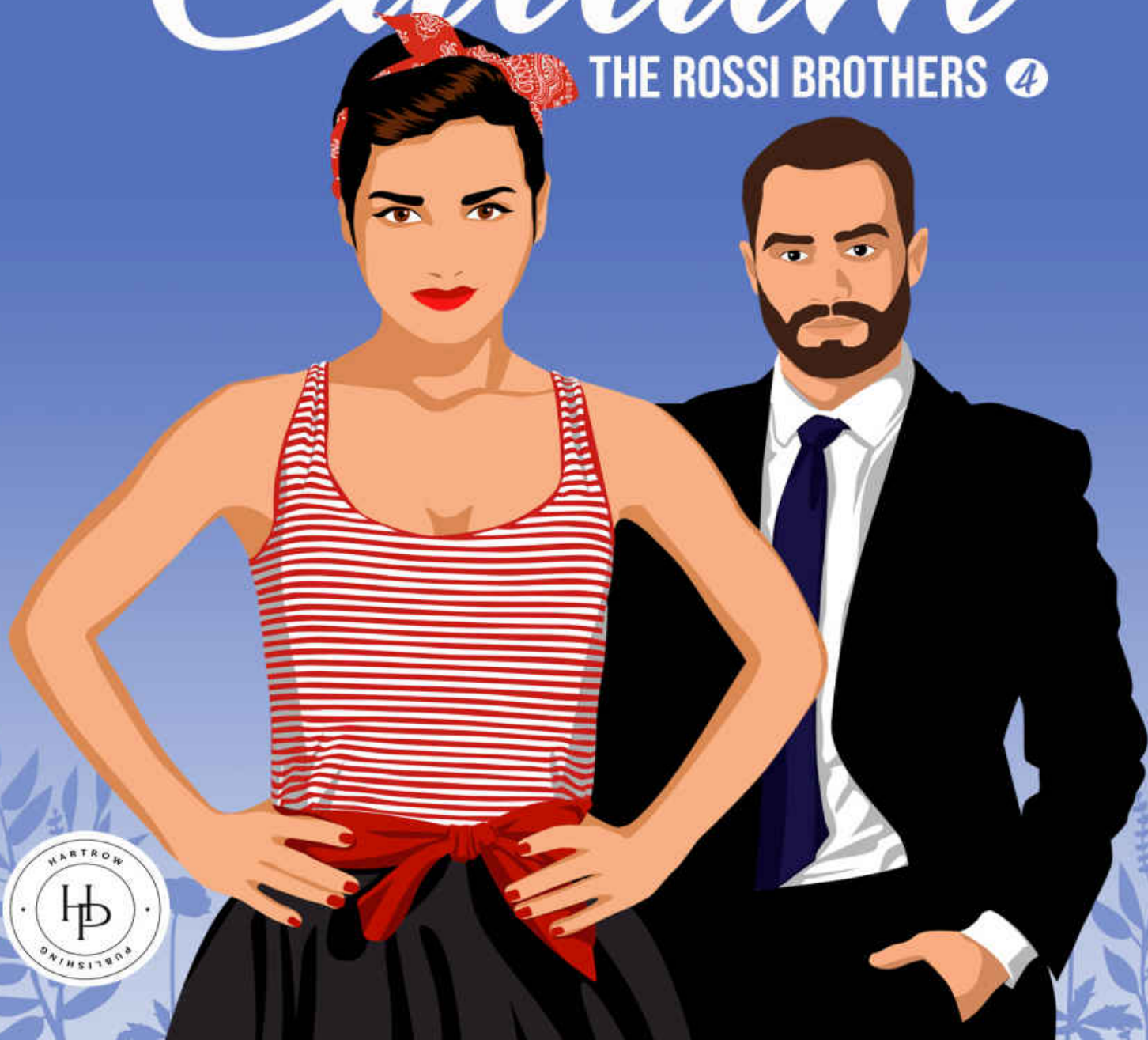


TAMARA BALLIANA

An illustration of a cityscape with various buildings, including a prominent one with a clock tower. A black cat with yellow eyes is perched on the edge of a building in the foreground.

Callum

THE ROSSI BROTHERS 4



CALLUM

THE ROSSI BROTHERS

BOOK 4

TAMARA BALLIANA

HARTROW PUBLISHING

Hartrow Publishing

Callum

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Epilogue

ALIX

It was all romantic comedies' fault.

Love stories that seemed impossible but then had a happy ending. The goofy and insecure heroines who managed to win a charming guy's heart, preferably played by Hugh Grant or Colin Firth.

Yes, it was without a doubt the English actors' faults that I'd found myself in a cell at the police station in Nice on New Year's Eve, with only a snoring stranger on the bench next to me for company.

That and a bad accident... The cops who'd arrested me called it "arson." Which I thought was a bit of an exaggeration.

Fire, yes.

Arson, not really.

Maybe there was a moment, a fleeting second, that evening where maybe I'd been happy about the sad fate of Cyril's parents' house. But it was only brief, especially when they started accusing me of starting it.

It was an accident!

"Hello! Anyone there?" I yelled for the tenth time through the bars.

I could hear laughing, which told me that the cops preferred to have fun and celebrate the new year among themselves, rather than take care of little old me.

“Don’t waste your breath, doll. They normally come by every hour.”

I jumped, but I immediately knew it was my cellmate, who’d just woken up. She was sitting with her head resting against the corner of the wall. Her eyes were glassy, her makeup had run, and her hair was all tangled. There wasn’t a mirror in this palace, but I wasn’t sure I was any more presentable, despite my sequined dress. One of my heels was broken, my arms were covered in soot, my tights were laddered, and that was just the tip of the iceberg. On the inside I was a complete mess. The only thing that was stopping me from bursting into tears was anger. I was angry at Cyril, his parents, as well as Hugh Grant. But most of all, I was angry at myself.

If you’ve ever been on a diet, you’re well aware of the advice not to go shopping on an empty stomach. Well, the same is true when recovering from a break-up. Don’t go see your ex.

Never.

Under any circumstances.

Even if *he* calls *you*.

Maybe I should have remembered that a few hours ago.

Like a drug addict promised a free fix, though, I’d accepted his invitation to come to his New Year’s party at his parents’ house. I’d put on a pretty dress, a more classic one than I normally wore, because I knew his parents thought my 50s-inspired dresses were ridiculous. I carefully put on my makeup, something I hoped was festive without being vulgar. I was proud of how I looked... but for what result?

“What’s your name, dear?” asked my cellmate.

Given that I was stuck here, I could at least kill time by talking to her. I didn’t doubt this experience would drive me crazy pretty quickly. Unlike Tom Hanks on his island, my Wilson was a real person, so I might as well make the most of it. God only knew how many hours they would keep me here.

“Alix.” I waited a few seconds and then asked, “Yours?”

“Magdalena, but everyone calls me Magda.”

I wasn't sure what cell etiquette was... Was I supposed to go up to her and shake her hand? Kiss her on the cheek?

She tapped the bench she was sitting on. "Come sit. I don't bite. It's probably going to be a long night."

I sat down next to her, and she stretched out her legs, showing off her incredibly high heels. If I thought mine were uncomfortable, I didn't dare imagine what these ones were like. They looked like they'd come out of a medieval torture chamber.

"So, what're you in for?" she asked.

"They're accusing me of setting my ex-parents-in-law's house on fire. Which is a total lie!" I hastened to add. "I can hardly light a barbecue or even the pizza oven at my own restaurant."

She let out an unencouraging whistle. "Was your ex there?"

"Yes. Otherwise, I'd have never shown up. His parents hate me."

"Mmm, I see. There's a man behind all this."

"I wouldn't say he started the fire either. It was an accident..."

"No, I meant, you're in here because of a man. It's always a man's fault. Look at me, I'm in here because of a man as well."

She let out a soul-crushing sigh, and I felt compelled to ask, "What happened?"

"I went to meet up with my boyfriend for a New Year's party, but he forgot to tell me that he's married with kids."

"Shit..."

"Exactly."

"And... don't tell me you set his house on fire as revenge?"

She laughed and shook her head. "No, at least not literally. But did I completely lose it and call him names? Absolutely."

"What did you get arrested for? Insulting an asshole?"

"No, public intoxication. Once I'd yelled at the evil bastard enough, I let his wife take over. Then I headed to the nearest

convenience store. Let me tell you, honey, vodka doesn't cure a broken heart, or a headache for that matter. So, I'd appreciate it if you didn't carry on banging on the bars. I feel like I'm growing hair inside my head, which is my limit."

At the beginning I didn't understand, but then she took off her wig, and I saw that Magda had the same hairstyle as Vin Diesel.

"What about you? I want to know how you accidentally set your ex-parents-in-law's place on fire."

I got the feeling Magda wouldn't judge me if I told her it wasn't any of her business, but she'd told me about herself. I could at least return the favor.

"Well..."

"Dalmasso!" yelled a voice from the corridor.

In less than a second I was up and running toward the door. A cop in uniform showed up with a key to open it.

"Can I leave?" I asked, not trying to hide the hope in my voice.

"That's not up to me. That's for the judge to decide."

"The judge?"

I was too scared to protest. The cop didn't bother to answer my question. A judge? But it was an accident! Cyril's parents weren't particularly fond of me, but still! They weren't going press charges, were they?

The officer motioned for me to follow him, and I asked, "Where are you taking me?"

"We need to ask you a few questions. Are you sure you don't want to call anyone to tell them you're here?"

I'd refused to earlier. The only family I had left was my grandmother, but given the hour, she was probably peacefully asleep at her nursing home, and I didn't want to worry her.

"Are you... are you going to keep me in jail?"

The policeman stopped and looked at me, like he was trying to work out whether I was stupid or on drugs.

“Miss, you set fire to the villa of the city’s biggest landlord. Did you really think I was going to let you off with a slap on the wrist?”

“But it was an accident!” I yelled, like I had a thousand times throughout the evening.

“Accident or not, you need to appear before a judge in a few hours.”

“Huh? Is this a joke?”

“Do I seem like I’m joking to you?”

Actually, he seemed as serious as a judge. And with good reason.

“But... but...”

“Do you want to tell someone at least?”

Up until now, I hadn’t seen the point in telling my friends. I knew that Jo and Cleo were celebrating New Year’s in the countryside at the Rossi house, a good hour away from Nice. I’d also been invited, and I probably should have accepted, given what had happened over the last few hours. I didn’t want to ruin their evening, but I didn’t have any other ideas. But one thing was certain. Finn Rossi was with them, and he was a cop in this police station. With any luck, he’d be able to ask his colleagues to forget their absurd idea of sending me to court at sunrise. After all, he was a kind of star policeman since he’d caught the most famous mobster on the coast: Bruno Santoni. I wasn’t sure why I hadn’t thought of it before, but it cheered me up.

I was going to call Jo, and everything would be solved in a matter of hours.

ALIX

“Don’t worry, we’ll get you out of there,” said Jo when I told her what had happened over the phone.

Roxane, who was listening to everything on speakerphone, and who was an expert in these types of situations, advised me to become best friends with the cellmate who seemed the strongest but the most quiet, also warning me to be wary of her.

I told her I was alone in my cell, apart from Magda, and that I got the feeling she wasn’t going to jump at my throat. First, because she seemed to worry about her manicure, and second, because we’d already gotten to know each other thanks to our mutual hatred of exes.

The fact that Roxane told me, “Shove your fingers in their eyes if something goes bad!” didn’t reassure me.

I returned to my cell, and the police party seemed to be over, or at least quieter. Magda had fallen back asleep and was snoring loudly. The policeman who’d brought me back told me it was 2:30 am. It must have been about 4 am by now.

But there was no sign of me getting out of here.

I dozed off a little bit, despite the snoring from my cellmate. I was exhausted. I’d closed my eyes to stop myself from crying. Or, at least, so that nobody could see me cry. I wasn’t as strong as I looked. I cried from time to time... okay, a lot these past few months. But only when I was at home or alone in the kitchen of my restaurant *Taula Nissarda*.

Never in public.

Never.

I was woken up by voices in the corridor. Maybe the police were bringing another person in? I would have guessed that the cells would be full on New Year's Eve, but actually they were pretty empty and cold, just like Cyril's heart.

That asshole, Cyril.

To think that only a few hours ago I was hoping he'd forgive our last breakup and ask me to take him back. At least this fire had helped to open my eyes. Even though I'd always been willing to do anything for him, the reverse wasn't true. Even at the height of our relationship, he never would have come to get me out of jail. I wondered who'd bother to visit me if I was in prison. Definitely Jo. Cleo? I wasn't sure my other friends would survive prison. As for my grandmother, she'd die of grief if that happened.

I couldn't blame people for turning their backs on me. I was a bad friend. I was always working, allergic to the phone, terrible at remembering birthdays, babies' names, and even their partners' jobs if it was more than one word. Give me a fireman, baker, restaurateur, and I could remember it. Expert in network visualization, however, seemed a bit abstract and... useless.

The voices got louder. It was two men. The first sounded like the cop who had come to find me earlier—he must have drawn the short straw. The second was more serious, more composed, impossible to understand, but it was unlikely that it belonged to a drunkard picked up on the sidewalk.

And for good reason.

The cop appeared in front of the cell bars, while the second man stayed a bit farther back, in the dark. I got up as a reflex, which was when the policeman said, "Dalmasso, your lawyer is here."

Lawyer?

Do I need a lawyer? Who's my lawyer?

But this word, which brought to mind a profession I couldn't stand, was quickly forgotten when I saw the lawyer in

question.

A man who ate at my restaurant at least once a week, who was connected to most of the important people in my life, and who I had about as much affinity with as a hunter did with the humane society.

Callum Rossi.

He stepped away from the wall, wearing the scowl he normally wore when I was around. I imagined what he must have thought of me at that moment. He'd decided to spend the new year in Nice rather than with his family, and probably wasn't happy about it. Showing up at the police station to see me probably wasn't very high up on his list of priorities. I even suspected that having a root canal without anesthetic could be more enjoyable for him. I didn't dare think about what Jo or Remy must have promised him to convince him to come. I'd never be able to thank them enough.

For a second I hesitated about asking to stay in the cell, but I wanted to escape the cell more than I disliked the youngest Rossi brother. I went to give him a small smile, but it was more like a hyena's grin, and said, "Hi, Callum."

"Dalmasso," he replied, without any expression in his voice.

Dalmasso? The guy was calling me by my surname? Who did that? Apart from teenagers who thought they were too cool to use their first names. And apparently the police when they interviewed you.

The policeman motioned for us to follow him. I walked in front of Callum to avoid looking at him. A single word out of his mouth made me want to kill him. The only thing stopping me was that, even though I wasn't the brightest, I wasn't stupid enough to commit a crime in a police station under the watch of a cop.

The policeman opened the door to a little room that must have been used for interrogations. I was disappointed to see it wasn't painted all black with a one-way window, like in the TV shows. The walls were beige, with traces of dirt here and there. There were prevention posters about alcohol, with a toll-

free phone number for vigilant neighbors. It smelled like old sandwiches.

“I’ll leave you two to it. I’ll be in the hall,” said the policeman before closing the door.

I fell into the chair, less elegantly than I would have liked. Not that I was looking to make a good impression. I looked up at Callum, who was standing with one hand in his pocket and a look on his face that was half bored, half annoyed.

That was when I noticed his suit. He was wearing a tux. A goddamn tuxedo that was no doubt tailored so it fit like a second skin. The dinner jacket was as black as his slicked-back hair, his eyes, and his soul. His white shirt was immaculate, had no creases, and was open at the collar, showing off a small triangle of tanned skin. His undone bowtie was hanging around his neck, and it was the only thing that indicated he’d had a long night or that it had even been a bit wild. Knowing him, it was more likely an arrogant gesture meaning, *Yes, I’m the type of asshole that’s sophisticated enough to prefer bowties that I tie myself, with a tux that costs a month’s worth of your salary...*

He was holding his neatly folded coat over his arm.

Who had an impeccable shirt at 4 am?

Who looked like a GQ model ready for a photoshoot in the middle of the night?

Who wore a tux for New Year’s Eve?

Callum Rossi.

The fact that he was so perfectly dressed made me feel even worse because I must have looked the exact opposite. Although I didn’t have a mirror—maybe it was a good thing, actually, that this room didn’t look like I’d expected—you didn’t need to be a genius to work out that after the night I’d had, my makeup probably made me look like a member of Kiss.

“Are you going to tell me what happened?” he asked.

“What’re you doing here?”

He raised an eyebrow that was neater than mine after I'd waxed it. "I thought you needed a lawyer." His deep voice was monotone and bored. I was surprised he didn't end his sentence with a yawn.

He thought I needed a lawyer?

Who did he think he was, talking like a pretentious old man?

Since I was slow to reply, he pulled his phone from the inside pocket of his tux jacket and nonchalantly began tapping away on it, one shoulder resting against the wall.

"Did Jo and Remy call you?"

"Well done, Sherlock," he said without even looking up from his phone.

"Are they coming?"

"I told them it wasn't worth it."

"Excuse me?"

My irritated tone made him turn toward me. He took his time putting his phone away and crossed his arms, looking at me like a child.

"They were supposed to be celebrating the new year and not spending part of their night getting your ass out of jail. I ordered them to get some sleep before driving."

"Ordered..."

I knew that out of everything he'd just told me, pointing out he was an arrogant, manipulative asshole wasn't the most important thing. But I just couldn't help myself.

"Sorry, I worry about the people I love, unlike some."

His reply was like a knife to the heart. I wasn't proud of everything that had happened with Cyril and his parents. The idea that I was a source of worry for my friends made me feel even worse. I really was a terrible friend.

I didn't reply for a few seconds, which prompted Callum to circle back to why he was here. "I'm assuming they told you

that you're to appear in court?" I nodded. "You need a lawyer."

"Aren't they supposed to provide me with a court-appointed lawyer or something like that?"

"If you want to leave your fate in the hands of some guy who's just finished law school, and who's so desperate he'd accept a hearing on January 1, you can," he said, pointing to the door.

Suddenly his words sent a shiver down my spine. Everything seemed even more real. I was going to appear before a judge who would decide if I'd live or die—well, not actually die, but you get the idea. I didn't want to end up in jail. Not because I was a spoiled child or something like that, but because I'd never had a roommate, and I was pretty picky about my food. So why start now?

"Wait!" I yelled, getting up. The chair scraped against the linoleum floor, and there was a second of silence. "Th... thank you for coming."

Callum looked at me. He was waiting for what was coming next, and something made me feel like I had to hurry up and say it or else he was going to disappear forever—maybe in a plume of smoke like the black prince of darkness that he was.

"I... I don't want a court-appointed lawyer."

That was easier than saying, "I want you as my lawyer." It seemed sufficient. He pulled back the empty chair and took his time carefully placing his coat over the back of it before sitting down to face me. I sat back down.

"Okay, start from the top. What were you doing at the Martins' New Year's Eve party?"

CALLUM

I sincerely hoped these first hours of the new year weren't a prediction for the rest of the year.

After getting through the most boring and frustrating New Year's of my life, I now found myself in a creepy room in the Nice police station with the most annoying woman in town.

That'd teach me to do my brothers and their other halves a favor...

There was no doubt that if I hadn't come here that Roxane would've welcomed me to the office on Monday morning with a knee to the groin, probably helped by Jo who, on top of everything else, knew how to use a scalpel and other dangerous objects. No, really, I didn't want to taunt the devil. That was why I was a commitment-phobe. Since they'd been in relationships, my brothers were at the mercy of their girlfriends, and I wasn't going to let that happen to me!

For a second I thought about what had happened earlier at my boss's reception... No! I wasn't going to think about that now. I had a client to get out of jail and surely a headache soon. I wasn't normally prone to headaches, but I knew the type of woman Alix was. She was the type who walked around with a big "complications" sign around her neck.

It was enough just to see the state she was in. Her makeup had run, and she had soot all over her arms, like if a chihuahua had come and put its paws all over her face. What must have been a rather elegant-looking bun a few hours earlier now looked like a bird's nest. The sequins on her dress were upside down.

I wasn't even sure it was hers, because she normally wore rockabilly dresses. Here she looked more like Donna Summers had been run over when leaving a concert.

Pathetic.

She still hadn't answered my question.

"So? The Martins? I may not be getting paid by the hour to take care of you, but that doesn't mean I have all the time in the world."

My remark made her sit upright in her chair. "Cyril called me."

"Their son?"

I knew exactly who Cyril Martin was. Everyone in this town knew the miserable runt who spent his parents' money like it was Monopoly money. Which wouldn't have been an issue if he weren't as useless as a chocolate teapot.

"Yes... we..."

"You were together at some point," I finished for her.

At this rate she was going to get wrinkles before she finished her story.

"Yes."

Her answer was hardly a whisper. She bit her lower lip, making me look at it. She wore red lipstick normally, but that wasn't the case now. I guessed the night's events had had something to do with it. She had particularly pink and plump lips, rather delicious-looking lips when you thought about it...

Stop!

Refocus!

"So, you went to see your ex for New Year's Eve," I concluded.

She frowned. "When you put it like that, it makes it sound like I'm some kind of psycho who shows up uninvited—but he invited me. He said he wanted to talk to me."

“You went there, even though you already had plans with your friends and my brothers?”

“Apparently you did the same,” she said dryly.

“I had professional obligations. And let me remind you it worked in your favor that I did, otherwise I wouldn’t be here with you now.”

My remark knocked the arrogance right out of her. She sat back a bit in her chair, and for a moment I felt sorry for her. But that quickly passed.

“So, your ex called, asked you to come to talk, and you rocked up to his parents’ party,” I summarized. “Then?”

“Everyone was there, a caterer, musicians, decorators...”

If I wanted to discuss organizing an event, I would have called my sister, Lara, but I let her give me the party details, as useless as they were, because I got the feeling that the more I cut her off, the more time we’d waste.

“I was there for two hours, but Cyril still hadn’t come to talk to me, except to tell me to stay because he had something important to tell me.”

“And what were you doing all that time?”

“I was talking to people I kind of knew... Some were customers at my restaurant, others I’d met since I’d been with him.”

“How long were you with this... Cyril?”

“Err... about two years, on and off.”

“So, you were in a non-exclusive relationship?”

She widened her eyes. “No! Well... I wasn’t... I was only with him.”

I didn’t bother asking if he’d been with other people because I already knew the answer, as I’d seen it with my own eyes. This guy made Judas look good.

“And when was the last time you met up?”

“Six months ago, although we stayed in touch.”

“Define ‘stayed in touch.’”

“Emails.”

For a second I tried to imagine Cyril Martin sending saucy emails to Alix. No, it was impossible. This guy was barely capable of writing his own name.

“Emails?”

She sighed. “Well, okay, rent receipts.”

I laughed sarcastically. “Ah yes, nothing says a declaration of love like a rent demand.” She glared at me. “The Martins own your restaurant building, right?”

“My apartment as well.”

What a good idea! May as well put all your eggs in one basket.

“Your relationship was only strictly professional these last six months?”

“Yes.”

“So, what were you expecting to talk about this evening? Rent increase? Plumbing issues?”

“About... us.” She seemed ashamed to admit it. She looked down at the ground, and I pretended to write some notes on my phone.

“Did you end up talking to him?” She nodded. “And?”

“You might want to know what happened before that.”

“When? Before he came to talk to you?”

“Yes. He... well, his parents made a speech thanking everyone for being there and summarized the year.”

I felt like she was describing my New Year’s Eve instead. Except that in mine, it wasn’t Mr. and Mrs. Martin but my boss, the feared Mr. Bonifaci.

“His parents then called Cyril up to join them, as well as Amanda.”

“Who’s Amanda?”

“His fiancée,” she said quietly.

“His fiancée!” I shouted. “But...”

If there was one guy I couldn’t imagined getting married—
apart from me—it was Cyril Martin.

“I didn’t know either. In fact, I don’t think anyone did until
tonight. He asked her to marry him at Christmas, and his
parents told everyone tonight.”

“Okay, so his parents announced their engagement, and you
set fire to their house to get revenge?”

“Not at all!” she said, annoyed.

“Okay, so tell me right now. I don’t care about your ex’s love
life.”

“Okay, I was surprised, but... but not to the point of doing
something that stupid! I went to hide in the kitchen so that
nobody could see that I was...”

“Disappointed? Quite frankly, you shouldn’t be.” My reply
seemed colder than I would have liked, but I wasn’t wrong.
She’d realize that at some point. “How long did you stay in the
kitchen?”

“I don’t know. I was watching the caterer from the corner of
the room. Spending time in the kitchen calms me down.”

I assumed it wouldn’t have been weird for a restaurateur to
have done this, but I wasn’t here to be her therapist.

“Did you talk to Cyril then?”

“Yes, he ended up coming into the kitchen as well. He said he
knew he’d find me there.” She was almost smiling thinking
about it. I wanted to tell her not to think of it as attention from
the bastard, just common sense. “He apologized for how I
found out about his engagement. He wanted to tell me before
the announcement, but he hadn’t had the time, given all the
guests.”

I wanted to yell at her to stop making excuses for him. If he’d
wanted to tell her, he would have.

“Then he told me...” She paused, and I was sure she’d stopped so she wouldn’t burst into tears. I felt like I was about to learn something interesting.

“He said he was going to kick me out of my restaurant!” she said hysterically. This time tears started rolling down her cheeks.

“Hang on. How... he can’t just kick you out like that. What exactly did he tell you?”

“His fiancée, Amanda. When she found out we’d been in a relationship, she asked him to kick me out. He didn’t want me in his building. Callum, this restaurant is my life! I can’t! I...”

She started to splutter, but I had to be firm.

“First of all, he can’t just kick you out like that. Don’t worry, he doesn’t have the right to. Second, who is this Amanda? Do you know her?”

“Absolutely not! She doesn’t seem like she’s from here. I don’t know how she knew I had a restaurant. And it was him who told her about us, not me. I admit that when he told me to leave, I became hysterical. I started screaming, and his parents came into the kitchen. They ordered the caterer to leave and...

“You set fire to the kitchen!”

“No! I already said it was an accident! Goddammit! Why won’t anyone believe me!”

She yelled so loudly that the police officer in the corridor knocked on the door to ask, “Everything alright in there?”

“Yes, yes, nothing to worry about.”

I got up and walked over to her. Even if I wasn’t going to touch her, given her state, I put a hand on her shoulder. “Eh, I believe you. So how did the fire start?”

Her skin was icy. I realized she must be freezing in her little sleeveless dress. I took a few steps toward my chair and picked up my coat to drape it over her shoulders. She didn’t refuse; in fact, she wrapped it around her, which told me she really must have been freezing. I was almost angry at myself for not having done it sooner.

“I started screaming, begging them not to do that. Because I was hysterical, I didn’t see the chafing dish near the window. I hit it, but it didn’t fall over. The flames must have caught the curtains... Who has curtains in a kitchen, anyway?”

“No idea, but the judge won’t be interested in that.”

“I didn’t even notice that they caught fire, and the Martins didn’t either. When we did notice, there was panic. I yelled at them to get out and tried to put it out, but it was too late.”

“Was there anyone in there with you?”

“No, they’d all left. When the firemen arrived, I was still in the kitchen, and they had to drag me out. After that, the Martins said that I did everything possible to spread the fire, but they weren’t even there to see me trying to put it out.” There was silence. Then Alix asked, “Do you believe me?”

“It doesn’t matter what I believe. But now I know enough to defend you.”

My reply seemed to annoy her. “I hate you, almost as much as the Martins,” she whispered.

“I don’t give a damn, darling. Maybe you’ll be a bit more grateful when I save your ass.”

With that, I left the interrogation room. I had a defense speech to give in a few hours.

ALIX

I was taken to the courthouse in a van, with Callum's coat still draped over my shoulders. I'd gone through all his pockets simply because I'd had nothing else to do.

Well, okay, maybe also out of curiosity. But the coat was just as impeccable as its owner. Or at least the image he gave off. Who doesn't even have an old parking ticket in their pocket?

That said, I was very happy to have it, his coat, especially when I had to walk down the deserted corridors of the courthouse. I must have looked a bit like Darth Vader after a night of drinking, but it was still better than walking about semi-naked in January.

They led me to a little room where Callum was waiting for me, phone to his ear. When he saw me, he said, "I've got to go, my client is here," before hanging up.

Who was he talking to? I doubted it was a work colleague. After all, it was a bank holiday. A girlfriend? A friend? I didn't know much about his personal life. He was the most mysterious Rossi brother in my eyes. Even Lara, who had told me a lot about her brothers, didn't seem to know much about the youngest of them. I wasn't fooled by his flawless image. Perfect-looking people were the worst. They were the ones who were cruel to animals, rude to waiters, or ate their boogers, I was sure of it.

Of course, Callum still had the time and the opportunity to change. He was wearing a black suit and smelled clean from a few miles away, which only made me feel even more like I'd

just crawled out of a dump. I even wondered if the smell was going to engrain itself in his coat.

He pointed to a bag at his feet.

“Jo prepared a few things for you. I advise you to get changed before going out.”

I didn't care for his haughty tone, so instinctively I replied, “Morning to you too.”

“We already saw each other this morning.”

He wasn't wrong, but manners never hurt anyone. I stooped down to pick up my things and murmured, “I'll change. I don't want to embarrass you.”

“Once again, my opinion doesn't matter. But a bit of advice—a good appearance can help make you look good, and you'll need it.”

I had to bite my tongue not to say anything back. Although nothing would have pleased me more than to knock him down a peg or two, I tried to remind myself that my fate was partly in his hands.

I glanced at the bag. Of course they weren't my clothes. Jo didn't have my keys, but it would do. We were a similar size. Black pants, a white shirt, and a pair of ballerina flats. She'd opted for something very demure, very different to my normal style. Though I'd have even put on a pair of Paris Saint-Germain track pants if it meant I could get out of my dirty dress.

I cleared my throat and asked, “Where is the restroom, so I can get changed?”

Callum raised an eyebrow, as if my request was completely strange. “I had to argue to be able to see you and give you your things before going out, so I'm afraid your only option is to change in here.”

“In here?”

I looked left and right to make sure nobody could see me. Nobody, that is, except the man in a suit who was almost six feet tall and facing me.

“Can you turn around at least?”

He let out a little laugh, which was unlike him. In my head he was incapable of anything except a stern expression. If I hadn't seen him devouring a steak, I wouldn't even have been sure he had teeth.

Once he'd turned to face the wall, staring at his phone, I rushed to get the clothes out of the bag and take off my dress. Jo had hidden baby wipes, deodorant, and makeup remover in among the clothes, and I almost cried with joy. I gave myself a cat bath and quickly put on the pants. As if on purpose, someone had set the room temperature to that of Siberia, and I felt like my nipples were going to rip through the cotton blouse.

Callum was still facing away after I'd finished getting dressed. I cleared my throat, the universal signal that I was ready to resume our conversation. Apparently, it wasn't clear enough, because he didn't move a muscle.

“It's okay, I'm ready,” I eventually said.

He continued doing god knows what on his phone. I wasn't sure if it was his way of telling me I was very low down on his list of priorities. Normally I wouldn't have cared if he ignored me, but given that my future was going to be decided in the next few minutes, it was very annoying.

I stood by his side and asked, “So, what's the strategy? What do I need to say?”

He looked up from his phone at me, as if I'd asked yet another stupid question, but he put away his phone in his vest pocket. “I'll do the talking. You don't say anything.”

“I supposed a ‘hello, your honor’ couldn't hurt?”

“Maybe in an episode of *Ally McBeal*, but you'd just look ridiculous in a French court.”

“Why?”

“Because we address the judge by saying ‘hello, President.’”

“Well, okay, not everyone studies law,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“That’s why I’m the one that’s going to do the talking and not you.”

“Can I at least know which law you’re going to use to get me released?”

“The law isn’t the most important thing today.”

“Excuse me, I thought for a second that we were in a courthouse,” I remarked, a bit alarmed that he seemed to be taking things so lightly.

“Anyway, it’s time to go.”

He motioned for me to go to the door, but I struggled to convince myself to put one foot in front of the other. As he went to open the door for me—yes, despite all his faults, he had an excellent upbringing, I had to admit—he said, “Do you know the difference between a good lawyer and a great lawyer?”

“Do you really think I want to play guessing games at a time like this?”

“A good lawyer knows the law, while a great lawyer knows the judge. And I’m a great lawyer.”

ALIX

We were in the courtroom waiting for the judge. Magda, who was a few yards behind me, gave me a little wave, and I waved back.

“A friend of yours?” said Callum, surprised.

“Yes. Sorry, sorry, she’s probably a bit less classy than a judge.”

He snorted but didn’t say anything.

In the seats I could see Jo, the Rossi brothers, Cleo, Roxane, and Adam. I was both touched and ashamed that they were here. My friends were going to see me in a less-than-glorious light.

When the judge entered the room, I looked at Callum, surprised. “That’s the judge you know?”

“Yes.”

“He must be at least 100 years old!” I sighed.

“No, and I advise you to keep your voice down if you don’t want to make him mad,” he said.

“He can’t hear me.”

“Old and deaf are two completely different things, Alix.”

“I’d be surprised if he could hear his own voice with the vegetable garden growing in his ears.”

Callum gave me an intimidating look as a way of telling me to shut up. Admittedly, ten minutes ago I’d promised to be quiet

unless I was asked questions.

The judge took at least five minutes to get seated with help from the clerk. The prosecutor, a little grayish man who seemed too tired even for the early morning—well, okay, he came to the station in the night to officially notify me of my appearance—took a step forward and announced the first case.

I felt like I'd already been here for hours, but only two cases had been dealt with.

“When will it be our turn?” I asked.

“When you're called,” replied Callum.

“Thanks, Captain Obvious.”

“Sorry, but it's a stupid question. Now be quiet before we get called.”

They carried on going through the files, and if my stomach hadn't been a ball of anxiety, I might have paid attention to them. But I could only think about hearing the order for my release.

I was going to get released, wasn't I?

When they said my name, my heart beat so strongly in my chest, I felt sick. Standing next to me, Callum seemed as relaxed as if he was on a terrace drinking a mojito. I was both reassured and... annoyed.

The prosecutor summarized the facts of the case against me.

Facts that were a bit exaggerated in my opinion. But I remembered Callum's advice and didn't open my mouth unless they directly asked me a question. I didn't really get the opportunity to explain myself, but I realized that wasn't what the prosecutor wanted. It was up to Callum to exonerate me.

When it was his turn, he took a step toward the judge. “Mr. Rossi, for the defense.”

“Rossi... Rossi...” repeated the judge, leaning toward him.

He squinted, and I saw Callum flash him a big grin. I would have thought even babies couldn't move him, let alone a guy who must have known Nice before it was a part of France.

“You’re part of Bonifaci’s firm!” said the old judge. “We saw each other last night, or rather, this morning.”

“That’s right, Mr. President.”

The judge chuckled.

A chuckle!

“Well, you look much better than I do!”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that, Mr. President.”

Is he messing with me? Is he really flirting with the judge like a schoolgirl?

“Well, how much trouble is your client in?” The judge turned to look at me to scan me from head to toe, as if I were a circus freak. The prosecutor had already stated the facts.

“Mr. President, my client, Ms. Dalmasso, has a clean record. She never had any intention of starting the fire, nor of hurting Mr. and Mrs. Martin’s property or persons.”

“Is that true, miss?” asked the judge.

“Yes...” I stammered.

“According to several witnesses, Ms. Dalmasso also told Cyril Martin ‘I’ll kill you’ before setting fire to the kitchen,” added the prosecutor.

“Empty words,” said Callum. “Mr. Martin had just told her that he was going to close her restaurant without cause. Plus, I would like to remind you that he and Ms. Dalmasso were in a semi-exclusive relationship for months and that my client was still shocked by the sudden announcement of his engagement a few minutes earlier. Emotion can make us say things we don’t really mean.”

A semi-exclusive relationship? Shock from the engagement announcement? I felt like he was putting my personal life on display for the court. I knew he was trying to defend me, but it was still embarrassing, especially since my loved ones were in the audience. Still, the old judge nodded.

“My client went to the Martins’ at the request of their son, Cyril. There are messages that can attest to this. I’m sure you

understand that she didn't expect to receive an eviction notice at the New Year's party she was invited to."

"Regardless, she still set fire to the Martin house..."

"Accidentally," specified Callum again.

"That's not what Mr. and Mrs. Martin said at the time," commented the prosecutor.

"Who would do anything to protect their son, everyone in town knows that," added Callum.

"Now, now, Mr. Rossi. Don't say things you might regret later," the judge reminded him.

I was well aware that nobody would dare risk threatening the Martins. Apparently, the judge was too. I wasn't Callum's biggest fan, but I still didn't want to see him end up on their blacklist.

"There were other witnesses at the scene," said the prosecutor.

"Most of whom weren't even in the room with my client. And I'm not even going to mention that at the time of the fire, most of them were intoxicated. I also have a police report which states that drugs were also consumed on site."

Drugs? At the Martins'? I hadn't seen anything! How had Callum managed to get that information from the police in such a short period of time? I glanced discreetly at Finn, but the oldest Rossi brother didn't give anything away.

"My client, however, was completely sober."

"She wasn't tested until several hours later. She could have..."

"I have several people that can attest to the fact that my client never drinks."

I stopped breathing. I guessed Callum must have questioned Jo, because I couldn't imagine how else he would have known that. I just hoped he wasn't going to explain why I was sober. I wasn't the sort of person who liked having my personal life displayed in public, even though I was very aware that was what we were doing.

Callum glared at the prosecutor with an annoyed look that was normally reserved for me.

I know the feeling, old man, it's not very nice.

But I wasn't going to pity him.

"Very well," concluded the judge. "Even if it was an accident, I get the impression that Ms. Dalmasso had serious reasons to be angry at the Martins. I wouldn't want to see the situation deteriorate."

"Mr. President, I'd like to inform you that my client is the manager of a restaurant in the old town, not far from here, the *Taula Nissarda*, famous throughout town for the quality of its food and the seriousness..."

"Oh! That's you!" said the judge as his face lit up like a Christmas tree. "Your gnocchi is fantastic!"

"Erm, thank you, Mr. President."

Okay, I shouldn't have spoken, but it was rude not to reply to a compliment, right?

Callum didn't seem to be bothered by the fact that the judge had cut him off; in fact, he seemed satisfied. He continued, "Ms. Dalmasso has several employees. And the business's reputation is also at stake. The sooner this incident is recognized as an unfortunate accident..."

The judge didn't let him finish. "I understand, but I still don't have the information I need to judge your client."

My stomach dropped. Despite how cold it was, I started to sweat in Jo's blouse, and my hands became moist.

No, no, was he going to send me to jail?

"Mr. President, keeping my client in custody would damage her business."

"But the Martins are the owners of her restaurant building and her home," chimed the prosecutor.

The judge looked at the prosecutor, then Callum, then me. I felt like I was floating above my body and watching the spectacle like a surrealist scene.

“Mr. President, it’s not just my client’s job that’s at stake...”

“I understand,” he cut him off. “That’s why I’m going to put her on probation until I have the information I need to judge the case. She won’t be allowed to leave the city or to contact the Martin family. What does concern me is whether she’ll be able to while...”

“That doesn’t pose a problem. The last thing my client wants is to be in contact with the Martins.”

Callum looked at me, and I confirmed it with the slightest movement of my head. I was in a trance listening to these men discuss my fate.

The judge always seemed skeptical. Maybe that was why Callum added, “I promise you, Mr. President, that she’ll keep her word. I’ll see to it personally.”

At that point I didn’t realize just how serious he was.

CALLUM

We'd barely left the courtroom when my three brothers, sister, Roxane, Jo, Cleo, and Adam met us in the hall. There were a few seconds of chaos—a tradition in our family—except that they were taking place where I worked. I didn't really like it.

"I think this is the first time I've seen you in a lawyer's dress," said Cleo. "It suits you. And happy New Year, by the way."

"Thank you, you too," I murmured.

Given that Luca was clinging to her like she was a bag of gold and he was a security guard, I guessed their new year was off to a good start. That was something positive, I hoped. I hugged my brother, who I hadn't seen in months because he was now living near Paris.

"Mom's going to be furious she missed this," said Lara, who was next in line for a hug.

"It was an immediate trial, certainly one of the least interesting ones of my career. If you can even call it that."

My sister snorted dismissively.

"I wasn't talking about you. Mom and Dad wanted to be here for Alix. I convinced them not to come by promising to tell them everything. I also said she'd hate having too many people here."

"You call this crowded?" I teased her, pointing to our little group in the hall.

Lara shrugged, and Jo came over to kiss me hello.

“Thank you,” she said, taking me to one side. “I know Alix doesn’t understand what could have happened, but I owe you one.”

“Even without my help, I don’t think the judge would have sent her to jail.”

“No, but he would have forbidden her from going to the restaurant, and you know how bad that would have made her feel.”

I nodded. I knew Jo wasn’t talking about the financial aspect, but rather Alix’s attachment to her restaurant. She put her heart and soul into her work, and although I found it annoying at times, I respected her work ethic. And given that I ate at *Taula Nissarda* at least once a week, I would have been sad if it closed.

“The judge is my boss’s friend,” I felt obliged to add. It was the truth, but I also knew he’d taken a liking to me.

“Thank you,” she said again, squeezing my arm before asking, “Are you okay? You look exhausted.”

“I only got an hour of sleep.”

“That’s true. I forgot you had an even shorter night than we did, sorry.”

I glanced at Alix, who was talking to Finn. He was talking to her about her night at the station and the evening before it. The advantage of having my older brother as well as Adam, my sister’s fiancé, in the police was that I had top-rate reliable information, and with this case I was going to put it to use.

“She needs to leave her apartment,” I told Jo. “I’ll suggest it, but it’s more likely, she’ll listen to you than me.”

“What makes you think that? You’re her lawyer, after all.”

“You’re her friend. I’m...”

I didn’t finish my sentence, but I was going to say I was sure she hated me. The truth was that I wasn’t sure why Alix didn’t seem particularly taken with me, but she hadn’t liked me since I’d met her. I hadn’t tried to ask her why because... it didn’t matter. But today it might’ve done me, or rather her, a

disservice if she hadn't listened to my advice just because it came from me.

"I'll try to get her to come to our place, but you know Alix, she's as stubborn as a mule."

No, the truth was that I didn't know Alix. Although I was around her often, eating in her restaurant, or at numerous events with my brothers and their girlfriends, who were her friends, we didn't really talk to each other. She was loud; she liked to be noticed, either by her clothes or her behavior, whereas I was the exact opposite. I didn't exactly hide in the corner, but I appreciated calmness and discretion, two qualities she seemed to be severely lacking in.

"Absolutely not!" said Alix. That was another thing I hated. People eavesdropping. Alix came toward us. "I'm not leaving my apartment. That would just be proving those idiots right."

I tried to argue with her. "You can't contact the Martins and..."

"I know, I was there. I'm just going to work and stay at home, like a good little girl. You don't have to worry."

"That's not what I'm worried about, but what will you do if they come to your apartment?"

She let out a little laugh. "That won't happen. The Martins would rather die than be near me, even when I was dating their son. As for Cyril, he rarely came to my place. I can't imagine him turning up now. Maybe to the restaurant..."

"If they get in contact with you in any way, shape, or form, tell me."

Alix looked at me for a few seconds, and I knew she was about to say she didn't need me—which wasn't true, of course—but to my surprise, she said okay.

"I'll take you home."

"That's not necessary, I think Jo can do it."

"Yes, of course," Jo rushed to reply to her childhood friend.

“My secretary will contact you about a meeting,” I said before turning away.

Since she no longer needed my help, there was no point in staying. I asked Lara if it was possible for her to come to my place that afternoon to discuss something. I said bye to my brothers, telling them I was going back home to rest for a bit. It wasn't a lie—I was exhausted. Except I wasn't a deep sleeper, and I'd sacrificed more than one night for work when necessary. It wasn't my lack of sleep that was bothering me, but I needed to be alone to go over everything. If Alix was in trouble, then I was in trouble. The only difference was that I'd managed to get caught up in it myself, almost voluntarily.

CALLUM

A few hours earlier on December 31

When I pulled up out front of the house—“manor” might be more appropriate—of my boss, Jacques Bonifaci, I was surprised to see a valet walk over to me.

A casual evening with friends. Yeah, right!

Who made people wear a tux or a cocktail dress for an evening with friends?

My boss, Mr. Jacques Bonifaci.

I had a few seconds of doubt when I thought about my brothers having a beer, drinking straight from the bottle, joking about god knows what. I'd never been so jealous of them—apart from when we were kids. Not because I hadn't mastered the art of tying a bowtie or because I was incapable of talking about serious and boring subjects for hours. But because tonight, I just didn't want to be here. My bother Luca was coming back for the first time in months, my sister Lara had just gotten engaged, and this New Year's Eve should be celebrated with family. Instead, I had to spend it with my work colleagues. Talk about a dream evening!

Mr. Bonifaci had assured me there wouldn't be any clients, just lawyers or people working for the courts, which actually meant ass-kissers who wanted to be here as much as I did.

I was one of them, and I knew it. If I did turn up—and not turning up was unacceptable—it certainly wasn't to enjoy my

boss's or his guests' company. It was strictly business... and out of self-interest.

I was on the list—which was very short, with only two names—of lawyers who were in the running to become a new partner. I had completely devoted these last few years to my job, and I'd brought in more business than anyone else. I was the first to arrive in the morning and the last to leave. But the old Mr. Bonifaci was always asking more of me, plus I had a strong opponent: Killian James. He was the son of a top London barrister who had decided to move to the French Riviera to be far away from his father. The problem was that he was stepping on my toes.

Of course, Killian was here at the party, and he'd even gone as far as to ask if he could bring a plus-one. I, however, couldn't think of anyone I hated enough to bring them along to a New Year's party at the Bonifacis' with the rest of the firm. *I am sometimes an altruist.* I was happy enough to say that I was coming with Norma, my assistant, though she was obliged to be there anyway.

Norma was getting dangerously close to retirement and had enough grandkids to scare any babysitter, but she was still in good health. That was probably why she would most likely leave the party in a better state than I would, even though she had the perfect excuse to leave early—after all, you can't refuse an elderly woman from going home early.

I got out of my car, handed over the keys to the valet, and went around to the passenger door to open it for Norma.

“Oh, Callum, you're always such a gentleman.” She laughed, grabbing the hand I held out to her. “Your mother should be proud of you.”

Despite her incredible skills as a paralegal, Norma had the tendency of talking to me like a grandson. I also suspected that she was regularly reporting back to my mother about me. I didn't think too much about it, as long as she wasn't doing it in front of clients or other lawyers. I really didn't want to annoy her and for her to ask to work with someone else. Life was full of compromises, after all.

We took a few steps up to the front door, and the door opened before I'd even had time to ring the bell. In front of us was Jacques Bonifaci, who welcomed us like long-lost family. In truth, although our firm was officially closed for the holidays, I'd run into him at the office this afternoon. *Once a workaholic, always a workaholic!*

"Norma, Callum!"

His wife was next to him with a champagne flute in hand. She must have been twenty years his junior, but with the fake tan, fake boobs, fake eyelashes, acrylic nails, and hair extensions, I wasn't sure if she was a human or a 3D printout.

"Mrs. Bonifaci," I said, holding out my hand.

She grabbed it and pulled me toward her to kiss me on the cheek. "Oh, Callum, you can call me Samantha."

My nostrils were being attacked by her strong perfume and the smell of hairspray, so I didn't reply, afraid of inhaling something toxic. Maybe someone should tell her to stay away from candles. After all, it would be dangerous. But I was her husband's employee, not her nanny.

Luckily for us, other guests arrived. Norma pulled on my arm to tear me away from Samantha Bonifaci and said, "Let's head to the bar. Nobody can survive this evening without a drink, even the president of AA."

I'd promised myself I'd be sensible because I was the designated driver, but she wasn't wrong.

A few minutes later, I had a glass of whiskey in my hand, and Norma had gone to gossip with the other assistants. I was listening to the boring babble of the old judge Edward Houston. I'd bet when he was a lawyer, he probably won against his opponents with boredom.

"Unfortunately, I have to go just after midnight. I'm in charge of the appearances first thing tomorrow morning," he said.

"Oh, that's a shame," I replied with my best poker face. I didn't go overboard with the lie, but I thought I was rather convincing, nonetheless. After all, my job did include acting.

“Edward! Callum! There you are!”

Bonifaci was walking toward us, a bit flushed and way too enthusiastic for it not to be due to alcohol—or maybe the fumes his wife was giving off. He almost never called me by my first name, and this now made two times in one evening. No doubt it was a bad omen.

It wasn't my boss's arrival that annoyed me; after all, he had saved me from a boring conversation. It was the person who was behind him.

“James,” I said in greeting.

I could have chosen to use his first name, but that would have made him seem too important. Anyway, his surname was also a first name.

“Callum, happy New Year.”

“Technically, it's not the new year yet.”

Okay, I was acting like a child, but Killian tended to awaken the immature asshole in me. And I was raised with three brothers and a sister, so reacting like that was an instinct.

Killian, who wasn't fazed in the slightest, turned to the woman on his arm. “Callum, this is Anna. Anna, this is my colleague, Callum Rossi.”

“Oh! I'm so happy to meet you. I've heard so much about you!” she said.

Either she was being very polite, and a bit of a liar, or she had the wrong person because I highly doubted Killian had mentioned me outside of work, and I'd never heard him mention her. Not that I paid a lot of attention to what my colleague said if it wasn't about work.

I grabbed the hand she held out and almost had to bend my knees. She was smaller than average, which was a good thing, considering that being Killian's plus-one automatically put her in the category of people I hated and the fewer of them, the better. She had the biggest, brightest eyes, which were almost disproportionate with the rest of her face, a bit like those scary Disney princesses, and she even had the smile to go with them.

I made an effort to smile myself, as I did feel a bit sorry for her.

I could sense that Bonifaci, who was next to them pacing up and down, was like a kid who was waiting to tell his parents something sensational, but uninteresting, that had happened to him at school. Unsurprisingly, he asked Killian, “Can I tell Callum?”

My heart skipped a beat. Surely, he wasn’t going to announce it tonight...

I froze. I was almost sure that anyone watching saw me turn pale, as if I was about to pass out.

“Do it, do it,” replied Killian, with the confident demeanor of someone who already knew the secret.

Goddammit! That could only mean one thing. He was going to get the partner position!

CALLUM

“Killian and Anna are engaged!” yelled Mr. Bonifaci.

I blinked. I considered myself to be pretty sharp, but it took me a few seconds to understand what he’d just said. “Engaged?” I repeated, as if I’d only just learned the word.

“Killian asked me at Christmas,” said Anna, pink with happiness. “And I said yes.”

“Yes, clearly,” I commented, without really knowing why.

She exchanged a nauseating smile with my biggest enemy that would have made any normal person ill. It was just as I’d imagined. Killian wasn’t really a man; he was probably a cyborg.

“I think congratulations are in order, don’t you, Rossi?”

I’d become Rossi again. I shook my head and did what my boss, my parents, and society in general expected of me. I mumbled, “Congratulations to you both.” I shook Killian’s hand, hoping he wouldn’t take advantage of the situation to take my DNA, and then shook the Tinkerbell-copy’s hand. I was sure Tinkerbell thought I was someone else, because she ignored my hand and jumped around my neck to hug me. It was quite a feat, considering our height difference.

“Killian, I’m so happy to see that you’re able to combine work and home life. You can’t imagine how important it is to find that balance. You can’t have one without the other,” commented Bonifaci.

I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes. The man was married to his job. Barbie Samantha was just there to spend his money and look pretty at parties.

“It’s very important to have a partner who understands the nature of our work and who has the capacity to support us in difficult times. An attentive and caring ear is what I like to have at home waiting for me.”

Anna nodded with a look that was too compassionate to be sincere. I thought Bonifaci’s comment was rather hypocritical, given that everyone at work knew he didn’t come home to his wife most nights.

“Basically, I’m so happy you’re engaged. And like I was saying to Samantha the other day, I don’t want to make yet another shark who’s prepared to sell his mother to succeed as partner. I want someone who understands that life doesn’t just revolve around business. It’s important to keep the human element at the core of our firm, and in my opinion, choosing someone who has both feet firmly planted in family life seemed pretty appropriate.”

Excuse me?

I stared at Bonifaci for a few seconds, trying to work out how intoxicated he was with god only knew what substance. On my right, Killian said, “I can’t agree with your wise words enough. I didn’t know how pointless my life was until Anna came into it.”

At that point I turned my attention to him. Was something wrong with him as well? What happened to the arrogant asshole whose office was just a few steps away from mine? He was taking Tinkerbell’s hand to kiss it. Goddammit, I was in a parallel universe! Or I was dreaming and had to wake up?

“In any case, that gives you one massive advantage in the race for the partner position,” added Bonifaci.

Is he mocking me?

My throat tightened, and fortunately, I wasn’t drinking, otherwise it would have come out of my nose. And everyone

knew there was nothing more embarrassing than that... apart from announcing an engagement maybe?

“I don’t remember there being any mention of marital or personal relationship status in the criteria for becoming a partner,” I said.

“Oh, Rossi. Surely you know that, like with any recruitment, there’s the written criteria and the more...”

“More?”

“Subjective. A candidate’s emotional stability obviously counts.”

“Emotional stability?”

“Yes, like I just said, it’s important that a partner who’s going to have heavy responsibilities has a steady home life. Plus, a single partner would find it much easier to leave to another firm or even another town, but someone who has roots here, who has chosen to raise children here, would be more inclined to stay.”

Okay, now I felt like I was in the 1950s. This conversation was really starting to annoy me. I turned to Anna and decided she was my sacrificial lamb—I never said I was a good person.

“Do you want children, Anna?”

The young woman turned even more pink than before and said, “Yes, one day. For now, I want to concentrate on my career.”

Take that, Bonifaci. Who was to say she wouldn’t run off to the other side of the world and take Killian with her?

“Oh yeah? What do you do? I don’t remember Killian mentioning it.”

I glanced to Killian. I was sure he’d never spoken of her to me.

I was hoping she’d say that she dreamed of joining Doctors Without Borders or wanted to become a teacher in Chili, or why not start an eco-farm in Thailand?

“I design children’s clothes.”

Shame. Of course Minnie Mouse had a cute, baby-friendly job. “Children’s clothes? But isn’t it better to be in Paris, Milan, or New York for fashion?”

She shook her head vigorously. “Oh no. I have a little brand. I work from home, actually, and that works for me.”

Killian moved closer to her and put his arm around her shoulders. “Which will be very handy when we have kids.”

I didn’t know what was more pathetic, the fact that he didn’t encourage her to be more ambitious or that he really thought it was possible to work from home while looking after kids.

“Killian, it’s the 21st century. Don’t tell me you haven’t thought about working from home to help look after the kids.”

If he said no, he’d look like an asshole to his fiancée, but if he said yes, our boss might see that all that about family stability and blah, blah, blah didn’t match the rhythm of work he expected of us.

But old judge Houston, who’d been silent up until that point, and who I’d almost forgotten about, chose now to chime in. “It’s good to see men join in with raising children. I must admit that I regret not seeing mine grow up.”

Our boss nodded his head. Killian gave me a sly smile. I replied with a blasé look. Bonifaci added, “I’m happy to hear about your engagement, Killian. And I hope, Rossi, that you’ll follow his example.”

He was Killian, and I was Rossi?

Follow his example? I’d rather die!

That was the moment Killian did something that made me crack. While Anna was showing off her ring to Bonifaci (seriously?) he mouthed, “I’ve won.”

Won? Just because he’d given a woman nobody had ever heard of a ring? Not a chance! I wasn’t going to be knocked out of the race for partner over something like that!

“I propose a toast,” I said, loud enough everyone looked at me, plus a few people around us who had been pretending not to

be following our conversation.

All of them raised a glass, with expressions ranging from Anna's stupid joy to Killian's suspicious look. He suspected I was up to something.

"To the happy couple and to the coming good year!"

"To the happy couple and the new year!" repeated the guests.

"A year that is bound to be happy, as my dear colleague Killian has just announced he's getting married to the ravishing Anna."

There were cries of excitement and surprise. For a few moments, the lovebirds were the center of attention. I gave them their moment of joy and happiness so I could savor what was coming. Killian's expression didn't disappoint when I added, "And I hope you enjoy wearing formal wear, because it's going to be an event-filled year. I'm pleased to announce I'm also getting married!"

The applause that followed made me smile, as well as made me realize how stupid what I'd just done was.

Get married? To whom?

CALLUM

January 1, late afternoon.

Lara blinked.

I blinked.

She opened her mouth and then closed it again.

“You’re not going to say anything?” I asked

She shook her head. The fact that she was speechless wasn’t a good thing. According to our dad, she’d arrived in this world screaming, and she’d made noise ever since. So, silence was even scarier.

“What exactly do you want me to say? That up until now I thought you were the most rational of my brothers, but I now realize I was wrong?”

“It’s completely rational. Killian used his fiancée like a pawn in a game of chess. I can’t get left behind. I... At the time it seemed like a good idea!”

“To pretend you were engaged? You don’t even have a girlfriend!”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t matter?!” she yelled. “Do you realize that in order to be engaged you need two people?”

“Well, I didn’t think you were so narrowminded, Lara.”

“Do you really think this is a time for jokes?”

She got up off the couch and started walking toward the kitchen, running her hand over her face.

“Are you sure they believed you? How did you manage to get them to think you were engaged? A New Year’s party is the perfect place to bring your fiancée, but you went alone.”

“I pretended she already had plans and we’d only recently gotten engaged. Last night was a professional thing, so I said I didn’t want to mix work and my personal life, unlike Killian.”

She glared at me. “And what’s this famous fiancée’s name?”

“No idea, that remains to be seen.”

She continued, pronouncing every word as if she was making sure she had it right. “You managed to talk about a girl that doesn’t exist for an entire evening without saying her name? I’ll ask again: Do you really think they believed you?”

“I’m a lawyer, Lara. I can trick people with my speeches—it’s my specialty. And it wasn’t that hard to dodge the questions. The important thing is that Bonifaci believed me. I think Killian has his doubts, but that’s in phase two of the plan.”

“Now you’re scaring me. What’s phase two?”

“Find a young woman. Anna, Killian’s fiancée, ate my lie up and invited me and my mysterious companion to their place for dinner.”

“Ah yes, because you’re thinking of carrying on with this lie! Callum, you made a mistake. Go see your boss, make up an excuse, tell him... I don’t know! You drank too much, you had a painful breakup, and it was a moment of madness.”

“What don’t you understand about what I said? My boss wants a partner with a stable home life. I’m not going to go see him and tell him I can’t handle a drink at a party!”

“But goddammit, Callum! Don’t you realize the severity of what you’ve done? What are you going to do? Go out with the first girl you see and pretend she’s your fiancée?”

I grimaced. “No, I’m not going to go out with anyone. At least not in a way that...”

I wasn't going to discuss my sex life with my sister, so I said, "I'll hire someone."

"An escort?" she said, shocked.

"No! Someone... Actually, that's why you're here. I thought you could help me."

I thought she was going to vomit. "You want me to pretend to be your fiancée," she said bluntly.

"Huh? No!" I hastily replied. "God, no! Plus, everyone at work knows you're my sister. No, I meant that you could help me find the ideal candidate, given you deal with weddings and all that..."

This time, she stared at me in disbelief. "Callum, I'm a wedding planner. I organize wedding receptions. I don't have anything to do with what goes on before: the meeting, the flirting, the living together, you know that."

"Maybe you know someone..."

"I meet couples every day. *Couples*, not single people. What are you suggesting? That after the meeting I ask one of my brides-to-be, in front of her fiancé, if she wants to pretend to be my brother's fiancée, since she already has a ring on her finger?"

"I'll admit, asking for your help wasn't the smartest move," I mumbled.

"No. Quite frankly it was stupid. Callum, get over your ego, go see your boss, and tell him you messed up."

"I might as well be giving Killian my balls on a silver platter."

"No position is worth getting yourself into all this."

"You don't understand."

"Clearly not."

"I need this position! I've worked for it for years. I was so close to my dream, and then that bastard Killian comes over from London and erases years of work, all because he decided to adopt a dwarf? Absolutely not!"

“To start with, you should stop talking about his fiancée like that. That poor woman hasn’t done anything wrong. You know you’re not the nicest person on this earth, which might explain why your boss is looking at another candidate. Someone who is nicer to their colleagues, maybe.”

“I am nice to my colleagues.”

“Oh yeah, who?”

“Norma, Roxane...”

That was pretty much it.

“You’re nice to Norma, that I know, but I’m sure it’s because otherwise she’d be able to make your life a living hell. As for Roxane, you respect her because she does a job that nobody else is capable of doing, and she scares you. Plus, you know that if you mess with her, you’ll have to deal with Finn and probably Remy, Luc, and me. But you know what your problem is, Callum? You’re guided by your ego. Maybe it’s time you came back down to earth and accepted the fact that you’re not the best at what you do.”

I was the best, which was why I wasn’t going to let myself be beaten by some guy who was worse than me just because he was getting married. Still, I knew this argument wasn’t going to help me get my sister on my side.

“So, you can’t recommend me anyone?”

“At what point did I make it seem like I was going to help you with your lie?”

“The moment I remind you that I’m your loving older brother and siblings stick together?”

I knew I was playing my last card, and I wasn’t even sure that it really was one.

“Seriously? You think I’m going to help you just because you’re my brother?”

“I helped you, this morning, get Alix out of prison.”

“Yes, and thank you for that. But she’s also your friend, isn’t she?”

“Not really,” I mumbled before offering, “What if I get Killian to call you to organize his wedding?” She opened her eyes even wider. “I’m sure it’ll be a lovely wedding. He makes good money. His dad is...”

“Callum, you do realize that not everyone puts their job first, right? Sometimes people have principles. I’m not going to ignore mine for some stupid contract.”

“What exactly are the principles you would ignore?”

She sighed and shook her head. “You’re even more desperate than I thought!”

She picked up her bag and walked toward the exit. I jumped up and ran after her. “Lara, wait!”

“Don’t try and convince me to help you again, it’s not worth it. I just hope you learn your lesson. Grow up, Callum.”

CALLUM

I arrived at work in a bad mood. I hadn't slept well. I'd been tossing and turning all night trying to figure out how I was going to get myself out of this situation.

I knew Lara was right, and deep down that was what annoyed me. But my little sister definitely didn't understand what had pushed me to do this. Plus, if there was one thing I hated more than anything else in this world, it was losing. When I walked into the courtroom, I came out a winner. People didn't blame an athlete for always wanting to win. I didn't run to get my victories, but I definitely wasn't going to accept defeat. I was a male Monica Geller; I was going to win. I was absolutely going to win over Killian for the partner position, no matter what anyone said. He was going to have to go cry to Miss Lilliputian and blow his nose in her baby clothes.

Anna, I corrected myself.

I had to stop giving her ridiculous nicknames because I was having dinner with her at the end of the week, and I didn't want to risk saying anything. Plus, as Lara pointed out, she hadn't done anything wrong. It wasn't her fault she was marrying an asshole. If she had even an ounce of sense, she'd figure it out at some point, hopefully before he put a ring on her finger. Otherwise, she'd make one of my colleagues very happy by telling them about her divorce. I wasn't in family law, but I would make an exception for her if she asked.

I walked down the firm corridors, which were still empty, to get to my office. I glanced around as I passed Killian's office. If he was in there, I didn't want him to see me paying him any

attention. But as I'd guessed, he wasn't in yet. He must be too busy having breakfast with Miss...

Anna. I have to call her Anna.

But one person was already in and waiting for me in my office.

"Norma? What are you doing?"

She was an early bird, but she didn't normally get in before me. The fact that she was looking at me with a grave face was concerning.

"I wanted to talk to you before everyone else got here."

"Is it one of your grandkids? Did something happen?" I asked, placing a hand on her shoulder.

She moved away. "My grandkids are fine. It's you I'm worried about."

I frowned, and she added, "Sit down."

I knew I shouldn't let her speak to me like I was in trouble, but... it was Norma. I sat down in my chair on the other side of the desk rather than next to her. If I'd have stayed within arm's reach, she could have given me a smack on the head. Now that I knew it was something personal, I had a suspicion what it was about. She didn't beat around the bush. "What's all this about you getting married?"

I smiled and said, "Ah, yes, it's quite simple really, I met someone and..."

"Don't lie to me, Callum Rossi. Do you think I was born yesterday? There's no young girl, no fiancée, you made it all up to get back at Killian. I'd have known if you had any kind of love life."

I opened my mouth to tell her that she was wrong, but the look in her eyes stopped me. This woman has missed her calling by working in law instead. She would have been much more useful in secret intelligence. Of course, she would have known if there was anyone in my life.

“You’re lucky I waited to talk to you this morning. I could have phoned your mother to congratulate her yesterday. Can you imagine the situation you’d be in now?”

Yes, I had an inkling. “Thanks for not doing that,” I mumbled.

“It was for her sake, not yours. I knew it wasn’t true. So, why did you lie?”

“You know why.”

“Yes, but up until now you’ve been happy to stand out professionally and not play games. But a marriage, Callum? What difference does that make for Mr. Bonifaci?”

“He was the one who said he wasn’t just looking for a new partner with an exemplary professional background, but that the personal side counted as well! That was when he proudly announced that Killian was getting married!”

I ran my hand over my face and fell back into my chair with a sigh. “I... I don’t know what came over me,” I tried to justify. “I wasn’t thinking...”

“Clearly,” she taunted.

I glared at her.

“Do you really think Bonifaci is going to make you partner when you tell him you lied? You’re in a lot of trouble, Callum.”

“I... I don’t have to tell him?”

She frowned. “You’re not a liar, Callum, you know better than that.”

“But there are exceptional circumstances, right?”

“Let’s say you don’t confess, then how...”

“Yes, I know, I need a fiancée.”

“I think you’re smart enough to know that’s not something you find at the supermarket.”

“I know. Actually, I need a fake fiancée.”

“Are you really—”

“Yes,” I cut her off.

She didn't like my reply, and she didn't hide it. But Norma, unlike my sister, always agreed to help me, even when it went against her principles. Well, up to a certain point. I couldn't imagine that she would agree to help me murder Killian.

“What are my morning appointments?” I asked to change the subject.

Norma told me I had a relatively light morning. Nobody liked seeing their lawyer on New Year's Day.

“If you want, I can see if Ms. Dalmasso is free this afternoon?” she suggested.

Ah yes, Alix. I have to take care of that.

“That can wait a few days. I don't have any more information about the case for the moment.”

“Are you thinking about taking on the case or giving it to Mr. Ning?”

Mathis Ning was the firm's youngest lawyer, and he had just finished law school. He was rather promising, and normally, given that it was a rather simple case, I would have given it to him. But because this was Alix, I was going to have the entire Rossi family on my back if I didn't personally take care of the case.

“No, I'm going to take it. Ms. Dalmasso is... a family friend,” I finished.

“Isn't that the young woman who owns the restaurant you often have lunch at? The *Taula Nissarda*?”

“That's the one. It's practical because it's close,” I justified, even though she hadn't asked.

“And Ms. Dalmasso is a charming young woman.”

“Not really, if you want my opinion.”

“Then why do you go there?”

“Because it's convenient and she's a friend of my brothers, like I said.”

“I don’t eat somewhere if I don’t like the restaurant owner. Even if it’s down the street and it’s the best food in town.”

“What’s your point?” I said, annoyed.

“Nothing. I’m just surprised you want to take this case when you don’t even like Ms. Dalmasso.”

“I don’t think serial killers’ lawyers are big fans of their clients, but they still take the case.”

The difference was that series killers made for particularly challenging cases. Norma had the grace not to point that out.

“You’re probably right,” she said with a small smile on her lips that I didn’t like.

She got up to go to her own office, but before she left, she asked, “What do I do if someone asks me questions about your fiancée?”

“Nobody’s going to ask you anything, for now. This isn’t *People* magazine.”

She let out a little laugh. “Just because you don’t take part in the office gossip doesn’t mean there isn’t any. I promise you that by the end of the day, everyone will know.”

“Well, you’ll just have to avoid the questions. I’m sure you’ll manage it.”

“I should at least know the name of your fiancée, as your assistant.”

“Given that I don’t have one, I can’t tell you.”

“You should fix that, Callum. Otherwise, people will quickly figure it out.”

I dedicated the next few hours to going through my phone contacts. I wasn’t looking to wish people a happy New Year, but rather for a potential fiancée. But no name particularly stood out to me. Last night I thought about searching “fiancée for rent” on Google, but I couldn’t do it. I had to admit it seemed completely desperate and unhealthy.

I also took the opportunity to clean up my contact list. Who was Blonde Audrey or Brunette Amandine? Well, I kind of

knew, but my mother wouldn't have liked it. I stopped at the name Gabrielle, a colleague I saw regularly... and not to talk about law. Under her lawyer's robe she had the body of a goddess, and I'd explored its contours on more than one occasion. I couldn't ask her to play my fake fiancée, even if I thought she might find it amusing. She'd hated Killian almost as much as I did ever since he'd humiliated her in court, but he'd never be fooled by her. She was known for being as dedicated to her career and afraid of commitment as I was.

At least, until recently. She'd offered for me to spend the night at her place twice, even though that wasn't normal for us, and she'd even suggested that we go out for dinner. I had to admit I was a bit alarmed, and I hadn't called her for a while.

My office door opened, and I jumped, as if I'd just been up to something shameful—which I had.

I looked up to see, my brother Finn's girlfriend, who was looking at me with wide eyes.

Officially Roxane worked for the firm as an IT specialist. In reality, her talents weren't just limited to updating our email system. If you needed sensitive information, then Roxane was the person you needed to see. She was a bit like Felicity Smoak from *Arrow*. I was the one who'd brought her into the firm. She was so good at her job that the boss would look past any little whim she had, such as dying her hair pink or an exemption from the firm's New Year's Eve party.

“Do you want to explain what this whole marriage thing is about?”

Norma was right, gossip traveled quickly in the office.

CALLUM

“I can explain everything, but please don’t yell,” I said, glancing nervously into the corridor.

The offices were glass, so I saw that a few of the employees were watching me curiously. Was it because of Roxane’s theatrical nature or the gossip? I didn’t know.

“Let’s just say I felt rather stupid when Greg from accounting asked me about your upcoming wedding. Given that I’m your sister-in-law and family is usually the first to find out...” She glared at me, and I was pretty sure she’d learned that killer look from Finn.

“What did you say?”

“I was smart enough to neither confirm nor deny it. That was when our colleague told me you’d announced it on New Year’s Eve. I managed to get out of it by saying you’d wanted to keep it private, so I hadn’t said anything. And when I say *you*, I have no idea who this second person is!”

“Ah, that’s the funny bit... there isn’t anyone at the moment,” I whispered. She looked at me as if I’d lost my mind. I glanced at the corridor again. “Listen, I can explain everything, but not here. If people ask you, just be as vague as possible.”

She nodded. Roxane used to be a professional con artist, so lying shouldn’t be a problem for her.

“We’re having lunch together. I won’t wait another minute,” she said, pointing at me. The women around me had a tendency to be a bit bossy.

“Okay, send me a text about where to meet you.”

As she was leaving my office, I realized that I should have told her beforehand. If there was someone who could help me, it was her.

I decided to look for the perfect fiancée later and get back to my emails. But after a few minutes, there was a knock on my door.

Killian.

I struggled to hide my annoyance at seeing him in my doorway, as well as to not ask him if he remembered where he’d put his pocket fiancée.

“What can I do for you?”

The tone I used would have convinced 90% of people to leave, but not Killian James. It had the opposite effect. He came in and sat down on one of my couches, as if I’d invited him to do so. Hell would freeze over before that happened.

“I came to talk to you about dinner Friday night.” An icy chill ran down my spine. “Anna wants to know if your fiancée is allergic to anything or doesn’t eat certain foods?”

“She’s vegetarian,” I said without even thinking.

I felt like it was a more... real characteristic? And at least if I chose a real-life vegetarian, they wouldn’t have to find themselves face to face with a steak. I thought I was being smart.

My reply seemed to surprise Killian, but he hastened to add, “Okay, I was right to ask.”

“Yes, sorry, with work, the... stress of the engagement, I completely forgot to mention it.”

“You had an engagement party?”

“Yes, well... just a small one. Just family, you know.”

“Given the number of brothers and sisters you have, that’s not that small,” he joked.

“Erm... yeah.”

“Does your fiancée have a big family?”

What are these questions? What does it matter anyway?

“No, not that big,” I said.

He may want to meet them. I just wanted him out of my office, so I said, “Why don’t we talk about all this on Friday? Sorry, but I have to write some closing statements for a case and...”

As he had some manners, he got up, but when he got to the door he said, “It looks like yesterday you asked for an immediate appearance?”

“Yes?”

“I heard that it had something to do with the fire at the Martins?”

“Yes, what’s your point?” I said, annoyed.

“Just so you know, I saw them go into Bonifaci’s office when I came in.”

He turned on his heels and disappeared into the corridor. What did he mean by that, and why was Killian warning me?

My phone vibrated in my pocket. It was a message from Roxane.

*** Lunch 12:30 Taula Nissarda. ***

Of all the places she could have chosen, it had to be there.

At 12:30, I met with Roxane. She was sitting down at a table a little way in and was in the middle of talking with Alix, who had two menus in her hand.

I walked up and said, “Hello, ladies.”

Roxane rolled her eyes, and Alix turned toward me with a slight smile on her lips that disappeared when she saw me.

“Callum,” she said politely.

She'd assumed her normal demeanor. She was wearing a retro blue polka-dot dress, her brown hair up in a bun tied with a matching ribbon. She was wearing red lipstick, and her hazel eyes were lined with eyeliner. She handed me a menu and said, "I'll leave you to choose. I'll come back in a bit to take your order."

I watched her walk away. Watching her smile at her customers, nobody would have guessed that just 24 hours earlier she'd been in tears in jail.

"Hey! Earth calling Callum," said Roxane in her annoying voice.

"Yes?"

"So, what's the story about the wedding?"

I explained everything to my sister-in-law. She seemed surprised, just like Lara, but when I'd finished explaining she said, "Goddammit, Callum. What the hell have you gotten yourself into?"

I closed my eyes for a second. "I have no idea."

"So, where exactly are you planning to meet your famous fiancée?"

"You're not going to try and convince me it's a bad idea?" I said, surprised.

"It's an incredibly stupid idea, but I understand why you did it. Killian's an asshole."

"You can say that again."

"But you're still in trouble."

"Can you help me?" She raised her eyebrow inquisitively. "Help me find a fake fiancée," I specified.

"Erm, well... I have many talents, but I don't know many people for the job. I mean, I could ask my friend Viki..."

"No!"

She burst out laughing. "You're right, nobody would believe you're together."

I guessed Viki had... qualities, but her tacky outfits and makeup were enough not to cast her as my ideal fiancée. Not that there was any competition at the moment.

“Have you asked Alix?”

I almost spat out my water. “Huh?”

“Yes, Alix. She’s single at the moment, and you did her a favor yesterday in court. You can say it’s repaying the favor.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Why not?”

“For the same reason as Viki. Nobody will imagine that we’re together.”

“But you both have so much in common!”

“We both breathe air, that’s about the only thing we have in common.”

“You—”

“End of discussion, Roxane. I need someone else.”

She crossed her arms, clearly upset. “At this point your only option is blackmail.”

“Meaning?”

“Find someone you can manipulate into helping you.”

“Any other advice?”

“Well, this is what you get when you ask a con artist to help you. And let me remind you, you’re not clean either, Mr. I-told-you-so.”

Our conversation was interrupted when Alix came to take our orders. I widened my eyes so that Roxane would know not to bring up the subject in front of her. The last thing I needed was for her to know what was happening in my life.

When I was about to leave to head back to the office, Alix yelled out, “Callum!”

I turned around, my hands in my pockets. She stood in front of me, looking nervous.

“Yes?”

“I... I wanted to thank you for yesterday.” She was whispering, and I knew she didn’t want her clientele to hear us.

“You’re welcome,” I said indifferently.

In truth, I was annoyed that everyone except her had thanked me yesterday.

“Your secretary called me to arrange a meeting. I told her I’d already made an appointment with another lawyer.”

This news took me by surprise. “Another lawyer?”

“Yes, I think it’s better,” she said.

I had a thousand reasons come to mind that said otherwise, but I stayed quiet. It was her right to be represented by whomever she chose. If she didn’t want me, I wasn’t going to chase after her.

“Okay. Well, see you later.”

“See you later,” she replied.

I hardly heard her. I was already halfway out the door. But I knew our paths would cross again, even if it was only when I needed lunch.

ALIX

I didn't open my restaurant on Monday nights, so it was one of the rare nights I had off. My plans were pretty simple. A rom-com, a light meal, and an enormous tub of ice cream, all eaten in my pjs with only my cat Darcy for company. I knew I corresponded perfectly to the Bridget Jones cliché. I was just missing singing Celine Dion at the top of my lungs.

It was the perfect evening for the loser that I was.

But that was without counting my friends. As I was putting the *Love, Actually* DVD into the player—I was counting on Hugh Grant's dancing to put me in a good mood, the doorbell rang. It was Jo and Cleo with a pizza and a bottle of wine in hand.

"I forgot we had plans?" I said, surprised.

Jo pointed at Cleo. "No, but this one just dropped Luca off at the airport and needs some cheering up, and you owe us an explanation about the New Year's party, so I decided to kill two birds with one stone."

I wasn't sure I wanted to recap last night's catastrophe, but I opened the door anyway.

The girls immediately went into my sitting room. Jo got the glasses out of the cupboard, as well as a bottle of water for me, and Cleo picked up the DVD case and sighed. "I'm not sure this is what I need right now."

Jo rolled her eyes. "I'm going to need another night to recover from this one with you two."

"Then why did you come?" I asked.

“Because I’m a doctor, and I didn’t want to have your depression on my conscience.”

“The famous hypocrite’s oath,” mumbled Cleo.

We were sat around my coffee table. My apartment was the size of a shoebox, but I liked it, especially as it was just above the restaurant.

We’d hardly sat down when Jo started questioning me. “So, may we know what possessed you to go and see Cyril on New Year’s Eve?”

“Goddammit, you don’t beat around the bush! You’ve been here two minutes and you’re already grilling me.”

Knowing Jo, it wasn’t that surprising. To tell the truth, I was surprised she’d driven me home yesterday without an interrogation.

“I... I...” I slumped over and reluctantly admitted, “I know it was stupid. But when he texted me, inviting me to the party... I don’t know. I thought that maybe... I thought I saw something that wasn’t there.”

“You thought he was going to get back together with you?”

Hearing it out loud made it seem even more ridiculous.

“I know you think I’m pathetic. You’ve warned me about him more than once. But... I can’t help myself. I know that sometimes he behaves like an asshole, but sometimes he’s really lovely to me. And when I got that text, I guess I was feeling a bit lonely and was thinking back to the good old days...”

My two friends were staring at me with a look on their faces that I didn’t like. There was pity in their eyes, and I hated that.

“Sometimes that’s just not enough,” said Jo, which annoyed me.

She was lucky enough to have a boyfriend who worshipped the ground she walked on. She had great parents, a job she loved, basically everything was going great for her. Me, on the other hand, not so much...

I looked down at my hands and my red nail varnish, as if it was the most fascinating thing in the world.

“I know I’m naïve. I went in the hope that he’d tell me I was the woman of his dreams and he wanted me back. Instead, his parents announced his engagement to someone else.”

Cleo grimaced and put her hand on mine, squeezing it tightly. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. What was I thinking? Who makes a declaration of love to someone they haven’t seen in weeks?”

“Hugh Grant?” suggested Cleo.

“In rom-coms! In real life he had affairs with prostitutes,” said Jo.

Cleo glared at her and asked, “So why did he invite you? To rub his happiness in your face? If that’s the case, then he instantly wins the prize for biggest asshole of the century.”

I shook my head. “No, he wanted to tell me he was breaking the lease on my restaurant and apartment.”

I’d barely finished my sentence when I burst into tears. The *Taula Nissarda* was my life. It was my favorite place in the world, the reason I’d worked so hard, the only thing I was proud of. And he was going to take it away from me.

“Oh, Alix!” said Cleo before getting up to hug me. “Don’t cry over that asshole, he’s not worth it.”

I sobbed against her for a few moments, but I needed to add, “Actually, all this really opened my eyes. I realized that I don’t actually care if Cyril marries someone else, but I won’t stand for him taking away my restaurant.”

“You won’t lose your restaurant. You’ll fight him, and we’ll help you. I’m sure Callum can find a solution,” said Jo.

“I fired Callum,” I said, sniffing rather unglamorously.

“Huh? Why?” said both of my friends in astonishment at the same time.

“He doesn’t like me. He only came to help me yesterday to please you guys. I don’t want to bother him with my case. If

he doesn't want it, he won't fight for me. Do you understand?"

"I think you're underestimating Callum's professional qualities. This guy lives to win, regardless of whether or not he likes you. He'll make sure he wins the case," said Jo.

"He hates me," I replied.

"Are you sure about that?" asked Cleo. "Because I get the impression that—"

"I'm sure. When he came to see me in prison yesterday, he seemed about as happy as a guy who's about to undergo a colonoscopy."

"In his defense, it was the middle of the night, and he had to abandon his plans with us to attend a work party," said Cleo. "I'd have been pretty annoyed too."

"He hardly ever talks to me when he sees me."

"But he eats at your restaurant every week, how's that possible?" said Jo, surprised.

"Of course, he talks to me when he orders, but that's about it. Most of the time, when he looks at me, I feel like I annoy him."

"He's not the friendliest person in the world," conceded Cleo. "He's a bit like Finn in that regard."

"There's a difference between the two, I assure you. I feel like Callum is angry with me for something."

"You haven't asked him why?" asked Jo.

"No, why would I do that?"

She shrugged before replying, "I don't know. To lighten the mood? Even if he doesn't come to your restaurant, you'll have to see him from time to time because of us. So, I don't know, maybe it's time to sort it all out, and then at least you'll know where you stand."

"Ah, yes, because the moment he tells me he doesn't like me because of my face, everything will be better!"

“No, but if it’s something as stupid as that, you’ll know that it’s not worth your time trying to be nice to him,” said Jo. “But something tells me it’s not just that.”

“So what could it be?”

“No idea. Only he can tell you.”

“That’s not likely to happen, given that we hardly ever talk.”

“Unless you allow him to defend you.”

“I already told you that I fired him. And I already told him. Plus, I don’t have the money to pay him.”

“You know very well he’ll do it for free,” argued Jo.

“Exactly, I don’t want to be pitied.”

“You’re just as stubborn as he is,” said Cleo.

“Gee, thanks. I thought this evening was supposed to cheer me up.”

“Okay, let’s not talk about Callum or your problem with the Martins anymore. Let’s watch a rom-com instead,” suggested Cleo.

“The first thing you told me when you got here was that you didn’t want to watch a rom-com.”

“You know that they say. Only idiots don’t change their minds...”

CALLUM

I was certain I was the last one in the office when I heard my boss call me. “Rossi, great, you’re still here.”

I stopped myself from pointing out that Killian had already left. He was clever enough to have figured that out for himself.

“What can I do for you, sir?”

Jacques Bonifaci was the type of guy who loved being called sir, even if he was talking to his baker. I wouldn’t have been surprised if his wife or his mistresses called him that in private as well.

“As you well know, I received the Martins this afternoon...”

“The real estate promoters,” I finished for him. “I wasn’t aware they were our clients.”

“Well, they’re not, but... they’re thinking about it.”

“We’re not exactly business law specialists, and I thought the Durant firm was taking care of them?” Our firm were mostly criminal lawyers, like me, or specialists in civil cases.

“They came about something else, and Durant actually referred them to us. He plays golf with Killian.”

Killian. Can he stop ruining my life?

I remembered that he’d warned me about the Martins that morning... What was he up to?

“What type of problem did they want to meet with you for?”

“I know you’re up to date about their house that was burned down on New Year’s Eve.”

“Somewhat, and it was an accident,” I added.

“That’s not what they seem to think, but it doesn’t matter. I was surprised to learn that you defended the arsonist at an immediate hearing?”

“That’s true, but as far as I’m aware, nothing prevented me from doing so.” I was defensive because I had a feeling things were going to go badly.

“No, actually. You have the right to choose your cases, however...” There was a moment of silence. He did this on purpose to emphasize what he was going to say next. “I’m going to have to ask you to drop the case.”

He didn’t know Alix had fired me a bit earlier, and I should have told him, but I preferred that he learn that later. “Why?”

“Because although I don’t doubt that it was an accident and you had your reasons for wanting to help this poor girl, it’s the Martins. And you know this town well enough to know what that means.”

I sank back into my chair and crossed my arms. I didn’t generally like him telling me what to do and even less so in this situation. I had my boss in front of me, but the Martins didn’t scare me. In fact, the opposite was true. If I could find a way to be an inconvenience to them, and to their miserable son in particular, I’d happily do it.

“The Martins have a certain influence around here. Don’t tell me they came to pressure you and make me abandon my client?”

“No, it’s better than that,” he said with sparkling eyes. “They offered to allow us to represent them in this case. They’re thinking of suing Ms. Dalmasso. Mrs. Martin was very shaken up by the fire and...”

“Is this a joke? She just has to call up her insurance company, choose a new decorator for the kitchen, preferably one that won’t suggest curtains, a good coat of paint, and that’s it.”

“It’s more complicated than that. It turns out that Ms. Dalmasso is also their tenant, but I suppose you already know that.”

“Let me guess. They want to take the opportunity to kick her out?” He nodded.

“Of course, everything I’ve just told you falls under professional secrecy. You can’t...”

“Have you already signed with them?” I yelled.

“No, but it doesn’t matter. Before they do, they want us to renounce Ms. Dalmasso as a client. I believe she’s a friend of yours, but Callum, I think you could take this case for the Martins. It’ll just be a simple formality for you to win. It’ll be great for your career to have them as clients, don’t you think?”

“No.”

Bonifaci clearly wasn’t expecting my answer. He widened his eyes before composing himself. I was angry, even if I was trying my best not to show it. Represent the Martins? Pigs would fly before I ever lifted a finger to help them.

“Should I ask Killian...”

“No need. We’re not going to take the case.”

“And may I know why?” asked Bonifaci with a tone that told me he didn’t appreciate my reaction.

“Because I can’t abandon Ms. Dalmasso.”

“If she’s really your friend, she’ll understand that it’s for the good of your career. You can give her to a colleague...”

“No, not possible.” I took a deep breath before saying, “Because Ms. Dalmasso is my fiancée.”

I would have found Bonifaci’s face hilarious if inside I wasn’t screaming, *Goddammit, Callum! What the hell are you doing?*

“Your... your fiancée?” he stammered.

“Yes, I told you on New Year’s Eve that I was getting married.”

“Yes, but...”

“So, I’m going to marry Alix Dalmasso.”

“You’re going to marry Alix Dalmasso,” he repeated, as if to be sure that he understood. “The young woman the Martins want to sue?”

“The very same.”

Bonifaci let a few seconds go by before asking, “So, on New Year’s...”

“She started the fire at the Martins *by accident*, while I was announcing my engagement.”

“Well then...”

“Yes, I know it’s a strange coincidence, but that’s my Alix, always a bit clumsy.”

I finished my sentence with a slight laugh that was too nervous to be honest. Luckily, Bonifaci was too shocked to notice.

“And you know that her and the Martin boy...”

“Yes, I know,” I cut him off. He obviously thought it was the reaction of a man that was jealous of his fiancée’s ex.

“Well...”

“You understand why I can’t abandon the case.”

“Yes,” he said, nodding as if he wasn’t entirely convinced.

“Family is important, you told me so yourself. And what’s more important than defending the woman who’s to be my wife?”

He wrinkled his nose and said, “That’s very unfortunate. The Martins probably won’t want to work with us in the future.”

“That’s possible.”

Did I realize that I’d just put myself in a delicate position because of Alix? Yes. The truth was that with or without her, I didn’t want the Martins to become our clients.

Shortly after, Bonifaci left my office. I was getting angrier and angrier, and I realized what I’d just done.

I told Bonifaci Alix is my fiancée!

Alix didn't even want me to represent her.

I only spoke to Alix when necessary.

Alix hated me.

Worse still, I was supposed to have dinner at Killian and Anna's on Friday with my fiancée! My fiancée who was now... Alix!

"Goddammit, what the hell have I gotten myself into!" I said out loud.

I picked up my things to go home. I wasn't in the mood to work on my cases. I still didn't understand what had happened.

How could you have let this happen, Callum?

I had to try and figure it out, to find a solution. Could I convince Alix? Tell Bonifaci it was all a lie? I didn't know. I took out my phone to send a message.

*** Can I swing by your place? ***

CALLUM

As I knocked, I realized it had been a while since I'd been here, and I immediately felt bad.

"Come in, it's open!"

I followed the instructions and pushed the handle. The door closed behind me with a little click. I took off my shoes, making sure not to leave them lying in the hall. I hung up my coat and headed for the sitting room. The TV was showing an English soccer game, if I wasn't mistaken, but nobody was on the couch.

"In the kitchen," said Raphael, who must have realized I was looking for him.

I walked toward the kitchen and found my friend in front of the fridge, grabbing two beers. When he saw me, he put them on his lap and rolled over toward me in his wheelchair.

"Hey, buddy. Long time, no see."

We exchange a complicated handshake that involved high fives, fist bumps, and ended in a hug. It was a routine we'd had since we were in school, and we'd kept it up ever since, even if I had to bend over to finish it. Raphael, my best friend, had been in a wheelchair for several years now.

"Happy New Year," I said.

"You too. How's this one starting? From the look of you, I'm guessing not very well."

I gestured to the sitting room with my chin, and he understood. I was going to tell him everything, which was partly the reason

I was here, but I was also going to drink my beer.

We sat on the couch, and Raphael uncapped the two bottles. I asked him a few questions about what he'd been up to recently, and for a few minutes, we avoided the real reason I was here. Only when things went silent did I confess, "I think I'm in trouble, and the worst thing is that I got into it all on my own."

Raphael sat back on the couch and crossed his arms, with an amused smile on his lips. Seeing him like this, it was hard to imagine that his legs didn't work anymore. He'd always been sporty, and that hadn't stopped after his accident, so his biceps had to be twice as big as mine.

"Tell me," he said.

I told him about everything that had happened since New Year's Eve. The fake engagement announcement, the fire Alix started, the hearing, the rivalry with Killian, and finally that I'd just told me boss that my fiancée was none other than Alix... who had no idea. When I was finished, Raphael looked at me, shocked.

"Wow! I was ready for anything... except this. I didn't know you were such a..."

"Liar? Madman? Good-for-nothing?"

He started laughing. "Yes, something like that. Goddammit, Callum, what came over you?"

I hid my face in my hands, my elbows resting on my knees. "I... I don't know. I..."

"You let yourself get caught up in your pride and your competitiveness. That's what happened."

"It's not just that... It's the Martins."

He sighed. "Callum... that's ancient history, all that."

I shook my head. How could he say that? I could feel myself getting angry again. If I was here, it was partly because I thought Raphael would comfort me and tell me I was right.

"You can't ask me to work for them. Not after what they did."

“I didn’t say that. But this whole thing isn’t just about them. It also involves your colleague.”

“Who’s a complete asshole. I’m sure he knows about my history with the Martins. He came strutting into my office this morning under false pretenses, just to have the joy of telling me they were there. Until then, I thought it was just a bit of competition, but that told me it was clearly personal.”

“Let me remind you that you started it with the fake engagement.”

“Not true. It was Bonifaci who started it all by introducing non-professional criteria into the competition.”

“Be that as it may, what are you going to do?”

“I have absolutely no idea!” I yelled, getting up and pacing around the sitting room.

“Have you told anyone other than me?”

“Lara, who thinks I’m mad, Norma, who doesn’t approve but who will help me with whatever I decide, and Roxane, who suggested that I blackmail someone into playing my fake fiancée. Given that I said it was Alix, maybe I should pressure her.”

“You guys haven’t been particularly close recently, right?”

“We never have been.”

“I don’t think so. I remember the first time you went to the *Taula Nissarda*...”

I glared at him, and he stopped talking. “She doesn’t even want me to represent her. She fired me.”

“So, she has a problem with you? What did you do?”

“It’s mutual, that’s just how it is.”

He let out a little laugh. “So why did you say she was your fiancée?”

“You missed the part where I told you the Martins wanted to sue her.”

“Really?”

Raphael became all serious and looked at me for a moment. He was starting to understand why I'd done it, or at least, I guessed he was. It wasn't only for Alix or because of Killian, it was bigger than that. It wasn't revenge either, but maybe this time it was a way of telling myself I'd have a clear conscience.

“At this point I think Roxane's right. Only negotiating will work. You need a plan.”

Whoever said to sleep on things was right. I got up the next morning with a strategy and the desire to move mountains.

“Alfred, I need you!” I said to Norma, who'd hardly put her purse on her desk.

She looked side to side. “Are you talking to your grandfather's ghost, or is that another comic book reference I don't know?”

“Norma, don't tell me that you've never read Batman!”

“Okay, I get it, you're the Batman, and I'm...”

“My confidante and man in the shadows,” I said, raising my eyebrows twice.

“If you're expecting me to iron your shirts, the answer is no. But I'm not against a ride in the Batmobile.”

I sat in the corner of her office. She squinted, but I was too enthusiastic to be impressed.

“Unfortunately, I need your help for something much more basic. I need you to arrange a meeting with Ms. Dalmasso, as quickly as possible.”

“I thought she'd taken her case to someone else. Why don't you call her yourself?”

“I already did, and she probably wouldn't pick up.”

“In that case, why do you think I'll have any more success than you did?”

I smiled with all my teeth, which I didn't normally do, but it was certainly helpful in helping me persuade Norma. "Use whatever excuse you like. But I know you'll manage."

ALIX

“Gino, I need to go out. I don’t think I’ll be long, is that alright?”

My chef wasn’t a big talker and replied with a simple nod. Even though I spent most of the time in the dining hall, I regularly helped out with his morning setup.

I wiped my hands on a cloth and made a detour past the restrooms to make sure my hair looked good and to put on some lipstick. I wasn’t looking to impress anyone, but I liked to be dressed up whenever I went out.

Callum’s assistant had asked me to stop by their office to sign some papers and give me the material my new lawyer would need. A lawyer I still hadn’t found, unlike what I told Callum.

Their office was right near the courthouse, in the old town, a stone’s throw from my restaurant. Despite the sun, the cold January air was freezing. I couldn’t wait until the weather warmed up a bit. I wrapped the scarf tighter around my neck.

A few moments later, I was welcomed by a receptionist in a rather dull pantsuit, with her hair so tightly pulled back into a bun that my scalp ached for her.

“I’ll take you to Mr. Rossi’s office.”

“Oh, I’m not meeting with Mr. Rossi, just Norma, his assistant.”

The receptionist looked at me doubtfully and motioned for me to follow her. Along the corridor she stopped in front of an

office where a white-haired woman was sitting. I'd seen her with Callum before in the restaurant.

"Ms. Dalmasso!" she said, standing up.

I shook her hand and got ready to collect the famous documents I needed to sign, when she said, "Come, let's go to Mr. Rossi's office."

"Do we really need to disturb him?" I asked.

"I'm afraid so," she replied with an embarrassed smile.

She moved toward the door. It was a glass office, but the blinds were down for privacy. That didn't surprise me, because Callum was the kind of guy who didn't mix with mere mortals, or even want to see them.

Norma motioned for me to enter. The room smelled of leather and wood. There were bookshelves filled with law books, but the decoration was rather sparse. It was the type of place that screamed *a caveman works here*, as I would have imagined.

As he caught sight of movement in the doorway, Callum looked up from his laptop. He was wearing black-rimmed glasses, like Clark Kent in a business suit. It was the first time I'd seen him wear them. He took them off and put them on his desk, which was a shame.

"Thank you, Norma. You can go."

Huh? No! Why?

But before I could ask why out loud, Norma had already disappeared, closing the door behind her.

"Hello, Alix. Please, sit down."

I realized it was probably one of the first times I'd heard him say my name, especially in such a nice phrase.

"Hello," I said, while staying standing. "I'm in a bit of a rush, and I'm assuming you have things to do. So, give me the papers to sign and I'll be out of your hair as quickly as possible."

His face didn't give anything away, but I saw a small nervous tic that made his jaw move. He got up and came to sit on the

corner of his desk, near me.

“There aren’t any papers to sign. At least, not the ones you came for.”

I frowned, so he added, “I asked Norma to bring you in because I’d like to offer you a proposition.”

“A proposition? And you thought that bringing me here under false pretenses was a fantastic way to get me to accept?”

“You never would have come if I’d called.”

“Maybe, but you could have come to the restaurant.”

“It’s not something I want to discuss in public.”

“And I don’t appreciate being lied to. Goodbye, Callum,” I said before turning on my heels.

“Wait!”

He grabbed my arms. He’d barely touched me, but I immediately pulled away. Maybe because the simple fact that physical contact between us was strange.

“Give me ten minutes of your time. I promise you have as much to gain from this as I do, if not more.”

I had to admit that I was curious. “Ten minutes, no more,” I accepted.

“Sit down.” I was going to protest again and say that I was fine standing up, but he told me, “Trust me, you’d rather be sitting down.”

I complied, but he stayed in the same place. In spite of myself, my eyes went straight to his legs, which were slightly open. Sitting in this nonchalant position, he gave off a powerful and dominating impression I didn’t really like... mainly because I found it sexy.

What’s wrong with you, Alix?

I cleared my throat and sat up on my chair. I looked around his office, at his bookshelves, the window, the green plant in the corner, everything except him.

“So, what’s this proposition?”

I didn't want to be here, and I had a service starting in less than an hour, so...

"I'd like you to reconsider my proposition to represent you. I have it on good authority that the Martins aren't going to drop the charges, and you'll need someone who'll take your case seriously."

"And I suppose you're that someone?"

"Yes."

"Are you aware that you're not the only lawyer in this town and especially not the only competent lawyer?"

He sneered slightly.

"Like I said, you're not the only one, and you and I both know you don't want to work for me, so..."

"That's not true. I want to work on this case."

This time I was intrigued. "So, there's something about my case that interests you enough to want to overlook the fact that you'll be representing me?"

"Basically, I have a score to settle with the Martins."

A score to settle with the Martins? I was surprised by his reply. Okay, I knew that he knew them, just like everyone else in this town, but a score to settle?

"So, your idea is to use me in your personal vendetta?"

"When you put it like that, it's very cynical."

"Is there another way of putting it?"

He opened his mouth while looking at me, and I could see that he was looking for the right words to convince me... or trick me.

Sorry, big guy, that won't work.

"Well, since there's no good reason for me to stay, I'll..."

"It's worse than you think," he cut me off. "I didn't want to have to tell you, because I'll be violating professional secrecy, but the Martins have decided to sue you. Not only do they want you to pay for the fire, but they want to take away your

restaurant and your apartment with it. And the worst thing is that they want to use my firm. My boss asked me to represent them.”

He said these words quickly, as if it was his last attempt to get me to stay. This kind of worked, because I was glued to my chair. There were a few long seconds of silence, maybe even minutes. I needed to analyze what he just said.

“I imagine that having them as clients will be great for your career,” I eventually said.

“Alix, I’m not going to represent them.” His voice was final.

“Why not?”

“I have my reasons.”

“And I guess that working for the other party is a great way to get them off your back?”

“Among others.”

“So, I’m your pawn?”

“Not at all. I started defending you, and I want to finish the job.”

I didn’t believe that was true for a second. Given that I didn’t have the desire nor the time to understand his reasons, and since he didn’t want to just tell me, I replied, “I don’t have the money to pay you.”

“I’ll do it for free.”

“I don’t want to be a charity case.”

“It’s not charity. In fact, I need to ask for something in exchange, and it’s not money.”

I watched him carefully; he seemed uneasy all of a sudden.

“So, to sum up, you want to represent me to carry out some vendetta against the Martins, plus you want me to do you a favor?”

“You always have a special way of phrasing things,” he said, shaking his head. “I want to be your lawyer so that you have every chance of beating the Martins, because you don’t

deserve to go to jail for a stupid accident, nor lose your restaurant. I know how hard you work, and I know you came from nothing. It'd be unfair if you got kicked out because they woke up one day and decided to do something else with your place. I'd even say they're completely stupid, because you only have to have eaten there once to know you and your team are fantastic."

He took a pause, and I was too shocked by his compliments to say anything. He carried on.

"I'm a fantastic lawyer, Alix. And I don't say that lightly. You can ask anyone in this town who's dealt with me. I'm up for partner at this firm in a few months. Don't give your case to anyone else. I'm the lawyer you need, because not only am I ready to fight to keep the *Taula Nissarda* alive, but I'd do anything to see the Martins eat dust."

I didn't ask him why. I knew he wouldn't tell me. Instead, I replied, "Wow, you really like my gnocchi."

And then something incredible happened. Callum started to laugh. Not that I thought he was incapable of laughing, I'd seen him joking with his brothers and Lara, but never with me. His face was transformed. He no longer seemed like a cynical and unfriendly lawyer. He almost had a boyish smile, which was absolutely adorable.

"You're still not sure? I come at least once a week."

"Honestly, I thought the kitchen was the only thing that attracted you to me." I realized my phrase had a double meaning and hastened to add, "I meant, my restaurant."

"The décor is nice as well."

"Thanks."

After his little tirade, I was more tempted to accept his proposal, but there was one thing that came to mind. "You said you didn't want money, that you needed something else in exchange?"

He scratched his head and grimaced. "Yes, it's... I need you to keep an open mind and not cut me off before I've finished explaining myself, okay?"

Any argument that normally began with *keep an open mind* was normally destined to failure. He had to know that—he was a lawyer. But given that I was curious, I nodded.

“So...”

He let out a nervous laugh. Surely nothing good was going to come out of the next few minutes, I was sure of it, but I let him carry on.

“I need you to pretend to be my fiancée.”

ALIX

I did just as he asked. I didn't say a word.

In truth, it had nothing to do with respecting his request. I was just in shock. Callum, the man who barely tolerated me breathing the same air as him, was explaining to me in all seriousness that he needed me to pretend to be his fiancée in front of his boss and colleagues.

When he'd finished telling me his reasons, which basically involved some obscure story about a promotion and a colleague named Killian, he sighed and asked, "What do you say?"

I didn't say anything. I looked from side to side.

Where did he hide the camera? This is a joke, right?

"Alix?"

"So, you need to pretend you're engaged in order to make partner? Where do you think you are? In a Ryan Reynolds film?"

"I've seen *Deadpool* many times, and I don't see what this has to do with—"

"I'm not talking about *Deadpool*! Have you never seen *The Proposal*?"

He grimaced. "I don't watch rom-coms."

"Well, you could've fooled me. Your script isn't awful, but I doubt it'll end well."

"Listen, I know I sound like a madman..."

“It’s not mad, it’s completely insane!” I yelled.

“Talk quieter!” he said, pointing to the door with his chin.

“I thought you had a bit of sanity in you, but now I’m seriously worried, Callum.”

He pursed his lips, and at that moment I knew even he was struggling to understand what he’d just suggested.

“I can’t let Killian get that position just because he’s engaged,” he said, annoyed.

“I don’t know anything about lawyers, but I sincerely doubt your boss bases his choices on things like that.”

“You’d be surprised to know how much doesn’t make sense around here,” he mumbled.

“Yeah, well, I’d probably be better off entrusting my case to a firm where people have a bit of common sense.”

I got up out of my chair, and Callum briefly closed his eyes.

“You don’t understand. I told Bonifaci you were my fiancée so he wouldn’t make me give up your case. It was either that or I take on the Martins as clients.”

“I’m sure you have other ways of convincing him, if not to keep my file, then at least to give up the idea of working with the Martins.”

“Yes, but I also need a fiancée.”

“But that’s mad! Why me? You don’t even like me!”

I saw his nostrils flare, and he admitted, “You’re wrong. I don’t have any particular objection to spending time with you.”

I put my hands on my hips and shook my head with a joyless laugh. “Wow. You really know how to flatter a woman. In fact, you’re like Mr. Darcy’s evil twin, but less charming.”

“Who’s that?”

“You see, that’s just it, that’s proof that nobody will believe we’re a couple.”

“Is that another reference to a rom-com?”

I rolled my eyes.

“It really wouldn’t be that complicated. It’d just be for dinner on Friday and maybe one or two other professional events... nothing else. And in exchange, you’ll get the best defense possible.”

“No, listen here, Callum... you... you’re talking about my life! It might not seem like I care, but I’m taking this case seriously and—”

“Me too,” he cut me off.

“So, your suggestion is to pretend? What’ll happen if your boss or your colleague realizes we’re lying? You’ll get fired, and I’ll be the poor idiot without a lawyer.”

“That won’t happen.”

“Of course it’ll happen. You and I have about as much chemistry as a koala and a blender.”

He put his hands in his pockets and didn’t even try to carry on arguing.

“That’s a no, Callum. I’ll find myself another lawyer and good luck to you explaining to your boss that you made a fool of him. But if you’re as good as you think you are, you’ll have no issue inventing a plausible excuse as to why I’m not your real or fake fiancée.”

I hurried toward the exit, but Callum didn’t move to stop me this time. He knew I was right. I went back out into the hall, as if I were being followed by a pack of rabid dogs. I was angry, really angry. I was angry at him for thinking, even for a second, that I’d go along with his terrible plan. Worse still, I wanted to stay and listen. For a second, I’d actually thought he wanted to help me, maybe not to help me personally but because he thought my restaurant was worth it.

No, his motivations were completely self-serving.

I saw Roxane’s pink hair, and her face lit up when she saw me, but her smile quickly faded. Apparently, my mood was showing on my face.

“You okay?”

“Apart from the fact that your brother-in-law is an asshole, yes, all good.”

She was about to ask a question, but I cut her off. “Not now. I need to get back to work.”

The truth was that I needed to get out of this place and fast.

“Okay, I’ll come by your place at the end of the day?”

“If you want.”

I almost ran all the way to the elevator, and I heard a male voice ask Roxane as I got in, “Isn’t that Callum’s fiancée?”

I didn’t hear my friend’s reply as the metal door closed behind me.

I was on autopilot for the lunch service. I was smiling at clients, taking orders, doing all my normal tasks without letting anything show. It was madness in my head, and I felt like I didn’t even know why. Okay, I was angry at Callum for having wanted to use me, but that wasn’t the only reason. If I was being honest, it was something else he’d told me. The Martins wanted to take back my restaurant.

I wasn’t stupid. I knew I didn’t stand a chance against them. They were the steamroller, and I was a tiny piece of gravel.

It was time to head home. Gino, Dahlia his apprentice, and Tim my waiter had left while I finished cashing out. I had a few hours before the dinner service. Normally, I would have taken care of the suppliers’ bills or the orders, but my head wasn’t in the right place. Instead, I decided to go back to my apartment.

I turned on my computer and started browsing the websites of lawyers near me. I read their biographies, the vast majority of which I thought were ridiculous. When that wasn’t the case, it was their photos that made me doubt them, or the location of their firm. Basically, I always found something to complain

about, so I never picked up my phone to call and make an appointment with one of them.

At 6 p.m. my doorbell rang. I didn't have much time before I had to go back to my restaurant. It was probably Roxane, since she'd asked me if she could come over. I had a few minutes to talk with her because Gino had the keys.

I didn't bother to look through the spyhole to see who was at the door. Maybe I should have, though, because it wasn't my pink-haired friend waiting for me on the other side.

ALIX

“Can I come in?”

This must have been completely rhetorical, because Cyril didn't wait for me to reply before coming in. I was too surprised by the fact that he'd show up here with no warning to even think about blocking him... or telling him to go to hell. He started walking toward the sitting room, hands in his coat pockets, before he stopped to look around.

“It hasn't changed much.”

I was still standing by the door. I shook my head before pulling myself together and saying, “You don't belong in my house.”

“Probably not. Although I could remind you that it's actually *my house*.” His tone indicated that he found it rather funny.

“The judge banned...”

He cut me off and turned toward me. “The judge banned you from coming to me. He never banned me. I'm a big boy who knows how to defend himself. I'm not scared.” A narcissistic smile appeared on his lips.

“What do you want, Cyril?”

“To take back what's mine.”

I raised an eyebrow, pretending not to understand. Deep down, I knew exactly what he meant.

“I'm going to take back the restaurant, whether you like it or not, and you know it.”

“You can’t. I have a rental contract. You don’t have the right to kick me out.”

He flashed a theatrical smile and walked toward me. I stepped back out of instinct.

“Listen, it’ll happen whether you want it to or not. So, I thought we could avoid the months of procedure and come to an amicable agreement, while remembering the good times.”

“I don’t want your agreement. I want to keep my restaurant, and that’s that.”

He clicked his tongue in disapproval and came a bit closer. I took another step back and found my back up against the wall.

“Alix, I’ve always considered your argumentative side charming, but we both know it’s just a façade. You don’t have the means to fight against us, so the easiest thing to do would be to give up right now.”

“Absolutely not.”

He was so close I could feel his breath on my face, and a cologne so overpowering it was saturating the air. They both made me feel nauseous.

“Alix...”

He moved a finger toward a piece of hair that had fallen out of my ponytail. I shivered out of disgust. He noticed but didn’t understand what it meant.

“Come on, we both know you still have feelings for me.”

“No.”

As soon as I said that word, I realized it was true. I didn’t have feelings for him. I didn’t even like Cyril, and I wondered what I’d ever seen in this manipulator.

“So why did you come to my parents’ on New Year’s?”

Because I’m an idiot.

But I was never going to tell him that.

“Cyril, we shouldn’t be talking, and you know it. So, please leave me alone.”

He let out a slight, fake-sounding laugh. “Come on, darling, we’re not going to be told what to do by an old judge.”

“Cyril, get out of my house!”

When I raised my voice, he stiffened. Apparently, he didn’t appreciate it when I pushed him away, and he put his hands on the wall on either side of me, trapping me. I started to panic.

“Listen here, Alix. You’re going to put a nice little sign on the front of your restaurant saying you’ll be closed indefinitely. Then I’ll give you two weeks to pack up your things and get out of this apartment.”

“You don’t have the right to do that!”

“I have all the right. It’s my place.”

“No...”

“I don’t care what that fucking rental contract says! I’m getting my place back!”

He was yelling, his eyes were wide, and this time I was really terrified. I’d never seen him like this. We’d had arguments when we were together, but I’d never been afraid of him. But now my heart was beating too fast in my chest and my hands were shaking.

Luckily, he took a step back. He ran his hand over his face and started to walk around the room as if to prove it belonged to him. I stood frozen against the wall, still in shock.

Why did he want my restaurant back at all costs?

As if he’d heard the question, he said, “Amanda wants to open some kind of tearoom.”

“That’s why you want to kick me out?”

“Yes,” he said, picking up some papers on my table.

This gesture brought me out of my stupor. I moved toward him and took the papers. It was only a pile of old bills, but I didn’t want him looking through my things. Nor did I want him touching anything that belonged to me.

“So, you’ve decided to shut down a successful business just to please your fiancée? Isn’t there some other place in town that you can use?”

He shrugged. “She wants this one.”

“By any chance did you tell her we were together?”

He assumed a blasé tone. “Maybe, I don’t remember. But it wouldn’t matter what her motivations are. If she wants it, she gets it.”

“I see. Well, you don’t always get what you want in life.”

“Maybe in yours, but not in mine,” he replied arrogantly.

“Maybe it’s time for someone to teach you that lesson.”

I tried to put on a brave face, but deep down I didn’t believe my own words. Cyril could obviously see through my façade, because he came toward me with a smug, mocking look on his face that I’d seen more than once, but never directed at me. His voice was as lethal as his words. “Consider this talk your last warning, Alix. You can’t win. My parents want to take it to court, but I’m too impatient to wait, and I don’t want to use less... conventional methods,” he said. “It would be a shame if anything happened to you.”

He turned around, and I was frozen to the spot. My nausea reappeared, and I didn’t move until it became too intense. I ran toward the bathroom to vomit. Once the spasms had stopped, I fell onto the cold floor and started to cry.

CALLUM

“Alix storming out of your office this morning was...”

Roxane was looking at me from her office chair. I’d come in to ask her a work-related question, but she took the opportunity to grill me.

I sighed and looked around to make sure nobody was listening in. “I asked her to help me...”

“And?” Roxane tilted her head and tapped her pen against her lips. She knew very well I wasn’t telling her the whole truth.

“And I asked her to play... you know what. She refused point blank, and as you saw, she left annoyed.”

Roxane let out a little amused snort. “I can imagine you suggesting that she help you. It’s not surprising she said no.”

“Huh? What do you know? You weren’t even there.”

“No, but I can picture it. You might be an ace in the courtroom, but when it comes to your personal life, your persuasion skills are a bit lacking.”

“But I did exactly like you told me to, I found a pressure point...”

“I told you to use leverage, but you have to make her think it was her idea. That she wants to help you because she doesn’t have any choice.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that?”

“Because I thought you were intelligent enough to come to that conclusion yourself! It appears I was wrong.”

I ran my hand through my hair, something I normally did when I was frustrated. “There are three days until the dinner, and I still haven’t found a solution.”

“Go talk to her.”

“What a good idea. I’ll walk into the middle of her restaurant and try to convince her between services,” I mocked.

“No, she should still be at home at this time. Plus, I’m supposed to go and see her. Go to her place; it’s just above the restaurant. Go and apologize, but don’t pressure her.

“And how am I supposed to convince her?”

“I don’t know! You’re the lawyer, not me.”

I grabbed my coat from my office and went on my way. It was nighttime, so the streets were almost deserted. I wondered if Alix would actually open her restaurant this evening. It wasn’t as if the place was full of tourists.

I got to the *Taula Nissarda* and all the lights were off. I hoped Roxane was right and she was still at home.

The door to the building opened, and a man stepped out. I rushed to enter while he held it open. “Wait!”

He looked up, and in that instant, we locked eyes.

Shit! What the hell is he doing here?

He also recognized me, and a small smile appeared on his lips. “Hang on... aren’t you Callum Rossi?”

“What are you doing at my client’s?” I asked in a dry tone.

“Your client? I own the building. You’ll have to be more precise.”

“Alix Dalmasso, you don’t have the right to be in contact with her.”

“Alix Dalmasso is still your client? Last I heard, my parents had hired your firm to bring that pyromaniac to justice.”

“We’re not representing your parents.”

He clicked his tongue. “Too bad. They must have a list as long as your arm of people ready to take the case. If you want my

opinion, it's not so bad. Now that I know you work there, I don't really trust them. If your boss is ready to hire a loser..."

"Last time I checked, *you* were the loser."

I didn't say anything more. I knew exactly what he was doing. He was trying to make me lose my cool, and I didn't want to play his game. I pushed the door open. I didn't want to continue our conversation.

He smirked. "I would say it was nice to see you, but we both know that would be a lie. Good luck with Alix—that chick is half mad."

I suddenly turned around, and I was tempted to chase him down the street to stick my fist in his face. But at that moment, a little old lady came out of the building. She seemed a bit surprised, but I held the door open for her, mumbling, "Good evening," and trying to calm myself down. I was here for Alix, not to rearrange her ex's face. As tempting as it was, I had to take a deep breath and go up to her apartment.

I went up to the first floor. Alix's name was inscribed on the bell, but when I reached the door, I saw that it was already somewhat open. So, I knocked and yelled out, "Alix?" There was no reply. I yelled again, "Alix? Are you in?"

I pushed the door open slightly, and it creaked, but from where I was standing, I could see that the sitting room was empty. All the lights were on, however.

I went in a bit. I didn't doubt that she was home. It wasn't big, and every wall was covered in posters and vintage signs. There were even a number of plants and a red couch covered in a blanket with a sleeping black cat on it.

On the coffee table I saw a photo of Alix with an old lady, probably her grandmother.

"Alix?"

There was no reply, but I thought I heard a noise from the end of the little hall. It had to lead to a bedroom or a bathroom, I guessed. I glanced in the first room. It was empty. Was she in the shower and hadn't closed the front door? Who did that? Apart from someone who was completely unaware?

The bathroom door was also slightly open. I walked up to it.

“Alix?”

I heard a hiccup, followed by some movement and something scratching the floor. I stayed back. The last thing I needed—and obviously her as well—was to catch Alix getting out of her bathtub.

The door opened, and she appeared. She was still wearing the same dress she'd worn to my office that morning. But she didn't look like the proud, strong young woman she normally was. Her ponytail was half out, her makeup had run, and her eyes were red, as if... she'd been crying?

“What...” I started.

“How did you get in?”

Her voice was partly hysterical, and I knew I had to reassure her.

“The door was ajar. I passed Cyril downstairs. Did he come to see you? What...”

As soon as I said her ex's name, she started crying again. She tried to wipe the tears away, but that only made her look more like a panda. I walked toward her, and a dull anger came over me.

“Alix? What's wrong? Is it Cyril? Did that asshole do something to you?”

Suddenly I had no idea what to do. Stay here and console her? Run after Martin to really beat the shit out of him? Call the cops? I put a hand on her shoulder. For once, she didn't pull away.

“Alix, talk to me. What happened?”

A sad smile appeared on her face, but she was avoiding looking at me. “It's nothing. I just need a few moments to get myself together.”

“It's not nothing. Look at the state you're in!”

She started crying again, so I did the only thing that came to mind. It was what I would have done if it was Lara or one of

my female friends. I pulled her toward me and hugged her. Her face was nestled up against my neck, and my collar was soon soaked with tears.

ALIX

It took me a minute to realize what a crazy situation I was in. I was sitting on my couch, with a glass of water from Callum in hand. The same Callum I'd just told everything that happened with Cyril to and who was now pacing around my sitting room. He was furious, running his hands through his brown locks. He assumed a calming voice and said, "You can't stay here tonight."

It was pointless to look at the clock to know that I shouldn't even be in my apartment anyway.

"I need to go to the restaurant," I said, getting up.

"No! Let your employees take care of the service. Pack a bag and get out of here."

Okay, the thoughtful man who had taken me into his arms and sat me down on the couch with comforting words had disappeared as quickly as he'd appeared.

"I can't pack a bag. I don't have anywhere to go, and I can't..."

"Alix," he cut me off in a dry tone before choosing a more gentle tone. "Please."

Please? What did that mean? For me to stop contradicting him? That he was too tired to argue with me? Or that he didn't want me to spend the night at my apartment in case Cyril came back?

The last possibility was also worrying me, if I was being honest. My ex's threats were playing over and over again in

my head. Was he really capable of putting them into action? A part of me said “maybe,” while the other part of me reminded me that I knew this man, that I was his girlfriend once. However, I’d never imagined he’d try to intimidate me in my own home.

For a moment, my mind replayed the scene over and over, to the point that I didn’t see Callum come closer and crouch down in front of me.

“I’m not trying to scare you, but I don’t trust Cyril. I think it’d be better to get you away from here, just for the night, at least. The confrontation has shaken you up, and a few hours elsewhere won’t do you any harm.”

“The restaurant,” I protested.

“You can’t work in this state. It’s a quiet night; they’ll manage without you.” His black eyes showed a kindness I didn’t recognize. Was that what made me give in? “Come on, let’s get your things.”

He held out a hand, and I took it. It was big and reassuring, and I knew it was exactly what I needed.

To be reassured.

Callum accompanied me to my bedroom and came in. It was strange to see him among all my things, in my apartment even. This place that was my sanctuary had been tainted by Cyril’s threats. My lawyer’s presence confirmed that this would never be my refuge again.

“Where do you keep your suitcases?”

“In the closet,” I said automatically.

He let go of my hand to go and open it, revealing all my multicolored clothes. He stared at them, the man who was always dressed in black, which made the situation even more odd.

He grabbed the suitcase on the stop shelf without needing a stepladder, unlike me. He was tall, like all the Rossi brothers. They must have been given steroids as babies, that was the only explanation. He put the suitcase on the bed.

“Grab things for a few days,” he said.

A few days? A few hours, sure, but...

“I’m not leaving...”

“I’d prefer it if you stayed far away for the time being.”

His tone was as direct as I’d imagined, but his eyes, which were normally so cold, begged for me to at least consider it.

“I can’t leave. I have a cat...”

“If you have something to bring him in, we’ll take him too.”

I hesitated. Was I going to obey him without asking any questions? “Where am I going?”

“To my place.”

“Huh? I’m not...”

“Just for tonight, at least,” he interrupted. “We’ll find a solution tomorrow. You can’t just go about as you please. Remember what the judge said.”

I was about to argue with him, but Callum ran his hand over his face. I was also exhausted. The evening was only just starting, and I was as tired as if I’d worked a double shift short-staffed.

So, I grabbed a few clothes and started putting them in the suitcase. Callum took care of Darcy, and I was surprised to see that he thought to take care of my cat. Did he have a cat? I struggled to imagine him looking after a pet. Or maybe he had something odd, like a snake, an iguana, or even better, a bat, even if I didn’t think it was the kind of thing you could domesticate.

“Are you done?” he asked while I was still pondering what to bring.

“I just need to get my makeup bag. It’s already packed, I just need to get it out of the bathroom drawer.”

Callum walked in that direction, and I let him. If he wanted to help me, why not? Except...

I suddenly remembered where it was, or rather what it was with.

I sprinted after him, but it was too late. He was there, drawer open, standing completely still. He had to have heard me behind him because he turned around. His face had an expression I never would have imagined the mysterious Callum Rossi would have. He was blushing. We looked at each other, and he immediately looked away. He took two steps toward the door, cleared his throat and said, "I'll let you sort it out."

For the first time since he'd arrived, I smiled. The big Callum Rossi who confronted criminals, who had perfected the glare, was blushing like a schoolgirl when faced with... my sex-toy collection.

This evening really was full of surprises.

ALIX

Callum lived in an apartment in a chic building downtown. I was expecting something refined, probably designed by an interior decorator with designer furniture and manly gadgets.

Not at all.

It looked like he'd just moved in. There was furniture, but not enough for the size of the main room. There wasn't any decoration on the walls and only a few knickknacks and a glass cabinet in the corner filled with... comic book figurines?

Was this a joke? What thirty-something had that in their sitting room? I walked toward it, grabbing one that looked like the Joker and turning it around and around in my hand.

"Did you just move in?" I asked.

"No," he said, taking the figurine out of my hand and putting it back on the shelf. "I've lived here for two years."

I glanced around. "I love what you've done with the place."

He walked toward the kitchen, which was open-plan, and said, "I'm doing the work myself, but it's not going very well, because I don't have a lot of time."

Work? The image of Callum in distressed jeans and a sweaty t-shirt popped into my head. Maybe even with a tool belt... Now I really wanted to see that, given what he'd just said. But it wasn't appropriate, especially if you remembered that: 1) he didn't like me; and 2) he was staring at me, phone in hand, waiting for a reply.

“Sorry?” I said, aware that my overactive imagination had made me miss the question.

“I asked what you wanted to eat. Chinese, Indian, or Italian.”

“You... you know how to cook all that?” I said, surprised.

He burst out laughing and shook his head. It was a deep laugh that caused unexpected sensations in my chest that I didn’t want to analyze.

Goddammit! After imagining him as a sexy handyman, now I was hooked on his laugh. I had a problem.

“I’m not going to cook. That’s not my thing. However, I have mastered ordering takeout.”

I walked toward him, even if reducing the distance between us was definitely the last thing I needed in my state, and asked, “Maybe I can cook something?”

He raised an eyebrow, amused, and I headed for the fridge. There wasn’t much room, so I brushed past him. Although I’d cried in his arms earlier that evening, I found this contact even more intimate.

Okay, this was all Mike from *Desperate Housewives*’ fault, or maybe Jack from *Virgin River*. I had a weakness for men who knew how to do manual labor. Just look at Magic Mike in his workshop...

I opened the fridge, but there was only a jar of mayo, some beer, and leftover takeout. The cupboards were the same. Callum watched without saying a word.

“Okay, order something,” I said. “But please, nothing local!”

The last thing I wanted was to eat something similar to what I had at home but worse.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” he said, picking up his phone.

While we were waiting for the food to arrive, Callum took my suitcase into his spare room. I didn’t comment on the fact that the room only had a bed and... nothing else!

“I still haven’t furnished this room,” he explained.

“No kidding,” I mumbled.

He was taking me in for the night, I wasn't going to be fussy. Callum said something about getting changed, and I took over the room. At least, I opened my suitcase in the corner and decided just to leave it all in there. It was only for one night, so I didn't need to unpack.

When I went back to the sitting room, I saw that Darcy was finally ready to come out of his carrying cage. He was walking around the figurine shelf, caressing it with his black tail.

“If I were you, I'd avoid going near those,” I told my cat, “unless you want to be the side dish next time he orders spring rolls.”

“She's right,” commented a deep voice, which made me jump.

Callum had come back, dressed in gray sweatpants and a plain t-shirt in the same color. He crouched down in front of Darcy, to move him away from the shelf, I guessed. But instead of moving him away, he just picked him up and started scratching behind his ears.

I didn't know what surprised me more. Seeing Callum in this outfit, since I'd never seen him in anything more casual than a shirt, or the fact that my cat was purring.

Yes, Darcy, who just barely allowed me to cuddle him, seemed to be having a great time curled up in Callum's biceps. They were some remarkable biceps, I had to admit, and maybe I'd also want to purr if...

Stop!

I had to stop ogling Callum as if he were suddenly the last man on Earth and I was having a hormonal crisis.

“What's his name?” Callum asked.

“Darcy.”

He looked puzzled, as if he was wondered where he knew that name from, then I saw the moment he figured it out.

“Isn't that what you called me this morning?”

He remembered that? “Yes.”

“What does that mean? Who is it?”

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t understand the question,” I replied, pretending to be offended, which made him smile.

Why hadn’t I noticed he had such a fantastic smile? Well, I’d seen it before, but I was so annoyed by him that I couldn’t appreciate it.

“Another rom-com thing?”

“Jane Austen just rolled over in her grave at that question,” I replied in a dramatic tone.

“Jane Austen? Okay, got it.”

I was just about to ask him if he knew who Jane Austen was when the delivery guy rang the doorbell. A few minutes later, I was sitting down for dinner. Callum opened the fridge, got out a beer and looked at me before saying, “I only have water, sorry.”

“You also have beer,” I said.

“You don’t drink alcohol.”

“That’s true, I forgot that Jo already told you that,” I said, remembering that he used it in court.

“It wasn’t Jo who told me. I noticed the few times we’ve gone out with my brothers, sister, and friends that you never drink.”

Again, I was surprised by his observation skills. But he didn’t pause and said, “I’ll contact the judge tomorrow to try and get a restraining order against Cyril.”

“You don’t need to do that. You’re...”

“I’m your lawyer, Alix.”

“I fired you,” I reminded him.

“You just rehired me,” he replied, as if it was an established fact.

I hated when people made decisions for me. I was about to argue with him when he added, “I won’t ask for anything in exchange. Forget what I said about pretending to be my fiancée.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Do you invite all your clients back to your apartment?”

“No.”

He didn't say anything else, but I believed him. His spare room was far from being in the backpacker's guide. I watched him for a few minutes, trying to figure out what the catch was.

“Ruining whatever plan that asshole Cyril Martin has will be payment enough,” he added.

“You have history with him.”

It wasn't a question, more of a statement. He'd already told me he didn't like him, but I now knew it was more than that—it was personal.

Callum sighed, and I thought he wouldn't say anything, until in a deep voice he said, “He hurt people I care about. That's enough for me to be angry at him.”

I stayed silent for a moment. It was the first time he'd told me something so personal. Suddenly, I asked another question. “And what's the story with your rival Killian?”

His jaw stiffened, and I immediately regretted saying his name.

“Killian wants the position that's rightfully mine, and I'm not ready to give it up.”

I looked at his figurines and suggested, “He's your Lex Luthor?”

He let out a little laugh and said, “No, not quite.”

“Harvey Dent?” I suggested, mostly because he was involved in the law.

“I see you know your comic books.”

“Sorry for tricking you, but my knowledge is limited to the films. So don't expect me to tell you about my secret stash of figurines.”

“Got it, you collect other things...”

He got up to clear the plates, and I remained silent for a second. What was he talking about? Then a lightbulb went off in my head. Shit, he was talking about *that* collection! The one in my bathroom drawer!

I suddenly realized that he'd mentioned it just before finding interest in doing the dishes. He didn't seem like the type of guy to avoid such a topic. It was only sex toys in a drawer, after all. Was it talking to me about them that made him uncomfortable? This troubled me as much as it surprised me. But I also realized he hadn't answered my question. So, maybe I should take that for what it was. Callum Rossi was a master manipulator.

ALIX

The next morning, I woke up earlier than usual after a good night's sleep. It looked like Callum had already left, and there wasn't any noise in the apartment. I got up and went to the sitting room. The place smelled of coffee, and Darcy's bowl was full, the sign that a human had recently been here.

On the counter I found a post-it note and a key. On the note, in tight and nervous handwriting, was written:

I've gone to the office. Take what you want from the cupboards for breakfast. Here's a key so you can come and go as you like for the next few days. If you go anywhere other than to the restaurant, tell me.

He'd managed to contradict himself in just a few lines. Come and go as I wanted didn't match the fact that I had to keep him up to date with my schedule. He spoke about a few nights, but I'd only settled in for one night.

I had to find somewhere to sleep tonight.

I wasn't fond of the idea of returning to my apartment when Cyril could turn up at any moment. I had to phone Jo to ask to stay at her place, or maybe on Cleo's couch for a few nights?

While I was waiting, I decided to try my luck with the first part of the instructions and rummaged through the cupboards, without much hope, while making myself some coffee.

I found a box of chocolate cereal. Seriously? Figurines and kids' cereal? What was next? Did he have superman sheets?

I hadn't seen his room. Out of curiosity, I picked up my bowl and headed down the corridor toward the first door that was slightly ajar. I pushed it open and discovered the perfect bachelor's pad. Finally, a room that somewhat matched what I'd imagined—not that I'd spent too much time thinking about what his place must have looked like.

A large bed with navy sheets was the centerpiece. Unlike the room I was in, and the rest of the apartment, this one was furnished. There were two side tables with lamps, a dark wooden desk, a TV on the gray wall, and even a midnight-blue rug on the floor. I could easily see which side of the bed he slept on because there was a pair of glasses, similar to the pair he'd worn in the office, on one of the nightstands. There was also a pile of comic books on it. So, the chocolate-cereal-fed lawyer liked comic books. After discovering his figurine shelf, this information wasn't that shocking.

At the back of the room were two doors that must have housed his collection of suits and perfectly polished shoes. But I didn't dare go into the room to have a look around. It was tempting—who knew what I might discover—but Callum trusted me enough to let me stay over and give me a key to his apartment, and I wasn't going to betray that.

Instead, I decided to go to my grandmother's nursing home before heading to the restaurant. I hadn't seen her since New Year's, and I barely went more than a few days without seeing her. After using the bathroom, I put on my black skater skirt, a red sweater that matched the bow in my hair, and lipstick in the same shade. I grabbed my coat, as well as my purse to head out.

When I was on the tram, I sent a message to Callum. Not to tell him about where I was going but to thank him for his hospitality.

****Thank you for the cereal, I'm full of energy and ready for third grade.****

****You're welcome. You know what they say, nothing but the best for champions!****

****If you're as good a lawyer as you are a cook, I think I'm in trouble.****

****I'll come eat at your restaurant at noon. Reserve me a table? What do you think of my taste in food again?***

I moaned. Obviously he'd found a way to use what I'd said against me.

****I don't have the reservations book with me, it might be full.****

****You always have a table for me****

****You have a very organized and convincing assistant who reserves for you. And the rest of the time you're just lucky.****

****Now I'm your roommate. That gives me a free pass, doesn't it? Can I get the best table? The one near the bar?***

My roommate? What the hell!

****About that whole "roommate" thing, I'll find a place to sleep tonight. I'll grab my things between the lunch and dinner services. And that table near the bar is far from the best.****

That table was near where I spent most of my time putting in orders and ringing up checks. It was out of the question to have him just under my nose.

I looked at the list of blue and green messages on my phone. I'd hardly said more than hello to this man since I'd known him, and now, we were talking like teenagers glued to their phones. I was waiting to receive another message, but this time my phone started ringing, and the name Callum popped up. I picked up. "Did you accidentally phone me when you were looking for the emojis?" I joked.

"If you're not at the restaurant, but you're talking about heading by the apartment later on, where are you now?" he asked.

"Erm... on the tram?"

I knew he wouldn't believe me if I said I was taking it to the restaurant. First because it hardly went anywhere, and also because it would take me just as long to walk the distance, so I

added, "I'm going to see my grandmother in her nursing home."

"Alix, I asked you to tell me where you were going."

"I'm almost certain that none of the Martins take the tram, and they're not likely to start today. I'm going to the nursing home, which is hardly their headquarters. The only thing I'm risking is being attacked by the nauseating smell of a diaper that hasn't been changed."

"Yes, to the tram, but the nursing home..."

"I don't remember the judge banning me from going there. And I'm not going to go weeks without seeing my grandmother."

He didn't reply straight away, but he eventually said, "I understand, but be careful. Cyril's crazy enough to wait for you there."

"Cyril never bothered to come with me the entire time we were together. I doubt he'll choose now to come. Well, I've gotta go, I'm here."

He started to mumble something, but I hung up. Since he didn't try to phone me back, I guessed I had the last word.

My grandmother was in the common room at the nursing home, her eyes riveted to a TV showing one of those programs about subjects people my age preferred not to think about, such as arthritis or incontinence.

"Granny?"

I was happy to see that her face lit up when she turned around. This meant it was a good day if she recognized me. "My dear, look at you, you're as pretty as a picture!" She leaned toward her neighbor and said, "That's Marie-Claire, my daughter."

Not quite.

This happened more and more often, her confusing me with my mother. It wasn't that she said the name of my mother, who'd done nothing more for me than give me life, that put me in a bad mood, it was the cruel reminder that my grandmother was slipping into a world in which I no longer existed. It was

because of her Alzheimer's, and although I knew what was coming, it didn't make it any less painful.

"How do you feel about a walk in the garden? It's a beautiful morning," I said, trying to keep up my good mood.

I went to grab her coat and carefully put it on. She held onto my arm, and I led her outside. We talked about all kinds of things. The weather, which was nice for this time of year, about the food at the nursing home—she told me she'd just had a delicious stew, though I doubted they served stew for breakfast—about her roommate, who she suspected of having eyes for my grandfather, who had been dead for 20 years. Basically, it was nothing unlike my other visits, even down to her questions about my love life. "So, have you found yourself a fiancé yet?"

But this morning my reply was a bit different.

"There's a guy who asked me to be his fake fiancée."

"His fake fiancée," she repeated, wrinkling her nose. "What does that mean?"

"Well, he asked me to pretend we're a couple in front of his colleagues and his boss. He wants me to help him at a dinner on Friday night."

"He wants you to act?"

"Exactly."

"Oh! That's so exciting, isn't it!" she said suddenly.

"Err... not really."

"Well, I mean, pretending to be someone else for the evening. That's fun!"

I mean, when you put it that way. I obviously left out the part where Callum recently helped me get out of jail and was trying to get me to help him in exchange for helping me with the case, as well as the fact that we weren't really... close?

Of course, I'd cried into his collar and probably ruined his shirt with my mascara, and my cat was probably playing with his figurines right now, but that didn't make us friends, did it?

CALLUM

I would have been lying if I said I wasn't excited to have lunch at the *Taula Nissarda*. Not because of the baked vegetables, but because of the owner. I had good news to tell her. "Judge Houston is going to issue a restraining order against Cyril."

"So quickly?" she said, surprised.

I didn't struggle to get a table. There weren't many people that afternoon. The table was well placed, even if it wasn't my favorite. It had a little "reserved" sign on it, and nobody was sitting there.

"I told you I knew the judge. He's an old man who appreciates service, which plays in my favor."

"What did you do in exchange?"

"Nothing that concerns you."

In truth, the judge was just concerned that Alix had been assaulted by Cyril in her own home. Sometimes, justice did its own work. But I wasn't going to waste an opportunity to make myself look good.

"Technically, Cyril isn't allowed to be near you, but..."

"He might," she finished.

"Yes. I doubt he'll confront you in public, but he may be a bit annoyed by the restraining order, and he's a loose cannon, so it'd be better if you didn't go home straight away."

She nodded, and I was relieved we were on the same page for once.

“I’m going to call Jo to ask her if I can stay with her for a few days.”

She was about to leave the table when my proposal came out all on its own. Even if I’d already thought of it, I hadn’t thought it through. “If not, you can stay with me.”

She looked at me with wide eyes for a second, before pulling herself together. I made the most of it to argue, “I have a free room that nobody ever uses. I’m almost never home, and you work the hours when I am. We won’t see each other much.”

I left the offer hanging there.

Alix bit her lower lip, like she normally did when she was thinking. It was plump and red, like a ripe cherry, and I wondered what it would feel like if I were the one biting it.

Focus, Callum! You’re not to go anywhere near Alix’s lips, not with your mouth, your teeth, or any other part of your anatomy.

My anatomy... her lips covering my chest with kisses, then my stomach, descending to wrap around... *stop!*

I pulled on my collar. Had someone turned up the heat in here? Or maybe it was just unusually hot for January.

“You okay? You seem...”

“I’m thirsty,” I croaked, picking up the carafe.

Alix frowned but didn’t comment on my suddenly strange behavior.

“I...” she started. “If it doesn’t bother you...”

“Are you agreeing to stay a few more nights?” I hid my surprise. Honestly, I was almost sure she’d refuse.

She smiled and became a bit arrogant. “Only because I’m worried about your eating habits.”

“Clearly. Why else would you agree to stay?” I retorted, keeping up the game. “Wait! Does that mean you’ll cook for me?”

Suddenly, this move had become very, *very* interesting.

“Mmm, let’s just say that I might bring home leftovers from the restaurant from time to time.”

I was already salivating. Clearly, I’d had the idea of the century.

“I’ve always thought that people who didn’t bring work home were losers.”

She let out a slight laugh, and I was hypnotized by the sound to the point that I wasn’t paying attention to who’d come walking through the door.

“Ah, the young couple!”

Alix stiffened, and my smile disappeared.

Killian.

What the hell was he doing here?

Of course, it was a free country, and although I sometimes suspected he might be a robot, he was apparently one of those that needed to eat to function. Of all the goddamn restaurants in town, did he really have to come to this one?

Plus, how did he know this Alix was my Alix? Well, technically she wasn’t my Alix, but I couldn’t remember if I’d ever said where she worked.

“Aren’t you going to introduce us, Callum?”

“Err... Alix, this is my colleague... Killian. You remember, I... I spoke to you about him.”

If I thought I was a bit hot earlier, now I was really sweating. Between Alix’s murderous look and Killian’s smile, which seemed completely unnatural, I felt as comfortable as a dancer in a boxing ring.

Killian held out his hand to greet Alix. Alix smiled, but as soon as it was over, she glared at me.

“Pleased to finally officially meet you,” Killian said. “I’ve heard a lot about you at the office. I saw you in the corridor, but I didn’t get the chance to introduce myself before you went into the elevator.”

“I was in a hurry,” said Alix.

Ah yes, that was probably how he’d made the connection. He’d looked into the case.

“I’ve had lunch here a few times, but now I know why Callum comes here so often.”

“The stew is delicious,” I said, before realizing that wasn’t what I was supposed to say.

It was far from a compliment, and nobody cared about my taste in food. Killian started laughing and said, “I hope you didn’t fall for lines like that.”

“Don’t worry, he’s better at convincing people than that,” replied Alix in a scathing voice.

“Well, the prosecutor would probably agree with you.”

He pointed to the free place at my table. “Are you waiting on someone, or can I join you? At least...”

He turned to Alix, wondering if she was going to sit there.

“No, no, I’m working. Sit down, I’ll get you some cutlery. Callum will be happy to have some company.”

She quickly left, and Killian asked, “All good?”

“Yes, great.” I didn’t know what to do. I was still aware that I’d gotten myself into trouble with my lie.

“How’s your case going?” asked Killian.

“Good, good,” I said, my eyes fixed on Alix.

She was getting her waiter to bring over the cutlery, and I was sure she wouldn’t be back to our table.

“Can you excuse me for two minutes?”

I didn’t wait for him to reply before getting up. I walked over to the till where Alix was pretending to be busy and grabbed her hand.

“Callum! What are you doing?” I led her toward the kitchen and pushed open the door. “Clients can’t be in here!” she yelled.

“I’m not a regular client.”

“Oh yeah? Because you’re still telling people that I’m your fiancée, is that it?” she said sarcastically. “You told me...”

“I know what I said!” I cut her off in a dry tone. I calmed down, aware that the chef and his staff could hear us.

“Then why does your colleague still think I am?”

“I haven’t had the time to take care of it. Excuse me for having put your problems before mine this morning.”

“Are you going to tell him you lied?”

I ran my hand through my hair and sighed. “I can’t... If I do that...”

“You’ll never get your partner position.”

“Exactly.”

There were a few seconds of silence, and then I proposed, “I’ll tell him we broke up. Does that work?” I knew it probably wasn’t what she wanted, but I could solve one lie with another.

“Is it really that important to you?”

“To have your approval? Yes.”

“I wasn’t talking about that. I meant the partner position.”

“Yes, it is... I’ve been working for it for years.”

She bit her lip again and briefly closed her eyes. “I think I’m going to regret what I’m about to say, but I’ll help you.”

“Huh?”

“Your colleague, you’re going to have dinner with him on Friday, right?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll pretend to be your fiancée.”

I was about to thank her, but she shut me up by raising a finger. “Just for the night and then you can carry on your lie for a few more weeks, but you make sure I don’t see him. And when the right moment comes, you’ll tell him we broke up.”

I was speechless.

“Does that work?” she asked.

“You... Why did you agree to help me?”

“Because you’re helping me too, by representing me and housing me, and I know you’ve put yourself in a tricky situation with your boss because of me.” She sighed and added, “You’re ambitious, and I respect that. I might not approve of the methods you use to get there, but I was also in a situation where I was ready to do anything to have my restaurant. And I’m ready to do more or less anything to keep it.”

“Thank you.”

I didn’t know what to say other than that. She looked at me for a few seconds with her hazel eyes and then said, “Well, now let’s get out of here before my clients think we’re doing some weird things in here.”

I left the kitchen laughing and sat back down with Killian.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you smile like that. I think it’s fair to say that Alix brings out another side of you.”

I winked at her as she walked back into the room, and she smiled back. This must have seemed like a loving gesture to Killian.

If only he knew...

Anyway, Roxane was right, the idea had to come from her.

ALIX

It was Friday, the day of the famous dinner at Callum's colleague/enemy's house. Callum had just come back to the apartment, and we were supposed to leave in a few minutes.

"I arranged everything so I could have the night off, even though it's one of the busiest services of the week. You could have at least held up your end of the bargain and come back a bit earlier, like we agreed," I grumbled.

We'd agreed to spend some time together to get a few things right about "our story." He seemed to think it was a good idea... until he devoted his time to something else.

"Sorry, I took care of a detail. I didn't think it would take that long."

"A detail?"

"Yes, for tonight," he said, handing me a package. I didn't even look at it.

"Well, now you're here..."

"I need to go take a shower," he cut me off, undoing his tie and heading for the bathroom.

"A shower? Is that really necessary?" I asked while following him.

But this was the man who was impeccable under any circumstances. I still hadn't seen him first thing in the morning, but I would guess he woke up with his hair already perfectly done, just like in the movies. Never a hair out of place, even when he ran his hands through it. It was always

coiffed. And never a creased shirt or a stain anywhere. At this point I was convinced he farted perfume.

“Look what’s in the package, it’s for tonight,” he said before closing the door in my face.

I looked down at the little blue bag I was still holding. It was well-made, and the gold letters bore the name of a well-known, chic little jewelry store in town. I stuck my hand inside and found a small square box at the bottom.

Oh my God! It’s...

I took the box out and carefully opened it. I was almost blinded by the ring inside it. A classic solitaire, but the stone was huge.

“Callum, what the hell is this?” I yelled through the door.

“I thought you’d recognize an engagement ring,” he told me.

“No, that’s not a ring, that’s an ice rink big enough to train an entire hockey team on!”

I heard him laugh through the door. “Put it on—my fiancée is supposed to wear a ring. It’ll make it more realistic.”

“I’m not sure I’ll be able to lift my arm if I do!”

“Stop fussing and put it on.”

I didn’t get the chance to carry on complaining because the water started.

I went into the sitting room. I’d been ready for a while, *me*. Darcy came and sat on my knees. I put the ring on my left-hand ring finger, and the feeling was strange. I looked at my hand and held out my arm, almost blinding myself with the glare from the stone.

“What do you think, Darcy?” My cat meowed. “Yeah, it’s not exactly my style. But who cares, it’s not like I’m actually engaged.”

I spent a few minutes looking at it without realizing that Callum had come out of the shower to join me in the sitting room.

“How’s the size?” he asked.

“Size doesn’t matter, darling,” I replied, batting my eyelashes.

Then, more seriously, I said, “Do people really care about the size of the stone?”

“I meant the size of the band. You have thin fingers, but I didn’t know your exact size.”

“Well, let’s just say you’ve got an accurate eye, champion. It fits me perfectly.”

“Perfect.”

“You could have chosen something a bit less blinding, mind you.”

“You should see Anna’s.”

“So, we really were playing a game to see whose was bigger.” I sighed.

“Everything about this is a competition, let me remind you.”

“How could I forget? Anyway, I’m impressed. It looks like a real one.”

Callum finished buttoning up his shirt and smiled. “Maybe because... *it is real.*”

“What?” I yelled, holding out my hand as if the ring had burned me.

“Did you really think I was going to give you a fake ring?” He seemed genuinely surprised that I would have thought so.

“I didn’t think you were going to make me wear a ring at all! It’s just one night.”

“Exactly, it needs to be as believable as possible.”

“By buying a ring that could feed a family for an entire year?”

“Several, actually,” he mumbled. “But that’s not the point. Let’s get in the car or we’ll be late.”

He handed me my coat and the next second we were off. I still couldn’t believe he’d trusted me with such a valuable ring. Maybe it was time to tell him I was the type of person who

looked for my phone 100 times a day and lost her keys at least twice a year?

“So, what’s our story?” I asked after putting on my seatbelt.

I didn’t have a car, given that I worked right below my apartment, so we took Callum’s. It smelled new, like leather, and it was black—surprising.

“Our story?”

“Yes, how did we meet? How long have we been together? The kinds of things they’ll ask.”

“Well, it’s best to keep it as close to reality as possible. We have friends in common, I regularly eat at your restaurant. The less we lie, the less likely we are to get caught up in the lies.”

“That’s funny coming from you,” I teased.

“Can we cut the sarcasm tonight?”

“I love sarcasm. It’s like punching people in the face but with words.” He looked at me with an annoyed expression. “Okay, I’m not supposed to want to punch my fiancé tonight. So, when did we become a couple?”

“Three months ago, I’d say.”

“Three months and you’ve already broken your piggy bank to give me a rock that could pay off all my debts?” I said, surprised.

“When you love someone, it doesn’t matter. Do you have a lot of debt?”

“That doesn’t concern you,” I said, avoiding the question.

“But three months, doesn’t that seem a bit quick?”

“Given that I’ve never spoken about you at work, it would be suspicious to say we’ve been together for years. Let’s just say that love at first sight makes people do stupid things.”

“I have to stop with the sarcasm, but you can stop with the cynicism. So where did you take me on our first date?”

“Err...”

“That’s not a very difficult question. Where do you normally take your dates?”

“Well...” he started, scratching the back of his neck.

“Don’t tell me you’re a monk.”

“I didn’t say that.” He seemed guilty.

“Callum Rossi! Don’t tell me you’re one of those guys that doesn’t bother to take a girl to a nice restaurant before getting down to it! Your mother raised you better than that.”

“Do we really have to talk about my mother right now?”

I shook my head. “I hope you don’t just order Chinese food in plastic tubs, delivered by a student with questionable hygiene?”

“Actually...” he started.

“You know what? I don’t even want to know! It’s because of guys like you that restaurants are closing. Well, the next subject. Killian, what does he like?”

“Who cares what he likes?”

“We were supposed to have a civilized discussion, where you told me, ‘Darling, my charming colleague Killian has invited us to dinner at his place on Friday. You know, the one who coaches the women’s basketball team on weekends.’”

“I doubt he coaches anything—team spirit isn’t really his thing.”

“Coming from an expert,” I commented.

Callum glared at me again. I raised my hands to surrender. “Okay, I’ll cut back on the sarcasm. But let me remind you that you started it this time. So?”

“He plays golf.”

“Golf?” I repeated, as if it was the most annoying thing on earth. “I’ve never played golf.”

“Me neither.”

“Really? I would have thought you did.”

“Oh yeah? Why?”

In truth, it was because I could easily imagine him in impeccably ironed beige chinos, a white sleeveless V-neck sweater, and a little polo shirt to match.

“I don’t know. What else should I know about Killian?”

“He grew up in London.”

“Ah! Finally, something interesting.”

“You’ve been?”

“No, but I’ve seen *At First Sight*, *Notting Hill*, *Bridget Jones, Love, Actually*, and all the seasons of *The Crown*. I know everything there is to know about the royal family!”

“You know there’s a difference between TV and reality, right?” he asked, parking the car in front of a building located in the hills.

“It gives you the general vibe,” I replied, getting out of the car.

“Would you call someone who’s seen *Fear City*, *Brice de Nice*, and *le Gendarme de Saint-Tropez* an expert on the French Riviera?”

Maybe he wasn’t completely wrong.

Callum pushed on the intercom at the bottom of the building and the door buzzed open. A cheery, crackling voice came out, “Fourth floor!”

We called the elevator, and I asked, “Do we have pet names for each other?”

“Let’s just keep it basic, shall we? I’d never let a woman call me kitten or snickerdoodle.”

“Okay, I agree.”

The elevator stopped, and Callum grabbed my hand.

“What are you doing?” I asked, trying to pull away.

“We’re engaged, we should probably look like the idea of touching each other doesn’t completely revolt us.”

“Yeah, I’m warning you, Rossi, don’t try to kiss me!” He seemed amused. “Don’t joke!” I said as we walked the last few yards to the door.

“Okay, no kissing.”

“Promise?”

“I won’t try to kiss you, scout’s honor,” he said, holding up two fingers.

“Were you at least in the scouts?”

The door opened straight after, so Callum leaned over and whispered in my ear. “Nope.”

CALLUM

The second the door opened, I knew this evening would feel like my own personal hell.

“Welcome!” yelled... Anna.

Killian put his arm around his fiancée’s shoulders so she was pressed against his chest. Their smiles were as white as the wall. Killian was wearing a V-neck sweater over his shirt. You would have thought they were posing for a portrait in *Country House* magazine. *The Jameses invite you into their little pied-à-terre on the French Riviera.*

Who opened the door like that? As if they were expecting an impromptu photo shoot?

We entered the large hall, which was decorated with contemporary paintings that carried on toward the sitting room on the left. Everything stank of luxury and sophistication, but it had something that my place was really missing. The feeling that people actually lived here. Photos of Killian and Anna, sometimes with other people, were on every flat surface. There were fresh flowers and lit candles on the table. Of course, the bay windows offered a panoramic view of the lit-up city, and the sea was completely black at this hour. During day it must be breathtaking.

“Alix, you already know Killian, and this is Anna, his fiancée.”

Anna was almost jumping up and down on the spot, like a child who was finally allowed to invite her friend over.

“Thank you for inviting us,” said Alix in a friendly voice that she normally used with clients, apart from me.

“Can I take your coat?” Killian politely asked Alix.

I had to stop myself from rugby tackling him to do it instead. The idea of him touching Alix, even just a little bit, relit the feeling of irritation he caused within me.

Instead of acting like a jerk, however, I kept my eyes fixed on the pretty brunette who turned around with grace. Now facing me, she flashed a smile I couldn't interpret. While Killian took her coat, I took the time to admire her. At home, stressed by the thought of tonight, I hadn't paid any attention to her dress, and now I realized that was my mistake. If her vermilion lips were already a call to commit a crime, then her dress was enough to make me lose my mind. All black, it was a good choice at first glance, with its boat neck and skirt down to the knees. Without revealing too much, she showed off her chest, and when she turned back to the hosts, I lost my breath. The back was completely open, apart from a strip of lace covering her lower back.

“Oh! I love your dress!” said Anna. “It's wonderful!”

“Thank you,” said Alix, embarrassed.

“Honestly, it's...”

I had to stop myself from finishing that sentence myself. I had a lot of words on the tip of my tongue, but I wasn't sure if they were actually about the dress or about Alix.

Anna grabbed Alix's hand, and at the request of our hostess, spun around. It was really difficult not to make a remark about how fabulous my fake fiancée's lower back looked. I concentrated on Killian, partly to check that he wasn't enjoying the spectacle—luckily for him, his eyes were fixed on his fiancée—and partly to avoid doing something embarrassing, like drooling or getting a massive erection, which would have been horribly inappropriate.

“Where did you get it?” asked Anna.

“Actually, I made it,” admitted Alix.

Huh? She made it? No wonder it was a torture device for me. Maybe she did it on purpose. *Calm down, Callum. Don't be so full of yourself, thinking she makes clothes with you in mind.*

"I make most of my clothes," she added.

That was news to me, but I guessed it wasn't as if we talked about clothes. Actually, we didn't normally talk at all.

I knew Alix had good style, a mix between retro and modern, often colorful but always very feminine, but I never realized she made them.

"That's great! I make clothes for children."

Anna held out her arm for Alix and led her to the sitting room. Their conversation was lively, and anyone would have thought they'd known each other for years. I was still in the hall, my coat over my arm... with Killian.

"Can I take that?" he asked.

"Ah... err... yes."

"They seem to be getting on well," he said, hanging up my jacket in the closet.

"Yes."

"Come on. Let's join them. I have a bottle of champagne."

Of course, he got out the champagne.

When I walked into the room, the two women were sitting on the couch. Anna was looking at the ring on Alix's finger.

"It's sublime!" she squealed with big eyes.

Ah yes, bigger than yours.

Alix was red with... pleasure? Embarrassment?

"I don't remember seeing it the other day at the restaurant," said Killian, approaching her.

Alix gave me a panicked look. I was trying to think of an excuse, but she beat me to it, saying, "I sometimes take it off for work. I'm worried I'll ruin it, or worse—lose it."

Well done, that was perfect.

“Killian told me you have a restaurant? I was so stressed about the idea of hosting a professional. I cook a bit, but I’m far from cordon bleu level.”

Alix put a reassuring hand on hers. “Don’t worry, I’m not fussy, and I’m not a chef myself. I normally work in the dining hall, even if I sometimes give them a hand in the kitchen.”

“Great, now I’ll worry about serving each dish.”

“Don’t, it’s just a friendly dinner, right?”

Alix was using a sweet and reassuring voice that I hadn’t heard before. Anna seemed revigorated by these words and said, “Darling, will you come with me to the kitchen? I’m going to get the aperitifs.”

They both disappeared, and I got the opportunity to sit down on the couch next to Alix, a little bit closer than I normally would. She smelled good, and I had to stop myself from leaning in closer.

“You okay?”

“Yes, they’re both absolutely lovely, aren’t they?” she asked, turning toward me.

When her eyes locked on mine, she added, “Ah yes, I forgot for a second that you don’t like him. Why?”

“He wants my job.”

“It’s not *your job*. It’s just the one you want, and he does too.”

“Well, that’s why I don’t like him.”

“For a guy who grew up with so many brothers and a sister, you could be a bit more open to sharing.”

“A partner position isn’t a toy and can’t be shared.”

We didn’t get a chance to continue our conversation because Anna and Killian came back. The young woman put two plates of canapés on the table and said, “These ones are completely vegetarian, unlike those ones.”

I didn’t immediately understand. I was focused on Killian, who was opening a bottle of champagne whose label said,

“I’m overpriced and chosen to impress you.”

“So, Alix, how’s your trial going?” asked the asshole who was hosting us.

“Killian!” said Anna, offended. “That’s not an appropriate topic for tonight.”

I clenched my jaw and inhaled deeply. If Anna hadn’t intervened, I thought I may have stood up and punched him in the face.

“Actually, I don’t mind,” said Alix.

She put her hand on my leg. Was it because she could sense I was two seconds away from exploding? Or because we were pretending to be lovers? And why did I feel the need to have an answer to these questions?

“We all know that I’ve spent a bit of time in court recently, but I’m not worried about what’s coming next because I know Callum is here to help me.”

She looked in my direction, and I returned the look. Even though we were acting, for a second I thought she meant it. The feeling that she was telling the truth was much more pleasant than I’d imagined.

“Callum is an excellent lawyer, I don’t doubt he’ll get you out of this mess without any problems,” confirmed Killian, holding out a champagne flute.

I, however, didn’t say anything. Between Alix’s admission and that of my worst enemy, I didn’t know what to say. Though I suspected that one of them was more sincere than the other.

We toasted to our engagements, and Alix bent down to grab a canapé.

“No!” yelled Anna.

As my fake fiancée stopped with her hand suspended above the plate, I realized my mistake.

Shit! I forgot to warn her.

“The plate with the vegetarian ones is here,” said Anna, pointing to the plate on the other side of the table. “I should

have put them closer to you, given you're the only person who doesn't eat meat."

Alix blinked and looked at me with an expression that meant *what's all this about?*

"I already told Killian your New Year's resolution. You know, not to eat meat."

Alix opened her mouth, probably to try and scold me, but then she changed her mind. She flashed a smile that was as fake as my enthusiasm for being here and said, "Sorry! I've only been a vegetarian for a few days, so sometimes I forget."

She ended her sentence with a little forced laugh before shooting me a murderous look. The truce we'd had up until now was well and truly over.

"So, how do you do it at work? Do you still serve meat?"

In the next few minutes, she brilliantly answered all of Anna and Killian's legitimate questions. Frankly, she was a talented liar, and if her job at the restaurant didn't work out, she could always become a lawyer.

CALLUM

Anna suggested we go sit at the table while she disappeared into the kitchen with Killian. Alix came over to me and spoke in a low and annoyed tone.

“When were you thinking of telling me that I’m supposed to be vegetarian?”

“Sorry, I forgot.”

“You see, my idea of a debrief would’ve been a good call. If this goes wrong, you’ll only have yourself to blame.”

“I was late because I had to get the ring.”

“Oh yes, because it’s so much more important to show your friend that your fiancée has a bigger ring than his than to have a story that actually makes sense, right?”

Had I made sure it was bigger? Yes. But I was starting to regret it. She was right that we should have gotten everything straight before we came, but I didn’t want to admit that out loud.

“I’m going to go see if Anna needs a hand.”

She turned around, and I protested, “Wait! You can’t leave me all alone!”

We’d only had a couple of minutes together, so maybe it was time for that famous debrief?

“Would you look at that...” said Killian in an amused voice. He came back into the room with a bottle of wine in hand.

“Callum Rossi stressed about the idea of being separated from his darling for two minutes.”

If I didn't like the idea of Alix leaving me, the thought of her being replaced by Killian made me break out in hives.

He motioned for me to follow him to the table. “Alix is great. She and Anna seem to have a lot in common. I can see why you fell for her.”

I looked at the asshole, trying to figure out whether he was being sincere or trying to piss in my backyard. Not because I thought of Alix like a piece of land or something that belonged to me.

“Relax, Rossi. I'm nearly a married man. You look like you want to jump down my throat.”

That was how I almost always felt in his presence, but he was right that the feeling had been stronger since that last remark.

“Yes, she's great,” I said, without responding to the rest.

Anna and Alix came back in, carrying two plates each and chatting away. That dress really did look perfect on her. I already knew that she had incredible legs, but in this outfit, with those stockings, they were simply sublime.

Alix put a greenish soup, that didn't look particularly appetizing, in front of me.

“Can I sit next to you, or is that reserved for your ego?” she whispered in my ear.

“Did you spit in it?” I replied in the same tone.

“I'm not that gross, but if it tastes of vinegar, you can't blame the cook.”

“You're perfect,” I said a bit louder, so Anna and Killian didn't realize our whispering had nothing to do with loving words.

Alix's face was close to mine, her lips just a few inches away from mine. For a second, I wondered whether or not she was going to kiss me, breaking her own rule. Instead, she smiled and said, “I know.”

Killian burst out laughing, and I didn't know why. When I gave him an inquisitive look, he said, "Her response was so appropriate. She didn't flatter your ego, like you would've liked. She played you at your own game, I love it."

"Callum doesn't need me to flatter his ego," she said before adding, "Plus, I know he'll want to kill me if I say it..."

Hey, stop!

"But he's far from perfect..." I swallowed hard, waiting for her to publicly humiliate me, but she said, "He's the kind of guy who leaves his laundry on the floor."

I raised an eyebrow at her. Dirty laundry on the floor? Was that all she was capable of? I would have expected worse coming from her. She'd chosen something mundane—and untrue, might I add—but it wasn't worth a place in hell.

"They're all the same," joked Anna. "It's as if Killian doesn't know where the laundry basket is in the apartment."

Was this really my life? Spending a Friday night learning about how one of my colleagues wasn't capable of putting his dirty underwear in a goddamn laundry basket?

"So, how did you celebrate your engagement?" asked Anna, who hadn't stopped asking questions all night. You would have thought it was her life's goal to give us a prize for being the perfect couple.

I arched an eyebrow and replied with an amused smile, "Well, like all couples, I guess? At least, those that don't wait until marriage to consummate?"

My remark solicited a laugh from Killian, and Anna just stared at me.

"I think what Anna meant was if we had a party with our nearest and dearest," said Alix, giving me a look that made me feel like a complete pervert.

What? If I was going to be engaged to a woman like Alix, my top priority wasn't going to be celebrating with my family. Of course, it was completely hypothetical, since I wasn't planning on getting married *at all*. The idea of some kind of celebration

under the covers with Alix was a lot more enticing. It was definitely the champagne's fault—and our sudden proximity. To keep up our lie, she sometimes touched me. Okay, a lot less since the whole vegetarian drama, but still somewhat. But nothing unseemly. I'd held her hand a few times, touched her arm or her thigh or put my hand on her back. At this last gesture she'd shivered, and I knew the temperature in the room had nothing to do with it.

“Ah... erm, yes, the engagement party! Well, it was just a small thing, with family,” I said.

I'd vaguely heard my sister Lara talking about that kind of thing; she may even have invited me to hers in a few days' time. I had no idea what it consisted of, but I imagined it was like a birthday party. Was I supposed to bring a present?

“I only have my grandmother, but Callum has a large family, so that's a lot of people!” joked Alix.

“I can imagine. Are you really one of five?”

For someone who'd never spoken to me about his fiancée, Killian had certainly talked to her about me.

“Yes, four boys and one girl. I don't know how my parents managed to keep us all alive,” I joked.

“Do you want a big family?” asked Anna.

I said no at the same time that Alix said yes. We looked at each other and a wave of panic washed over me. *Shit, were couples who were about to get married supposed to know this kind of thing?*

But Killian's laugh interrupted our embarrassing moment.

“Ah, kids! A normal topic of disagreement for couples. I didn't really want any before meeting Anna, but I know she wants a big family. Even if we don't agree about the number, I'm sure we'll find a compromise.”

He took her hand and kissed her knuckles, while she looked at him like he was tiramisu.

“Our job may be incredibly difficult, but I'm happy to have met someone I can forget all that with when I come home in

the evening. I guess it's the same for you, Callum?"

"Of course," I said, putting my arm around Alix's shoulders. "I didn't know how badly I needed her before she came into my life."

I leaned over to kiss her on the temple. My lips had hardly come into contact with her skin when I realized it was a bad idea. Her scent, the velvet feeling of her skin, everything made me want to stay close to her. Pulling myself away from her was more difficult than I'd imagined, especially when I locked eyes with her. She looked confused, as if she didn't know how to interpret my gesture.

On the one hand, we would probably be at each other's throats sooner rather than later... But on the other hand... I didn't want to think about it.

When the evening was over, I was morally and physically exhausted. Who would have thought acting was so exhausting?

Well, we spent the first few minutes on the way home in silence. I felt like I could finally act normally, without feeling like my every move was being scrutinized. In the passenger seat, Alix was looking out the window. Did she feel the same?

"You okay?" I asked, her silence worrying me a bit.

She sighed. "Yes."

Her response seemed positive, but it was lacking any enthusiasm. "What's wrong?"

She looked at me as soon as we stopped at a red light. I turned to her, and she looked full of resentment. That wasn't good.

"I hated lying to them all night, Callum. Plus, they're really nice."

I had to stop myself from saying I hadn't forced her to come. We both knew that although technically I hadn't put a gun to her head, she'd helped me because she felt like she owed me something.

"I don't understand why you hate him so much. Killian is really nice."

I opened my mouth, but then closed it again. I felt like it was the same old story. I hated Killian and that was that. In truth, I didn't really know why, but that was too complicated to explain to Alix.

Once we got back, I suggested a nightcap.

"I'd prefer to go to bed, I'm exhausted."

She disappeared into her room, and I found myself alone in the sitting room. I poured myself a glass. I needed it. I knew it'd be difficult to go to sleep straight away. I would have liked to have spent a bit of time with her, away from Killian, Anna, and anyone else. This thought scared me a bit, actually. We'd spent so long ignoring each other, and suddenly I couldn't remember why we were fighting. Were we even fighting?

Tonight, in spite of our little jabs, there were moments where I felt a sort of bond between us. Was I imagining it? Was it for show?

I sat down at the kitchen counter, glass still in hand, as I thought about it. My eyes fell on the ring I'd given her a few hours earlier. It was taunting me with its brilliance.

I had my answer. Tonight was nothing but an illusion.

ALIX

I woke up on Saturday morning after a bad night's sleep. The evening at Anna and Killian's had shaken me more than I would have thought. Not because of Callum's ridiculous revenge plan against his colleague. I was convinced it wasn't because of anything in particular. What confirmed this for me was that he was so childish about some things. Rather, it was Callum's behavior toward me that had disturbed me.

I'd been sure that he hated me for so long, but these last few days, I felt that we were getting a bit closer. Plus, I tried to remember how we came to be like this.

It took me a good chunk of the night to remember that he was the one who started it all.

I went through every confrontation I could remember, and I came to the conclusion that he had hated me even before I became friends with his brothers. I knew he was the first Rossi brother to come eat at my restaurant. Well before Jo, my best friend, and Remy met. And from the beginning I got the feeling he didn't like me. Why he continued to eat at the *Taula Nissarda* was a mystery to me.

I left my room and instinctively looked toward Callum's door, which was ajar. Was he already up? Did this guy ever sleep? The apartment was silent, and suddenly I thought that maybe he was at work, even though it was the weekend.

But when I entered the living room, I found him sitting at the kitchen counter with Darcy comfortable on his lap, a cup of coffee in front of him, and his eyes fixed on... a comic book?

“Hey,” I said, walking toward him.

His eyes—he was wearing glasses—scanned me from head to toe, and a smile spread over his lips.

“Nice pjs.”

They were a present from Jo, with a big W for Wonder Woman across my chest. It had nothing to do with the character, but rather the fact that my best friend thought I was exceptional, in my own way. But from Callum’s point of view, my shorts suddenly seemed very minimalist, and the fact that I wasn’t wearing a bra under my shirt was a very bad idea.

“Do you want coffee?” he asked, motioning for me to sit down on a stool.

He picked up Darcy to delicately put her on the floor. My cat didn’t seem to appreciate being rejected like that.

“I’d love some. I don’t think I should have abused Killian’s champagne yesterday. It’s going to be a long day.” The drinking had nothing to do with the fact that I’d slept badly.

“What time do you need to be at the restaurant?”

“Soonish. Saturday lunch is often crazy, and I don’t know what state I’ll find the place in after last night.”

I didn’t normally miss Friday night, or any night for that matter. So, I was a bit stressed, even if I completely trusted my employees.

“Do you want me to drop you off?” Callum asked, handing me a steaming cup of coffee.

This conversation, him serving me coffee, and asking me about my day, suddenly seemed all too domestic.

“Thanks, but I’d like to walk. Plus, it’s not far.”

“Okay, in that case, I’ll let you be. I need to go shopping.”

“Finally decided to fill the kitchen cupboards?” I joked before adding, “If you want, I can go on my break this afternoon. I pass by the shop on my way, and I’ll bring some things back from work.”

“If you like, but I need to head out anyway. I have other things I need to pick up.”

I didn't interrogate him for long, because it wasn't any of my business. If he needed to buy hemorrhoid cream or face cream or hair gel, I certainly didn't want to know. And the longer I kept him, the less time I'd have to drink my coffee in peace.

But then he'd only been gone five minutes when the doorbell rang.

Did you forget your keys, Callum?

I went into the hall and opened the door without looking through the keyhole.

Big mistake.

There was a young woman at the door, finger hovering over the bell. She scanned me from head to toe. Although I'd quite enjoyed being inspected by Callum a few minutes earlier, it was a completely different experience under this woman's eyes. Unpleasant to say the least.

She was wearing workout gear, but I doubted she'd run here. Her hair was impeccably coiffed. Her makeup was perfect, with the right amount of bronzer that made her look like she'd been to the beach earlier that day without making her cheeks look metallic like C-3PO. Her smile faded instantly, but she smiled again.

“Hello, is Callum in?”

She leaned to look over my shoulder, as if he was hiding just around the corner and calling him out would get her out of this conversation.

“That depends, who's asking?”

“Oh, err... I'm Gabrielle. I was running nearby, and I thought I'd pop by and say hi.”

Of course, the way she said her name made her sound sophisticated. She looked again, and her attitude irritated me. This woman showed up unannounced—and she'd never get me to believe her running story—and she hadn't thought for a

second that maybe I lived here? Plus, she hadn't even asked my name!

"Is Callum in?" she said again, slightly annoyed.

Okay, dear, I'm not in the mood for this kind of attitude this morning.

I figured she had to be one of Callum's booty calls, either an ex one or a future one. Nothing like the idea of imagining him rolling around in his navy-blue sheets to make me want to vomit. And in that moment, I suddenly realized that it was bound to happen at some point. He'd agreed to take me in, not live like a monk. I was bound to run into a Gabrielle at some point soon. This one was particularly annoying, though, so I wanted to teach them both a little lesson.

"Callum is busy at the moment."

"Busy? Is he okay?" Her worry was as fake as her eyelashes.

"Not really," I said, grimacing.

After my acting performance last night, I felt exhilarated. But that didn't stop Gabrielle, the queen of contouring.

"Should I go see him?"

She tried to step between me and the doorframe. I blocked her. "I wouldn't, if I were you. I think it's a stomach bug."

"Oh!"

Her disgusted look spurred me on. It was too funny. "The poor thing, he was on the toilet all night long. The noises coming from there were unbearable. I thought I even heard him praying for a quick death at about 2 a.m. You know the type, right?"

"No, not really."

I tilted my head to the side, as if to say *stop lying to me*.

"Well, Gabrielle, we've all been there at one moment or another. Even people as well coiffed as you and Callum."

"Sorry, what did you say your name was?" she asked, batting her eyelashes.

That was when I administered the final blow.

“I’m Alix, Callum’s fiancée.”

The Saturday lunch service was brutal, so I didn’t go back to Callum’s place and stayed to do the dinner service, which was just as difficult. When I finally returned, sometime around midnight, having left my employees to close up, I headed for the bathroom to take off my makeup and then get into bed. Callum’s door was closed. Was he asleep? Out? I had no idea. I didn’t even turn on the light in my room, which resulted in me walking into something that I wasn’t sure had been there when I left this morning.

Using the flashlight on my phone, I lit up the room. Either I was in the wrong apartment, or someone had gone into my room while I was out. I turned the light on and looked around. There were now two side tables, a headboard, a little desk, and a wardrobe.

What the...

This was his shopping? Why hadn’t he said anything? And what right did he have to come into my room while I was out? Okay, it was his place, but still...

I left my room in a huff and knocked on his door. If he was asleep, too bad. He could have at least texted to warn me! He didn’t reply, so I knocked again.

Was he deep asleep by now?

Incredibly annoyed, I finally pulled the handle. But as I did so, I panicked. Was he alone? The last thing I needed was to find myself face to face with Callum in action. He would have made some noise, right? Unless he was one of those people who did it in the dark and without making a sound, although I doubted it.

It only took me a second to see that his room was empty. No Gabrielle in her underwear, and no Callum sleeping. After all,

it was only midnight. Maybe he'd gone out. He wasn't Cinderella, that much I knew.

I went back to my room and lay down, but I was aware of even the slightest noise. As soon as I heard the sound of his key in the lock, I would be ready to jump down his throat. But the hours were ticking away, and in the early hours of the morning, I finally went to sleep.

When I woke, I wasn't angry anymore, but a quick glance at my furniture reminded me that I still needed to talk to him. I wasn't to go into his room—okay, I'd opened the door in the middle of the night, but only because he'd annoyed me—and he wasn't to go in mine. If that didn't suit him, I would find somewhere else to crash or go back to my apartment.

It was already late; I'd slept longer than I thought. But again, there was no trace of Callum in the apartment. The fact that the door to his room was in the exact position that I'd left it and his bed was still made told me one thing. He hadn't slept here.

Had he gone to Gabrielle's? Another woman's? That was none of my business. But then why did it annoy me? Callum wasn't accountable to me. We were just roommates, and maybe for not even that long. I hurried to get ready for the breakfast service. It was out of the question for me to be here when he got back, wearing the marks of his night. The image of Callum with messy hair and a huge hickey on his neck came to mind. No, I really didn't want to think about that.

CALLUM

I was hoping to get home before Alix left, but when I opened the door, I saw that she'd already left.

Shit.

I was disappointed to say the least. I was curious to know if she'd appreciated my surprise. I'd waited until the last moment to leave yesterday, but she hadn't come back during her break. I was tempted to send her a message, but I knew she'd interpret it as my way of checking that she was respecting the limits to her freedom as accorded by the judge.

I bent down to pick up Darcy. His bowl was still full and his water had been changed, so Alix must've been here at one point. I began to stroke him before setting him down on the couch. I'd come back as early as possible to see her, but that hadn't worked out.

A part of me realized this was all absurd, considering that up until a few days ago we were doing everything we could to avoid each other.

Well, she was doing everything to avoid me.

If I was being completely honest, I maybe hadn't always been against spending time with her. At least, there was a time when I regularly went to her restaurant because I was worried about her. Then, it became a habit. I never knew why she hated me. What could I have done to make her smile fade every time she saw me? I felt like over these past few days, things had gotten better between us, but surely, I wasn't making it all up.

I phoned Raphael to ask if he wanted to meet for lunch.

“I’m guessing you want to meet at your roommate’s place?”

Even though the idea had crossed my mind, I pushed it to the back of my mind. In light of my lack of response, he joked, “Come on, I know you’re dying to. You don’t have to pretend with me.”

“They serve socca at Sunday lunch.”

He burst out laughing. “Yeah, let’s say the socca is why we’re going, if you want. I’ll meet you there?”

He wasn’t fooled and neither was I. Alix could have served me puréed green beans—and God only knew how much I hated those—and I still would have gone.

When I arrived at the *Taula Nissarda*, Raphael was already sitting down, and he was chatting with... Alix.

“Over here!” he said when he saw me.

Alix turned, and her smile faded. My stomach suddenly dropped. I thought we were past this stage.

“Hey,” she said coldly. “I’ll leave you with the menus, and I’ll come back to take your order in a few minutes.”

Okaaay...

I grabbed her wrist, making her look at me. “You okay?”

She forced a smile, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Yes, I just slept badly.”

She pulled away, and I didn’t insist. When I turned back to Raphael, he arched an eyebrow that was full of questions. “Are you fighting?”

“No, we didn’t even see each other this morning. I didn’t sleep at home last night,” I explained as I sat down opposite him.

“I see. Where were you?”

“Did you join the police force without telling me or something?”

“No, I leave that to your brother. But who knows, maybe your mother’s paying me to question you...”

“That would surprise me, given I was just with her at the country home. I missed New Year’s with the family, so I went to spend the evening there with them to make up for it. I arrived late, so I slept there so I wouldn’t have to drive back in the dark.”

Raphael seemed strangely surprised by this information. “Oh! And let me guess, Alix has no idea you spent the night playing bingo with your parents?”

“They don’t play bingo.”

“You know what I mean. But you didn’t tell her where you were?”

“No, I would have had to see her to tell her that.”

Raph started laughing and shaking his head. “No wonder she slept badly!”

“You know, Alix is a big girl. I highly doubt she needs to have someone in the next room to sleep. She’s lived alone for years, and she never seems like she’s lacking sleep.”

“My poor Callum. You really are bad at understanding how women work.”

“Oh, and you’re an expert?” I said back, somewhat annoyed.

“You don’t need to be an expert to imagine what conclusion Alix came to.”

I looked at him blankly, so he said, “She thinks you spent the night with a woman.”

“Oh!”

I took a few seconds to think about what this meant, but my thoughts were interrupted by Tim, Alix’s waiter, who’d come to take our order.

So, she’s mad at me because she thought I was with another woman? But she doesn’t even like me. She doesn’t care, right? Unless...

“Excuse me.”

Tim and Raphael were looking at me, surprised, as I got up. The order wasn't completely written down, but I had to make sure everything was all right between us. I couldn't help myself.

I went over to Alix, who was putting some bread on a table. I planted myself just in front of her and asked, “Can I talk to you, please?”

“Err... I'm in the middle of service.”

I didn't listen to any of her arguments. I grabbed her hand and led her toward the back of the room. I was vaguely aware that wasn't how a gentleman behaved, but Alix didn't think of me as one anyway.

“Callum, I already told you that you can't come into the kitchen,” she protested.

Not to worry, there was also a pantry out back. It was more like a broom closet than anything else, but it would do. I pushed open the door, turned on the light, which was just a dim bulb, and led Alix inside before closing the door behind us.

“Callum, you...”

“I wasn't with a woman last night!” I cut her off. I was filled with an irrepressible urge to set the record straight, just like a vigilante. “I slept at my parents' house, the one in the countryside. It was late and...”

She put her finger on my lips to make me shut up. I had to restrain myself from kissing her fingers.

“I don't care what you do with your evenings, Callum. You don't have to tell me.”

My enthusiasm deflated like a soufflé. *Shit. That wasn't it? Raph was wrong, and I look like an idiot.*

“Then why... why are you giving me the cold shoulder?”

“I'm not.”

This time I made her stop with a look. She replied with some of her attitude, telling me she wasn't going to let that happen, an annoyed pout, hands on her hips and frowning.

“You went into my room without permission.”

“Huh? But it's...”

“Your place, I know, but you could have warned me. I don't appreciate my things being touched when I'm not there.” She tapped on my chest with her index finger, painted with red nail polish. Her touch didn't give me the same feeling as before, however. I had the unpleasant sensation of being called to order.

“I didn't touch your things. I put furniture in the room, so that it was...” I ran my hand through my hair, frustrated by the turn things had taken. “Shit, Alix! I wanted to make you happy.”

She glanced at the shelves behind me and bit her lip. I was angry. The people who said that doing the right thing made you feel good were wrong. The proof was the fact that I'd tried to extend an olive branch to thank her for helping at Killian's, but all I got in return was criticism.

She eventually shook her head, and to my surprise, she said, “I'm sorry, I may have overreacted, and... I'm a bit tired at the moment. With all the stress of the trial and knowing that Cyril...”

“He hasn't come to see you, has he?”

She shook her head. “No... but...”

I put my hands on her shoulders, making her look at me. “Alix?”

“This morning, one of his friends dropped by. He didn't say anything special, but I'm almost certain he was watching me. And sometimes, when I walk here... I feel like I'm being followed. But like I said, I'm probably tired and...”

“Eh!”

I pulled her against me, and she let me. She smelled good, a floral scent mixed with thyme and oregano.

“You can talk to me about it, even if it’s nothing,” I said, gently stroking her back. “And not just because I’m your lawyer. I’m also...”

“My fake fiancé?” she joked, moving away slightly.

“Exactly, and your roommate. But most of all your friend. We’re friends, right?”

She stepped to the side and smiled. A real, sincere smile, which I rarely got from her. But she didn’t answer my question, instead she asked, “Were you really with your parents?”

“Yes. I’m sorry, I should have told you. I’m not used to having someone at home.”

“That’s surprising, because your spare room has so much charm,” she said sarcastically. I narrowed my eyes, and she said, “I mean, before you put in all the furniture.”

“I should have warned you, but I thought I’d be returning home.”

She shrugged. “You don’t have to tell me when you’re coming and going.”

I didn’t know what to think anymore. On the one hand, she wanted to know where I’d spent the night, but on the other, she pretended that she didn’t care... What if it was all a façade? The thought that Raph was right was becoming more and more pleasing. Maybe that was why I asked her, “You’re closed tonight, right? How about we have dinner together?”

ALIX

“Did you cook?” I said, surprised, as I walked into Callum’s kitchen on Sunday night.

“Contrary to what you may think, I don’t only eat processed food or takeout.”

“No, you also eat whatever your mom leaves in the fridge.”

Callum opened his mouth to protest, but I cut him off. “Don’t bother, your sister sold you out a long time ago, and I saw that she came during the week.”

“Sometimes I cook. Okay, I know how to make about five dishes, but that’s something, right?”

“Five? I’m impressed! So, one is burnt spaghetti Bolognese, what are the others?”

“Shit!”

He ran to the stove, but it was too late. At this point, maybe it was better for him to just order out. At least it’d be better for his health.

He angrily tipped the contents of the pot into the trash, while I looked through the cupboards in search of inspiration to make us something edible, and if possible, without burnt bits.

“I wanted to give you a break by cooking dinner,” he said softly.

A part of me wondered if he’d burned it on purpose, but I thought that would be twisted, even for him.

“Just put the furniture together next time.”

He leaned against the worktop and crossed his arms. He had an arrogant smile on his lips. “So, you’re not angry that I went into your room after all?”

I sighed. “No, thank you for the furniture. It’s... nice.”

It was more than nice. It was the type of gesture that was worth a lot of points on the Hugh Grant scale—the system I invented for romantic gestures. Although, theoretically, Callum and I weren’t a couple, nor engaged in any kind of relationship, apart from a platonic one.

“You’re welcome.”

“If the whole lawyer thing doesn’t work out, don’t even think about stepping into a kitchen. I’d rather warn you now, I won’t take you on as an apprentice.”

He headed for a cupboard and got out a bottle of wine before stopping and turning to me.

“If I offer you a glass of wine, would you accept?”

“I’d prefer not to.”

He didn’t insist and traded the bottle of wine for a beer from the fridge. I could almost hear the question he wanted to ask, even though he didn’t dare say it out loud, and I surprised myself by answering it. “My mom was addicted to a whole bunch of things. It started with alcohol, then pills, and finally the hard stuff that led to her grave. I’d rather not take the risk.”

Unlike most people I’d spoken to about it—and there weren’t many—he didn’t try to reason with me by saying I wasn’t any more likely to become an addict because my mother had been one.

He just said, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I was raised by my grandmother, who’s incredible. It’s the best thing that happened to me.”

“And your dad?”

“Never met him. I’m not sure my mother knew who he was—probably a one-night stand, a drinking buddy or who knows.

But maybe it's not that bad. You can't be disappointed by someone you've never met."

He was silent for a minute, and I knew it wasn't easy to continue after such an admission. So, I carried on cutting vegetables and said, "Don't think of my childhood like Cosette in *Les Misérables*. I got all the love I needed from my grandmother."

"She seems like a good person."

"She is. She's the one who made me want to open my own restaurant. She always had people over, and she loved to spoil her guests and always made sure their plates and glasses were full."

I smiled at the happy memories. The sounds of cooking in the kitchen, the smell of basil, my grandmother's friends laughing and the clinking of cutlery. All of this sadly belonged to the past. I now had the restaurant, which was constantly busy, the clients and the employees. I was surrounded, but still, sometimes, I felt terribly alone. Of course, I had my friends, but they all had their own busy lives. I didn't have anyone to tell about my day when I got home, nobody to cook for outside of work, nobody to watch rom-coms with.

You didn't need to be a psychologist to understand why I'd gone to see Cyril on New Year's Eve. I knew that getting back together with my ex was a terrible idea, but I felt alone, and the idea of spending the night surrounded by couples made me sad.

But I had to remind myself of my grandmother's wise saying. If you passed the same tree in a forest twice, you were lost.

Just before we sat down at the table, Callum was tapping away on his phone. The guy I had thought was a master at hiding his emotions was suddenly making a series of grimaces expressing surprise, confusion, and amusement? I guessed he now felt more comfortable around me if he was allowing himself to show so much emotion.

As if he realized I was watching him, he looked up, smiling.

“I want to know why I’ve got a message from one of my colleagues wishing me a speedy recovery.”

“Why would I know? Were you ill recently?”

I had a rough idea of what it could be about. *I-pretend-to-run Barbie is a lawyer?*

“Oh, no. She’s also wondering why I didn’t tell her about my engagement.”

Oops.

“Erm...”

For a second I thought he was angry. What right did I have to reject one of his... his what?

“Your colleague?” I said, pretending to be surprised. “Is that what people are calling it nowadays?”

Callum tilted his head to the side before replying, “Gabrielle is a lawyer.”

“She does seem to have a talent for all things oral,” I mumbled so he wouldn’t hear me.

I put the plates on the table and was surprised to find Callum only a few inches away from me when I straightened up.

Did he need to be so close? I could almost feel the hairs on my arms being drawn to him, as if he were magnetic. A phenomenon more commonly known as goosebumps, of which he was the cause, much to my displeasure.

“So, she came by here yesterday, and you told her we were engaged?”

“Of course, what if she was one of Killian’s spies?” He raised a doubtful eyebrow. “You said yourself that she’s a lawyer, so she knows him. She could be selling you out.”

“You didn’t know she was a lawyer, until just a minute ago.”

“I guessed that she wasn’t a professional runner. Or she has a very funny way of training.” This time he didn’t understand.

“Never mind. I’m sorry I rejected your girlfriend. I can phone her if you want, and I’ll tell her it was all just a joke.”

He wrinkled his nose. “She’s not my girlfriend.”

“Oh yeah? Your booty call, then? Or whatever you want to call it. Actually, don’t tell me. We should eat before it gets cold,” I said, trying to change the subject.

But because I couldn’t stop thinking about the blonde Gabrielle and her perfect skin, I said, “I’m serious. If you want me to explain the whole stomach-bug thing and the engagement thing, I can.”

“Stomach bug? You told her I had a stomach bug?” he asked, wide-eyed.

“Err... yeah. It seemed like a good idea at the time...”

For a second, I thought he was going to become the old Callum, with his glare and his sigh of annoyance when I did something stupid. Instead, he started laughing. A deep laugh that got me laughing too. It was an infectious laugh, the kind you can’t resist. But it also made him incredibly sexy in my eyes.

Okay, maybe I was missing a couple of braincells at that moment.

“No wonder she left in a hurry. Gabrielle doesn’t seem like the type to offer to hold your my back.”

I wasn’t going to tell him that the way I phrased it, it would be more like a toilet paper delivery that he’d need. We were ready to eat, after all.

“Like I already said, I doubt she actually runs.”

CALLUM

“Do you want to watch a movie?” I suggested while I finished the washing up.

Alix was playing with Darcy on the couch, and I wasn't going to cut the evening short. The dinner was very pleasant, and despite the little jabs at one another, there hadn't been a major incident.

“Sure, why not.”

I sat down next to her. Darcy abandoned her lap for mine. She made a little annoyed pout that made me smile on the inside.

“What do you want to watch?” Alix's eyes looked at my shelf of figurines and then at me. “I don't only watch superhero movies, if that's what you're wondering. What's your thing?”

She bit her lip. She really had to stop doing that, because the action drew my eyes toward it and...

“Rom-coms,” she said, interrupting my thoughts, almost as if she was waiting for me to object.

Okay, not my first choice, but I was happy to step outside my comfort zone if it made her happy. “All right,” I said, handing her the remote. “I'll let you choose, impress me.”

She looked at me, dazed. “Really?”

“Yes, it's been ages since I've seen one. But who doesn't need an actress falling in love with a bookstore owner or a bride running away from the altar from time to time?”

“For someone who hasn’t watched a rom-com in a while, you sure seem to know Julia Roberts’s films rather well.”

I shrugged. “I have a mother, a sister, and sisters-in-law, and they don’t hesitate to fight me for the remote.”

“It’s not just a genre for women.”

“No, but I don’t know a lot of guys who are excited for Reese Witherspoon’s next movie.”

“Maybe they need more movies with guys running away from the altar. I don’t think there are any.”

“You just need to sell the idea to Hollywood. Anyway, what are you choosing?”

She looked at the screen and started to scroll through the menu before stopping. “Look at us having a movie night and a perfectly civilized conversation. If you’d told me a week ago...”

I smiled in spite of myself. “I probably wouldn’t have believed it either.”

She went back to choosing a movie, but she seemed to hesitate. I could see that she was sneakily looking at me.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

I was waiting for her to say something like she couldn’t find a movie she liked.

“I was wondering something.” Her teeth started to abuse her lip again.

“Stop doing that,” I said, pointing to her mouth.

“Why?”

Because I want to be the one doing it.

“Because you’ll get lipstick on your teeth.”

“I’m not wearing lipstick.”

“That’s not the point, it’s... Surely, it’s bad,” I stumbled.

“What was your question?”

She made a face and inhaled before plucking up the courage. This didn't seem good. "Well, okay...okay... I've been thinking..."

"Alix, spit it out."

My firm tone made her talk. "Why do you hate me? I mean, did you hate me? I'm not sure it's still the case. Or maybe it is, but you decided we're having a truce I didn't know about. I've thought about it for a while, especially last night, and I can't remember what I said or did. Or if it's the accumulation of loads of little things. Well... tell me."

She'd said all this so fast, and I was so surprised by it that I held my breath.

Alix

I'd finally asked the question that had been bothering me since last night. Once I'd asked it, I closed my eyes, like a child trying to avoid reality. Callum was quiet, too quiet maybe. Every second that ticked by made me fear the worst. My heart was beating so loud it was hard to ignore it.

I didn't know how he'd react. Laugh maybe, because he found me so ridiculous? Reply with an annoyed sigh? But I had to rip it off like a band-aid. I'd done it, and now I had to face the consequences.

I'd felt a certain friendliness between us this evening, and that was what had undoubtedly pushed me to do it. I needed to know why we didn't like each other. The more time I spent with him, the more I needed to know. Maybe it was because, in spite of myself, I found myself liking him more than I'd thought possible. I also had a ton of questions. Why was he helping with my trial? Why did he take me in? You didn't do that with someone you could barely stand. The promotion story didn't seem sufficient to me.

When I opened my eyes and dared to look at him, he was looking at me in a strange way, as if he was lost in thought.

“Callum?” I prompted.

“I’ve never hated you,” he replied in a firm but sad voice that mirrored his expression.

His black eyes focused on me, and they seemed infinitely deep. I almost shivered.

“Err... excuse me, but most of the time I feel like I’m annoying you... Sometimes I don’t even need to open my mouth and you look at me as if I’ve just killed your cat. I feel like just breathing the same air as you is a crime.”

“Do you really think I’d be sitting on the couch next to you if that were the case?”

“No, but...”

“Do you think I would have had dinner with you?” He didn’t give me time to respond. “Do you think I would have continued to come to your restaurant every week?”

“I admit that I’ve never understood why you did. I guessed you liked the menu, and it was practical, given that it’s so close to your office.”

He looked at me for a second longer before getting up from the couch. Darcy, who was curled up on his lap, let out a disapproving meow.

I wondered where he was going, but he didn’t seem to know either. He took a few steps toward the window and then turned back to the kitchen. He ran his hand through his hair and finally leaned against the counter.

“Do you remember the first time we met?”

“Not really, if I’m being honest. I guess it was at the restaurant?”

“Yes, you’d just opened it. It was summer, and I was on the terrace with Raph.”

“The guy you were with at lunch today?”

“Yes, my best friend. He’s the one who introduced me to your restaurant.”

“Maybe you’re a bit less angry with him now,” I joked nervously.

That didn’t make Callum laugh, and instead he carried on. “We were talking, and you were taking your time talking to every customer, like always.”

Except with you, I was tempted to add.

Callum shook his head, with a sad smile on his lips. He wasn’t looking at me anymore, staring off into the distance. “You were wearing a black dress with cherries on it. It was tied around your neck. You were wearing matching red sandals and your hair was down.”

What? I couldn’t remember what I had for lunch yesterday, and he could remember all that?

“But what really struck me was your smile, because I never felt like you were there for work, but as if you liked talking with people you didn’t know. As if... as if you were really happy they came to eat at your house.”

“That was probably the case,” I replied almost automatically.

I was completely stunned by his story, and I didn’t know where it was going. “I was... charmed.”

Huh?

“I was charmed, and I told Raph I’d ask for your number when we left.”

I froze at those last words. He didn’t really say that, did he? I was a victim of auditory hallucinations. Callum Rossi wanted...

Hang on! Did he do it? I can’t remember!

Callum’s black eyes landed on me again, and a few seconds passed before I said, “What did I say?”

“Nothing, because I didn’t ask.”

“Why not?”

“Because Cyril arrived just as I was coming up to you, and you jumped at his neck to kiss him.”

CALLUM

“Oh.”

Her response was as short as her astonishment was big. She looked at me carefully, maybe to see just how serious I was.

The silence made me regret having said anything. The longer it went on, the more I imagined the ground opening up and swallowing me whole.

What was I thinking telling her that?

“So, you hated me because... I wasn't single?”

“What? No, not at all!” Frustrated, I ran my hand over my face. It wasn't that hard to understand, was it? At least... for someone who had all the cards in their hand. I couldn't blame her for not knowing. “First, I've never hated you, I...” She raised an eyebrow skeptically. “Okay, I admit that at times I might have seemed...”

“Rude, impolite, cynical, arrogant, a real asshole?”

In spite of myself, I smiled. She knew her synonyms.

“Something like that.”

“For once we agree on something.”

“You're not innocent either.”

She pointed accusingly. “We're talking about you, Callum. Then why?”

“Cyril.” The explanation was short, but his name summed it all up.

“Okay, you were disappointed that... Hang on, you said that he made people you love suffer...” She remembered.

I nodded. She was waiting for me to carry on. I owed her that much. It turned out to be the night of truths.

“You’ve met Raph. He... he hasn’t always been in a wheelchair.”

She was concentrating on my words, but letting me go at my own pace.

“We were both students. I was studying law, and he was studying sports science, and maybe you know that Cyril studied law as well?”

“The first I’ve heard of it. He never mentioned it.”

“He stopped after a year. Well, there was a party at a classmate’s in the hills. There was a crazy crowd. Cyril was there; so was I. I told Raph to meet me there because a girl he liked was there. The night was going well, but I was exhausted, and I was ready to head home, so I did. Raph came back two hours later, when the party was over, on his motorbike. He hadn’t drunk more than one beer the entire evening, he was completely sober, but he hadn’t even made it one mile when a car hit him from behind, causing him to slide off the side of the road. The person didn’t even stop. It was a quiet road, so it was 30 minutes before anyone found him. He was lying on the ground dying for half a goddamn hour.”

I clenched my fists, just as angry as every other time I told this story. I felt guilty too. Why hadn’t I stayed later? Why hadn’t I offered to take him home? Why had I invited him?

Over the years, Raphael had told me over and over that I couldn’t have known what was going to happen. He was right, but there was still a little part of me that wondered... could I have stopped it from happening? I knew I would always wonder about it.

Alix looked serious, a little pale even. In a soft voice she asked, probably already knowing the answer, “Who was driving the car?”

“Cyril Martin. He was stopped a few hours later, thanks to a CCTV camera that caught him speeding further down. His car even had the marks on it.”

“But... but was he arrested?”

If there was one thing that made me even more bitter about what happened, it was what came next.

“No, his parents covered it up. They blamed Raph. He was a scholarship student, and he didn’t have much money, so they offered to pay his medical bills and his rent while he recovered. He didn’t have anyone to advise him, and he was scared. The Martins used their influence over the town, and they have for a long time. He accepted the deal, and I don’t blame him.”

“So, Cyril never paid for what he did?”

“No, unless you count his parents’ money.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Sorry for what happened to Raphael and for... Dammit! I feel so bad for being with a man like that!”

“I know that if you knew, you never would have agreed to go out with him.”

She started pacing back and forth, clearly frustrated. “No wonder you hated me. You must have thought I was like him, that I was—”

“Never,” I cut her off.

“And...”

“Like I said, I’ve never hated you. I was worried about you.”

“You were worried about me?” she repeated, surprised.

“I continued to come to your restaurant, and I got to know you through my brothers and Jo, and I saw that you weren’t like him. I could tell he didn’t treat you like he should.”

“How do you know that?” she asked, ever so slightly defensive.

“People talk, I have eyes. When I came to eat at your restaurant, there were days when you didn’t smile. And believe me, on those days I wanted to go and punch him in the face.”

“So instead, you decided to pass your frustration onto me?”

“Hey! Let me remind you that you never missed an opportunity to jump down my throat.”

“Because you started talking to me like I was a thorn in your side.”

“You were nice to everyone except me!”

She moved in closer and pointed an accusatory finger at my chest. “Because you were behaving like an idiot! You never smiled, you always had a cold, annoyed tone. Put yourself in my shoes. I didn’t know what I’d done to deserve it! And even now, I don’t know why. My only fault was that apparently I dated Cyril. You are aware that I’m not him?”

“Yes, thanks, I got that.”

How could she ask that? Things had escalated, and I took a deep breath to try to calm myself down.

“Listen, I’m aware that sometimes, when I’m angry, I don’t always make good decisions.”

She rolled her eyes. “You don’t say. You only have to see how you handled the situation with Killian and your boss.”

“Don’t change the subject.”

“It’s the same subject. You make decisions based on an emotion you have in the moment. Which is completely the opposite of your job, where you probably tell clients not to do that.”

“I’m far from perfect.”

“Says the guy who looks like a model on a magazine cover and never has a hair out of place.” she snorted. “But if you’re not perfect and you’re doing everything you can to look like you are, now I have proof it’s all just appearances.”

“I know who to call if I need my ego deflated,” I mumbled.

“At your service. I can give you a healthy dose of humility Tuesday through Sunday at lunchtime, and sometimes even in the evenings, if you want. Is that why you continue to come to my restaurant? To remind yourself that not everyone worships the ground you walk on?”

I shook my head. “No, I continued to come because I wanted to keep an eye on you. To check that you were okay.”

I was admitting it both to her and to myself. I’d never dared to say the words, even in my head.

“Oh.”

A good while passed, and I didn’t know how to carry on. After some time had passed, I said, “I guessed that if you were happy around others, then you must be okay. It’s not an exact science, I admit.”

She didn’t say anything. The ticking of the clock in the kitchen seemed deafening, the little purring from the fridge, my own breathing, I was aware of every little noise.

I pretended to glance at my watch and said, “I think I should go to bed. I have a long day tomorrow.”

I figured we weren’t going to sit on the couch and watch a movie after all that, and I was more exhausted from the conversation than I thought I’d be. I left the kitchen, but Alix snapped out of her trance and came after me.

“Hang on.”

She grabbed my hand, and a shiver ran through me from this touch that was so simple but made more sense than it should have.

“Thank you for telling me all that.”

“You’re welcome,” I said with a quick smile.

“We’ve spent so long hating each other over nothing, haven’t we?”

“Probably.”

I felt like she was hesitating to add something. But given that she didn’t say anything, I started heading for my room.

“Callum?” I stopped again. “If I hadn’t been with Cyril and you’d asked me for my number... I would have given it to you.”

“That’s all in the past.”

“Really?”

I didn’t know how to answer that. Maybe it didn’t actually need a response. Alix walked toward me. There wasn’t much room between us, but I didn’t want to get carried away by my imagination. My heart was beating so fast in my chest that time seemed to stop. I could smell the perfume in her hair. It was soft and delicate, and I had to stop myself from running my hand through it, or worse, plunging my face into it. Alix bit her lip, and it sent a shock through me. I had to taste it too. I’d waited too long.

I didn’t know which of us took the final step, but the next second our lips finally met in the most delicious of ways.

ALIX

It wasn't a tender and hesitant kiss. It was something deep, intense, a kiss that said, *I've wanted to kiss you like you never could have imagined.*

If I'd ever had any doubts that Callum didn't want me, they were gone in a fraction of a second. I felt shock run through my body, but it was quickly replaced by the need to demand what I wanted.

He opened his mouth, tilted his head, and let his tongue slip between my lips. My hands were still by my sides, but they instinctively went for him, helped by the fact that he put his hand against the small of my back.

I responded to his kiss without shame, without fear, but I was angry, and I didn't really know why. Was it because he'd just admitted I was wrong this whole time? Or because he'd never tried to straighten things out?

He forced me take a few steps back, until my back was against the wall. One of my hands was holding the bottom of his t-shirt and the other hand was caressing his shoulder and neck. He brushed my upper thigh, and I wrapped it around his hip, bringing him even closer to me. Through his pants, his erection was pressing against my crotch, and I let out a muffled cry.

His hand was resting on the bottom of my face, making me look him in the eye as he let go of my lips and said, panting, "I want a chance. A chance to show you how wrong you've been about me all these years."

“I don’t think I was wrong. You showed me a skewed version of reality.”

His thumb caressed my cheek, and he whispered against my mouth, “I let my pride, resentment, and jealousy win. I’m sorry.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I ran my fingers over his neck while looking into his eyes, which seemed even darker than normal.

“Alix...” he pleaded before kissing me again, slowly and sensually. He plunged his hand into my hair and let out an almost frustrated moan. “This could get out of control very, very quickly,” he groaned.

“I don’t care, let’s do it—we’ve lost enough time as it is.”

He stepped back a bit to make sure I was in full possession of my senses. “You sure? You could...”

“Callum,” I said in a stern voice, “it’s now or never.”

But instead of melting into me, as I’d hoped he would, he carried on talking. “Sex can ruin our friendship, you know.”

“Then it’s a good thing we’re not really friends.”

That wasn’t exactly true. He’d done more for me in the last few days than some of my closest friends had. But this wasn’t the time to think about that. He smiled at me, which made me melt even more. The desire to feel his hands on my skin, his mouth against mine, was all the more pressing than any logical thinking.

In one swift movement he put his hand under my butt and picked me up. I wrapped my other leg around him. He carried me to his room, kissing me passionately all the way. People who said men couldn’t multitask had never met Callum Rossi.

He put me down near his bed, and his hands immediately started to move all over my body, and this time I was much more proactive. I loved the feeling of his firm muscles under my hands, but I wanted more. As I reached the hem of his shirt, I had a doubt. I pulled my mouth away from his and asked, “Is this really what you want?”

He rolled his eyes, as if my question was the stupidest one he'd ever heard. I persisted. "I don't want you to wake up tomorrow with any regrets. We can still stop and pretend it never happened. I don't want you to ignore me again just because we overstepped a boundary you didn't really want to overstep."

Callum looked at me for a few seconds, and I thought he'd actually changed his mind. But instead, he delicately touched my face and kissed my forehead.

Okay, this is the moment where he tells me this was all a terrible mistake.

"I've wanted this every time our eyes met. Even when you were with someone else, even when you looked at me like you wanted to kill me. Even when you were in the police station, with your messy hair, soot on your cheeks, and you looked at me like I was scum. You were always the unattainable woman of my dreams, Alix. The woman I thought I could watch from afar but never get close to. So, do I want this? You can't image how badly."

I grinned like a Cheshire cat. "Really?"

"Really. You're so beautiful when you smile," he added in a low voice.

I pulled his t-shirt over his head. When he was standing semi-naked in front of me, I gasped. Then I put my hands on his soft, warm skin and ran them over his chest, his shoulders, and his biceps before moving down to his abs, which contracted under my touch. He was beautiful. His body was far more muscly than that of any man I'd been with before. I needed to know what that golden skin felt like under my lips.

I pressed my lips against the base of his neck and moved down to his collarbone. His hands lifted my dress up over my thighs, and his fingers glided over my stockings, moving up to the strip of bare skin at the top.

The desire was intensifying within me. I almost wanted to beg him to tear off my clothes. But instead, I attacked one of his nipples with my tongue. Satisfied by the roar of pleasure it

gave him, I attended the other while my hand traced the line of black hair running from his belly button to his jeans. I gently caressed the bulge that was hiding beneath it.

Callum's breathing sped up, and I was spurred on. I undid his zipper and plunged my hand into his boxers, encircling his throbbing cock as my tongue teased his throat.

Callum groaned, his hand running along my panties and grabbing my ass. "Fuck, that's good," he gasped. "Don't stop."

I touched the tip, teasing it with my thumb, and noticed that he was already wet with pleasure.

"I want to see you too."

He was busy undoing my dress, so I helped him by lifting up my arms, regretfully abandoning my task. When his eyes landed on my semi-naked body, I thought they were going to pop out of their sockets. I always made a point of wearing nice underwear, even if I was the only one who'd see it. My baby-blue ensemble seemed to be to his liking.

"You're..."

He didn't need to say any more. For the first time in a long time, my heart was filled with the most delicious feeling. Discovering that this man thought I was the epitome of perfection and that he couldn't take his eyes off my body was absolutely exhilarating.

CALLUM

She was perfect. There was no other word to describe what I had in front of my eyes. I was partly convinced I was dreaming.

Alix Dalmasso was almost naked, just a few inches away from me, and I was finally about to make her mine.

Pinch me.

I got closer and closer and slowly I put my index finger on the bulge of her breast. Her mouth opened, that goddamn mouth that normally drove me crazy, but had become even more tempting with her kisses. I couldn't resist kissing her again. I even thought about making it my full-time job, if she'd let me apply.

Where did I get that idea from? I kind of knew. From the months, years even, of frustration that had fried my brain. I would do anything for her, so long as she let me carry on kissing her.

I wanted to take my time, but I was also aware of my own limits and this fire that was raging within me. My hand moved to her back, and I undid her bra, tossing it away before teasing her nipple with my thumb. She arched her back, and the sounds she made sent a shiver through me.

Magic.

My other hand slipped between her thighs, and I started to caress her through her panties, slowly growing more and more intense. She began to move her hips, and she instinctively pressed against my hand. Her panties were soaked, and I took

that as an invitation to continue. I moved the flimsy fabric to the side and slipped one of my fingers inside. She grabbed my hair, and I could feel the tension building in her.

“Yes,” she sighed against my lips.

I continued moving back and forth for a moment before stopping to gently grab her and lay her down on my bed. I took off her panties and her stockings and threw them onto the floor. I stood up to remove my jeans and boxers. The contrast of her light skin against my dark sheets was a real treat for the eyes. I resisted the temptation to wrap my hand around my hard dick and pleasure myself to this incredible view. But something told me that was not what she had in mind, and there was a limit to her patience. Mine too.

I lay down on top of her, taking care not to crush her with my weight. My mouth found one of her breasts, and I started dancing around her areola with my tongue before biting her nipple. I should have tried to go slower, but my brain and the tingling in my body told me otherwise. I’d waited so long, and I wanted it to be as good for her as it would be for me, which I knew it would.

I felt her spread her legs, silently begging me to attend to that part of her anatomy again. I was happy to oblige, sliding in a finger while playing with her clitoris.

She moaned, and it was like music to my ears. I continued to cover her in kisses, slowly descending over her stomach, her crotch, until my mouth replaced my hand on the little ball of nerves, making her vibrate.

“Callum!” she let out.

I carried on, gradually increasing the intensity to drive her crazy. Her hands were balled into fists, grabbing my sheets, and her moans told me she was in delicious agony. I added a finger, and the tension in her body intensified, her walls contracted, and I knew she was close. I hesitated to tease her more, to play with her pleasure. But I knew I couldn’t be patient forever either. So, I gave her the final blow. My name became a litany in her mouth, and until then, I hadn’t realized how much I appreciated it. When her orgasm overcame her, I

couldn't help my own little moan. My breathing was jerky, in sync with hers. I gave her a final lick and stood up to enjoy the expression of pure happiness spread across her face.

I was the one to put her in that state. I didn't think I'd ever been so happy about an accomplishment in my life.

"Don't move," I ordered her.

She looked at me as if I'd lost my mind. "I can't move my legs."

"Good, because we're far from done."

"Smug?" she suggested.

"I promise to tell the truth and nothing but the truth," I joked.

The sound of her laugh made me want to grab her face and kiss it until I couldn't breathe. Instead, I rolled over to my nightstand and grabbed a condom. I opened it with my teeth and covered myself. I felt Alix watching me, and between that and the anticipation, I almost shivered.

I returned to my position between her thighs in less time than it took to say it. My eyes met hers, and for a second, time seemed to stop. Her sensual mouth was partly open, her chest was moving up and down with her breaths. I teased her clitoris with the tip of my sex, and her pupils clouded with desire.

When I started to enter her, she bit her lip.

She was going to drive me mad.

She wrapped her leg around me, as if ordering me to press against her a bit more, and I respectfully responded to her request. But once I was all the way in, I had to take a second to pull myself together. We had hardly started, and I was already seeing stars.

I started to move slowly, withdrawing almost completely before diving back in. She closed her eyes.

"Look at me," I ordered.

"You're really annoying," she sighed as her hands slid over my back, her nails digging into my skin.

“Oh yeah?” I smiled.

“Yeah,” she replied, grabbing my ass. “Why does it feel so good? How dare you be so attentive, patient, and talented when I was sure you’d be selfish, and I don’t know... bad?”

I stopped and looked her dead in the eyes. “You know I love to prove you wrong.”

“So, carry on proving me wrong.”

I leaned in to quickly kiss her on the lips. “Your wish is my command.”

I was rewarded with the most charming smile. I resumed our sexual dance, but this time the rhythm was more intense and slowly increased in ecstasy. I was possessed, bewitched, the fault of a pretty brunette with hazel eyes and a sharp tongue. When I collapsed a few moments later, my body covered in sweat and filled with the feeling that I’d just been to paradise, I had only one obsession. To go there again.

ALIX

I spent the night in Callum's bed.

After a second round that was just as delicious as the first, I tried to get up to go back to my room, but I'd barely sat up on the bed when he grabbed my hand to pull me back.

"Where are you going?"

"Err... to my room?"

He frowned. "Absolutely not, you're staying here."

I never thought I'd be the type of woman to give in to a *you Jane, me Tarzan, I have testosterone, so I decide for you* argument, but maybe too many orgasms had ruined my good judgment, so I stayed in his bed.

In the morning, Callum woke me up too early, but my body once again stopped my mind from protesting, which was why he was now half lying on top of me. We were sweaty, our breaths short, and I wasn't sure what my name was.

"Am I crushing you?" he asked without moving.

He fell onto the mattress next to me and pulled me against him so that he was big spoon and I was little spoon. He kissed my shoulder.

"Don't you have to go to work?" I asked.

The alarm clock was displaying the time that he normally went to work.

"Yes, but if I'm late, I'll say it's because of my fiancée."

It was supposed to be a joke, but given recent developments, it took on a whole new meaning. I turned to face him, and he looked apologetic. He moved a strand of hair out of my face and said, “I know, I promised I’d tell my boss and Killian we broke up.”

Why did something in my chest tense when he said this? That was what we’d agreed.

“Okay.”

I felt like he was scrutinizing my face, so to stop him from extracting any information, I said, “I’m going to go take a shower.”

I broke free of him and headed for the bathroom without looking back. I was completely naked, but I felt that if I’d stayed a second longer my soul would be bare too.

I closed the door behind me and looked in the mirror. I almost screamed out of fright. My cheeks were red, my hair a mess, last night’s makeup smeared under my eyes, making me look like a panda.

I washed my face while trying to get my head together.

I’d slept with Callum.

Suddenly, it seemed like the most stupid idea in the world. He was my lawyer, he wasn’t exactly a friend, and most importantly, Callum Rossi didn’t do the whole relationship thing. It wasn’t as if I didn’t know. Everyone knew. That was why there were Gabrielles at his door. His nightstand drawer had a condom collection worthy of an STI awareness association, and nobody would be surprised to learn that we’d broken up.

Really, what was I thinking?

There were two knocks on the door. “Alix, you okay?”

Instead of replying, I turned on the shower, and after patiently waiting a few seconds for it to warm up I got in.

I’d hardly been in for two seconds to enjoy the soothing effect of the warm water when Callum knocked again. “Alix?”

I swore in my head. Couldn't he just leave me alone?

Apparently not, because the next moment, Callum came in.

"Were you not taught to respect people's privacy?"

"You didn't lock it."

"Yes, but that doesn't give you the right to barge in whenever you want!"

I hadn't finished my sentence when he took off his boxers and came into the shower with me. Goddammit! How did he have such a perfect body, despite sitting behind a desk all day and eating takeout regularly? That only added to my annoyance. Clearly, the gene fairies that had leaned over his cradle hadn't been so generous with the rest of us.

"There's not enough room for both of us," I protested.

"There's enough room for what I want to do."

"If you think we're going to sleep together again, you can forget it, Rossi. I'm not some sex doll, and I think you're overestimating your abilities. But given the size of your ego, that's not surprising."

Something dangerously close to a smile appeared on his face. I wanted to hit him even more.

"I would prefer not to have this conversation completely naked with the risk of getting shampoo in my eyes, but we need to have it before I go to work. So, if it has to be in the shower, then it has to be in the shower.

"I'm sure ecowarriors wouldn't approve of that idea."

"Alix," he said in a firm tone.

"Callum?"

He sighed. "I'd like... I don't know how to put it, so I'll just say it. I'd like to be in a relationship with you."

These words were so surprising, I wondered if I'd heard him correctly. Was the noise of the water causing me to mishear him?

"You want to be in a relationship with me?" I repeated, dazed.

“Yes, a real relationship. Not you playing my fake fiancée, but...”

“Hang on!” I cut him off. “Is this some ploy to get me to carry on pretending to be your fake fiancée?”

“I just told you I don’t want you to be my fake fiancée!”

“Yes, but you could just be telling me that to make me believe you want to be with me and then I’ll turn around and say, ‘while we’re at it, why don’t we tell people we’re getting married?’ so I feel like the idea came from me when, in fact, it was yours.”

“That’s a rather twisted plan, isn’t it?”

I pointed a finger at his wet chest. “Let me remind you that you’re the one who claimed to be engaged when you didn’t even have a girlfriend. Don’t you think *you’re* a bit twisted?”

“Probably. I swear that I’m being sincere this time.”

“You don’t normally do relationships. Why have you suddenly changed your mind?”

He opened his mouth, then closed it again, which did nothing to reassure me. Then he took my face and lightly kissed me on the lips. “Maybe because I’ve never met someone like you before?”

“I’ve watched a lot of rom-coms, but I’m not naïve. That’s not how it happens in real life.”

“Yesterday when I told you I’d wanted you for a long time, I meant it.”

“There’s a difference between desire and...”

“No, Alix. You said it yourself. I’ve carried on coming to your restaurant for months, just to hear you laugh, just to see you, to make sure Cyril wasn’t hurting you. Do you really think that’s the behavior of a guy who’s just looking for a one-night stand?”

I didn’t have a response to that. Or rather, the one I did have agreed with him, and I wasn’t ready to say that out loud just yet.

He kissed me again, but quickly. It wasn't the sensual, breathtaking kiss I'd been expecting, that I so desperately wanted, even though my mind was telling me to avoid it.

"I'm not asking you to decide right now. But think about it."

He got out of the shower and left me alone under the jet that didn't seem so burning now that he'd left. By the time I'd realized what had happened, he wasn't in the bathroom anymore. And I was lost.

CALLUM

If I was in a good mood, it quickly disappeared when I found Cyril Martin waiting for me in my office, under the careful eye of Norma.

“Ah, good, there you are. I thought you were the kind of guy to get to work early,” he said with a smile, which made me want to knock out all of his teeth.

“I had things to do.”

Like making love to Alix.

But even if I would have loved to throw that in his face, I wasn't about to stoop to that level. Plus, I feared that she'd find out and come castrate me herself with a knife. So, I'd be a gentleman.

Norma gave me a worried look, and I motioned for her to join us in the office.

“To what do I owe the displeasure this Monday morning?” I asked, sitting down.

“You're still representing Alix Dalmasso?”

“Clearly.”

“I've come to inform you that my parents will not be filing a complaint against her.”

I should have been happy for her, but I knew he was hiding something. “And you needed to come see me in person to tell me this?”

“That’s not the only reason I wanted to talk to you.” I raised an eyebrow, urging him to carry on. “I’m going to sell the restaurant and the apartment.”

“Okay, and do you have a buyer?”

“Yes, a friend of mine. He’s been to the restaurant a few times these last few days, and he’s convinced it’s a good deal.”

“But what about your fiancée’s tearoom project?”

“She gave up on it. She wants to open a clothes shop instead, but the location isn’t suitable.”

An entrepreneur at heart... No wonder they got along so well—neither could make up their mind.

“So why do you want to sell it?”

“She doesn’t like that I’m still in touch with my ex.”

I could understand that. I didn’t really like that she was still in touch with her ex either. Although I knew that technically we weren’t together, despite my wish, the idea of her seeing him again made me cringe, and not because I was jealous, but because I was sure Cyril wasn’t someone she should be linked to. He was toilet scum, and she was a diamond. She wore her heart on her sleeve, whereas he just looked after his own self-interest.

“So, you’re dropping the charges because you don’t want it to affect the sale?”

“Exactly.”

“Have you spoken to Alix about selling?” For a second, I was afraid he’d say yes. “That’s why I’m here. I’m legally obligated to offer it to her first, but you and I both know she doesn’t have the funds to buy it, so I don’t want to waste everyone’s time.”

“You still need to talk to her.”

“Do what you want, but I need all this dealt with quickly. I don’t want it to drag on for months.”

“Believe me when I say that the sooner I don’t have to hear from you again, the better.”

“Well, now that’s settled, I just need to leave. Call me before the end of the week to tell me that Alix said no.”

I didn’t reply. I wasn’t going to stand up for him, and the sooner he was out of my sight, the sooner I’d be relaxed.

That evening I left the office a bit earlier than normal, and Alix was already at home.

“Anna came to see me at the restaurant today,” she told me as soon as she saw me.

I stopped dead in my tracks. “Oh.”

I didn’t know what to do with that news. What had Alix told her? The question must have been written on my face, because she said, “Don’t worry, I played my role to perfection. We even talked about cake flavors.”

I scratched my neck. “Okay, I’m sorry. I didn’t get a chance to talk to my boss today. I promise I’ll take care of it as soon as I can. You won’t have to pretend for much longer.”

She bit her lip, and I walked toward her. I was happy to see that she walked over to me too and put her hands on my biceps.

“About that. I’ve been thinking…” she started.

My hearted began beating so fast. But if she was touching me, that was a good sign, right?

“I thought that maybe we could keep pretending we’re engaged for Killian and your boss.”

That wasn’t exactly the topic I thought she’d been thinking about. “Why? You didn’t like acting in front of people on Friday, and you wanted to stop.”

“It wasn’t that bad. I just said that to… annoy you, I guess.”

“I thought you hated lying to Killian and Anna.”

“Yes... but if we’re actually together, then it’s not really acting, is it?”

These words gave me some hope. “You mean you made a decision?” I asked, smiling.

She got up on her tiptoes and kissed me. “Yes.”

I put my hand around her back to stop her from leaving. “So, I can kiss you any way I want?”

“Isn’t that the whole point of being together?”

I replied with a smile, but also with a long kiss that left us both stunned. I was ready to take things further, but Alix seemed in the mood to talk.

“So, we can keep making Bonifaci and Killian think we’re engaged.”

“Is this some ploy to tell me you want me to propose?”

Her eyes widened, and horrified she said, “Huh? No! Absolutely not!”

I burst out laughing. “Calm down, I’m only joking. But yes, if you’re willing to carry on with this, then that suits me. Like you said, we won’t really be lying. I don’t want you to feel obliged either. I’ll let you choose. I’ll go along with whatever you decide.”

She flashed me a tender smile. “I knew you’d let me choose. That’s why I accepted. If I can help you... you’ve already done so much for me.”

“You don’t owe me anything. By the way, Cyril came into the office today.”

“What did he want?” she asked in a worried tone.

“His parents have dropped the charges for the fire. They want to sell the restaurant, and they wanted me to tell you that you have the right to be the first to offer because you’re the tenant.”

Her face brightened and then darkened. She shook her head. “I don’t have the money to buy it, unfortunately.”

“Are you sure? The restaurant makes good money. You could get a loan and...”

“My finances are still too unsteady. I have a bit of money put aside, but with my grandmother in the nursing home, I can’t spend it. If I have even the slightest issue at the restaurant, I won’t be able to pay for it, and I don’t want that to happen.”

“I can lend you the money,” I offered.

“Absolutely not,” she said firmly. “I don’t want charity.”

“It’s not charity if you pay me back.”

“I need to do this myself, Callum. Have I already thought about buying the restaurant? Of course. I thought I had a few more years to save before the opportunity arose. But unfortunately, I don’t. Sometimes life doesn’t go as planned, but maybe it’s not a bad thing. Look at us. Our timing was bad in the beginning, but we eventually found each other. It’s probably better like this, right?”

How could I argue with that? I hugged her, and she buried her face in my neck. I inhaled her rose scent, and already I wanted to explore every inch of her body that I hadn’t yet discovered.

I slid my hand over her waist, her ass, but she suddenly stepped back.

“We never watched that film. Do you want to watch it now?”

I accepted, even though it wasn’t really in my plans. I knew I had to be patient, and the reward would be worth it.

ALIX

In the next few days, we'd come to terms with a few things. Although I was willing to start a relationship with Callum and to carry on pretending we were engaged for his work, I didn't think it was a good thing that we were already together.

It might have seemed paradoxical, but my friends were in relationships with his brothers, and he was technically the last single Rossi. I wasn't ready to make our relationship "official." It would cause too much excitement and put too much pressure on us. We'd hardly gotten to know each other, and we didn't need all that on top of everything else.

Callum was strangely okay with this idea and agreed that we wouldn't tell our friends or his family. We were together for real, engaged for work, and single for friends and family. If anyone knew the truth, they might have thought we were crazy. It wasn't always easy to do the mental gymnastics to keep on top of everything.

Cyril was no longer a threat, since the charges had been dropped and they were selling the restaurant. So, I chose to go back to my apartment, but I'd barely told Callum when he said that was out of the question.

Of course that caused an argument, and we made up in bed, and I gave in yet again. His main argument was that we needed to because we were fake engaged, and it was unlikely I'd choose to move out now. Plus, we'd invited Killian and Anna to have dinner at "our place" in a few days. There were other arguments, such as the fact that it was easier to see each other while remaining secret, plus it was much nicer than

sleeping alone. At the end of the discussion, he even went to get my things to put them in his own wardrobe.

I let it all go because there was a little voice inside of me, reminding me that Callum had never been a big fan of commitment. At least, he was proving that he was trying to change by wanting to keep me close.

Weeks went by, and I learned to take evenings off at the restaurant to watch rom-coms and superhero films, lying on the couch, cuddled up to my boyfriend, my cat on our laps. He met my grandmother, and even if she continued to get me mixed up with my mother, I felt like she was happy for me.

Yes, Callum Rossi was my boyfriend, and if someone had told me on the first day of the year what was going to happen, I'd never have believed them. I never would have believed I'd have such a connection with someone. Although we sometimes had heated arguments, our reconciliations were just as passionate. Our differences gradually became our strengths, and I was happy.

He also seemed to be happy. He was smiling more, and although he was still working a lot, he wouldn't stay so late at the office, and came to see me on my break from time to time and finish work on his files at home.

"Isn't it suspicious that our outfits match?" I asked, looking at his suit for Lara's wedding.

"Why, is it forbidden to want to wear the same color as a *roommate*?" he joked.

"It's more than just the same color, your pocket square is the same fabric as my dress."

"You shouldn't have left scraps of fabric lying around."

Finally, he'd brought my sewing machine from my old apartment and had it set up in the office, which was formerly his guest room. I found this adorable, and it earned him some points on the Hugh Grant scale. The fact that he matched his outfit to mine? Even more points.

I sighed. "I guess we should tell them soon. I think your mom is suspicious, especially since the last time she came over."

“Oh yeah?”

“She saw my things in your room...”

“Okay, so no need to lie anymore,” he said, leaning over to kiss me. “We can tell them today.”

“No, not today. It’s your sister’s big day, I don’t want to steal the spotlight.”

“Even if Beyoncé showed up to the reception, Lara would still be the star. But whatever you want,” he said, seizing my lips with his again.

“Stop it, you’re going to ruin my makeup!”

“I’m counting on it,” he replied with a cheeky look on his face.

The ceremony was amazing. It was even more beautiful than any I’d seen in films. Not because of the quality of the décor, which was perfect, or because Lara was a wedding planner, but because of the love between the happy couple. I wiped away a tear and even tried to hide it. Even Callum had teary eyes.

After the ceremony, everyone was invited to toast the happy couple. Although I knew there were a lot of Rossis, I didn’t know just how many of them there were until I realized most of the guests were related to them in one way or another. There were a lot of cousins, uncles, and aunts. While I was speaking with his cousin Olivia and her husband Victor, he asked, “Are you Callum’s girlfriend?”

“Err, no, just a... roommate.”

This whole thing was becoming such a headache. Callum was right, we had to tell them sooner or later, because I couldn’t see myself telling his cousin, who I’d just met, the whole work-lie thing. On the other hand, I was uncomfortable lying to him, and I knew he’d ask questions. Callum was very attentive, making sure I always had a full glass with my

favorite drink and was rarely more than a few yards away from me. Plus, we had matching outfits, dammit!

“Oh, sorry. I thought... sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“Alix?” someone called out.

I turned around to see... Anna? Accompanied by Killian! She waved at me, and I was stunned, so I remained frozen, like a statue.

I finally pulled myself together and said, “Anna, Killian, what a nice surprise! But... what are you doing here?”

“We followed your advice, and we called Lara to help organize our wedding. You were right, she’s great! She knew we were considering this place as our venue, and she invited us to come for a drink to see it in person. Isn’t that so sweet?”

“Ah, yes, so sweet,” I said in a strained voice.

I tried to hide my hand in my back pocket. I wasn’t wearing my engagement ring, and I prayed they hadn’t noticed.

“But I’m still thinking about it,” said Killian. “I hope you and Callum aren’t thinking about getting married here? We wouldn’t want to take it from you. Maybe it’s a special place for your family?”

“Err...”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Olivia, and I saw her eyes go from Killian and Anna to me, clearing thinking we were deranged—for obvious reasons.

“No, we haven’t gotten that far yet... Would you excuse me? I just need to find him... Something to do with a surprise he’s been planning for his sister.”

“Oh yes, of course. We won’t hang around the reception for too long anyway. We’re going to go to the buffet to try those delicious-looking canapés. Lara highly recommended this caterer. Let’s talk about it when we get together next week?” suggested Killian, putting his arm around Anna’s shoulders. Anna nodded enthusiastically.

“Yes, of course,” I replied quickly in the hope of being rid of them.

“We could go to golf after our lunch?” suggested Anna.

“Yes, golf. Callum will be delighted.”

I ended my sentence with a tense smile. Callum hated golf, and I didn’t know anything about it, apart from the fact that there was a ball, clubs, and some grass, a lot of grass.

Goddammit! I had to find him quickly, or there was going to be a disaster in less than five minutes.

I left Anna and Killian and went to find my boyfriend/fiancé/roommate/lawyer depending on who you were. This situation was anything but simple. No matter how hard I looked for him, he was nowhere to be found, it was like he’d vanished.

“Alix!”

Jo and Remy were coming in my direction with big smiles on their faces.

“What’s all this about Callum? My cousin Olivia told me that friends of yours are here and they seem to think that you’re...”

“Shh! Now’s not the time!” I glared at them, but that just seemed to amuse them even more.

“I was thinking that you spend a lot of time together, and now you’re living at his...” started Jo.

“Yes, we’re together, well no, actually it’s complicated. It’s connected to what I told you about his work.”

“You’re still pretending to be his fiancée?” she said, surprised.

“Not so loud! People could hear you.”

She closed her mouth, but I could see all the questions in her eyes. And her expression clearly said, “*You’ve got some explaining to do.*”

“I need to find Callum.”

“He’s over there,” said Remy.

I saw him where Remy had indicated, near the bar and... he was with Killian.

Shit.

I left Remy and Jo and hurried over to Callum. I didn't know if I should join them. After all, the whole idea was to warn him that Killian was here, but it was too late. I went over anyway. My boyfriend had his back to me, and Killian didn't seem to have noticed me. I didn't know if he was the one who'd led his colleague to this corner, but they were away from prying eyes.

"I had to admit I couldn't believe it. That you were suddenly engaged at the same time as me."

I stopped dead. What were they talking about? Was Killian in on the lie?

"But Anna convinced me after the dinner at our place that you really were in love. She said she could see it in your eyes."

I breathed, relieved, but I was curious to know what Callum said to that.

"Ah, well, I guess your future wife has better senses than you do."

"You can say that again. Well, if I needed any more proof, the fact that you bought the restaurant was it."

"Excuse me?" Callum didn't say that, but me. When he turned around and saw me, he grimaced. "You did what?" I was frozen to the spot and couldn't believe what I'd just heard.

"Oops, was it a surprise?" Killian asked.

"Shut up," Callum said bluntly.

"Did you really buy the restaurant?"

He didn't blink when he answered, "Yes."

CALLUM

“Alix, wait!”

She ran across the grass, and I did the same, attracting quite a bit of attention from people in her way. But that was the least of my worries. I had to catch up to her.

Luckily for me, her heels didn't help her, and I managed to her. I grabbed her arm.

“Let me go!” she yelled.

I did as she said. The last thing I wanted was for her to think I was trying to get her to do anything. She carried on walking, and I followed.

“Please can we talk?”

“I don't think so, no.”

She went into the country house where the marriage ceremony had taken place, and we walked through the room full of tables that the waiters were setting up for dinner.

“Alix, please.”

“I don't want to talk to you, Callum. Go back to the other guests.”

“Where are you going?”

“I'm leaving.”

“You can't...”

“Yes, I can if I want to. I don't need you to tell me what I can or cannot do. Or worse, that you can do things for me.”

“Listen, I’ll explain everything.”

She stopped dead. “There’s nothing to explain. I asked you not to do anything, and you went and did it behind my back. You lied to me, Callum Rossi.”

“But I was going to tell you the truth! It’s just that...”

“No! I don’t want to hear your reasons. You always do whatever you want, and you always win, even if it means going against the people around you. It’s over.”

She walked toward the cloak room and gave the employee her ticket.

“Give me mine as well,” I said, handing over my own ticket.

“What are you doing?”

“Well, you’ve clearly decided to leave. Let me remind you that we came together, so I’ll take you back home and we can talk later.”

“Oh, no. That’s not going to happen. You stay here. You can apologize to your parents, Lara, and Adam for me. You’ll come up with a good excuse—you’re an expert liar. I’ll take a taxi.”

“Alix...”

“And don’t expect to find me at the apartment. I’m going to grab my things and go home. I’ll give my key to the concierge.”

She said these words in a detached and cold tone. They were like a slap to the face. I stayed where I was and watched her leave, like an idiot. A taxi arrived a few minutes later and she got in without even looking back.

After all that, my sister’s wedding seemed like long and painful torture. I was hardly aware that anyone was talking to me. Jo and Cleo were giving me hostile looks, and I was sure they’d already been told a more than unflattering account of what happened.

“Hey,” said Roxane, standing next to me. “You okay?”

On the dance floor, people were singing *Alexandrie Alexandra* way too happily for me to bear. I glared at Roxane.

“What stupid thing have you done now?”

“Why do you think I’ve done something stupid?”

“Because if it was Alix, you wouldn’t be making that face.”

“What face?”

“The one where you look like you want to die, but you’re too proud to admit it.”

“I’m not ashamed to admit I’ve fucked up.”

“Oh! Oh! What happened to Callum Rossi?”

“Is that supposed to be funny?”

“Not for you. Well, let me guess, it has something to do with Alix and maybe even Killian.”

“Finn should really think about getting you to join the police, you’re really perceptive,” I said, incredibly sarcastically. “Alix left, and Killian showed up at my sister’s wedding. Do you really think that wouldn’t put me in a bad mood?”

“Because of the restaurant?”

“How did you know?”

“We work together. You had the real estate department sort out the contracts, and guess who has access to all the company’s documents?”

“It’s supposed to be confidential!”

“I haven’t told anyone,” she said. “But if you want my opinion, it wasn’t very nice of you to do it without telling her.”

“No kidding, thanks Captain I-give-advice-after-the-disaster’s-already-happened.”

She brushed it off. “Alix is an independent woman. It’s not surprising that she doesn’t appreciate you meddling in her business without talking to her.”

“I was going to talk to her about it.”

“I don’t doubt that, but you can’t keep a secret to save your life.”

“I was just waiting...”

What was I waiting for? I hadn’t exactly decided when I was going to tell her, but I wanted to do it on my own terms, not because of Killian.

Bloody Killian.

Roxane tapped me on the shoulder. “Give her a bit of time and try to find a way to fix it.”

“If she’ll ever speak to me again.”

“You’re giving up that quickly? You’re not going to fight a bit? What have you done with Callum, the guy who never gives up?”

I ran my hand through my hair. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Well, you’re going to have your work cut out for you, that much is clear. But with any luck... Alix is a big romantic. You have to make a big gesture, like in the films.”

“Great, what’s your advice? Ring all the doorbells down her street and invite her to my non-existent nephew’s carol concert? Admit that I was a jerk at a press conference? Or a big declaration of love in the rain?”

“Wow! Did you memorize the classics, or do you have a secret crush on Hugh Grant?”

I let out a joyless laugh. “It’s... Alix.”

I thought of her laughing every time we watched one of those movies. The moments where she could recite it by heart because she’d seen it so many times. All the little things that made her so great in my eyes. Yes, she was a big romantic, but she had her feet firmly on the ground. She was a hard worker who was doing everything herself, and I knew that by buying her restaurant I was meddling in her business, which she didn’t want. But here we were. I wanted to take care of her, to help her realize her dream. The idea was that one day, when she was ready to buy it, she could. I just wanted to give her the chance, but she hadn’t given me time to explain.

I was tempted to go see her at the end of the reception, to beg her to listen to me and to apologize. If I'd learned one thing from all the rom-coms I'd watched over the past few weeks, however, it was that rushing was the worst thing I could do.

ALIX

I was in a foul mood. In theory, the Sunday lunch service should have been the perfect distraction for my problems. But here I was, and I hadn't forgotten what I'd learned the day before. My new landlord was none other than Callum. Every time I glanced around the restaurant, the same thought came to mind. I was at his place.

That was infuriating in itself, but the fact that he did it behind my back made it even worse.

I scolded Tim more than once, whined at Gino, and I'd even managed to spill water on a customer. I could see my team exchanging puzzled looks, annoyed ones even.

"You should go back to your place," Gino finally suggested.

My place? It wasn't really mine—it was his.

"I'm fine here, and the terrace is busy."

"I agree with Tim. You're scaring customers away."

"You and Tim would do well to carry on with your jobs rather than sticking your noses in my business."

Gino looked at me, shocked. I didn't normally talk to my employees like that. I immediately knew I'd crossed the line.

"Sorry, Gino. I'm a bit... stressed this morning."

"Really? We hadn't noticed," he grumbled.

I sighed, leaning against the worktop.

"Seriously, Alix, you seem exhausted."

I made some mistakes on a few checks and then I swapped two orders. Gino was looking at me, and Tim didn't exactly subtly insist that they could finish the service without me. I had to face the fact that I wasn't doing well at anything.

A few minutes later I was climbing the stairs to my apartment. I'd only just gotten there when I felt like I was suffocating. Callum had only come here once, but it felt like he was everywhere. The feeling that I was lacking space invaded me, and it was depressing, considering that I was living here again. I decided to get out, so I grabbed my purse.

After a short ride on the tram, I'd reached the nursing home.

"Marie-Claire!" cried my grandmother when she saw me. I gave her the biggest smile, even though deep down my heart wasn't in it. "You look so elegant! Turn around, let me see your dress." I was happy to play along. My grandmother was a seamstress, and she was the one who'd taught me how to sew. "Beautiful. Are you here alone? Your fiancé isn't here?"

I opened my mouth, not knowing what to say. Of course, we'd never told my grandmother we weren't really engaged. I'd just introduced Callum as my friend. I couldn't escape him even here.

"He... he's not coming."

"Oh! I hope he's just busy, that you haven't broken up. You're so cute together."

How did she remember that, this woman who'd forgotten I existed?

"Actually, Grandma, we're not together anymore." Saying these words, it hurt me more than I thought it would.

"He doesn't know what he's missing."

"It's... it's not..."

I didn't finish my sentence. I fell back into the chair next to her. She waited patiently for me to explain.

So, I told her everything, starting from the very beginning, how we first met, about how we always joked and jabbed at

each other. I told her about Callum's lies, my arrest, playing fake fiancés and our actual relationship.

My grandmother listened attentively, asking a few key questions. In the space of an instant, I had the strong and attentive woman who'd raised me back, the woman I'd told about my teenage troubles. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed her until then.

"Well," she said, "that's quite the story."

"Yes."

"This Callum must really like you to have bought your restaurant."

"We're not in the 50s anymore. It wasn't a chivalrous gesture. It was more toxic masculinity in all its glory."

She frowned, and I wondered if she was stuck in the past, if my comment about the 50s had shocked her. But she surprised me and said, "Are you sure about that? After everything you told me, he seems like a rather thoughtful guy."

"He bought the restaurant, Grandma. Not flowers!"

"He's a wise man if you ask me. They normally think we like pretty things, but just like with them, the stomach is the way to the heart."

This conversation wasn't going anywhere. I was still frustrated, and my grandmother didn't seem like she was going to support me on this. She grabbed my hand, and I looked into her blue eyes, which had been dulled by the years.

"Callum seems like the perfect guy, but it's all an illusion. He has faults just like everyone else. Even a diamond has a vulnerable point where it can be broken. Give him a chance to make it up to you."

I returned home, but I wasn't really comforted by my grandmother's words. It suddenly started to rain, and I cursed myself for not having brought an umbrella. It was a fine rain, and the light from the streetlamps made the Nice cobblestone streets sparkle. I was almost hypnotized by it, to the point that

I didn't notice the silhouette at the foot of my building until the last moment.

He came toward me and covered me with an umbrella.

"Hey," he said softly.

"What are you doing here?"

"I came to talk to you."

I stepped around him, but he followed me, covering me as I rummaged through my bag for my keys. Of course, they chose now to play Houdini.

"You don't happen to have a spare, do you?" I said sarcastically. "Given that you're my new landlord."

"Alix," he said, grabbing my wrist.

I shrugged him off and finally found my keys in my coat pocket. I had to try them in the lock three times. Callum waited patiently without laughing. I opened the door, but not all the way, just enough to slip through. I was about to slam it shut behind me, but Callum stuck his foot in it like an experienced vacuum salesman.

"Please, Alix, just give me a few minutes and then I'll go, if you still want me to."

"I'll save you the time: I *already* want you to go."

"Please," he repeated.

I knew just how stubborn he could be—almost as stubborn as me. If I didn't hear him out now, he'd find a way to annoy me later.

"Okay, five minutes and that's it."

We climbed the stairs to my apartment. I could feel the weight of his gaze, and I would have been lying if I said I didn't care.

CALLUM

The apartment was small, but Alix seemed so terribly far away. A few months earlier, when I walked through that door, I thought our two worlds couldn't have been more different. Today, I thought they complemented each other.

The issue was that I had screwed up.

"Well, what do you want?" she asked, with her hands on her hips, not even trying to hide her annoyance.

You.

"To apologize, first of all." She rolled her eyes, but that didn't stop me. "Listen, I know you told me not to get involved. But I couldn't not and..."

"You bought my restaurant!" she yelled. "Without even talking to me! How did you think I'd feel?"

"Technically, that's not the case. I still need to sign some papers."

"Who cares about the paperwork! Do you realize the situation you're putting me in?"

"I'm freeing you from the Martins."

She threw her hands in the air. "Great! My owner is no longer my ex-boyfriend, but my..." She stopped herself from saying, "My new ex-boyfriend."

The words were like a knife to the stomach, but I didn't focus on that. I couldn't admit defeat. I walked toward her and said, "Listen, I know how important this place is to you. I didn't

want you to miss the opportunity. The idea was never to be your landlord. I just wanted you to be able to keep your restaurant. And who knows what another buyer would have done with the place? I was thinking of letting you slowly buy it off me, when you can, at your own pace. I know it's important to you, and I wanted you to be able to have it."

She shook her head, and I felt like she was about to cry. "It's humiliating, Callum."

"There's nothing humiliating about it. You're running your business. Just let me give you a hand. I know you normally want to do everything yourself, but I'd like to help."

She shook her head again, and when I tried to walk toward her, she motioned for me not to move. "You lied, Callum."

"It was supposed to be a surprise."

"A surprise would be giving me flowers or a box of chocolates. Not telling me you're the one I now need to send the rent to."

I sighed. I wanted us to be closer, so I could take her into my arms and tell her I was sorry until she forgave me. But I knew she wasn't going to let that happen.

"You lied to me."

"I had to. You said it yourself—you never would have let me help you."

"And when exactly where you going to tell me?"

"In a few days' time when the paperwork was all finalized."

"Is that really true?"

"Alix..."

She assumed an accusatory tone. "How can I be sure? Maybe you've made up some story, maybe you've been lying for months."

"I'd never do that."

"Oh yeah? You sure about that? Because lying seems to be your specialty, doesn't it, Callum? You lie to your boss, your

colleagues, your family, to me. Is there anyone you don't lie to if it means getting what you want?"

"You know very well that..."

"No! I don't know anything! Look, Callum, you lie like you breathe! You're so caught up in the lies that you don't even realize it. Your entire life is a lie. Nobody really knows you. For a moment I thought I knew the real Callum Rossi, but all this has just told me that I was wrong."

Her tirade was like a knife to the heart, but in my last attempt to convince her, I said, "You're the one who knows me the best, Alix. The one who knows exactly who I am. I'm sorry that I've lied to you until now, but since you came to stay with me, I've been honest. If I went against your wishes, just know that I wasn't trying to hide anything. It was stupid, and I know that now, but I just wanted you to be happy, Alix. These last few weeks together have made me happier than I ever could have imagined, and I realized how much I love spending time with you and how much you mean to me. I know I've never told you this, but I lo..."

She walked over to put her hand over my mouth. Her eyes were filled with tears, but there was no joy on her face. It was gone, and it was my fault.

"Don't say another word. I won't believe it."

She removed her hand, as if the idea of touching me was unbearable.

"I'm being honest, Alix."

"Please, go away."

Normally, I would have insisted, pleaded my case and chosen my arguments to convince her. I'd memorized all the things I wanted to say to her before I came, but one look was enough for me to realize it was all in vain. Her word was final. Like in a courtroom when the audience knows the jury has made their decision and nobody can change their mind. So, the only thing I could do was as she wished, no matter how hard it was.

A tear rolled down her cheek, and I wiped it away. As I touched her, she closed her eyes and whispered, "Go away,

Callum. Please,” before opening them again.

I stepped back, trying to keep her gaze. She avoided it, and it was as if she'd slapped me. I finally turned around and smelled her perfume one last time, even though I felt like I couldn't breathe.

I arrived home, completely soaked by the rain, but also completely unaffected by it. The cold water was nothing compared to the pain in my heart.

CALLUM

I put my phone back into my pants pocket after having robotically checked that I hadn't missed any calls.

I'd received a few, but none of them were from the person I wanted. It was as if she'd lost my number. At least, that was the lie I was trying to tell myself, because I knew there was no way that was the reason for her radio silence. I knew why, and it had nothing to do with her phone operator or her phone. Me and my stupid lies were the reason.

I went into Bonifaci's office; he's just called me to ask me to join him. But to my surprise, he wasn't there. It was just Killian sitting in a visitors' chair.

"Hey," he said, watching me as I sat down next to him.

"Hey," I mumbled through my teeth.

There were a few seconds of silence.

"You okay? You don't look so good." I closed my eyes. Goddammit! The last thing I needed was to chat with him. "Are you sick? Did Alix give you her virus?"

I'd canceled our lunch together, saying Alix had a bad cold.

Another lie.

I tried not to reply, and luckily, Bonifaci came into the office at that moment.

"Sorry, gentleman, I had an emergency, but I'm with you now. I assume you've both been eagerly awaiting this conversation."

Killian smiled, and I suddenly realized we were here for *that* conversation. The one that would change my life. At least, what I'd seen as a turning point in my career a few days ago. Now I wasn't so sure.

"Given the circumstances, I thought it'd be easier to have you both here at the same time, rather than see you one after the other."

"Yes, a way to save time," commented Killian.

"Exactly, that's what I was thinking. So, like I said, in light of the new information that has been brought to my attention, I guess there's no point in dragging this out..."

"Hang on!" I interrupted.

Bonifaci and Killian both looked at me in shock, and my boss motioned for me to carry on.

"Before you say who it is, I have something I want to admit." I waited a few seconds before saying, "I lied to you both."

Bonifaci frowned, and Killian grinned slightly, making me think he might have already known the truth.

"First of all, I want to tell you that I'm not proud of what I've done. I've recently realized that lies can affect the people around us and... actually, I don't have the words to tell you how sorry I am for having succumbed to the temptation to lie to everyone."

"Carry on," ordered Bonifaci.

"Well, when you announced Killian's engagement on New Year's Eve, and you told us about the importance of having a family by your side when you're a partner... I panicked. I wasn't thinking clearly, and the idea that someone wouldn't consider me for the job for something that I considered unimportant made me angry. So... I made up a story. I wasn't engaged at that moment, and actually, I didn't even have a girlfriend."

Bonifaci's face changed as I carried on. Killian was less expressive, but I felt like he wasn't surprised.

“I asked my friend Alix...” Well, if you could even call her a friend at that point. “To pretend to be my fiancée for a while to make my story seem credible.

Bonifaci’s eyes widened, as if I’d just told him the truth about UFOs.

“I know it’s completely unprofessional and unethical, without mentioning the fact that it goes against this company’s morals.”

“You don’t say,” my boss eventually commented.

“That’s why I thought it’d be best for you to make Killian your new partner. By lying, I think I’ve proven I’m not mature enough for this role. I was completely blinded by my sense of competition. I’ll never be able to forgive myself for that.”

Bonifaci seemed shocked, and Killian said, “I’m happy you finally decided to tell the truth. It confirmed what I thought about you.”

“That I’m an asshole with no morals?” I said bitterly.

“The opposite. That you’re someone who’s ready to do anything for this firm, even if it means resorting to a few extravagant schemes. At first, I didn’t see anything wrong with it.”

“Hang on... you knew?”

“Not at the beginning, but Anna told me when you came over for dinner.”

“How did she know?” It didn’t really matter, but I was still curious, and Bonifaci seemed to need time to recover from my confession.

“Intuition. She told me you two had great chemistry, but you didn’t seem like you were already in a relationship. After that I paid close attention. I’d guess you actually did become a couple at some point, though, am I right?”

“Yes.” I sighed... even though it was in the past.

“What you’ve just told me is concerning, Rossi. That’s not good for a future partner.”

“I know, sir. And I’d understand if you asked me to leave the firm.”

“I... I have to process this information, but yes, I think we can’t rule that out as an option.”

I nodded. Then I said the words I never thought I’d hear myself saying, “I think Killian would make an excellent partner.” Killian raised his eyebrow. “I’m serious. I know you don’t believe me, especially given everything I’ve just said.”

I meant every word I said. Killian was a fantastic lawyer, and he’d probably be a good manager. I’d been too blinded by my own desire to succeed to realize it. His only flaw was that he’d been my rival from the second he joined the company. He forced me to do my best, but equally my worst.

“But you see, Rossi, the problem is that I was going to tell you that Killian’s leaving the firm.”

“Huh?”

My eyes darted between my boss and my colleague; neither of them seemed to be joking.

“Anna wants to be closer to her family after we get married. It’ll be easier when we have kids. So, I told Mr. Bonifaci I was withdrawing from the race for partner. What’s the point if I’m going to leave in a few months’ time?”

“This impromptu meeting was to tell you that you’d won. By forfeit, of course, but still. However, with what you’ve just told me...”

He didn’t need to carry on. I’d screwed up in the biggest way possible.

When I left his office a few minutes later, I didn’t feel the weight of defeat like I should have. I was happy, but I also felt like I’d gotten something off my chest, like a ball and chain I’d been dragging around for a while had been lifted.

“Callum, wait!”

I’d already reached the elevator, and I was tempted to pretend I hadn’t heard anything. At least, that was what I would have done yesterday. I turned around to see Killian, who was

coming up the stairs in a rush. He stopped in front of me and said, “I’m sorry, I should have warned you that Bonifaci was going to announce your promotion.”

“It’s not your fault. I got myself into this mess.”

He didn’t say I was wrong. “What about Alix?” he asked.

“She hasn’t wanted to talk to me since my sister’s wedding.”

“I see.”

I didn’t think he did, but I was too tired to throw it back in his face.

“You know, a few years ago, I would have done the same thing as you.”

“What? Made up a fiancée to get a promotion?”

“Maybe not that big of a lie, but let’s just say that I was ready to bend a lot of truths if they served my purpose.”

“What made you change?”

“Anna,” he said without hesitation. “I wouldn’t say I’ve become a better man thanks to her, but my priorities have changed. I dreamed about this partner position, but making her happy is more important, so it’s only a small sacrifice. We talked it out a lot and found a solution that suits both of us. Communication is key in these types of situations.”

ALIX

I found myself sitting in my grandmother's room, feeling desperately empty.

"The doctor told us she went in her sleep, so she probably didn't feel anything," said the nurse. I nodded automatically. "I'll leave you be if you want to stay a bit longer."

I didn't say anything, but she left. I walked over to the bed and sat down. I grabbed the cushion and hugged it against me. I was disappointed to note that the sheets were clean, that they didn't have her scent on them. I was sad, but I'd been prepared for this moment. My grandmother's mind had disappeared slowly, and she'd very subtly slipped away.

I stayed for a while, trying to remember the happy times I'd had with her in this room. But unlike before I put her here, there weren't many of them. To tell the truth, the best ones I could remember all had one thing in common. They were my visits with Callum.

I pushed the thought out of my mind, telling myself it didn't belong there. And God only knew that I'd done this same thing dozens of times a day. Although we'd only spent a short amount of time together, everything seemed to be colored by his presence. I sometimes found myself waiting for him in the restaurant. More than once I thought I'd seen him sitting down at his favorite table before realizing it was actually a man who looked nothing like him. He hadn't stepped foot in the *Taula Nissarda*, nor in my apartment.

But he had been sending me messages nonstop for the past few days. I hadn't read any of them, and I even deleted them so I wouldn't be tempted to read them later on. A part of me thought it was childish, but the other part of me said it was self-preservation. I couldn't trust a man who didn't even show his face, who lived in a reality tainted by a lie, who wanted to win so badly he was ready to sacrifice everything.

My grandmother's funeral happened a few days later under a beautiful spring sky. I hadn't gone to many funerals, but I always felt like they were incredibly cold and rainy days. This one, however, was just like my grandmother. Beautiful and happy.

There weren't many people, a few remaining able-bodied friends and a few staff members from the care home. The entire Rossi family came too. I was happy to have my friends around me in that moment. Jo held my hand throughout the entire service. A few yards away, out of the way, I could see a familiar silhouette. I was careful not to meet his gaze, but I could feel the weight of it, and it was strangely comforting if I was being completely honest.

I was surprised a few days later when a notary called me to go see him. That was when I found myself sitting in his office in front of a document stating that my grandmother had left me a very large amount of money.

"But I didn't think she had anything. Where did all this money come from?"

"It looks like it dates back to when your grandfather was still alive."

"But why didn't she spend it? I could have put her in a better nursing home. That would have made her life better."

"From what she told me when I sorted her will with her a few years ago, she wanted to leave it all to you. She knew you'd never accept it while she was alive."

I was frozen. Of course, I would never have accepted it! It was hers. I didn't really need it.

"I don't understand... why..."

“Why she didn’t tell you? People have their reasons. Remember that she did it to keep you safe. Don’t think of it as a lie, but that your grandmother wanted to make sure you were okay after she’d left this world.”

Life carried on, and I got stuck in work. With the arrival of summer, it was much busier, and it was exactly what I needed. Jo thought I was spending too much time at work, but I told her it helped me to feel better. She didn’t insist after that, but she asked me what I was going to do with my grandmother’s money. I was rather vague, saying that I didn’t know. The truth was that I had an idea, but for that I needed to talk to Callum.

I wasn’t ready. I was still receiving texts from him daily. And I still deleted them. Did he know I wasn’t reading them? Definitely not at this point, but that didn’t discourage him.

Then one Tuesday during the lunch service a man showed up with a reservation for two. I wasn’t paying any attention until the second person arrived.

Callum.

When he saw me, he hesitated for a second and started to smile before my demeanor made it disappear. It wasn’t that I was particularly unhappy to see him, quite the opposite. My body reacted violently when I saw him. I shivered, my heart sped up, and my palms started sweating. Either I’d caught the flu, or I was still not immune to this virus in a dark suit. He seemed a bit tired, but nothing serious. He might have lost some weight and his hair needed a cut, but he was still the same.

Of course, he had to show up on the day Tim was off, and I was alone on the floor. Apart from getting Gino to serve, I didn’t know how I was going to get out of it.

I walked up to their table and handed them two menus with trembling hands. My fingers touched Callum’s, and the shock that ran through my body made me shudder.

“Hello,” I said, trying to focus on his companion. “Welcome to the *Taula Nissarda*.”

“Hello,” said the man in a suit. “What’s the day’s special?”

A special.

Of course, we had a special. But in that moment, I couldn’t remember what it was for love or money. “Err... well...”

“Daube niçoise?” suggested Callum. “Gino normally likes to cook that on Tuesdays, doesn’t he?”

The man in a suit laughed and said, “Well then, your old assistant wasn’t lying when she told me this was your favorite restaurant. You even know the chef’s name!”

“I used to come here a lot.”

I avoided his gaze, a bit disturbed by the fact that he specified that he no longer came here. But why was this man talking about his old assistant? Then I remembered that Norma was well past retirement age. She must have finally decided to enforce her rights.

I mumbled something about the special and ran away, leaving them to consult the menus. A few minutes later, I had to go back to take their order.

“Anyway, I’m happy you took the time to meet with me, and I hope you’ll consider our offer.”

Callum didn’t reply, giving me an annoyed look, as if he didn’t want me to hear what he was going to say, which, naturally, made me curious.

I went back over several times, bringing water, bread, salt, mayo. Okay, the last was absolutely not necessary, given that they’d both order the daube, but I was using any excuse I could to listen to their conversation.

“... leaving your firm...”

“...you’ll like our offices in Paris...”

“...we need someone like you...”

Was it what I thought it was? Callum was going to leave the firm?

Once I'd served their food, I couldn't really go back to their table before they'd finished eating. Instead, I went behind the bar and grabbed my phone. I was going to call Jo, but she'd be at work, and it wouldn't exactly be very discreet. So, I texted Roxane.

****Can I ask you a question? It's about Callum, but you have to promise you won't say anything****

****A few days ago you made me promise not to say his name in front of you, so do you really want an answer to that?****

The answer was yes, so I put my ego aside.

****Has Norma retired?****

****I thought you wanted to talk about Callum?****

****I'm trying to understand something, so just answer****

****No, Norma's doing just fine, and in fact she just told me off for being on my phone while I'm having lunch with her.****

Norma hadn't left? That didn't make any sense... at least... I hesitated, and then I asked the question, knowing full well that if there were any rumors going around, Roxane would be the first to know.

****Is Callum leaving the firm?****

****Callum quit a few days ago.****

****Huh! Why didn't you tell me!!!****

****See message 2.****

This time I pressed the button to call her. I went into the storeroom to be more discreet. She immediately picked up.

"I wasn't talking about force majeure!" I grumbled.

"Force majeure? You know that in law it's quite strong, and last I heard, he hasn't disappeared, and he hasn't..."

"Yes, I know, he's currently here with a guy and undergoing what seems to be an informal job interview."

“It’s possible. He has to work. And like I said, he left the firm.”

“Why?”

“Do you want the official reason or what I suspect is the actual reason?”

“He didn’t get the partner position?”

“He *turned down* the partner position.”

I was speechless. He’d turned down the partner position that was his life’s goal? His very reason for being, the reason he’d pulled me into that charade as his fiancée?

I hung up on Roxane and went back to my customers. I felt like Callum was constantly watching me. When I cleared their table and then served them dessert and coffee, their conversation seemed to have turned to something other than work.

The unknown man paid the bill, and when he got up, Callum shook his hand and promised to let him know soon.

I had no idea what had happened, but I had a feeling I wasn’t going to like it.

CALLUM

I felt like Alix hadn't taken her eyes off me the entire meal. To tell the truth, I couldn't look away from her either. I was barely listening to what Mr. Dupree, the man I was having lunch with, was saying.

I thought it was a bad joke when he told me the name of the place we were having lunch. Then, when he told me he had gotten the information from Norma, I realized two things. First, he really wanted me to consider his proposal. Second, my old assistant was sticking her nose in my business, even though she no longer worked for me.

Because she hadn't chosen the restaurant just because it was my favorite, but because she'd been telling me for weeks to go talk to Alix.

I knew Alex better than she did, though, and the fact that she wasn't even bothering to read my texts told me she still wasn't ready to forgive me. I still carried on sending them, every morning, at the time when I knew she was awake but not at work. I told her everything in them. I told her I'd refused the partner position, that I'd quit so Bonifaci wouldn't have to decide to fire me—which I fully deserved. That not only had I told Killian and the entire firm the truth, but I'd also spoken to my brothers and my parents. I told her in detail what each of them had said and how disappointed my parents were by my actions.

I knew they hadn't told her. That was my *mea culpa* moment, when she lost her grandmother, and she must have had a lot on her plate, so they didn't bother her with it.

These texts allowed me to get everything off my chest, but also to admit a ton of things to her that I hadn't told her before. How much I'd loved these last few months we'd spent together, how I missed her laugh and how lonely I currently was.

I'd gotten used to her silence, even if it bothered me. I got news about her from Jo, Roxane, Cleo, and Lara, but it wasn't enough. I couldn't ask for more, so I took it as my punishment. Seeing her today was bittersweet. I was happy to be able to be near her, but sad I had to keep my distance.

At the end of the meal, I didn't know what to do. I locked eyes with her when she was behind the bar. I inhaled and walked toward her.

"Hey," I said rather awkwardly.

Her hazel eyes looked unsure, and she bit her lip. "Hey... did... did you enjoy your meal?"

She seemed just as awkward as me, which was reassuring in a weird way.

"Yes," I said with a little laugh. I ran my hand through my hair. "Alix, I..."

"I have to ask you something."

We spoke at the same time, so I motioned for her to continue.

"I need to talk to you about something, but I'm in the middle of service right now."

"I can swing by later," I immediately offered.

"If you don't mind."

"No, not at all."

As I left, I gave her a stupid little wave. No, but seriously, what on earth was going on in my head? She must have thought I was an idiot.

When I came back two hours later, she was sitting at one of the tables with a pile of papers in front of her. She motioned for me to sit down and thumbed through the documents. It was a rather strange welcome, but still...

“I’d like you to tell me how much you want for the restaurant.” Okay, all my hopes were dashed by a single question.

“Well... I wasn’t expecting...”

“You don’t need to give me a figure right now, but it’s something that I’m considering. No, I’m sure of it. My grandmother left me some money, and I’d like to buy it.”

“Oh... I thought your grandmother didn’t have any money?”

“Well, apparently she lied to me.”

I nodded lightly and then cleared my throat. “Well, we can come to an agreement if that’s what you want.”

“Perfect, as soon as possible would be best.”

It was as if she’s just told me that the sooner she was rid of me, the better.

I got up and said, “Give me 24 hours to work it out, and I’ll let you know.”

I pushed my chair in. I was terribly disappointed. Alix also got up, certainly to see me out. I was going to tell her it wasn’t necessary when she asked, “So you just left the firm?”

“Yes, but don’t worry. If you don’t have the funds to buy it right now, I can wait. I should be working again soon anyway.”

“Okay. Were you in an interview earlier?”

“Yes, for a Parisian firm.”

“Paris... I’m sure you’ll like it there.”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s quite... cool. Well, it seems like it is anyway.”

She didn’t seem completely convinced by what she was saying, and that was enough to give me a bit of hope.

“Yes, but I won’t know because I’m going to decline the offer.” A look of surprise flashed across her face.

“Oh? Err... why? Actually, that’s none of my business,” she hurried to add.

I looked at her closely, with a slight smile on my face. “You’d know why if you’d read my text this morning... or any of the others.”

She bit her lip again and admitted, “I don’t read them.”

“I know.”

“But you send them anyway?”

“Yes.”

“Why?” she asked sweetly.

“Because it’s the only way to stay in touch with you, and I’m not ready to cut that off.”

“You should.”

“I don’t think so.”

She didn’t say anything. I was worried those were our final words, so I bit the bullet and went for it.

“I tried to be as honest as possible with you, Alix. I know you’ve suffered because of my lies, as well as people I care about, and I didn’t realize just how much they were hurting me as well... until I lost you.”

I waited a few seconds and carried on.

“I know I’m not perfect, I’m only human. To tell you the truth, even superheroes make mistakes. But I’d like to think that I’m able to learn from them and become better as a result. Life isn’t a rom-com. I’m going to screw up, and you will too. I’m sure we can work through it. Not by living separately, but together. By learning from each other, by expressing ourselves and our needs. I waited years to tell you that I liked you because I let my stupid ego get in my way. Now I want to tell you what I said in those texts, that I love you and that I miss you so much. I know you don’t feel the same way, but I can’t be any more honest than this. I love you, Alix, and I’d love for you to give me a second chance.”

I was almost out of breath when I finished my declaration, my breathing erratic. Alix was staring at me with her mouth open. The silence lasted a long time, a little too long. As the seconds ticked by, my heart shattered into a thousand tiny pieces that were ready to escape from my chest. I was unable to bear it any longer, so I turned around and started walking toward the exit.

I was sure she'd try to stop me, like in all the movies she'd convinced me to watch. That she'd grab my hand, pull me toward her to kiss me until we couldn't breathe. That it would start to rain, even though we were inside and the weather was nice. I would pull her into my arms, she'd wrap her legs around my waist, and I'd carry her to her apartment to make love to her, wildly at first and then tenderly. But I'd already walked through the restaurant doors and across the terrace, and I was blinded by the sun.

I'd made it a few yards down the street, and I wasn't even walking in the right direction to get home. A tourist walking in the opposite direction bumped into me and apologized, and I didn't reply.

"Callum!"

My name.

Her voice.

I turned around, and she was running at me like a cannonball. She knocked over a chair, and I stumbled over a paving stone. I caught her as best I could before falling to the ground. She fell on me with full force. I couldn't catch my breath, and there was a pain in my ribs.

"Oh! Sorry!" she yelled.

She tried to get up, but I stopped her.

"Hang on, what did you want to tell me?"

She looked at me for a while, and her eyes filled with tears. I was almost sure mine looked the same.

"I... I miss you too, and... I think that I love you."

"You think?"

“I’m sure of it,” she said.

I had the biggest smile ever on my face. I was vaguely aware that I was lying on the ground in the street and that people were looking at us as if we were mad. The smell on the street wasn’t very pleasant, and I was half blinded by the sun, but I was happy. So, before going back to reality, I did what I’d been dying to do. I kissed her.

As soon as our lips touched, it was as if I’d returned home after a very long trip, as if I’d finally reached the promised oasis. I savored the kiss like a precious nectar, one that I could drink again and again.

“Excuse me.”

A firm voice interrupted us. Alix stiffened, and I helped her up. Two uniformed police officers were staring down at us, one looking at us as if we were completely mad and the other seemed amused.

“I don’t know what you’re up to, but I feel like I have to step in.”

Alix looked embarrassed. “Err, sorry, I got caught up in the moment and...”

The cop cut her off and said, “Do as you wish, but in private. I’d hate to have to arrest you for public indecency.”

“Is that actually a thing?”

She was asking me more than him, and I nodded and apologized to the policemen.

“Sorry, we got a bit carried away.”

The cops left, and Alix whispered, “I think I’ve spent enough time in prison to last a lifetime.”

“I’ll come and get you out every time, if I have to.”

“But in this case, you’d have to be locked up with me.”

“Actually, being locked up with you is pretty high on my list of priorities at the moment.”

She smiled and said, “Let me close up the restaurant, and maybe I can get someone to cover for me tonight. Then I’m all yours.”

She couldn’t imagine just how happy those words made me.

EPILOGUE

Alix

One year later

I stared at the contents of my jewelry box, confused. I was sure it should be in here. It had bothered me all evening, from the moment I'd decided to change into something more comfortable. Since Callum had set up his own firm, only taking cases that actually interested him, and I'd hired a new waitress, we had more evenings to ourselves. Romantic film nights had become a ritual we never missed, either of us.

But as I was removing my earrings, I noticed the engagement ring wasn't where it should be.

I knew I would lose it eventually! I hadn't even taken it out of the box once... Okay, well, maybe I had put it on a few times, just to remember what it looked like.

I'd also suggested to Callum that he sell it. After all, we weren't engaged, and he'd bought this monster of a ring just to show off to his former colleague. I didn't see the point in keeping it, and now I'd lost it.

"Darling! You coming?" yelled Callum from the sitting room.

I left the room, passing by what was once my room for a few days when I first moved in and went to the sitting room with a heavy heart. I was going to have to tell him the truth; we'd talked a lot when we first got together and had promised to be as honest as possible. I wasn't going to lie to him.

Callum was sitting on the couch. He got up as soon as he saw me. “You okay? You seem a bit off.”

“I... I have something to tell you.”

He turned pale, and I realized he also didn't seem okay. Was the truth written all over my face? This ring was undoubtedly worth a small fortune and...

“Sit down,” he said, walking me to the couch. “What happened?”

I couldn't breathe. Callum frowned and squatted down in front of me, taking my hands in his.

I couldn't hold it in anymore and almost shouted, “I lost the ring you gave me last year when I was your fake fiancée.”

I pulled my hands away a bit, convinced he wouldn't want to touch me after that. But to my surprise, he sighed, smiled, and even laughed.

“Err... I'm telling you that I misplaced a ring that's worth a small fortune and you're laughing?”

“Sorry, it's nerves. You have no idea how relieved I am it's just that.”

“What? Do you understand what I just said, Callum? I lost...”

He didn't let me finish and kissed me.

“Forget the ring, let's make the most of our evening together. I've selected a few rom-coms you might like.”

He gave me the remote and with one knee still on the ground moved slightly to the left, probably so he could see the TV better. But I couldn't take my eyes off him.

“Are you sure you're not mad?”

“No, I'm not mad. I'd tell you if I were.”

Truly, it wasn't his thing. I frowned, trying to find a possible explanation. Then it hit me. “You lied! It was a fake ring!”

“No, I didn't lie. Let's change the subject, shall we? What do you want to watch?”

“Why do you want to change the subject? You... Hang on, we watched a rom-com last time. It’s your turn to pick a superhero movie.”

Something was up. We organized everything so that it was fair, and he wasn’t the type to give up so easily.

He grabbed the remote and pointed it to screen.

“Look, there’s some Hugh Grant films because I know he’s your favorite. There’s *Love, Actually*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, and *Notting Hill*. Not to mention *Bridget Jones*, because I know Colin Firth is also up there. And *Pride and Prejudice*.”

I looked at the screen without really understanding where this list of my favorite movies had come from, but I was still bothered by the missing ring and the fact that we should be choosing between *Venom* and *Aquaman*.

“Do you want to know which is my favorite?” he asked.

This shifted my attention back to him. “Err? No...”

He looked at me, still on his knee, a smile on his lips. “Do you remember the first one you told me about?”

I racked my brain, but I couldn’t remember.

“The first time, when I suggested that you be my fake fiancé, you asked me if I thought I was in a Ryan Reynolds film.”

“*The Proposal*,” I mumbled.

He nodded, and all of a sudden, I realized what was happening. There were candles in the room, a bottle of champagne and two glasses, Callum was on his knee in front of me, and he let go of one of my hands to reach into his back pocket. He pulled out a jewelry box that looked suspiciously like the one I was missing.

I held my breath.

Callum opened the box and revealed a ring that looked nothing like the original. This one was art deco and seemed a lot older.

He started talking. “Alix, I’ve thought about a thousand different ways of doing this, and I admit, Ryan, Hugh, or even

Colin have set the bar pretty high for the perfect declaration of love. I've tried to imagine what you'd like, I've watched your every reaction to these movies, and I came to the conclusion that they can all go to hell."

I let out a little nervous laugh, surprised by this confession and excited by the situation.

"I love you, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. And for real this time, not like last year, not artificially like in the movies. It's not a moment that's made to be nice for others to see. It's a special moment, like our love, and just for us. It's certainly not perfect, but that's not the point. The memory of this will be much more precious, well... that is if you say yes to what I'm about to ask you."

I already had tears in my eyes and the words he was going to use didn't seem that important.

"So, Alix Dalmasso, will you do me the great honor of marrying me?"

I burst into tears, but still managed to say yes. Then I pulled him toward me to kiss him.

When our kiss was over, I mumbled, "This is perfect."

I wasn't just talking about the kiss. I was talking about the proposal, the ring, and him. I couldn't have dreamed it better.

Callum grabbed my hand and delicately slipped the ring onto my finger. "I took the other one out of the box the other day to change it. It didn't really suit you."

"I love this one, but I would have said yes even if you'd proposed with a piece of string."

"I know, but I still thought it was important."

We never watched the film. Instead, he made love to me tenderly. My new fiancé—for real this time—made the evening even more special by telling me over and over again just how much he loved me, and I did the same.

When we were lying down, side by side, almost asleep, I whispered, "You know, I think I'm going to give up the Hugh Grant scale."

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah, I’m going to replace it with the Callum scale, and you know what? Even Hugh Grant can’t keep up with you.”