

A man with a beard, wearing a black leather motorcycle jacket, is leaning on a chrome motorcycle. A woman with long, wavy brown hair, wearing a bright yellow sleeveless dress, is leaning her head against his shoulder. They are outdoors, with a clear blue sky and distant mountains in the background. The motorcycle's headlight, mirror, and handlebars are visible in the foreground.

**BLUE BLOOD  
MEETS BLUE  
COLLAR**

*Cynthia St. Aubin*

MILLS & BOON  
DESIRE





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## ***Remy Renaud didn't remember her.***

Cosima wasn't sure whether to be insulted or relieved. Both, it turned out, but at different points in their conversation.

Insulted because every detail of their original meeting remained burned in her brain.

Relieved because it had been a pretty severe gambit to assume that a one-night stand nine years ago might make him more likely to agree to her proposal.

And she needed him to agree.

“Miss Lowell?”

*That voice.* Haunted by just a hint of a drawl and rich as wood smoke from the bonfire at the biker rally outside Memphis where she'd first seen him. She still remembered how it had ripped through the neon-colored haze of the hole-in-the-wall bar later that same night.

“Yes?”

“I asked you what story you think is so worth telling.” Time had carved deeper wedges beneath his prominent cheekbones. Chiseled his jaw into a more dangerous cliff. His hair was shorter. His chest, deeper. His hands, rougher. His stare...just as hungry.

The thought brushed her middle with delicate butterfly wings.

\* \* \*

***Blue Blood Meets Blue Collar* by Cynthia St. Aubin is part of the **The Renaud Brothers** series.**

Dear Reader,

When I first met Remy in Marlowe and Law's story, I found myself trespassing inside his head. It was a little scattered in there and a surprising amount of real estate had been given over to the process for perfectly smoking meat, but the secrets I found down some of the more neglected hallways convinced me he had a story to tell. I'm so glad I get the chance!

Cosima Lowell may have traded her biker boots and miniskirts for power suits and her own production company, but this blue-blooded former wild child still remembers what Remy Renaud seems to have forgotten—the wild night they spent together nearly a decade prior. For all the things that have changed, the chemistry between them is as electric as ever, and even though he's turned from a deliciously bad boy to a temptingly good man, the single father and recently minted millionaire is strictly off-limits. Now that she has a shot at a clean slate *and* a binge-worthy reality series based around the Renaud brothers, Cosima is determined to seize both...if she can keep their old spark from kindling a fire that burns both their dreams to the ground.

Happy reading!

*Cynthia*

# **BLUE BLOOD MEETS BLUE COLLAR**

**Cynthia St. Aubin**

# **DESIRE**

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**CYNTHIA ST. AUBIN** wrote her first play at age eight and made her brothers perform it for the admission price of gum wrappers. When she was tall enough to reach the top drawer of her parents' dresser, she began pilfering her mother's secret stash of romance novels and has been in love with love ever since. A confirmed cheese addict, she lives in Texas with a handsome musician.

For crazy aunts everywhere, but especially  
for my aunt Patty, who laughed like a  
pterodactyl and who gave me “the talk”  
with equal parts brass tacks and beauty.  
Save me some peanut M&M’s.

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Excerpt from *One Stormy Night* by Jules Bennett

## *One*

Rainier “Remy” Renaud had been many things in his thirty-five years.

A brother, a thief, a convict, an ex-con, a biker, an offshore oil worker, a father, a single father, co-owner of a distillery, and most recently a millionaire.

But before all of that, he’d been one of Charles “Zap” Renaud’s boys.

And his father raised no fools. Fools were a considerable liability to a third-generation Louisiana moonshiner and purveyor of assorted ill-gotten gains to an ever-changing cast of shifty locals and shady passers-through. Remy knew this because, like his three brothers, he’d been part of the operation.

In the process, Zap had given him the one good thing to come from his whole, hungry, hardscrabble youth: a no-fail, honest-to-God bullshit detector.

At present, it howled a grab-your-waders-and-a-shovel warning at a most unlikely source.

Cosima Lowell.

Television producer and trouble with a capital *T*.

Walking, talking temptation in a dove-gray power suit.

“Well? What do you think?” Full lips painted a double-dog-dare-you red twisted in a smirk that told him she already knew the answer.

He thought the woman asking him this question was a trick the whole damn universe had decided to play on him.

If someone had taken his every teenage fantasy and created a composite in female form, Cosima Lowell would be it. Smooth skin a shade that brought to his mind the buxom lifeguards forever sprinting in slow motion down the beach on

the show he'd watched obsessively the summer of his fourteenth year. Curls the color of the toasted chestnuts he and his brothers had scrapped over when they could get them. Hypnotic hazel eyes as deep as the ocean he'd never seen and as wild as the waves he'd dreamed of surfing.

All of it seated across from him in an office chair that probably cost more than his first car. Haloed with light from the tall bank of windows containing a snatch of the distant Los Angeles skyline behind, she was everything he had ever wanted but could never have.

The Renaud Luck.

Zap had referred to it often and with a lot of venom. His nickname—earned after a run-in with a circuit breaker at the oil refinery—being a prime example.

As a fully grown man, Remy had come to the conclusion that almost all of their troubles had mainly been self-inflicted. Not so much bad luck as consequences of famously bad ideas and even worse decisions.

Agreeing to come to Los Angeles had been one of them.

He'd known it when, seated on the couch across from his youngest brother, Law, and Law's very pregnant and very significant other, Marlowe, Remy had watched his brother nod, smile, and lie.

Of course, a docuseries based on 4 Thieves distillery was a good idea, Law had said. Couldn't believe he hadn't thought of it first. He would just love to talk with Marlowe's producer friend from prep school to talk about it. He'd book the next flight to LA.

They hadn't booked the *very* next flight, but one still too damn soon for Remy's comfort. Then Marlowe had to go into labor with her twins seven weeks early, leaving Remy to travel from Fincastle, Virginia to face his personal adolescent fever dream solo.

"Mr. Renaud?" Cosima Lowell's question triggered an involuntary clench between his belly button and spine. She

had the kind of earthy, sexy, burnt-sugar husky voice he didn't usually hear until *after*.

After whiskey.

After sex.

"*Remy*." He reached for the glass of water he'd accepted after being offered everything from a latte to a massage in the plant-choked waiting area of the coworking space in west LA that housed Ferro Studios. "And I what I *think*, is that I need some more information."

She pressed her lips together, the smile tightening slightly. "About the preproduction process?"

"About you."

The light in her eyes flickered like a candle flame in a sudden draft.

"What would you like to know?"

A fair question.

Marlowe had given him a basic rundown and some of the details had surprised him. Daughter of a once world-famous Italian opera-singer mother and a father from New England old money, Cosima had up and vanished her senior year of Lennox-Finch Preparatory Academy. When she'd reappeared several years later, it had been all the way across the country and in a field far distant from her family's Philadelphia connections.

Hollywood.

"How'd you end up all the way out here?" he asked.

Her eyebrows were a shade darker than her hair, and dramatic when arched. "You'd like to know the physical route I drove, or is this a personal question?"

Damn if his ears didn't burn just as they had when his freshman algebra teacher had caught him staring down her blouse while she bent over to help him with an equation.

He'd needed *a lot* of help with equations that year.

“I’m not in the habit of conducting business with people I don’t know on a personal level,” he said.

“That’s funny.” The pointed tip of an almond-shaped nail tapped the tiny dimple in her chin. “The article I read about Samuel Kane’s new venture capital company making an investment in 4 Thieves almost read like you two weren’t acquainted at all.”

It had to be some kind of progress that he could hear a string of words like *Samuel Kane*, *venture capital*, and *investment* without his eye starting to tick.

Not that he wasn’t grateful that Marlowe Kane’s older brother had swept in to keep the distillery expansion project afloat when Kane Foods patriarch, and notable jack-hole, Parker Kane had washed his hands of it. But it still chapped Remy’s ass that they’d accepted an offer from either of them in the first place.

He took another sip of water, as if he could swallow the fact like a bitter pill.

“Samuel Kane wanted to put money into my business,” he said, resisting the urge to yank at the neck of the dress shirt Law had insisted Remy wear for the meeting. “Not a damn camera crew into my life.”

“Not into your life,” she said, sliding back into her sales-y tone. “Into your distillery.”

“The distillery *is* my life.”

Or had taken over most of it in the months since the investment.

He’d learned quickly what was expected of him. Present his hand for shaking and his back for slapping.

Work.

And work. And work. Put in extra hours as the orders poured in.

Sacrifice. Offer up the only thing he held sacred.

Time with Emily.



Tenderness trampled his heart like a stampede of wild horses just as it always did when his eight-year-old daughter ambled through his mind. Huge gray eyes, wind-whipped hair, limbs growing longer by the day.

By the hour, it sometimes seemed.

He was all too conscious of how many of those hours he'd lost during this process.

“My therapist would say that statement is an indication of an unhealthy work-life balance.” Cosima's red mouth twisted in a wry, self-deprecating grin that eased the tightness in his chest. An admission meant to both gently rib him while hinting at her own dysfunction.

Not that any of it was visible from his vantage.

“I'm guessing your therapist never built a distillery with his bare hands.”

“*Her,*” Cosima corrected. “And, no. I think she built her practice with delicate Hollywood egos and a poorly concealed desire to judge.” Mirth sparkled beneath the dark lashes of her eyes as she sat back in the rounded cup of chair and crossed one leg over the other, the tawny curve of her calf reflected in the chair's chrome base.

*I will not think about her legs.*

A commandment he broke in the same moment it had been decreed.

Legs were, and always had been, Remy's thing. Third in birth order but dead last in height at a respectable six foot one, he'd chased and frequently caught women whose willowy limbs meant they had a couple of inches on him if they wore heels.

Cosima Lowell wore heels every bit as high as women he'd dated in the past, but if they were to stand toe-to-toe, the crown of her curly head would barely brush the tip of his nose.

Tiny. Short. Petite. Diminutive. Delicate.

None of the words frequently welded to women of her height seemed to fit.

*Distilled* felt much closer to the truth. Every ounce of sex and sophistication refined to its purest, most powerful form and radiating the same banty rooster energy that made Chihuahuas swagger up to pit bulls at the dog park.

The sound of a cleared throat snapped his eyes back into his head and his attention back to the present, where a whole other human had arrived in the office without his noticing.

*Shit.*

“Remy Renaud, this is Sarah Sharp. She’s part of the ‘damn camera crew’ and my assistant when we’re not filming.”

Lean in T-shirt and skinny jeans, Sarah had hair the color of an orange rind and the coat of pale freckles that came with it. She assessed him from huge doe eyes behind chunky nerd glasses. Just a kid, really. Which, to Remy, meant anyone between the ages of three and twenty-four.

“Can we be *The Camera Crew of the Damned*?” the “kid” asked. “That sounds much cooler.”

Cosima shrugged. “His distillery, his rules.”

Remy folded his arms across his chest, angling a skeptical look at her. “I don’t recall agreeing to let you film.”

“Not yet, but you will. I’m just that good.” The cocky way she said it left not one shred of doubt in his soul that that word put its fingerprints not just on her office, but every aspect of her life.

“That’s factually correct,” Sarah said, hoisting the silver thermal carafe in her hand. “I’ve witnessed. Coffee?”

“Please.” Cosima leaned forward to shrug out of her blazer.

“I’m okay, thanks,” Remy said, never quite rid of aligning refusal of resources with politeness.

“You’re sure?” She shimmied to get the sleeves down her forearms and the motion did things that failed to aid his concentration. “This is from my personal stash. Not that weak bean-water they serve out there at the bar.”

Taking this as a cue, Sarah set one of the white ceramic coffee cups on a glass-topped table at Cosima's elbow and began to pour.

When the rich aroma of roasted beans hit his nose, Remy's salivary glands clenched so hard it hurt.

Good coffee was hard to come by at 4 Thieves. Not because they didn't buy it. Because Emily insisted on making it, and he and Law didn't have the heart to tell her that the last sip shouldn't come with a bonus mouthful of grounds.

"Jamaica Blue Mountain," Cosima said, her smoky voice winging through the words like a barn swallow.

He felt like one of those hapless cartoon dogs, fingers of steam hooking him by the nostrils as she pursed her lips to blow it from the surface of her cup.

"All right."

*You're an oak, Renaud.*

"Told you so," Sarah murmured under her breath after filling his mug.

The coffee tasted even better than it smelled, and it was all he could do keep himself from making sounds that had no business in a glass-walled office.

With great effort, he set his cup back down. "So, where were we?" he asked, wincing inwardly. Though he'd received the official explanation for his compulsive fidgeting and difficulty focusing on extended conversations from state-funded health professionals at Nelson Coleman Correctional Center, the symptoms had been present since his boyhood and only marginally helped by the medication he forgot to take half the time.

This morning being part of that half.

Cosima's red-lacquered fingernails clicked against the ceramic as she lifted it to her lips for another sip. "You were staring at my legs."

There went his ears again.

“I wasn’t, either,” he said, hating the hint of bayou that crept into his voice when flustered. “I was just...thinking.”

“Thinking about my legs?” She glanced down at them and pointed the toe of her high heel, flexing her shapely calf.

Because she looked, he felt obliged to do the same. All too easy to imagine how the backs of her thighs would feel pressed into his palms as he lifted her onto the desk.

“Are you absolutely certain you and Marlowe Kane were friends?” he asked.

The longer he spent with this firebrand of a woman, the harder it was to imagine her and the cool, reserved billionaire heiress palling around together, even as long ago as prep school.

“More like, friend-*ly*.” Cosima stared into the dark pool of her black coffee. “Our circles were a Venn diagram that intersected at old money and cheerleading.”

Cheerleading.

*Cheerleading?*

She *had* to be doing this on purpose.

“Marlowe said you transferred to another school your senior year?”

A noticeable change of topics, but it was either move this conversation to safer ground, or use one of the many plants as a lap screen and scuttle his way to the door.

The light in her eyes dimmed. “The official version, yes.”

“And the unofficial version?” he asked, piqued by the admission.

She looked up from her mug, clearly weighing whether to answer. “I dropped out. Well, ran away, technically.”

“And you came straight to LA, or...”

Christ, he was terrible at this.

Unlike Augustin—thief two of four—Remy hadn’t inherited their father’s silver-tongued smoothness when it came to

business matters. Never mind that his brother had chosen to use this gift in ways destructive to their business in general, and Law's relationship with his former girlfriend in particular.

"I spent a few years knocking around. Causing good trouble for bad people but saving plenty for myself." She offered him a roguish smile. "Eventually I came down from the adrenaline and got my act together. The production company where I'd worked my college internship hired me right after graduation. The rest, as they say..." She waved a hand to paint the road to her present.

"What made you want to get into television?" He had to ask this carefully, avoiding the Luddite resentment for all things bright and beautiful that had been forged into his bones in the mud-colored shotgun house of his youth.

She took a deep breath and stared out the window, a wistful expression smoothing her face. "My older brother, Danny, and I used to watch reruns together late at night. *I Love Lucy*. *I Dream of Jeannie*. *The Brady Bunch*. That kind of thing. We used to talk about hitchhiking to Hollywood. Getting jobs at some little all-night diner where some producer would inevitably discover us and we'd both be *huge* stars."

Now that sounded vaguely familiar. Siblings sharing improbable dreams.

He couldn't help but wonder if Cosima and her brother had similar reasons for wanting to plan their escape.

"So how did you up behind the camera?" he asked.

"By being in front of it first. I did a few commercials. Even had a minor part on a soap opera once upon a time."

His antennae twitched.

*An actress.*

That made just a little too much sense.

"It was the stories, when I think about it," she said. "That's what it was really about. Not the movie stars or the red carpets or the chance at fame." When she looked at him again, her eyes were alight with conviction. "That's why I reached out to



Marlowe if you want to know the truth of it. I think 4 Thieves has a story worth telling and that I'm the right person to tell it."

*Damn.*

She really *was* good.

*Almost* good enough to drown out the tornado siren of his bullshit detector firing off once again.

Not because of what she'd said.

Because of what she *didn't* say. What she *wouldn't* say.

Remy should know, after all. Secrets were his specialty.

And he intended to find out Cosima Lowell's if it took him all night.

## Two

Remy Renaud didn't remember her.

Cosima wasn't sure whether to be insulted or relieved.

Both, it had turned out, but at different points in their conversation.

Insulted because every detail of their original meeting remained burned in her brain.

Relieved because it had been a pretty severe gambit to assume that a one-night stand nine years ago might make him more likely to agree to her proposal.

And she needed him to agree.

Having spent her very last cent buying her ex-fiancé out of Ferro Studios—the production company she had founded and foolishly made him a partner in—she hadn't so much as file cabinet to store the settlement agreement in, or a pen to sign it with in the aftermath.

“Miss Lowell?”

*That voice.* Haunted by just a hint of a drawl and rich as the woodsmoke from the bonfire at the biker rally outside Memphis, where she'd first seen him. She still remembered how it had ripped through the neon-colored haze of the hole-in-the-wall bar later that same night.

“Yes?” she said, having learned long ago that *sorry* was not a word to be used casually in negotiations.

“I asked you what story 4 Thieves has that you think is so worth telling.” He slouched in his chair, an irritatingly amused smirk notched into one corner of his mouth. Time had carved deeper wedges beneath his prominent cheekbones. Chiseled his jaw into a more dangerous cliff. His hair was shorter. His chest, deeper. His hands, rougher. His stare...just as hungry.

Eyes doing all the work as his mind worked behind them, already tasting the thing he wanted.

At twenty-one, it had made her knees weak.

At twenty-nine, it made her desperate. She was so close.

And Remy Renaud could be all the separated her from the reality she'd worked for since she'd fled her parents' Long Island estate and never looked back.

“Right,” she said, recrossing her legs. Her coffee had cooled, but she sipped it, anyway, to give her hands something to do. “The story of brothers who forged a shared dream with grit, determination, and the skills gleaned from their hardscrabble youth.”

The furrows branching out from the corners of his eyes deepened. “And how would you know anything about our youth?”

*Crossroads.*

There was more than one way to answer this question. She chose the simplest.

“Because it’s referenced in the section entitled ‘About the Bad Boys of Booze’ on your website.”

Remy heaved a disgusted sigh and muttered something under his breath that might have been *goddamn marketing punks*, but she couldn’t be sure.

His fingers flexed against the arm of the white leather club chairs Cosima hated with a deep and abiding passion. Like the rest of the furnishings, they had come as part of the office package that she had rented specifically for this project. She wasn’t certain she could pay the second half until VidFlix came through with the advance production fees for the show she’d pitched.

A show the Renaud brothers hadn’t *technically* signed off on.

Yet.

Risky? Yes.

Necessary? Also, yes.

She needed a win.

When a familiar pair of brooding eyes peered out from the screen of her iPad above an article in the *Los Angeles Times* salaciously titled *Bad Boys Make Good*, she knew she'd found it.

And the idea for *Bad Boys of Booze* was born.

Four Thieves distillery was docu-reality gold. An idyllic setting, a colorful cast of characters, an irresistible rags-to-riches hook, and above all...drama.

Drama she'd learned about under cheap motel sheets, her ear pressed to his chest after an hours-long marathon of back-bending, wall-thumping, going-to-feel-this-tomorrow sex.

She'd had to throw a mental fire blanket over this part of her memory when he'd stepped over the threshold of her office, and it all came rushing back.

His scent. His sarcasm.

His sexy scowl.

"If we agree to move forward with the show, there would need to be some ground rules in terms of filming at 4 Thieves," he said.

Her pulse picked up to a trot at his use of the conditional. "Such as?"

"We're not doing any bullshit story lines or scripted scenes for emotional conflict. I hate it when they do that shit."

*Busted.*

"And which reality TV show have you watched where this was a problem for you?" she asked.

The tips of his ears crimsoned once again.

"*Kardashians*, but only one seasons because I was at the mercy of the hospital's cable after surgery."

"Before or after Kim announced she was studying to become a lawyer?" she asked, tickled by the revelation.

“Can you believe that? She can’t even keep track of a seventy-five-thousand-dollar earring, and we’re supposed to believe she can handle law school?” His hands launched into flight, illustrating his apparent exasperation.

Cosima remembered the way those work-roughened palms and scar-latticed fingers cushioned, sliced, and stabbed at the air to emphasize a point.

Sometimes, mere words didn’t seem sufficient to express the full force of his thoughts.

Sometimes, his hands had made thoughts and words unnecessary.

“One season, did you say?” She raised an eyebrow at him. “I’m pretty sure Kim lost that earring in season six. Which any self-respecting reality TV junkie knows happened over a decade ago.”

The flush bled from his ears into his cheeks. “They ran repeats late at night. The pain meds made it hard to sleep.”

“No judgment.” She held up her own hands in a deflective gesture. “What other conditions do I need to be aware of?”

Remy cleared his throat and all traces of levity evaporated. “Under no circumstances will my father or the Renaud brothers other than Law be mentioned or asked about.”

Cosima quickly fixed a curious expression to her face and asked a question she already knew the answer to. “May I ask why?”

His broad shoulders stiffened. “I’d rather not get into it.”

This stonewalling answered a question she knew she couldn’t ask outright: whether Remy was still sitting on the secret he’d been keeping from his brothers for over a decade.

Excitement simmered in her belly, effervescent as champagne.

Truth had a way of bubbling to the surface no matter how tightly it was bottled or how deep it was buried.

She had learned that the hard way.



“So, no fake storylines, dad and brothers aside from Law are out,” she said, ticking the items off on her fingers. “Is that all?”

Those iron eyes bored into hers with the same feral intensity she’d seen when he’d stopped her from being crushed beneath six and a half feet of drunk biker when a fight had broken out at the bar.

“Under no circumstance is my daughter to appear on camera.”

Moisture bloomed between her shoulder blades and under her breasts. The cheerful background hum of the office died away as the rushing sound of her pulse filled her ears.

A daughter.

Remy Renaud had a daughter.

Did she have a mop of curly hair? A crooked grin?

*Not now. Don't think about that now.*

“Warm-up for anyone?” Alarmingly prescient as ever, Sarah hovered in the office door, carafe in hand.

“Please,” they said in unison.

A sly little smile played about Sarah’s lips as she quickly refilled both mugs and made herself scarce.

Just one of the many qualities that had made her an indispensable resource since their unlikely meeting in an all-night coffee shop several years back. Cosima had taken one look at the prickly, pissed-off young thing perched at the counter and seen her entire life.

The chipped nail polish. The ragged fishnets. The raccoon eyes smudged with liner and shadowed by worry.

A girl she knew. A girl she had been. A girl she couldn’t let down.

“Provided I work all those stipulations into the contract, do we have a deal?” Holding her breath was one of those habits her acting coaches had warned her about. But as she looked at Remy’s rugged profile, she couldn’t help herself.

She wanted this.

Wanted it so badly, her chest ached.

He set aside his mug and scooted forward in his seat. “I’ll need to let Law look over the contract, of course.”

Adrenaline punched her fast and hard.

“Of course,” she agreed, hoping she didn’t sound as pathetically overeager as she felt.

“And we’d need to find a when Samuel Kane’s team isn’t on site,” he added. “Those weeks tend to be...busier.”

She suspected that *busier* was a political choice in words judging by the grimace rolling across his face like dank fog.

“Absolutely,” she agreed.

“*I su-u-po-o-ose,*” he drawled, clearly drawing it out to torture her at this point, “we might be able to work something out.”

Iron will alone prevented her from rocketing out of her chair, pulling him up by his lapels, and planting a kiss straight on his lips. Not that she hadn’t thought about it for reasons entirely unrelated to a victory lap.

She’d become so jaded by living in the land of prenups that at first she didn’t realize why he had risen or was holding out his hand.

This, not the paperwork or lawyer-reviewed contracts, was the sealing of their deal for Remy Renaud. They’d both spoken their piece. Agreed to help one another.

A vein of fear streaked through her elation.

The gesture was so heart-shreddingly earnest.

And incredibly naive.

Their handshake when he’d arrived at her office had been a brief, gentle, perfunctory squeeze.

But now.

But *now*.

An electrical current leaped from his palm to hers, tingling all the way up her arm and grounding itself with a surge of warmth in her chest. They stood there facing each other, neither of them releasing the hold.

He looked at her so intently, she half expected a “hey, wait a minute...” To fall from his lips.

“Any chance you’re free to have dinner with me tonight?”  
A sheepish smile softened the stony expanse of his jaw.  
“Purely to celebrate our joint venture.”

*Interesting.*

She angled her chin to look up at him from beneath her lashes. “Is that what you did when Samuel Kane wanted to invest in 4 Thieves? Ask him to dinner to celebrate your joint venture?”

The comment had been meant to provoke him, but he resisted the bait. Mostly.

“He’s not my type,” he said, his left eyelid ticking ever so slightly.

Cosima’s heart froze in her chest as the scraps of their first conversation drifted back to her, nostalgic as gilded leaves on the first stiff wind of autumn.

*You’re not my type, he’d said.*

*Single?*

*Short.*

His rebuff had stung at the time. Now, it was fuel.

“Rich?” she challenged.

He cleared his throat and shifted on the soles of his battered work boots. Paint-flecked and totally at odds with his pressed slacks, they had been the second thing she noticed when he stepped over the threshold of the office.

His dress shirt had been the first. At least two inches too small in the collar and arms. Faded from too many washings. Court hearings and funerals.

He'd had plenty of both.

Remy leaned in, stirring a warm current of air that smelled of fabric softener and clean skin. "Maybe I just enjoy your company and want a little more of it before I head back."

Cosima straightened the gold-lion pin on his probably borrowed tie. "Or maybe you want more time to study me?"

From the second he'd arrived, his eyes had been all over her hands, her face, her legs. The last, he had in common with his younger self. It amazed her that men considered these kinds of assessments subtle.

"Can't think of a nicer subject," he said, not missing a beat.

"Then I accept. As long as I get to pick the place."

His dark eyebrows shot up.

"And don't you worry your pretty little head," she said, noting the lines bracketing his mouth. "It won't be somewhere the words *sprout* and *tofu* are featured prominently on the menu."

He treated her to the full width of his smile. "It's like you know me."

*Isn't it, though?*

Glancing at her phone, she did some quick math. "If you don't mind, I just need to wrap a few things up. I could be ready by seven?"

"Perfect," he said.

She glanced toward her office door in a subtle invitation.

"Should I get your number?" he asked at last. "Just so we can coordinate?"

"How about you give me yours and I'll shoot you a text?"

He rattled off the string of numbers. Seconds later, his pocket pinged.

A familiar sound effect.

The descending whistle that typically announced a large object falling toward an animated character.

He gave her a self-effacing grin as he pulled out the phone and swiped his thumb over the screen. “Emily’s choice. I’ve been introducing her to vintage cartoons.”

*Emily.*

Why did knowing his daughter’s name make her feel like she’d been mule-kicked in the chest?

“A vastly undervalued cultural artifact,” she said breezily. “Speaking of dinner spots, where are you staying? I can pick something nearby.”

Remy rocked forward on his boots, thumbs hooked in his pockets. “The thing is, I was kind of hoping this meeting would be over early enough that I could just hop an earlier flight home.”

She cocked her head. “You didn’t book a hotel?”

He gave her a dazzling smile. “I figured I’d find a spot if I decided to stay.”

“And?”

“Seeing as I have dinner plans, I guess I better get looking.”

“Hold, please.” She glanced back down at her phone and tapped out a quick message to Sarah, receiving a reply almost immediately.

*Done.*

“Sarah has a reservation for you at the Proper on Broadway,” Cosima said. “How about I just pick you up there? Say, seven thirty?”

His stiff nod was adorably unconvincing. “Even better, why don’t I meet you at the restaurant at eight? That will give me time to check in with home first.”

With his manners, she knew this most likely had more to do with his discomfort at the idea of having *her* come to collect *him* than it did needing the extra thirty minutes, but decided to let it slide.

“Alrighty,” she said. “I’ll text you the address.”



“See you then.” He gave her a nod, then made his way through the maze of trendy tables and booths from which kids barely into their twenties would launch their million-dollar start-ups. Disastrously young as they all appeared to her, several sets of eyes covertly tracked him as he stalked toward the elevator.

Cosima lingered in the doorway, pondering the broad expanse of his back.

He looked so solid.

Like the kind of structure she could huddle under or near in a hurricane.

Which is exactly what her life had felt like as of late.

Caught in the middle of gale-force winds, watching pieces of herself flying away. Picking through the rubble. Trying to decide what, if anything, she should keep. Finding little that actually resembled her in the life she’d worked so strenuously to assemble.

Irritated at herself for these useless thoughts, she sat down at her desk, fired up her laptop, and composed the email to the contact who had been not-so-patiently awaiting the results of today’s meeting.

A sharp rap on the door made her jump as she stared at the screen, desperately trying to think of a way to buy herself more time.

Sarah’s eager face floated in the doorway.

Cosima had deliberately ignored the last response in their text thread.

Hotel...good sign?

“Well?” she asked, chewing the ragged cuticle of a nail.

Cosima closed her laptop. “I’m at least eighty-three percent sure we have a green light. I’m meeting him for dinner tonight, so I should have a better idea after that.”

Sarah leaned a narrow hip on the doorframe, eyebrows raised on her freckle-dappled forehead. “Oh, *really?*”

Rolling her eyes, Cosima stood and began tucking her things into her bag. “Don’t get any ideas.”

“I get ideas all the time,” Sarah said. “I’m getting one right now, in fact.”

“Seriously. I’m pretty sure he just wants to drill me for details about Samuel Kane.”

At least, that was one theory.

The ferocity of Remy’s reaction both times Cosima had mentioned the Kane Foods CEO’s name had surprised her. From what she could remember, it had always been Parker Kane, not his quiet, bookish eldest son, who had tended to produce such vibrant dislike.

Her own parents, ambitious as they were, had bulldozed her into asking him to a Sadie Hawkins once upon a time. It had been a painfully awkward evening marked by her occasional attempts to engage him in conversation and Samuel’s mumbled replies as he pretended not to be staring at Arlie Banks—now Arlie Banks-Kane—across the gymnasium.

She took strange comfort in this thought.

Some things really were meant to be.

“Well,” Sarah said, picking at the chipped nail polish. “Keep me posted.”

Cosima shrugged her bag onto her shoulder and met her assistant in the doorway, gently guiding her hands back to her sides. “We’re not picking, remember?”

Sarah blew a strand of strawberry-blond hair away from her face. “Sorry. It’s just... Work has been really stressful for Justin lately and—”

“I know,” Cosima interrupted, saving her the trouble of finishing the excuse.

And, anyway, she *did* know.

In addition to rough edges and a fondness for riding life’s rails, Cosima had recognized another glaring similarity between them almost immediately.

Terrible taste in men.

Overhearing Sarah's half of the conversation that night at the café and the few times they'd traveled together for a film project had been like watching reruns of her own life.

Which is why she had offered her a job with Ferro Studios. She was hoping that financial stability might empower her protégé to realize that Justin was a narcissistic leech in need of a swift kick to the curb.

The full width and breadth of the irony hadn't emerged until Cosima's own relationship had spectacularly imploded, placing *both* of their livelihoods in jeopardy.

*Guilt.*

Always, it nipped at her heels like a mangy dog.

It had been the reason she spent the years following her dropout from high school bouncing from town to town, from bar to bar, job to job, trouble to trouble.

The one time she had stopped, Remy Renaud had found her.

Now, she might have a chance to leverage that past devastation to repair her present.

If she could keep history from repeating itself.

## Three

Cosima told herself it was the heavenly aroma of smoked meat, not the sight of his sculpted torso in a pectoral-hugging black T-shirt that caused her salivary glands to contract when she spotted Remy in the waiting area of the restaurant she'd chosen for their celebratory dinner.

"You clean up nice." His eyes lingered on the clingy nude cocktail dress she'd selected during her rushed postwork ritual, which had involved fifteen minutes of trying on, and flinging off, fourth fifths of her wardrobe. All of which seemed to draw attention to the pallid hue that long hours indoors staring at legalese during the year-long battle for control of Ferro Studios had left her with. Robbed of the summery glow she typically managed to hang on to well into winter because of her Nona Ferro's side of the family.

As soon as the second half of the preproduction check was on its way, she intended to remedy that situation.

"And you..." she began, searching for but not finding the linguistic equivalent for a man who was at his most powerfully attractive when *not* cleaned up. "Look...relaxed."

"This old thing?" he said, tucking a thumb in his jeans pocket.

Cosima was familiar with the expression "the clothes make the man," but with Remy, it seemed to be the exact opposite. Even a plain black T-shirt and well-worn jeans took on the look of something too permanent, too classical, to be affected by considerations as ephemeral as style.

"Your choice of venue is a little surprising," he said, glancing around the entryway.

She understood what he meant.

One of the better-kept secrets in Los Angeles, Ruby Que couldn't be classified as a hole-in-the-wall or dive.

More like, a homey but completely unpretentious backyard barbecue moved indoors.

“You’d expected somewhere with six courses and name-dropping waitstaff?” she asked, shifting her weight to plant a hand on her hip.

“Four, maybe,” he said. “And at least a name-dropping maître d’.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” she said.

“You don’t disappoint me in the least.” Heat flared in his quicksilver irises as they landed briefly on her mouth.

“Well, hey there, Miss Lowell!” A perky blond Tinker Bell of a server came bouncing over to them, menus in hand. “I haven’t seen you in forever. How have you been?”

“Great,” Cosima said a little too quickly, desperately trying to communicate with her eyes what she couldn’t with her lips. Going so far as running her conspicuously ringless left hand through her hair. “Really great.”

When Greta motioned for them to follow her, Cosima mistakenly thought she was home free.

“And how are the wedding plans coming?” she added, glancing over her shoulder.

*No such luck.*

“They’re not, actually,” Cosima said.

Greta faltered, nearly running into the giant barrel of salted peanuts that were doled out to each table in tin pails. “I’m so sorry to hear that,” she said, thankfully leaving it at that.

“It’s all good.” A weightless lie to cover a heavy truth.

“Will this be okay?” Greta asked, pulling up at a booth several spaces down from her—*their*—usual one.

“This is perfect,” she lied.

Greta set down the menus and scurried off with a promise of returning with water to flee the scene of her social faux pas.

Cosima wished she could do the same. Somehow, the booth felt five times smaller with Remy filling the other side of it.

“So,” he said, cracking open one of the menus and examining the laminated page. “What’s good?”

“Everything,” she said. “Just depends how hungry you are.”

“So hungry my stomach thinks my throat’s been cut.” He flashed her a sheepish smile.

“Oh, wow.” Cosima shook her head fondly. “I’d heard about those but never seen one in the wild.”

“One of what?” he asked.

“A dad joke.” She could imagine him saying it as he sat across a cozy kitchen table from his daughter, delaying the punch line until he had her attention. Receiving an eye roll and a ‘*Dad,*’ for his trouble.

Because she had no doubt that’s what he was.

A dad. Not a *father*, like Daniel Alcott Lowell had been to Cosima and her brother. Or an *estranged* one.

Even now, that term felt altogether insufficient for capturing the resounding familial lack she often felt.

“I’ll warn you,” he said. “I’m somewhat of a barbecue snob.”

“Is that right?” She already knew this, because barbecue, or the promise of it, had been the reason they’d met. The reason why she’d pointed her Mustang off the exit ramp just outside of Memphis when a local had told her where to find the best burnt ends in the state of Tennessee. *If* she could get the sour-faced monolith of a bartender to part with a plate.

“Yes, ma’am.” He folded the menu and set it aside, leaning back in his bench seat. “I do all the smoking for the Blackpot. My brisket—”

“Takes on its signature flavor from being smoked with the distillery’s own recycled bourbon barrels,” she said, reciting some ad copy.

Remy rested his forearms on the table, laced his thick fingers and studied her with an intensity that was mostly harmless.

*Mostly.*

“Seeing as you seem to know so much about me, don’t you think it would be fair if I knew a little more about you?”

His request had more merit than he even realized.

She knew that he liked to drink his bourbon neat. That he talked in his sleep. That he was good with his hands and even better with his mouth.

Luckily, Greta arrived with their water. Cosima gulped at hers, hoping it might ice her revving libido from the inside out.

After ordering drinks, she pretended to be enthralled with her menu once more, half praying he’d forget what he’d asked her.

Memory didn’t seem to be his strong suit, after all.

“I don’t know if you’re a pulled-pork guy,” Cosima said, not looking up, “but theirs is first-rate.”

He cleared his throat.

“I mean, a lot of places overcook theirs and it basically shreds into pulp, which totally defeats the purpose, if you ask me,” she continued.

Remy drummed his fingers on the tabletop. She could *feel* his eyes boring through her skull.

“But that’s not as bad as when it’s oversmoked. There’s nothing more disappointing than pulled pork that’s like a mouthful of mesquite chips.” Turning to the menu’s back page, she ran a nail along the meat plates. “But if pulled pork isn’t your thing, their spareribs are also amazing.”

“Cosima.”

The sound of her name uttered in that deep, raspy voice sent warmth rippling through her.

“Hmm?”



“You never answered my question.”

“About?” she asked.

“Getting to know you better.” He folded his menu closed and set it aside.

Begrudgingly, she did the same. “I gave at the office, remember?”

“You really expect to get through a whole meal without telling me anything else about yourself?” He lifted a dark eyebrow at her.

Inclining her head, she mimicked the placid plaster saints who had crept her out as a kid. Always glaring down at her from the walls of St. Joseph’s with their painted eyes and frozen smiles.

“What are we supposed to talk about then?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Sports. The weather. The merits of cold smoking versus hot smoking.”

“Now you’re just trying to distract me,” he accused, the corners of his mouth curling upward.

“Is it working?” she asked, nodding her thanks as Greta set a generously poured glass of cabernet before her.

“Like a charm.” Remy lifted his frosted mug in a toast.

“Do you guys know what you want, or do you need a need another few minutes with the menu?” Greta asked, not so subtly eyeing Remy’s flexed bicep when he brought the mug to his lips.

“I’m going to let her order for the both of us.”

“Such trust,” Cosima marveled. “You’re sure about that?”

“Anyone who has such great taste in cars can pick my dinner anytime.”

She snorted. He must have been watching when she whipped around the corner, sailing into the parking lot on two wheels. An impressive feat for a 1978 Mustang King Cobra.

“The three-meat plate with brisket, burnt ends, and the spareribs.”

“Sides?” Greta asked.

“Let’s do the loaded potato salad, coleslaw, and, oh, do you have any of the jalapeño cheese cornbread?”

“You bet,” Greta said.

“That oughta do it.” Cosima gathered both their menus, handed them off, and turned back to Remy. “Where were we?”

He folded his arms across his chest and sat back in the booth. “In danger of falling madly in love.”

Cosima laughed as she reached for her wine, relishing the silky flavor of dark fruit as she sipped, already anticipating how it would mingle with the smoke and spice. “Pretty shallow method of choosing a partner, don’t you think?”

“I can think of shallower ones,” he said.

“Touché.” She felt uncharacteristically awkward, her head empty of words. Generally, she experienced quite the opposite problem.

*Chiacherrona.*

That had been her Nona’s nickname for her.

Chatterbox.

Always spoken fondly and typically in concert with her hair being ruffled. She could feel the ghost weight and warmth of her grandmother’s hand perched atop her head like a hat.

Greta returned with a basket of corn muffins and two small plates. Remy automatically reached for them, dealing a plate to her before folding away the tea towel and sliding it across the table.

This small act of care pierced her.

He waited until she had selected one to add one to his own, then broke it open in a puff of steam to add a pat of butter. His eyes widened as he chewed.

“Good, right?” she asked.

“Better than mine.” He grunted appreciatively. “How’d you find this place?”

*Ugh. No way around this topic, she supposed.*

“My ex-fiancé. He worked here part-time before he got cast in the TV role that launched his career.”

His jaw flexed. “So he’s an actor?”

Cosima didn’t think she was imagining the flicker of a chill in his tone.

“He is.”

“Have I heard of him?”

This was always the first question anyone asked after discovering this fact. It had been much easier when she could say “probably not” and mean it honestly.

Because truly, he wasn’t just an actor, he was a movie star.

Releasing a heavy sigh, Cosima flipped over her phone on the table and did a quick Google search before sliding it across the table to Remy.

He stared at it, disbelief stripping about ten years from his face. “Michael Cooper?”

The man who had broken her heart and her spirit.

Hearing his name conjured him as he’d been the day they’d met. Both crammed into a tiny waiting room at one of the endless rounds of casting calls she’d gone to shortly after her arrival in LA. This one, for a minivan commercial. She’d taken one look at him sitting there among the other hopefuls and had to grab the doorframe so as not to swoon.

Sandy hair that fell perfectly across his smooth, tanned forehead. Eyes the sparkling blue of tropical waters. Killer smile. All wrapped up with a shy Midwestern farm boy’s unassuming politeness. Her diamond in the rough, now honed to brilliance by a publicist, stylist, and talent agent. A realization that had gouged her just as deeply as when he’d shown up with an equally dazzling starlet on his arm the day

they'd met for the last time in her lawyer's office. Three months ago.

"Yep," she said, taking a much healthier swallow of her wine.

"You were engaged to Michael Cooper?"

She'd developed a defensive streak a mile wide at this brand of smug surprise mixed with patronizing disbelief. She'd heard it at red carpet events, after-parties, restaurant openings, movie screenings.

*This is your fiancé?*

*You're just not what I'd pictured.*

Or her personal favorite: *I guess opposites really do attract.*

Scraping away little bits of her confidence, comment by comment. An old wound that felt like a fresh bruise for Remy's having poked at it.

"Still yep," she said tightly. The base of her wine glass clinked as she set it down just a hair too hard.

"I didn't mean that like it sounded. He's just not who—"

"Quit while you're ahead," she interrupted.

He aimed a disarming grin at her. "I have a feeling that would be never, where you're concerned."

"Smart man." She pressed a finger to a tender muffin crumb and dropped it back onto her plate.

"Michael Cooper sure isn't."

Cosima nearly choked on her wine, coughing into her curled first and desperately trying to recover her composure.

"Excuse me?" She blinked watering eyes and reached for her water glass instead.

"Look, I know it isn't my place and that we don't know each other very well, but if you're telling me he had you and now he's settling for that Ashley Mc-whatever girl, I'm telling you the man's a fool."

She blinked at him, wholly thunderstruck and with her heart suddenly galloping in her chest. Michael and his new arm decor hadn't even made themselves red-carpet official yet. The only way he could know that was if...

"Rainier Renaud," she said, crossing her arms and leaning back against her bench. "Are you telling me you read *gossip blogs*?"

Glancing at his reddening ears, she couldn't help but smile. With his upbringing, having such an obvious external barometer of his inner thoughts must have been a significant liability.

"I might have become familiar with one or two of them over the years. Purely to stay informed about the legal proceedings between Khloe and Lamar, you understand."

"Naturally," she said.

"Anyway." He cleared his throat. "All I meant to say was, he downgraded by an order of magnitude."

Beneath the table, Cosima gripped the edge of her bench seat to keep from floating away. "It wasn't all his fault. I'm not exactly the easiest person to live with."

Remy took another sip of his beer. "And what makes you so intolerable?"

"How long have you got?" she laughed.

The beer mug clunked down onto the wood tabletop as he leaned in, sending a fresh wave of his heady, dizzying scent washing over her. "I've got all night."

Her mouth went suddenly dry as the moisture relocated itself much farther south.

"I'm bossy," she said.

"I believe you mean *motivated* and *direct*, but go on," he insisted.

She thought for a moment. "I like things my own way."

"It's a shame you're the only human being in history afflicted with *that* condition," he said drolly.

Cosima rolled her eyes at him. “I’m also incredibly impatient and always right.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. “Sure would be a terrible thing if every girl grew up to be enthusiastic and self-assured like you.”

“I’m too loud,” she said, hoping to stay ahead of the feelings welling up inside her.

He raised an eyebrow at her. “And who told you that?”

“Actually, a lot of people.” She swirled the stem of her wineglass between her thumb and forefinger. “My mother, my father, my teachers, the priest—”

“Michael?” he interrupted.

Her throat caught.

No stranger to the entertainment industry, Cosima knew how she stuck out among Hollywood’s golden ones. The heartbreaking part had been watching Michael realize it. Lamenting that she always had to pass when designers sent couture gowns designed for the tall and leggy. Teasing about how easy she was to lose in a crowd. Joking that her slightly nasal laugh always seemed to carry a second too far into sudden lulls in the conversation.

“Maybe.” She shrugged.

His smile flattened. “Did he cheat?”

It was the perfect question, really.

Just personal enough that she had full license to shut down this conversation. Seal away that part of her life and return them to any number of mundane and inconsequential topics.

So when her answer came, it surprised her.

“Yes.” The word hung suspended on air warmed by the pendant light overhead, until he spoke.

“You want to know what I think the shittiest part about being cheated on is?” He stared at his hands, wrapped around the bottom of the condensation-fogged beer mug.

“What’s that?”

“It’s not that they slept with someone else, or that they lied to you. It’s that now, you have to go back over everything. Every conversation. Every smile. Every kiss. You doubt every memory.”

Cosima tasted metal beneath her tongue as guilt crept in like an undertow, making her hands and feet feel cold and heavy.

“Emily’s mother?” she guessed.

He nodded.

“Met at the tail end of a wild streak. We were dumb, she got pregnant, we got married in a hurry and regretted it just as quickly.”

“You have a picture?” She molded her lips into what she hoped was at least a reasonably convincing smile. “Of Emily,” she clarified.

“If you insist.” He shifted in his seat, then brought out his phone, swiped the screen, and slid it over to her.

The device was still warm from his pocket and felt strangely alive and intimate in her hand.

His whole life was on here.

Beginning with the girl grinning up at her from the screen.

Cosima’s hand floated to her mouth, but not in time to stop a small bleat of surprise from escaping.

Huge gray eyes, a wild cascade of chestnut-colored curls, lips stained cherry-red and in the perfect *O* of a singing Christmas-card angel as she pointed up at a lotus of fireworks.

A girl just like the one she’d imagined when she’d learned she was pregnant after their one-night stand.

## *Four*

The shock and dismay frozen on Cosima's face brushed the primal part of Remy's brain that had always launched him straight into panic when confronted with female distress.

Unlike Law, he hadn't taken a backhoe to his own subconscious.

Mostly because he knew on some elemental level that his wasn't a hard-packed pile of resentment for Zap and his assorted neglect and cruelty.

It was as spongy and treacherous as the marshlands he and his brothers had often escaped to on a commandeered pontoon. Pits that could swallow up not just a stone or a stick, but an entire vehicle if you didn't keep it moving at a steady clip.

His memory—such as it was—felt like that, too.

Places that his recollection had painted prettier than they actually were. Corners where shadows turned regular branches into gnarled fingers reaching for him in dreams. Spots where the ground fell away into a blank void.

Holes.

Better not to stand on the edge of this one for too long.

“You okay?” he asked.

She blinked her dampened eyes and handed the phone back to him. “Can I say yes and you pretend like you believe me?”

“Sure,” he agreed.

First, her ex-fiancé, and now this.

He was on a roll, all right.

His mind swam, desperately casting about for something that would banish the gut-shot hurt from her eyes. Or better yet, restore that cocky pirate smirk that could probably steal his heart along with his wallet if he'd a mind to let it.



“Any other incredibly painful memories I can dredge up for you?” he offered. “Seeing as the brisket isn’t here yet and I still have a little room after swallowing my foot?”

Shoulders rounding, she set her elbows on the table. Her lips pillowed as she blew out an exhale. “My brother died in a car accident while I was in high school, if we want to get that out of the way.”

Remy’s hand moved to cover hers without him thinking about it. “I’m sorry,” he said.

She sat up and tucked a curl behind her ear. By the time she met his eyes, he could see she’d capped off whatever well he’d accidentally backed into.

“Who doesn’t have a sad story, right?”

He couldn’t argue with that.

Greta chose that exact minute to arrive with a giant aluminum cookie sheet bearing various bowls and baskets, the pride on her face striking a discordant note with the moment. It faltered slightly as she set down the tray.

“Can I bring you anything else to drink?” Her eyes flicked to their half-empty glasses.

“Bourbon,” they said in unison.

“Any preference?” Greta asked.

Remy glanced across the table. “What are my options?”

“*Oh.*” The girl flipped her blond ponytail over one shoulder. “We have Southern Comfort, Evan Williams...or if you want something local we have Film Noir, Angel’s Aid—”

“Angel’s Aid will be fine,” he said.

“Snob,” Cosima accused once their server had disappeared again.

He shrugged helplessly. “Is it a sin to like the finer things in life?”

Where he’d come from, the answer had been a resounding *yes*. Scorning anyone else who had them had been the most

effective way of smearing lipstick on a very obvious pig's snout.

*Lipstick on a pig.* Not a bad name for a drink.

He made a mental note of it for Grant, general manager of the bar and Blackpot's resident mixologist. Law frequently fussed at him for his ever-more elaborate and nuanced concoctions, but there was something about the ambitious, unpretentious, burly, redheaded former inmate that Remy had liked right off. His stupid party trick of telling each of the bar's patrons which liqueur they resembled notwithstanding.

Remy wondered which comparison Cosima Lowell would garner.

Campari. Bittersweet and red as a cardinal's wing, like the lipstick she favored.

Or sambuca, maybe. Silky and dark as her hair, full of earthy depth.

It made him some kind of bastard, having these thoughts while the last of her awkwardness burned away like fog.

But the fact remained that he *was* having them.

And mentally comparing the woman seated across from him to things he dearly loved the taste of was about as bad of an idea as he could think of.

The dress wasn't helping.

It fit her like skin on a peach, clinging to breasts even fuller than he'd imagined—and he'd imagined hard. While in the shower, he'd quickly had to turn to cold water before quickly scrubbing up.

Following her to the booth, he'd realized how lucky he'd been that pencil skirt had concealed just as much about her generously rounded posterior or he might *still* be in that shower. Because the hint of its hills moving beneath the gently swaying fabric had just about run him into the peanut barrel.

“You keep eating it with your eyes and there won't be any left for your mouth.”

The sentiment and the curiously musical way Cosima had pronounced it had the feel of a well-loved adage.

That it applied just as well to the image in his mind as it did the carnivore's feast before him would have to remain his secret. Noticing she'd already served herself a plate, he set about hastily constructing his own.

"Where'd you hear that?" Forking up a slice of brisket, he forbade himself from commenting on the smoke ring—or what passed for one here—and why trimming was such a vital part of the process.

"My Nona Ferro."

He watched as she tore one of the slices of pillowy white bread in half, piled it with pulled pork, and hosed it with barbecue sauce from a plastic squirt bottle.

The corners of his eyes began to tug.

*You will not explain why vinegar-based sauces are inherently superior for pork.*

"You're not going to have any ribs?" he asked, noting the untouched slab.

She dabbed the corner of her mouth with a paper towel from the roll provided near the condiments. "There are certain things a woman needs to do in the privacy of her own home."

*And certain things a man would pay to see.*

"Nona Ferro," Remy said, picking up the thread of their conversation. "Your father's mother?" he asked.

"Mother's," she said, spearing a bite of macaroni and swiping it through the puddle of sauce.

*Eyes on your own plate.*

"Nona. That's Italian?" he asked.

"It is," Cosima said. "She was an opera singer, actually. Traveled all over Europe. Just like my mother."

"And do you sing?" he asked.

"Not unless bribed," she said.

Remy watched in rapt fascination as her fork scooped up some coleslaw, then some macaroni and cheese, and then, to his horror, traveled toward the one item on her plate that approached being decent.

The brisket.

“The starch will completely overpower the flavor of the smoke.”

It shot out of his mouth despite his best efforts to keep his teeth welded together.

Irritation creased her features.

“If we’re going to work together, there’s something we need to get straight right now.” She aimed the pointed tip of her red-lacquered nail at him. “I eat what I want, drink what I want, and do what I want. Your opinions, instructions, and/or approval are not required for any of those items. Got that, Renaud?”

He raised his hand as if on the witness stand. Palm turned toward her.

“You have my sincerest apologies and my word that never again will I weigh in on any of the above.”

The tension in her face eased incrementally. “Good. Now, open wide.”

He studied the fork now poised in the air between them, not quite believing what she was asking of him.

“I—I don’t think I could.” Already, his heart had begun to beat a little faster at the prospect of the mishmash of textures. The muddying of flavors.

“I’m quite certain you can. Seeing as the personal questions that tap-danced all over my psyche seem to be issuing from that general vicinity.” She wiggled the bite at him.

Remy swallowed the dry lump at the base of his throat.

“It’s this or you’re paying for my next therapy session.”

“How much does your therapist charge?” he asked.

“Two hundred dollars per hour. Per forty-five minutes technically.”

“God damn,” he said. “You ever consider just breaking things?”

“Things, yes,” she said. “People, no.”

That proved the pole he needed to knock loose the buzzing hive of his panic. His jaw creaked open.

He felt the cool, smooth metal tines on his lower lip as she withdrew the fork, leaving its burden behind.

“You’re going to have to chew eventually, as much as you like to talk.”

He chewed.

And damn if, once he pushed past the knee-jerk revulsion, he didn’t start to see her point. The complimentary combination of textures. The layered flavors.

“Well?” Cosima leaned forward in her seat.

“Well,” he said, “I lied. I am going to offer you an opinion.”

“About?”

“I could have used a little more coleslaw on the finish.”

She made a rude noise and lobbed a balled-up paper towel that bounced off his sternum.

“Don’t start something you’re not ready to finish,” he warned. “I’ll have you know that I was a remarkably mediocre pitcher for the South Terrebonne High Gators when I wasn’t out committing minor felonies.”

Remy reached for his drink but was thwarted by Cosima’s warm but surprisingly firm grip on his wrist. The sensation did absolutely nothing to assist with the blood rushing to a very particular part of his anatomy below the table.

“I’m beginning to suspect there’s not a single mediocre thing about you, sir.”

As if summoned by the offensive honorific, Greta arrived with their second round.

“I appreciate the sentiment, but can we leave the sir out of it?” Remy asked when she’d departed.

“Mr. Renaud?”

He winced.

“Worse?” she asked.

He nodded. Not because of any associations with his father. Zap wasn’t a man who people troubled themselves with titles for.

It had been the appellation of choice for the iron-faced judge who’d taken one look at a scruffy boy barely out of high school and decided to throw not just the book at him, but the entire shelf.

Because wearing the name *Renaud* in a community where gossip bred like mosquitos in the stagnant puddles of rumor had proved to be an uphill battle on an almost daily basis.

“My point,” she said, “is that you don’t do anyone any favors by selling yourself short. Least of all you.”

He tried to let this sit for a moment, but it refused to stay put.

Was this some kind of preemptive buttering? An attempt to stroke his ego?

“From what I can tell,” he said, “your therapist is worth every penny.”

“Smart-ass,” she grumbled under her breath. Phantom fingers remained on his wrist as he sampled the bourbon.

“The verdict?” she asked, lifting her own drink.

Despite trying to keep his face neutral, he found himself pressing his lips together and sniffing hard through his sinuses to land on the specific notes. “I can’t say I’ve ever had a particular hankering to eat rotting peanuts out of a leather pouch before, but if I do, I certainly know what to reach for.” He put down his glass and turned his attention to his food.

She only shrugged. “Tastes fine to me.”

Remy leaned forward. “Tell me one scent you get from that.”

Cosima rolled her eyes at him. “Aren’t you at all concerned that I won’t be eating my brisket at the optimal temperature?”

“Humor me.”

“Haven’t I been doing that all evening?” she asked archly.

*Had she?*

The thought coated his insides in oil as she held the drink below her nose, delicate nostrils flaring.

“Nu-u-u-tmeg?”

“You asking or telling?”

“Guessing,” she said.

“You know you’re actively terrible at this, right?” he teased.

“I guess ignorance really is bliss.”

He placed his palm over the rim of the glass when she attempted to take another sip. “I’m sorry. I cannot in good conscience allow you to drink bourbon that looks and tastes like it’s been filtered through a lumberjack’s sock. Not in my presence, at least.”

“Then I guess it’s a good thing you’re not going to be at my condo at one o’clock in the morning.” She turned her attention back to her plate. “Because I plan to eat these leftover ribs right out of the fridge while slurping rotgut through a bendy straw completely in the nude.”

*Jesus.*

Already the image had begun to unfold itself in his mind in vivid detail. Down to the rounded curves of her ass rinsed in in the refrigerator’s light blue glow.

“Best that way,” he insisted. “No shirt to stain.”

“I’ll have her bring us two boxes so you can take some with you to the hotel,” she offered.

“I appreciate the thought,” Remy said. “But after how early I was up today, I’m likely to face-plant straight into the sheets

and stay there until my alarm goes off.”

“Suit yourself.” She motioned to Greta, who brought over a box and helpfully packed up the ribs before promising to return with the check.

“But, if the minibar doesn’t have anything that passes muster,” she continued, “I’m just a few short miles away and I get gifted bottles all the time. I’m sure to have something you at least mildly detest.”

Remy felt the tips of his ears going warm again. He studied her face for any sign that she’d meant it as an invitation and not just an after-hours alcohol-delivery service. He got nothing. His bullshit detector seemed to be shorting out in direct proportion to the tightening in his crotch.

“Very kind of you,” he said. “But I also have a flight at eight thirty and I’m actually not much of a drinker these days.”

Her mouth curved into a sly smirk. “Neither am I.”

*Oh.*

Remy did some very quick math.

Eleven months.

That’s how long it had been since he’d been with a woman.

So long that it took a message this overt to draw his awareness to her body language.

The way her breasts rested on her arms, her cleavage mounding above them. The way she looked at him—not straight on, but from beneath her lowered lashes. The tilt of her head.

He glanced down at his phone.

No messages from Law. He’d already called to wish Emily a good-night and to make up a story for her via phone. She would be tucked into bed now, fast asleep and clutching her weathered unicorn stuffed animal to her chest, kicking the covers off her long, skinny grasshopper’s legs.

He didn’t have to be a brother, or a father, or part owner of a distillery also partially owned by Samuel Kane.



Just for this moment, he could just be him.

Did *he* want this?

*Want* wasn't even the word.

What he felt was more akin to hunger. To thirst.

The overwhelming imperative fired up from every cell in his body at once.

“Say I wanted to wash the taste of that liquid chaw from my palate?” he began.

“You’re wondering if it might be convenient to just go to my place now?” She paired the question with the toe of her high heel nudging the outside of his boot. Then he felt warmth probing beneath the cuff of his jeans and realized it was her foot.

Her bare foot grazed his calf, then his knee, sliding against the inside of his thigh as it came to rest on the bench between his legs, mere inches from his rapidly thickening cock.

Remy reached beneath the table. Her instep fit against his palm as precisely as Cinderella’s glass slipper. He squeezed gently, feeling the delicate bones of her toes.

Her good, hard ankles.

Wrapping his fingers over the top of her foot, he began to knead her high-arched foot with the pad of his thumb.

“You know high heels are terrible for your posture.” He shifted positions so he could access her with both hands, gently rolling the under pads of each toe. “They put way too much pressure on your lower back.”

Her head dropped back against the bench as her lashes lowered. “Guess you’ll need to rub that, too.”

Sliding down on the bench, she flexed her toe to press the ball of her foot against his now rock-hard erection.

He hissed out a breath.

“Ready to get out of here?” she asked, sliding up his length.

Remy glanced out at the dining room, as much to look for Greta as to see if anyone had noticed there might be a foot job in progress.

Predictably, everyone remained tunnel-vision focused on their own tables. Their meals. Theirs lives.

“Ten minutes?” he asked, giving her foot a squeeze and setting it aside. “Unless you want me to scandalize the staff.”

“Speaking of,” Cosima said through one side of her mouth. “Incoming.”

Remy quickly dropped a cloth napkin in his lap and reached for the small black leather folder.

Cosima batted his hand away, pinning it to the table. “This is on me.”

Generations of male pride rose up in him. Demanding that he argue. Demanding he stop her.

“I’m the producer. You’re the client. Which means when you’re in LA, you’re on my dime.”

He relinquished his hold and allowed her to slide in her credit card and pass the folder to Greta.

“And being on my dime means I’m in charge,” she said in a much silkier tone. Her foot was moving, finding him again, renewing the gentle pressure.

“You keep this up, and you’re going to need a pitcher of ice water to drop in my lap before we can leave.”

“Unless...” She trailed off, raising an eyebrow at him.

All at once, he understood.

“On the count of four.”

Her lips remained sealed, but the hand resting on the table raised an index finger, then a middle finger, then...

Then a sound more beautiful than anything he’d ever heard filled his ears and goose bumps rose on his scalp and spilled down his body in prickling waves.

His mouth dropped open. His breath caught in his chest. For a moment, he was paralyzed. Cosima's eyes widened at him even as her red lips moved, shaping the sound as a sculptor shapes clay.

She was singing. Something Italian that made him feel lighter than air.

*This* was the diversion.

At last, he came unstuck. After a quick glance at the path between him and the restaurant exit, he found it clear and made a beeline for the door.

Once out in the parking lot, he located her cherry-red Mustang and took his time strolling to it, then circling it. Years spent in the company of bikers rendered him physiologically incapable of placing a hand on it, however tempting the prospect might be. These were prized possessions, dearly bought, and often the symbol of money and sacrifice beyond what its owner had to give.

When he neared the passenger door, he caught a whiff of acrid smoke, and smiled.

Life seldom offered clear delineation, such as pinpointing the exact moment when love turned to hatred, or grief to nostalgia.

But on this night in early spring, Remy could identify the exact second when his casual curiosity about Cosima Lowell had turned into infatuation.

And it had come with the screech of tires.

The sound that made him look out the restaurant window at the precise moment she'd taken a sharp turn into the parking at a speed far greater than most union stuntmen would perform.

His eyes had lifted from the smoke of burned rubber to find her face...caught in a moment of pure, potent joy.

It had almost made him feel like a voyeur, having this stolen image burned in his brain. A vision of her that he alone could keep tucked into his pocket like a lucky stone.

He steered his thoughts from it, not wanting to rub the shine from sharp chrome and her ecstatic smile.

She emerged from the restaurant and strode toward her car at a quick clip, cheeks as red as candy apples and eyes sparkling with mischief.

Remy turned toward the door as she approached, not entirely free of his very obvious arousal.

He'd thought himself long past the days of such uncontrollably enthusiastic biological responses.

He'd been wrong.

He just hadn't met Cosima Lowell yet.

\* \* \*

Remy didn't recognize it at first.

It had been so long since he'd felt it that he'd all but lost his ability to recognize the symptoms. The thunderous applause of his heart. The lightning branching in his veins. The antigravity stomach flip. The tunneling of his vision down to one, single human. His entire life altered in one instant and eternal moment.

Mortal terror.

The engine of Cosima's Mustang roared as the slim white needle barged its way between the deceptively mundane tick marks separating 115 from 120 miles per hour.

In his peripheral vision, the city lights smeared into iridescent caterpillars.

With the top down, the night air blasted their faces, whipping her hair into a tornado of silk that fluttered skyward.

His fist ached from white-knuckle clutching the door handle. When he glanced in the side mirror, he half expected his teeth to be peppered with insects.

"Think we could slow down a little?" Words he'd spoken at what seemed like an unreasonable decibel were stolen by the wind.

“What?” she shouted back, hair flying into her mouth and being blown back out again.

“Can we slow down?” he asked, enunciating every word.

She glanced at the speedometer, gave a little *O* of surprise and let up on the gas.

“Sorry,” she said, once the roar had died away. “This thing just makes it a little too easy to go fast.” Reaching out a hand, she patted the tawny leather of the dashboard.

Remy wasn’t sure what scared him more—that she hadn’t realized how fast she was going, or the indication that this happened on a regular basis.

He bit back the need to make some sort of joke that might plant the idea of caution in her head. Since the threat of immediate danger had passed, he was able to appreciate the sight of her hand on the ball of the stick shift, expertly gearing down as she exited the freeway.

“Almost there.” She slowed before a sleek granite building crosshatched by glass balconies, then turned into a parking garage. There, she pulled up to a valet station and put the car in Park.

A man in a light gray button-up shirt and black pants opened the door for her as Remy levered himself out.

“Out causing trouble again I see,” he said, winking at her.

The *again* stuck in Remy’s craw.

“Don’t you worry, Ralph,” Cosima said, leaning in to grab her purse and the container of leftovers. “I left plenty for you.”

The man chuckled and waved a fatherly hand at her. “You have a good night, Miss Lowell.”

“Only if you do the same.”

Remy quick-stepped to beat her to the glass door so he could hold it open for her.

“You really don’t need to do that.” She punched the button for the elevator. “I manage this myself every night.”

It pinged almost immediately, and he hung back when the doors opened. “After you.”

She rolled her eyes at him and shook her head in apparent exasperation as she hit the button for the eleventh floor.

“Just because can’t teach an old dog new tricks doesn’t mean he forgets the one’s already learned,” Remy said as the elevator doors closed.

The car surged upward.

The air in it seemed to thicken.

“You know this one?” In a quick flash, she swiped her fist sideways to hit the red stop button. The car halted abruptly, giving Remy’s stomach a roller-coaster lift.

She turned to face him.

“I *invented* this one.” He took a step toward her and, with his eyes on hers, took the leftovers container, and set it on the floor at their feet.

“How very practical of you,” she teased.

“I have a feeling we’re going to be hungry later.” The control he’d had a stranglehold on dissolved through his fingers like sand and he couldn’t keep himself from touching her a single second longer.

One single fingertip traced the downy curve of her jaw, slipped down the elegant curve of her neck, and across her collarbone.

They reached for each other at the exact same moment.

Her, winding one arm around his waist and pressing a palm against the back of his neck. Him, bypassing her face to fill his hands with the luscious curve of her ass.

Her moan began in her throat but ended in his as their mouths met in a wet, hungry clash. No hesitance or tenuous exploration. No time spent in coy flirtation or polite invitation.

They got right down to the business of mastery from the start.

She opened to him and immediately demanded the same, her honey-sweet tongue sweeping over his in a call that he immediately answered. A dance of velvet. Stroking and curling and sucking their way through this final introduction.

Remy had long ago given up the idea of an afterlife and only in this present moment did he understand why.

He had no taste for heaven.

His paradise was here. Warm and real. Solid and alive.

He believed in what he could touch, and what could touch him.

Cosima did.

Her hands molding him like living clay. Fisting in his hair. Cupping his jaw. His neck. Rounding over his shoulders, his biceps, his forearms.

Finding the aching arousal straining against jeans and growling her delight like a lioness.

He wrenched his mouth from hers to drag in a breath as she pressed the tips of her fingers against his swollen head through the denim, thumbing the sensitive ridge.

*“Christ,”* he hissed.

“Let’s keep religion out of this,” she whispered. Her warm breath tickled his ear, moist lips brushing the cartilage. The soft tip flicked into the hollow as she gently sucked in a breath, making him break out in a full-body shudder.

Remy moved her hand away from his cock, backing her into the elevator’s chrome.

Cosima grabbed his hips and undulated against him.

He grunted at the increased friction, quickly jerking back his hips before he wandered anywhere near losing himself.

Since when had it taken so little to whip him into a lather?

*Since her* was the immediate response.

“Might we continue this conversation five floors up?” he asked, panting.

“Why don’t we finish it here?” Nimble fingers slipped beneath the waistband of his boxer-briefs. “I think we’ll have plenty more to talk about when we get there?”

“Impatient?”

“I like to think of myself as *eager*.” She smiled against the base of his neck. Planting kisses there, letting him feel the ridge of her teeth as she sucked before following it with her tongue.

“Easy,” he said. “Or I’ll have some explaining to do when Samuel Kane arrives at the distillery tomorrow.”

He glanced down at her and, seeing how his censure had dimmed her fire, pulled her closer.

“How about you do the talking and I keep my damn mouth shut?” Remy slipped a hand beneath her dress, riding the curve of her hip.

“That sounds like an excellent idea.” Her head lolled backward to rest against the panel when he located scrap of lace at the apex of her thighs, already damp with her need.

“God *damn*,” he rasped.

“What did I say?” Her hand covered his, arresting his movement.

“My apologies.” He slid the soaked fabric to the side and began to explore each ridge and ripple of her slippery folds. Trying to memorize with his fingertips what he couldn’t see with his eyes. She jerked when he grazed the swollen bud, lower lip caught between her teeth. “I won’t let it happen again.”

“Damn right, you won’t.” Looking at him from beneath heavy-lidded eyes, she punched the red button and rearranged her clothes as the elevator lurched to life. “I think I’m ready for that back rub now.”

Remy bent to grab the leftovers as the elevator slowed to stop on her floor. The doors opened, but she stayed put, smiling sweetly at him.

“You first,” she invited.



“I’m not... I can’t... You have to—”

“Only one way out of here,” she said with a shrug.

A gust of frustration blew through him as he stepped into the hallway and waited for her lead. She exited, stopped about halfway down the corridor, unlocked the door, and held it open for him once again.

He didn’t know what the point of these little tests was, but his mood was beginning to tank. And fast.

Purely for the sake of avoiding argument, he complied.

What he saw as soon as he stepped inside brought him up short. Huge windows with a view of west Los Angeles took up one entire wall. To his left, a set of spiral stairs led up to a loft opposite the view. To his right, an open-concept kitchen with a gleaming black granite countertop, white cupboards, and a kitchen island.

Straight ahead of him was a bed.

No couches. No rugs. No TV. Not so much as a picture on the wall.

His whistle echoed.

“I hate to tell you this,” he said, “but I think you’ve been robbed.”

Cosima clicked passed him into the kitchen, where she set down her purse on the countertop. “Decorating hasn’t exactly been high on my priority list.”

The long shadow of a bad break-up was implied in her statement.

“I have to admit, the proximity of the bed to the kitchen is a stroke of pure genius.”

“All the easier to eat ribs at midnight,” she said, disappearing into the pantry.

When Remy noticed that she’d gone in with her heels on and come back without them, he followed her to take a peek.

Sure enough.

There, neatly lined up on the walk-in pantry shelves, was an extensive collection of shoes. Though he knew nothing about brands, he could tell by looking that, like the Mustang, these had been ceremonial objects. A piece of herself she was unwilling to yield.

Cosima caught him peering at her and instantly assumed what he'd already come to identify as her defensive posture. Weight on one foot, hand on her opposite hip. "I hardly ever cook and the closet in the loft is barely more than a cupboard."

He suspected this might be a bit of hyperbole but decided to keep his thoughts on the matter strictly to himself.

"No judgment," he said.

She padded over to the cabinet and opened it, taking down two glasses from the bottom shelf. The only shelf, Remy noticed, that had anything on it.

All the ways he'd thought himself at a disadvantage when it came to his brothers, he'd never once considered the predicament of someone whose height made standard cabinetry a challenge.

He leaned against the kitchen island and made a show of watching as she opened the freezer.

"What?" she asked, dropping a large ice cube into each glass.

"Just making sure it's not being used as an entertainment center."

"You certainly seem entertained," she quipped. She bent at the waist and opened a lower cupboard, coming back with a bottle that she set on the counter.

"Eats barbecue, *and* likes scotch," he said. "If you're trying to put me under some kind of spell so I'll sign contract before I leave LA, you've certainly got the right ingredients."

Remy hated knowing that what he said in jest, he'd been told in earnest from the time he was a boy.

An old, ugly refrain sung by a man who both feared and mistrusted women as a general principle. A man who taught

his sons to sleep with one eye open because women always had one foot out the door. A philosophy he'd no doubt inherited from his own patriarch.

Generational trauma, as he'd learned from Law, on whose therapeutic journey Remy had been a supportive, if not always reliable, copilot.

Cosima slid the bottle over for him to pour. "The Mustang doesn't get me anything?"

The cork squeaked as he withdrew it and poured them each a finger of the deep amber liquid. "Speeding tickets, I'd wager."

She crossed her arms below her breasts. "Speaking of the contract, I guess we'd better get our terms straight."

"About the filming?" he asked.

"About this," she said, motioning between them.

"So this is a business proposition?" Saying the words aloud made his rib cage felt a size too small to contain all his vital organs.

"Let's say, a proposition I don't want to affect our business." She accepted the glass Remy held out for her and sipped.

Remy followed suit, imagining fire scalding the central channel he'd always pictured filled with mud.

"What terms would you like to suggest?" he asked.

"One night only," she said. "When you leave here, I'm the producer, you're the show participant, and nothing more. That that's all. When we see each other again, this never happened. It's erased from your memory."

"Like that's going to happen," he said.

"Something tells me you'll manage." Her gently patronizing tone failed to set him at ease.

"Do I get to add any terms of my own?" He hated how needy his question sounded. Spoken by that same, awkward tongue-tied boy not quite trusting his luck.

Her eyes narrowed. “Go on.”

“If I’m able to get Law to sign the contract, you owe me one motorcycle ride to a location of my choice once you’re on site at the distillery. Subject to twenty-four hours’ notice, of course.”

“Seventy-two hours’ notice,” she said.

“Forty-eight,” he countered.

“Done.”

Just as he had earlier in the office, she held out her hand.

Remy took it and shook before shooting his scotch and walking into her pantry.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she asked.

Browsing among the rows, his eyes fixed on a pair stiletto heels the exact shade of her Mustang. “Choosing the shoes it will be the most fun to try and make myself forget.”

## *Five*

“Those don’t even match my dress,” she pointed out.

“Good thing you won’t be wearing it for long.” His eyes blazed like banked coals as he wrapped his hands around her waist and lifted her onto the counter.

Her mouth dropped open and stayed that way for a good thirty seconds.

Among the other indignities her height had inflicted was a tendency to trick men into thinking that being shorter also made her lighter, and therefore a natural choice for all their unfulfilled romantic-hero moments.

It was all fun and games until someone—Michael—had slipped a disk trying to carry her over the threshold of their first apartment together.

The apartment she had feathered like a nest. Laboring for months on end to pick out the perfect classic leather sofa. The correct texture and variety of throw pillows. Lamps that created the proper ambiance.

A home.

*Their* home.

Or it had been, until she’d come home early after landing a meeting with a nature documentarian she’d chased for months and found her fiancé with another woman on the sofa she’d spent an entire month visiting before buying.

It was as if the entire apartment and everything in it had been stained by that moment.

When she’d left, she couldn’t bear the thought of taking a single thing with her.

She watched Remy walk back into the closet and return with the bright red Louboutin *Torrída* silk-bow platform

sandals she'd unwisely splurged on for her first red-carpet event, post-Michael.

The salesclerk had attempted to politely talk her out of them, specifically citing the exact feature she'd instantly fallen in love with. A wide cuff with a length of silky red ribbon tied at the ankle that the clerk helpfully pointed tended to *shorten the leg*.

Her stubborn streak demanded that she buy them immediately, putting a meager 1,300 dollars on her American Express card already so near its limit that that the Roman centurion's eyes had started to bulge.

The decision had earned her a jab from the local fashion police about one of the munchkins making off with Dorothy's ruby slippers.

She hadn't worn them since.

Remy, dark and sleek as a panther, prowled around the kitchen island.

A warm current of air stirred as he leaned in, caressing her nostrils with the subtle scent of his cologne and warm, clean skin. She rested her hands on the smooth, cool countertop to keep from reeling.

The same scent she had inhaled from the T-shirt he'd left behind, sheepishly tucking it into her duffel bag.

She brought her glass of scotch to her lips, letting the smoky liquid carry her backward in time on a river of peat smoke and heat.

His hands were warm on her ankles as he slipped the sandals onto her feet, carefully tying the bow at each ankle.

He did this with such effortless gentleness that it made her want to cry.

This was a man used to seeing to the needs of another human on a daily basis.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt cared for.

He took several steps backward, admiring his handiwork like an art gallery patron.

“You’re right,” he said, eyes on hers. “The dress doesn’t match.”

Taking her cue, she pulled the stretchy fabric up and over her head, and tossed it at him.

“Better?” she asked. She watched him eat her with his eyes the same way he’d had their meal, his gaze moving over her black lace bra, the matching thong.

“Much.”

A little shiver of anticipation rippled through her middle as he took two steps toward her. His hands were warm on her knees as they pushed them apart to make room for his hips.

Remy leaned in, and Cosima measured time not in days or hours, but in the endless, uncountable span separating past and present. In the infinitesimal degrees he traversed to release her from the purgatory of all the years between then and now.

His kiss had aged like the scotch mingling on their tongues. Deeper and more intoxicating than anything preserved in her memory. He cupped the backs of her knees, dragging her forward until his lean hips pressed the insides of her thighs. Remy’s fingertips dimpled her backside and she felt herself being lifted.

His erection branded her stomach, notching itself against her as she wrapped her legs around his waist. His dark groan rumbled through her as he walked them toward the bed.

Falling through time and space, they found themselves on another set of cool sheets.

Hands planted on either side of her, his mouth moved down her throat, lighting up her senses with the delicious rasp of a day’s stubble. Friction. One body moving against another, opposing surfaces kindling heat. And that’s precisely what he did.

Everywhere his lips landed, he started a new blaze. In a small smooth spot below her ear. In the dip of her collarbone.

At the base of her throat. On the swell of her breasts.

As his mouth worked downward, his hands worked upward. Tracing a line up the inside of her thigh, skimming over her stomach.

“I need to see you,” he mumbled against her skin.

She felt a knuckle against her sternum and the cups of her bra fell away.

“You’re so beautiful,” he murmured. Reverence lit his features from within as he stroked the curve of each breast, his thumb rolling one nipple, then the other, before he lowered his mouth to her.

Exquisite torture.

His tongue finding that hard bud, flicking across it with quick feather-light strokes, sucking it, teasing it.

Cosima threaded her fingers through his hair, black as a raven’s wing, as she arched into him. The hand on her thigh began to move again. Fingers gliding up and down her soaked panties, pressing against the spot, spiraling with sensation with the heel of his palm.

Her hips bucked and she bit back a cry.

Remy planted a kiss on her sternum. The plane of her stomach.

Lower.

He woke every area with his lips, then followed with his tongue, increasing until Cosima was a wriggling, impatient wanton thing.

It seemed to take forever for her panties to make the short journey from her hips to the floor. Even longer for his mouth to make its way to her bared skin. When, at last, he parted her with the flat of his tongue, she buried her face in a pillow to keep her scream from echoing off the loft’s ceiling.

A habit she had developed under Michael’s tenure.

*You want the neighbors to call the cops?*



*Sometimes*, she had thought, but didn't say.

Remy raised his head and looked at her from beneath hooded lids. Intent. Determined. Angry.

"Don't," he said.

"Don't what?"

His fingers released their possessive grip on her hips and glided down her inner thigh.

Then he was *there*. Cupping her. Slipping inside her. Showing her just how wet she was. Kindling heat and a pressure so delicious, Cosima was in danger of biting through her lip.

She relaxed her jaw with a deep breath, releasing a soft, sultry sigh.

"That's it," he said. "That belongs to me. Give me what's mine."

He *wanted* to hear her. The unfathomable thought remained pinned in her mind as he rose to his feet.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

That damnable grin lifted one corner of his reddened lips. "Gonna open a window."

"Remy," she stage-whispered. "No!"

"I'm sorry?" He dramatically cupped a hand to his ear as he walked backward toward her uncurtained window. "I'm around a lot of machinery at the distillery. I'm afraid I'm going to need you to speak up."

She blinked at him, dumbfounded. She couldn't believe what she was hearing.

Always, she had been told she was too loud. Too blunt. Too short. Too hungry. Too passionate. Too needy. Too intense.

*Too* everything, basically.

And here Remy Renaud was, inviting her to be more. To be her *most*.

Kneeling down before her, Remy lifted her ankle, setting it back down on the edge of the bed with her knees bent. Repeating the process with the other. Curating the view for his own delectation. He kissed her everywhere. Lighting up all her sensitive spots and inventing a few new ones.

Then his mouth was on her again and her back bowed off the bed of its own accord. He supported her hips, moving with her, but never stopping the onslaught.

He took to the task like a composer, coordinating his hands and his mouth to coax out of her ragged cries, her desperate gasps.

Her fists knotted in his silky hair as her hips undulated in time with his relentless rhythm. She clenched around his fingers—random, furious pulses that seemed to begin behind her belly button and unfurl endlessly outward. Her legs began to shake and she careened over the edge while pleasure pinwheeled through her on a cry that only faintly resembled anything human.

A gentle tap on her knee lowered her out of the stratosphere, and Cosima became aware she had his head pinned there.

“Sorry,” she breathed, willing her knees to relax.

“Don’t you ever be sorry for that, cher.” Remy gave her a wry smile as he sat back on his heels. “I can think of far worse ways to go.”

He reached for the bottom of his shirt, but halted when a tinkling sound took on the notes of a recognizable song.

“My Girl” by the Temptations, low but unmistakable, emanating from the kitchen counter.

Remy sprang away with catlike grace, an impressive string of curses trailing him like smoke.

“Hey, Bug.” The instant infusion of warmth and enthusiasm in his voice told Cosima everything she needed to know.

His daughter.

“What are you doing up so—” He stopped in midsentence, listening.

Even in the dim light spilling in from the hallway, she could see his brow furrow. The corners of his mouth turned down. “Okay, okay. Take a breath.”

“I’m so sorry, Bug.” A pause. “I’ll be on that plane first thing tomorrow and I’ll be right back home with my girl.”

Her chest caught so hard she thought it might crush her heart flat. Ridiculous biological hard-wiring designed to release an oxytocin dump at the tiniest hint of protective behavior in a male of the species. Cosima folded the blanket over herself and sat up, feeling exposed and tawdry in the face of such a tender scene.

“All right, honey,” he said. “You get back to sleep and no more of those bad dreams. I’ll be home before you know it.” The corners of his eyes crinkled as his grin widened. “No, I love you more.” Another pause. “I guess we’ll just have to arm-wrestle about it when I get home. *Bonne nuit, cher fille,*” he said, making the words into a singsong rhyme. He disconnected, but didn’t set down his phone, fingers working over the keyboard.

“Everything okay?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said without looking up. “Just had a bad dream and woke up scared because she didn’t remember I was out of town.”

Cosima already knew the flat, slightly cool tone of his voice brooked trouble.

Quickly tugging at the ribbons, she untied the shoes and let them fall to the floor next to the bed.

“Is there anything I can do to help? I can look at an earlier flight, or—”

“I’ve got one here,” he said.

Cosima slipped out of the bed and retrieved her dress. Driven by an insistent need to be less vulnerable in the wake of this abrupt shift in temperature.

“Do you want me to drive you to the airport? I’d be happy to swing you by your hotel so you can grab your stuff.”

“It’s okay. I’ll just grab a cab.” The hollow echo of those words confirmed it.

This had become her fault.

Whether he knew it or not, he had already decided.

For being the reason he needed to come to LA and leave his daughter.

For asking him to come back to her place. For making him want something that now made him feel guilt.

She knew the matrix well.

“Hey,” she said, placing a hand on his bicep. “Look at me.”

On a short, sharp exhale, he tore his attention away from the phone.

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Remy. You know that, right? You’re allowed to take time for yourself.” Cosima pulled her hand away as he stiffened beneath her palm.

“I sure appreciate you pointing that out to me,” he said, shoving his phone in his pocket and crossing his arms over his chest. “Any other parenting tips you’d like to share? Seeing as you have so much experience.”

She sucked in a breath, startled by the sharpness of his remark.

“Maybe don’t be an asshole?” She turned on her heel and stalked to the bathroom, where she slammed the door.

Hands planted on the cool granite countertop, she made herself meet her own eye in the mirror. Tears blurred her vision, obliterating the fine details separating her from the scared, sad girl who had made such a thorough mess of her life following her brother’s death. She saw only the passion-tangled hair. The kiss-swollen lips. The smudged, smoky eyes.

A mess.

Then, and now.

Cosima turned on the faucet and splashed her face with cold water, elbows on the countertop as she patted her cheeks with

a towel.

She heard footsteps and felt him hesitating on the other side of the door. Try as she might, she couldn't make herself reach for the handle.

Another eternity of minutes elapsed before she heard his boots shift and then clomp away. Her front door opened and closed.

When she emerged, she found that history had indeed repeated itself.

Remy Renaud had walked out on her for the second time.

## *Six*

Remy felt like a first-class asshole.

Staring at the phone in his palm while he waited at the airport, he had willed Cosima's number to appear on the screen. A call to bawl him out. A text to inform him he was a bastard.

Because he had been.

Despite years spent unlearning the behavior, he had taken the coward's way out and slid a pair of wheels under his feet at the first sign of trouble.

Trouble that hadn't even been her fault. Unless she could be blamed for being too tempting to pass up, however idiotic his reasoning in accepting her invitation.

All the way home, he'd replayed the scenario in his mind, putting different words in his mouth. Swapping out the look of irritation on her face for one of satiated languor.

What had he accomplished by hightailing it out of there, anyhow? The earlier flight had been delayed, landing him in Roanoke only an hour earlier than he would have been had he taken the original. In the process, he had managed to deny himself something he wanted so badly, his gut still ached.

When he found Emily curled like a cat on the porch swing outside of Law's house on the distillery property, his heart nearly tore itself in two.

"You didn't have to wait out here for me, Bug." He slung down his bag on the front porch before plopping on the swing beside her.

"I didn't," she said, rubbing sleep from her eyes with the palm of one hand.

"Gee, thanks," he said, feigning offense.

“I just mean I came out here because it’s really loud in there.”

As if on cue, a thin, reedy sound rose from inside the house and quickly became a duet.

The twins.

“Shit—er, shoot,” he corrected before Emily had the chance. “I completely forgot grab flowers.”

“*Dad*,” she said, the way she always did when exasperated by something he’d forgotten to do.

“Guess I better get my hide in there and apologize.” He slapped his thighs and rose from the bench.

Emily hadn’t been kidding. Scarcely had the front door creaked open, when Remy was plunged into a hive of activity. He had a vague recollection of Law mentioning Kane family reinforcements coming to help once the twins were born, but hadn’t held onto the particulars if they’d been given to him.

Taking a bracing breath, he crossed from the foyer into the kitchen.

There, a woman in yoga pants and an oversize sweater popped a metallic capsule into a machine that looked like something off a spaceship. Reaching a hand up to tuck a dark red tendril back into the pile atop her head, she turned and jumped as she saw him standing in the doorway. Her face struck him as vaguely familiar, but nowhere in his sleep-deprived brain could he land on a name.

“Charlotte Westbrook,” she stated. She wiped a hand on the dish towel and reached out to him. “I’m the one who always sends you those irritating meeting reminders.”

“That’s right,” Remy said. “Nice to meet you in person, finally.”

“If you’ll excuse, me, I’m just going to take this up to Law.” She lifted a steaming mug from the counter. “The capsules are in the cabinet next to the sink,” she said. “If you want some coffee.”

Remy didn't just want it. He needed it like a brushfire needs a crop duster. He eyed the gleaming black-and-chrome machine with mistrust.

Much as he didn't like to admit it about himself, he was aware of his tendency to balk at change of any kind.

He was squinting at the text on one of the boxes of capsules when a blond woman whose face and name he'd never be able to forget breezed out of the laundry room.

Arlie Banks-Kane.

Samuel Kane's wife.

Whose lap he'd accidentally dropped a plate of lobster étouffée into when Samuel had first come to review the operations. She'd been nothing but gracious about the accident.

Her husband, less so.

"Remy," she said, offering him a smile that seemed genuinely warm. "So good to see you again."

"You as well."

"Mind if I jump in there and make myself some coffee?"

"Not a bit." He stepped out of her way, covertly making note of the procedure.

"How have you been?" After loading a capsule, she pressed a button that made the machine hum to life.

"Oh, you know. Pretty busy. How about yourself?"

"Just about the same," she said. When the hissing and spitting had finished, she set her mug on the counter and added a splash of cream from the fridge. "I heard you guys might be going through a rebrand. That's got to be exciting."

A high-pitched buzzing invaded his ears.

News to him.

"Definitely." He felt ape-like and stupid, imitating what she'd done in hopes of producing the same result.



“Is it just the name you’re changing, or totally starting from scratch?” she asked.

“I’m not too sure about that.”

*Because no one had bothered to discuss it with him.*

He felt prouder than he had a right to be when the machine began to dispense the steaming liquid.

It was nowhere near Cosima’s coffee, but certainly better than Emily’s muddy brew. As if summoned by the thought, Emily chose that minute to come bouncing into the kitchen with a giant grin on her face.

“Aunt Arlie, will you make me your cheesy eggs again?”

*Aunt Arlie?*

He’d been gone one day, and the entire family structure had shifted?

Arlie smiled and turned to Remy. “If it’s all right with your dad.”

Her asking felt like token effort. A bone tossed in his direction.

“Not at all,” he said through a tight smile.

“You know the drill, sous chef,” Arlie said, tying an apron around Emily’s narrow hips.

Remy abandoned the kitchen to them and pointed his boots toward the stairs.

The syncopated wailing swelled as he climbed, and he noted the new pictures sprouting on the wall like spring tulips.

Memories Law and Marlowe had begun to make together.

Family.

He stepped hard on the pang of loneliness he felt as he rapped on the half-closed door.

“Come in,” a voice called.

The scene he witnessed when he stepped inside hit him like a freight train.

His youngest brother, backlit by the light of the window, looking equal parts awestruck and terrified as he swayed from side to side with a pink-faced bundle tucked protectively in his arms.

Remy remembered.

Emily's birth. Holding her for the first time. That moment had become the axis of his entire world, wiping away swaths of his experience. Scrubbing out everything but her. Those sleepless, endless nights and the grave, overwhelming sense of responsibility he'd felt knowing it was his job to stand between her and the rest of the world. The first late-night feedings when he was paranoid he would break her just by picking her up from the crib. How strange it had been to hold her tiny fist with a hand that had gripped prison meal trays, and the handles of oil derricks, and the handlebars of motorcycles and pool cues.

"Hey there, Uncle Remy." Marlowe's voice snapped him out of the reverie. She sat bathed in the light of the window, gliding back and forward in a rocking chair, the other twin resting against her chest.

Remy lifted a hand in greeting and crossed the room to get a better look at the tiny thing cradled in his brother's giant arms. He'd known that twins would be smaller, but the little face staring up at him seemed unreal.

"I don't know," Remy said, catching Law's eye. "You sure these two are big enough to keep?"

"They're actually in the ninetieth percentile by birth weight."

This information came to him unsolicited courtesy of Samuel Kane, who Remy had failed to notice in the brand-new leather chair in the corner.

The stab of annoyance he felt was instant and intense.

Samuel was the kind of man who changed the air of any room he walked into. The kind of man who knew the right bottle of wine to order and the history of the vineyard it came from. The kind of man whose shirts refused to wrinkle and

who probably never spilled anything on anyone in his entire life.

The kind of man who could operate seamlessly in the social circles Cosima hailed from.

“Especially in identical twins born in the thirty-third week,” Samuel continued.

Not for the first time, it occurred to Remy just how satisfying it would be to jam a pie straight into Samuel’s patrician-featured face.

Instead, he broke for bait just as predictable and problematic.

“That’s the Renaud genes for you. What we lack in brains, we make up for in brawn.”

Law cut him a sharp look and shifted to reach for the steaming mug in the windowsill.

“You should let Remy hold him,” Marlowe suggested gently.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Samuel asked. “He did just make a joke comparing infants to sport fish.”

That he knew he was being teased did absolutely nothing to stop the sweat that had broken out between his shoulder blades.

“Seeing as he has an eight-year-old daughter, I bet we can trust him just this once,” Marlowe replied dryly.

After an awkward shuffle, the small bundle was transferred successfully.

“What’s your name, young man?” Remy gazed down into eyes the amorphous gray-blue of all new infants.

“Franklin Kane,” Marlowe answered. “And this distinguished gentleman is Joseph Kane.”

Remy felt a quick burst of defensive pride.

He didn’t know Law and Marlowe’s plans where marriage was concerned, but it was foolish of him to assume that his

nephews would share his last name when the Kane legacy was available.

It shouldn't sting as much as it did.

He looked at Law, coffee in hand, standing next to Marlowe's rocker, not an ounce of contention visible on his face.

"They're named after—" Samuel began.

"The Hardy boys," Remy said, finishing for him.

He'd been the only one of the Renaud boys who enjoyed disappearing between the pages of a book as much as he did working on go-carts that never seemed to go.

"How was the meeting with Cosima?" Marlowe asked in a deliberate bid to steer the conversation back onto safer ground.

"Cosima Lowell?" Samuel asked before Remy could answer. "I haven't seen her in ages. What she's up to these days?"

Irrational jealousy crept in sleek as a mink, and he found himself wondering what the specific circumstances of the event in question was. Until he saw Samuel's eyes light up and his face soften when Arlie appeared in the doorway with a stack of folded receiving blankets.

"She's a television producer in LA," Marlowe reported. "She reached out to me when she saw the article on 4 Thieves in the *Los Angeles Times*."

"For what purpose?" Samuel asked.

"She wants to film a docuseries about the distillery." Remy winced inwardly at how boastful his tone sounded.

"A *docuseries*?" Samuel pronounced with skeptical mirth. "You know that's code for reality TV, correct?"

*Correct.*

One of the flag words in the Samuel Kane lexicon that Remy had come to associate with something he was about to be taught. Usually followed by another term that he'd not had occasion to make part of his own regular usage. Such as

*meeting cadence or company culture or long-term incentive plan.*

Franklin began to fuss as Remy's bouncing motion had become a hair too frenetic.

"May I?" Arlie asked, setting down the blankets on the bench at the end of the bed.

"Of course." He handed off the baby with far more grace than he'd received him, glad to be relieved of the delicate burden.

The room's temperature seemed to rise with all the bodies in it. Remy's shirt stuck to his back, the travel and the company making him long desperately for a shower.

Samuel, who looked like he could walk through a volcano and not darken the pits of his light blue dress shirt, gazed at Arlie as the baby quickly hushed in her arms. "You told Cosima we're not interested, I hope."

*We.*

What used to represent all four Renaud brothers, then just Law and Remy, had been shoehorned to include a third.

"Why would I do that?" Remy asked, folding his arms across his chest.

Samuel scooted forward in his chair.

"In the first place, with the aggressive road map we've set for the 4 Thieves expansion, having a camera crew on site would represent a significant disruption to production. In the second, that kind of publicity would undermine our rebranding efforts."

"Right," Remy said. "Seeing as I learned that those were happening all of five minutes ago, I'd appreciate any additional information you'd like to share about that."

Unfolding himself from the chair, Samuel assumed the posture Remy had come to think of as *visionary monologue*, and typically associated with ten-minute speeches five minutes before the meeting was supposed to end.

“If we have any hope of making 4 Thieves a globally recognized brand, our energy is best spent aligning it with class and sophistication. Mastery of craft. Essentially, having the distillery aligned with a reality TV show would be directly counterproductive to our efforts at rehabilitation.”

That word.

It had been condescendingly explained to him by his court-appointed lawyer. It had been preached to him by the judge who looked at his 18-year-old self and seen nothing worth his mercy. It had been dangled in front of him like a carrot by the parole board year after year and it had been handed to him like a trophy he hadn't really won. Now, he was having his face rubbed in it by a man who hadn't just been born with a silver spoon in his mouth but an entire goddamn drawer.

Red edged Remy's vision as his heart sped in his chest. His teeth clenched so hard that his head ached.

“I guess it's too bad I already agreed then.” He threw it into the center of the floor like a gauntlet.

“Agreed?” Samuel asked. “Or *signed*?”

“I gave her my word.”

The Kane CEO's lips pressed together, his jaw flexing as he thought. When he spoke, it wasn't to Remy, but to Law.

“Why don't we table this discussion for now? We have a steering-committee meeting in a week. We can run it by Angela Cheng. She's had some experience with visual media and—”

Joseph broke out in a sudden voluminous wail that effectively cut off Samuel.

Law leveraged the opportunity.

“Would you mind if we revert offline?” he said, proving his superior acuity with this new language. “There's a couple things I need to check on down at the granary.”

“Of course,” Samuel said.

“Remy, can you give me a hand?” The look in Law’s eye left no doubt that this was not a request.

Everyone in the room knew exactly what this was.

He was being escorted out.

Law bent to kiss the top of Marlowe’s head. “Back in a bit.”

They climbed down the stairs and through the kitchen, where Emily sat across from Charlotte at the table, her knobby elbows on the table, chin sitting in her cupped hand, eyes glued to the cascade of glorious auburn hair being woven into a French braid.

Law opened the back door and stepped out onto the porch, eyes scanning the distant tree line.

“I know this has been a lot,” he said. “The investment. The twins. But agreeing to film this show without even discussing it with me? Since when is that something we do?”

Remy turned to face him, acid eating away at his insides. “Since when do you and Samuel have discussions about *rehabilitating* 4 Thieves?”

“You’ve told me on numerous occasions just how much you hate anything related to sales or marketing.”

He did. With a bright and abiding passion.

“That doesn’t mean I don’t want to be involved when we’re discussing changing the name of the company that you and I have been dreaming of since we were boys.

“But we’re not boys anymore.” Law turned his stony profile to look Remy in the eye. “And 4 Thieves isn’t just some backwoods bootlegger.”

“So that’s what this is really about,” Remy said. “You want to use the Kane money to erase the Renaud name.”

Law’s posture stiffened. “That’s not what I’m doing.”

“Really?” Remy demanded. “Is that why you don’t even want your own sons to have it?”

“You’re going to want to watch yourself there, brother.” Danger flashed in Law’s eyes, but Remy couldn’t stop himself.

“You want me to change Emily’s last name, too? God forbid she would want to have part of the business someday.”

Law loomed over him in a way he hadn’t since they were teenagers, full of toughness and testosterone. “You’re out of line, Remy. Why don’t you get some sleep and we can talk about this later?”

Remy refused to grant him any quarter. “Sleep isn’t the problem. The *problem* is sitting upstairs in his custom-tailored slacks talking to me like I’m some slack-jawed idiot while you stand there and let it happen.”

He watched his brother wrestle for control of his temper, nostrils flaring, deep chest inflating on quick sharp inhaleds. “Maybe if you paid less attention to his clothes and more attention to his ideas, you’d see that he’s trying to help us.”

“You,” Remy said. “He’s trying to help *you*. And I just come with the package. Everyone knows that 4 Thieves was your idea. Hell, it’s right there on the website.”

Three hours delayed from the flight he’d spent eight hundred dollars to switch to, Remy had forced himself to visit the About Us page that Cosima had referenced in the story-worthy-telling part of her pitch.

He’d sat there while fellow travelers ate their overpriced airport-food breakfast and seen exactly how his role in all of this had been framed.

Law opened his mouth to speak, but the front door swung open and Emily stepped out holding the backpack Remy had dropped near the front door. Her eyes had the feverish look they usually took on when showing him some YouTube video demonstrating a new gadget she absolutely had to have.

“Aunt Charlotte was just telling me that there’s a camp for kids who get to be in plays and she knows one of the directors and that I can go if you say it’s okay.”

Remy and Law exchanged a look, simultaneously catching on that this *aunt* business had likely been Emily’s doing.



“It’s supposed to be a really good program.” Law shrugged, both offering this olive branch and communicating that he didn’t care if Remy took it.

“It’s two weeks from now when I’m on spring break,” she added, clearly trying to sweeten the deal.

“I’ll need to talk to *Aunt* Charlotte a little more about the details,” Remy said, “but I think it should be alright.”

“So I can go?” Her small hands laced together and she clasped them to her chest.

“It’s a conditional *yes*.”

She leaped forward, arms winding around his waist as she grabbed him in a fierce hug that stole his breath. Every day it seemed the crown of her head rose a little higher on his sternum. Soon he’d no longer be able to pick her up and somersault her onto his shoulders. He did it now to her whooping delight.

When he recovered his equilibrium, he saw that Law had already turned to go back into the house.

The unfinished conversation throbbed in his consciousness like an open wound.

Left untreated, it was deep enough to scar.

## *Seven*

She had broken one of her own cardinal rules.

Never be the first to text when he did the walking out. Her reasons for doing so justified the infraction. Unable to sleep after his abrupt departure, she had cracked open her laptop to discover a very enthusiastic email from her VidFlix contact asking if there was any way they could expedite the pilot timeline to hit the summer sweeps.

She'd done some creative cursing while staring at her cell phone and figuring out what combination of words would get a man who hadn't even signed a contract yet excited about the idea of her crew coming pretty much yesterday.

After typing out and deleting several long explanatory messages, she'd reverted back to a principle she'd learned in the television-commercials unit of her filmmaking class.

Consider your audience.

She opted for a simple: Well? Do I owe you a ride? To reopen the lines of communication.

The message she received back was promising, if odd.  
Do you ever.

Cosima felt a flutter in her stomach followed by an instant stab of annoyance. Even now, after he had run out of her apartment like someone had lit his ass on fire, she found herself excited by the prospect of seeing him again.

What followed was a rapid-fire back-and-forth that left her jittery with endorphins.

Cosima: How soon can we take it?

Remy: Is this a hypothetical question?

Cosima: Is that a hypothetical answer?

She almost dropped her phone when it instantly began to ring in her hand. Shaking her head, she answered it.

“See, the way this works is, you’re supposed to give me some times that might work for you, and then I choose one and then we talk.”

“How about now?”

As a trained singer, she was conceptually aware that vocal cords thicken overnight, then loosen as they’re used throughout the day. In actual practice, all she heard was what he might sound like when she woke up in bed next to him.

Not that she’d ever had the chance.

“You’re talking to me, aren’t you?” She heard a crunching sound in the background and imagined him walking up one of the many gravel paths she’d seen in the pictures run with the article about Samuel Kane’s investment. When thinking about shooting locations, she had already been identifying areas of the distillery they would want to avoid. Spaces between buildings or areas where extra equipment had piled up on the warehouse dock.

“Is that an actual rooster I just heard?” she asked.

“Foghorn,” he said.

“This is going to come as a shock to you, but even though I was raised in Philadelphia, I recognize the difference between poultry vocalizations and warning sirens.”

“Foghorn is the rooster’s name,” he said. “Like Foghorn Leghorn?”

She slapped her hand over her face out of reflex, immediately hoping he couldn’t identify it by the sound.

“Yeah,” she said. “That’s a bit before my time.”

The crunching ceased and was replaced by the sound of footsteps on something wooden and hollow. A door squeaked, then closed. “You know how to hurt a guy, don’t you?”

*Look who’s talking.*

“We’ll have to save that topic for a future discussion.” She pushed herself up from the bed he’d set ablaze and began to pace. “But Law signed off?”

His pause lasted a hair too long. “He’s on board.”

“You’re sure?” she asked.

“You’ll have the contract back within the hour.”

Hurdle one cleared.

“The thing is, I heard back from the network executives, and they wanted to know if there’s any way we could move up the production schedule. I told them that you were very adverse to—”

“No problem.”

Cosima felt like a carp. Her mouth opened and closed without the arrival of any words to justify the action. This was nothing like the response she had expected. She had a little speech prepared. Note cards of possible rebuttals to the refusals she expected. It had long been a habit of hers in situations where she expected to receive the answer she didn’t want.

With an east coast trial lawyer for a father, arguing had been both a sport and a rite of passage. Mealtimes, especially, were dedicated to an extended game of *can you guess what I already know?*

And with the father who’d been a prosecutor and then a judge, winning had been a near impossibility. No matter the topic.

“Really?” she asked.

“Really,” he said. “When would you want to come?”

Drawing in a deep breath, Cosima scribbled on the notepad near her to release her nervous energy.

“A week from now?” She braced herself for an exclamation of dismay from his end of the phone.

“Fine. Anything I need to do for my end?”

Cosima's eyebrows scrunched together in the expression her mother always warned her would create permanent grooves in her forehead.

*Why was he making this so easy?*

"Not yet. I'll get my crew together and make travel arrangements. I was thinking Roanoke for the hotel. That would probably make the most sense in terms of getting back and forth?" She hovered at the kitchen counter, phone sandwiched between her ear and shoulder as she began typing in the search engine on her laptop.

"Or you could stay here," he suggested. "Seems like that would save you a lot of time and trouble."

Time, yes.

Trouble, no.

Trouble she intended to avoid by sticking to a new cardinal rule.

Never be alone with Remy Renaud.

"I'm not sure that's such a good idea, given our history."

"Don't think you can keep your hands off me?" A lightness had crept into his voice that hadn't been there until that point.

She fought a solar flare of temper.

"My hands are making a very particular gesture right now," she said, stopping to sip her mug of lukewarm coffee. "Feel free to use your imagination."

His chuckle was rich, warm, and genuine.

"Your hands and the rest of you wouldn't be staying anywhere near me," he explained. "When we built out the distillery, we added a section of staff cabins to the property. Marlowe just finished having them redone, so I can vouch for the quality."

She couldn't pretend it wouldn't shave a nice chunk off their budget for lodgings, in addition to allowing her crew to catch footage they might otherwise miss.

“We’ll take you up on that then.” Cosima set down her mug on the counter and wandered over to the window. “I’ll call you when I have a more definite ETA.”

“No text first?”

She sighed loud enough to let it be heard through the phone before disconnecting. Staring out over a city famously slow to rise, she hugged her robe tighter around her.

She’d gotten exactly what she wanted.

So why was her stomach a knot of dread and elation?

\* \* \*

The Mercedes cargo van slowed to a roll as it turned onto the mouth of a tree-lined drive. Thick, beautifully gnarled wood polls rose at least sixteen feet on either side. Connecting them was a large copper plate with the words *4 Thieves* cut out of the metal. The elements had aged it with the beautiful green patina she had seen on the copper accents of French chateaus.

Chateaus like the one in the Berkshires, where her parents summered.

Times like this, she felt ridiculous coming from the kind of family that used seasons as verbs.

“Hello, trailer fodder.” Roosevelt Toussaint looked more like a club bouncer or NFL linebacker than a seasoned camera operator. Tall and solid, he had russet-brown skin and a closely shaved head perpetually kissed with sweat.

Always their default driver, he craned to see out the windshield.

“That’s way too obvious for an opener.” The predictable reply came from Matthew Lee, Roosevelt’s right-hand man and self-appointed hype guy. A closet film nerd, wiry, and virtually tireless, he had proven to be an asset on some of their most grueling shoots.

“It’s way too early for you two to start bickering.” This observation was Sarah’s contribution. Curled onto the van’s back bench, where she had been sleeping, she hauled herself

upright and pushed her large dark sunglasses onto the top of her head. “Please tell me they have Wi-Fi out here.”

Cosima had to laugh.

Though Sarah had been with her only a couple of years, she’d quickly become accustomed to a lifestyle that didn’t involve the application of mosquito repellent. An item she groused about roundly when she saw it listed on their preproduction shopping list.

“They have Wi-Fi,” Cosima said. “Running water, too, I think.”

Two weeks.

She had repeated this phrase to herself over and over as she made preparations for the trip. She could do anything for two weeks if it meant getting what she needed for a company-launching series of her very own. Especially if it meant showing the network executives who had dropped their interest when Michael Cooper’s name was no longer attached to the company that they’d made a huge mistake.

Even if that anything was keeping her distance from a man who had proved to be damn near irresistible both times she’d been anywhere near his physical proximity.

The van continued down the lane, which was shaded by oak trees already beginning to slip on their green-studded spring jackets. At the end of the tree line, they came face-to-face with a beautiful quilt of sprawling green dotted with buildings that housed the distillery’s various operations.

When they reached the last leg of Remy’s comically descriptive instructions, she shot him a text.

Almost to the office.

The answer came immediately.

I’ll be waiting.

And he was.

He wore a white T-shirt this time, but the rest of what she’d come to think of as his standard uniform was present. The jeans. The boots. The stomach-flipping smirk.

Cosima often heard the expression “heart skipped a beat” but had never experienced it until now.

He stood beneath yet another large wooden arch on the part of the distillery she knew had been partially converted from an old barn on the property.

“Holy shit,” Matt whispered under his breath.

“Told you so,” Sarah hummed from the back seat.

“You said he looked like a lumberjack,” Matt argued. “Not a goddamn Spartan.”

“Are you two going to be able to keep it together?” Cosima asked. “Or do Roosevelt and I need to do all the talking?”

“Don’t volunteer me for that job,” Roosevelt said, glancing over his shoulder at her. “That man looks three parts mean and one part crazy.”

Seeing him standing there on the stoop, arms crossed over his broad chest, she could understand his concern.

If men were dogs, Remy would be a rottweiler. A big, beautiful beast whose bark and bite both promised trouble.

“All right, kids,” she announced. “Go time.” Pulling a deep breath into her lungs, she scooted across the middle seat and pushed the button to open the sliding door.

Dressed for scouting in a pair of designer joggers, hiking shoes, and a plain white T-shirt, she became very conscious of the way the fabric clung to her breasts and butt as Remy’s eyes roamed freely over both areas.

His dark hair looked shower-damp and was combed back from his face but brushed the nape of his neck. He hadn’t shaved since their meeting in LA and her skin lit up in the places where it held the tactile memory of that dark stubble grazing against her.

Lips that had been on hers curled up into a mischievous smile. He held out his hand as if they were meeting for the very first time.



“Miss Lowell.” Her name was honey dripped from his tongue. When his hand closed over hers, that same pop of electricity shot up her arm and her entire body filled with a silky liquid warmth. Gazing into the gunmetal-gray depths of his hooded eyes, she read there what lived in her own head.

Desire.

Awake, alive, and ready.

Exactly who the hell had she been kidding?

Keep her hands off Remy Renaud for two weeks?

She wasn't going to last ten hours.

“Morning,” he said.

“Morning,” her entire crew chimed in enthusiastically as if he was a teacher they wanted to impress. Cosima went through the introductions, giving a brief bio for each of the three people who had become absolutely invaluable to her. Remy greeted them each with a nod and some variation of “pleased to meet you” that sounded welcoming and warm.

“I’m sorry my brother Law couldn’t be here,” Remy said. “His wife just had twins, and between that and the distillery, things have been a bit hectic for him of late.”

Cosima had been so distracted by the morning light playing off the planes of Remy’s T-shirt that it took her a moment to catch the unfamiliar word in the sentence.

“Wife?” she asked. “Since when?”

“Since they filed the paperwork at the county courthouse,” Remy said. “Marlowe said it was the most efficient use of their time and resources.”

“That’s the most Marlowe thing I’ve ever heard in my life,” Cosima replied, stealing a glance at the back of those well-worn jeans as he propped open the distillery door for them.

A guest at Marlowe’s sweet-sixteen birthday party, she’d heard a different version of the same logic. But back then the argument had been pointed against marriage. Why it was always a great deal for the man and a terrible deal for the

woman. And if you were foolish enough to cave to societal expectations, why spend all that money on a ceremony that lasts half a day when it could be invested in a tech stock and potentially double in minutes? Even then, she had been a far more practical creature than Cosima.

Like all other fanciful things about her, her imaging of a fairy-tale wedding was solidly her Nona's fault. Cosima had sat for hours staring at the pictures taken of her Nona in her wedding gown. Acres of handmade Italian lace, waterfalls of creamy silk, a high collar above which floated her grandmother's face, complete with dark, heavy-lidded eyes, and dreamy smile.

Her parents' wedding pictures had looked so different. Her father handsome and his Navy dress uniform. Her mother in a couture gown like something from a French bakery. Lots of billowing taffeta with a cathedral length train. Theirs had been a society match. Beautiful, famed opera singer marries young maverick from old money.

What they lacked in genuine love and affection, they made up for in pomp and circumstance.

A theme that carried over into all aspects of their life.

And Cosima's.

"So how do you want to do this?" Remy asked as they filed into a vestibule leading to a second set of doors.

"It would be great if we could get a tour of the distillery itself, and then just the general grounds for shot-scouting purposes," Roosevelt said. "Once we have that planned out, we can do a little storyboarding?" he added, glancing over his shoulder at Cosima.

"Okay," Remy said. "Do you want to start here?"

What she wanted was to go back in time and slap her hand away from her laptop when she'd composed the email to Marlowe Kane. Or better yet, to drop her laptop off the balcony from her fourth story apartment to prevent her from reading the article that had put this idea in her head in the first place.

“Sounds great,” she said.

They stepped into a whoosh of cool air, thick with smells. Some of them pleasant—grain and wood. Some of them not—alcohol, nail-polish remover. Down the center of the vaulted building, a row of gleaming copper pot stills perched, sentinel-like, an array of various pipes running back and forth between them. For the first time, it occurred to her to wonder where they’d gotten the seed money for the initial build-out.

With Sarah busy making notes on her phone and Matt and Roosevelt already plotting out camera angles, Cosima was free to feel Remy’s eyes on the side of her face. Heat seemed to vent from the neckline of her T-shirt and she suddenly became very grateful she’d worn her good bra with both lift and padding.

“Doing all right?” he asked in that deep, resonant purr that so moved her. “You look a little rattled.”

She swallowed hard and lifted her chin, refusing to look at him. “We should keep moving,” she announced.

He obliged.

For a solid hour, he paraded them through the operation. The granary. The bottling and temperature-controlled storage area. Finally, they trooped through the warehouse and down to a long room where rows of stout barrels stretched down a corridor with a central walkway.

“Oh, man,” Roosevelt said, an excited light brightening his eyes, “this would be a perfect spot for the OFT station.” He turned to Remy, ready to explain. “An OFT is—”

“On the fly,” Remy said, finishing for him. “Interviews usually done minutes or hours after action happens to capture immediate reactions.”

Remy tapped his head when Cosima blinked in surprise. “Been studying up.”

His wink softened her knees in the most annoying way possible.

“Oh, man.” Matt’s cheeks were a glowing pink. “If the main areas are this amazing, I can’t wait to see the rest of the property.”

“Tell you what,” Remy said. “I’ve got an ATV outside. Why don’t you guys take it out and look around yourselves?”

“That sounds perfect.” Cosima said.

Remy grimaced. “I’m afraid it only seats three.”

“Weren’t you saying you wanted to see the smokehouse setup?” Sarah asked helpfully. “You and Mr. Renaud could go look at that while the three of us scout the rest of the property.” Mischief sparkled in her green eyes.

Cosima had the feeling that no matter what she proposed, it would be countered. And, it was ridiculous of her to think she could spend the next two weeks having absolutely no one-on-one contact with the head of operations for the entire distillery.

“Sounds like a plan,” she said.

“Keys are in it,” Remy said, turning to Roosevelt.

The cool, damp, humidity-controlled air was heavy with wood and smoke. Cosima imagined this must be what the hull of a pirate ship smelled like. It was a fantasy all too easy to extend to who the captain might be. Remy’s face was just the kind of brutal and charismatic one that inspired fear and loyalty in his crew.

“So,” Cosima said as soon as they were out of earshot. “Which way is the smokehouse?”

He grinned at her.

*Grinned.*

“In a hurry?”

“Actually, yes. Our schedule is incredibly packed today. If you don’t mind—”

“But you got here a full two hours ahead of schedule. Surely you could spare a few minutes of conversation?”

She crossed her arms over her breasts and glared up at him, waiting for whatever it was he had wanted to get her alone to say.

“The way I left things—”

“We don’t need to do this. You don’t owe me an apology. We’re two grown adults. We tried to scratch an itch. It didn’t work out. End of story.”

“Who said anything about apologizing?” He took a step toward her, flooding her senses with that intoxicating scent. Soap, laundry detergent, and warm clean skin mingled with the oak barrels.

“Then what are you saying?” She held her ground, a skill she had honed early and out of necessity. Women of her size were frequently loomed over, talked over, and passed over. A state of affairs that bothered her to no end.

“I’m saying that I wish I would have stayed.”

He spoke these words with no idea what they would mean to her in a different context. What a balm they would be if they could apply to both situations.

Though she knew she should shut down this conversation immediately, she couldn’t resist the peek inside his head. Starved to know what it had been like for him in the week since their encounter.

“Why is that?” she asked.

“Because for the last seven days, I haven’t been able to get you off my mind for a single second. Because I go to sleep thinking about how good you feel.” His heated gaze fixed first on her mouth, then traveled lower. “And wake up thinking about how good you taste.”

The air refused to be drawn into Cosima’s lungs. Heavy with tension that seemed to find its way into her pores. Gathering in the creases where her hips met her thighs, drawing her stomach muscles down where a clench tightened everything between her belly button and spine.

She clutched at the fraying threads of her irritation in a desperate bid to hold on to her resolve. “Is that why you were so in favor of our coming out early? You want to finish what you started?”

He inched closer still. “Technically, I believe you were the one who started it.”

And he was right about that, too, damn him.

“I did,” she admitted. “But as I recall, you were the one who ended it.”

“Didn’t, either,” he said, his voice going husky. “I just pressed Pause.”

Her body moved toward his as if someone had planted a magnet behind her sternum. His hand anchored in the hair at the base of her skull and angled her face upward. It felt electric and a little terrifying to be on the receiving end of his undivided attention. It reminded her of an odd impression she’d had the first night they met. That there wasn’t one Remy Renaud, but many, and now they were all united in wanting her.

Within seconds of their lips grazing, they shot straight to the same fever pitch they’d had in the elevator.

Zero to fifty in point-two seconds.

He kissed the way an animal ate when it was unsure of its next meal. The hunger winning over the urge to slow down and savor.

She was starving, too.

Minutes, hours, entire evenings of fantasizing about touching him the way he had touched her. Of seeing him. Feeling him.

Her hands slid under the soft edge of his T-shirt, playing over the hard wash of muscle she found there.

Remy’s rough, low grunt tingled up the lifeline of palm as her fingers found the tracks of his ribs. All the while his tongue tangled with hers, seducing and sparring until she was too dizzy to stand on her own.

She clung to him, encouraged to rest her weight against him by strong hands beneath the curve of her behind. He walked them backward between two of the barrels, where they were no longer visible to anyone who might happen to glance down the aisle.

In that cool pocket of shadow, he lifted her against the curve of a barrel to align their bodies. She wound her arms around his neck for better leverage. Angling her hips to grind the waking part of her against the hard heat growing behind the zipper of his jeans.

He gasped air from her mouth and wrenched his lips from hers.

“God, do I want you,” he growled, grinding his hips against her. “But, I don’t have anything with me.”

“Want to go back to high school?” she asked, rocking against him.

“Even though this happens to be the one subject I was good at, you’re about to get me for as long as I would have lasted then if we don’t slow down.”

“Been a minute?” she asked, nipping at his earlobe, where a tiny hole in the lobe reminded her of the silver hoop he had worn there when they’d met all those years ago.

“Been forever.”

Then they were devouring each other again.

Remy cupped her breast through her shirt and bra, kneading her, thumbing her nipple through the layers.

“...said they were down here?” A voice both familiar and authoritative echoed down the aisle.

They froze, ready to leap apart just like guilty teenagers.

“Actually, I thought they said they were moving onto the smokehouse.” Sarah’s hasty and somewhat panicked reply had no effect on the strident footfalls proceeding toward them at an alarmingly quick clip.

Remy swore beneath his breath as he eased her back to her feet.

“Who is that?” Cosima asked, quickly running a hand through her hair and adjusting her shirt.

“Samuel Kane,” he muttered.

“What’s Samuel Kane doing down here?” Pulling a tissue from her pocket, she dabbed at her kiss-swollen lips. No time to powder or reapply lipstick. Maybe, coming from LA, he’d assume she’d just had a disastrous collagen treatment.

“Beside ruining a good time and shining a flashlight up the distillery’s collective hindquarters?”

She scooted as close to the main walkway as she could without being seen.

Remy moved to follow her, but she planted a hand squarely in the center of his chest. She widened her eyes and cut them toward his crotch, where a very significant problem bulged beneath the denim.

“Shit.” Turning his torso away from her, he thumped his forehead on the rounded wood.

“Just stay here and be quiet. I’ll take care of it.”

His brow furrowed. “What are you going to do?”

Cosima offered him a smile as she pulled a set of earbuds from her pockets and wedged them in her ear canals. “What I’m best at.”

Remy’s amused grin began to slip from its moorings when Samuel was almost on them and she’d yet to move.

When she could see the mirror-polished tip of an expensive Italian loafer, she whipped herself around the barrel and straight into Samuel’s path.



## *Eight*

Remy smiled to himself at Samuel Kane's startled curse.

Apparently, there was a human being beneath that unflappable calm. He stopped himself from peeking out between the barrels when he heard the scuffling of shoes and a masculine grunt of displeasure. His fear that Cosima might have been hurt was as great as his desire to see whether or not the Kane Foods CEO might have eaten some concrete.

No such luck.

"Oh, my goodness, I am so sorry," Cosima gushed.

"It's fine. Just make sure you—" The bristling irritation died a sudden death, and when Samuel spoke again his tone was considerably softer. "Cosima? What a pleasant surprise. I had heard you might be on-site at some point but had no idea it would be so soon."

And damn if he hadn't said that exactly like he knew Remy would overhear.

"Yes, well, Remy was kind enough to rearrange his busy schedule at my request," Cosima said.

This, he had *definitely* been meant to overhear. Had she picked up on his irritation? Made the connection that agreeing to the expedited timeline was just a convenient way to irk Samuel Kane?

"What a guy," Samuel said with no enthusiasm.

Remy's jaw ached as his molars ground together. He loosened his jaw, remembering how his dentist had commented that if he kept it up, he'd have nothing but nubs back there soon. He had half a mind to send Kane Foods International the bill.

"Congratulations on your wedding, by the way," Cosima said. "I'm so sorry I wasn't able to make it. I was filming in

Italy at the time.”

“Thank you,” Samuel said. “It was a wonderful day. Your parents looked well.”

“They always do.” Some of the daylight had gone out of her voice.

Samuel must have heard it, too, but unlike Remy, he was able to smoothly steer the conversation away from a potentially painful area with the ease of a naval captain.

“Speaking of filming, tell me about this 4 Thieves project.”

“It’s a docuseries, actually,” she said. “About the distillery, its operations, its history. But I promise, we’ll do our best not to get in the way.”

“Oh, I wasn’t worried about that at all,” Samuel said. “I was just hoping to get a better understanding around the approach.”

A pause. Remy would have paid a hefty sum to see Cosima’s face in that moment.

“Approach?” The sweetness in her voice sent up red flags of warning, and though Remy had no particular love for the man who had interrupted them, he found himself silently telegraphing *don’t do it, man* to Samuel from his hiding spot.

“Your take on the story, so to speak,” he clarified.

“You’re suggesting I have an angle?”

A familiar feeling of unease began to creep into Remy’s gut, dissolving the residual heat of their encounter like so much dish suds.

“The Cosima I knew wouldn’t leave her desk without an angle, much less travel all the way across the country.”

There was no heat in Samuel’s statement. Not even a hint of suggestion, but he definitely had a point, and he was getting at it.

“I’m not exactly sure what you’re implying,” Cosima said.

“I’m implying that you’ve always been excellent at assembling a narrative. I have a stake in what that narrative will be where 4 Thieves is concerned.”

Splinters dug into Remy's knuckles as he ground a fist against the barrel.

"Maybe the Renaud brothers would like to shape their own narrative," Cosima suggested.

"Which I have no objection to," Samuel said. "I just feel that there are elements of it that might best be left out of frame, if you take my meaning."

"Such as?"

"Forgive me," Samuel said. "I'm just remembering a recent project of yours where the participants seemed to have a very differing version of events from what made it to the final cut?"

Remy felt a twitch of annoyance. While he'd thought to do research on the filming process itself, looking up the specific projects Cosima had been associated with hadn't occurred to him.

"Isn't it funny how different people will have different recollections of the exact same memory? For instance, the graduation party I threw at my house. I seem to remember it was you who slipped me fifty to draw Mason's name from a hat when it was Arlie's turn for seven minutes of heaven. But you kept telling everyone Mason had done it. It seems I remember several occasions of strange things happening on debate-team trips that mysteriously ended up being blamed on Mason. Isn't that odd?"

Now, Remy couldn't help himself. Slowly, carefully, and as quietly as he could, he slipped down to the end of the row and leaned forward to peek through the tiny gap. The barest sliver of Samuel's face was visible.

His coloring had miraculously changed from a healthy glow to something resembling a late-summer beet. Refreshing, not to be the only one whose body parts glowed with embarrassment.

Samuel cleared his throat. "Well, it's been pleasant catching up with you. Please let me know if there's anything you need from me or the distillery staff in terms of filming."

"You, as well," Cosima said. "And I appreciate that."

Remy waited until the sound of footfalls faded into faint echoes before stepping out.

“All right, spill it. What kind of dirt do you have on him? Jaywalking? Did he run a stop sign? Fail to help an old lady cross the street?”

She angled her face up at him. “More like a lifelong subversive campaign to supplant Mason Kane as their father’s favorite. Which, if you knew their father, wouldn’t surprise you.”

“Oh, I know their father, alright. His backing out of an investment in 4 Thieves is the whole reason Samuel Kane has crawled all the way up into our business.”

“In that case, Parker Kane did you a huge favor,” Cosima said, beginning to walk toward the stairs. “However much you dislike dealing with Samuel, take that and multiply times a billion.”

Remy fell into step beside her. “If you’re trying to make me like the guy, it won’t work.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Cosima said. “But it would be in your best interests to make him like you.”

Remy’s throat felt hot and sour.

This sounded a little too much like a threat.

\* \* \*

When they walked into the restaurant, Remy felt a swell of pride.

Gleaming floors and cathedral ceilings built from wood they had salvaged from old churches in the hulls of decommissioned ships. But perhaps Remy’s favorite feature was what they called the Boxcar Bar.

In the distillery’s earliest days, when Bastien had been around, he and Remy had stumbled across an estate sale where the family of the recently deceased was trying to off-load an old dining car from the Atlantic Coast Line. It had been in pretty bad shape, but then so were most of the things the

Renaud boys had inherited. From well-meaning church ladies, teachers, and distant cousins. They had taken one look at the moth-eaten seat cushions and long, gleaming rosewood bar top, and made an instant offer.

These days, it was most frequently manned by Grant, who was currently stocking the backlit shelves with clean glasses, while Law sat at the counter with his laptop and a mug of coffee.

Given his bloodshot eyes and the grim set of his jaw, this conversation wasn't destined to go well.

They'd been doing a pretty good job of avoiding each other since the other morning, and over the years, had figured out a pretty solid system for never talking about uncomfortable things when possible.

These days, they'd just about run out of track.

Law stood at their approach.

Even with her rugged-soled hiking shoes, he would have guessed Cosima topped out at about five-two, whereas Law, a solid six-five with an added inch of workboot, had more than a foot on her. If Cosima noticed the inequity in their height as Remy made the introductions, she gave no visual cues.

"Any chance I could get one of what he has?" Cosima asked Grant as she hopped onto a stool.

"Would you like the bourbon-infused vanilla syrup in your latte as well?" he asked, nearly tripping over his shoes in his excitement to retrieve a mug.

Remy raised an eyebrow at Law, who, like himself, had always taken his coffee black.

"It has a really smooth finish," Grant said.

"You talked me into it." She swung her knees toward Law and crossed one leg over the other.

A wave of déjà vu swept over him, and in a flash, he saw her smooth tanned legs with their curving muscles against the edge of a denim skirt.

Wishful thinking.

“I really appreciate you letting me come on such short notice,” Cosima said to Law. “My network contact is hot to trot, and I know you have plenty going on, but Remy has been so accommodating.”

Law gave her a tight smile, then shot a sideways look at Remy. “He certainly has.” Closing the lid on his laptop, he turned to Cosima. “*So* accommodating, he entirely forgot to tell me you were coming.”

As gifted a communicator as Cosima had proven to be, Remy was sure she didn’t miss the filament of frustration in Law’s outwardly teasing statement.

“Well, I’d say you’ll barely know that we’re here, but that would be a lie.” She accepted her steaming mug from Grant with a smile that caused his ginger freckled cheeks to flush atomic pink at the edge of his russet beard. “We’ve tried to stay out of the way of operations as much as possible, but I’m afraid that, as one of the show’s principals, I will need you for at least a couple hours of day for the next two weeks.”

A crease dug in the center of Law’s dark eyebrows as he scowled. “A couple hours a day? Seriously?”

As if Remy hadn’t been required to sacrifice so much more than that with his own daughter in order to accommodate Law and Samuel’s plans for the business. As if this TV show, just like Remy going to Los Angeles to speak with a television producer, hadn’t been Law’s idea in the first place.

“Not all at once,” Cosima reassured him. “We’ll need to do a little storyboarding up front so that we know which shots we need to get, but after that, we’ll mostly just be following you through a typical day. With a few separate on-the-fly interviews, of course.”

Having observed his youngest brother in a variety of stressful contacts, Remy felt his own blood pressure rising when he spotted the vein becoming a fat worm beneath the skin of Law’s temple. He tried to catch his brother’s eye to

signal that they could talk about this later. Law refused to look at him.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he grumbled under his breath.

The gentle curve of Cosima’s lower back flattened as she sat up straighter. Her posture was instantly recognizable. Defensive.

“I seem to remember us reviewing this process when we had our initial discovery call. In fact, I believe your words were something like ‘that sounds fun.’”

Remy remembered it, too.

Whether he’d said it just to please Marlowe, or because he assumed that Remy would turn her down flat once he’d flown out, didn’t matter. Lots of things sounded fun before you were running on little sleep and had a near constant soundtrack of stereo screaming from two tiny infants.

Even with a household of help. Which was a hell of a lot more than Remy’d had when Emily was first born.

He flicked away the nib of resentment. It would do nothing to help the situation.

“We’ll find a way to make it work. When did you want to hold this storyboarding session?” After draining the last of his coffee, Law slid a class to Grant, who had been hovering nearby. “We have state inspectors coming today, a call this afternoon with a potential brewery affiliate, and video session with the Kane Foods marketing team.”

None of which Remy knew about.

Grant cleared his throat.

“I’d be happy to meet with the state inspector. I shadowed Remy last time he was here, and I’ve already been filling out the inspection checklists.”

Having begun his career at the distillery in the granary, Grant had slowly found ways to make himself indispensable in other areas. Like Mira, the restaurant manager, and a good deal of the warehouse staff, Grant had come to them by way of

a prison bus. Law had been initially dubious about the prospect of taking on ex-cons.

Something Remy was still working on trying to forgive his brother for.

He remembered all too well the hell that was job hunting after his own release. The gnawing worry as he sat across from employers with the power to turn him away. Waiting as they silently read through his application. Anticipating the moment when they get to that most terrible of checked boxes.

Watching as their faces changed. From surprise, to dismay, to disgust. And even worse than the disgust was the pity.

The invisible dismissal. *I'm afraid we don't have anything for you here, but I might be able to come up with something in a different department.*

That *something* almost always required heavy lifting for light pay.

Remy had told himself that if he was ever in a position to provide opportunities to people feeling that same pain while trying to rebuild their lives, he would stop at nothing to do it. Which is why when they finally decided to get serious about the distillery, contacting the local prisons to build a work-release program had been on Remy's list of nonnegotiables.

"I suppose that would be alright," Law said.

Grant beamed a slightly gap-toothed grin that both Remy and Law returned despite the simmering tension between them.

"You could just let me sit in on the storyboarding once the crew gets back," Remy suggested. "Since you and Samuel have such a busy day."

He knew he should have left off the second sentence, but he couldn't quite help himself.

He could see his brother grappling with the same temper he'd been wrestling with on an increasing basis. As had been the case when they were younger, they saved their worst fights for private.



“Works for me.” Law pushed himself up from the stool and glanced down at his phone. “Looks like I better head back. Good to meet you,” he said, nodding toward Cosima and tucking his laptop under his arm.

To Remy, he said nothing.

“I’ll catch you up later, brother,” Remy called after him. The hand Law held up in acknowledgement as he walked away might as well have been a middle finger.

When Grant disappeared into the kitchen with Law’s mug, Cosima wheeled on him.

“What the hell was that?”

“Exhaustion would be my guess,” Remy said.

Cosima snatched away her coffee when he reached for it. “I meant what the hell was that with *you*.”

He shifted on his feet, not at all comfortable with this turn in the conversation. “With me?” he asked dumbly.

Cosima was one of those women who ripened with anger the same way fruit ripened in the summer sun. Her cheeks flushed. Her lips reddened. Her eyes sparkled. He wondered if this is what male praying mantises saw right before they were relieved of their heads. So fascinated with the magnificent creature in front of them, they lacked the good sense to be afraid.

“First Samuel Kane, then your brother,” she said. “I know memory isn’t your strong suit, but I don’t believe it just slipped your mind that we’d be arriving today.”

“It didn’t,” he admitted.

“Which means you chose not to tell them despite knowing how they’d react.”

“Correct.”

She arched a dark eyebrow. “Well?”

Remy couldn’t think of a single thing to say.

“Let me guess. You thought it would be a fun way to jam your thumb into Samuel Kane’s eye, right? Show him he’s *not the boss of you?*” She coated the saying with sarcasm.

“No, I just thought—”

“I’m gonna stop here right there, because if you took the time to think about anything, you would know what a monumentally stupid idea pissing off a man like Samuel Kane really is.”

Remy’s heart hammered in his ears, a deafening throb that threatened to split his skull.

“You think I don’t know that?” The question scorched the back of his throat like battery acid. “You think I haven’t been reminded my entire goddamn life what men like Samuel Kane could do to me?”

Cosima hopped down from her stool to face him, hands firmly planted on her hips.

Despite the animosity whipping between them like a downed power line, he felt an affectionate respect for her need to fight from her feet.

“Look, if you’re determined to commit career suicide, that’s your business. Next time, find a different vehicle.”

The sole of her shoe squeaked as she spun and stomped off.

The rest of the day passed with a maddening sluggishness. Like the hands of a clock moving through cold molasses. Stationed at his desk in the loft office above the distillery’s main floor, Remy did his best to focus, as elsewhere in the property, Samuel and Law held their meetings and made their plans while Cosima’s crew scouted for locations and unloaded their equipment.

That afternoon, he managed to get through three hours of storyboarding. A process he decided had been invented to personally vex him. An entire hour would be broken down into twenty-minute segments. And then the twenty-minute segments broken into five-minute segments. And then the five-minute seconds broken into individual shots. He was

considering breaking his own finger in order to have an excuse to leave when at last he heard the blessed words.

“Let’s take a break.” Any hopes he had of them ducking off to a quiet place so he could apologize to Cosima were promptly dashed when her phone rang.

She glanced down at it, smiled, swiped her thumb over the screen, and answered. She wasn’t quite out of the room when he heard her greet the person on the other line.

Michael.

Remembering the blond god whom he absolutely had not Google stalked after the fact, his jaw tightened.

Was her ex-fiancé making some sort of reconciliation attempt?

The thought did little to improve his mood.

Glancing down at his own phone, he felt an intense burst of gratitude when he realized a task was available to him. A task that would take him out of this room, out of this building, and down the gravel road.

He breathed easier the second he was outdoors. After sliding behind the wheel of his ATV, he sent gravel flying as he took off.

Emily’s joy at having him meet her where the bus dropped them off was tempered with her embarrassment that the Varmint was parked within view of her classmates.

The promise of being allowed cookies for an afternoon snack instead of the usual healthy options smoothed the matter considerably. A bribe. He had been hoping she might agree to simply go back to their home on the property and forgo their usual routine.

Foolish of him.

“*Dad,*” she said with apparent exasperation. “You know I need to take the mail up to the shipping office. And then I always help Mira roll silverware for the dinner shift. And I haven’t even checked on the twins yet.”

He felt a pinprick of guilt at the insistence in her tone. She'd grown up mirroring him out of necessity. When they had a staff of less than ten, it was just easier to take her with him. First strapped in a carrier across his chest, then in a backpack, then in a wagon, and then under her own steam. Her mind had seemed to have grown twice as fast as her body. Learning first by simian mimicry, stunning him with her unabashed delight when she figured out how to do a task by herself. She had officially reached the phase where she knew how to do things so well, the idea of him helping her was an insult instead of an aid.

He sometimes wondered if he let her do too much. If, instead of letting her become their self-appointed mail carrier, he should have insisted she go play.

They entered the warehouse, where, just as she always did, Emily followed the safety path marked with a little white shoe prints of the kind people used to use for instructional dance illustrations. As they turned down the hall that led up to the shipping office, they nearly collided with Cosima, earbuds firmly wedged in her ears, her phone held out in front of her.

What she'd done to Samuel Kane earlier hadn't just been an act, but a consequence of habit.

Her face cycled quickly through several expressions. Irritation came first. Then recognition, then, when her eyes landed on Emily, disbelief tinged with fear.

For the second time since they'd met, she looked like she'd seen a ghost.

## Nine

The small girl standing before her had stolen the breath from Cosima's lungs. The blood from her cheeks. The heart from her chest.

"You must be Emily," she said, stooping to pick up the stack of talent release forms that had flown out of her hands when she'd almost collided with Remy's chest. "It's very nice to meet you."

"You're not allowed to wear those in the warehouse." The girl tapped her ear, which was absent the earbuds that were wedged into Cosima's.

"Emily," Remy warned. "That wasn't a very polite thing to say to Miss Lowell."

"It's okay." Cosima managed a smile even though her knees threatened to abandon her as she tried to rise. "She's just following protocol. Isn't that right?" She winked in what she hoped was a disarming manner.

Emily remained armed.

Her gorgeously snobby, freckled face was completely implacable.

Remy angled an apologetic look at her that Cosima batted away with a harried grimace.

"Well," she said, holding up her hastily gathered stack. "I better get these taken care of."

She stalked off without a follow-up, willing her feet to carry her around the corner before the tears blurring her vision could spill down her cheeks.

Unfinished business.

Isn't that what all ghosts had in common?

In Emily Renaud, Cosima hadn't just seen one. She'd *felt* one.

Her calves and thighs burned as her heart rushed in her ears and she sidestepped into a small meeting room just in time.

Windowless and blessedly dim, the unoccupied space held her as she let herself collapse backward against the wall and slide down until her bottom hit the floor.

A tide of memory rose.

Too tired to fight against the current, she let herself sink.

In film, she could show the aftermath of their one-night stand in less than five minutes.

*Bird's-eye view.* Human puzzle pieces on a disheveled mattress. Her back fitted perfectly against his bare chest, their legs a calibrated chevron pointed east, where gray dawn spills through the window.

*Fade to daylight.*

She is there; he is missing.

*Full shot.* The woman from behind, sheet wound around her body as she parts the curtain. A motorcycle's ripping engine fades into a distant rumble.

Neon tears streak her face.

*Cut scene.*

*Three weeks later.* The girl in an old-fashioned pink waitress's uniform. Wide lapels, black apron and all. She's carrying a tray of chicken-fried steak toward a table of truck drivers in the corner when it hits her. Her face goes deathly pale, the skin at the corners of her mouth darkening to a gray-green. She shoves the tray into the closest set of hands and bolts for the bathroom, where she heaves until her stomach is empty and sore. She begs a coworker to cover for her, and heads straight to the nearest drugstore, where the clerk takes one look at her in the feminine-needs aisle and gives her a pitying frown.

Pregnant.

She receives this life-changing news while seated in a stall covered with numbers to call for a good time. A dirty limerick

featuring a man from Nantucket. A heart containing the initials of a couple who felt their love at least worth memorializing in this most uninspiring of venues.

*Pregnant.*

*Cut scene.*

She counts an envelope of dwindling cash in her hotel room. Searching GED programs on her phone. Emailing instructors at Lennox-Finch Preparatory Academy. Night classes at a community college to finish her high school classes.

An acceptance letter to UCLA.

The old Mustang pointed west.

*Bridging shot of a map*—a line as red as the Mustang tunneling through it. Her waitress notepad on the seat next to her. All through Arkansas, she writes down boy names. Through Oklahoma, it's girls.

Outside of Amarillo, she starts to cramp.

A kind doctor confirms what she already knows.

A miscarriage.

She keeps driving.

She sees the road through sheets of tears, then sheets of rain that look like tears. And sometimes a combined veil of both.

No official tests had confirmed this, but Cosima knew.

A girl. It would have been a girl.

Had Cosima not miscarried, the girl would have been Emily's half sister.

Had she not reached out to Marlowe Kane, the one-night stand, like the pregnancy it caused, would have remained a singular event.

A thing that had happened to her.

But now, it was history. *Their* history.

History that Remy didn't know they shared.

What exactly did she owe a man who had been gone before she'd woken up? How hard was she supposed to try to find him? They'd both been irresponsible. He'd assumed she was either prepared to deal with the consequences, or didn't care about them any more than he did.

It was hard to reckon that careless version of the careful man he'd become. The patient, affectionate father raising a daughter on his own.

Given a hundred years and the worst possible intersection of experiences, she couldn't imagine Remy reacting to Emily the way her father had when she'd called him in a moment of desperation after her miscarriage.

You made your bed.

He hadn't been wrong about that.

Even from her present vantage, she couldn't fault him. Cosima had made her parents' lives a special kind of hell in the days of their deepest grief following her brother's death. Expecting them to turn around and bail her out of the misery she'd created for herself with her staggering irresponsibility had been both naïve and entitled.

She knew this, and here she was, hurling herself headlong into another risky venture, hoping the cost would be worth it when the dust cleared.

All because she'd given her body, her money, and her livelihood to another man.

Michael, this time.

Cosima hugged her knees to her chest, holding herself together. She was so damn tired. Of the fear. Of the pain. Of the shame.

Of the hope that this time would somehow be different. That she'd finally found someone who understood.

Once the pilot episode was off her desk, she would find a way to tell Remy everything.

After that, she would have her answer.



\* \* \*

Remy looked on as Emily watched Cosima go, completely agog.

“She was rude.”

“Not everyone likes to be corrected like that, Bug. People around the distillery are used to you reminding them of things. But for people like Miss Lowell, it’s kind to be a little more patient while they learn.”

She considered this, still clearly not pleased with this interaction.

“Maybe you could give her another chance at dinner tonight,” he suggested.

Despite her lukewarm acceptance of this idea, their evening meal with Cosima and her crew proved to be just as adversarial.

Emily corrected her about the year the distillery had been founded. About which kind of grain was used for which kind of liquor. About which side the little fork went on in a place setting.

For her part, Cosima bore it patiently, though Remy could see her tolerance was growing threadbare.

Hoping for a ceasefire, he announced Emily’s impending bedtime, reminding her that she only had one more day before spring break and would be able to stay up later. Her expression of abject pleasure melted into such a look of horror that for a moment Remy thought she might’ve seen a grizzly bear standing behind him.

“My spring project. It’s due tomorrow. I thought I had two more days.”

Remy took a deep breath against the instant spike of irritation that always came in the wake of these last-minute revelations. This was just as much his fault. He had a vague memory of her mentioning it, but he had been so stuck in work that he’d completely forgotten to follow up.

“What spring project is this?” he asked.

“We’re supposed to do a presentation or demonstration on what we want to be when we’re grown up.”

Glancing down at his phone, he felt a wave of exhaustion roll over him. They had a long night ahead.

“And what would you like to be when you grow up?” This question came from Roosevelt, who sat at the end of the table, scraping the last bites of banana pudding from an old-fashioned parfait glass.

Remy had to smile at this question despite his flagging energy. The answer changed rapidly, and usually every week. He had heard everything from flight attendant to monster-truck driver within the last several months.

“I want to be a personal chef, like Aunt Arlie’s mom.”

Figured.

“How about we film a cooking show?” The sound of Cosima’s voice caused a ripple of movement as everyone seated at the table turned to look at her.

She’d been uncharacteristically quiet throughout the meal, her eyes a little forlorn every time Remy stole a glance at her.

Emily’s face brightened, then darkened as quickly as clouds blown across the sun. “That would take way too long,” she said, her longing evident by the regret weighing her words.

Cosima cleared her throat and leaned forward in her seat so she could catch Emily’s eye.

“You seem like a girl who knows an awful lot about an awful lot of things. But I bet you this is one of those things where I might know just a little bit more than you do.”

The softness and lightly teasing cadence of her words struck him as incredibly generous in the face of Emily’s constant provocation. She had absolutely no reason to offer up help.

“She’s right,” Roosevelt chimed in, pushing aside his glass. “We could set up a camera in the kitchen back there quick enough. We’d need maybe one umbrella light.”

“Easy,” Matt confirmed. “I could have that up in fifteen.

Emily aimed her freckled face up at Remy, seeking either approval or permission. He knew the days were waning when she would want either.

“Sounds like a pretty fantastic idea to me,” he said, lifting his eyes to find Cosima.

“Roosevelt, you know the drill. Remy, you’re on props. Sarah, you want to be in charge of wardrobe?”

“I’m on it,” Sarah said, winking at Emily.

Cosima clapped her hands like the director’s placard and her crew launched into motion.

Within twenty minutes, they had everything set up to film the impromptu episode of *Bug’s Bistro*.

Its star was receiving her final touches from Sarah, who bent to powder her delicate button of a nose, and Cosima, who loosed her braids from their characteristic pigtails.

Watching these women tend to his daughter, Remy felt a sick ache deep in his gut.

Emily deserved this.

She had from the beginning. It was a pain he knew despite trying to convince himself that it didn’t exist. Remy hadn’t decided which he thought worse. To have, then lose, a nurturing maternal presence, or to never have experienced one at all.

He shook his head as if to clear away the thought, not wanting to hold the bitter memory in his mind while watching the sweetness of the scene before him.

When everything had been arranged, Cosima stepped back and gave Emily a thumbs-up. Emily returned it confidently with a decisive nod.

It took her a few tries, but using the hastily drawn-up cue cards, she was able to talk the audience through the construction of the perfect grilled cheese sandwich. Complete with an ad-lib anecdote about how it was her go-to snack after school.

“That’s a wrap,” Roosevelt said, after the last run was finished. “I think we have everything we need. I’ll get this edited and then share it with you guys via dropbox.”

The crew began packing up their cameras while Grant and the kitchen staff took over the cleanup. Emily came out from behind the kitchen worktable like she might be offering autographs at any moment.

“You, young lady, are a pro,” Cosima said.

“I kept messing up the introduction,” Emily said, staring down at one sparkly purple sneaker.

“I was nowhere as good at that when I was your age.”

“Really?”

“True story,” Cosima said. “I even got kicked out of a play once.”

Emily’s eyes peeled open, such an affront unimaginable to her. “You got kicked out of play?”

“Yep. I got the part of Little Red Riding Hood, but on opening night, when the wolf jumped out from grandmother’s bed, I punched him right in the snout instead of screaming and running like I was supposed to.”

A peel of laughter escaped through the fingers Emily clapped to her mouth. “You did?”

“Of course, the boy in the wolf suit used to pick on me for being short, so that might have had something to do with it,” Cosima said.

Emily nodded sagely, “He sounds like Jackson Myers.”

Remy almost ran into a door. “How come I’ve never heard of Jackson Myers?”

“Because if I told you about him you would come to school and scare him, and he’d make fun of me even more.”

Cosima looked over her shoulder at Remy with eyebrows raised.

Remy shrugged with a guilty-as-charged look on his face.

“I think I could give you a few pointers to take care of old Jackson,” Sarah said. “It just so happens scaring bullies is my specialty.”

They spoke in hushed whispers as they all made their way up to the Varmint, where Matt and Roosevelt were already loading their equipment into the back.

“Can Sarah take me back to the house?” Emily asked. “I was going to show her my Roblox.”

“It is *so* past your bedtime, Bug,” Remy reminded her.

Her small shoulders slumped.

“I can get her tucked in,” Sarah offered. “I have a little sister her age. I miss her a lot.”

Cosima and Remy exchanged a look.

“Alright,” Remy said, relenting. “But no more within half an hour. If you’re not in bed by the time I get home—”

“I have to scrub the goat trough with my toothbrush,” she recited.

“For the record, she’s never had to do that,” Remy said when he received horrified looks from both of the cameramen.

Somewhat relieved, they, along with Sarah and Emily, bundled into the ATV and rumbled off into the night.

Remy filled his lungs with a long, slow breath and turned to Cosima. “Long day.”

“It was,” she agreed.

“Walk you to your quarters?” he offered.

“If you like.”

“What’s on the agenda for tomorrow?” he asked, beginning to amble down the path.

She fell into step beside him.

“We’re going to shoot some B-roll around the property. Get some one-off interviews with the staff.” Already, she’d begun to outpace him and was half a step ahead.

An effective metaphor for their dynamic in almost every regard.

“I believe I offered to *walk* you to your quarters?” he said, jogging to catch up.

“Exactly,” she said. “This is me walking.”

“Like you’re trying to get away from the scene of a crime.”

She gave him a sidelong glance. “What’s wrong with getting from point A to point B efficiently?”

Remy slowed in the center of the path, the sound of the gravel crunching dying away to reveal the faint cry of a loon in the distance. “You would have missed that.”

Cosima shook her head, her wild curls blowing in the breeze.

“Next you’ll be hitting me with platitudes about life being a journey and not a destination,” she grumbled.

“Furthest thing from my mind,” he said.

“What’s the closest?” She glanced at him from beneath a fringe of lashes.

“Nothing it’s proper for a gentleman to talk about while he’s alone with a lady.”

She made a disbelieving sound. “I don’t know which is funnier. You comparing yourself to a gentleman, or me to a lady.”

Only to Remy, she would have been. Anyone in the rural area he grew in could spot the difference between someone with money and someone without as easily as they could tell a cupcake from a carburetor.

What someone with Cosima’s upbringing might have experienced, he couldn’t begin to guess and she didn’t seem inclined to tell him.

“You going to tell me what’s wrong?” he asked.

The smile she gave him was tight and completely unconvincing. “What makes you think anything is wrong?”

“Maybe the fact that you ate next to nothing at dinner, but now you’re trying to eat your lip for dessert,” he said.

She shrugged. “Nervous habit, I guess.”

Remy shoved his hands in his pockets and slowed abruptly. “What’s to be nervous about?”

Stopping several paces away, she huffed air through her nostrils like a frustrated filly, irritated at having her canter slowed. “The production schedule, the fact that neither your brother nor Samuel particularly wants us on-site. I can’t say that makes me especially excited about the filming process.”

Just as he had that day in her office, Remy felt something beneath her words. Deeper, and older, and heavier. Something she didn’t yet want to share.

He took a couple steps toward her and slipped his fingers through her belt loop, tugging her into a pocket of shadow just off the path.

She let him walk her backward until her back met the bark of a cottonwood tree.

Even in the dim light, he could see her narrowed eyes. “Remy, I’m fine. I don’t need to be coddled.”

He didn’t answer. Only stood there, waiting.

She heaved a disgusted sigh. “I mean it. I don’t need you to fix things for me, or hold open doors, or make sure I’m driving safely. I don’t need you to worry if there’s food in my fridge or shoes in my pantry. Just because you’re a father doesn’t mean that I need one.”

Remy took a step closer to her. “Have you ever considered that maybe this is about what *I* need? That maybe being near you makes wrong things seem right and the world feels a little steadier under my feet? That after what has been a colossally shitty day, I might find it just the least but helpful to have you in my arms?”

Cosima shifted on her hiking shoes, looking equal parts shocked and surprised. “Actually...no.”

“Well, it’s true.” He himself hadn’t considered this until he’d spoken it.

“When you put it like that...”

“Would you just get your stubborn ass over here and let me hold you?”

Then, wonder of wonders, she did as he’d requested, letting her arms encircle his waist and her ear rest against his sternum. Her body was stiff at first, but by degrees, began to melt into him. Remy held her there. Letting his arms encircle her shoulders, his chin rest on top of her head.

What followed felt like the longest exhale of his entire life.

They stayed in exactly that position for a span of time he’d never be able to calculate.

She moved against him, releasing his waist to mold her soft hands to his rough jaw.

He let himself be drawn down, his mouth lowering to meet hers. For the first time in his life, Remy let himself be kissed. Gave himself over entirely to whatever it was she wanted to take.

Her lips brushed over his, sweet and faintly scented of wine from dinner.

Nectar he was powerless to resist any more than bees could resist Technicolor flowers when buds began to open.

Spring fever.

That was about right.

The first taste of sunlight on skin after a long, cold, lonely winter. That extra hour of daylight rinsing dark, dusty corners. Waking up the world.

He was waking up, too. Coming alive from scalp to soles.

He pressed his lips to her temple. Her cheekbone. The curve of her jawline.

Then he kissed her back.



Cosima opened to him, granting him access to the source of words that drove him half-mad. Source of pleasure that drove him the rest of the way.

Remy plumbed those velvet depths with thorough, languid strokes, holding his breath until his lungs burned with the effort of drinking every last drop of her throaty moan. Touching her, tasting her, filling his senses now for all the times he'd gone without.

As a boy.

As a man.

As a human.

Only in allowing himself this luxury did he realize how empty he'd been.

Existing on fumes. Praying that it would be enough to get him over the next hill. Through the next day. Last the next year.

She caught his hand as it moved beneath the hem of her shirt, guiding it downward instead, beneath the band of her pants. To silk panties already damp with need.

“God damn.” Pleasure bordering on pain knotted at the base of his spine. “Already?”

He felt her smile against his lips.

“You kidding me?” Nimble fingers made short work of his belt buckle, button, and zipper. “I’ve been wet since I set foot on your property.”

An answering growl rumbled from his chest when her warm fingers wrapped around his cock and began to glide up and down its length.

He lost his breath again. Or found too much of it and couldn't seem to remember how to fix that. Gasping inhales and ragged exhales in time with her ministrations.

Tree bark branded his forehead as he leaned into the pleasure, the feeling of her hot, wet mouth sucking and

sampling the skin at the base of his neck a maddening accompaniment to the increasing friction below.

The ridge of her teeth sank gently into his shoulder when he slid aside the small scrap of fabric to find the silken petals of her sex, coating the small, taut bud with slick strokes.

She quickly matched, then exceeded his pace once again.

A race.

Each trying to get the other there first.

Cosima bucked against his hand, sending a muffled cry into the wall of his chest a precious half second before Remy lost himself in endless, rhythmic pulses.

And still, he was starving.

Ravenous with the need to be inside her.

With nearly Herculean effort, he dragged his mouth free. He gazed down into eyes the gold-green of a meadow in late summer.

“You have no idea how bad I want you right now.”

Her fingers flexed against his still-stony length. “I think I can make a reasonable deduction.”

He brushed a damp lock away from her face. “Know what I want even more?”

“A cigar and bottle of Macallan eighteen-year?”

That wave of déjà vu surged through him once again, blurring reality like a watercolor.

Her face became his anchor. The pad of his thumb found a soft damp swell of her lower lip. “I want you all to myself.”

“What do you call this?” Warm lips planted small kisses around the spot she’d bitten.

“For a whole night,” he added, notching a finger under her chin to tip her face up to his. “In a place where only the stars get to watch.”

Cosima began restoring her clothing to its rightful arrangement. “Do I get to know where this place is?”

He followed suit, tugging up the band of his boxers and closing his fly. “Nope.”

She rolled her eyes as if amused by his need for subterfuge. “When?”

“This Sunday.”

He’d given it considerable thought. Or at least as much thought as he was capable of in the last five minutes with minimal blood supply above waist level.

Emily would be safely installed at camp. Samuel Kane would be back in Philadelphia. And maybe he and Law would have a chance to smooth things over. All of which felt like it needed to happen before he could devote his complete and undivided attention to an event that surely required it.

Cosima pinned him with her cocky grin. “What should I wear?”

Remy reached out and plucked a leaf from her hair. “Something easy to get off.”

## *Ten*

For the days that followed, Cosima lived in a state of near-constant state of arousal.

Watching Remy around other people, knowing she couldn't have him, left her swooning in her beautifully appointed cabin. In the warehouse. In the distillery.

There had been some near misses, of course.

When they ran into each other in the barn.

When she'd caught him alone in the shipping office.

When they'd met in the hallway after the grueling hour she'd spent coaching Law through his first confessional segment in the axe-throwing gallery.

Each of these times involved an inevitable fusion that left them both raw-mouthed and panting, frequently rearranging their clothes mere seconds from getting caught.

It was a dangerous game they were playing.

And that danger proved to be the most potent aphrodisiac of them all.

Tempering this ardor was what Cosima had come to think of as The Emily Situation.

Namely, that the more time she spent with the girl who had once been her self-appointed safety supervisor, the more she found herself developing wildly protective feelings for her.

In their early collisions, she'd begun to recognize a common theme.

She and Emily had butted heads because were so much alike. Bold, bossy, and absolutely convinced they alone were responsible for making sure the earth remained fixed on its axis.

This realization had finally crystalized on Saturday afternoon during the preparations for a group dinner Emily had insisted was necessary before she departed for camp the following morning. When Emily learned Cosima would be cooking her Nona Ferro's manicotti she had asked if she could "help."

See: supervise.

They'd spent the next several hours in the kitchen together, hand-crushing San Marzano tomatoes. Picking fresh basil from the distillery's herb garden.

Talking. Laughing. Flicking each other with suds when they did the first round of dishes.

When Emily checked the oven temperature for the third time, it finally clicked.

We control what we don't trust. This truism floated through Cosima's head as she observed the relief on Emily's face when she'd confirmed that all was right with the world.

It wasn't the oven or the temperature Cosima had provided that Emily didn't trust.

It was herself.

That she had remembered to do what she was supposed to do, or that she'd done it correctly.

Cosima had been surprised by the intensity of her longing to sit the girl down at the table and share something, anything, that would help.

But she didn't, knowing it wasn't her place.

The thought pierced her as the afternoon began to drain away.

Later, Law and Marlowe arrived, each with a twin strapped to their chest, followed by her crew, followed, at last, by Remy.

Turning with a pan of manicotti held in two oven-mitt-covered hands, she spotted him leaning in the doorway with a strange little smile on his face.

Family.

He'd never had much of one.

What she'd known of hers, she'd lost.

A grandmother. A brother. A mother who had tried. A father who didn't know how to.

She hadn't realized until that moment exactly how much she missed it.

The following morning, Remy saw Emily off to camp—a scene that left even stoic Sarah dabbing her kohl-rimmed eyes.

And then there was nothing to do but wait.

Which Cosima was exceptionally terrible at. She spent the day returning emails and catching up on various administrative tasks she'd allowed to fall behind while they were filming. After the two hours that ate up, she migrated to Sarah's cabin only to find her still asleep.

Her crew and the distillery staff, including Grant the Viking, stayed up a little too late sampling their own wares. More than once over the last couple of days, Cosima had caught what she had hoped might be a flicker of mutual interest between the gentle giant and her scrappy, thick-skinned assistant.

Unable to further her cause as matchmaker, Cosima took herself on a walk to the part of the property containing the sprawling Craftsman home Marlowe and Law shared. With her sister-in-law and soon-to-be sister-in-law back in Philadelphia for a couple days and the twins down for a nap, Marlowe gratefully accepted Cosima's offer of company.

They sat down at the kitchen table together with coffee and slices of the cake Marlowe had begged her to help eat.

“This is a trip, right?” Marlowe said, acknowledging the massive elephant in the room while simultaneously leaning down to stroke the ear of the brown-and-white mutt of a dog she'd seen patrolling the property on occasion.

“I mean, raising twins isn't exactly a promenade through Hyde Park,” Cosima said.

They shared a conspiratorial smile at the mention of their sophomore-year, debate-club summer trip to London.

Cosima and Marlowe had met two adorable Irishman at a nearby pub and ended up on the back of their scooters, missing curfew entirely and sitting together on a bench in Hyde Park as the sun came up.

“You really were a terrible influence.” Marlowe smiled fondly.

“You needed one.”

“No argument there,” she agreed.

“I have to say, out of all of us, you would have been the last that I picked to end up married,” Cosima said.

Marlowe chuckled softly to herself. “Getting pregnant with twins after a three-day fling with Law Renaud wasn’t exactly a part of my life plan.”

Cosima felt a little start of surprise. She had known the relationship advanced quickly, but had no idea of the circumstances surrounding the pregnancy.

“When did you find out?” Cosima asked, knowing she was being deliberately nosy but unable to help herself.

“At Samuel’s reception—wait, no. That’s when everyone *else* found out. *I* found out in the bridal suite before the ceremony,” Marlowe said.

“Holy shit.” Cosima clapped a hand to her mouth, imagining Marlowe and the various immediate family members receiving that news in environs as luxurious as they would be for any Kane wedding. “You and Law weren’t even together?”

Midsip of her coffee, Marlowe coughed, and for a terrifying moment, Cosima thought she was going to be treated to a spray of atomized caffeine.

Marlowe dabbed at her mouth, then her eyes, with a clean spit-up rag draped over the back of her chair. When she had recovered control of herself, she set aside the cloth.

“We were about as *not* together as you can be. We slept together while I was there to conduct an audit and hadn’t even spoken to each other in two months.”

Cosima blinked at her, thunderstruck.

All this time she’d assumed Marlowe was gliding along like a swan, having no idea how furiously she’d been paddling below the surface.

“How did you two decide that you wanted to...” She trailed off, not sure how to categorize their union in light of this new information.

“Have a shotgun wedding?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“But you were thinking it.” Marlowe tucked a stray strand behind her ear.

“Maybe a little,” Cosima admitted, tracing the smooth of the mug’s handle with her thumb.

“I went through the normal stages of emotion associated with an unexpected pregnancy.”

“Shock, denial, more shock, existential dread, more denial, acceptance?”

Only when Marlowe’s shrewd gaze lingered a beat too long on Cosima’s face did she realize what she might have given away by pegging it so precisely. “Exactly. Anyway, after I made my way through all of that, I actually started to get...”

“Excited,” Cosima said, finishing for her. *In for a penny.*

“Of course, my father was furious when I told him.”

Just that sentence alone demonstrated how far Marlowe had come.

The prim, somewhat prudish young woman she’d been when they were in prep school had always sat up a little bit straighter when Parker Kane walked into the room. She’d missed out on parties and trips for her polo matches. Even after the accident that ended her polo career, she hadn’t said a single word when her father sold off her beloved horse.



Cosima had never mastered this skill. She seemed to be categorically incapable of hiding emotion. Positive or negative.

“How are things now?” she asked. “Between Law and your father?”

Marlowe flashed her a beleaguered smile. “A reasonable degree of mutual tolerance has been established. I think the fact that Law has more contact with Samuel than he does with our father helps.”

“I’m sure,” Cosima said, careful to keep her tone even. “And you and Law? Storybook happy?”

“If by that you mean that sometimes I’m a witch and he’s an ogre, then yes.”

“I’d have gone with Snow Queen. Or I *would* have, anyway.” Cosima lifted her friend’s wrist, lightly puffy, but still retaining its elegant lines.

“I know, right?” Marlowe rotated her arm. “How weird is it that have an actual tan. Like, from *the sun*.”

“I’ll bet you garden and everything.”

“It’s even worse.” Marlowe pushed herself up from her chair and swung open a cupboard door to reveal a legion of gleaming Mason jars. “I’ve discovered canning therapy.”

“Eat your heart out, Martha Stewart,” Cosima clucked.

“How about you? Think you’ll ever pair off permanently?” Marlowe stopped at the counter to grab the French press and held it out in question. Nodding gratefully, Cosima held out her mug for a top-up.

The thinking she could do. It was the implementation phase where everything always seemed to go awry. Her roots never sank deep enough before the next storm came along.

Cosima shrugged. “If my history is any indication, finding men who are willing to put up with my schedule are hard to find.”

They exchanged a meaningful look, held in the spell of silence created by a chain saw dying away.

“It’s a tradeoff,” Marlowe said. Following her eyeline out the window, Cosima spotted Law, bare-chested and sweaty, grinning as he raised a hand in greeting. Marlowe waved in return, love falling across her features like a veil. “Especially with a man like Law.”

“How so?” Cosima asked.

Marlowe studied the beautifully burnished surface of the farmhouse table.

“Have you ever watched wood being stained?” The heiress’s voice took on a soft, dreamy quality.

“I can’t say that I have.”

The slim tip of Marlowe’s fingernail followed the maze of knotholes. “It brings out the wood’s natural beauty. The grain. The striations.” She lifted her winter-sky eyes to meet Cosima’s. “It also brings out the flaws. You can’t see one without seeing the other. Being in a relationship with someone like Law or Remy who had such a traumatic upbringing is a little like that. It’s going to take you closer to the beauty and the pain.”

She paused, allowing time to absorb the metaphor.

“Am I making any sense?” Marlowe dropped her elbows to the table, massaging the dark circles beneath her eyes. “I’m so tired.”

Cosima drained the last of her coffee. “Here you have a chance to nap while the twins are sleeping and I’m here drinking all your caffeine and yapping your ear off.”

As if on cue, a green light blinked from a futuristic baby monitor on the table before it began to emit a wail.

Marlowe offered up harried half-grin. “That will be my manager,” she said, rising.

No sooner had she gained her feet when the front door swung open, and Law, wearing a concerned expression and fine coat of sawdust, appeared in the foyer.

“Is that Frank?” he asked. “That’s Frank, right?”

“He keeps one of the monitors clipped to his belt,” Marlowe explained.

Cosima experienced a sympathetic surge of oxytocin. “That’s the cutest damn thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Right?” They both glanced in the direction of the stairs as Law took them two at a time.

“What was it?” Cosima asked. “What made you decide you wanted to build a family with Law?” she quickly added, realizing the question followed not their conversation, but her own thoughts.

“Remy, actually.” Marlowe flipped a switch on the monitor when the bass rumble of Law’s voice became audible.

“Remy?” Cosima asked, irritated at herself for the instant heat flushing her cheeks.

Marlowe nodded.

“Seeing how he and Law were with each other and with Emily. That fierce loyalty. How protective they are of each other. How hard they’ve worked to get past the pain they came from.”

Guilt lanced the warmth in Cosima’s chest.

Marlowe reached down and squeezed Cosima’s hand, communicating some essential truth through that touch. “It’s worth it,” she said. “Love is always worth it.”

As a button to their conversation, it solidified Cosima’s resolve.

She had to tell Remy tonight.

## *Eleven*

At exactly ten o'clock, there came a tap at her window.

Her stomach flipped as she crossed to it and pried up the painted frame.

Remy stood in the golden square of light painted on the grass below, a helmet in his hand and a smile on his face. He wore a slight variation on his standard attire. Worn jeans, a ribbed sleeveless undershirt, and battered black leather motorcycle jacket.

Cosima, on the other hand, had prepared herself for their meeting with an almost bride-like devotion to ceremony.

Something old: a long bath in the old-fashioned clawfoot tub.

Something new: the beautiful cream silk bra-and-panty set she'd treated herself to before the trip.

Something borrowed: this simple white sundress Marlowe had loaned her with eyebrows raised when she'd asked for something light and breezy. Because *easy to get off* would have shot her eyebrows straight into the stratosphere.

Something blue: the pall of worry cast over what had been pure excitement only a day earlier.

"This place comes with a door, you know," she said gazing down like Juliet from her balcony.

Moonlight and mischief colored his eyes a more ghostly version of their typical iron-gray. "Where's the fun in that?"

"Speaking of," she said, hands on the sill, "I have a question."

"I can try to have an answer."

"What kind of footwear would you recommend for the evening's festivities?"

Remy sucked at the inside of his cheek for a moment. “Don’t suppose you have any boots? Leather, preferably. Something that covers your calves.”

“This is part of your shoe thing, isn’t?” Cosima teased.

“Hell no,” he replied. “I mean, yeah. But this time it just happens to be practical as well as personally beneficial.” He gave her the full wattage of his dazzling smile.

“Just so happens we’re both in luck then.” Padding away from the window in her socked feet, Cosima sat on the battered steamer trunk at the end of the bed and zipped herself into a pair of stiff, custom-made leather riding boots she’d had to dust off before packing for the trip. Luckily, her shoe size hadn’t changed since her own disastrous foray into women’s polo at age sixteen.

She grabbed a denim jacket from her bedpost and shrugged into on the way back to the window, where she would apparently be making her exit.

Though she could have easily stuck the landing without his help, she planted her hands on Remy’s broad shoulders and allowed him to hold her hips as she came down.

He surprised her by lacing his hand with hers on the way to his motorcycle.

Classic lines. Well-maintained. Gleaming chrome showing its age in a way that seemed dignified and proud and quietly powerful.

*Bikes that look like their owners.*

Remy mounted first. A gentleman even now, he turned his face away while she stepped on the pedal provided and swung her leg over.

Unlike the first time they’d ridden together, they both slipped on helmets.

A stark reminder of the lessons life had brought them both since that night.

Now, they both had something to lose.

The bike came to life beneath her with a deep, throaty growl that vibrated through the insides of her thighs into the creases of her hips.

Remy handled the machine like an extension of his own body, expertly shifting his weight to round corners. As he did, she melted against his broad, muscular back. Arms like vines creeping around his waist. Abdominal muscles flexing against the insides of her wrists through the soft fabric of his T-shirt.

They had the country road entirely to themselves, winding upward for what felt like an eternity, but what she logically knew had been less than ten minutes.

The motorcycle quieted as he slowed to turn off just after a sign advertising a scenic overlook. Balmy night air felt deliciously sweet on skin dampened slightly by the helmet's close interior.

“Fraid we have a bit of walking to do,” Remy said, hanging his helmet off one of the handlebars.

They climbed over a short wall of crumbling stone and followed an unofficial path clearly worn by people with the same idea in mind. Tall grass already gathering condensation kissed her kneecaps as they stepped into a small clearing.

From this vantage, they had an unobstructed view of the valley below. Rendered in shades of gray and midnight blue with a glittering constellation of lights gathered in their throughout.

Four Thieves sat apart. A diamond solitaire set in the velvet hillside.

“Wow,” she breathed, so mesmerized by the sight that she didn't see the blanket until the yellow glow of a camping lantern—LED but engineered to mimic flame—began to flicker in her peripheral vision.

Additional details arrived as her eyes adjusted to the darkness. The vintage picnic basket. A cozy heap of throw pillows. The light gray dome of a tent back in the shadows.

“You didn't have to go to all this trouble,” she said.

Remy scuffed his feet in the grass like a teenage boy caught caring about something that his friends would later mock him for. “I figured it’s easier to watch the stars without rocks poking you in the ass.”

“That may be the most romantic thing anyone has ever said to me.” She kneeled at the edge of the blanket and rested her rear end on the heels of her boots, watching as he set out a handful of small, round plastic disks.

She wasn’t sure what they were until he turned one over and flipped the little black tab on the bottom. A flickering orange obelisk appeared above its surface.

Flameless candles.

“Courtesy of Emily. Because having an open flame *is so incredibly dangerous*,” he said, affectionately channeling his daughter’s lecturing tone as he crawled around the blanket’s perimeter to set out the lights.

As he crouched there, Cosima *knew*.

She could love this man.

This man who quoted his daughter’s words and borrowed her flameless tea-lights.

This man who opened the lid of a wicker picnic basket with hands that held babies, and fixed motors, and shaped wood.

This man whose smile she could erase by letting seven words fall from her lips.

*There’s something I need to tell you...*

Many somethings, beginning with all the tiny untruths designed to plumb his memory. The coffee. The barbecue. The blues record. The scotch.

Clues.

To see whether a fresh start might truly be possible.

She should have known better.

It never was.

These thoughts left her feeling empty. Hollow. Purged of any hope. Resigned to whatever fate this night brought her.

Remy set out a plastic-wrapped charcuterie board she recognized from the Blackpot's Heads section—named after the term for the first draw of liquor following the distillation process.

Rocks glasses followed.

Then a glass bottle whose blue-and-gold label froze her heart in her chest.

Macallan scotch whiskey, aged 18 years.

“Is this okay?” he asked, clearly concerned by the expression on her face. “I just thought, since that’s what we were having when—”

“It’s perfect,” she said, infusing her features with as much gratitude as she could. “Really.”

He opened the bottle and poured them each a finger’s worth.

The scent of peat smoke rose from amber liquid as Cosima consulted her glass. If she held it still enough, she could see the night sky reflected in its surface. As if constellations, not barley, had been distilled for her consumption.

*Star-crossed.*

She remembered how disappointed she had been when her eighth-grade honors drama teacher explained that this was a *bad* thing.

*Ill-fated.*

Later, after Danny’s death, she’d found the hard kernel of truth at the center of her resistance to the term. She’d seen herself in it. The same way she had seen it in Remy when he’d sat down on the barstool next to hers.

Broken people, recognizing shared fault lines.

Tears crowded her throat and a single, warm drop slipped down her cheek.

Remy spotted it immediately, of course.



“Hey,” he said, putting down his glass. “What’s the matter?”

She shook her head, knowing that that second she opened her mouth, more would come.

*Do it. Do it before you lose your nerve.*

Drawing in a shaky breath, she turned her torso to face him.

“You know the other night, when we were walking back to my cabin, and you asked me what was wrong?”

“Oh, I remember,” he said, a wicked glint in his eye.

“I wasn’t entirely honest with you.”

Remy was silent for a moment, his smile fading to something more poignant. “I know,” he said, surprising her to her very core.

Her cheeks began to tingle as all the blood drained from her face. “You do?”

He nodded. “The way you looked when you saw Emily’s picture for the first time at the restaurant. The same way you looked when we ran into you in the hallway in person.”

Her vision blurred.

“And then, there was the dinner,” he said.

“The dinner?” she asked.

“The way you were with the twins,” he explained. “I don’t think anyone would pay me two hundred dollars an hour, but I can make an educated guess as to why someone might have that reaction when around babies or kids.”

Cosima set down her glass and hugged her knees.

Now was the moment. She could feel it right there at the base of her throat.

*We’ve met before, Remy.*

“I had a miscarriage.” Not the words that she had intended to say, but now they were out, and she had to continue. “A couple years after I left home, when I’d turned self-destruction into an art, I wasn’t being careful, and got pregnant.” She glanced at his face to see how this information had been

received before continuing. “I...wasn’t in a relationship with the father, but I had this ridiculous idea that I was going to raise her myself.”

“It was a girl?” he asked quietly.

“I wasn’t quite far enough along to say for sure, but I think so.” Reaching for her drink, she took a fortifying sip. “It had been such a dark time. I felt like maybe this was a light at the end of the tunnel. My wake-up call.”

Remy took a long, slow breath. “I know that feeling, alright.”

“I had just learned that I’d been accepted into UCLA. I had packed the little I owned into my Mustang and was on my way to Los Angeles when it happened.”

Her voice broke, and she felt Remy’s warm hand land between her shoulder blades.

“Nona had died only a couple months before, and I was such a mess.” A bitter laugh escaped her. “Who am I kidding? I still am.”

She dropped her face into the hollow of her arms, her forehead resting on her knees.

Literal navel gazing.

Remy shifted to crouch before her, taking her by the wrists to peel them away from her face.

“You are *not* a mess,” he insisted.

“Right,” she agreed sarcastically.

“I mean, Jesus. Just look what you’ve been able to accomplish. And all by pulling yourself up by the bootstraps.”

“A broken engagement, a barely furnished loft, and a production company that’s going to tank if this series flops?” Cosima said, dabbing her nose with a wadded tissue she found in the pocket of her denim jacket.

“It’s not going to flop.” He said it with such conviction that for a moment, Cosima was tempted to believe him. “I’ll make sure of it.”

“How do you plan to do that?” she asked.

“I’ll take my shirt off in every episode.”

“Remy,” she said, shaking her head.

“My pants?” he suggested.

“Wrong channel.”

“I’d be willing to clock Samuel,” Remy said. “Or back over him with the Varmint? Whichever you think would be better for ratings.”

Her laugh sounded more like a honk through a nose swollen by crying. “I thought you said you were against scripted scenes.”

“Depends on the storyline.” Plopping down onto the blanket next her, Remy wrapped his arms around her and maneuvered her onto his lap.

She came to rest with her behind on the ground and her back against his chest, her legs stretched out between his much longer ones. His chin gently rested atop her head.

Together, they gazed down into the silent valley below.

The steady rhythm of his heart against her felt like a song from an instrument she’d stolen.

“Is it stupid of me to want this?” he asked.

“No,” she said. Because she wanted it too. Even if this night was all they would ever have, she needed them to have it.

Cosima turned in his arms and, like hawks, they grappled as they sank earthward.

At last, they came to rest, facing each other side by side, blanket below and stars above. Bodies knitting themselves together in a configuration that was all their own. Her breasts against the bottom of his rib cage, legs tangled like vines.

Desperate to feel every part of him she’d not yet touched, Cosima ran her hands over the wide, muscled wings of his back.

At first, she thought he must have been leaning up against something with a pattern when she felt the smooth, raised web of skin beneath her fingertips.

Then recognition hit.

Scars.

“Oh, Remy,” she breathed. “What happened to you?”

“A truck,” he said, pushing himself up on an elbow. Using one hand and moving awkwardly, Remy pulled his T-shirt over his head and rolled onto his side.

The small exclamation of surprise escaped her before she could stop it.

From the top of his left shoulder down to the bottom of his rib cage, his skin was several shades lighter and marked by the telltale repeating diamond-shaped pattern of a healed skin graft.

“According to witnesses, anyway,” he continued. “Seems getting clipped by a farm truck and sliding under a semi left me kind of foggy on the details.”

“What’s the last thing you remember?” she asked.

He was quiet as he sifted through his thoughts. “I was supposed to meet up with some of my riding buddies, but I got caught in a huge storm just outside of Memphis.”

A sick twist gripped Cosima’s gut and she reached for her scotch to wet her suddenly dry mouth.

Her pulse had begun to rush her ears, drowning out the soundtrack of night birds. “How long ago?”

She already knew.

She knew, but she needed to hear him say it.

Remy rolled over to face her. “About nine years back.”

An accident.

He’d been in a horrific, life-altering accident. She had no way of knowing whether he had any intention of returning to her room before he’d been clipped by the truck and slid under

a semi. But she did know that this was the reason he had no memory of her. Not because she'd been so inconsequential that she'd fallen straight out of his mind the second the door had closed behind him. Not because he had so many one-night stands that she blurred into the vast quilt of his conquests.

Because he'd been hurt.

Badly.

She felt the scaffolding of her plans crumbling beneath her.

Remy Renaud had suffered a tragic childhood and a heartbreaking adolescence, followed by a string of misfortunate that would have driven a lesser man into the bottle or the grave.

And she had leveraged all of it for her own gain.

## Twelve

Remy experienced a physical pain in the center of his chest when he saw the expression on Cosima's face.

*Stricken.*

God, but he was an asshole.

The accident. Her brother. Of course.

He had been so mesmerized by her warm, light, feathery touch that he hadn't even paused to think whether he should share this story. The fact that he could feel her fingers at all was miraculous. Even now, half the time he registered sensations as either pressure or tingling. He felt like the worst kind of starry-eyed fool, imagining her as some sort of princess capable of turning his toadlike bumpy skin into something smooth and normal.

What he had, he'd earned after months of a painfully slow recovery, and in the parade of nurses, doctors, surgeons, and a very persistent ambulance chaser of a lawyer. He never could get past the irony that it had been the settlement he'd received from the trucker's employer that provided the seed money to start 4 Thieves.

Other people liked to say they poured their blood, sweat, and tears into a project. But he actually had.

Law seemed to have forgotten this fact and Remy had chased away.

"I'm so sorry." Cosima's hand moved from the ruin on his back to his chest, pressing firmly against his heart. "I'm so sorry, Remy—"

He stopped her words with his mouth, tasting the tears on her lips as their kiss morphed from tender to tempestuous.

Remy pulled her back onto his lap, facing him, this time. She whimpered when he thumbed down the straps of her

sundress, baring her breasts.

He wanted to put his mouth on her more than he wanted air, but the last shreds of his self-control howled at him to slow down. To drink in her elegant shoulders juxtaposed against the valley where the distillery slumbered quietly beneath the blanket of stars.

To burn this into his memory if it took all night.

For once in his life, he had to savor instead of devouring. To take his time, and believe he had time for the taking. To fight the urge to consume as quickly as possible for fear that this one good thing he wanted would inevitably be taken away.

It began with her legs.

He let his hands move up her thighs, the smooth, hard muscles gliding beneath his palm. He felt the power in them, the years it had taken to tone them, the effort it took to maintain. Their role in the purposeful stride that had carried her through life, and for much of it at a pace everyone around her had to scramble to keep up with.

A pace he apparently failed to match now.

Cosima captured his hand and guided it to the soaked lace of her panties. “That’s what you do to me, Remy. Now let me feel what I do to you.”

She molded her hand to the erection straining against the denim and scooted backward on her knees to grant herself better access to his belt and zipper. “Lose the pants.”

He did as ordered.

A smug smile curved her lips as she picked up the accordion fold of several condoms that had fallen from his jeans pocket when he’d worked them over his hips.

“Four?” She lifted an eyebrow at him.

“A lot of hours in one night.” Remy’s cheeks warmed as he reached for the packet, but she dropped them just out of his reach.

“You won’t be needing those just yet.”

She sank to her elbows, and seconds later, he felt warm breath against the skin of his stomach followed by the silky sweep of her hair as she freed him from his boxers. Looking at him from beneath her lashes, she planted kisses to the left and right of his twitching cock, and brushed her velvety cheek against its marble-hard shaft.

The blanket bunched where Remy wadded fistfuls in anticipation, not realizing he'd been holding his breath until his chest began to burn. Then her capable hand wrapped around his base and her lips closed over his throbbing head, and he thought he might lose his mind.

That smart mouth. Tasting and teasing him. Sucking and swirling. Sliding up and down his length in concert with her fingers.

Unable to sit still, Remy he leaned forward to gather her dress up to her waist, tracing her thong where it met the downy dip in her lower back, filling his hands with the rounded globes of her ass before venturing lower. He curled his fingers into her silken folds from behind, relishing the slick warmth he discovered there.

Her moan vibrated all the way to his root and he sucked in a breath, arresting her movement with a hand on hers.

“Wait,” he groaned, grappling for control.

For once, she complied, waiting until he had released her hand before lifting a foil packet to her mouth. After tearing it with her teeth, she carefully sheathed him, kneeling while he slipped her panties down her thighs.

Her hand rested on his shoulder, and at last, Cosima lowered herself onto him, inch by glorious inch.

Remy lost his ability to speak. Not that any of the words he knew could adequately describe the perfection of being inside her.

Peace such as he had never known kept him still at first. Exchanging exhales and inhales as they adjusted to this new thing between them. Innumerable living creatures had and would do exactly this thing in the spring darkness. Theirs was



only one joining in an endless cycle, but somehow the center of the universe at the same time.

Then the need took him and he began to move. They rocked together for what might have been an eternity, slowly kindling the blaze that would incinerate them both.

“We should have done this a hell of a lot sooner,” he said, tilting his pelvis to angle himself deeper against her core.

Cosima’s eyelids fell closed, the dark fringe of lashes fanning against her cheeks as she let out a sigh. “I agree.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” he chuckled.

*There was also a last.*

He swatted the thought away, not wanting it to pull him out of the moment.

“Are you suggesting...that’s my fault?” she purred.

Leaning forward, she rested her elbows on his shoulders, and for a moment he was so distracted by the proximity of her naked breasts that he failed to notice she had wrested control of the pace, her undulations speeding it ever so slightly.

Endearingly impatient as ever.

He might have been tempted to slow it down again if it didn’t feel so damn good.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he said.

“What *do* you dream of?” she asked in the breathless, throaty voice he’d come to crave.

His hands wandered up her rib cage, testing the weight and supple softness of her breasts, running the pads of his thumbs over her hardened nipples.

“Other than this, you mean?”

She laced her fingers at the back of his neck. “Other than this.”

The truth was, he didn’t know.

He’d been working to make the distillery a reality for so long that it had never occurred to him to stop and think

whether it was what he truly wanted.

“Gonna have to get back to you on that.” Remy lowered his mouth to her breast, painting her rosy areola with lazy strokes of his tongue before sucking its pearly peak.

“You’re trying to distract me.” Her fingernails dug into his shoulders.

“Is it working?” Parting her sex with his thumb, he found her swollen clit and coated it with the slippery warmth, teasing her nipple with the edge of his teeth at the same time.

Her fingers threaded through his hair as she gasped. “Like a charm.”

He smiled against her skin. “Good.”

She was panting now. Short, sharp bursts of breath carrying equally urgent cries of pleasure.

“*Please.*” The plaintive note in her voice nearly pitched him over the cliff then and there. All uncharacteristic softness. Desperate, soul-deep need as she fluttered and contracted around him. Dancing the edge of oblivion.

Cosima tugged at his hair, lifting his mouth from her breast so they were eye-to-eye. And he knew it was because she wanted him to see her face. To read the pleasure he had created there.

He had meant to hold himself back. To let this first time be about her and her alone. But hearing his name erupting from her lips while she tightened around him detonated his own end with startling force.

His hips jerked and he thrust upward on a growl as he lost himself in hot, rhythmic pulses.

She collapsed forward against him, cheek on his shoulder, limbs as heavy as sand. He held her until their breaths began to slow. She lifted her head to look at him and panic leaped into his heart when he saw the silvery sheen glazing her eyes.

“You okay?” he asked, pushing sweat-damp hair away from her face.

“Yeah.” Blinking rapidly, she shook her head, sending the curls bouncing back against her cheekbone. “Just wishing we’d met under different circumstances.”

A chill crept into Remy’s chest. “You’re afraid this is going to ruin your show.”

Her gaze shifted from his face and she looked downward. “It’s not quite that simple.”

He was silent for a moment, feeling the words at the back of his throat like lead fishing weights, knowing he shouldn’t say them. “What ever is?”

She blinked at him. “I’m just saying that there’s a lot at stake here. For both of us.”

This information was no revelation. But his heart sank all the same.

Glancing around him at the candles, the basket, the scotch, and the view he felt an old hurt waking in a small, cramped part of his psyche. In elaborate mating dance for a mate who had no intention of setting up shop.

Trying too hard.

“You think I don’t know that?” he asked, hastily pulling his boxers back into place. “I’m not stupid, alright? You’re in LA, and I’m here, and I have a daughter that will always come first. Believe me, I’m very aware of the factors that make me a less than desirable choice for a woman like you.”

Cosima tugged the straps of her dress back up and pushed herself to her knees. “Remy, I’m not saying that at all—”

“What *are* you saying?”

Her gasp wrenched him abruptly out of the quicksand of his memory.

His heart sped when he saw one of her hands fly to her mouth and the other point down at the valley.

Fire.

A small column of flickering orange feeding on the converted barn housing the Blackpot.

Remy let fly a string of curses as he jammed himself back into his jeans, fumbling with the blanket to find his cell phone.

With shaking hands, he punched 911 into the keypad and hit Send only to hear the distinctive beeping of his call failing. No cell reception.

“*Come on,*” he shouted, already jogging toward the motorcycle as he shrugged his shirt over his head.

Cosima scrambled to grab her jacket and sprinted after him. They thundered through the brush and breathlessly mounted his bike after buckling themselves into their helmets.

His motorcycle felt like it was flying. The ground was scarcely present beneath the wide tires as he cornered, accelerating into turns and pushing the engine to its very capacity.

As they completed the homestretch, a glow rose like an artificial sunrise and true metallic panic began to set in.

He should have been there.

It was all Remy could think about as the motorcycle’s engine ripped in his ears and vibrated through his body.

If he lived a hundred years, he would never forget the fear etched into faces glazed the color of lava by the roaring blaze. Grant, Mira, and the restaurant staff. Warehouse and distillery workers who lived in the staff quarters on site. Cosima’s crew.

With dawning horror, he saw the scene unfolding.

Law, charging like an enraged bull, looking like he’d tear straight through anyone idiotic enough to set foot in his path. Roosevelt with his camera aimed at the towering inferno and Matt with a boom mic held near the staff.

Remy sprinted to head him off, shoving Law hard by the shoulder to set him off course before he could slap the expensive machinery out of the cameraman’s hands.

Law stumbled, caught himself, and wheeled on Remy.

“Where *the fuck* were you? I’ve been calling you for *twenty* minutes. Why didn’t you answer?”

The instant rush of defensiveness added to the deadly cocktail of adrenaline and guilt boiling in his gut. “I took my bike out for a ride up the canyon and I didn’t answer because I didn’t have cell reception.”

Law’s eyes moved from Remy’s face and focused over his shoulder. He didn’t have to follow them to know what he saw.

“You were with her, weren’t you?” The question came with an arctic chill.

“What business of that is yours?” he growled back. “I’m allowed to have a life outside of the distillery, remember?”

“Not when that life is a direct threat to my livelihood and legacy.”

He knew now was not the time to have this conversation. Not while sirens wailed, and firehoses roared, and chaos ruled. Not while Law, sleep-deprived and gripped by the fiercely protective aggression of new fatherhood, could see flames less than half a mile from where his twins slept. In cooler, more logical sections of his brain, Remy knew this.

But he did not live in those regions at present.

“*Your* livelihood,” Remy replied, incredulous. “Get the fuck over yourself, Law. Samuel Kane may have sheared off a pretty minor chunk of his multibillion-dollar inheritance to grow the business, but I gave you every damn dime of my accident settlement to help start it. I helped you build this place from the ground up. And whether you like it or not, Bastien and Augustin did, too. So stow the shit about *your* legacy. Because the fact is, if I hadn’t taken the fall for the Robichaud scrapyard job, if we *all* hadn’t pulled your ass out of the fire time after time, you’d still be *rehabilitating* your name just like the rest of us.”

Law’s hands bunched into fists at his sides.

Remy lifted his chin, daring his younger brother to take a swing. To answer a question they’d both been dancing around for months now.

Did 4 Thieves belong to the Renaud brothers?

Or did it belong to Kane Foods International?

For Remy, it was a one-or-the-other proposition.

Bitter thoughts crowded his chest, pushing against his ribs and filling his throat with cement. All his resentment for Samuel Kane's interference. The long hours he'd had to work. His irritation with Law. All of it had obscured one vital fact.

Four Thieves had been their dream.

That dream was burning.

## *Thirteen*

Cosima watched as Remy and Law faced off in glowering opposition, wanting to intervene, knowing her interference would only make things worse.

Small snatches of the screaming match that ensued were audible over the wailing of sirens, rush of water from the fire hoses, and the roar of the blaze itself.

Glancing through the crush of firefighters and huddled staff, Cosima saw Roosevelt motion to Matt, who nonchalantly aimed a small handheld camera they often used for diary-entry-type cuts and aim it at the wrangling Renaud brothers.

She hated herself a little for the conditioned twitch of excitement she felt picturing the teaser for this part of the pilot.

This hadn't been part of their storyboarding, but she'd have to be insane to leave it out.

Just when she was sure they were destined to come to blows, Grant rode to the rescue, placing a hand on each of their chests and urging them to step away from each other.

At last, she could exhale. She flexed her fingers to stretch knuckles aching from death-clutching Remy on the ride back to the distillery.

Shivering from the mix of adrenaline and terror from the bike ride, Cosima didn't even notice Sarah until a silvery foil blanket landed around her shoulders.

They blinked at each other, then clutched in a spontaneous hug. Sarah's lithe, thin form shook just as hard as her own.

"You okay?" Cosima asked, pulling back to examine her assistant.

Black charcoal tears streaked down Sarah's cheeks. "I don't know what happened. We were all just sitting around,

throwing axes and shooting the shit, when all of a sudden the smoke alarms went off. We thought it was just a drill. Then we saw smoke, and...”

Her voice thickened at this, her eyes sinking toward her boots.

Cosima fanned out the blanket like a cape and wrapped them both in it. They stood side by side, holding each other and shivering as the flames eventually gave way to plumes of steam.

While none of the staff had been hurt, the entire kitchen and half of the dining room had been eaten away, along with the beautiful Boxcar Bar.

Watching as Remy and Law spoke first with police, then a fire marshal, had left her feeling brittle and hollow.

When the last emergency vehicle had pulled away, Remy made his way over to them.

“You guys all right to get back to your cabins? I have some things to finish up here.”

“I’ll walk them back.” Grant’s booming voice echoed in Cosima’s ringing ears. “There was a leak in the sink of Sarah’s cabin I was going to look at, anyway,” he said.

Glancing at Sarah’s face, the correct answer came to Cosima immediately.

She turned toward her protégé and squeezed her in another hug. Then, very quietly asked, “You’re sure you’re okay?”

Sarah nodded, her cheek brushing past Cosima’s.

“Be careful,” she said, sotto voce, as she pecked her assistant’s cheek.

“You, too,” Sarah whispered back.

Cosima ducked from under the blanket and secured it around Sarah’s shoulders, squeezing her elbows before she walked away.

Then, she was alone.



A thousand different times during the course of this evening, she'd meant to tell him. She had rehearsed the words in her head at least twice that much.

How could she tell Remy now?

In the wake of such a horrific loss, what was the proper way to inform him that she knew exactly how much this evening had cost him?

He stood in front of the smoldering ruins of the restaurant that had been his passion project. Arms folded across his chest.

With soot staining the creases at the corners of his eyes and etching brackets around his mouth, he looked carved from stone. Permanent in a way she didn't understand and couldn't pretend to.

For the first time in her life, she couldn't think of a single thing to say.

Grass baked by flames crunched under her boots as she came up behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist.

She felt the breath go out of his lungs. His shoulders slumped and he rested his weight against her. A hard knot in his spine met her cheekbone as she pressed her face between his shoulder blades, buttressing him.

Her hands slid up the ridge of his stomach and layered themselves over his heart.

They didn't speak. They didn't have to.

She released his body and took him by the hand instead. "Come on," she said. "Let's get you home."

Once there, they removed their boots on the front porch and she led him to the master bathroom, where she turned on the shower and helped him out of his smoke-stained clothes before stripping off her own.

Even here, his handiwork was evident.

The doors swung smoothly outward on hinges she knew he had installed himself. The spray she nudged him into fell from

an upgraded showerhead he had chosen and screwed in with his own hands.

She lifted a chunk of rustic soap and glided it over the taut muscles of his neck and back, loosening ashes that peppered the common stream winding toward the drain.

When his body was clean, she sat him on the bench and washed his hair, working her fingertips against his scalp. His big body shuddered, releasing tension.

This completed, she quickly washed and rinsed herself, then turned off the shower spray. After swathing herself in one of the clean, fluffy towels hanging from the back of the door, Cosima used the other to dry Remy off.

She caught herself being gentle over the scars long healed as she steered him toward the bedroom. Treating them as if they might still pain him. An external symbol of internal hurt she couldn't help.

Peeling back the bed covers, she guided him into it, and then slid in beside him. Remy melted into her, lying with his head on her chest, his arms winding around her rib cage like great vines.

“Anything you want to tell me about it?” she asked.

“Not tonight,” he mumbled sleepily.

As if he, too, understood that the problems would still be there to solve tomorrow.

Just as dawn began to crawl through the blinds, Cosima woke to the feeling of him hard against the small of her back. Her hips arched backward, instinctively seeking his heat.

His sexy, sleepy mumble curled her toes as his hands found her hips. That contact alone was enough to release a rush of moisture at the juncture of her thighs.

Remy nuzzled her neck, his jaw deliciously abrading the spot below her ear as beneath the covers, he discovered how ready she was for him.

Sliding his length against her, the blunt silky head of his cock teased the taut bundle of nerves while his fingers found

her nipples. Lightly pinching and rolling as his wicked mouth sampled the sensitive skin of her neck and earlobe.

“Should I make you come like this first, *cher*?”

The tide of memory rolled in, dragging her into its undertow.

*Cher.*

That’s what he’d called her. This man who had made her feel alive for the first time in years.

“I think,” she sighed, head already swimming in sensations, “I’m pretty damn close already.”

Remy shifted, rolling her beneath him.

“I lied,” he said, kneeling between her legs. “I need to taste you first.”

*I lied.*

The words landed in her stomach like a lead weight. She evicted them from her head and forced herself to focus on Remy’s face in the silvery light.

He crawled down her body, planting kisses on her collarbone, her sternum, each of her breasts. Her stomach. Her thighs.

Then his mouth was on her and she was grateful to be relieved of all thought. Feather-light strokes teased her open, lighting up her nerves just so he could intensify this feeling by circling and flicking the aching nub between her folds.

“Remy,” she panted, gripping his hair and arching her hips toward the source of the pleasure electrifying her body.

“That’s right,” he murmured against her. “Say it.”

He paired the order with fingers slipped inside her, their tips curling against a spot that made her stomach shudder.

Cosima didn’t just say his name, she chanted it like a prayer as she felt the first quakes of the shockwave threatening to turn her inside out. Helpless, she contracted around his fingers as he sucked and tongued every last spasm out of her.

She lay there in the aftermath, utterly slack and dazed.

Remy tasted of the earth and rain when he kissed her.

“Roll over.” His command further contracted her already pearly nipples.

Despite feeling mostly boneless, she managed to roll onto her stomach. Cheek in the snowdrift of a pillow that smelled like his clean skin, she breathed him into her lungs. She heard a drawer open and close. The metallic tearing of the foil packet.

Time had taught him to be careful.

His hair-roughened knee slipped between her thighs, guiding them apart.

And then he was there. A hot, silky presence nudging at her most sensitive flesh. One hand planted on the bed by her ribcage and she felt his fingers trailing down her spine.

“You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.” He murmured this almost as if not saying it to her.

Cosima stifled a snort in the pillow.

“No,” he corrected. “That’s not what I meant. You’re the most beautiful person I’ve ever known.”

Her throat tightened. “Don’t say that,” she said.

Strong hands tucked under her hips, drawing her pelvis upward. “Why not?”

She hugged the pillow to her chest and pushed up on her forearms. “Because it’s not true.”

He teased her opening, barely breeching her before pulling back again. “How would you know?”

Cosima gripped handfuls of the pillowcase to keep from wriggling. “I just do.”

He advanced again, delving deeper this time. “You know everything, don’t you?”

How she wished that was true. Wished that she had even a scrap of that eerie prescience that Nona had always used to tell

her what she was feeling before Cosima herself even knew half the time.

More than that, she wished she knew what she could say, what she could do to bring them all out of this unhurt.

“I know I want this.” She waited until he pushed forward again to arc her hips back to bury him to the hilt.

Remy sucked in a breath that escaped with a curse Cosima recognized through a common Latin base.

*Merde.*

He lowered to his elbows, gluing his stomach to her back, his pectoral muscles to her shoulders. His fingers laced with hers as he curled his hips forward in a slow, undulating wave that sank him deeper still. Stretching her. Filling her with a perfection she had experienced only once before, all those years ago.

“God, I love being inside you.” His mouth was wet and warm on her shoulder.

Cosima tightened her grip on his fingers. “I love it too, *caro.*”

He stilled.

*Shit.*

The endearment had been a slip. An orgasm-induced misfire in the primordial part of her brain where memory and language overlapped. A portal between past and present.

He had called her *cher*. She had called him *caro*. Traded endearments from dramatically different upbringings.

“Say that again,” he whispered against her ear.

Relief, thick and sweet as warm honey, spilled through her, quickly tinged with sadness.

“I love the way you feel, *caro.*”

Remy rewarded her with another slow, deep thrust. And another, and another. Speeding his strokes as he set them on a breakneck course with oblivion.

\* \* \*

Remy wanted to forget.

It seemed an absurd thing to long for, famously faulty as his memory was.

Now that the horrific details had been burned into his brain, he realized for the first time just how much he'd taken this gift for granted.

The flames glazing Grant's eyes. Emily's half-burned drawing clinging to what remained of the hostess stand. Tough-as-nails Mira, silent tears streaking her face as she lifted the remains of a wooden butcher's block he'd helped her seal.

All there, every time his eyelids closed.

Two hours of this hellish cycle, and he had reached for Cosima again.

Losing himself in her for the third time since last night.

It had been their most frantic by far. Dreaded daylight crawled across the floor an inch at a time, dragging consequences in its wake.

Cosima gripped the headboard, her hair a passion-tangled squall as she rode him hard. Remy used the leverage of his superior strength to roll her beneath him, pinning her hands to the mattress only to have her swing her legs up and clutch his rib cage in the viselike grip of her thighs.

They had given up the ruse that this was anything but an out-and-out battle for control. A mutually agreed-upon contest of wills ending in a long, explosive draw.

Their sweat-slicked limbs tangling in ever-changing configurations aimed at exhausting their bodies, if not their minds.

Relinquishing her wrists, Remy anchored his arms beneath her, cupping her shoulders to anchor himself.

Claiming her. Marking her as his, if only until they faded.

Sooner than he would have liked.

She clutched the damp hair at the nape of his neck and brought his mouth to breasts already swollen and mottled with pink from his mouth and unshaven jaw.

Hooking her ankles behind his back, Cosima bucked against him, spurring him toward a final, frantic finish.

If he could just stay inside her longer, maybe he could make it all go away.

If he could keep his face buried in this sweet-smelling crown of Cosima's hair, he could chase the ghost of smoke from his lungs. If he could taste the sweetness of her tongue, he could rid his mouth of ash.

Startled by the gentle warmth of her palm against his cheek, Remy looked down to see Cosima's gold-green eyes aimed up at him, full of a poignant tenderness that was almost worse than the pain.

Tethering him to this moment.

To the gift of her coming undone beneath him, fusing around him in clenches that lit the fuse of his own explosive climax.

They collapsed together in an exhausted heap.

On the nightstand, several empty water bottles and a graveyard of foil wrappers were evidence of their foolhardy quest to outrun the inevitable. Cosima reached for the one bottle with a few sips left and took a swallow before offering it to Remy.

He held up a hand. "All yours."

She raised an eyebrow at him, still managing to look sophisticated even with her face scrubbed bare of designer cosmetics.

"Don't get all noble on me, Renaud. If you don't get some hydration in you, you're going to pass out before you make it downstairs to drink some of my amazing coffee."

Remy took the bottle and drained the remaining swallows before reaching across her bare breasts to set it among its

fallen comrades. “Kind of you to offer, but I’m afraid I just have your standard top-shelf, grocery-store fare on hand.”

Dragging a sheet up to cover her chest, Cosima gave him a saucy smile as she swung her legs over the side of the bed. “Shows what you know.”

He tried to sit up but was met with a stiff finger to the chest. “Stay.”

Too tired to argue, he sank back against the pillows. There he stayed, until the intoxicating aroma of coffee crept from the air-conditioning vent.

Remy stepped into a pair of boxer briefs and athletic shorts, and shuffled down the hallway, mouth open to call downstairs when a sound snapped his mouth shut.

Voices.

One male. Low, rumbling, accusatory.

One female. Loud, earthy, agitated.

Remy ran a hand through his hair and thundered down the stairs to fling open the front door. The sight that met him proved just as shocking as the fire had the night before.

Cosima Lowell, standing there in nothing but his T-shirt, hands on her hips, eyes blazing at an opponent who towered over her by at least a foot and a half.

His brother. Bastien.

It had been over three years since Remy had seen him last and very little had changed, save for a few more silvery hairs sprinkled among the coal-black beard obscuring his upper lip and most of his jaw. His eyes were as serious as ever, pale blue and intense beneath dark eyebrows. A few more creases had gathered at their corners. They deepened as he studied Cosima, arms folded across his flannel shirt.

“Well, hey, brother,” Remy said. “Nice of you to drop by. Coffee’s brewing if you’d care to come in.”

Normally, this sort of sarcasm had earned Remy a bicep punch when they’d been growing up and he found himself



almost flinching out of reflex even after all this time.

“Pass.” Bastien’s voice had grown even deeper and more gravelly, rusty with disuse.

“Then maybe you’d like to tell me what the hell you’re doing here?” Remy asked.

“Been wondering the same about her.” His brother jerked his woolly chin at the woman standing opposite him.

Remy cleared his throat. “Bastien, this is Cosima Lowell, a television producer. Cosima, this is Bastien, my oldest brother.”

Cosima’s kiss-swollen mouth twisted into a tight line. “Such a pleasure to meet you,” she said, her voice dripping with saccharine sarcasm. “Glad you decided to come around to the porch instead of just staring in the window like a creeper.”

Bastien’s eyes flicked down to a finger being pointed at his chest like a bayonet.

“I see,” he said. “We’re pretending like you don’t already know who I am.”

The rosy flush all but disappeared from Cosima’s cheeks.

“What are you talking about, Bastien?” Remy stared at his brother, awash in a brain-blunting blend of confusion, irritation, and, below it all, a hard knot of stubborn gladness at seeing him again.

“I’ve been monitoring web searches for anything related to the Renaud name for years. When I saw a bunch of hits recently, I tracked them to an IP address in Los Angeles registered to her name,” he said, glancing at Remy. “That name suddenly pops up on local surveillance-equipment rentals, and naturally, I get a little curious. When I learn there’s been a fire, I get a lot curious.”

“*Camera* equipment rentals,” Cosima clarified with no small amount of frustration. “For the specific purpose of filming a docuseries about 4 Thieves distillery.”

“You mean you actually signed on to do this voluntarily?” Bastien asked incredulously.

A burst of defensive anger chased away a measure of the irritation. “What difference does it make to you? We haven’t even heard from you in three years. Not one damn word. Not to me. Not to Law. Not to your niece.”

Remy felt a stab of satisfaction when he saw the job land home, but Bastien’s face hardened again just as quickly.

“I left to keep our family safe, and here you are planning to air our dirty laundry for every troglodyte with a TV—”

“Excuse me,” Cosima interrupted. “That is not the kind of show I’m making here.”

Bastien’s voice dropped to a register that had the power to send the average Terrebonne Parish resident running for the hills.

“Then why is it that you’ve been searching for our mother?”

The bottom fell out of Remy stomach. He looked at Cosima, whose face had gone bone-white.

“Cosima?”

She looked at him, blinking a little too much, talking a little too fast. “Even if it’s a topic you don’t plan on discussing on film, doing background research is a completely normal part of the pre-production process.”

“That’s where I’m a little confused,” Bastien said, eying her warily. “The first search you did for our mother was nine years ago.”

## *Fourteen*

The stone porch went spongy under Cosima's bare feet, and for a moment she wished it would just open up and swallow her whole.

"That can't be right," Remy said. "It couldn't have been nine years ago. Four Thieves hadn't even been founded yet."

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he turned to look at her, and she knew.

His eyes hardened into flints. His mouth tightened into a line.

"How?"

"Can we please talk about this privately?" Her voice sounded strained and thin.

Remy took a small step closer to his brother. "I think we've done all the talking in private we're going to do."

"Remy, *please*." It was the last of what she had to offer. The only plea her guilt would allow her to make. She could have—should have—found a way to tell him before now, she knew, but Remy's deliberate show of masculine solidarity with a man he hadn't even spoken to in years woke an old grudge.

"Fine," she said, grateful for the ice water that had invaded her veins. Cooling her head. Numbing the ache in her heart. She yanked open his front door and stalked inside to gather her things. She needed to get out of here.

Now.

At the moment, she didn't care if she lost her office, her company, her entire world, as long as she didn't have to stand and face their scrutiny.

Remy followed after her, catching up to her on the stairs.

"How?" he asked again.

“Oh, so you *do* want to talk in private?” Breezing into the bedroom, she stripped off his T-shirt and grabbed her discarded dress from the foot of the bed.

Of all the times for her father’s voice to come rising up in her. The how-dare-you hauteur overriding the part of her brain that knew she was at least partially in the wrong.

Remy stood in the doorway, arms folded and face grave. He didn’t look at her when he spoke. “How did you know enough about our family to look up my mother nine years ago?”

She supposed there was no way around it. Never had been, really.

Sinking down on the edge of the bed they had so thoroughly rumped, she scrubbed her face with her hands before beginning.

“Nine years ago, we met at a biker bar. We slept together, you left the following morning, and I didn’t see you again until your face was in the *Los Angeles Times*.”

It felt completely irrational that the trouble should summarize so neatly when it had made such a thorough mess of her life.

Remy planted a hand on the wall to steady himself. “We... *slept* together?”

“Yes,” she said, bending to jam her feet into her discarded riding boots.

“And I told you about my family?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said again.

He blew out a breath and began to pace. “We slept together nine years ago, I told you all about my family, and you sat there in that office and pretended like we’ve never met?”

“I didn’t *pretend* anything. I sat there in that office waiting for you to remember and completely ready to talk about it. When you didn’t, I just assumed it hadn’t been particularly memorable for you, so it didn’t need to be particularly memorable for me. Until last night I had no idea you’d been in an accident.”

He stood there in the doorway, staring at her like she'd just stepped off a UFO.

"I just don't understand how you could sit there and act like you hadn't—that we hadn't—"

"You have one-night stands all the time Remy. You told me so yourself. Exactly how much weight and space do you give those women in your future decision making?"

"That's not the same situation and you know it." He pushed himself off the wall and stabbed a finger at her.

Cosima forced herself to stop and take a breath before continuing.

"I offered you the same kind of contract I would offer anyone I was planning on engaging for a series. During the discovery process, I would find out as much as I can about them and decide what my angle would be. Exactly the way we did when we were storyboarding. If you and I had never met before, I would have framed your back story exactly the same."

The summary sounded far more simplistic and dismissive than she had wanted it to. But when backed into a corner, the lines she drew were sharper and always farther from the center than she would have liked.

"It didn't matter," he said quietly.

"What's that?" she asked.

For the first time since he'd come downstairs and found her face-to-face with his estranged brother, Remy looked her straight in the eye.

"Before you knew about the accident, when you thought that I'd just slept with so many people that I didn't remember you. It didn't matter."

Cosima was silent.

"I was an asshole, right?" he accused. "I slept with you and left before you woke up and so you were perfectly justified in doing whatever you needed to get your hit show. Better that than Ferro Studios going belly up?"

Resisting the urge to bite back with something twice as scorching proved a significant difficulty.

“I genuinely thought this could be a good thing for both of us. That may be with my help you could get out from under Samuel Kane’s thumb. That you would have more control over your life and the operation.”

He took a step closer. She could tell from his stiff posture that it wasn’t to increase the intimacy of the moment.

“But you still didn’t tell me, even though you were willing to sleep with me. And what’s the harm? You get your show. I get a paycheck. Does that sound about right?”

She shot up from the bed. “Remy, I *wanted* to tell you. I was *going* to tell you.”

“I’m supposed to believe that right? Gullible, simple guy like me. Perfect mark, basically.” His mouth twisted into an ugly smile. “That’s why you were so upset last night when I showed you my scar. Here I was feeling bad for bringing it up because it probably reminded you of your brother. When really, it just made it so you couldn’t feel okay about taking advantage of our family.

“Now that we’re discussing it, exactly how far do we need to walk this back?” He closed the small space separating them, his eyes as empty as a shark’s. “Your brother’s death. Is that just part of your backstory? Something you thought might increase your chances?”

Furious tears blurred her vision. “Is that Zap talking, Remy?”

He paled.

“You told me all about him, you know. How he was a misogynist who bullied your mother. How he—”

“*Stop,*” he barked.

“Told you never to believe a limping dog or the tears of a woman.” She swiped one from her cheek and held her shining finger out for him to see. “See how good I am at manipulation?”

He took a step backward and she ducked around him, flying down the stairs and out the front door, where she found a bonus Renaud on the porch. Law and Bastien standing there like towering bookends.

She stalked past them without a word.

The acreage looked too much like heaven for what had unfolded in the past twenty-four hours. Rolling hills muted by a coat of morning dew. Tender leaves barely committing themselves to life.

“Cosima.”

The urgent sound of her name on air still clinging to last night’s smoke brought her up short.

Remy stood on the opposite side of the porch as his brothers, one hand gripping the railing, the other holding out a fluttering white paper singed black at the edges.

Her feet felt rooted to the spot.

*Just walk away.*

But she didn’t.

Where Remy Renaud was concerned, this had always been her problem.

Crown of her head high, chin raised, she marched back to the porch and snatched the paper from him.

And immediately wished she hadn’t.

It was a drawing.

Showing a sophistication that a casual observer might mistake as ignorance of proportion. The gamine sprite of a girl standing next to a woman only half a head taller. Both their hair a teddy-bear-brown. One bound into braids. The other a riot of curls. Both figures aproned and standing behind a counter.

Like the hosts of a cooking show.

At the bottom, leggy cursive letters already beginning to show a distinctive style spelled out two lines followed by an

exclamation point whose dot had been replaced by a hasty little heart.

Thank you, Cosima,

Love Emily!

Damn him.

She couldn't bear to ball it up and pitch it back in Remy's face, so she flung words instead.

"I imagined a girl who would draw things like this for me once." She placed the paper back on the railing and drilled the full force of her teary gaze into him. "It felt like a miracle. Like despite everything that had happened, everything I'd done, I could bring this perfect life into the world. I always wondered if your mother felt the same. Wondered why she chose what she chose." She swiped the wet tracks from her cheeks with a knuckle and looked from Remy to his brothers. "All those years, you hated them for hating her."

She pronounced the sentence just like he had that night when telling her about his brothers. He had made those words seem like a gift. In fact, they'd been a millstone. A piece of his truth she had carried for years.

"Don't you think it's time they knew?" she asked.

Remy flinched, flanked on either side by the men whose reputations had loomed large enough to keep him in the dark.

This time, she didn't look back.

\* \* \*

*Lies hide behind pretty eyes. You remember that, Remy.*

Zap's mocking voice paraded through his head, dragging a train of nasty words in its wake.

*Dupe. Sucker. Fool.*

Of all the details for his colander of a brain to hold on to with perfect clarity, it had to be the one thing he swore he'd take to his grave. The thing he'd never tell another living soul.

But he had.



He'd told Cosima Lowell.

*Don't you think it's time they knew?*

Remy stared long after she disappeared around the side of the barn, this phrase looping through his head like a melody. Maddeningly familiar but unplaceable.

Impossible to think that she'd held his secret in her head from the second he had set foot in her office.

He thought back to their first meeting. The way his bullshit detector had fired four alarms when she told him the story about the article in the *Los Angeles Times*.

He'd been right after all. She *had* been hiding something.

Small comfort against the flashes of past and present trying to assemble themselves like puzzle pieces in his head.

A different porch.

A different time.

Another woman departing his life, leaving him with a heart full of lead and a head full of questions.

Déjà vu.

*Already seen.* Already lived. Just like the moment he found himself in now.

How many times had he pictured it? Standing here with his brothers. Only, in those scenarios, it had been all four of the thieves present when he finally let the words roll off his tongue.

"This a kitchen discussion?" Law asked.

"Yep," Remy answered.

"My place?"

"Yep."

This was all the discussion required.

Bastien trailed them down the front steps and out to Law's brand-new—and much more spacious—ATV parked at the bottom of the drive.

Law took the back road from Remy's section of the property to his own, avoiding the scorched wreckage down the hill. The journey was short and silent, and then they were back in the kitchen, where Law had all but begged him to go to Los Angeles and at least *talk* to Cosima Lowell.

On a gut level, he had known it was a terrible idea.

But he had flicked the voice of self-preservation Jiminy Cricketing from his shoulder, stomped it flat beneath his work boot, and agreed.

The reason he'd ignored his own better instincts goaded and gutted him in this sunny kitchen.

Because Marlowe had asked them to, and Remy knew what it was like to sit beside a woman with your child in her belly and want to bring her the world and build her a cabinet to keep it in.

Only, his brother succeeded where Remy had failed.

As usual.

"I'm going to check on Marlowe and the twins," Law said, toeing out of his boots in the mudroom. "Coffee's on the counter."

Bastien glanced around after his departure and located the coffee maker, quickly loading a pod and starting the cycle with no apparent consternation whatsoever.

"Don't tell me you have one of those, too," Remy scoffed, leaning back against the counter.

"Hell no." When the machine had finished its hissing, his brother carried the mug to the table and pushed it toward Remy. "I imported a *Marzocco Linea* from Italy," he said, effectively ending the short-lived feelings of solidarity.

*Figured.*

He thought of the French press of coffee sitting on his counter. This simple gesture of kindness growing cold.

Only one set of footfalls came down the back stairs.

Until that moment, Remy hadn't realized he'd been hoping Marlowe would join them. That he'd have the benefit of her cool, level-headed counsel.

Though he doubted even she could untangle the knot of dread tightening in his chest.

Law appeared in the doorway, the thunderheads in his eyes having lightened to a drizzle after seeing his wife and sons. He picked up the mug on the counter and put it in the microwave before setting it on the table along with the baby monitor he unclipped from his belt.

The sound of their chairs scraping back was the gavel calling the court to order.

"Let me see if I'm all caught up here." Law pinched the bridge of his nose, cupping his elbow with his opposite hand. "You and Cosima..." He trailed off.

"Yeah," Remy said.

"But nine years ago you also..." Law held out a palm as if to receive a word.

"Yeah," Remy repeated.

"But you didn't remember because..."

"What the hell is this?" Bastien growled. "Amnesiac ad-libs?"

"The accident," Remy said, ignoring his eldest brother. "It was just the one night."

"Once is all it takes," Bastien pointed out. One of Zap's favorite decrees, often repeated.

That both he and Law had lived long enough to inadvertently prove their father right was perhaps the most painful irony of all.

"That's not what we came here to talk about," Remy said.

*Where to begin?*

The same place they all had. Their mother.

“You remember how I used to climb up on the roof when I had trouble sleeping?” he asked.

“The wolf dreams,” Bastien said, surprising him.

“Right.” Wrapping his hands around the mug his brother had pushed at him, Remy sat back in his chair. “I was up on the roof the night mom left.”

Silence thick as concrete poured into the room. Even the birds, lunatic with spring mating songs, fell quiet.

A deep trench appeared between Law’s eyebrows. “You saw her leave?”

Remy had been expecting this.

As the youngest, Law had taken her departure the hardest. The only fistfight the two of them had ever had had been as a direct result.

“It was the week before Thanksgiving,” he continued. “Zap was doing overnights at the refinery, and when I saw her hauling a suitcase out of the house, I climbed down to help.”

Glancing up from his coffee cup, he found his brothers wearing twin expressions of resignation.

They’d long ago hardened themselves against her absence.

They’d had to.

Remy didn’t enjoy that luxury.

He could still see the expression of fear on her face when he’d tapped her shoulder.

“She told me that she was leaving, but that as soon as she found a job somewhere and made some money, she’d find a way to come back for us.”

Human lie detector that his father had made him, that younger version of Remy had looked his mother in the eye and known she was telling the truth.

Or believed that she was at the time.

Remy had offered to go with her. He could work, too, he had insisted. He was good at fixing things.

She had hugged him then. One of her tears fell on his shoulder. He could still remember that. How he could feel the cool night breeze on the small damp spot as he watched her taillights grow smaller and smaller.

“Looks like she forgot.” Bastien’s voice was flat as he picked at a gouge in the table.

Once upon a time, he would have argued that point. *Had* argued that point until right after he’d been released from prison, when he’d been assigned a mental health liaison to make sure he was adjusting to life on the outside. At the center of the wild centrifuge of his pleasure-seeking, he’d found a mother-shaped oubliette of bottomless rage.

He’d gone looking for her in the big cities she used to tell him about. Charlotte. Savannah.

Turned out, he didn’t need to go far.

“She was killed in a car accident outside Shreveport less than a week after she left,” Remy said. “Zap knew about it. He admitted as much right before he punched his ticket.”

Amelia Evelyn Renaud.

He’d always felt like a coward for choosing a name for his daughter that combined his mother’s first and middle names instead of directly and obviously paying homage. A secret tribute. An apologetic afterthought.

Black coffee splashed onto the table as Law set down his mug hard. “She was dead, and all that time, Zap didn’t tell us?”

Bastien, who had displayed no reaction to this point, lifted his gaze from the glossy wood. “It was easier for him to make us resent her for leaving if we didn’t know she couldn’t come back.”

Law shoved back in his chair. “But *you* ’ve known this for the past eight years,” he said, pointing at Remy. “How could you not say anything to me about it?”

It was Bastien who answered for him. Quietly, and with a pain that made Remy’s throat ache.

“Neither of us went looking, Law.”

Law shook his head, not satisfied with this explanation.  
“But Cosima knew?”

It appeared his brothers had been comparing notes while he was verbally duking it out with the woman in question.

“It would appear so.”

The baby monitor squawked and Law lunged for it, grateful for a task that would take him out of this room. “Coming,” he said after pressing the button.

“Actually...” said a slightly furred, mechanized version of Marlowe’s voice. “Can you send Remy up?”

His brother narrowed his eyes at the small, gray speaker.  
“Remy?” he repeated.

“Remy,” Marlowe confirmed.

A fine film of sweat broke out on the back of his neck.

Like a kid summoned to the principal’s office, he rose from his chair, crossed through the living room, and climbed the stairs, each one seeming taller than the last.

He cleared his throat to announce himself before tapping on the doorframe, ever on guard against interrupting her while she was nursing.

“Come in,” she called.

Remy nudged open the door and found Marlowe seated in the gliding recliner, a small, round bundle strapped to her chest and a lap desk propped on the chair arms.

She glanced at him over the screen and pushed a pair of reading glasses onto her head.

“Please,” she said, indicating the cushioned window seat opposite her.

Because he made a point of never disagreeing with women wearing infants, he obliged.

“Technically I wasn’t eavesdropping,” she explained, keeping her voice quiet and even. “Law always forgets to put

it the monitor in one-way mode.”

Not knowing exactly what she'd heard, Remy thought it prudent to let her lead the discussion.

“You remember when you ambushed me on that porch down there?” she asked, glancing out the window over his shoulder.

*Shit.*

The film of perspiration stuck his shirt to his shoulder blades.

“Vaguely,” he admitted.

“Then I'm hoping you'll also remember us walking out to the horse corral and you telling me that you were going to ask me an honest question, and you wanted an honest answer.”

“I recall something of that nature being said.” A single bead of sweat crawled down his ribs.

“Well, it's officially your turn to do the answering.”

He swallowed a throatful of sand. “I'm listening.”

She reached out and flipped the laptop screen closed before rocking the recliner into its forward-most position. Her glacier-blue eyes fixed on his, pinning him to the spot.

“Did Cosima tell you about the night her brother died?”

Remy's mouth opened. Closed. Opened again. This was not at all the line of questioning he had expected as he'd taken his death-row walk up the stairs. “I'm sorry?”

“Did Cosima tell you about the night her brother died?” she repeated.

“I'm not seeing how this relevant to the discussion we were having downstairs,” he said.

“Just answer the question, Renaud.”

He sagged against the wall as a wave of exhaustion swept over him. “Just that he was killed in a car accident.”

“He was on his way to pick her up from a party.”

A swarm of bees had taken up residence in his skull, drowning out all logic with their numbing drone. “What?”

Marlowe nodded. “Her mother didn’t leave her room for weeks afterward. Her father wouldn’t even look at her. I think that’s why she really ran away. They made her believe it was her fault.”

Remy’s throat felt hot and dry. “Why are you telling me this?”

The bundle at her chest cooed and Marlowe smiled down at it.

“Maybe the reason she didn’t bring up what had happened between the two of you when you didn’t seem to remember is because she thought you, of all people, could look beyond a past, to see a future.”

In the wake of those words, several pieces of information assembled themselves into an order that made his pulse thunder in his ears. Cosima’s miscarriage. The girl she’d dreamed of. Her reaction to Emily. Their one-night stand.

Remy pushed himself up from his seat, unable to stay still for a second longer.

He had to know.

He found Law and Bastien at the table, just where he’d left them, and only half heard the question called after him on his way out the door.

“—think you’re doing?”

Flinging himself into Law’s ATV, he was forced to admit that it *might* in fact be just the tiniest bit faster than the Varmint. That it didn’t belch out black smoke that smelled like burning tar was an added bonus.

His heart dropped into his guts as he rounded the side of the barn and saw the gravel parking area in front of the cabins.

Their van was gone.

Only in that moment were Remy’s true feelings on the subject of Cosima Lowell made clear to him.



He missed her.

\* \* \*

“Would you just call her?” Law aimed the slim black remote at the wide-screen television to pause the show that he and Marlowe had been watching and Remy had been mostly ignoring.

They’d taken pity on him.

With Emily still at camp and the Blackpot out of commission for the next month, Marlowe had insisted he spend his evenings with them.

Which, unfortunately, looked mostly like his third-wheeling a dinner eaten in shifts according to the twins’ current demands, followed by hours of his watching them adore each other on the large leather sofa.

Even monolithic Bastien would have been a welcome addition. But, ever the agent of chaos, he had disappeared back to the wilds of Maine and his off-the-grid shipping container shortly after frag-bombing Remy with unsolicited information. His promises to return once they’d received the permits from the city to begin rebuilding the restaurant were met with a stiff—but affectionate—middle finger from Remy.

“Law’s right,” Marlowe added, shifting the bowl of kettle corn to the cushion beside her. “It’s been four days. She’s got to talk to you sometime, right? I mean, they need to come back to continue with filming.”

Remy dragged himself off the couch in favor of raiding the liquor cabinet. “She’s sending a sub agent.”

“What?” Marlowe asked, her voice laced with concern. “How do you know that?”

His shoulders jerked upward in a shrug. “Basically, her email stated that with the many project bids she’d been receiving, she would be far too busy to be onsite supervising the filming of my big, stupid face.”

“She used those exact words?” Law took a healthy pull on his bottle of beer.

“Hers were much less complimentary,” Remy said, bypassing the bottle of scotch and opting for cognac instead.

Law whistled under his breath, earning him Marlowe’s elbow when she thought Remy couldn’t see.

“Emily gets back tomorrow, right?” she asked brightly. A clear bid to change the subject.

“Saturday,” Remy corrected, tipping amber liquid into a rocks glass.

“That reminds me,” she said. “I saw that 4 Thieves has been selected as one of the ‘top tastes of ten states’ by *Travel* magazine.”

“I’m sure Samuel will be excited to hear that,” Remy said sourly.

“That’s it—” Law set his beer aside and scooted to the edge of the couch. “Either you lighten up or I’m throwing your ass out of here.”

“Law,” Marlowe scolded. “It’s been a rough week for him.”

Her attempt to sound concerned was seriously compromised by the last few words being eaten up by a yawn.

“Let me help you upstairs,” Law offered.

“I can see the stairs *and* climb them now, remember?” She patted her shrinking midsection.

“It’s let me help you or be carried,” he said, covering her hand with his. “Those are your options, woman.”

Witnessing this affectionate exchange produced a familiar knife twist of envy in Remy’s guts.

Law steered her toward the stairs, casting a look over his shoulder to let Remy know that he was expected to hang back.

Hearing the boards squeak overhead, he tracked their progress down the hall and into the bedroom, where the faint murmurs of their conversation sank through the ceiling. In the

meantime, Remy rinsed his glass and placed it in the dishwasher, pausing to look down at his hands as he dried them on the dishtowel.

What a story they told.

Wind-chapped and weathered, often etched with some kind of grit or engine oil.

Empty.

Just like he felt.

Every time he dragged the swamp of his memory for any detail about his one-night stand with Cosima. Every time he thought about her waking up alone the following morning. Every time he imagined himself immobile in a hospital bed while she carried, then lost, a life he'd irresponsibly helped create.

Having witnessed the early months of a pregnancy firsthand, the thought of Cosima enduring them alone and scared filled him with a crushing sense of regret.

Hearing heavy footsteps on the stairs, he steeled himself, drawing in a deep breath as he shuffled to the fridge. If he was going to be verbally backed into a corner, he could at least do it with a cold beer in his hand. His brother's silhouette filled the doorway in the reflection of the kitchen window, superimposed on early spring dark.

So this was to be a another kitchen talk.

Retrieving a second beer, Remy placed it in front of his brother, as required by the rules of engagement. How many problems had they solved this way? Hundreds? Thousands, maybe.

"It's partly my fault you've been miserable lately, brother."

Remy's ears pricked. *Brother* was a term of honor reserved for only the most sincere of requests.

"And I know you're sick of hearing Samuel's name, but there's an idea he wanted me to run by you and I think it's worth your time." Law lifted his beer and set it back down on a coaster, dealing one out to Remy as well.

Remy sipped his beer, keeping his mouth occupied as was dancing right on the edge of saying something dangerous.

Law twirled the neck of his beer bottle, spinning the coaster with it. "Samuel has offered to buy you out."

Remy was silent for a moment. He couldn't pretend to be entirely surprised by this news. "And what do you want?"

Leaning forward in his chair, Law waited until he had Remy's attention. "For my brother to be happy again."

*Well, shit.*

He really hated it when genuine emotion got in the way of a good mad.

Sighing, he picked at the damp label on the brown bottle's condensation-misted surface. "Brother," Remy sighed. "I don't have the first clue how to get there anymore."

Law met his weary smile with one far more mischievous. "I do."

## *Fifteen*

“You have to answer him sometime, you know.” Sarah’s manicured nail tapped the screen of Cosima’s phone before she could swipe it into the tiny, beaded clutch next to her on the seat of the limousine.

“Says who?” Lifting the glass of champagne to her lips, Cosima took a healthy swallow and tried not to cough. It had been a minute since she’d had the good stuff.

Not that it hadn’t been offered.

By network executives.

By bankers.

By her parents.

All of whom had come crawling out of the woodwork since the first round of trailers for *Bad Boys of Booze* went live a month ago.

Tonight was the red-carpet event for season one, filming well underway for a second season with the help of the production company she had engaged to keep her as far away from Remy Renaud as possible.

Because...

Well, *because*.

Keeping a clear head was essential now that opportunities were flooding her inbox. Already, she’d been contacted about a potential series following a celebrity who discovered recent familial roots in Tuscany. Another about the oldest bordello in Provence. And another still about a woman in London who ran a bridal boutique specifically for brides over sixty-five.

And Cosima couldn’t make herself be interested in any of them.

Instead, she’d spent an embarrassing number of hours re-reading the multitude of text messages and emails Remy had

sent. First, the apologies. Then, the questions about the night they'd spent together. Whether he'd been the cause of her accidental pregnancy.

*So why hadn't she answered any of his calls when he was practically begging to help carry the secret that had sat so heavily on her soul?*

For the same reason she hadn't answered when she saw her father's number on the screen of her cell phone for the first time in almost ten years.

She wasn't sure her heart could handle it.

"Holy shit." Sarah's face was damn near glued to the window. "Do you see that crowd?"

She had.

First glimpsed it earlier while they sat in side-by-side pedicure chairs while *Access Hollywood* aired on the salon's flat-screen TVs.

"And this just in from an anonymous source," a perky blonde announced in conspiratorial tones. "Reality-television star and first-class hunk Remy Renaud was recently spotted in Los Angeles for the premier of *Bad Boys of Booze*, and with a very special lady."

Cosima's nail technician had yelped when she'd accidentally dropped the wineglass into the foot-spa, splashing them both with the pinkish liquid as Remy's face had appeared on screen.

Nausea had gripped her stomach until the angle pulled back and the "special lady" became visible.

Emily, freckle-cheeked and beaming, an iconic cap bearing two round mouse ears perched atop her head as her father shepherded her toward an equally iconic teacup ride.

The scene buried a hatchet in her heart before the story flashed to the venue for tonight's red-carpet premiere, already beginning to glitter with paparazzi staking out their territory.

And why wouldn't they?

*Bad Boys of Booze* had made Remy a star.

Or rather, YouTube had.

Someone—and she felt reasonably certain she knew exactly who this someone might be—had leaked advance clips from the third episode in the series where Remy had been “caught” skinny-dipping at the pond on the property by an ATV containing none other than Samuel Kane and a handful of investors.

The comments had been enough to make Cosima spit nails.

*Should I call him father, or daddy?*

*They need to change the distillery name from 4 Thieves to 1 DILF alert!*

Cosima drank the rest of her champagne as flashbulbs began to strobe the limousine’s tinted windows.

“You ready for this?” Sarah asked as the car began to slow.

“Of course,” she lied, nodding eagerly.

Her assistant scooted across the leather seat, popped open Cosima’s clutch, and tucked in a small fold of extra tissues. “Well, you look hot at least.”

Damn right she did.

She’d spent a goodly chunk of season two’s advance on a Jezebel-red classic couture gown that worshipped her every curve and created a few new ones. With a deeply décolleté halter neckline in front, brazenly baring from behind and a generous slit revealing her tanned leg almost to the hip, she was ready for Remy Renaud from any angle.

Only, he didn’t show.

Not at the celebratory cocktail reception, not at the dinner, and not even for the red-carpet march itself.

*Where was he?*

By the time everyone had made their way into the theater for the preview and the velvet curtain had risen, Cosima had chewed off two coats of candy-apple-red lipstick.

The audience sat in rapt fascination during the pilot's concluding scene, their eyes glazed molten by the flames, immersed in chaos that took Cosima's breath away even though she'd been there.

Stunned silence gave way to thunderous applause when the lights came back up.

One by one, bodies began to rise all around her in a standing ovation.

Sarah clasped Cosima's hand and squeezed so hard she thought her knuckles might pop.

There was a smattering of confused laughter when the house lights dimmed and Remy's torso filled the screen just before his voice filled the theater.

"Well, damn. I think this thing is working after all."

As he backed away, the distillery's barrel room became visible behind him, complete with the single stool they'd set up for the solo off-the-cuff interviews.

"What the hell?" Cosima wondered aloud. This hadn't been part of the final cut of the first episode.

"I hope you don't mind if I keep you for just a second longer." He grinned into the camera. "I never like to stand between a person and their after-party."

Uproarious laughter, hoots, and catcalls filled the hall.

Cosima turned to Sarah and caught her a split second before she could arrange her face into an appropriate expression of shock.

"What's going on?" she asked in a harsh whisper, only to be met with an infuriatingly unconvincing facsimile of innocence.

"Come to think of it, there's really only one person I need to talk to, and I'm pretty sure she knows who she is, so the rest of y'all can leave if you have a mind to."

He was playing up the low country twang in his voice just as he had during the episode, turning the crowd to putty in his hands.



“No?” He cocked his dark head, a smirk twisting lips she could remember all too easily. “Ain’t you a nosy bunch. All right then, Miss Cosima Lowell—” the hooting reached fever pitch at the mention of her name “—I guess they’re all just going to have to hear what I’ve got to say.”

Her cheeks stung as heat flooded her face. Cosima was positive that, if she looked in a mirror, she’d be hard-pressed to tell where her dress ended, and she began.

“I’ve been a lot of things in my thirty-five years.”

Miraculously, the audience picked up the audio from the show’s trailer, reciting the list right along with him. “A brother, a thief, a convict, an ex-con, a biker, an off-shore oil worker, a single father, co-owner of distillery, and most recently a millionaire.”

More applause.

“In addition to all that, I’m also sorry. Which you’d know, if you’d answer your damn phone.”

Another swell of laughter.

“But it’s not like you’re perfect, either,” he added, to the chorus of an anticipatory *oooohh*.

“You’re stubborn, impatient, and possibly the most terrifying driver I’ve ever met in my life.” He paused, and his expression shifted from mock seriousness to his cat-that-ate-the-canary grin. “But you’re also the most passionate, loyal, brilliant, brave, and beautiful woman I’ve ever known.”

The entire auditorium combined in a collective gasp as everyone realized the sound was no longer coming from the speakers.

It was coming from the stage.

There stood Remy in his trademark white tanktop and jeans, beautiful biceps on display and dark hair gleaming beneath the stage lights. He looked right at her and Cosima knew at once he’d been there all along, watching her from some out-of-the-way pocket usually only reserved for the crew.

“I, on the other hand, am a suspicious, accusatory, taciturn asshole. But it just so happens that I’m also crazy about you.”

The audience erupted once again, and that uncontrollable roar turned into white noise, blurring out everyone and everything, save for the two of them.

Cosima became aware she was standing, then walking, then sprinting to him, her four-inch heels discarded somewhere along the way.

Remy tossed his microphone at one of the stagehands before leaping off the edge and into the aisle. His arms flung wide just in time for her to leap into them as the crowd collectively lost its mind.

The momentum turned into a spin, her dress flying out behind in a perfect arc that would make the front page of half the entertainment sections across the country.

She let herself dissolve into him for the perfect happily-ever-after movie kiss.

As the soles of her feet again touched the ground, Remy leaned down and whispered in her ear. “You think that will get us to season three?”

He glanced to the side of the aisle, where one of the main cameras dedicated to filming the premiere was aimed squarely at them.

And that’s when she understood.

The ridiculously scripted episodes that had created the manic fervor. The on-stage stunt. His in-person appearance.

He hadn’t done any of it to get her attention. He’d done it to ensure the continuity of the project that had become Ferro Studios’s bread and butter.

Cosima looked up at him, feeling like her heart might punch its way out of her chest at any moment. “I’m still pissed at you, you know.”

“Oh, baby,” he said, his hand gripping her hip through her gown. “I’m counting on it.”

Remy laced his fingers through hers as they walked up the aisle, heads bent toward one another to talk above the din.

“Just so happens I have a Harley-Davidson Knucklehead parked outside. How do you feel about riding off into the sunset?” His gaze shifted from her eyes to his lips. “Or at least until we’re out of frame and can go somewhere to talk.”

Cosima glanced down at her complicated couture gown with its yards of crimson taffeta. “This dress isn’t exactly motorcycle-friendly.”

Remy only smiled and leaned close to her ear. “But it’s sure camera friendly.”

Like a pair of newlyweds, they ran up the aisle and out of the venue to where his motorcycle was parked conspicuously at the curb. He hopped on and turned the engine over, waiting until she gathered her dress and straddled the bike behind him. The valet attendant brought them their helmets.

“Do you have any idea how much this hairstyle cost me?” she asked, carefully snuggling the helmet over her updo.

“No, but I know how much I’m gonna enjoy messing it up.”

“That’s pretty presumptive of you,” she said, an atom bomb of heat already detonating in her middle.

“Is it?” he asked.

“Shut up and drive, Renaud.”

He did. To the Los Angeles Mandarin, where they rode in a gilded elevator up to his suite.

She couldn’t help but marvel at the contrast between this room, with its decadent fabrics and beautiful furniture, and the sad little motel she’d called home on their first night together so long ago.

What had changed between the last time she had seen him and now, she wasn’t sure. But Remy looked...comfortable. With the luxurious surroundings. With himself. With life.

She perched at the end of the bed, her stomach floating and her head dizzy. Remy dragged a chair opposite her and seated

himself in it.

“I let Samuel buy me out,” he announced.

Cosima felt like she’d been hit with a bucket of ice water.  
“What?”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I’m going to stay on at this distillery. At least until they finish season three. But it’s high time I started figuring out what I want to do. What I want my legacy to be. What I want my *life* to be.” He looked up from his hands, and his eyes lit with the fire from within. “All I know is, I want you in it.”

She searched his face, eyes already beginning to well.

“That morning, after the fire,” he continued, “all I could think about is what I’d lost. Everything I’ve ever tried to build blowing up in my face. Sometimes literally,” he added with a sheepish smile. “I was looking for a reason not to trust what I knew was a good thing. Because good things always go away. It was easier to lose you if I convinced myself I’d never really had you in the first place.”

“I know,” Cosima said after a beat.

“You do?” An endearingly boyish expression lifted his features.

She took a deep breath, knowing she had to say what came next if there was any way forward for them. “It’s the same reason I didn’t try to find you when I learned I was pregnant after our night together in Memphis.”

She watched the realization solidify in his eyes, confirming his suspicion.

Remy stood, stalking over to the window.

Cosima rose as well, but let him keep his distance.

“You brought me back to life that night, Remy.”

His broad back expanded on a breath.

“I’d spent years just trying to numb or outrun the pain of losing my brother. My Nona. My parents. You listened to me. You made me feel...safe,” she said, her throat tightening over

the word. “For the first time in so long. I’d never experience that kind of connection with anyone. When you were gone the next morning, I convinced myself that it had all been in my head. And then I found you again, and everything came flooding back, but you didn’t remember. I thought that maybe we *could* start from scratch. That the past didn’t matter. That maybe this show was a way for some kind of good to come from all of it.”

Her passionate plea seemed to hang on the air between them for an eternity.

“If I could live my life all over again,” he said, finally turning around to face her, “I would stay. I would stay right there and hold you until you woke up, then put you on the back of my bike and never let you out of my sight.”

Cosima hugged her arms around her torso, feeling an emotion too large for her body to hold. “But then you wouldn’t have had Emily.”

His eyes misted and his voice was gravelly when he spoke. “I don’t know how well fate worked in her favor on that score.”

“Are you kidding me?” Cosima asked. “Do you know how lucky she is that instead of allowing all the pain and trauma of your upbringing to continue, you dedicated your life to making sure she never had to suffer like you did?”

She took a step toward him when he didn’t answer. “When I look at Emily, I see a girl who she *knows* she’s loved. Unconditionally. Not just by you, or Law, but by a whole family that you’ve built from people who society had thrown away. *That* is your legacy, Remy. And I’m already part of it.”

She saw his jaw flex as he swallowed. When he looked at her, it was with a longing so poignant that she felt it to her very bones.

“Would you just get your stubborn ass over here and let me hold you?”

She did, letting herself melt against a man more solid and real and alive than anyone she’d ever known.

“Speaking of Emily,” Cosima said, looking up at him.  
“Where is she?”

“In the presidential suite, helping Law and Marlowe with the twins,” he said. “Now that she’s discovered what a jetted tub does to bubble bath, she may up and turn amphibious.”

Cosima’s heart gave a painful squeeze. “In that case, I don’t suppose I could interest the two of you in a trip to SeaWorld? I hear it’s where all the amphibious cool kids hang out.”

Remy gazed down at her, and a million questions boiled away.

“There’s nothing I’d love more,” he said, his voice hoarse as he wrapped even tighter.

“*Nothing?*” She let a suggestive hint dance through the word.

He drew back from her, eyes hooded with desire. “Aside from seeing what you’ve got beneath this revenge dress.”

She batted her lashes in exaggerated innocence. “Revenge?”

“Mmhhh,” he said. “But if you really wanted to make me suffer, you should have worn the shoes.”

“The ones I left sitting somewhere in the aisle of the Village Theatre?”

Remy pulled her into him once more, lowering his mouth until his lips barely grazed hers. “The ones even another truck couldn’t erase from my memory.”

With his kiss, Cosima came to the end of a long, lonely journey, finding in Remy Renaud the only thing she’d ever been searching for over those many miles.

*Home.*

\* \* \* \* \*

*Look for the next Renaud Brothers novel,*

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*Coming Soon.*

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Bennett.*

# *One Stormy Night*

by Jules Bennett

## *One*

Trouble in stilettos walked straight toward his door and Cruz Westbrook braced himself for the impact.

Mila Hale wrestled against the blowing wind and sheets of rain as her umbrella flipped up. A gentleman would go offer some assistance, but Mila would likely claw his eyes out if he came to her rescue. He'd only met her once in person, but he'd picked up pretty quick that she valued her independence and control.

When she stepped up onto the porch, Mila tossed the broken umbrella into the landscaping and swiped the thick, dark strands of wet hair away from her face.

Damn it. Even soaking wet—maybe especially soaking wet—the woman stirred something inside him that should most definitely not stir.

They were entering into a working relationship, nothing more. No matter how much those bold red lips called to him.

“Beautiful day, isn't it?” he offered, as he rocked back on his heels and slid his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “Flight okay?”

Those wide, bright green eyes landed on him, and he couldn't be certain, but he got the impression she might be a bit cranky.

“The flight was fine. It was the rental car nightmare and then the two-hour drive here that got me.” She glanced at the rain and the blowing wind, then back to him. “You live in the middle of nowhere.”

Yes, he did, and that's exactly how he enjoyed his life. Since becoming co-owner of the successful, world-renowned magazine *Opulence* with his twin brother, Zane, their lives had



become a bit chaotic. When Cruz had decided to build on his own little slice of Northern California heaven, he'd purposely gone off the grid by choosing a little valley tucked in the bend of a river. While Zane had built on a hill overlooking the valley about thirty minutes away, Cruz liked being nestled in nature. He'd been living with his brother temporarily and, now that his home was complete, was happy to finally be in his own space.

"We've taken some great shots here for the magazine," he informed her, then kept going. "You know our art director, Maddie? She had the idea for the project in my wildflower field and the board is all in agreement that you'd be perfect."

Cruz had never had a model come to his estate without other staff around, but Maddie hadn't returned his texts or calls over the past couple of hours, and Mila had actually made it in thirty minutes early.

"This is quite a storm," Mila stated. "I don't know how we're going to be able to start in the morning, let alone see the property today."

Yeah, there was a legit concern about using the property for a shoot right now and this freak storm didn't seem to be getting any better.

Mila had flown in from Miami a day earlier than the shoot was scheduled for with the intention of checking out the project first. She wasn't the first model he'd worked with who'd had demands, but she was the first one who had starred in his dreams in the most intimate, erotic type of way.

Those red lips...

He clearly needed a social life. He'd been working too damn hard over the past couple of months, ever since Zane got engaged to Cruz's best friend, Nora. Between their upcoming wedding and the baby on the way, Cruz had tried to take some of the heavier workloads.

Which was why he found himself staring at those wet clothes plastered to each one of Mila's sweet curves.

*Focus, damn it. You're a professional.*

Thunder rolled in the distance, but enough that the ground seemed to shake. Mila jumped and put a hand to her chest.

“Not a fan of storms?” he asked.

She straightened and faced him fully. “I’m fine. Just ready to get this project started.”

“Mother Nature has other plans, but hopefully this will pass soon. You never know in the spring.”

Northern California was known for its temperamental weather... Mila should feel right at home.

When he’d met her in Miami a couple months ago, she’d been a bit standoffish, but the majority of the models he’d worked with were. She’d been reserved, yet bold. Most people jumped at the opportunity to work with *Opulence*, but she never showed her emotions.

The magazine had started small, using unknown photographers, art designers, models, and more, and since their meteoric rise—expanding to include a jewelry arm, travel arm, and hotel arm—they’d kept the same concept. Seeking out unseen talent had been their ticket to unmatched success.

“I lived in an area like this once, but we had snow. I couldn’t wait to leave.”

Cruz chuckled, unsure if she just wanted to share a personal story or if she associated her short time here with wanting to exit. He couldn’t get a grasp on her. They’d extended the invitation for her to work with them, but he couldn’t tell if she was just nervous or too much of a diva to act like she cared.

He had to assume the latter. Models, no matter their status in the industry, had egos. He didn’t care about any of that. What he cared about was his magazine’s empire and remaining at the top of their game.

“Are we at least going to go inside?” she asked.

Cruz shifted his attention from his thoughts to her question as another round of thunder rumbled. Flashes of lightning lit up the sky. He didn’t know what was more dangerous—

remaining outside in the storm or going inside alone with temptation.

“If you’re comfortable with that,” he offered. “I don’t typically bring subjects into my home without other members of my staff on hand.”

More thunder boomed, this time with lightning striking something close, based on the echo of the crack.

Mila didn’t ask again, and she didn’t wait on an invitation. She skirted him toward the door, but he was faster. He might not like her attitude, but he could sense her fear and he was still a gentleman. And he didn’t necessarily want to get struck by lightning, either.

The moment they stepped into the foyer, Mila shifted to the side and started to slip off her black heels. His eyes immediately landed on her perfectly polished red toes, and he instantly realized red might be his favorite color.

“I’m dripping.”

Right. Manners. He needed them instead of letting wayward thoughts cloud his judgment and common sense.

“Let me get you a towel.”

He headed toward his first-floor bedroom and grabbed a plush towel from his en suite, then made his way back down the hall toward her. She’d turned toward the large oval mirror above the accent table that he’d built years ago. She attempted to smooth her hair and twist it up into some knot.

“Here you go.”

He stood behind her and reached around, catching her reflection in the mirror. Her eyes locked onto his, and for half a second, he wondered what she was thinking. Likely, she already wished she were back in Miami with warmth and sunshine instead of a freak spring storm in the woods. He’d take this over humidity and hurricanes any day.

“Thank you.”

He nodded and stepped back just as his cell vibrated in his pocket. Another flash of lightning and boom of thunder had

Mila jumping as the windows rattled.

“You okay?” he asked, searching her reflection.

Her chin tipped up. “Perfectly fine.”

The rapid pulse at the base of her throat proved otherwise, but he wasn’t about to call her out on that. Everyone had their fears, and clearly, hers happened to be intense storms—or being alone in a virtual stranger’s home during such a storm.

Not wanting to pry anymore into her personal life, Cruz pulled his phone out and glanced at the text from Maddie.

Flight rerouted due to storms. See if Mila can meet us there tomorrow.

“Problem?”

Cruz glanced back up as Mila dabbed her neck. She turned to face him, her eyes darting down to his cell. This was certainly not a position he wanted to find himself in, and he sure as hell didn’t want to have Mila feeling uncomfortable or stuck with nobody else around and the weather raging outside.

“Your assistant canceled, didn’t she?”

He pocketed his phone and nodded. “She’s not my assistant—she oversees our art department. Her flight was rerouted because of the storms, so no, she can’t make it today.”

Mila blinked. Cruz didn’t know if she was going to cry or throw something. She was emotionally guarded, and she couldn’t stay here. That much was evident.

“Where are you staying?” he asked. Even though his company made the arrangements, that wasn’t his department.

“Golden Valley Bed and Breakfast.” She made very precise motions in refolding his towel before her eyes sought his once again. “How far is that from here?”

“Too far to be driving in this storm. It’s about twenty minutes on a sunny day.”

The roads were curvy and she’d have to go over a mountain to get to the other side and into the next valley. Unfamiliar

roads and these conditions did not make for a smart combination to be out in.

“Well, I can’t stay here.” She let out a humorless laugh and handed his towel back. “I guess this was all in vain, since I’m heading back out.”

“Why don’t you wait until this passes?” he suggested. “I know we only met once before, but I promise I’m not a creeper, and you’re safer here than out there on roads where you have no experience.”

Mila held his gaze for another moment. “I should try to get to my room. I’ll go slow and pull over if need be.”

Cruz had a feeling she would want to stand her ground on this matter. He wanted her to be safe, but she clearly had her mind set. Likely, the more he pushed, the more she’d push back and be even more set in her decision.

“Send me a text when you get there so I know you made it safely,” he told her.

Mila jerked slightly. “You want me to check in with you?”

“You’re technically my guest and here for my magazine, so yes. I’d like you to let me know you are safe.”

Mila pursed her lips and ultimately nodded. “Fine. I’m sure I’ll be there in no time.”

He doubted it but held the door open for her to head back out into the harsh elements. Crazy woman. Why was he even attracted to someone so hardheaded and stubborn?

Good thing she wasn’t staying in town long and that she showed no interest in him, because there was no way he could avoid temptation. Plus, nothing good would come from trying a relationship with someone with her attitude anyway.

Cruz stood on the porch and watched as she slowly pulled down the drive. The torrential rain came down in sheets, and he knew without a doubt that she wouldn’t get far.

\* \* \*

Well, damn.

Mila made her way back up the drive toward Cruz's house. She wasn't going anywhere anytime soon, not with the bridge that led to the main road of the estate washed out.

She hated—absolutely hated—being at the mercy of anything else. The storm, the man...her desires. It had been quite a long time since someone had captured her interest the way Cruz had, which was ridiculous since he annoyed the hell out of her.

But she had caught him staring at her mouth earlier, which had only brought more desire to the surface than she could allow. This arrangement had to be all about business. Her entire life could be nothing beyond work and dedication. She'd come too far to lose sight of her ultimate goal—to become a fashion designer and make beautiful clothes available to women of all shapes and sizes.

Mila squinted and willed her wipers to go faster. She'd been foolish to think she could leave. Storms were never good for her nerves, but neither was staying in that house alone with a man who had awakened every one of her fantasies. "Tall, dark, and handsome" wasn't just a cute saying. Cruz Westbrook embodied each and every adjective.

She pulled as close to the front steps as possible and didn't even bother with her purse or the luggage in the trunk. She grabbed her cell and jerked open the door and made a mad dash for the shelter of the porch.

The second she stood beneath the safety of the porch roof and somewhat out of the elements, she swiped the rain and hair from her face and blinked.

Cruz stood before her extending the same towel she'd used earlier. "Figured you'd need this."

Damn it. He knew she'd be back, and that smirk of his irritated the hell out of her. She hated predictability and she hated that sexy grin on his face. Mila took the towel and muttered a thanks as she followed him back inside. Just like before, she toed off her shoes and started the drying process once again.

“The bridge is out, by the way,” she informed him.

“Is there a tree over it?”

Mila shook her head and patted her neck and chest with the towel. “No. It’s literally out. As in, washed away.”

Cruz muttered a curse and sighed. “Well, damn. I’ll have to go down there once the storm passes. Nothing I can do right now.”

“Is there another way off the property?”

“Helicopter.”

She narrowed her eyes at his grin. The man had the audacity to *smile*. How could he smile at a time like this? Being stuck did not sit well with her, and he’d just lost access to civilization. How the hell was he so calm?

“Do you have a suitcase in the car?” he asked. “I’m sure you want dry clothes.”

Mila patted her face and eyed him over the terrycloth. “You seriously want to go out in that?”

Cruz shrugged. “It’s just water. If you want your things, I’ll get them.”

She did want her things. She wanted to be dry and comfortable, but in her own room at the B and B that had been booked. She wanted her sketch pads and pencils, and a retreat to hide away in and do what she secretly loved. She also wanted to hear back from the two prospects she had for upcoming projects. Being self-employed really was a struggle at times, but she’d be damned if she’d ever go back to Montana just to hear her father say, “I told you so.”

“I’m already wet,” she countered. “I’ll get them.”

Cruz held up his hands. “You’ve been through enough. It’s no trouble.”

Before she could argue further, he headed out the door and off the porch. Maybe a true gentleman lay beneath that snarky exterior. She’d take a smirk and sarcasm if that also meant he had a tender side.

What the hell was she thinking? This wasn't a date or some relationship interview. She was only here for a few days to do a job. The end. Period.

With the double doors wide open, Mila couldn't tear her gaze from his broad, masculine form. The rain pelted him, immediately molding his shirt to his body.

Damn. Who knew this CEO billionaire had such excellent muscle tone? The moment he popped the hatch on the small SUV, he paused, clearly taking in all of her belongings. So what? She liked to be prepared. He was the one who volunteered.

Mila watched in awe as Cruz managed to get all of her belongings, including the purse in the front seat, and bring them back inside. She stepped out of his way and closed the set of doors, shutting out the sound of the pounding rain.

"Impressive," she murmured.

Cruz set her makeup case on top of her large suitcase, then piled her toiletry bag and purse onto it. There was another bag he'd put up on his shoulder and he set it down by his feet.

"How long were you planning on staying?" he asked.

"Just a couple days."

"Not a month?" he asked, again with that smirk. "I can show you to a guest room if you'd like to change and freshen up."

Of course he thought she was some high-maintenance model. If he only knew the truth, he'd feel like a fool for his assumption. But whatever. He wasn't the first and he wouldn't be the last. She knew what she had to do in order to survive each day and work toward her goals. The opinions of others didn't matter...if they did, her father would have ruined her long ago just as he had done to her mother.

"That would be great."

When she started to reach for her bag down by his feet, Mila's bare foot slid in the puddle on the hardwood floor, and she tumbled forward. Strong arms banded around her, but the



impact sent them both to the floor. Cruz broke her fall, but she landed directly on top of him.

Every delicious, hard plane seemed to mold perfectly against her.

“Gracious sakes.”

Mortified, she scrambled to move away, but those thick arms didn’t budge.

“Are you all right?” he asked, his dark eyes holding her in place. “Are you hurt?”

“Am I hurt? I landed on you.”

Could this whole situation be any more humiliating? She looked like a drowned rat, with her hair flattened to her face and her clothing plastered to her curves. Not the glamorous impression she wanted to portray.

Thankfully, they’d met before and he’d seen some of her still shots and work or this would be even more of a disaster.

“Are *you* hurt?” she countered.

“I’m perfectly fine.”

Cruz released her and helped her up as he came to his feet as well. He kept a watchful eye on her, as if he didn’t believe she was okay. She truly wished she’d stayed in Miami. Being trapped in this home, for who knew how long, and having a ridiculous crush on the man who could launch her to stardom, would not do well for her psyche. But she desperately needed this gig and hoped *Opulence* could get her over the slump her career had settled into.

“How about that room?” she said, nodding in the direction of an open door.

Mila lifted the bag containing her sketchbook and hoped it wasn’t ruined from the rain. Some of her favorite pieces were in there. When she attempted to reach for her larger suitcase, Cruz held up a hand.

“We’re going upstairs,” he informed her. “I’ll get it.”

“Do you think I can’t?”

“Not at all, but I’m trying to be helpful.”

“I can get my things. I’m sure you want to go dry off as well and get changed.”

The mental image of him peeling that shirt off gave her pause and she stilled, her eyes landing on his chest.

“My eyes are up here.”

*Busted.*

And what she thought might be a smirk was actually a naughty grin. She didn’t know which was worse.

“And my room? Where is that?” she asked, not addressing his comment.

Why did he have to be so adorable and frustrating...and sexy? This storm had come at the worst possible time and things wouldn’t have been nearly as bad if that art director had shown up. At least they would have all been trapped together and Mila’s attention could be elsewhere instead of on Cruz Westbrook and all of his appealing, irritating traits.

Cruz pointed up the steps. “Any room up there,” he replied. “Mine is down here.”

He walked away, leaving her to get her luggage just as she’d requested. But damn the man, whose carefree whistling echoed from the hallway and mocked her as she wrestled with her things and wondered how she’d lost control so fast.

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