's okay if Luke's moved on, but I need to give myself some time. I'm not ready yet.

Where is Nayla? I want to go home.

She's disappeared as if the earth had swallowed her. I'm dying to get out of here, and I should at least let her know before I leave.

I scan the room, searching for any sign of her. Everything is a blur of unfamiliar faces and loud music, making it difficult to pick her out. I excuse myself from the group of men I've been talking to and make my way toward the bathroom, hoping to find her there.

I push past the crowd, my eyes scanning for any sign of her familiar face. As I reach the bathroom, I knock on the door, calling out her name, but there's no response. Where is she? Could she have left without letting me know?

While standing in the hallway, I pull out my phone to send her a text, and the sound of something falling startles me. I spin around, but the hallway behind me is completely empty.

“*Shhhh...*” I hear a whisper and a chuckle.

I narrow my eyes. “Is there anyone here?” I step forward, and a side door comes into view. My hand hesitates for a moment on the handle before I open it. My eyes widen, and my mouth falls open.

“Sorry,” I mumble as I realize what I've interrupted.

Nayla, on the wall in front of me, held by a man, bare buttock pumping her with a murderous rhythm.

They stop at once, and the man turns his face back, sweat dripping down his forehead.

Nayla peeks over his shoulder.

“Oh, Emma, it’s you,” she moans. “I’m almost done.” She giggles. “Double meaning.” Her fingers dig into the man’s ass. “Don’t stop, baby,” she tells him. “I’m close.”

I swallow and rush out. Slamming the door behind me.

Sex in the closet room. With a random guy, she just met at a party. Maybe I should do something like that. Just let go of my inhibitions and stop overthinking. Stop thinking about him, and just enjoy myself. Ha. Who am I kidding?

I want to get out of here.

I dare to open the door again, just a small crack. The moans from inside become louder.

“I’m leaving, Nayla. Bye.”

“Byeeee!” she screams, and I close the door and laugh. At least it sounds like she’s enjoying herself.

My phone buzzes with a new message. I check the screen and see it’s Luke. My finger hovers over the delete button. I don’t need to read his message to know that nothing good will come of it. Every time we meet, I regret it later.

But I open the message anyway.

Luke
I don’t care.

He doesn’t care about what? About me? I already knew that. I knew I shouldn’t have opened it. He’ll just spoil my evening.

Another message arrives, and I start looking for options on how to block his number once and for all.

Luke

I don't need anyone.

I'm a mess. Forgive me.

What did you do to me?

I need—

Need what? What does he want from me?

I wait for the next message, but it doesn't arrive.

Leave me alone.

I know you're just playing with me.

The message shows it hasn't been read. He's so rude, sending messages while he doesn't even bother to read the reply.

I call him to tell him what I think of him, but the phone just rings and rings until it goes to voicemail. Is he screening me?

I feel like going to his house and telling him what I think of him.

Then it hits me. I know nothing about him. Not where he lives, not who his friends are. I don't even know his last name. How did I give my virginity to someone with no last name?

Only he can put me through this range of emotions in a minute and a half. I'm a total mess.

I take an Uber home, pondering on the way home what my life has become. I can't help but chuckle at the absurdity of the

situation. And all because of him. Maybe I should learn something from Nayla. I'm still young and need to have fun.

I stop in the middle of the stairs, key in hand.

A shoe. A leg. Someone is lying next to my door.

I reach into my bag and pull out the Mace I bought in case Uriel comes back. My heart is pounding so hard I'm afraid he'll hear it.

He doesn't move.

I climb another stair slowly, trying not to make any noise. There's no movement, so it appears he hasn't noticed me yet.

I release the spray from my clenched fist when I see his face. "Luke?"

He doesn't respond.

"Luke?" I climb the rest of the stairs quickly and approach him. He doesn't answer. Something is wrong. I kneel next to him and shake him lightly. "Luke!" He moans and moves, and a sigh of relief escapes me as he opens his eyes.

"Emma? Emma, you're here. You came back to me." He reaches out and caresses my face. His fingers are shaking.

"How much did you drink?" I look at the empty bottle next to him.

"Just this bottle. It was supposed to be for you. Oops." He chuckles. "Well, technically for Laura, but..."

Who the hell is Laura? Is he sleeping with someone else at the same time as me? I know nothing about him, and we haven't talked about relationships. I just gave myself to him like a fool.

I pick up the bottle and his phone from the floor. There's no way a man his size would be that drunk from a little wine.

"Did you drink anything else?"

He shakes his head. "No, but I want to drink you." He smiles at me, showing those sexy dimples.

Even in this low state, his smile is still breathtaking. I mustn't let him affect me like this.

"Come on." I take hold of his arm and lift him up, struggling to keep my balance as he leans heavily on me. I guide him inside and over to the sofa, then gently lower him onto it. But he doesn't release his grip on me, and I find myself lying on top of him, his intense blue eyes locked onto mine. My defenses weaken, and I'm tempted to run a hand through his hair, to run my fingers over his features.

"Emma..." he whispers, looking confused, his eyes fluttering.

What's wrong with him? "Luke, look at me."

He blinks. Are his pupils dilated, or is it just me? "Did you take something? Drugs? What did you take?"

I grab his bag and spill its contents on my living room table.

I stare at the bottle of pills that's almost empty.

Fuck.

"Luke? How much did you take?"

What if he took the entire bottle? What if this is a suicide attempt?

"Two. I took two. Well, maybe four? I'm fine, don't worry. I'll go home. Can you call a taxi? I can't find my phone," he mumbles, looking disoriented.

"A taxi? Are you kidding me? You're completely wasted. Didn't the doctors tell you that you shouldn't have these pills mixed with alcohol?" I open Google and search for signs of poisoning or overdose.

"I don't care." He glances at me through half-closed eyes. "I don't care what happens to me. I'm just as fucked up as she is. I deserve to be kicked out, just like he kicked her out."

Like her, who? "You need to sober up."

"I know. Maybe if I get some sleep. Just for a few minutes." He closes his eyes, and within thirty seconds, he's

snoring.

According to the search results, the amount he took would give him stomach aches and motoric problems.

Yes, I've noticed Google.

I think he's going to be okay. I take a bottle of soda out of the fridge and drink straight from the bottle. Maybe I should ask Tony to come over?

No, I can handle Luke. In the morning, after he's sobered up a bit, I'll kick him out.

I approach the couch and watch him sleep. My hand moves over his jawline as if on its own. He looks so sexy even like this. To hell with me. He's a son of a bitch. I must not fall for him again. I pull my hand back.

What if he suddenly stops breathing? Maybe I should keep an eye on him.

I take my laptop out of my bedroom and sit at the kitchen counter. I can finish some reports I started while I watch over him.

Twenty-Five



LUKE

A throbbing headache pulsates through my head as I open my eyes to the unfamiliar darkness. Struggling to orient myself, I sit up with a small groan, pressing my arms against my knees as the room spins around me. Taking deep breaths, I try to steady myself and ease the rising nausea.

This is Emma's house. I glance around. How did I get here? Where is she?

I know I came to apologize, but everything that happened after that is a blur. I glance down at myself. All my clothes are on, so nothing happened.

I rise to my feet carefully.

My phone catches my eye as it glows on the living room table, and after checking it, I realize it's only five in the morning.

I make my way to her room and find her asleep, dressed only in a t-shirt and thong, her breathing steady and peaceful.

My cock reacts immediately to the sight. I'd love to fuck that ass right now, but I don't think she'd like the idea as much as I do. It takes all my willpower to stay away from her.

I go back to the living room and collapse onto the couch. I should get out of here. Fast. Before she wakes up.

A laptop.

Her laptop just sits there on the kitchen counter. The computer I've been looking for all this time.

I can't do this to her.

I must.

No.

I bite the inside of my cheek, and my hands clench into fists. Without fully realizing it, I find myself in the kitchen,

reaching for the keyboard. It doesn't matter. I wouldn't know her password even if I tried.

The laptop whirs to life, and her background picture illuminates the screen. It's a photo of her and Tony, their arms wrapped around each other, both wearing big smiles.

She has no password.

Why don't you have a password, Emma? I run my finger over her smiling features. You are so beautiful, so innocent. And I'm a jerk.

I click on some folders on the computer. First and foremost, I am a journalist.

There's nothing there.

All the reports appear to be orderly, and I can't find anything that would warrant an investigation. Nevertheless, I send everything to my email address for further examination. I'm not an accountant. It's better to have an expert look at it.

I open her email, sure that I'm breaking some ethics rules here, including my own. Her correspondence with Tony piques my curiosity. Skimming through the key messages, I see nothing out of the ordinary, just production requests and orders. A faint rustling noise from her room startles me, and I freeze, listening intently for any further movement, but there's none. She hasn't woken up.

I open the attached files, and one of them catches my attention.

Something about the special knots of the design seems familiar to me. Where have I seen this before?

I go to the living room to retrieve my phone. I open the information I saved and quickly scroll through it. There it is. I knew it looked familiar.

The same design was posted in the last item about Milan and on the cover nonetheless.

I press my palms against my forehead and sigh heavily. Did she steal their design? I'd been looking for proof of theft, and now I have it before me. I glance again at the email with

the attached picture and compare it to the article on my phone. It's the same design. There's no doubt.

Wait a moment.

The dates in the email are from a few months ago. It's June, and these emails are from January, over half a year ago. The article on Milan is from last month. How could she know about this design back then?

Damn, I got it all backward. She didn't steal from them. They stole from her!

I'm sure if I look deeper, I'll find more designs that were stolen from her. Why doesn't she protect herself? Why does she let them accuse her of this nonsense?

I knew it couldn't be true. Emma's not a thief, and I'll prove it.

The feeling of relief and joy that overwhelms me amazes me.

I send everything to myself and delete the history.

I take another peek into her room. She's still asleep. My chest tightens. "You deserve someone better than me," I whisper to her before slipping silently out of her apartment.

My stomach hurts. It's only because I drank too much I console myself and cringe a little from the obvious lie that even I'm not convinced by.

It's only six, so I can't go to the office or talk to the accountant about the numbers I saw. But I don't want to go home, either, so I wander the streets, my legs eventually carrying me almost on their own to Connor's building.

I hesitate before ringing the doorbell.

"Wait," his familiar voice comes from inside.

He's going to kill me.

He opens the door for me, in sweatpants and with his hair messed up from sleep. "Do you know what time it is?" He yawns in my face.

I nod and go inside.

“I had to talk to someone. Sorry.”

“What’s wrong? Did you tell Raphael?”

“No. I went to Laura’s to sort things out first.”

“And she told Raphael something?” He yawns again.

“No. Let me finish.” I follow Connor to the kitchen, and he turns on the coffee machine.

When the coffee brews into the cups, I continue. “I apologized to Laura, then I went to Emma’s.”

He tilts his head but says nothing. It’s okay. I know what he’s thinking, and he’s right.

“I only wanted to apologize, but she wasn’t home. Then I saw a picture of her at an event with some other guy, and I freaked out. I drank all the wine I bought and took some painkillers...”

Connor examines me. He’s wide awake now but still not talking, letting me complete the story. Neither of us drinks the coffee.

“In short, she came home and found me sprawled on the floor by her door, talking nonsense. She let me crash on her couch, and after I woke up, I ran away, and now I’m here.”

“I see.”

“Is that all you have to say after all that?” I snap.

“Are you looking for comfort or the truth?”

I don’t know. “The truth. I think.”

“Okay. I have two things to say to you. The first is that you need help with these pills before it becomes a serious problem. It’s clear you’ve crossed a line. I’m here for you, but you have to want the help.”

I nod. “And the other?”

“You’re in love with that woman.”

“I’m not,” I reply but fall into silence as I consider his words. Could it be true? I’m aware that my feelings for her go beyond physical attraction. Every time I look at her, I can’t help but feel something deeper. It’s impossible for me to stay impartial and write an article about Goddess when all I can think about is wanting her and the emotions she evokes in me.

Damn, I really am falling in love with her.

I did not expect this. I didn’t want it.

“Fuck!”

Connor laughs. “It’s not that bad. It’s okay to fall in love. It sounds like she’s interested in you, too, not that I understand why.”

“I’m supposed to write an exposé about her, remember? I lied and told her I was a courier. I spied on her and snooped through her emails. There is an IRS investigation against her. She’s accused of stealing designs. Shall I continue?”

He twists his mouth.

I down all the coffee in one big gulp.

“Do you think she did all that?” Connor asks.

“No. In fact, I’m pretty sure she didn’t.”

He nods. “Well, you can’t dance at two weddings.”

I agree with that. “I know.”

“So it sounds to me like you have a choice to make. Talk to Raphael, get off the story, and give this relationship a chance, or continue the investigation. I know what I would choose.”

I frown. I’m not at all sure she’ll want me after everything I’ve done. “How could you choose love after what you’ve been through? Didn’t you tell me just two days ago that you didn’t want to fall in love again?”

“I don’t. You’re right. But everyone needs to love at least once in their life. Mine just ended too soon.”

“Raphael won’t take it well. He gave me this story as a kind of test.”

“I don’t know him, but I’m sure he doesn’t have a heart of stone. A love story softens everyone. He’ll understand.”

“I can’t face him. He’ll kick my ass into the street.”

“After all your achievements?”

“If he hears I slept with her, he sure will.”

“Okay, so what if he fires you? It’s not the only newspaper you can work for.”

“No, it’s not. But this is the best newspaper. Anything else would be a downgrade. And I worked hard to reach the status I have now.”

“I won’t tell you what to do, Luke. I know your career is important to you, but think carefully about what you’re giving up here.”

Twenty-Six



EMMA

The house is quiet as I rush to throw on a robe and make my way to the living room, determined to confront Luke.

I won't let anyone treat me like that. I'll give him a piece of my mind and show him the door, banishing him from my life like the piece of shit he is.

"Good morning," I say in a sarcastic tone as I walk out into the living room.

He's not on the couch.

"Luke?" I call, walking into the bathroom. "Are you here?"

Just to be safe, I also check my study. He isn't anywhere in the apartment. Where the hell is he?

A sudden knock on the door startles me. My heart jumps as I peek through the peephole to see Luke standing on the other side. I close my eyes, taking a deep breath to steady myself before opening the door.

"Hey," Luke greets me with a smile. "I went to grab us something to eat." He raises the brown paper bags he has in one hand and a carton of juice in the other. "Sorry it took me so long."

I just woke up. How long was he gone? I can't shake off the suspicion and look at him with a questioning gaze. Did he really just go to buy breakfast?

I take the bags from him and begin to unload the contents onto plates, arranging everything on the kitchen counter. My eyes fall on the fruit salad he bought me, and I can't help but smile. He remembered my preferences. The pastries catch my eye, all kinds of sugary treats that seem to call out to me, tempting me to indulge. The aroma alone is enough to make my mouth water. Maybe I'll allow myself a small taste. It couldn't hurt.

No. I need to stay on course. Tell him exactly what I think of him.

“I’m so angry with you,” I say, but the words feel empty and inadequate to convey the hurt.

“I know. You should be, and I’m sorry,” he says, his gaze cast downward. “And I also know I shouldn’t have been drinking yesterday, too. That was a mistake.” He pauses. “I know I’ve messed up. I’m not good at this.”

“Not good at what?”

“This,” he says, gesturing wildly at the space between us as if the movement could somehow make me understand. Then he takes my hand and entwines our fingers, halting my progress with the food. “I don’t know how to put into words what’s happening to me, but all I can think about is you. I know I’ve made mistakes, more than a few. And maybe it’s too late for me to ask, but will you give me one more chance?” He smiles, and I feel my resolve weakening at the sight of his dimples. They seem to have become my kryptonite.

It’s difficult to resist him when he’s standing so close to me. Not when he puts in his shadow the dozens of models I’ve worked with. When my body yearns for him. I should hate him. I shouldn’t forgive him, and I should not let him get close to me.

He takes a step forward, crossing an invisible border into my personal space. I feel his breath on my cheek as he lifts my hand and kisses my knuckles, pulling me closer to him.

My body betrays me so quickly.

“God, Emma, you’re driving me crazy. I want you so much. But first, I need to tell you something.”

My brain feels like liquid mush, and I can’t think. My whole body is throbbing and tuned in to him. The attraction between us is simply too strong. It’s beyond my power to resist.

I tilt my face up to look at him. That’s all the invitation he needs.

His piercing blue eyes lock onto mine, and I can't help but shiver. He looks like a predator ready to pounce.

As our lips meet, desire floods through me, consuming me and the entire room. The world around us disappears, and all that's left are the two of us. I want him to take me.

Now.

He breaks the kiss, and we both struggle to catch our breath.

“What do you want to tell me?” I whisper.

“Later,” he responds, his face inches from mine. He takes my bottom lip between his teeth and lets out a low growl.

I want to surrender to the feeling that overwhelms me, to this intoxication of the senses that I never knew existed in me. I have an overwhelming urge to let go, to release myself, and forget all the reasons why I'm angry with him.

Our bodies fit perfectly together, with my soft curves molding to his hard angles. His fingers are all over me, fumbling with the belt of my robe until it falls open, exposing me. He bends down and sucks one of my nipples through the fabric, leaving a damp spot on my shirt.

I moan, and my mind empties of thoughts. All I want is more of him.

He pulls my shirt off, and I stand in front of him, wearing only my underwear. The visible evidence of his desire in his pants fills me with a sense of security. He reaches down and rubs himself.

“I'm dying to fuck you, Emma, but I'm not sure I can be gentle right now. Are you still in pain?”

I shake my head. It doesn't hurt anymore, and I wonder how it will feel now, the second time around. Different? Better?

He reaches between my legs, and I spread them wider to allow him easy access.

“You’re so wet for me. You’re such a good girl, Emma,” he whispers while placing kisses on my body. “Come to bed.”

He leads me into the bedroom and roughly throws me onto the bed. I love this dominant behavior. I prop myself up on my elbows and watch as he undresses and pulls a condom from his pocket.

I admire his perfect body. He would have landed a job as a model in a minute. “You should model,” I mutter, looking at his naked body. His cock already has a glimmering drop on it. God, it is also beautiful. Is there such a thing as a beautiful cock?

He smiles crookedly. “Would you like me to be one of your model friends? Like the one you were with yesterday at the event?”

I’m confused. “What are you talking about?”

“Am I just the appetizer? Are you going to move on to them now?” His eyes gleam, and his jaw tightens.

“No!” I try to sit up, trying to stop whatever is happening here. I never had feelings for any of them. I’m confused by Luke’s words.

He towers over me, his muscular body pinning me down. He looks like he wants to punish me for something, but instead of scaring me, it only fuels my excitement.

He reaches between my legs, inserts two fingers, and his eyes darken. I moan, and he starts moving them inside me while his thumb rubs on my clit. Then he touches that spot inside me, and I cry out in pleasure. My fears are forgotten, and so are my inhibitions.

All of my attention is focused on a single point, his fingers, and his touch. His tongue hovers over my nipple, then flicks over the tip and slowly circles the pink areola. On one side, then the other, his warm wetness soaks into my skin and sends little shudders of pleasure through my body. I feel how with each of his suction, another wave of wetness flows between my legs. My breathing comes faster. I’m not sure if he can sense it.

He stops and stares into my eyes.

“Don’t stop,” I barely whisper, addicted to his touch.
“Please.” I want to come. I have to.

“I’ll make you forget him.”

I don’t have to forget anyone because Luke is the only one in my thoughts. The heat floods me from the inside, starting at the point where he’s touching me and spreads like a ball of sweet fire through my body. I’m so close.

“Please,” I moan.

And he stops.

“No, don’t stop.” I can’t believe it’s me saying the words. I look at his cock. It looks hard as a rock.

He straightens up and rubs himself in front of me. I can’t look away. “Do you want me, Emma?” he asks.

I nod.

“Say it. Say you want me to fuck you.”

“I want you to fuck me,” I answer, my body feeling empty and longing for his touch once more.

He quickly puts on the condom and enters me with one swift thrust.

I cry out in both pleasure and pain as the intense sensation takes over my body. He doesn’t stop or give me any time to adjust to his size before he starts moving faster.

It’s deep and intense, and I love it.

He lifts my legs and places them on his shoulders, allowing him to go even deeper with each thrust. The new position is incredibly intense. It feels amazing. I can feel the pleasure building. I just need a little more, a minute more, a few more thrusts, and I’ll reach my climax. He continues to thrust into me hard and rough, the sensation both painful and pleasurable. He doesn’t hold back, pushing me to my limits.

“What are you doing to me, Emma?” he moans.

I almost scream as the spasms take hold of my body, and I come hard on his cock, clenching around him from the inside while my hands grip the sheets with force, in the strongest orgasm I've ever experienced. "Fuck, Luke. Come inside me. I need you."

"God, Emma, I can feel you. You're so tight. I'm about to explode."

He maintains a strong and powerful pace, fucking me so hard that the head of the bed starts banging on the wall. His eyes are dark and hazy as if he's looking into my soul. Moments later, he reaches his climax with a loud moan, emptying himself into me.

A sheen of sweat covers his chest as he collapses on top of me and kisses me forcefully as if he's not done with me, as if he's still not satisfied.

We lay there motionless for several minutes. The only sounds in the room are our heavy breathing.

I close my eyes, hoping he won't notice that I've fallen completely in love with him.

Shit. The recognition hits me. I think I started falling in love with him from the first time he kissed me on my couch, and it's clear he doesn't feel the same way.

"What's wrong?" He cups my chin and turns my face to him.

"Nothing." I'll be damned if I admit to him that I'm fool enough to fall in love with a man who doesn't feel the same.

"Are you still thinking of him?" Luke's eyes darken again.

"Of whom?"

His face contorts in anger. "The man from the party."

He seems to sense my confusion and gets up from the bed, retrieving his jeans from the floor. He takes his phone out of a pocket and starts scrolling through it, then he holds it up in front of me.

“Oh,” I blurt out at the sight of the picture. It’s the guy who fucked Nayla at the party. I didn’t notice that we were being photographed. He asked if she was available.

“Oh,” he says, mocking me.

“He just...” I stop myself, watching Luke closely. Why do I owe him an explanation? He slept with me and then disappeared without a word. We never made any promises to each other. I’m free to do as I please.

“Just what?” He traces his fingers over my nipples, which harden instantly under his touch.

My gaze drops to the sight of his hands touching me.

“Did you sleep with him?”

“Why is it any of your business?”

His eyes narrow. “So you slept with him?” He pinches my nipple, and I moan. Fuck, it’s good.

“No,” I say. I don’t feel like playing this game. I don’t feel like playing any games.

“Tell me the truth.”

“No, of course not,” I shout. “I didn’t sleep with anyone. You’re the only one.”

He clings to me, his hands tight around my waist. His breath feels like fire against my neck as he whispers, “I want to feel you, touch you, and fuck you for hours on end. I want to hear you scream for me.” His hand slides devilishly between my legs, pushing them apart until I’m fully exposed to his voracious gaze. His lips crash against my neck with ravishing intensity, and my moans echo throughout the room.

Every brush of his fingertips sends a bolt of pleasure through my body. His lips press against my ear. “Are you ready?” He kisses the nape of my neck, and I gasp. “I’m going to make you scream my name. I want you to be just as crazy about me as I am about you.”

Twenty-Seven



LUKE

Three times.

Three times I made her scream my name before Tony announced he was on his way, and we had to say goodbye, or I would have gone for a fourth time.

We didn't have the opportunity to talk, and I didn't have time to explain. It wasn't the right place or time, so I'll have to explain everything this evening. I just hope she understands and forgives me for my deception.

Is this what love feels like? I think I've fallen hard. I can't stop thinking about her. I can't let her go. Connor was right. I must be in love.

Tonight, I'll prepare a romantic meal for her, reveal my true identity and explain everything that happened. I hope she can forgive me. She must understand that I never intended this to go so far. Falling in love with her was not something I planned or had control over.

First, I need to break the news to Raphael that I'm not going ahead with the article I was writing and, instead, I'll be doing a piece on Milan. I'm sure there's something there.

I take the elevator to the office, the memories of this morning still fresh in my mind. I can still taste her breast on my tongue, feel her hips as they arch up to meet me. The look on her face when I make her come brings a smile to my face.

The second I set foot in the hallway, Laura appears. I have to figure out how she does it every time.

"Hey, what's that smile for?" she asks.

I try and erase my grin. "What smile?"

Her eyes narrow. "You were at her house, weren't you?"

"Whose house?" I feign innocence.

“The woman you had incredible sex with. We’re friends now, so don’t hold back. Spill it.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” It was absolutely amazing. So amazing that I feel...happy? I almost laugh when I realize I have no idea what happiness feels like. It’s as foreign as...love.

She sighs in disbelief, then strides back to her station. I observe her, then turn to Raphael.

“What’s up?” he greets me as soon as I enter and shut the door. “I haven’t spotted you in days, so I assume this project has been consuming your time.” He gazes at me from over the screen and studies me.

“Yes, I’m working on it. But there’s a problem.” I take a seat in the chair in front of him.

He frowns. “You asked for a story, and I agreed. You can’t drag it out forever, even if you don’t like it. If you don’t submit it, I won’t give you anything else.”

“That’s not the issue,” I hasten to say. “I just think we’re checking the wrong place. Do you know the saying about the pot calling the kettle black? So I think that’s the case here.”

“What are you saying?”

“Milan is actively attempting to ruin Goddess, and they’re succeeding in their efforts. We misunderstood the situation. It’s now clear to me that they’re the ones who are stealing designs. I saw the stolen design in Goddess’ records many months before Milan released it.”

“Why would a giant corporation like Milan care about a two-person business? Plus, theft? Goddess is just a tiny company. It makes little sense when Milan’s a billion-dollar corporation. Goddess shouldn’t even be a blip on their radar.”

“I don’t know why, but I’m certain there’s something there. Let me investigate further. There’s a huge potential story here.” I lean forward over his desk. “I don’t think Emma would do something like that. It doesn’t seem like her.”

“Doesn’t seem like her?” He raises an eyebrow.

Shit.

“I thought she wasn’t willing to speak to reporters, and suddenly you’re sure it doesn’t ‘seem like her’?”

“I’ve gotten to know her a little since—”

“Are you sleeping with her?”

Fuck. Where did that come from? “Sleeping with who?”

“Do I have to spell it out for you? How many women are you sleeping with simultaneously?”

I can’t lie to him. It would not be wise. I had hoped to write the article without revealing my personal involvement, but as usual, Raphael sees right through me. It’s no surprise that he’s won awards as an investigative journalist. “Yes, I was with her.”

“Damn, Luke. What’s wrong with you? Was your brain hurt, too, not just your shoulder? Are you ready to throw away your career? I thought the work here was important to you.”

I don’t even know how to respond to that. Obviously, I don’t want to throw away my career, it’s the most important thing in the world to me, but I’ve been acting out of character recently. “Of course not.”

“I don’t think you can stay objective. How will you investigate her company while you’re sleeping with her? Didn’t they make you take an ethics course in school? I don’t know what’s been going on with you lately. I should fire you for this.”

He’s right. I have no excuses, and I have no answers for him. I lower my head and remain silent.

“If word gets out about this, I will have to fire you. You know that, right?”

I nod, knowing he’s right. He can’t take the blame for me. I have sinned. I will fall.

“Are you sure about Milan? Is there meat in it?” he asks after a long silence.

“Yes.” I nod. “I’m sure there’s something there. I understand why you think I’m not objective, but there’s a story there. I know my shit.”

He’s looking at me in silence, and I can see on his face that he’s trying to decide if I’ve completely lost it.

“Okay. I’ll give you a chance to pursue your lead,” he says, and I make a small victory gesture under the table. “But you will be working with Laura. I want someone neutral working on this to ensure you don’t compromise the integrity of the story.”

“I don’t need a babysitter.”

“In light of your recent admission, I disagree with you.”

Well, he didn’t fire my ass, so I have no right to object. “Okay, fine.” I nod as if I have a choice. It’s a good thing Laura and I are on good terms now.

I go to look for her and head to the kitchenette, spotting her with her back to me, stirring her coffee. One of our researchers, whose name I’m not familiar with, is perched on the counter, staring at her legs. I follow his gaze and take a closer look. Her legs are indeed very attractive. But in the three years I’ve been working with her, I never noticed. What does that say about me?

“Laura,” I call her name, and the other guy quickly looks away. Yes, yes, I saw you. “I need to talk to you for a moment.”

“Okay,” she responds without smiling, remaining in place.

What, here? I throw a menacing look at the other guy, and thankfully he gets the hint and goes.

“I need your help with the story.”

“Really? Out of the blue? I thought you didn’t need my help.”

“I’m going to investigate Milan.”

“Milan? Why? What happened to the Goddess story? Is it because you’re sleeping with her?”

“I’m not.” I try to keep my expression neutral.

“Don’t play dumb. I know you’re not stupid, and neither am I. If you want my help, be honest with me.” She stands in front of me, hands on her hips.

“I discovered Milan is stealing from Goddess and making it appear as though it’s the other way around. I don’t know why, but I want to find out.”

“So it’s not about her?”

“No.” I’m getting myself into a tangle of lies, but I can’t risk Laura finding out. I don’t know what she might do, and my career could be over in a snap. Raphael will watch over me as long as it stays quiet.

“You’re lying. I thought you wanted us to be friends again. So sorry, but no thanks.” She goes back to her coffee.

“Raphael’s asked you to work with me on this,” I say.

Her face falls. “So you don’t want my help? Raphael is forcing you?”

Shit. That’s not what I meant. She doesn’t look pleased at all, and I’m no longer sure the whole apology thing really worked the way I thought it did.

“So I don’t have a choice in the matter... Okay. What do you need from me?”

Twenty-Eight



EMMA

““**W**hy did your man run away so fast?” Tony asks. “I wanted to meet him.”

“I think that’s exactly why he ran.” I laugh. Tony is always protective of me and can seem quite scary to those who don’t know him.

“So, are you two serious?”

“Yes... I think so.” The memories of our encounter linger in my mind, causing my cheeks to flush. I can’t believe I allowed him to do those things to me. How can I still crave him so much?

“Emma.” Tony snaps me out of my daydreams.

“Yes? What do you need?” I shake it off. This morning was so perfect that I feel like I’m floating on a cloud.

“It’s not what *I* need. It’s what *you* need. You need to finish this collection already, and you’re daydreaming. Again. I mean, I understand you’ve discovered orgasms, but it looks like your brain is melting.”

I stare at the new coiling snake tattoo on his arm and mutter, “You’re right. I need to finish.”

The idea comes to my mind at first as a flash, but then the images crystallize into a complete idea. I can just see it forming before my eyes.

“I have a brilliant idea for a collection,” I exclaim, excitement building in me. “And it’s going to be amazing.” I grab my notebook and begin sketching. “What if we create a swimsuit that looks like a tattoo?”

“What? A tattoo swimsuit?”

“We’ll construct the entire garment as a body sticker, like a tattoo pattern. Because it will be a temporary sticker, there’s no need for precise measurements, and everyone can adjust

and apply it according to their preference. It can have fuller coverage or be more revealing.”

Tony looks interested and examines the drawing taking shape on the page. “And how will it not wash off in the water?”

“You know those muscle tapes that athletes use? They don’t wash off easily. We can use the same material or something similar. The cost just needs to be low enough for it to be viable.”

I show him how the tape can be applied in a specific way to enhance the chest for those who desire it and demonstrate various possibilities. “It will definitely generate buzz at fashion week. I’m certain of it.”

“Yes, the temporary tattoos combined with transparent neon beachwear. It will look amazing on the runway.” Tony joins in my enthusiasm.

“It can also be really colorful.” I sketch a few more ideas and show him. “Look.” I feel like painting the world with strong colors.

“Emma, that’s a crazy idea. Keep fucking him as much as you want. The sex has enhanced your creativity.”

I laugh. “Go get me a stack of those athlete tapes. I want to try it first to see if it works. And tell Nayla to come. I want to test it on her.”

“How much do you need?”

“Everything you can find. I need enough so I can cut them.”

Tony nods and hurries off, leaving me to my drawings. I have so many ideas suddenly, and I’m quickly filling pages upon pages of new sketches. It’s going to be amazing and original.

Only the doorbell has me looking up from the pages. Yes! Tony is finally back. I’m eager to see it come to life before my eyes, and I rush to the door.

“Uh...hello,” I say to the unfamiliar figure standing in my doorway. It’s not Tony.

“Emma Woods?” she asks.

Who is she, and what does she want? I’m not sure what to answer. If I say it’s me, a swarm of fans might come after her.

“Yes?” I answer.

“Laura Norris.” She reaches out for a squeeze.

I don’t reciprocate, and she pulls her hand back awkwardly. “I’m sorry, but I don’t expect anyone to show up at my private residence. If you’d like to schedule an appointment, please contact my agent.” I say in a firm tone.

“I work with Luke Brant. I’m joining his team.”

Luke Brant? Does she mean my Luke? What team? Since when do couriers work in a team, and why do I need to know about it? I stand there, trying to understand what this woman wants from me.

“You know Luke, right? I didn’t get the address wrong or something?” She glances around as if to check again what’s written on the door.

“Yes,” I say, assuming she’s talking about the same Luke. I still haven’t asked him what his last name is, damn it.

“He told me he was planning on investigating Milan. And it’s not that I don’t trust him. He’s an excellent journalist, of course, but he rarely covers subjects like this, so if I join the team, I have to verify the facts.” She smiles a sweet smile.

My expression must be giving away my surprise as I can feel my legs trembling. I can hardly believe what I’m hearing. “What did you say?”

She looks at me and narrows her eyes. “I just need to verify a few facts with you. Luke thinks Milan has been stealing from you. I just want to know why.”

“So you’re a journalist?”

“Yes, like I said.” Her tone is cutting. “I’m on Luke’s team.”

“The Luke I know is a courier,” I say, noticing my voice shake a little. “I think you’ve made a mistake.”

“A courier? No way. He’s a journalist, one of the best too. At least until his accident. Now I’m not so sure...” she mumbles.

“His accident?” What the hell is she talking about?

“Yeah, you know, since he got shot at that demonstration. He’s lucky to be alive.”

I close my eyes and lean on the doorframe for a moment. This can’t be a coincidence. Luke said he got hurt on a scooter, and this woman now says he was shot?

“Are you okay?” she grabs my arm.

I straighten up. “He injured his shoulder?”

She nods. “Yes, as I said. So, can I verify a few facts with you? Why did you tell him that Milan is stealing from you? Do you have proof?”

“I don’t speak with journalists,” I firmly state and attempt to shut the door, but she prevents it by standing in the way.

“Really? But you spoke with Luke. Or is it only those you’re sleeping with that you speak to?” she asks with a hint of accusation in her tone.

The look on her face strikes me as evil for a moment, but it disappears immediately, and I’m not sure if I saw it or imagined it.

Did he also tell her about us? That son of a bitch. What else does she know? Did they also sit and laugh about the fact that I was a virgin? Will it be in the story he writes? I push her out of my doorway and slam it, then quickly turn all the locks.

Who is this woman, and what does she want from me? How does she know all these things? I slide down against the door onto the floor, feeling helpless and overwhelmed.

I’m trying to remember the name of the journalist who called me a few weeks ago. What did he say his name was?

Shit, I can't remember. It can't be the Luke I know. It just can't be.

I stand and head to my laptop, taking it and sitting down on the couch. My hands shake as I open it and type in "Luke Brant." The first search results include a link to the *New York Daily Publishing* newspaper. I click on it and find various articles with his name, including ones about the BLM movement and the current war. However, there's no picture of him on the website, which doesn't provide much help.

I return to the results page and look for something else. "A journalist got shot at a demonstration," I type in the search box. That's what she said happened.

"A New York Daily Publishing reporter was accidentally shot during an anti-war demonstration." I click on the headline. The name of the reporter is not shown, but there's a video link.

My finger hovers over the link as I hesitate for a moment, but I have no choice. I press play.

The video appears to have been recorded on a smartphone, with the camera shaking as it captures the energetic crowd, holding signs and shouting. Suddenly, loud explosions can be heard in the background, along with screams. My entire body tenses in fear as I anticipate what's about to happen. The phone is dropped, then picked up again, this time at a lower angle, indicating that the person holding it is now lying on the ground.

Then I see him.

Luke is standing on something high to the left of the camera.

The video goes into slow motion, showing gunshots and blood, and it's everywhere. Then, he collapses to the ground. I cover my mouth, trying to hold back a scream. Within seconds, he's surrounded by the crowd, and all I can see is chaos. I feel like I can't breathe. My vision starts to go black.

“Emma. Answer me, Emma.” I wake up when someone shakes me and slowly open my eyes.

“Mmm...” I mumble.

Tony stands over me, a worried look on his face. “What happened? Should I call an ambulance?”

“I needed a reminder of why I don’t watch the news,” I mumble. “It’s okay, I’m fine. Just my stupid blood phobia. When did you arrive?”

“Just now. And you didn’t answer, so I used my key. What happened? What were you watching?” He sits down next to me, takes the laptop from me and presses the keyboard to wake up the screen.

“This is the journalist who was shot at the demonstration two weeks ago,” I say.

“Yeah, I heard something about it. But why did you watch it? You’re not allowed to watch the news. You know blood makes you pass out.”

He turns the screen to him and presses play. I close my eyes when the screams are heard again and take a deep breath.

“It’s Luke,” I say.

“What?”

“It’s Luke. In the video. The one who gets shot.”

“Luke? Your Luke? The beggar? But I thought you said he was a courier.” Tony looks at the screen again, and I see how he brings his face closer, trying to make sure that the man in the video is the same one he saw briefly this morning. But I know it’s him. I’d recognize him anywhere.

“It says here that he’s a journalist.” Tony’s eyebrows furrow.

I lean my head back and close my eyes. “He’s been deceiving me all this time.”

“Emma...”

I don't want to see the look of pity on his face. “He must have been the one who stole my designs,” I say, my voice trembling. “I let him into my house.”

“I'm so sorry, Emma.” Tony pulls me into a hug.

It was all a lie.

Twenty-Nine



LUKE

“Mr. Milan is unavailable at the moment. I can schedule an appointment for you later this month, but I can’t guarantee he’ll see you.” The secretary at Milan’s office blocks my entry.

“I need to speak with him this week. If you don’t schedule a meeting for me, I’ll publish the article without his response. Trust me, he won’t be happy about it.” I attempt to sound intimidating, but she remains unfazed.

“Do you really believe that anyone can just walk in here and meet with the CEO?” she argues, sneering at me.

I show her my journalist ID and hand her a business card. “Tell him to get in touch with me. I’m writing an article about him, whether he likes it or not.”

I step out onto the sidewalk and take a breath of fresh air. I need to look further. I need to uncover the truth behind Milan’s motives. Raphael was right. Why would Milan, a big, successful company, be interested in a small fish like Goddess? Emma doesn’t pose any kind of threat to them. There must be something more going on. That’s the key to uncovering everything.

I make my way to the nearest coffee shop, pull out my laptop and start jotting down the different angles I can take with the story. I think about the potential connections between Milan and Goddess and the motives for stealing designs. I have no idea what I’m looking for. As I sip my coffee, I decide to search out anything related to Milan or accusations of theft. I also plan to dig deeper into the financials of both companies to see if there are any red flags.

After not finding anything new, I rub my neck in frustration. My coffee is long gone, and I signal the waitress to bring me another one. My shoulder hurts, and I take out the bottle, look at it for a moment, and put it back in the bag. Last

night, I almost messed up everything with Emma because of those pills. I can't let it happen again.

I re-examine all the articles I've previously read, searching for any overlooked details. In the past two years, Milan has focused heavily on attacking Goddess. But why?

Concentrate. You can crack it. Milan has been around for two decades. Maybe I can find clues buried in the archives. I start to dig deeper, researching the history and background of Milan and its CEO, Alexander Milan, in the archives.

The title jumps off my screen.

"The owner of Mystic Fashion, Gina Ostov, is suing Alexander Milan for sexual harassment."

I wonder if that has anything to do with what's going on now. The date on the article is from over ten years ago. It's ancient. I run another search on Mystic Fashion but don't find anything. It doesn't exist anymore. So I run the same search in the archives, find more articles and start reading them.

Mystic is a small company owned by a young woman, or at least she was young a decade ago, who produced beachwear. It was quite successful and closed suddenly. The resemblance to Goddess doesn't escape me. But what's the connection?

Alexander seemed to be interested in Gina, and they were even seen together on several occasions until she sued him. She disappeared from sight after that. I go to the verdict database and try to find the results of the trial, but again don't find anything. The case must have been settled out of court. I have no way of knowing what happened.

I rub my chin. My only option right now is to look for this Gina and hope she agrees to talk.

Maybe it would be better to get Laura involved in this end. Gina's more likely to agree to talk to a woman, especially if she's been harassed. I text my investigator Dave and ask him to track down Gina Ostov, the former owner of Mystic, then call Laura.

"Hi."

“Hey, Luke. I’m just coming back to the office. Do you need something urgent? I’m about to enter the subway.”

“I need your help. There’s someone we need to interview, and I think it would be best if it was you who does it.”

“You mean Emma Woods? Because I was already at her place, and she didn’t agree to talk to me.”

“Emma? You were at Emma’s?” I try not to stress out. Emma doesn’t talk to journalists. There’s no way she revealed anything to her.

“You wanted me to join the team, so I needed to do a fact check. I can’t have my name appear on something I didn’t approve. By the way, why did she think you were a courier?”

Fuck! I almost scream, and all the air comes out of me. “What exactly did you say to her, Laura?”

“What I told you, that I needed to check the facts you gave me for the article.”

What did you do?

“Anyway, she said she wasn’t ready to be interviewed, and I left. So it wasn’t her you wanted me to talk to?”

“No. The subject’s name is Gina Ostov. I’m sending you the details now. I asked Dave to track her down,” I tell Laura as if she hasn’t turned my world upside down.

“Okay. As soon as I get back to the office, I’ll check it out.”

I hang up. My hands are shaking. This can’t be. This can’t be happening to me. I call Emma, but she doesn’t answer, so I send her a text.

Call me, it’s urgent. We need to talk.

I quickly check her profile, and her last seen date is gone.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

She's blocked me. I have to fix this. Explain to her. It can't end like this. I'm not ready.

I gather my things and drive to her place, praying she's home, praying she'll listen.

I knock like crazy on the pink door, but no one answers.

"Emma! I know you're here. Open the door, please. We need to talk."

Nothing.

"Emma! Please!" I shout.

I'll break the door down. Or I'll wait here until she comes out. She has to come out sometime.

I keep banging my fist on the door and almost fall in when it suddenly opens.

"Get out of here." Tony stands in the doorway, blocking it with his body. Damn, he's a big man.

"I need to talk to Emma. It's not what she thinks. I wasn't with her because of the article."

"Are you a courier or a journalist?" He tilts his head, his eyes piercing into mine.

"A journalist," I admit, biting the inside of my cheek.

"Then you have nothing to talk about." He tries to slam the door in my face, but I stick my foot in the gap.

Damn, it hurts. "I lied about my profession. That's true, but everything else is real. I have real feelings for her," I painfully say in what's supposed to be the most romantic moment of my life. "Can you hear me, Emma? I'm in love with you," I shout into the space of the apartment.

Tony smirks. "Do you really think that's how you can fix what you did? You spied on her, stole her designs, and damaged the business. A few words won't be enough for her

to reconcile with you. The most important thing to Emma is her business. Men like you are garbage. So just go away, creep. Whatever you got from her, I hope it was worth it.”

“What? I didn’t steal any designs.” What is he talking about?

He pushes me back with force. “Go away and never come back. She doesn’t want to see you anymore.” He slams the door.

I stand in front of the closed door and realize that it’s final. She’s gone.

“Go away and never come back.” Dad pushes a big, bloated bag into Mom’s hands. “These are all your belongings. I don’t want to see you anymore.”

“Baby. I have nowhere to go. Let’s talk about it,” she begs.

I hide behind Dad’s body. What is he doing? Is he really going to kick mom out?

“Luke, honey, tell him. Tell him not to kick me out of here. Do you want your mother to live on the street?”

I look up at Dad, and he squeezes my shoulder. “Don’t answer her.”

“Dad?”

“But why, baby? Why are you throwing me out on the street like this?” she whimpers.

“I tried Kylie. I sent you to countless rehabs. I turned a blind eye when you lay here drugged all day and spent all my money on more drugs. Even when Luke got hurt in the past. I thought he would grow up and it would be okay, but it doesn’t get better. He called for help, and you didn’t answer. The next time he might not survive. I just can’t take that risk anymore. You are not the woman I married. You have nothing to look for here anymore.”

“Luke.” Her eyes beg me. “Help me, honey. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I can get better.”

I don't know what to do, so I just stand there and absorb the harsh words being said. I don't want Mom to go. I know she's not a good mother, but I don't want her to leave. I want to ask Dad to let her stay with us, but I just stand there, silent, tears streaming down my cheeks.

Thirty



EMMA

Tears stream down my cheeks as I sob into my pillow.

He says he's in love with me. What a joke. Apparently, he'll say anything to cover his deception. Spying on me and stealing from my company aren't the actions of someone who truly loves someone. If this is what love is, then I want no part in it.

My heart aches as I realize the truth. I trusted him. I thought we had something special. I opened myself up to him, and he used that to betray me. The tears flow freely as I come to terms with the fact that he never loved me. He only wanted to use me for his own gain. The thought of him playing me like a fool fills me with anger and hurt. I can't believe I fell for his lies. I can't believe I thought he was worth fighting for.

"He's gone." Tony enters my room after a few minutes. "I kicked him out. And I won't let you mourn him for more than an hour. Do you hear me, Sis? Garbage belongs in the trash." He hugs me, and I rest my face on his broad chest. Memories of the time he picked me up from the street, crying and hungry, come back to me. I've gotten over worse things than this.

I try to harden my bleeding heart. Tony's right. I shouldn't cry over Luke. He's not worth my tears. I'm lucky I discovered his true face now, before...

Before what? Before I fell in love with him? Who am I kidding? I was in love with him from the beginning. I wouldn't have given myself to him without feeling something. While he was just plotting, spewing from his poisoned mouth words like love. I can't believe a word that comes out of his mouth.

"He destroyed me, and he stole from Goddess."

"He destroyed nothing. You're still here. Goddess is still here. He hasn't seen any of your new designs for fashion week. No one but the two of us knows about it yet."

Rage fills me and pushes the tears aside. I sit up in bed and wipe my tears with my sleeve.

I have a collection to prepare.

“Well done, Sis.” Tony seems happy to see me up. “You didn’t even take the full sixty minutes I allotted you.”

“Let’s do this.”

Tony and I sink into the design, cut and stitch, trying to solve the problem with the bottom part.

“Maybe we should put a cloth on the inside, so it doesn’t stick *there*?” Tony suggests. “It hurts just thinking about it.”

“I can’t find another solution. But then it becomes normal bikini underwear.”

The doorbell causes me to jump. Luke’s back? I look at Tony with wide eyes.

He glances at his watch. “It must be Nayla. You told me to invite her, remember?”

I nod but leave him to open the door, just to be safe.

“Hey, handsome.” I hear Nayla’s voice and relax. “What’s going on?” She enters the apartment like a storm.

“Shit, Emma, what’s happened? Have you been crying?” She pauses when she sees me.

“I just threw the garbage away,” I say with a fake smile, trying to look indifferent.

Nayla’s gaze switches back and forth between Tony and me.

“The guy she was dating turned out to be a fucking liar,” Tony tries to explain.

“Oh, Emma. Are you okay?” She comes over and hugs me. “Men are so terrible sometimes. That’s why I never date. They’re only good for one thing.” She smiles and winks. “Do you want to go out with me this evening? We’ll find you someone handsome.”

“No thanks,” I mumble.

“You need a rebound. Sometimes when I need to cheer up, I look for some good sex. It helps me forget everything for a while,” she suggests.

I hesitate. Should I take her advice? Tony always says to get back on the horse. I think of Nayla with that man on the counter and feel my cheeks flush. She seemed to enjoy herself. Maybe I should be more adventurous, too.

“Come with me.” She punches my arm lightly.

“Yes, Emma, don’t dwell on him. A night out will do you good,” Tony suggests. “Michael and I can come along.”

They both gaze at me expectantly, and I give in. “Sure, let’s go out clubbing tonight.”

“Yes!” Nayla exclaims, bouncing in her seat. “It’ll be a blast.”

I’m dressed in an extremely short evening dress that sparkles like the Eiffel Tower, with my hair styled and pinned with jeweled pins in strategic places. Tony and Michael pick me up, and we drive to a new club on the outskirts of the city. I’m not accustomed to going to clubs, as most of my outings are for celebrity parties and events. It’s part of the job. Although it may seem like I go out often, the only real social outings I’ve had recently have been with Luke.

Enough. Stop thinking about him. He doesn’t exist.

We meet Nayla outside of the club.

“You look amazing!” she says as she examines me. I compliment her in return, noting how her blonde afro frames her face and bounces with each step she takes on her high heels. I’ve never seen hair like that. It’s amazing. She turns to show off her dress, a barely there ensemble of three small pieces of fabric that barely cover her body.

“What do you think of my new dress?” She circles in front of us, showing off her assets.

“Perfection,” Tony says.

We look exactly the way we wanted to look—two models coming to conquer the world, and we head inside the club.

The music inside is already blasting, and the dance floor is packed with people. I can feel the bass vibrating through my body, and it feels exhilarating. Tony and Michael lead us to the VIP section, where we choose a table and order some drinks.

Tony takes me to the bar, and we all down a few shots of tequila. The drinks flow freely, and soon, I’m feeling more relaxed, letting loose on the dance floor with my friends.

I needed those drinks, but I still feel tense, wondering which of the men here I’ll sleep with tonight. I can’t believe I’m going to do this.

“Come dance.” Nayla tugs on my arm, and we move to the rhythm of the music. I raise my hands in the air and dance, letting myself go free.

Tony and Michael kiss and a slight pang of jealousy hits me. This could have been Luke and me.

Oh, I’m thinking about him again. He’s a fucking liar. I need to erase him from all my memories and thoughts. But how do you delete your first?

As someone approaches us and begins dancing beside us, I smile and move my body to the music. Nayla glances at me and raises her eyebrows in a suggestive manner. I wonder if she’s interested in him or if she’s encouraging me to go for it.

The stranger leans closer, bringing his head near my ear. “Hey, I’m Adam.”

“Emma,” I shout over the music. The alcohol is starting to take effect, and I feel a sense of liberation.

“You’re gorgeous,” he says, and I can’t help but smile. He’s attractive, and I feel like I could have some fun with him.

Nayla winks at me and moves to dance closer to Michael and Tony. I laugh and let go of all my worries, enjoying the moment and the company of a handsome stranger. I can feel

my friends watching me, like a monkey who just got his banana.

We dance more, the atmosphere heats, the tempo increases, and I feel sweat on my back. Adam dances closer to me and slowly dares to put an arm on my waist. I allow him to touch me, to press his pelvis against mine. I feel his arousal, and his gaze jumps from my face to my cleavage.

I wonder if his body is as toned and muscular as Luke's.

Shit, Luke again. Enough. Luke is not here.

I give him a flirtatious smile, and he takes it as an invitation, moving in closer and pressing his lips to mine. The music and the crowd around us fade into the background as I let myself sink into the kiss. For a moment, I forget about everything else and just try to enjoy the sensation of Adam's touch. But as our kiss deepens, I can't shake off the feeling that something is missing. It's not the same as when Luke kisses me. My body doesn't tingle. There's no lump forming in my stomach, no contraction between my legs. *Concentrate. You can do it.*

But I can't do it. I pull away, feeling confused and unsure of what to do next. "Sorry," I say awkwardly.

"It's okay." He smiles at me. "Do you just want to dance?"

I nod, loving that he doesn't pressure me and doesn't flinch at my rejection. He seems like a lovely guy. I should give him a chance. I try to push away thoughts of Luke, but it's hard when the memory of him keeps creeping back into my mind.

Adam and I dance a little more until the heat overwhelms me, and I gesture with my hand toward the bar, indicating that I'm going for a drink.

Adam pulls a pen from the bar. "Give me your hand."

I give him my hand, and he writes his phone number on it.

"Call me if you're interested." He gives me one last smile and disappears into the crowd.

Nayla appears next to me as if she's been watching me all this time.

“Well?” she asks.

“Well, what?”

“I saw you kissed him. He looks cute.”

I shake my head. “I'm not ready for that yet.”

She glances at the number written on my hand. “Are you going to call him?”

“I don't know.”

Thirty-One



LUKE

On the outside, I maintain my composure and keep my expression blank. But on the inside...? A vast void has opened up inside my chest, leaving me to feel as if my very essence is draining away.

I feel like taking a blade and plunging it into my flesh to distract from the unbearable agony that consumes me.

With unsteady legs, I enter my apartment and swallow two painkillers in an attempt to dull the pain. I turn on the TV, only to have the universe mock me as Thomas appears on the screen, delivering a news report from the frontlines of the war.

Fuck.

My own missed opportunity flashes before me. It should have been me on that screen.

The whiskey bottle in the cupboard taunts me. What am I even fighting for? And for whom?

I haven't heard from Mom since that damn day she disappeared from my life. I guess she's never forgiven me for not stopping Dad from kicking her out. Just like I haven't forgiven him for doing it. So how can I expect Emma to forgive me for what I did?

I open the bottle of whiskey and take a sip, then another.

I can't comprehend how I've found myself in this mess, how I've lost everything that was good in my life.

Bang.

My head hurts.

Bang.

I struggle to open my eyes, confused about my surroundings. I try to steady myself as the world around me continues to spin. The persistent knocking continues, and I

realize, through the haze, that it's coming from the door and not within my own mind.

I rise to my feet and make my way to the door, where I find Laura waiting.

“What are you doing here?”

“You look awful.” She pushes me aside and brushes past me until she's inside.

“Come on in...”

“Damn it, Luke, did you drink all that?” Her gaze shifts between the empty bottles on the table and me.

My head is pounding. “What are you doing here in the middle of the night?”

“It's morning.” She looks shocked. “You didn't come to the office, and we agreed we would talk about the investigation, remember?”

How could it be morning already? What happened to last night? “Not now, Laura. Leave me alone,” I groan.

She raises an eyebrow. “It's a work day.”

Oh shit, my stomach is turning. I rush to the bathroom and barely make it to the toilet in time.

“What's happened to you?” Laura's voice comes from the bathroom doorway.

I close my eyes and lean my head against the wall. Another wave of nausea hits me, and I retch into the toilet again. Oh God, it's not over yet.

Laura's words pound in my head like hammers. “Please go away,” I plead. “I don't want to say anything I'll regret later.”

“Like what?”

“Nothing,” I mutter. What can I say to make her go away and leave me alone? I stand and wash out my mouth.

“It's that woman, isn't it? Emma? Is that why you're behaving like this?”

I remain silent.

“What’s your involvement with her?”

I close my eyes. There’s no involvement. I lied, and she dumped me like the asshole I am.

The nausea finally subsides. I glance at Laura and say in the steadiest voice I can manage, “I’m getting off this story.”

“But yesterday you were so eager to—” Laura stops and studies my face closely. “You’re in love with her.”

She sinks onto the couch heavily. “You’re completely in love with her. How did I miss that? Damn it, and she thought you were a courier. I ruined everything, didn’t I?”

“It doesn’t matter now. She wants nothing to do with me,” I reply.

“Then make it right.” Laura approaches me and places a comforting hand on my shoulder. “I’m sorry. I thought you were just fucking her. I didn’t know you loved her. I shouldn’t have said anything. I shouldn’t have interfered.”

“It’s my fault. I tried to have my cake and eat it too. I jeopardized my career and my relationship with her, and it all fell apart. There’s nothing left to do. It’s lost,” I say.

“Lost? Since when do you give up so easily? That’s not the fighter I know.”

“She’s blocked me everywhere. She wants nothing to do with me. I have no other option.”

Laura shakes her head. “There’s always something you can do. If you don’t fight for her, you don’t deserve her.”

Laura’s eyes glisten with tears as she studies me. “You know, for the past year or so, I’ve been waiting for you to notice me, to realize that I’m right in front of you. I hoped that you’d suddenly realize that you were in love with me, but it never happened. I tried to give you hints, but it doesn’t work that way.”

“I’m sorry...” I’m shocked by the revealing confession. Of course, I noticed her recent attempts, but a whole year? In love with me? How did I not notice? Am I really that self-

absorbed? “I’m sorry, Laura. I didn’t realize I was hurting you.”

“No, I’m sorry. Because I thought you’d notice on your own, and I wasn’t trying to fight for it. Don’t make the same mistake, Luke. You had something good, so fight for it.”

“She doesn’t want me. It’s too late,” I say, sinking back into the couch. “There’s nothing left to fight for. It’s over.”

But I can save her business.

A glimmer of hope shines through the darkness. I know how much her company means to her. She built it from scratch with her own two hands. I may have hurt her, but I can at least give her that.

I straighten and look up. “Do you have Gina Ostov’s address?”

Laura nods. “She lives in New Haven.”

“Can you drive?”

She grimaces. “Are you in any condition to travel?”

“Give me half an hour.”

After two hours of driving nonstop, we arrive in New Haven. I dozed off during most of the journey, trying to dilute the effects of my hangover with isotonic drinks and some rest.

“I need to fill up on gas,” Laura says as she exits the main road and follows the signs to the gas station.

We’re close to our destination. I need to focus and find the story in the sea of information. What am I going to ask Gina?

I rub my face with my palms, trying to shake off the grogginess. “I’m going to use the bathroom,” I tell Laura as she pulls up to the pump.

I don’t like the way I look in the mirror today. I splash some cold water on my face and run wet fingers through my

hair, trying to tame it into a tidy shape.

I'm feeling sober now, but nothing is helping this terrible headache.

I open my bag and glance at the bottle of pills. They would take away the pain and allow me to concentrate on the interview.

No.

I can't do that anymore. I can't keep going down this path. I hold the box in my hand and close my eyes, feeling its weight in my palm. I shake it back and forth, listening to the sound of the small pills inside.

No matter what, I will not become like my mother.

I toss the bottle in the trash and walk away.

Gina Ostov's house appears like any typical suburban home. A small garden at the front, a tiled roof, and a picket fence.

"Where is she working these days?" I ask Laura as we park in front of the house.

"There's no information about her current employment in the report. I have no idea."

"That's a little strange." The investigators always include that information.

We stand in front of the door, and I take a deep breath before knocking.

The woman who answers the door is dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. Her light hair is pulled back, and the look in her eyes radiates curiosity. She appears to be in her thirties, and I can easily envision her as a model at a younger age.

"Yes?"

"Gina Ostov?" I ask.

Her eyes narrow. “I don’t use that name anymore. My name is Gina Austin. What do you want?”

“I’m Luke Brant, and this is Laura Norris. We work for the *New York Daily Publishing*.”

“New York?” Her expression changes instantly as if the name of the city is a curse word.

“Yes. I need your help. Milan is trying to hurt someone I know with false accusations of theft. I know it’s not true, and I know you had problems with Alexander Milan too. I’m trying to figure out if there’s a connection.”

She lets out a laugh. “Is that what you think he did? Stole from me?”

Laura and I exchange glances. “I’d like to hear your story.”

“No. I’m sorry, but I’m never going back there again. Not for any price.”

“Please,” I almost beg. “I won’t mention your name if you prefer. You could be an anonymous source.”

“He’ll know right away that it was me,” she says and tries to close the door, but I stop it with my hand.

Laura intervenes. “Gina, please. Can’t you just tell us your story off the record?”

“No. I can’t. I can’t risk it,” she says firmly.

Laura continues. “We need to understand what we’re up against. Luke here,” she points at me, “is fighting for his love.”

Gina looks at me now. “This person you know who’s going through this. Do you love her?”

I nod.

She sighs and falls silent. We stand and wait.

“Okay. I’ll tell you my story but off the record. You can’t publish it. I can’t take the risk. You have half an hour before my son returns,” she says and lets us in.

“Would you like water or coffee?” Gina offers.

We both decline and sit together on the couch. She goes to the kitchen and gets herself a glass of water, then sits across from us and takes a moment to compose herself before she looks straight into my eyes and begins to speak.

“Alexander Milan is a rapist and a pedophile,” she says, starting with a bang. “The women he’s interested in are usually models between the ages of sixteen to eighteen. Preferably those who need something from him and have no support. Like me.”

Laura looks at her with wide eyes.

“My family moved here when I was thirteen. They thought they could make a decent living here, but they didn’t find learning English easy and couldn’t bring in enough money. I was fourteen when I started modeling. I wanted to help my family. Alexander was nice to me. He told me he would give me a job as a model, that I would earn a lot of money, and all I had to do was model for him. So I did. He was nice at first. He took me to expensive places I could only dream of.” She stops and takes a sip of water.

Laura and I are hooked and remain silent.

“His advances seemed harmless at first but slowly became more and more invasive. He would take pictures of me and get too close, his hands running over my body in unwelcome caresses. When I said I felt uncomfortable, he dismissed it, telling me it was just what they expect of models. He demanded that I undress in front of him. I was young and naïve, with no real understanding of what was happening, but with an undeniable pressure to bring home money.”

“So he sexually harassed you?”

“I wish that was the end of it. On my seventeenth birthday, he invited me to a special photo shoot. In retrospect, I know he was waiting for this date because, at that age, I was above the age of consent.” She tries to smile. “How can a girl my age, one who all she knows is what this predator told her, agree to anything?”

I can see that reliving this part of her life is upsetting Gina. Laura obviously sees it, too and moves to sit beside her, taking her hand and holding it. Gina seems to appreciate the gesture and smiles softly.

“He raped me that evening. Even though I said I didn’t want it and that I was a virgin. After he finished, he threw money at me and left. I ran away and didn’t return. My parents didn’t understand why I didn’t work there anymore, but I couldn’t tell them. He said my life would be over if I told anyone. After a month, I found out I was pregnant.”

I dare not speak so as not to interrupt her speech, but a lump forms in my stomach.

“I told him. I thought he would support me. He always told me I was the most beautiful, that he was in love with me. But Alex wanted me to have an abortion. I didn’t want to. It was not how I was raised. He threatened me. He said he wouldn’t give me money, that he would make my life miserable. But I didn’t care. I wasn’t ready to kill my child. With no support coming from him and desperate to make money, I founded a fashion design company and tried to make a living that way.”

“Mystic Fashion?”

“Yes. Alex persisted in his demands to get me to have an abortion, exerting tremendous pressure from all directions. He told my parents that I was a prostitute, that I was pregnant by someone else. That he just wanted to help, and I was plotting against him to get his money. He made sure no one would hire me as a model, and when he heard about Mystic, he sabotaged everything. He stole my designs, and my store caught fire. All so I wouldn’t succeed financially and give up the child. So after a couple of months, I gave up. I closed the business and told him I would have the abortion if he paid me a million dollars.”

“A million dollars?”

She nods. “Yes. I thought that was an amount that would allow me to live peacefully. And he agreed. I gave him a confirmation of the abortion, and he gave me the money. I ran away from the city and moved here, far from him. I changed

my name. I haven't seen him since, and I don't want to see him ever again."

"And your son is...?" Laura asks.

She nods. "Yes. The certificate was fake. I gave birth to Alex's son, and he doesn't know it. I told my son that his father had died. I want nothing to do with Alex Milan, and he can never find out about my son. Do you understand why I can't have it published?"

Tears glisten in her eyes. I nod. God, this is not what I expected to hear. A sexual predator of sixteen-year-old girls? A pregnancy? A child? "We have to bring him down. He should be convicted for his actions."

"What actions? I can never prove that he raped me. He'll say it was consensual. He waited until I was the right age. And if he knew about my child, I don't know what he'd do. At the very least, he'd hurt us and force me to return the money. This money supports us. He's crazy. You don't understand what he's capable of."

Laura leans over and hugs her. "Don't worry. Your story is safe with us."

Gina turns her gaze to me. "I'm sorry about your girlfriend. I hope you support her. That you're there for her after what he did to her. I had no one."

I shake my head. "He's trying to bring down her business, just like he tried to bring down yours. But he didn't rape her."

She smiles. "Maybe she didn't tell you, but I know him. He only has one reason to bring down a company."

I shake my head again. It's not possible. There must be something else here. "Did you say earlier that he stole designs from you?"

"Yes."

"Did you ever find out how he stole from you?"

"Yes, it wasn't difficult. I only had one employee. Someone I hired to manage the office, phones, etc."

“And are you sure it was her?”

“Yes. She admitted she got paid by him. I wasn’t in a position of power. She wasn’t even afraid to tell me. She knew I wouldn’t do anything about it. I just closed the business and ran away.”

“What was your secretary’s name?”

“Sheila Rivera. Why?”

The name doesn’t ring any bells. “I thought maybe that would tell me something.”

We thank Gina and say goodbye.

Back in the car, Laura sits down and looks at me.

“You were right. It’s a big story.”

I nod. “But we don’t have a source. Gina won’t be willing to talk, and I won’t pressure her. She has a child to protect.”

“So, your girlfriend then.”

“Emma? She hates me right now. She won’t tell me anything. And I don’t even know what the connection is. It’s not the same. He didn’t rape her.”

“How do you know? Maybe she didn’t tell you. Gina hid it too. He threatened them.”

I don’t answer, instead going over all the information we just received in my head. “Surely there’s more.”

“More what?”

“There’s a ten-year gap between Gina and Emma. Gina said he likes young models. It can’t be just the two of them. He wouldn’t have waited that long to repeat his actions. He must have done this to other women. The only way I knew to seek out Gina was because she tried to sue him. But the others probably didn’t even file a police report. He continues to evade consequences and becomes more emboldened each time.”

“Yes. That makes sense.” Laura nods, catching on to my enthusiasm. “It is unlikely there’s a decade gap. But how do

we locate them?”

“We have to go through all the models who worked for him. That’s how Gina said he started with her.”

“All right. I’ll send a request to Dave to start working on a list, and we’ll be looking as well. This is going to be a huge story, Luke.”

“So you’re in with me?”

Laura nods and starts the car. “Definitely.”

She shifts into gear and looks at me. “And Luke. You need to talk to Emma about this.”

Thirty-Two



EMMA

“I’ve got our tickets to Miami, Sis! We’re gonna show ‘em who’s boss.” Tony moves his pelvis back and forth teasingly.

I cover my eyes with my hand and laugh. “At the moment, I don’t even have a collection ready.”

It’s been a week since I saw Luke, and he hasn’t contacted me either. Even though I have no intention of letting him get close to me again, I still feel a pinch of disappointment.

“These models don’t match at all,” I say, spreading out the cut-out designs on the table. “They don’t have the same style. I can’t put them on the runway together. How could I have made such a mistake?”

Tony leans over the table and moves the designs around, examining them carefully. “You know what happened?” He looks up and stares at me.

I tilt my head. “What?”

Tony slides the models on the table, separates them quickly into two groups, and points. “Before the breakup.” He points to the other side. “After the breakup. The models you designed before your breakup are colorful and happy, and the ones you designed after are heavy and depressing.”

I scowl and examine the new arrangement he made on the table. He’s right. That’s exactly what happened. Shit.

“We’ll turn it to our advantage,” Tony says excitedly. “I think it would be genius. We can call it ‘Between Light and Darkness’ or something similar. We’ll start with the dark, black, gold, almost gothic. And then, we’ll transition to the light, colorful, neon prints. It’ll be perfection.”

I try to visualize his idea in my mind. Yes, it could work. “You’re a genius, Tony,” I say, impressed.

“I know.” He puts on a coy face. “But you did it, not me.”

I smile. “We both did.”

“You know...” he starts.

“What?”

“Never mind.”

“Finish what you wanted to say. Don’t leave me hanging.”

“Do you recall when we went to see Giselle together?” He hesitates before continuing. “I was thinking about it last night. Do you remember what she said to you?”

“How could I forget? She said I had a curse on me and needed to take a dip in the ocean. What’s that have to do with anything?”

“But do you remember *exactly* what she said? Because I do. She said you will be in a relationship with someone whose name starts with an L, and if you don’t remove the curse, there will be a big betrayal.”

“Okay. So?”

“Well, you didn’t do it, and I think we have reached the great betrayal with Luke, whose name starts with an L.”

“It’s just a coincidence.”

“She also said he has an honorable profession and is successful in his field. Didn’t he turn out to be a successful journalist?”

“It’s—”

“It’s what? A coincidence too?”

“Yes.”

“Sis, everything she said came true. Can’t you see that there is something here?”

“I don’t believe it.” No, it can’t be. “I don’t want to go there now, Tony. Let’s focus, please. We need to finish the designs. We don’t have much time left until the runway.”

We spend hours working on the designs, making sure that everything is perfect. We use mesh fabric in a skin tone as the bottom piece and add our unique stickers on top. I place a

small sticker that barely covers my crotch and another one on my chest in bright yellow, running diagonally from one side to the other. The final product is suitable for all occasions, and I can't wait to showcase it on the stage.

I walk out into the living room, and Tony stares at me with wide eyes. "God, Emma, you look like sex on a stick."

I smile. "Come take my picture."

We gradually add more stickers, creating a range of coverage options. I'm excited to see where this concept will take me and my career. With Tony by my side, I know I can make it happen.

I organize all the designs in their designated folders, making sure to include the reference pages and the specific placement for each design. I want to ensure that there are no errors. I arrange the designs in the order that they will be presented on the runway. The design for Nayla will be the highlight of the show, appearing three times at the beginning, middle and end, so it has been given three separate folders.

When that's all done, I sit on the couch, exhausted.

We have put in a lot of effort over the past week to reach this point. In just a few days, I will show my models on the runway at the most important swimwear show in the world. It's a make-or-break moment for Goddess and for me.

My thoughts drift back to Luke, and I can't help but wonder if they paid him to spy on me or if he did it for publicity. I try to push the thoughts out of my head and focus on the task at hand. I need to stay focused.

Ugh.

I recall my meeting with Giselle and what Tony said to me. I had not followed her advice. Perhaps there really is a curse, and it persists.

Even though I don't believe in witchcraft, I decide to take a dip in the ocean. With the big runway show approaching, I don't want any superstitions to cloud my judgment or any "curses" to get in the way.

I change into a swimsuit and beach dress and head out.

The sun is setting, and the waves are calm. I walk to the water's edge and dip my toes in. The water is cold. I take a deep breath and wade into the water until I'm waist-deep. Then I close my eyes and let the water wash over me. All thoughts of Luke, Alex and the runway disappear.

Ten times she said?

I submerge myself in the water ten times as Giselle instructed, counting each one in my head before emerging from the water.

I shake my head, feeling foolish for even considering Giselle's advice. But I guess it doesn't hurt to try.

I make my way back home, still thinking about the road ahead and all the preparations that need to be made for the upcoming fashion show.

Alexander is going to be there.

I've repressed the thought until now, but the moment of confrontation is getting closer. I have to be ready to face him. I can't let him get into my head. I'm no longer that frightened little girl. I'm smarter and more mature. And I have Tony by my side.

I exit my car, locking it as I spot a figure in the shadows. My heart races as I wonder if it's Alexander here to finish what he started.

But as I get a better look, the silhouette appears tall and slim, not matching Alexander's build at all. Could it be Luke? My eyes narrow as I try to make out the figure through the

darkness. I grip the Mace I purchased for protection and prepare for the worst.

Whoever it is, I'm ready for him.

But as I look again, the figure is gone, leaving me to wonder if they gave up or if they'll be back.

Thirty-Three



LUKE

I let out a deep sigh as I plop down on Connor's couch, my mind consumed with the overwhelming urge for a drink.

Despite having been sober for a week, the cravings feel stronger than ever. I glance up at Connor, who has allowed me in without a word, and I know he understands the struggle I'm going through.

"What happened?"

"I just went to look at her. Just for a second. But she saw me. I think I startled her."

Connor shakes his head. "Why are you putting yourself through this torment? Stay here today. You look like you haven't slept in days."

I really haven't. "What am I doing, Connor? Why can't I move on from Emma like she's moved on from me? How can I get over her? I want to go back to the way things were before when I only cared about myself and my career. I had a good life then," I say, feeling defeated.

Connor smiles. "You cared before too. You just like to pretend that you don't care about anyone, that you don't need anyone, but that was never true. Don't you care about me?"

I examine him silently and realize he's right. I do care about him. He's my only friend.

"You care about Emma, and you care about your father too. You don't get hurt by someone you don't care about. You care too much, Luke. That's why you push people away."

I keep silent.

"And I'm sure your life hasn't been good like that. It's a lonely life. I know mine is. It's been hard for me since Lori died," Connor continues.

"I'm sorry that I joke sometimes about your dates. I know it's hard for you without her. I lost a friend when she died."

He nods. “But you’ve been there for me, and now it’s my turn to support you. And even though it’s hopeless for me, you still have a chance to make things right with Emma. You can prove to her that you didn’t steal from her and that your lies were not meant to harm her.”

“How?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. But you have to try. Women like big gestures.”

No, not Emma. She’s outwardly glamorous and outgoing but far from being a woman of grand gestures. I remember our evening on the sofa and on the beach before everything went wrong. She loves the little moments. Like I do. “I’ll need to think about it.”

“Great,” Connor says, patting my shoulder. “Now, come on. Let’s get you something to eat. You look like you could use a good meal.”

Maybe he’s right? Is there still a chance?

I sift through stacks of old papers in my office, searching for a lead to follow. Laura sits across from me, focused on her laptop and nibbling on a pen. We’ve been at this for hours with no luck. Dave bursts through the glass door forcefully, and it protests loudly.

“I found Sheila Rivera,” he announces, waving the papers in his hand.

“Why were you looking for her?” Laura asks me.

“Because I’m out of ideas,” I reply, taking the papers from Dave. “Where did you find her?”

“Turns out she lives nearby,” Dave says. “I’ve printed out her information for you.”

I take the prints from him and thank him before he leaves the room and returns to his desk.

“Do you think it’s a coincidence that she lives close by?” I ask Laura.

She looks over the information Dave brought us. “Probably. Looks like she’s always lived here and had no reason to run away. I think this avenue is a waste of time. It happened a decade ago, and we already know what went down there.”

“You’re probably right. But I don’t have any other direction at the moment, so I’m going to check this lead first.” I look for the address on Dave’s pages. “It won’t take long.”

I get up and start gathering my things, putting my laptop in the bag.

Laura gets up from her seat. “I’m coming with you.”

I raise an eyebrow. “You don’t have to. I can manage.”

“We said we were doing the article together. I’m coming.”

We leave the offices and take her car to the address provided, planning our moves on the way.

“It says here that she has a fortune-telling business.” I raise my head from the page and examine Laura. She doesn’t take her eyes off the road.

“Let’s go in as a couple interested in a reading,” she suggests.

“Why? We can just say that—”

“Say what? That we’re investigating Alexander Milan? After what Gina told us she did? You do remember that Sheila Rivera worked for him, right? Maybe she still is. What reason does she have to tell us anything?”

Laura’s right. But lie again? I’ve already gotten in trouble for this.

“She won’t agree to be a source, anyway,” Laura continues. “Let’s get what we can out of it. I have an idea.”

“Fine,” I say, letting her lead, as I have no other ideas.

We park near the address, and I glance at the building. “I would expect Milan to pay for her to live in a better place.”

Laura grins. “Okay, So you’re my boyfriend. We’ve been dating for a year now, and I want to check if we’re compatible and if we’re going to get married.” She shoots me a look. “Just go along with it, okay?”

I nod.

We get out of the car, and she puts her arm around mine. “Just in case she’s looking,” Laura says in response to my puzzled looks.

I bite my lip and allow her to hold onto me, even though she’s standing too close for my liking. Now that I know how she feels, I’m uncomfortable with the close proximity.

On the mailbox, I see a sticker, “Giselle, A connection to the divine.”

Giselle? I turn my gaze to Laura. I hope this isn’t a mistake.

We go upstairs, knock on the door, and Laura rests her head on me.

“Yes?” A woman with curly red hair opens the door. She’s dressed simply in jeans and a white button-down shirt.

“Hey.” Laura purses her lips. “We saw the sign downstairs, and I thought you might have time to give us a reading?”

“You need to make an appointment,” the woman says, then hands Laura a card. “Make an appointment, and I’ll be happy to see you.”

“Oh, please. We’re already here, and it’s urgent. I don’t know what to do. He cheated on me!” Laura sobs, her voice trembling with emotion.

Since when does she know how to act like this? I feel her elbow thrust into my waist.

“I’m not cheating on you. Why would you think that?” I hasten to say. “I love you.”

“If you loved me, you would have already proposed.”

The woman standing in front of us looks uncomfortable and unsure of how to react. Laura pulls away from me and embraces the woman, who tries to console her. I stand there, confused and at a loss for words. Laura's sudden outburst has caught me off guard, and I'm not sure how to react.

"Do you understand what I'm dealing with? I gave him a year of my life, and he promised it was serious. But do you see a ring? Do you?" She presents her fingers.

God. Even I start to panic. She's putting on quite a show. The woman surrenders and allows us to enter.

"Give me a moment to get organized. Sit here in the meantime." She points to the living room and disappears behind a beaded screen.

We sit on the yellow couch, and Laura looks at me.

What was that? I ask her with my eyes, but she just shrugs.

The woman returns, wearing a floral dress now, and turns to the kitchen. "I will make your coffee and be right with you."

We wait until she comes back and puts two cups of black coffee in front of us.

"I'm Lisa," Laura says, introducing herself, "and the cheater here is John."

"Giselle," she says, and I exchange a quick look with Laura. I hope we aren't wrong here.

"Who wants to be first?"

"I'll go first," I volunteer, and Giselle explains to me what to do.

She holds my mug in both hands. "This is odd."

Laura jumps. "What is?"

"You said you're a couple?"

"Yes. Why?"

"It's very rare... And it's the second time I've seen it recently. But you claim to be a couple..." she murmurs, her

eyes fixed on me with a knowing gaze. “The coffee grounds indicate a significant betrayal in your relationship, one that may be difficult to reconcile.”

“I knew it! He’s cheating on me. I found lace underwear under our bed,” Laura sobs. “Extra small! And he says it’s mine. I’m not an extra small! He doesn’t even know what size I am.”

“Is there a way to make up for this betrayal?” I ask in a low voice, my eyes still locked on Giselle’s. It can’t be... Could it?

Laura’s body is shaking with tears, and the cup that she holds spills boiling coffee on me.

“Ouch!” I jump as the coffee passes through the fabric of my pants and burns me.

“Oh, baby, I’m sorry. Does it hurt?” Laura puts the cup down and tries to wipe the coffee from my pants. “Where’s the restroom?”

Giselle rubs her face. It’s evident that she’s unhappy with what’s going on. “In the back.” She points to the beaded curtain. “The second room on the left.”

I get up, and Laura pinches my thigh as if trying to imply something. I give her a meaningful look. *It’s okay. I’m not dumb.* I get what’s going on.

I hear Laura continue to rattle, blaming me for all kinds of things and issues that I’ve never done. I have a feeling she’s enjoying all of this.

I pass the bathroom and enter the room at the end of the hall, where a big bed sits in the center. Her bedroom. I rush to the dresser and quickly open all the drawers.

Clothes, underwear, nothing interesting. There’s nothing here.

I go back out and enter another room that looks like an office. I quickly search through the desk drawers, scanning the contents. My eyes land on a pile of papers on the desktop, and

I quickly flip through them, looking for any useful information.

“Everything okay?” Laura calls from the living room.

Shit. “Yes, baby. The stain won’t come off, though.”

I run to the bathroom, turn on the water, then head back to the office.

Bills. She has a lot of bills. Some of them are overdue. If Milan’s still paying her, it must not be a large amount.

I glance at one envelope. “Sheila Rivera” is written there on the address.

Bingo.

I pull out the phone and take a photo. Then I check out more of the documents scattered on the desktop. There are also bank account details. I take the page carefully out of the envelope, take pictures and put everything back in place.

Then I leave the room, hurry to the bathroom and sprinkle water on myself, wetting my khaki pants and my groin in deliberate negligence.

“What happened to you, babe?” Laura is smiling, barely holding back her laughter.

“You spilled coffee on me, and it isn’t coming off. That’s what happened. And now everyone will think I peed on myself,” I say with fake anger. “Let’s go.” I pull her arm, urging her to get up. “Now.”

“How much do we owe you?”

“I didn’t read your coffee yet.”

“Another time,” I say. “I don’t want to stay here like this, all wet.” I stretch my lips to a thin line. “A hundred dollars will suffice?”

She nods, and I leave a bill on the table. “Come on, honey. I need a change of clothes.”

Back in the vehicle, after we close the doors, I allow myself to breathe a sigh of relief.

“Well?” Laura asks. “Did you find something?”

“Yes, *baby*.” I laugh and open the phone to show her the photos I took. “Her mail says, Sheila Rivera. It’s her. Giselle is probably a stage name or something.”

“Great.”

“I couldn’t dig into it there, but I took photos of everything I found. We’ll go through it back at the office.”

“We’ve been working on this for hours.” Laura raises her eyes from the documents. “I can’t find any connection between Sheila Rivera, Milan or Goddess.”

“There are two large money transfers, five thousand and ten thousand dollars, from the same account to her account. It could have been payments for stealing designs.”

“Maybe. But we have no way of knowing who the sending account belongs to. It could be a birthday gift from Grandpa for all we know.”

“We have to find a connection between her and Goddess.” This is what we’ve been trying to do for the last two hours without success. We already know Sheila has a past connection to Milan, but there’s no relationship with Emma or Tony, as far as we can tell, so we have nothing.

“She doesn’t work as a secretary anymore,” Laura says, tapping on her hips as she paces the office. “And I just don’t see any way she could have access to Goddess’ designs.”

I jump up as I suddenly see it. “The dates.”

“What about them?”

I open my data on Goddess. “There it is. See.” I turn the screen to her, and Laura gives me a puzzled look.

“The payment dates match the publications of Milan’s announcements regarding their new designs. Both times.”

“You’re right.” She looks at me with a wide grin. “So she must be the key. But we still have to prove it if we want to publish anything. This is still just circumstantial.”

“It’s probably enough to go to the police and open an investigation. I know someone there. They can find the account number. It’s from Milan. I just know it.”

“Let’s go.”

Thirty-Four



EMMA

I completed the three days of ocean dips before my flight to Miami, hoping it would bring good luck and I would meet someone special there.

I pack the last of my designs and items for the runway, making sure they're well-protected and organized. Tomorrow, we'll begin the first fitting with the models I've chosen. I quickly jot down a post for my Instagram, updating my followers on my journey to Miami and expressing my excitement for the upcoming show.

As I greet Michael and Tony at the airport, I notice Nayla's absence. "Where's Nayla?" I ask, trying to hide my concern.

Michael shrugs. "We thought she was with you."

Panic sets in as I realize the flight is leaving soon. Did she miss her ride? "Call her," I tell Tony, my eyes scanning the terminal frantically. I can't believe this is happening. We can't afford for her to miss this flight.

Shit. The flight leaves soon. Maybe she's waiting for me to pick her up or something?

Tony firmly grips my shoulders. "Take a deep breath. Everything is going to be all right. Be patient during this trip. There will be plenty of challenges ahead."

"I'm not sure I can handle it."

He reassures me with a steady gaze. "I'm here for you. You'll be fine."

Nayla's familiar voice calls out behind me. "Emma, I'm here."

I turn to see her approaching, dragging a large suitcase and wearing a vibrant ensemble of clashing colors, a green crop top, and a pink and yellow skirt. Despite the mismatched outfit, she somehow pulls it off.

As Nayla runs through the airport, her golden curls bouncing, many people stare. But Nayla appears unbothered by the attention, and I know she'll be a sensation on stage. I let out a sigh of relief as she reaches us and envelops me in a hug.

"You made it," I say, trying to steady my voice.

"Just barely," she says, panting. "I got held up at home. But I'm here now."

"Good," I say, feeling the tension in my shoulders ease. "Let's get on the flight. We don't want to be late."

"I can't believe I'm going to model at Miami Fashion Week. Me! A model!" Nayla screams and jumps with excitement. It's impossible not to be caught up in her enthusiasm. "I'm sorry I was late. I had a minor problem with my caramel frappuccino and someone's clothes."

Tony chuckles. "Did you spill it on someone?"

Nayla makes a face. "You'd think he would have taken it better. I smiled and apologized and even offered him my phone number." She winks. "He's hot... Boiling. But he was also so rude."

I join in the laughter. "Did you try to hit on him after you spilled coffee on him?" She shrugs nonchalantly. "It was worth a shot. He's exactly my type, tall and brooding, but he turned me down. Oh well, he was at the café near my house. Maybe we'll cross paths again. He's the first one who's ever said no to me in a long time. I bet I can melt him down eventually."

We arrive in Miami and check into our hotel. From the balcony of my room, I see the sea sparkling in the sunlight. If it weren't for all the work ahead of the show, I'd already be at the beach. But the fun will have to wait.

I pull out my planning notebook and look over the designs again. Should I put number five before three? I struggle with the order of the designs, questioning my choices. What if they

don't like the collection? What if they don't like my ideas? What if the entire show is a failure?

The fear of failure weighs on me, and I feel like giving up and running away. I let out a sigh and lay down on the large bed, staring at the photos of the models I received from the organizers. I believe I know who I will choose, but until the measurements tomorrow, everything is still up in the air. I need to see how the swimsuits fit them. It's especially crucial to me they're all a bit different. My swimwear is not just for models but for women of all shapes and sizes. It's not just a marketing slogan for me, and the show needs to honor that.

I, with my small brand, am going to showcase on the world's largest beachwear stage. I'll be presenting alongside all the big names in the industry, and after this week, there won't be anyone who doesn't know the name Goddess. All my dreams are coming true, and I haven't even turned twenty-five yet. Alex Milan can bite me. He and his threats don't scare me and will never make me stop.

I ignore the void in my heart that reminds me there is one dream that was brutally shattered. It doesn't matter, though. Nothing is as important as my independence and promise of the future.

I call Jess and inform her I arrived and everything is fine before I turn in for the night.

The models walk down the runway, adorned in Goddess swimwear. I didn't use the final designs. Those will be kept secret until the actual show. I don't want to take any chances of leaks. I've already caught one spy, but that doesn't mean that Alex hasn't sent another. Only Tony and I know what will appear on stage, and it will stay that way.

These swimsuits are just a backup. The designs I had planned for the collection before I came up with the new idea. They look good, but they won't make the impact I intend to make.

I call one of the models to come closer to me. Her skin tone is perfect for the neon swimwear.

“What’s your name?” I ask her.

“Tina.”

“Hi Tina, welcome to the show. Please take this note and go to Tony. He’ll explain everything to you.”

She nods, clearly happy to be accepted.

For each of the models I’ve chosen, I assign the specific design that fits her. I jot down the model number I’ve selected on a note and pass it on to Tony. He manages their registration and schedule.

At the end of the day, exhausted, I go backstage to look for Tony. I chose fourteen models, so along with Nayla, there will be fifteen. Each of them is already engraved in my mind, with her designated design.

I look for Tony to make sure everything is in order and that he registered and organized the models as I requested.

I quickly glance around as I think I spot a familiar face in the chaos. One that doesn’t belong here. But there is no one there, only models and fashion industry professionals. I shake my head and turn back. Am I starting to imagine him?

Why can’t I stop thinking about him? He betrayed me. I need to forget about him and delete him from my mind as if he never existed. Enough.

Dwelling on the past will only bring me down. It never leads to a good place.

“Tony,” I call out, catching his dark head in the distance.

He looks up and smiles, waving his hand for me to come over to him.

I watch him as he finishes taking details from one model, and when she withdraws, I approach. “Did you get everything?”

“Are you worried, Sis?” He turns his tablet to me, where I can see a neat table with the details of each model, including

measurements and the design number. I breathe a sigh of relief.

“Everything is ready.” Tony hugs me. “And until the exhibition tomorrow, the beach is calling us.”

“Tony.” I knock on his door, dressed and ready to go to the beach. Nayla found herself a date and decided not to join.

He opens up, wearing a tight swimsuit that flaunts his muscular body.

“Where’s Michael?” I ask and walk inside.

“Still getting dressed. He takes hours.” Tony rolls his eyes. “Which glasses should I wear?” He switches between three pairs of sunglasses, making faces in front of me. “The yellow ones, right? They go well with my swimsuit.”

I nod. “The black pair is beautiful, too.”

I set my canvas bag on the floor and take a seat on the armchair in the room, looking around. Our rooms are identical in every way except for the picture above the bed. “Michael, are you ready?” I call out. “It doesn’t make sense that I’m ready before you.”

“Just a moment,” he responds from the other side of the door. “Sorry, but number two.”

I make a disgusted face, and Tony shrugs. “I told you. Hours.”

“I’ll go downstairs and grab us some towels,” I say, feeling restless and needing to release the pent-up energy from all the preparations and stress. I leave the room and head to the elevator, humming an Ed Sheeran tune.

The hotel has thirty-three floors, and I’m on the thirtieth floor. I wait patiently for the elevator to arrive, then step in. On the twenty-seventh floor, the elevator stops to pick up another passenger. I take a step back to make room, but when the door

opens and I see the person entering, I quickly retreat to the back of the elevator.

“Emma Woods,” the raspy voice caused by cigarettes calls. “I didn’t think you’d have the courage to come here after the publicity about your thefts.”

“You know very well who the thief is between the two of us.” I straighten and lift my chin. I’m not the girl I was then, and I won’t let him intimidate me.

“Your business will fail, one way or another. No one says no to me and gets away with it.”

I glare at him. “The business is mine, and you won’t be able to touch it.”

“Want to bet?” He takes a step forward, closing the distance between us.

I have nowhere to retreat. I can smell his cologne. The same cologne he’s worn since I knew him, and the smell makes me nauseous.

“You can still say yes, you know. Just say yes, and everything will go away. You could have a business worth millions. I’ll even help you,” he says, examining my body from head to toe, looking at me through the sheer fabric of my swimsuit. “I have to say, you’ve grown up nicely. I don’t usually like older women, but you’re still worth a fuck.”

I shrink away from him, feeling disgusted.

The elevator finally reaches the ground floor, and I rush out, gasping for air as if I were suffocating.

Alex grins at me and keeps walking. Damn it. I thought I was stronger than that. And yet, he made me feel like a scared little girl all over again.

I go to the towel stand, collect towels for the three of us and take a selfie with the guy handing them out, who turns out to be one of my avid followers.

I see Tony and Michael getting out of the elevator. Finally.

“Everything okay?” Michael asks as they approach. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I did,” I say and exchange a look at Tony.

“Alex?”

I nod.

Tony grasps my arm. “Did he do something?”

“He just informed me I can still accept his offer.”

“Disgusting. What a creep. Don’t go anywhere alone while we’re here. One of us will accompany you at all times,” Tony says, and Michael nods in agreement. “Now, come. Let’s hit the beach and relax.”

We return to our rooms after spending a wonderful afternoon on the beach, sunbathing and laughing and drinking cocktails. I’m happy. My dream is going to come true tomorrow, and I’m here with my best friends. But when I enter the empty room, my face falls. Michael and Tony are happy with each other. They’ll spend the night together while I’m still alone.

“Hurry up, put it on.” I hurry one girl to put on the transparent beach dress over the garment. “Don’t forget at the end of the runway—”

“Take it off. Yes Yes. I remember. Don’t worry.” She smiles at me.

My nerves are on edge. It’s show time, all or nothing. All the models are ready and wearing the taped swimsuits. The first half of the show will feature all-black suits, exuding a mysterious and alluring vibe. As the show progresses, the models will unveil the new prints in vibrant and glowing colors.

The reactions I got from the models themselves when we taped the swimsuits for the first time were amazing.

As showtime approaches, interest in the Goddess swimsuits increases. Photographers and journalists who are granted access backstage excitedly snap photos of the models in hair and makeup wearing my designs. Surveys and interest are on the rise, as they seem to have left the other displays and come to ours. It's not surprising since our designs stand out and are unlike anything else out there. I spot some angry expressions from my competitors, but I don't let it bother me. My goal is to elevate my brand above everyone else, not to feel uncomfortable about succeeding.

I myself am wearing one of my designs under my dress, one of our more revealing options, and over it, I'll be wearing a kaftan in the new flamingo print. I know there's an expectation for me to walk the runway, and I intend to fulfill it.

I organize all the models according to the order they'll walk on the runway. Nayla, in the revealing swimsuit, goes up first so that as soon as she comes down, she'll have time to add more coverage. She'll make three different appearances on the stage, and each time we'll add another part to add coverage, and in her third appearance, she'll wear a fully covered swimsuit, all taped up. I hope this is enough to make my vision clear. The level of coverage depends on the user and can change from day to day according to their mood. You no longer need to decide in advance what to buy and wear.

My heart races when we're called to the stage. We're next in line. Tony comes from behind and squeezes my hand in encouragement. "Everyone is exactly where they're supposed to be. Don't worry."

He knows me so well.

The music starts playing, and I give Nayla the signal to go. She gives me an excited smile, her curls bouncing nervously. It's her first time on stage, and I hope her excitement doesn't get the best of her. She's definitely not the typical runway model, and neither are any of the other girls I've chosen. I did that on purpose.

I watch nervously from behind the scenes as Nayla confidently struts down the runway. I hear a murmur from the audience. They understood it's not just a piece of clothing. I glance at the audience. There are many familiar faces in the front rows. Celebrities. I can't believe they came to see little old me. Rumors about my designs must have spread as they're whispering among themselves.

Nayla reaches the end of the stage and takes off the top as we had planned. The tiny swimsuit looks great on her, highlighting all her assets, and I feel like a proud mother hen.

When she gets off, I rush to her to apply the extra parts.

"Emma, I'm about to faint from excitement. Did you see who was in the crowd? Wow, what pressure!" she exclaims. "Did you see me? Was I okay?"

I laugh. "Please don't pass out. You have two more walks to make. And you were excellent." I give her a hug.

As the show comes to an end, I take off my dress, revealing the swimsuit I'm wearing. Tony gives my hair a final adjustment and sprays me with a shimmering body spray.

I wait for Nayla to finish her walk and hear the applause of the audience. The effect worked. The faces in the audience look impressed. And now, it's my turn.

I walk up to the stage and strike a pose. The shouts and applause are deafening. The lights are so bright that I can barely see, but I don't care. I walk to the end of the runway and take out my phone as if posing for a selfie. The pictures I take appear on the screen behind me at the same moment, and the photographers' cameras flash wildly around me. I turn a final pose and blow kisses to the audience. Everyone is cheering.

I get off the stage, put on my dress quickly, and go up again with Tony and Nayla. We walk with arms entwined and bow. The atmosphere is electrifying. I conquered a summit.

I smile at the crowd, allowing myself to relax a bit. The show is behind me, and everything went smoothly. I did it.

I turn my head to the left and freeze as if I've just received a blow to the chest.

Luke.

His gaze is fixed on me, and he stands, clapping and grinning. What the hell is he doing here? Why did he come?

I try to keep the smile on my face and not move a muscle. I forcibly turn my head away from him and wave to the enthusiastic crowd.

We exit the stage, and I fall into Tony's arms, who embraces me in a crushing hug.

"You did it. You killed them," Tony screams.

"You think?"

"I'm sure of it."

I break out of his hug, only to be sucked into another hug from Michael, then Nayla, and after that, hundreds of people seem to surround me. The models and crew hug me and shake my hand. I just smile and say thank you, trying to push away the thoughts of Luke from my mind, but I can't.

Luke is here. He was in the crowd. Why? Did he like the show?

After the pressure weighing me down the past few days dissipates, I pose for what feels like hundreds of pictures until my facial muscles ache from smiling. I look around, expecting to see Luke standing in a corner somewhere, waiting for me. Smiling at me.

I hate him. I want to punch him, show him how angry I still am. Damn, I'm still so mad. It still hurts so much. But he's nowhere to be found.

Nayla finds me wandering. "Are you looking for something?"

I shake my head. "No, nothing." I force myself to focus and return my attention to her.

"It was crazy. I can't believe I walked a runway and I was photographed so much. I can't wait to see myself in the news.

But don't worry, I'll always model for you, even when I'm a multi-millionaire and on the cover of *Vogue*. I won't forget where I started." She laughs and pats her hair playfully.

I smile and hug her. I'm excited too.

Tony approaches us, holding a tablet, and speaks into his earpiece. He motions for us to wait and then turns to us with an excited expression. "Emma, you won't believe it. We have thousands of orders. I can't keep up with the influx. Our website is crashing, and I had to enlist Michael's help to handle the calls coming in."

"Are you serious? You're not messing with me?"

"Do you think I would laugh at such a thing? Emma, you nailed it. We're the hot topic everywhere." He opens his phone and shows me the tags. The number of views on the hashtag is increasing by the minute.

I can hardly contain my excitement. I hug Tony tightly, laughing and crying at the same time. "We did it, we really did it!" I exclaim. Michael joins in the hug, and we all jump up and down in excitement.

The rest of the night is a blur of congratulations and champagne. I can't believe it. My brand is a success. All the hard work and sacrifices have paid off. I can finally breathe easy, knowing that Goddess is here to stay.

Everyone continues to celebrate, but after more than enough excitement, I head back to my room. I need to be alone to process everything that has happened tonight. The show was a success. The brand is on its way to the top, but my personal life is a mess. I need to figure out how to deal with my feelings for Luke and move on from the past. I'm too afraid to face him. Afraid that from the moment he shows himself, I'll be forced to admit the truth, that I am still in love with him, and I have not forgotten him at all.

I lock my door and retreat inside. If he comes knocking, I'm not going to open it. Not ever.

Thirty-Five



EMMA

The ringing of the alarm clock jolts me out of my sleep. I'm lying in bed, still dressed in yesterday's clothes. I guess I dozed off after making plans. Luke never showed up and didn't even knock on my door. I don't understand why he came to my show if he had no intention of talking to me. Was he just trying to drive me insane?

I need to get ready and begin throwing my stuff in a bag. Today marks our departure from Miami. The city has been good to us. Tony kept me updated with messages that were full of screenshots of our orders. I look at my phone and realize he kept going even while I was asleep. The numbers we've been getting are outrageous. Wow!

There's also a message from Jess. I open it with a smile, waiting to see her congratulations on the show she may have seen online. It's hard to say I wasn't disappointed in her decision not to come, but I understand. It was worse for her, and she doesn't have Tony to protect her.

Jess

The show was wonderful yesterday. I'm proud of you.

A knock on my door causes me to jump. Luke?

I get up and open it, ready to yell at him and slam the door in his face, but it's just Nayla. I didn't want him to show up, so why am I so disappointed he didn't?

"Good morning, Emma." She enters the room with light steps and looks well-rested. "You haven't packed yet?"

I raise an eyebrow. "You're already packed?"

"Yes, I packed yesterday." She winks. "What? Don't look at me like that. I just shoved everything into the suitcase. It's

going in the wash when I get home, anyway.” She laughs.

“Did you sleep at all? How are you so alert and cheerful?”

“Good sex gives me energy,” she says. “This guy I found here... God. What durability he has. Three times in a row. Can you believe it? And he also gave me two orgasms with his mouth. I’m so satisfied I could melt. You should try it.”

I twist my lips into a fake smile. I wish I could be free like her.

“Anyway, I wanted to make sure you’re okay.”

“Of course, I’m okay. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Her eyes widen. “Didn’t you see?” She opens her phone, and within a second, I hear my incoming message.

I click on the link she sent me. “What is it?”

As I lay my eyes on the names, a knot forms in my stomach. Luke Brant and Laura Norris. I can’t imagine anything positive coming from this. Could this be the reason he came here? To unveil a story about me? My mind races with thoughts of what accusations they could have made this time.

As I delve deeper into the article, my jaw drops. The piece references Goddess, but this time, it depicts us as the heroes. Luke and Laura have provided proof that the recent designs Milan released were originally mine. They even mention a specific email, with a date, that I sent. Damn it, I knew Luke was spying on me.

The article continues, revealing that they have uncovered the true criminal behind the espionage. Some woman named Sheila Rivera. Allegedly, she was paid by Alex to steal from me. I don’t know anyone by that name, and I’m certain she never had access to my work. Could it be a fake identity?

“Well?” Nayla says impatiently. “So, is it true?”

“The part about the stealing is. They stole my designs, but I have no idea where they got that information from,” I say. This article presents Goddess as Red Riding Hood and Milan as the Big Bad Wolf. I don’t like it. I never saw myself as a

victim or as someone who needed saving. I dealt with Alex Milan when I was sixteen, and I can deal with him now by myself.

This article reveals private information about my company, about me. Things I didn't want to be revealed.

I hurry to read to the end. I hope he didn't find out what happened five years ago. Please no... I spot another name mentioned in the article, another unfamiliar name, Joanna Reese. A former model. My heart skips a beat.

Joanna tells how Alex slept with her while she modeled for him and fired her as soon as she got a little older. She's older than me. It was before my time. How many years has he been doing this? He's accused of using his position of power for rape, bribery, and theft. I bite my lip and continue reading. I breathe a sigh of relief when I understand that there's no mention of me.

"I want to gouge his eyes out," I mutter.

"What?"

I completely forgot that Nayla was here. I look up at her. "I want to kill this reporter who exposed me."

"But I thought it was a good story? He proves that everything they accused you of is false and that Milan paid someone to steal from you. You come out clean."

"Maybe," I tell her. "But that's not the exposure I want. I'm a designer and a business owner. I want articles about my designs. About how I started a business on my own so maybe I can inspire other women. Not for false accusations or theft. This is not the way I want to be famous."

There's a knock on the door, and Nayla rushes to open it before I can stop her. I breathe a sigh of relief when I see it's just Tony. What would I do if Luke were standing here right now?

Tony storms in with a smile on his face. "'Milan's stock is plummeting. And we need another factory.'"

"What?"

“From the moment the article was published, the phone hasn’t stopped ringing. We sold hundreds of thousands of units. Our factory can’t handle the load.” Tony grins.

“What?” I repeat.

“You are a phenomenal success.” He hugs me tightly.

Nayla screams and jumps in the air. “Yes, baby! I’m going to appear on the cover of *Vogue*.”

“I don’t understand.” I feel disoriented.

“The article your beggar published exploded. Everyone is talking about it. Alexander will probably be indicted. You’re a star. A hero. Look how many messages and phone calls I got.” He turns the device around and shows me the number.

“I’m not a hero.” Far from it. I ran away. “And you know I don’t talk to the media.”

“Your beggar?” Nayla interjects. “Who is he?”

I don’t have the strength to handle this, and I sink onto the bed.

“I don’t think you can get away with it this time.” Tony tilts his head. “The police are involved. They’ll probably call you. You’ll have to talk.”

I shake my head. No, this is not what I wanted. I don’t want to wake up sleeping demons.

“I think we should hire a public relations person,” Tony suggests. “Let them draft responses to the media. What do you say?”

“Yes, please,” I agree with Tony. “Find a woman to represent us.”

“A woman?”

“We’re a women’s swimwear brand. So yes, a woman. And yes, I dated the reporter who published the article,” I add, turning to Nayla.

“You dated him? Wait, is this the guy you cried over? I don’t understand.” She looks confused.

Me too.

“Yes, he’s the same one. He tricked me and spied on me to get this article.” For him, it was just a means to an end. I, on the other hand, fell hard.

I suddenly remember the name mentioned in the article. “Tony, who is Sheila Rivera?”

“I wondered about that too. I don’t know anyone by that name. And she hasn’t worked for us. Do you think he might be wrong?”

Although I hate Luke for what he did to me, I’m sure he wouldn’t have written names without a reliable source. I looked him up. He’s won several awards. He’s not someone new and inexperienced, but he is someone who knows how to manipulate a woman into giving him everything he needs, who knows how to make her fall in love and fall hard.

“No. We need to figure out who she is and how she’s related to us.”

Nayla interjects by handing me her phone. “Here.”

“What?”

“I looked her up. Sheila Rivera from New York on Facebook. Here’s her profile.” She hands me the device again.

“Fuck, Tony.” I look at the picture on her profile.

He takes the device from me. “Fuck!” he shouts. “Fucking Giselle.”

“Giselle?” Nayla is trying to follow our conversation.

“That’s Tony’s stinky fortune teller,” I shout. “Tony, that’s your fortune teller! I can’t believe you gave her secret information.”

“I never thought... I just wanted to find out the chances of success. She was good, always knew what was going to happen,” he mumbles.

“Of course, she was good. She sold everything you brought her to Alex.”

“I’m so sorry. Really, Emma. I don’t know what to say. I never thought...” He looks defeated.

“I can’t believe you took me there. That she works with Alex.” I sink back onto the bed and hold my head in my hands, having trouble digesting the whirlwind I’m in right now. “That’s why she didn’t want to give you a reading in my presence. She was afraid I’d find out you were talking to her about my designs.” It’s all coming clear in my head.

“I know it’s terrible, Emma, but look on the bright side. Goddess is only benefiting from his article, and everyone now knows who Alex is. You won’t have to be afraid of him anymore.”

Nayla shifts her gaze between Tony and me, trying to keep up with our conversation.

I turn and fall face down on the bed. I’ve spent all these years running away from the news, and now it’s caught up to me anyway.

Thirty-Six



LUKE

My phone has been ringing nonstop since we released the article, but I've been screening all the calls and allowing Laura to handle them and take part in the interviews, letting her be in the spotlight. She deserves recognition, especially after the way I treated her.

Besides, the whole situation seems so insignificant and bland to me now. My entire life, I've been chasing fame and recognition, and it doesn't matter at all.

The notification sound of an incoming message catches my attention, and I look at the screen.

Laura

We received confirmation from the police that they're opening an official investigation against Milan.

Finally, justice is being served.

Laura found a model who was willing to speak out about how Alexander Milan sexually harassed her when she was young, as well as other girls who worked for him. The confirmation of the official investigation does hold great significance to me. It's not about me but about Gina and all the other victims. Milan will finally be held accountable for his actions and face trial.

I'm restless as I pace back and forth in the living room. I had to see Emma, and I flew to Miami specifically to do so, with no other motive than to see her and make sure she was okay. Now, I regret that decision. She's constantly on my mind and haunts my dreams. Her show was incredible, something I had never seen before, and the audience's enthusiastic reactions seemed to mirror my own thoughts.

When she stepped on the stage wearing that tiny swimsuit, I had to resist the urge to run up to her. And it took all my willpower to stay put when her eyes met mine in the crowd. Her pain was reflected in her eyes, and I was the one who hurt her.

I rake my hand through my hair. It's unbearable to be so close yet so far away from her. I want to break something, but I know it won't do any good.

She wants nothing to do with me. I made a huge mistake, and there's no going back from it. I have to accept that I've lost her and let her go.

At least I could help save her business, which is what matters most to her.

I drive to the office, feeling drained of energy as I make my way inside.

"Hey, Luke, well done." I receive congratulations and pats on the back as I enter, but I ignore them and head straight to Raphael.

"Brant, the article is blowing up," he says in greeting. "You were right, there was a huge story here, and we were looking at the wrong side. You and Laura did an amazing job."

I nod.

"Did you see that Alexander Milan was arrested?" He turns on the TV hanging on the wall in his office and switches to a news channel. Milan is shown being taken into custody, hands cuffed behind his back, as the cameras flash repeatedly.

"Nice." I hope that Emma finds some comfort and closure in this. Perhaps it will serve as a form of atonement for my actions.

"I want to bring you back to current affairs. I have an article about—"

I raise my hand in the air and stop him. "I need a vacation."

"What?" He looks confused.

“I need a vacation first.”

“Is that an excuse for going to interview elsewhere? Let’s talk. I don’t want to lose you.”

“No, no. I really need a vacation. You were right. It was a mistake to come back right after getting shot without rest. I need a few days off.”

“Does your shoulder still hurt?”

“No, I’m fine. It’s not that. I just need time to organize my thoughts. I have vacation days coming. I’ve never taken them.”

“Yes, yes, sure.” He furrows his forehead. “Will a week be enough for you?”

I nod. “Thank you, Raphael.” I haven’t felt so defeated in a long time. The world around me seems gray and colorless. Even the success of my article doesn’t bring me any joy or excitement.

“Luke, wait,” I hear Laura call out to me, and I stop.

“Come here.” She pulls me into her office, closing the door behind us. Our relationship has shifted since the article was published. She seems to have come to terms with the fact that we will only be friends and accepted it. “Are you going somewhere?”

“Home. I asked Raphael for some time off.”

“Time off?” She raises an eyebrow, knowing I’ve never asked for time off before. “Is everything all right? We’re swamped with requests for interviews. Why now?”

I nod. “I’m feeling drained and need to take some time to rest.”

She gives me a thoughtful look. “I truly apologize for what happened with Emma.”

“It’s not your fault. I’m the one who lied. She would have found out, eventually.”

Laura studies me. “But I’m the one who told her. So I’m sorry. Again.”

“I forgave you a long time ago,” I say sincerely. I’m not angry with her. She was hurt because of my actions. I acted like a jerk, and I accept the consequences of my actions. “What can I help you with?”

“We got invited to appear on *The Tonight Show* tomorrow.”

I shake my head. “You go. I’m not interested.”

“That’s crazy, Brant. Why would you miss something like that?”

“You can go.”

“You don’t understand. I can’t go alone. They want both of us. You have to come, or I can’t go either.”

Shit. I don’t feel like putting on a happy face and looking like I’m excited about the success of our exposé. I want to disappear for a few days. Sort out my thoughts. Forget Emma.

“Please, Brant, I know you’re mad at me, but don’t ruin this chance for me,” Laura begs.

“I’m not mad,” I mutter. The last thing I want is to hurt her again. I try to imagine myself in her place. I would be disappointed if the situation were the other way around. “Okay, fine. I’ll do it. Send me the details.”

“Yes!” She hugs me.

I wrap my arms around her and hug her back. She deserves someone wonderful. Someone who isn’t me.

She pulls away from me and looks deep into my eyes. “Use it.”

“Use what?” I ask, confused.

“*The Tonight Show*. The exposure. If you want her back, take advantage of it. Show Emma how much you love her.”

I stare at Laura, my mind racing. How can I make amends for my deception? I traveled all the way to Miami, hoping she would forgive me, but it was clear just from looking at her she wouldn’t even speak to me.

“I already told her I love her. She’s not ready to hear from me.”

“Think of something. Don’t miss this opportunity. What have you got to lose?”

What do I have to lose? I’ve already lost her. It can’t get worse than that. Laura is right. I have to do something.

I return home and start formulating a plan.

Thirty-Seven



EMMA

“**W**ait!” Laura blocks my door with her body, holding it open with force. I clench my fists, trying to keep my anger in check. She’s lucky I’m not a violent person.

I narrow my eyes. “What do you want? I’ve already told you I’m not talking to journalists, and especially not you.”

“I want to apologize,” Laura says, her voice sincere.

I raise an eyebrow. “For what?” I stop trying to shut the door and lean against the doorframe, waiting for her response.

“For the things I said the first time I was here. I was hurt, and I acted like a jilted woman.”

“You just told me the truth.” I try to shut the door again.

“Yes, but I did it with a selfish motive. I wanted to ruin it for you because I was in love with Luke. It wasn’t mutual, and I was hurt. I just wanted to hurt him back.”

I shake my head. “Still, it’s not your fault. He’s the one who lied.”

“That’s precisely what he told me.” She manages a half-smile. “He was going to tell you everything and assure you he never intended to deceive you. But then I showed up first and spoiled it for him. What if I hadn’t shown up, and he had arrived that night and revealed the truth over dinner? Do you think you would have listened?”

“I don’t know. I can’t say how I would have reacted. It didn’t happen that way. He betrayed my trust, he stole—”

“He didn’t steal any of your designs. He proved that Milan did it.”

I hesitate. “He still poked through my documents without my permission. There’s a copy of a private email in your article.”

“You’re right. Luke messed up. I agree. Big time. But his motives were always good. He never wanted to hurt you. After he realized what was happening to you, he was determined to save your business.”

I raise my hand to stop her. “I don’t need saving.”

“Think about it,” she adds. “You’re giving up on love just because of one mistake. I get it. He’s an idiot,” she says. “He was wrong big time, but at the core of it all, his heart was always in the right place. That’s all I’m saying.”

“I have nothing to think about.”

“All right. I’ve said all I can but one last thing. I suggest you watch *The Tonight Show* this evening,” she says and turns away.

I watch as Laura disappears down the stairs, and I close the door.

Luke’s intentions change nothing. How can I forgive something like this? He didn’t even tell me his name. He spied on me and snooped through my laptop. Maybe I was wrong, and he wasn’t the one who leaked the designs, but he stole my trust. What kind of relationship can exist without trust? Love is not always enough.

Tony arrives a few minutes after Laura leaves, missing all the drama.

“Hey, Sis,” he hugs me. “Did you get some rest?”

I nod. “Want some tea?”

“Coffee, please,” he asks, and I turn to make him a mug.

“It seems everybody can’t stop talking about us since that article came out. The show and the article combined generated a real buzz, and it’s still going strong.”

“How much did we sell?”

“We’ve reached several hundred thousand units already, and the orders are still coming in. That’s what I wanted to talk about.”

I finish the coffee preparation and hand him the cup.

“We need to find a new factory,” Tony says.

I look at him. “Why?”

“Like I said earlier, the current one is too small to keep up with demand. We’ve reached our maximum capacity, and they can’t produce any more than what we’ve already given them.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Are you serious?” I bite my bottom lip and think. “What percentage of all orders are they producing right now?”

“About sixty percent. I had to stop sending new orders to them.”

“How long until they can take on more orders?”

“A few days, I think. I can call and check,” he offers.

“Do that. I’d rather not have to find a new factory. The feeling of shortage will only increase demand. Get time estimates for new orders, and we’ll give our customers a realistic delivery date, even if it’s two months out.”

“But summer will be over by then,” he points out.

“I don’t care. I want to keep our company a boutique one. The name it builds is worth more to us. Demand will just be higher next year.”

He nods. “Okay. I’ll take care of it.” He sits down on the sofa, and I hurry to take out the coasters.

“What about your beggar?”

“What about him?”

“Have you spoken to him since the article was published?”

“No. And I have no intention of speaking to him. He betrayed my trust and lied to me. I’ve erased him from my life. You know, he even sent his partner here.” I let out a bitter laugh.

“What did she want?”

“To apologize, she said. I think Luke thought it might make a difference. Oh, and she also mentioned something

about watching *The Tonight Show*. I guess they'll talk about their story or something."

"Do you want to watch?"

"The show? I don't know. Why should I?"

"Let's see." Tony gives a half smile and reaches for the remote in the desk drawer.

I glance at him and playfully stick out my tongue. I own a TV, but I hardly watch shows or movies, as I rarely have spare time. However, if Tony wants to watch the show, I'll give it a few minutes of my time. "Sure, why not?" I shrug and sit back as Tony turns on the TV and navigates to the channel where the show is airing. I can't help but feel a twinge of curiosity about what she might say.

I listen attentively as the celebrity being interviewed talks about his new film. The host then concludes the interview and proceeds to the next item.

"It's time to bring out the two journalists who uncovered the scandal that's been shaking the fashion industry. The exposé on bribery and sexual harassment led to the arrest of a major player in the industry. Please welcome Laura Norris and Luke Brant, the minds behind the most talked-about article of recent times!" the host declares with excitement.

My eyes widen as the host announces Laura and Luke as guests on the show. I glance over at Tony and see the same shock on his face. I turn my attention back to the screen, where Laura appears in a stunning evening gown, her dark hair styled in elegant curls. She looks amazing.

I feel my heart clench as Luke appears on screen, dressed casually in scuffed jeans, a white t-shirt, and a jacket. He exudes a charismatic, bad-boy appeal I find hard to resist. Alongside Laura, they take their seats on the guest couch next to the host, looking more like movie stars than journalists. Surely not harmful to the ratings.

"How does it feel to have uncovered such a wide-ranging corruption case spanning fifteen years?" the host asks.

“We worked hard to make this happen,” Laura responds. “We left no stone unturned.”

“Alexander Milan is now in custody, awaiting trial. Do you think he’ll be convicted?”

“There’s a lot of evidence against him, so we hope so,” Luke chimes in. “Not only did he attempt to intervene in the market and eliminate small companies, but he also had a history of sexual harassment. It was important to us to expose that and make sure he couldn’t hurt anyone else. We may not have been able to interview all of his victims, but we found a few willing to come forward and file a complaint. We hope others will do the same.”

“Does he know about you?” Tony asks, looking at me with concern. I shake my head, my gaze fixed on the screen. Luke seems unaware of my connection to Milan, and I hope to keep it that way.

“I was told that you have a personal interest in the story. Do you want to tell us about it?”

“Yes,” Luke says, and I lean forward. Maybe he does know? No, no way.

“I’m in love with Emma Woods, the creator of Goddess, the one who set it all in motion,” Luke declares as my image appears on the screen. The studio erupts with applause and cheers that only add to the dizzying feeling in my head.

“It sounds like the audience is disappointed,” the host says with a grin as whistles and shouts are heard once again. “Does that mean she’s taken?”

“No. Unfortunately, I messed things up,” Luke says, raising his hand and halting the applause from the crowd. “I didn’t consider the impact my actions would have on Emma. I was only thinking of myself. I’m sorry, Emma,” he says, looking directly into the camera. “And I do love you. What can I do to earn your forgiveness?”

The audience stands, erupting in cheers and support. They love him. Adore him.

Suddenly, the crowd erupts into enthusiastic chants of “Forgive him!”

The shouts grow louder and more unified until the entire audience is cheering it together in unison.

What the hell?

“They want you to forgive him,” Tony says.

I can see that. “Why? Because he asked for forgiveness? He betrayed my trust.”

“He really loves you, Sis. No one does something like that in front of the world without meaning it.”

“I don’t care. It’s too late.” I hold the remote and press the off button. It would have been better if I never watched it to begin with.

“What?” I say to Tony’s stare.

“You should forgive him.”

“Are you taking his side too? I can’t believe you’re against me.”

“I’m not against you. I’m for you. You deserve love. I’ve never seen you so happy as when you were with him.”

“He lied to me, Tony. He stole from—”

“It was Giselle. And he’s the one who exposed her. If he hadn’t done that, Giselle would have continued to steal from us, and Alex would have continued to threaten you. Thanks to your beggar, we found the criminals, and Alex will pay. You no longer have to be afraid.”

“I can’t forgive him.”

“True, he was wrong. But we all make mistakes. I made a big mistake when I told Giselle about the new designs. You were mad, but you forgave me. You didn’t cut me out of your life.”

“It’s not the same.”

“Really? Because I think it is. I know it’s hard to admit, but I can see the way your eyes light up when you talk about

him. And I know it's scary to take a chance on love again after everything that's happened to you. But that's just part of the journey. Relationships aren't always easy, but if you give up after the first obstacle, you'll end up alone. And I know that's not what you want. You have a chance to make things right, to take a risk and see where it leads. Don't let fear hold you back."

I shake my head. "It's not the same. You and I have a history, a bond. You saved me. He deceived me from the start, and that's not something I can easily forgive."

Tony chuckles. "So, you're saying I have a certain amount of 'credit' with you, and he started with none, so he's in the red? And if I mess up again, I'll also be in the red? Can I check my balance?"

I narrow my eyes. "Don't be rude."

"You know, I seem to recall that he also saved you once. That should account for some credit. And can I say that I think orgasms should also be considered as credit?"

I punch Tony in the shoulder, and he pretends to faint. "No, you can't say." How could he compare what happened with Giselle to Luke's lie? It's not even on the same scale.

We finish completing the last details of the deliveries, and Tony leaves.

I sit on the couch heavily. My hand hesitates on the remote.

I really shouldn't.

I turn on the TV again and replay *The Tonight Show*.

Thirty-Eight



LUKE

I sit in my living room, swirling my coffee for no reason. My gaze is fixed on my phone, resting idly on the table beside me. I can't help but wish with all my might that it would ring or at least display a message. But nothing. Not a single notification. Damn it.

My heart sinks as I think back to the public embarrassment I faced confessing my love on national television. Laura had assured me that there was no way Emma could ignore it, but yet here I am, still waiting for a response.

I look at the still device again. Nothing.

Memories of Emma flood my mind, the way she smiled, the way she laughed, the way she looked at me. I can't believe I've lost her. The pain is overwhelming. I try to push it away, but it's all I can think about. How do I move on from this? How do I forget about her and move on with my life? I feel lost and alone without her.

My heart races as I hear the notification for a new message. "Please let it be her," I whisper to myself as I reach for my phone on the table. Then my heart sinks as I see it's a message from Connor. I quickly set the phone back down, feeling defeated.

After a few moments, I force myself to pick it back up and reluctantly open the message from Connor.

Connor

My house in an hour.

I read the cryptic message repeatedly. The last thing I want is to go out right now, even if it's to Connor's house.

Did something happen?

I wait for an answer. Maybe it's nothing. Maybe he won't mind rescheduling.

Connor

Just be here.

I exhale. He leaves me no choice. I get up from the couch and go get ready.

"I'm here. So what's so urgent?" I say as I enter through his door, walking directly into the living room. How come it's always so tidy in here? Does he have a housekeeper? Maybe I should get one.

"I called your office earlier to check on you, but you weren't there, and your phone was off," Connor says, his voice filled with concern.

I remain silent, staring at him. I had turned off my phone, hoping it would help me stop thinking about her nonstop. It didn't.

"They told me you took a week off," he continues.

"That's right."

"You haven't taken a day off since you started working there four years ago," he observes, sounding surprised.

"Exactly. So I have some vacation days I can use."

"You didn't take time off even when you got injured."

"Okay and?"

"Then you can probably understand that I'm worried," Connor says.

"You have nothing to worry about. Everything is fine."

“So it’s not a coincidence that your vacation came at the same time as what happened with Emma?” he asks, gaping at me.

“No, it’s not a coincidence. I needed some time to think and get myself together.”

“What about the pills?”

Ah. We arrived at the core. That’s why he called me here. To see if I’m doped. “I got rid of them.”

“Are you sure?” He examines me carefully, studying me intently to determine if I’m telling the truth.

“Yes, I’m sure. I got rid of the pills. Want to check my pupils? What is this interrogation about? I thought we were friends. I didn’t come over here expecting to be treated like a suspect.” I pace the room.

“We are friends, and you know it. I’m here for you.”

“I’m fine.”

“Take a seat,” he says, gesturing toward the armchair in front of him. “I want to tell you something.”

“What is it?”

“Sit down.”

I hesitate for a moment before eventually sitting down.

“When we were sixteen—” he starts.

“What does this have to do with anything?”

“Shut up and let me finish. Do you remember that day when we got home from high school, and your dad was home?”

Fuck. where does this story lead to? My dad was rarely home. “Are you talking about the day of the big fight?”

“Yes.”

I remember that day all too well. “He scolded me for missing classes after years of being absent from my life. After he left me alone, without a mother to turn to—”

“You weren’t alone.”

“I was surrounded by nannies, but it sure felt like being alone. For years, I was without parents, and he was hardly around. But suddenly, he decided he wanted to be involved again.” It was too little, too late.

“Are you sure he wasn’t interested or was it that you didn’t want to listen?”

I shake my head. He wasn’t there for me. I couldn’t shake off the feeling that he was only interested in me then because he felt guilty. Our relationship faded almost completely after that argument.

“Anyway, after your heated argument, I was left alone with your father. Maybe he was drunk, maybe he just felt guilty, but he opened up to me about secrets involving you and your mother.”

No, I don’t think I want to hear this. Why would Dad tell him such things? What the hell did he say?

“I think you should listen,” Connor insists. “These are things you need to know. I should have told you that day, but he asked me not to, and I was sixteen, so...” He pauses for a moment. “I shouldn’t have agreed to his request. I should have told you this back then.”

I clench my fists. How terrible can it be?

“He revealed that when you were just a toddler, your mother left drugs out, and you accidentally ingested them. You were hospitalized for several days and barely escaped death. The incident prompted your father to send her to rehab for the first time.”

“I remember nothing like that.”

“You were too young to remember. Paul said they were put through an investigation with child services and finally convinced the police that it was something you found outside.”

“I didn’t know that,” I mutter.

“He told me about a second incident, too.”

I look at him with wide eyes. My dad told Connor all this?
“Why didn’t he tell me all this?”

“Maybe because you shut him out after what happened with your mother?”

“I didn’t shut him out. I lived with him until I was eighteen.”

Connor tilts his head. “Living together and being present in each other’s life are two different things. You know it, and he knows it. You shut him out when that happened.”

“That’s not true.”

“Paul kicked *her* out, not you. And I must say that considering his stories, he probably made the right decision. A decision that a ten-year-old boy wasn’t capable of making or understanding. I don’t know what I would have done in his place... Maybe it’s time to open up to him? You might get yourself some peace finally. Talk to him.”

“We talk.”

“No, you don’t. A polite conversation once every few months doesn’t count as talking. You should call him and actually speak to him. Let him tell you his side. You might be surprised by what you hear.”

I know Connor wants what’s best for me, but right now, he’s pissing me off.

Why did he summon me here? Did he call me here just to scold me? My thoughts turn to the sculpture by Jeff Koons in the corner, and I imagine myself picking it up and watching it shatter into a million pieces on the floor. I don’t want to have a conversation with the man who calls himself my father.

“You are not to blame for what happened, Luke. It’s not your fault she was gone.”

“I know that.”

“No, you don’t. You still blame yourself every day since then. But you couldn’t stop it. It’s not your fault she left.”

His gaze is intense as he speaks, as if he's trying to see deep into my soul. "It's not your fault," he repeats.

I try to hold back the tears that threaten to spill over. "I know," I manage to say. "He got her out of my life and made sure she didn't come back."

"She had to leave, or you would have ended up dead," Connor insists. "But you didn't let anyone in after that. Not your father, not a partner. You blocked yourself from feeling because you're afraid of being hurt again."

"No." I don't want to believe it. I know she was using most of the time, but she was still my mother. I loved her.

"You couldn't stop your mother from leaving, but you can still fight for Emma. She's the only one who lit the fire back in you after all these years."

"I tried! I said I love her in front of the entire world. I made a big gesture like Laura suggested. Emma didn't even send a message after that."

"Did you call her?"

"She blocked my number."

"And that's what's stopping you? A blocked number? The Luke I know would pitch a tent outside her door. You've worked harder for stories. Sitting at home and wallowing will not get her back. You should do something more intimate. Something that will make her understand you see her. That you're there for her, that you will wait until she's ready."

"I think it's a lost cause."

"No. It's not lost. You're her first. That's not something a woman forgets. You betrayed her trust, and it will take her time to forgive you, but you need to be more stubborn. Don't give up. Does Emma like jewelry? Maybe buy her something expensive."

I twist my mouth. No, money won't work here. "No. I have to think of something else. But you're right. I have to prove to her I see who she is."

He smiles. "Go get your love back."

I glance at my phone, unsure. But this time, it's my turn to make the call. The information shared by Connor yesterday continues to weigh on my mind. Could I have been mistaken all these years? Could Dad have truly saved me from her?

"Luke?" The familiar voice on the phone trembles a little.

"Yes, Dad. How are you? How's Malai?"

"I'm fine, and Malai too. How are you?"

"I... I've been thinking a lot. Do you have time to chat?"

"Yes." He sounds surprised. "I always have time for you. What did you want to talk about?"

"I want you to tell me about Mom."

I can hear his heavy breathing over the phone. "I wish I were there with you in person. This is not the kind of story that should be told over the phone. Can you wait a few days for me to come and visit? We can talk face to face."

"I need to know now, Dad. I can't wait."

"Please, Luke. Just a few days. I'll try to catch a flight as soon as possible. Maybe even tomorrow. I've been looking forward to this conversation for years, and I don't want to mess it up."

"There is no right or wrong here, only the truth, Dad. It's important to me. I need to know." I need to know what happened there. If everything I remember is wrong.

He sighs. "That's not how I want us to talk for the first time after all these years. I'm booking a flight and coming to you."

"Okay, fine." I close my eyes and hang up. It's okay because right now, I have something else to think about.

How to convince Emma to forgive me.

Thirty-Nine



EMMA

“Yes?” I answer the unknown number, imagining that it’s once again reporters asking me questions about Milan. Tony handles the press for me, but whoever this is has called five times already, and it’s getting annoying.

“Hello, this is Officer Peterson from the SVU unit,” the voice on the other end of the line says. “This is regarding the complaint filed against Uriel Branson. We need you to come down to the station in an hour to give your testimony and verify your account of what happened before the hearing.”

My hand trembles as I grip the phone tighter, feeling a knot form in my stomach at the mention of Uriel’s name. “But I already gave my statement.”

“I know, but since the hearing is just a few days away, we need to go over the details again.”

“Will he be present?” I ask. I had hoped never to see him again, and so far, Tony’s done a good job of keeping him away from me.

“No. Don’t worry, Miss. He will be in a different room, you’ll have a police officer present at all times, and you can bring a support person if you like as well.”

“All right. I’ll be there.” I hang up and call Tony to ask him to come with me to the station. When I face this scumbag, Uriel, I’ll need Tony’s mental support.

Tony is waiting for me on the steps of the station, and I put my hand in his. “Thank you for coming with me.”

“Of course, Sis. Whatever you need.”

“This might make a splash when it goes public,” I warn him.

“What’s a little more noise after what we’ve been through?” He smiles and hugs me. “You know, I’m proud of you for this step. At first, I was worried but look at you. You’re standing your ground. Look how far you’ve come. How strong you are. Now let’s go slaughter him.”

We walk in hand in hand, and the officer at the counter directs us to a room. I sit down. My hands are sweaty, and I wipe them on my jeans repeatedly.

“Relax. It’ll be fine. I’m here,” Tony whispers.

The door opens, and I prepare myself to see Uriel, but Luke appears in the doorway. My skin tingles, and my heart rate goes up a few beats. He looks better than I remembered. His sharp jaw is covered with several days’ worth of stubble, and his hair is wild, as if he just got out of bed. The white t-shirt he’s wearing clings to his defined muscles, reminding me of the way his arms used to hold me and how his hands used to caress my body. I bite my cheek and look away. Even in these circumstances, I feel my body awakening, the passion that lives beneath the surface. I can’t believe he’s here. Did they ask him to come too?

Luke takes a chair and sits next to me. Too close. I try to keep my distance and avoid his gaze, but the scent of him is overwhelming.

“Are you allowed to be here?” Tony asks in a low tone.

“I used some favors,” Luke answers without moving a muscle, and his eyes are fixed on me the whole time. I can feel his gaze burning me.

A police officer enters the room. You can cut the tension with a knife.

“Hello, I’m officer Cade Sinton. You are...Emma Woods?” He lifts his head from the pages, and I nod. “And...” He looks down again, “Luke Brant? I’m told you were present at the time of the incident in question?”

“Yes,” Luke replies. “I happened to be there and caught the man trying to force himself on Emma, er, Ms. Woods.”

“Where is Officer Peterson?” I ask.

“She’ll be right here. She’s just taking a statement from the defendant first.” He turns to Luke. Aren’t you that reporter from *The Tonight Show*? The one who published the story about Alexander Milan?”

“Yes, that’s me,” Luke admits with an irritated tone.

“Didn’t you say you two were a couple?”

“No. We’re not a couple. Unfortunately,” Luke adds, with a pleading glance in my direction.

The police officer smiles. “I saw the show. What exactly did you do to screw up so bad that she won’t forgive you?” He shifts his gaze to me, and I cringe.

Is there anyone who hasn’t seen the show?

“I can’t believe you were dating a supermodel, and you screwed it up.” The officer smirks.

“I’m sitting right here,” I say. He talks about me as if I’m not there. Like I’m a piece of meat.

The policeman seems to remember now that we’re here for a reason and turns to me. “Yes. Right. Back to the matter at hand. Please tell me your version again.”

I repeat everything that happened that evening. Luke shifts uncomfortably in his chair, and the officer looks at him sympathetically.

I’m the one who almost got raped, and he feels sorry for Luke.

After I’m done talking, he asks Luke to describe what he saw.

“I arrived at the building to meet Ms. Woods. I heard a scream for help and found a man lying on top of her on the stairs, trying to undress her. He had a hand around her throat. She was frightened and scared, unable to move. I kicked him off her and escorted her to her apartment.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t consensual?”

“She was screaming from fear. She told him no. No one wants to be pushed onto dirty stairs of a building,” Luke rages.

“No woman would want to lo—”

I grip his arm and stop him. Hell, he can't say I was a virgin. I'm a model. It's not something I want to be published. Luke looks at me, and I give him a small nod.

I wonder how much the officer understood, but he says nothing.

Luke's body language conveys distress. He's more tense than I am. I feel like reaching out and comforting him, caressing his face, telling him I'm fine. That Uriel didn't hurt me. That he saved me.

He saved me.

“Did you leave right away?”

“I stayed at her apartment to make sure he didn't come back.”

The officer looks at me with an expression that says, “he's the perfect man. Why don't you want him?”

I ignore him.

“Ms. Woods, why did you wait until the morning after to file the complaint? Why didn't you report the incident right away?”

“He didn't get the chance to rape me. He just assaulted me. There was no need for a medical examination, and I was in shock at the time, too scared and upset to think about it.”

Luke nods in agreement.

“In the morning, after I calmed down a bit, I drove to the police station.”

The officer finishes recording my words and rises from his seat. “I think we're done. Wait here.”

Luke places his hand on my thigh and immediately removes it. How terrible is it if I wanted him to leave it there? I catch his gaze and see his need reflected in his eyes.

The officer leaves the room, and as the door opens, I see Uriel walking in the hallway. He stares at me, and I feel my

body tense up. I try to steady my breathing and remind myself that I'm not alone. Tony is here with me. Our eyes meet, and I feel a wave of emotions wash over me. Anger, fear, and disgust. I take a deep breath and remind myself that I'm strong and I will not let him intimidate me. He's the one who needs to be ashamed.

The smug look on his face is erased when he sees Luke in the room. This is no longer my version against his. There's a witness.

After the investigation is over, they let us leave.

The three of us go outside together and stand on the sidewalk in awkward silence. Tony holds my hand, comforting me and making me feel safe. If he hadn't been here next to me, what would have happened? Would I have broken down or run out of there? Would I go with Luke right now?

I want to feel his muscles under my fingers, caress his warm skin, and feel his body next to mine. Ah, the hell with me.

Luke glances between my face and the hand holding Tony's. "Emma," he finally says, hesitating.

Tony tugs on my arm, pulling me away. "Goodbye, Luke." I send him one last look, catching the longing in his eyes.

I'm horny. From the moment Luke entered the interrogation room, I haven't been able to get him out of my mind. Even the horrifying encounter with Uriel didn't stop this need I have. I want to taste Luke again, feel him inside me. My core throbs, sending waves of desire through my body.

I drink tea and sit in front of the TV, tempted to watch that episode of *The Tonight Show* again. I'll never admit it, but I've watched it dozens of times already. I look at him through the screen, knowing that with one phone call, he would be right here next to me.

He saved me twice. The first time with Uriel and the second time when he exposed Milan and made Goddess a hit. He saved me but broke my heart.

I decide to go into the shower to cool myself down a bit. But even under the stream of water, I still imagine him touching me. I want him to be here with me.

I take the shower head and point it between my legs. The powerful current hits my clit. Oh shit, this is strong.

I move it a little to find the ideal spot, close my eyes and imagine Luke here with me. Remembering how good we were together that last time, I imagine his muscular body pushing me against the wall. I feel the cold tiles on my back and imagine how I wrap my legs around him, letting him take me. How he devours my lips with hunger, and I moan. His lips come down and suck my neck as he thrusts into me, going deeper, filling me, demanding that I give my all.

That pleasant and familiar little lump forms in my stomach, growing bigger. Waves of pleasure build up in my body, carrying me up until the lump is too big to hold until I can't contain it anymore, and I scream his name as the orgasm breaks through my body, sending aftershocks to my legs. I tremble, leaning against the shower wall, breathless and drained.

Forty



EMMA

I rapidly type out a stern email to our factory, demanding they speed up production. The orders keep pouring in, and as I hoped, the shortage has only increased the demand. But the shortage can't be too severe. I need to make a profit.

Next, I open Nayla's social media accounts and check to see if she's posted a picture of the new model I sent her. She hasn't yet, so I send her a message.

Where's my picture?

Nayla

Working on it. Which one should I choose?

I immediately get a stack of pictures of her in my new bikini. I quickly scroll through the images, searching for the perfect one to post. I finally settle on a shot taken from the side, showcasing her curves. Her following has been growing rapidly since her runway debut, gaining thousands of followers each day. If she continues at this pace, she may even surpass me in popularity. This is great news, as I have a contract with Goddess for her to represent our brand for the next three years.

These.

I send her my choices, and she sends me a thumbs-up emoji and a kiss.

Next, I open the new file I'm working on. It's a new line of dresses for the new company I'm considering opening. Still a distant dream. I go over the designs, making tweaks and notes for improvements. The dresses are elegant and modern, but

they need to be refined further before they're ready for the market. I envision the brand's target audience and make adjustments to cater to their taste. It's a work in progress, but I'm determined to make it a reality. My dream of starting another successful fashion line drives me forward.

I raise an eyebrow as the doorbell rings. I'm not waiting for anyone. It must be the reporters again or Laura. But I've already heard everything she had to say.

"Who is it?" I call aloud.

"I have a package for you."

My heart leaps. Luke?

Then I remember he was never a courier. That was part of his lie.

I open the door.

"Sign here, please," the man says, handing me an electronic device. I sign and take the large envelope, surprised by its weight. I can't imagine what's inside.

"Thank you." I take the envelope and close the door. What is it? All my fabrics arrived a long time ago. I don't remember ordering anything new.

I shake the envelope, trying to figure out what's inside. It doesn't make a sound. I open it carefully, revealing something that looks like a pink notebook. I pull it out and discover a *Burda Style* magazine.

Fuck.

I examine the envelope, searching for any indication of who sent it, but find no information. I nibble on my lower lip as I gaze at the magazine, knowing without a doubt that Luke sent it. He's the only person aside from my father who knows the significance the magazine holds for me. Even Tony, my closest friend, is unaware of that story.

But Luke remembered. I can't believe he remembered. My heart flutters. I close my eyes and exhale. It doesn't matter because I'll never forgive him. I won't accept gifts from him, just like I won't accept his apologies.

I carefully pick up the magazine, my fingers grazing over the glossy pages as memories flood back to me of my childhood spent mesmerized by the world of fashion and sewing. I had dreamed of one day being able to afford the luxurious items featured on its pages.

I take the magazine and defiantly throw it in the trash.

An hour passes, and another courier appears at my door with a similar envelope. I peek inside and discover another magazine. Another edition. I throw it away, along with the envelope, joining the first one in the trash.

When the fourth one arrives, I can't help but feel a pang of anger as I throw it away, looking at my trash bin with all the envelopes in it.

By the fifth delivery, the courier starts to ask questions. "What's with all these packages?" he inquires with curiosity.

I simply reply, "Someone who seems to think it's amusing to send me a never-ending stream of deliveries." I take the latest envelope and place it on my table with a sigh.

A short time later, I receive yet another package, this time in the form of a small box. The delivery person hands it to me with a grin, leaving me to wonder when this barrage of deliveries will end. Carefully, I open the box to find an astonishing number of magazines, counting up to twelve of them.

An entire year's worth of *Burda Style* magazines.

What is he thinking?

The deliveries keep coming. They arrive at a steady pace, each one containing more and more issues of the magazine. The latest one is so heavy the delivery person struggles to bring it up to my doorstep. I now have a veritable mountain of *Burda Style* magazines in my home, easily six years' worth. I pick one up and take a seat. They're already here. Nothing will happen if I browse them a little.

Wow. Here is a stunning cut for a dress that can match my new collection. I take a pencil from the drawer and sketch some changes on it. Yes, it can work.

I suddenly realize that not only did I not throw them away, but I'm also using them. Hell. He found a loophole.

What do I do with him?

I pick up the phone and call Tony.

"Hey, Sis. I'm taking care of the delays. Don't worry."

"That's not why I called."

"No?"

"Luke did something..."

"What did he do? Should I beat him up?"

"No, nothing like that." I smile. Somehow Tony always makes me laugh. "He sent me loads of *Burda Style* magazines."

"Why would he do such a thing?"

"I told him on our first date that when I was a young girl, that's how I started sewing."

"Oh, Emma."

"Oh no. If you've called me by my name, then it's serious." I laugh.

"Emma, you need to talk to him. I already told you that before. He screwed up. There's no disputing that. But everything he does and has been doing ever since has been for your benefit. He's trying. People make mistakes. The greater thing is to forgive. I know you don't watch TV, and I don't allow you to read comments, but the internet is buzzing. Everyone wants you to forgive him. They want to see you two together."

The whole universe wants me to forgive him. "They don't know what he did."

"True, but they see what he's doing."

I keep quiet. Maybe Tony's right? Maybe I should hear Luke out?

"Talk to him, Emma," Tony says again. "You don't have to forgive him, but you owe him at least a conversation."

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yes, I’ll talk to him.”

“Okay. Call him now and update me later,” he says enthusiastically and hangs up without even saying goodbye.

What did I agree to? I’m not ready to talk to Luke. My pulse is pounding in my ears just thinking about it. I don’t want to see him.

No. I do want to see him.

Damn it.

I remove the block on my phone and begin sending him a text.

I thought we should

No, no, no.

I received all the magazines you sent

I delete it quickly. Fuck. I don’t know what to write to him.

Hi

I quickly send it over before I have time to regret it. One word that reveals nothing.

My phone rings at the speed of light.

“Hey,” I reply.

“Hey.” His low voice makes me shiver.

I swallow. “I received your packages. You shouldn’t have sent them.”

“Of course, I should have. I made a plan with several steps. This is stage one. If that wouldn’t have worked, I’d move on to the next step.”

I don’t hold back and ask, “What’s the next step?”

“Rent a helicopter and fly in front of your apartment with a sign.”

I’m laughing.

“I love hearing you laugh.”

I close my eyes.

When I don’t reply to that, he goes on. “Step three will be to cut off an ear or something. I haven’t quite decided yet.”

“No!” I exclaim. “Why would you do that?”

“That way, you’ll pass out, and I can kidnap you. I heard there’s such a thing as Stockholm Syndrome.”

I chuckle. “I don’t want you to cut yourself.”

“I’m glad to hear that. I’m not so keen on cutting myself.” He pauses. “Emma, I want to see you.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“I can come now.”

Now? As in right now? How can I resist him when he’s close, right here next to me? I haven’t been able to do it before. “I—”

“I’m on my way to you.” He hangs up.

He’s on his way here. Shit. I throw the phone on the couch and run into the bedroom, taking off my pajamas while running and opening the closet. What should I wear? Heck, he lives close by. I have no time.

I take out a black minidress and get dressed quickly, peeking in the mirror. No way. I can’t open the door to him like this. He’ll think I dressed up, especially for him. I take off the dress, hang it nicely in the closet and pull on skinny jeans and a satin tank top instead.

I quickly brush my hair and check that it's neat. Do I have time to put on makeup?

The knock on the door answers my question.

Don't get excited, I remind myself. Everything is fine. We're just talking.

So why is my heart beating so fast?

I put a hand on my chest and take a deep breath, trying to relax.

He knocks again.

I go to the door and open it.

Luke's magnetic gaze holds me captive as he steps through the door, and I feel my heart trying to bust out of my chest and reach him.

The memories of his touch, his scent, and the way he used to make me feel flood back to me, overwhelming me with a mix of longing and fear. I try to steady my breathing and force a calm facade, but inside, I'm a jumbled mess of emotions. The thought of him being here, in my home, is both exhilarating and terrifying.

I move aside and let him in, closing the door behind him, then turn and find him standing right next to me. So close that I can smell him, the smell of cologne mixed lightly with his sweat. The best smell in the world.

I feel my resolve crumbling. I remind myself of the hurt and betrayal he caused, but it's no use. He still has a hold on me, and I can feel myself falling for him all over again. I turn my head away, trying to hide the emotions that I know must be written all over my face.

It's not fair.

He cheats.

I stick out my chest and scoot past him on my way to the kitchen, accidentally brushing his hand. He inhales sharply, and I'm pleased with my effect on him. I can play this too.

"Do you want a drink?" I turn on the kettle.

“You can’t hide behind a cup of tea,” he says, grinning.

“I’m not hiding.”

“I wanted to apologize again, but I think I’ve done it everywhere possible, and it hasn’t worked. So I’ll try something else.” He tugs on my arm and forces me to look at him.

I look down at his hand holding me. My arm is burning. The attraction between us is undeniable.

“Look at me,” he demands.

I slowly raise my eyes to meet his, and I exhale slowly. He takes my hand, and I allow him to lead me to the sofa, where we sit together. The urge to move closer, to feel his warmth against my skin, the attraction that never truly faded, is hard to resist.

I remind myself of all the reasons why we shouldn’t be together, but at this moment, sitting so close to him, it’s hard to remember them. All I can focus on is the way my body yearns for his touch and the way my heart aches with longing.

“I guess you already saw what happened at the demonstration,” he says, half stating, half asking.

I nod.

“I was struggling. My injury ended my career just as it was reaching its peak. I had been working hard for years to cover wars as a journalist, but when I returned to the office after getting out of the hospital, my editor assigned me to write an article about Goddess. I refused.”

“You refused?”

“I initially refused, but my editor gave me the ultimatum of either taking the assignment or nothing. I wasn’t used to this type of work and felt out of my element. But I couldn’t admit defeat after losing my opportunity to be on the frontlines reporting on the war. So, I came here, sat in my car in front of your building, and thought about what to do.”

“You sat in front of my apartment?” I mumble, surprised.

“Yes. I saw couriers were coming to you, and in a moment of poor judgment, I went for it. I thought I could just talk to you a bit, and that’s it. I didn’t expect to like you so much. I didn’t expect to fall in love.” He pauses and looks into my eyes.

“You don’t do things like that to someone you love,” I interrupt.

“You’re right, I have no excuse, and I take full responsibility for my actions. I just need to explain to you how it all went so wrong. Anyway, at first, I thought it would just be a short fling and that you would never find out. But I fell in love and got entangled in my own lies. Every time I tried to tell you, something stopped me. I messed up big time, Emma. I know that. But at no point did I try to hurt you or the company.”

“You betrayed my trust.”

“I know. I know, and I regret it every day that passes. I did everything I could think of to get you to forgive me. Tell me what you want me to do. What does it take for you to give me another chance?”

I shake my head. It’s hard to see him sitting here next to me, full of regret. I want to forgive him. I want to touch him so badly, to kiss him. “I don’t know if I can forgive that.”

“I’ll do whatever it takes to make things right. I know I’m not good at relationships. I never had a good role model. But you should know that despite all the mistakes I may make, I’m willing to do anything for you.”

I hesitate, and Luke continues. “When I got to know you, I knew immediately that you were not capable of the things you were accused of. So, I abandoned the article my editor assigned to me, and instead, I focused on investigating Milan.”

“I never asked for it.”

“I know. But I wanted to take him down so badly after I found out he was stealing from you all that time. I wanted to crush him. What I don’t understand is why you didn’t want

him exposed? You had all the proof. You knew it was him all along.”

I avoid eye contact and fidget with the hem of my shirt.

He reaches out and takes my hands in his. “Emma, when I researched Alex Milan, I found out that he raped several models who worked with him. Most of them didn’t want to make a public statement. But I know you were a virgin, so…” His voice fades. “What does Alexander Milan hold against you?”

I remain silent, not daring to look at Luke. My eyes fill with tears.

“Emma.” He lifts my chin, so I’m looking at him. “Fuck. What did he do to you?”

“He tried…”

“Fuck.” Luke gets up from the couch and runs his hands through his hair, pacing and cursing loudly.

I wipe the tears with my palm. How can I tell him what happened to me? He’s a journalist.

Luke stops his pacing and comes back to sit next to me. “I know I haven’t proven myself until now, but you can trust me. I love you. I won’t do anything to hurt you.”

I see pain, remorse and love in his eyes. “Kiss me,” I whisper in an almost inaudible voice, but his lips are already on mine, just as soft and warm as I remember. He kisses gently, with patience, waiting for me to initiate the next move.

I lean into him, my arms tightening around his neck as our kiss deepens. He tastes so good, and I can’t help but feel like he was made for me. His tongue penetrates my mouth, probing, and I part my lips and allow him to enter. I can feel the heat rising within me as I give in to the passion that has been building between us.

I stop the kiss, gasping, and study him, his lips swollen from our kiss, his eyes burning with desire. I have secrets too. Maybe it’s not fair to accuse him of holding back when I haven’t revealed everything myself. I need to tell him. If I

want a future with him, I have to tell him. Start over, with no secrets between us.

“Alexander Milan didn’t rape me, but he raped my sister,” I whisper.

“What?” Luke says in a harsh tone, pushing me away from him.

I’m startled by his reaction, and he pulls me into an embrace.

“I already told you I came from a family without money. My family struggled financially for a long time. My father lost his job, my mother’s income was limited, and we could barely afford food. We were even at risk of losing our home. To help, my older sister began working as a model to bring in money for the family. Alexander approached my sister and offered her a contract that was too good to pass up. She modeled for Milan for a year, and my parents were thrilled with the financial stability that came with it. However, as the money flowed in, my sister’s well-being declined. At just seventeen, she suffered from bulimia and lost her joy for life. I couldn’t understand what was happening to her, but my parents did.”

“So your parents knew?”

I nod. “She continued there a little over a year—”

“Continued? What do you mean? You said they knew!”

“She continued,” I say, ignoring his questions, “for a little over a year until she couldn’t take it anymore and refused to go back.”

Luke inhales sharply, and his hands hold me tight.

“I was fifteen years old when it happened, and my parents hid everything from me. I didn’t know it then, but Alex told them that Jessica signed a three-year contract, and if she didn’t finish it, he would make them pay him a sum of half a million dollars.”

“What?” Luke shouts.

“Obviously, they had no chance of paying it, and he knew it. Jess realized they were going to force her to return to him

and ran away.”

“They were going to return her to him? Their own daughter? After he raped her?” Luke rubs his face, looking shocked.

“They didn’t think they had a choice. Milan spares no means to get what he wants. He would send people to break their legs if they didn’t pay or worse. He’s capable of anything. But Jess disappeared and couldn’t be found. They were under pressure, and none of their explanations helped. Then Alex demanded me in her place. If Jess can’t complete the contract, he said, then I could. And they agreed.”

“Fuck.” Luke pushes me off him and stands up. “What do you mean, agreed?” he shouts. “They sent you to be raped? They sold you?”

“Yes, you could say that.” I look away, tears flowing down my cheeks. It took me years to come to terms with that. I’ve turned it over and over in my head, refusing to believe it. But that’s exactly what happened.

“Sons of bitches. How old did you say you were?”

“Fifteen. It was my luck, as it turned out. He touched me but didn’t rape me. That’s his defense, it seems. To wait for the age of consent.”

Luke leans his forehead against the wall.

I don’t know what he’s thinking after my story, but he must know everything before he decides if he wants to be with me. “He convinces himself that all the girls he’s with want him, and it’s not rape because he doesn’t use force.”

“He threatens them and forces them in other ways. It doesn’t differ from rape by physical force.”

“You’re exactly right. My parents told me, ‘it’s nothing. You’re saving the family.’ They said if I didn’t do it, he would kill them. That I couldn’t stop.”

“They sacrificed you to save themselves.”

“A year later, Jess contacted me and told me what happened to her. At this point, I was already deep into the

contract with Alex. I was afraid of him. He disgusted me with how he touched me all the time, and I didn't know what to do. Jess told me that once I turned seventeen, he would rape me like he raped her. That I must escape before then or my life would be over."

"Oh, my God," Luke mumbles.

"I was angry with her. I was angry that she didn't tell anyone, that she didn't go to the police. That she allowed my parents to send me to him instead of her. That I was in that situation because of her. But I also knew she was right. That I had to get out of there. So I went to Alex and told him I wouldn't work for him anymore."

"And he agreed?"

"What do you think? He beat me up. He said my sister owed him a lot of money, so either I do what he wants and continue to model for him, or he would haunt us for the rest of our lives. He said that I would never succeed in anything. He would make sure of it."

Luke shakes his head.

"He gave me a second option, of course. To sleep with him. If I would have sex with him, he would write off the whole debt."

"At sixteen?"

"Yes. I don't know how to describe it. He was horny to the point of losing control. He was willing to take risks to have me. He took out his cock and started rubbing it in front of me. I froze. I couldn't move. I closed my eyes and thought it was over for me. But he forced me to look while he masturbated until he was done. Then he said, 'See, it wasn't so bad. You'll have fun with me. Think about it.'"

I choke on tears that fill my eyes as I recall that horrific moment. "I ran away. I knew I couldn't go back home, that my parents wouldn't understand. I tried to contact Jess, but I didn't know how. So I just wandered the streets and slept on a bench. I went to McDonald's and pretended to clear the tables while I took the leftovers. After a few days like that on the

street, I ran into Tony. He picked me up, and we haven't been apart since. He became my only family. He took care of me in lieu of my parents."

I look up at Luke. He's pacing the room like a restless tiger.

"I founded Goddess a few years later with the help of Tony. After the company began succeeding, Alex found out that I was behind the name. He came to me and threatened me again, saying it wasn't too late to accept his offer. That he would ruin my life and business if I didn't sleep with him. I told him to get lost and to do the best he could."

"Why didn't you sue him for sexual harassment? Why didn't you report him?"

"Why didn't I go to the police? Because I was afraid. He's one of the most successful people in the industry, and I was sixteen. My sister is still afraid of him. Plus, I didn't think anyone would believe me. He didn't even rape me. I have no proof of what he did. As long as I remained silent, I could ignore his accusations and threats. If I were to do something, anything against him, it's hard to know what he's capable of doing to me in return."

"You should have told me."

"Really? I should have talked to a journalist who didn't even tell me he was a journalist? Trust you with the hardest story of my life?"

"You're right. I didn't deserve your trust. I'm still not worthy. So why now?"

"Because I don't want any secrets between us, Luke. It would be just like what you did to me. This story is my biggest fear. My biggest secret. The reason I don't have a family, the reason Tony is an integral part of my life, the reason I've never been in a relationship. It's the reason I don't want anyone in my life, or at least I didn't want anyone. Until now." I shoot him a look, examining his demeanor.

His eyes light up. "Does that mean you're willing to give me a chance?"

“What about my story?”

“I’ll encourage you and be right by your side if you go to testify in Milan’s trial. But I’ll support you even if not.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Did you think I would run away? This story changes nothing about who you are or how I feel about you. Setting up a business on your own. You raised yourself from scratch. I’m sorry that Milan is in custody. I’d love it if he was here now, so I could strangle him with my bare hands.” Luke raises his arms and simulates a strangling motion.

“I’m not looking for revenge, Luke. I just want to live my life in peace. I wanted Goddess to succeed so that I would never be in my parents’ place, where they have to sell their daughters to survive.”

He shakes his head. “No. They’re just human scum and not parents. There are many parents in bad financial situations who would never do such things. I would die before I would let something like this happen to someone I love.”

His face turns serious. “Damn.” He bites his lip. “There’s something else I need to tell you too.”

Oh no. I look at him. Is he going to drop another bomb?

He shares with me the story of his mother, her struggles with drugs, and how his father forced her out of their home.

I hold his hand and comfort him. “It’s hard for me to comprehend that you thought you were responsible for her leaving. You were just a child. How could you possibly blame yourself?”

“I blamed myself because my father kicked her out because of me. I was angry with him for years and felt guilty for not standing up to him and preventing it. But now, I’m ready to understand his perspective.”

“So you talked to your dad?”

“Yes. He’s arriving in a few days. I’m ready to hear his side of the story after all this time.” Luke pauses, then says, “You know, I thought that if I became a successful journalist,

she would see my name and be proud of me, maybe even come back. But I realize now that was foolish thinking. She always knew where I was. She just didn't care."

He wraps his arms around me. I feel safe in his embrace. We both bared our guts. We're both exposed and vulnerable.

He tilts my head up with his hand and looks into my eyes. "If you want me to leave, now is the time to tell me," he says, and I see the storm brewing inside him.

I shake my head. "I don't want you to go." I want him so badly. I wanted him from the moment we met.

He strokes my body, sliding his hand under my tank top. I raise my arms, allowing him to remove it. He guides me down on the couch and positions himself on top of me, his fingers running through my hair. "You're so beautiful," he whispers. He unbuttons my pants and slides them off my body, leaving me feeling exposed and shivering from the cool air.

I can't take my eyes off Luke, who is standing in front of me, taking off his clothes. His erection is evident. I want to do it for him. I close my fingers around his cock and put it in my mouth. It feels different from what I expected. I run my tongue over the tip, and he groans.

"Be careful with your teeth," he says, and I cover them with my lips. I'm not sure I'm doing it right, but Luke moans in a tone that makes my limbs vibrate. I can sense his shift in breathing.

"You're so good," he moans again, moving his pelvis and pushing himself deeper into my mouth. I feel the wetness running down my thighs. I suck and lick and give him a little swirl of my tongue around the head. He thrusts himself deeper, making me choke from his size. He pushes himself in and then pulls away. "I want to cum inside you."

He repositions me and places me on the couch on my knees with my back to him, gently pushing my face down onto the couch so that only my buttocks are up in the air, exposed to him. His fingers caress my back, then slide over my thighs,

between my legs, and dig inside me. My body is on fire. I squirm, wishing to get from him what I need so badly.

I feel his warm mouth between my legs, then his tongue on my little knob of pleasure. He licks me, and my arousal grows with every moment. His tongue circles, licking, sucking. Waves of desire flow through my body. It's getting hard for me to breathe. I gasp out loud. I know I can come on his tongue, but I want him inside me.

Luke rises and lightly bites my ear. "Tell me what you want."

I shiver and cry out as his fingers push inside me. He grasps my arms, holds them behind my back and doesn't allow me to move while tormenting me with his other hand. I'm more aroused than I thought possible. I need him. "You. I want you."

"You can have me," he says, pushing into me with force. "I was always yours."

"Fuck!" I shout. It's so good. Too much time has passed. My body missed him. I missed him.

He thrusts into me hard, moving in a fast rhythm, so strong, it's almost too much. Painful. I moan as my body is pushed against the back of the sofa with each thrust.

"Do you trust me?" he asks.

I summon my voice to answer him. "Yes." Despite everything, I trust him.

He releases my arms, and I feel his finger circle around my back door, collecting from my wetness and softening me up. What is he going to do?

"Relax," he says, and I try to do as he asks. His pace slows, and I feel a finger sliding all the way into my ass.

"Oh," I cry out, feeling so full as he moves in and out of me slowly with his cock and finger at the same time. In and out, in and out. I didn't think it would feel like this. Full. Painful. Satisfying.

Another finger goes in, stretching me wider. My fingers dig into the sofa as I try to hold on. My mouth falls open as I approach the edge of my great fall. My pussy starts to contract around him.

“Yes, Emma, come for me,” he groans, pulling out his fingers and gripping my waist, increasing the pace of his thrusts into me. “I feel you, how you tighten around me, fucking gorgeous. Come for me, Emma. Be a good girl.” He calls again, and I explode.

My walls contract in on his cock as the orgasm hits me violently, waves of pleasure wash over my body, and I bite the fabric of the sofa to muffle my screams. Luke picks up the pace, pursuing his pleasure.

He freezes for a moment, and his cock pulses inside me. “Oh, fuck.”

Forty-One



LUKE

Maybe he didn't come? My eyes continue to scan the airport.

"Luke!" I hear a call to my left and spin around. My father approaches me with quick steps. He looks as I remembered, only older. His hair is silver on the sides, and small wrinkles surround his eyes. He smiles, and when he gets closer, I see his eyes twinkling.

He clears his throat. "It's been a long time, Son."

I nod. "Yeah, it has."

We stand there for a moment, taking each other in before he extends his hand for a shake. I accept it, our grip firm, both of us trying to convey that we're okay. Dad clears his eyes with the back of his hand. "Just something in my eye."

"How was the flight?" I ask, trying to steady my voice. I can't believe I'm here, standing face-to-face with my father after all these years. Emotions well up inside me, but I push them down, determined to keep a strong exterior.

"Long."

We drive to my apartment in silence. The tension in the car is palpable as if we're both afraid to say something that might break the fragile connection we've just re-established. I carry his suitcase upstairs and go to the kitchen. He paces my apartment, examines it for the first time, and then sits down.

"Can I get you a cup of coffee?" I offer, but he declines. I pour myself a cup and sit down on the couch across from him. I look into his eyes, which resemble mine, and steel myself for what I need to ask. I can do it.

"I need to know what happened when I was a child."

"I should have talked to you about this a long time ago," he says, his voice filled with regret. "Kylie was the love of my life since high school. Our love was intense, like something

straight out of a movie. After we got married, I started the business, and your mother tried to be a singer. She always loved to sing.”

“I didn’t know that,” I reply.

Dad nods. “It’s true. I was focused on building my career and making enough to support us while your mother pursued her passion for music and joined a band as a vocalist. They had some success performing at clubs and touring the East Coast. We were both doing well in our respective fields, and we were happy. But when she became pregnant with you, her career came to a halt. After you were born, she couldn’t find a new band and couldn’t regain her previous success. She began searching for singing jobs in bars. It wasn’t about the money. She just wanted to sing and achieve her dreams.”

“So she didn’t go back to singing?”

“She tried, but it just didn’t work out. What I didn’t know at the time was that the music industry was filled with drugs and alcohol. Unfortunately, Kylie fell into that lifestyle. By the time I realized what was happening, it was too late. She was already addicted.”

“How come you didn’t notice she was using?”

“I didn’t realize the extent of her addiction until it was too late. She kept it hidden from me, and I admit I was initially in denial about the situation. When I confronted her, she said it was just a one-time thing. Then she said it was under control and that she would stop, and I believed her.”

I shake my head, not wanting to believe this.

“One day, I came home to find your mom frantically crying over your lifeless body on the floor after she had left drugs within your reach, and you had accidentally ingested them. You were only two years old,” he says, his voice cracking with emotion.

That’s what Connor told me.

“After that tragic event, she agreed to seek help and went to rehab. I sent her to the best facility I could find, and when she returned, I was sure that our lives would improve, that our

lives would get back to the way we were before. But unfortunately, she began using again.”

I feel a lump form in my throat, and I have to fight back the tears.

“One time, she was on a bad trip. I was in the bathroom, and she started screaming, blaming you, an innocent five-year-old, for ruining her career. I rushed out and found her trying to stab you,” he cries.

I take in a sharp breath. I can’t believe it. It can’t be. He’s lying. I gasp as the realization hits me. A faint recollection of a painful experience surfaces in my mind, and I glance down at my hand, noticing the small scar on it. “The scar on my hand,” I whisper, feeling a mix of disbelief and frustration.

“Luckily, she only injured your hand before I stopped her.”

Fuck.

“I was so angry with her, but how can you be angry with someone controlled by a cruel drug? That was her second time in rehab. When she came back, I was so afraid to leave you alone with her. I tried to hire nannies, but she kicked them all out. I knew she was back to using, but she seemed to be in control this time, so I turned a blind eye. You were nine by then and so independent. More than your peers. You knew how to cook for yourself and take care of yourself. I thought it wasn’t so bad. Not like before. She wasn’t hallucinating, just sleeping a lot.” He sighs.

“But I was wrong again. You were old enough to remember the third incident, so I’m sure you do. I came home and found you hanging out of the window, between life and death. I couldn’t take it any longer. I lost it. I knew that you would continue to be at risk if I didn’t do something drastic, so I suggested she move to a supervised facility for people with her condition, but she refused.”

“You offered her a place to live?” I’m surprised.

“Of course. I wouldn’t just abandon her. After she declined that offer, I proposed buying her an apartment in a convenient location where you two could meet under my supervision.”

“But that’s not what happened. She doesn’t live nearby. We haven’t seen each other since that day. You kicked her out.”

“No, because she didn’t agree to that either. She wanted money and only money. But I knew she would use the money for drugs. I offered her every other solution I could think of, and she rejected all of them.”

“You kicked her out of the house. She cried. I remember that.”

“I was trying to help her, but she couldn’t see that. She left us for the drugs and the lifestyle. I never gave up on her, but she gave up on us.”

He pauses, taking a deep breath. “It was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to go through, watching her self-destruct like that. Understand, I couldn’t let her stay near you. I had to make sure she wasn’t alone with you. I lost her to the drugs, and I couldn’t lose you too... But it turns out that I lost you either way.” Tears flow down his cheeks.

“So where is she? You said you’d let her see me under supervision. Why didn’t she come to see me then?”

“She didn’t want to, I guess. I even provided her with an apartment in the city, but she never moved in, far as I know.”

She didn’t want to? “You prevented her from seeing me. I know it.”

“No. That’s why I wanted to talk to you in person. So you can understand that what I’m telling you is the truth. You have to believe me.”

I shake my head.

“Why didn’t she come to see you after you left my care?” he shouts. “I haven’t lived in the United States for eight years, and you’re already twenty-eight. Even if I wanted to, there was no way for me to prevent her from seeing you. So why hasn’t she come to meet with you?”

I don’t know what to say. He waits in silence, letting me digest everything that was said.

“Do you know where she is?” I ask, breaking the silence.

“The last information I received was that she was using in Mexico. But that was a few years ago. I’m not sure if she’s even still alive, as she never succeeded in overcoming her addiction.”

Mexico?

Damn it. She never wanted to see me. I hold my head in my hands, Dad’s words forcing me to question everything I thought I knew about my life. Could it be that he isn’t the villain I’ve painted him to be in my mind?

Forty-Two



LUKE

THREE MONTHS LATER

“**G**od, it’s huge,” Nayla exclaims and holds Emma’s hand.

“Huge and stunning.” Emma nods.

We stare at the large video advertisement of Nayla on the massive wall in Times Square. Her curly hair takes up the entire screen as she smiles playfully, and the new dress designed by Emma flows in the breeze, highlighting her figure.

“I can’t believe I’m on a billboard in Times Square,” Nayla whispers.

“I can’t believe my dress is on a billboard in Times Square.” Emma shakes her hand.

“I don’t understand why you stopped modeling. You could have been up there with me.”

Emma shrugs. “Modeling was never my passion. Now that you’re a star, I prefer to concentrate on design.”

All this talk makes me horny. Well, I guess everything about Emma makes me horny. “I believe we should hurry,” I whisper in her ear and nibble her neck. I found this to be her weak spot. “We have a flight to catch.”

“The flight isn’t for several hours—” She turns to me and stops at the look in my eyes. I see the passion ignite in her, and my body wakes up immediately. Fuck, this woman will take me to my grave. I fucked her before we left the apartment, and I want to do it again. And again.

Nayla looks at us and smiles. “Okay, okay, you pair of rabbits. I will never stand in the way of a good fuck. I also have a task to do.”

“Are you still chasing the guy from the cafe?” Emma laughs.

“No. He’s an asshole. But I’m helping him with something.”

“Why are you helping him if he’s a jerk?” I ask.

“It’s a long story.” Nayla shrugs. “I kind of have to. What’s the latest on Uriel’s case, by the way? Has the judge made a decision yet?”

“No, not yet.” Emma scowls. “Can you believe it? How much longer will this take? And the lawyer says he won’t be getting much even if he’s found guilty.”

“Yeah, probably,” Nayla agrees. “But at least he won’t be able to work as a model again anytime soon.”

“Thanks to you,” Emma says. “I’m still not sure how you managed to make that happen.”

“I may not be a lawyer yet, but I know how to navigate the system and know what to say to get what I want,” Nayla says with a grin.

“By the way,” she begins, turning in my direction, “how were you able to take a vacation so soon after starting your new job?”

After the big noise that Milan’s trial made in the media, and still does, the news channel contacted me and made me an offer to be their current affairs reporter. I left the newspaper and went to work on television.

Unfortunately, Alexander Milan got the trial delayed, and he’s now out on bail, claiming his innocence. But Emma is determined to fight and has decided to share her story. The public has been very supportive, and the exposure has actually been beneficial for her.

I know if he ever gets close to her again, I won’t be able to stop myself. This man destroyed her soul and her family. I still find it hard to believe how strong she is and how she built herself up all by herself despite everything. I look at her in admiration.

“He’s boosted their viewership significantly since he began working there,” Emma says with a chuckle and glances at me with her captivating eyes. “All the girls are drooling over him, so they have to agree to whatever he wants.” She smiles at me, and I melt.

“It’s just for a few days,” I interject. “Maybe I’ll even report from Thailand.” Although, the only one I want to drool on me is Emma.

“A report of what? Sex positions on the beach?” Nyla winks, and Emma’s cheeks turn red.

I love that even after a few months together when we’ve already tried every position, and she’s so relaxed in bed with me, she still blushes when someone talks about it.

“There will be a beach there, but we’re not going on a beach vacation,” I correct her.

“No?” She glances between us.

“Luke is traveling to meet his father’s new wife. They live in Thailand,” Emma explains.

“So you’re going to meet the parents? Wow.”

Emma bites her lip and looks at me. Fuck. It really is meeting the parents, isn’t it? I hadn’t thought about it until now. My father and I have been reconnecting more and more recently, and I thought it was time to visit him and meet his spouse.

“Ah-ha,” Nyla says, looking between us. “Okay, so I’ll move on now,” she murmurs in understanding.

I nod, and she leaves us alone.

“I didn’t consider the fact that you would be meeting them too,” I say.

“Would you prefer that I not go with you?” Emma asks.

“No,” I respond, pulling her close to me. “If you don’t come, I won’t go. I want you with me.”

We return home and quickly finish packing. Every time I look at her bending over the suitcase, I have to adjust my

pants.

She answers her phone, and I can't help but feel annoyed by the interruption. "Tony," she says before heading to the study to take the call. I remind myself that she promised that our time in Thailand would be just for the two of us, so I understand that she needs to handle any remaining business with him before we leave. I'm grateful for all he has done for her, and I feel a sense of indebtedness to him for saving her from the streets when she was sixteen. But now, I'm here to take on that role.

As we exit the cool airport, Emma and I pull our luggage behind us while she holds my hand. The heat is overwhelming, with a thick and humid air enveloping us. I'm struggling to catch my breath. I knew it would be hot in Thailand, but this is beyond anything I've ever experienced.

I stop and look around.

"Taxi?" someone shouts as local Thai drivers surround us, and I refuse. Sweat is already pouring down my face because of the humidity in the air. I wanted to rent a car, but Dad insisted on coming to pick us up himself. I didn't give up the idea of a hotel room, though. Malai, my father's wife, manages one of the luxury hotels in Phuket. She promised to take care of the room for us. I spot my father waiting near a car, and we embrace in a warm hug.

"And you must be Emma." He holds out his hand to Emma, and she squeezes it warmly.

"You look so much like Luke," she says.

Really? I look at him again. We have the same facial structure and the same eyes. I guess there is something to that.

Emma breaks the moment of silence by asking, "Is the weather always this hot here?"

"Yes, it can be quite warm here, and it also rains sometimes," Dad replies. "Let's get you to the hotel so you can

freshen up after your long flight. I know you must be tired.”

Dad continues to chat and provide information about Phuket, filling the silence with neutral conversation. I appreciate his effort to connect with us and make the visit more enjoyable. Although we’re still not what I would consider close, our relationship is improving.

We arrive at the Phuket Resort and Spa, and the car comes to a stop. Emma looks over and asks, “Is this it?”

Dad responds, “Yes. Let’s go meet my wife.” He exits the car and walks toward a stunning Thai woman, embracing her before introducing us to her.

The woman stands, smiling at us. Her straight hair is pulled back with a white flower tucked over one ear. She’s wearing a lovely green dress and a name tag identifying her as a hotel employee.

“This is Malai, my wife. Malai, this is my son Luke and his girlfriend, Emma.”

“Welcome,” she says in a gentle voice.

“Hello,” I say.

She shakes our hands. “I know Paul and I are keen to visit with you, but you must be exhausted from the flight,” she says in perfect English.

I smile at her, and Emma squeezes my hand in encouragement. Malai leads us on a short walk to the room, which is a small villa overlooking the beach and opens the door for us.

“Enjoy,” she says.

“Shall I call you in an hour for dinner?” my father asks, and I nod. They turn back and leave us.

I walk into the room with Emma behind me.

“Wow,” Emma says.

The room is breathtaking, with a large white bed as the focal point, adorned with white flowers. A bottle of champagne and glasses are set up in one corner, likely

arranged by Malai. I walk toward the balcony door, feeling the softness of the sheets beneath my hands as I pass the bed.

I step out to the small private pool and take in the view. The pool is situated with a clear view of the ocean and is surrounded by walls for complete privacy. I feel my excitement building. I don't want to wait a minute longer.

I turn back and see Emma sitting on the bed, removing her shoes. Although I had planned to take a shower first, the sight of the private pool outside changed my mind.

I take the ring out of my pocket and conceal it in my hand, then remove my shirt and all other clothing, standing naked. Emma is watching me as I look back. I flex my muscles, giving her a nice view of my backside, before diving into the refreshing water.

I glide through the water, my gaze fixed on the stunning sunset painting the sea in shades of red and pink. As I turn, my eyes fall on my goddess, standing naked at the edge of the pool, her hands running seductively over her body. Damn, she's gorgeous. My heart races as I take in her beauty. She teases me with a smile before diving into the water and swimming toward me.

As she reaches me, I hold her tightly in my arms, and she wraps her legs around me. She kisses me passionately, sucking on my lips and tongue. I break away from her embrace to gaze into her striking, almost inhuman green eyes, which sparkle with the reflection of the water.

I run my fingers over her face gently, gliding over her body, until I find her palm and slip the ring on her finger.

"Luke?" She raises her hand in front of her eyes and looks at me. Her mouth falls open.

"Emma, before you came into my life, I thought I had everything I wanted. I didn't know that I was missing the most important thing. Love. I know it hasn't been long, but I already know that there's only one thing that is still not perfect in my life. I can't imagine being without you. Will you do me the honor of being my goddess forever?"

“I’ve loved you since the moment our lips met,” she whispers. “I’ve always been yours, and I always will be.” Then she seals her promise with a kiss.

About the Author

Karin Winter is an emerging author of stories weaving steamy romance with emotional angst. This is Karin's third book.

She was a software engineer who used to write code but decided she loved to write books even more.

If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a review — it would be greatly appreciated — even a few words are a huge help!

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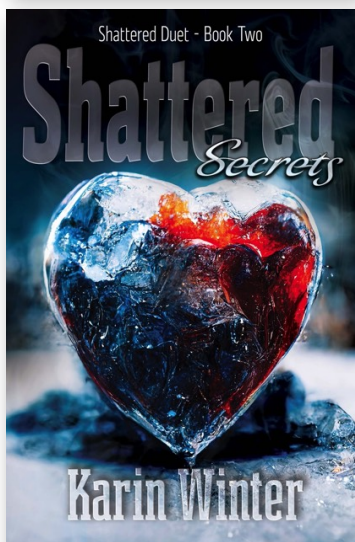
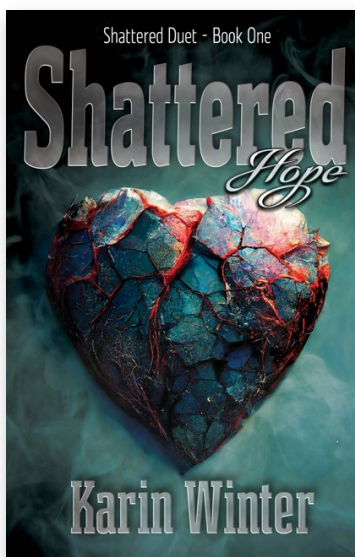
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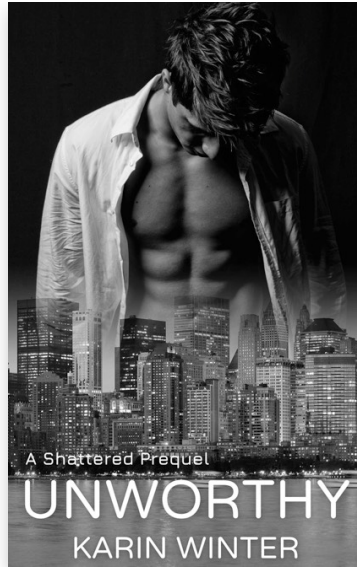


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