



*Dark*  
**DESIRES**

BOOK ONE IN THE BLACK SERIES

K T B L A C K

# Dark Desires

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**KT Black**

Skye High Publishing

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## Chapter One

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““**Y**ou may now kiss the bride,” Francois, the slender middle-aged registrar, announces with pride from the front of the sun-soaked Summer Room.

I stand discreetly by the double doors at the back of the room and watch as the bride and groom enjoy their first kiss as husband and wife. Sniffs of emotion erupt from their nearest and dearest sitting on rows of mock bamboo chairs, straining their necks to get a better look at the blissfully happy couple.

I love this moment. I love my job, helping couples enjoy the best day of their lives. I tick off another box on my mental list—the day’s main event has gone without a hitch, and another bride and groom begin the next chapter of their lives.

I twist the brass knobs on the double doors, push them open, then hurry into the light-filled Orangery, sweeping a scrutinizing gaze around the room to ensure everything is perfectly laid out for the champagne reception. A long rectangular table dressed in a pristine white tablecloth is covered with glasses of champagne and orange juice for the non-drinkers. Sweet perfume fills the room from the calla lily garland I painstakingly spent most of my morning pinning to

the tablecloth as the late May sunshine beats down on the glass-roofed atrium.

The familiar sound of the “Wedding March” starts behind me, and the scraping of chairs against the parquet floor of the Summer Room signals the ceremony is over, and the bride and groom are headed this way. My cue to leave.

Once the final preparations on the wedding day are complete, my job is nearly done. I spend the rest of the day hovering close by, ready to jump in just in case there’s a last-minute mess-up but mostly dissolving into the background. Just how I like it.

I back out into the bar as the Orangery fills with the hum of chatter.

“I opened the doors to the gardens to let in the breeze. It was like an oven in there.” Olly, the head bartender, runs a hand through his mop of chestnut brown hair, flashing a self-satisfied grin, evidently pleased with himself for doing me a favor.

“Thanks, Olly.” I smile appreciatively. “It’s hotter than the forecast suggested.” I pinch my dress at the front and pull it from my body in a desperate bid to circulate some air between the material and my clammy skin. My navy boatneck pencil dress is smart but not exactly light-weight and summery. I awkwardly shift from foot to foot, the soles of my feet burning in the bluish heels I’ve been in since eight this morning. *Why didn’t I wear sandals?*

“I’ve only just poured the drinks.” He folds his arms, oblivious to my shuffling feet. “No one likes warm champagne.”

*That’s true.*



“How’s it going?” Lucy asks, popping up to my right.

“Great.” I reach a hand behind my head and smooth down my hair which is swept up into a high ponytail. At least I had the forethought to wear my hair up today. “I could do with it being a bit cooler, though. The flowers will start to droop.”

“It’s lovely and cool by reception…” Lucy straightens her light-blue blouse. “I’ve got both front doors open, so there’s a nice breeze. “

I puff out my cheeks and flap a hand in front of my face. “Lucky you. Is it still busy?”

She wrinkles her nose. “No, since the morning rush, it’s been dead. You okay, Ol?” She peers around me at a preoccupied Olly staring into the Orangery.

“I’d better go and open another bottle. It looks like they’re running low. Can’t have that, can we?” He winks at me and heads off to sort out the drinks.

Technically, the bride and groom have paid for drinks for fifty, and that’s what they’ve been provided with, but I can’t fault Olly’s helpfulness, so instead, I offer another polite smile of thanks.

“He’s trying to impress you,” Lucy says once he’s disappeared from earshot.

*I know he is.*

“I can’t understand why you’ve turned him down,” she carries on, tilting her head to the side, her eyes following Olly’s pert backside.

*Not this again.*

“He’s nice, but I’m not really looking to start anything, Luce.”

She gives me a melodramatic sigh that tells me she doesn't understand my thought process. "You've been single for three years, Sophie. Three years. He's cute, and he's got a nice ass."

"And you're getting married in just under two months, so less talk like that, young lady," I scold playfully, giving her a sideways glance.

She twirls a blonde curl around her index finger and twists her red lips in thought. "So? There's nothing stopping me from having a look. I think you should give him a chance."

*She's not letting this go.*

"I'm fine on my own." There's an edge of defiance in my voice, but I can't help it. I'm surrounded by enough love and romance in my day job to last me a lifetime. Happily-ever-afters are something that happen to other people. Not me. It's easier to fly solo.

Lucy's expression softens as she gives me a look that tells me I'm not going to like what she's about to say. "I think it's time you let your guard down and gave a guy a chance." She rubs my shoulder supportively, and I wish she wouldn't because it's making my stomach churn with trepidation. I know she's right. "They won't all be like Theo."

Saliva fills my mouth, and my gut twists with nausea at the mention of his name. It's been a long time since I've allowed myself to think about him because whenever I do, it brings all the dark memories from our time together rushing to the surface.

I force myself to focus on the bride and groom in the Orangery to distract myself from the unwelcome memories prickling at my mind. Her arms are draped around his neck, and they're gazing lovingly into each other's eyes as the flash

of a camera from across the room captures them in their loved-up state. Happiness and envy prickle at my skin competing for first place. Envy, I'm ashamed to say, is winning.

“Ah... Lucy, there you are.”

I'm snapped out of my self-indulgent trance as George, the assistant manager, comes bustling up to us. He swipes a hand across his shiny bald head, looking hassled. “Can we have you back on reception, please? It doesn't look professional.”

“It's been dead for an hour,” Lucy replies bluntly. “I'm bored stiff.”

“Yes, well, even so...” He smooths a hand down his green and white striped tie and laughs nervously. Even though George has basically run the place these past three years, confrontation isn't one of his strong points. “There really should be someone on reception at all times.”

Lucy heaves a weary sigh as if to signal she knows he's right. “Are you okay, George? You seem a little... on edge.”

“Nothing to report here.” He laughs a little too loudly. “I'm tickety-boo. I'm fine, I'm fine.” His voice falters slightly as he forces a weak smile. His bushy gray eyebrows draw together as he turns toward the Orangery. It seems as if he's looking for a distraction, his eyes lighting up when he spots the wedding guests. “Ah, yes, the wedding.” There's a surprising note to his voice as if he'd forgotten there was a wedding booked today. “Is everything okay, Sophie?”

“Absolutely perfect.” I give him a reassuring smile and can't help but feel a little sorry for him. George has always been a fussy manager, but since we learned of the elderly hotel owner's death six weeks ago, the future of the place has been uncertain, so he's worse than usual.

“Wonderful, wonderful.” He clasps his hands together. “It’s nice to see we’ve so many bookings for the summer.”

“Yes,” I agree. “We’re certainly going to be busy.”

It’s not difficult to understand why Gladstone Country Manor is a popular wedding venue. The three-hundred-year-old Georgian manor house in the heart of the Surrey countryside provides a scenic setting for weddings with its beautiful period features and manicured grounds.

I can only pray that whoever takes over the hotel can honor the bookings. Weddings are, after all, the primary source of income.

George’s brows furrow. “Pity we don’t know who’s going to be running the place.” He rubs his hands together. “Anyway,” he exclaims with far too much enthusiasm. “I doubt the whole thing’s been sorted out yet. Wills and things take time, and I’ve not heard a peep about it, so I’ll just keep turning up until I’m told not to bother.” His laugh sounds forced and does nothing to ease my nerves about the situation. It would be awful to have to cancel on all those couples I’ve worked with to plan their happy day, including Lucy.

George catches my worried look. “I think I’ll go look at the grounds and make sure they’re shipshape. We’ve not had our usual grounds maintenance team the last few weeks, and the team isn’t deadheading the roses in the courtyard garden.”

“Bloody hell,” says Lucy as we watch him scuttle off. “He’s a nonstop joy at the moment. Aren’t we all worried about what’s going to happen to the hotel? Aren’t we all worried about our jobs?” Her brows arch. “Not to mention I’m due to get married here very soon. If it weren’t for the fact we’d lose our deposit, and I don’t trust anyone else to plan the

wedding apart from you, we'd have tried to find another venue."

I'd be upset if I was fired from my job. My wage only just covers the bills, food, and rent. Okay, so my rent's not that high, but then I've got a matchbox-size apartment in a cruddy part of Fulham to level it out.

"Anyway..." Lucy breezes by. "I'd better get back to my post before Mr. Pedantic comes back."

"I'll come with you." I glance at my wristwatch. Three thirty. The photographs will be coming to a close soon, and I've left the timetable for this evening with reception.

"Ahh, yes." Lucy slaps the palm of her hand on her forehead, remembering. "I knew I'd forgotten to tell you something."

I roll my eyes. In the sixteen years I've known her, she's always had a brain like a sieve. "Your phone's been ringing loads. Magda's been trying to get hold of you."

*My rent's paid up to date. Why would my landlord possibly need to get hold of me?*

## Chapter Two

---

**T**he oak-paneled hallway is darker and cooler. I can practically hear my body sigh in relief at the change in temperature as my heels click across the tiled floor.

“Yes, I see why I was needed back at my station,” Lucy mutters sarcastically as she slips onto the chair behind the small oak reception desk. “It’s busy in here.”

I scoot behind the desk and locate my clipboard. Running my finger down the itinerary for the rest of the day, I see I was right. Photographs are due to end at three forty-five with exterior shots at the front of the hotel. At four o’clock, the wedding meal begins in the Summer Room.

“I’m still not completely decided on what we should all dress up for on my hen-do.” Lucy places a ballpoint pen in her mouth and chews the lid. “School girls, Playboy bunnies, or nurses. What do you think?”

I frown. She’s chosen each theme to get male attention, which she adores, and I hate. “Umm... how about none of the above?”

Lucy opens her mouth to argue her point but is cut off by my cell phone lighting up and vibrating against the desk. It’s Magda. Again. “Please, answer it,” she wails. “It’s been doing my head in.”

“Hi, Magda, what’s up?” My brain whirs to fathom what the hell it is she wants. In the three years I’ve rented the tiny flat above her florist shop, she’s never needed to call me. *What the hell happened?*

“Sophie, darling,” she croons in her Polish lilt. “I’ve been trying to get hold of you all afternoon.”

“I’m at work today.” I glance at Lucy, who rolls her eyes. She’s never been a fan of Magda. Her psychedelic hippy, spiritualistic vibes don’t mix too well with Lucy’s that’s-a-load-of-old-rubbish approach to all things mindfulness.

“Oh, darling, of course you are. Silly old me. I’m sorry to call you about this while you’re at work. It’s not good news, I’m afraid.”

A moment of uneasiness seizes me, and I freeze. *Gas leak? Water leak?* When Theo and I split up, I was left with only a few possessions, but they were mine. I had to start over, and most of my bits of furniture are secondhand, but I’ve made them my own by adding pretty throws or cushions. The idea of them being water-damaged in a leak or burned to a crisp in a fire renders me mute for a moment. And then there’s my dad’s painting...

“Whatever’s the matter?” I ask, not entirely sure I want to hear the answer.

“Asbestos.”

I frown and try to work out what impact that one word will have on my life. “Asbestos?” I repeat.

Lucy’s eyes widen, and she pulls a face, signifying it’s not good.

“I’m afraid so, darling. I was having some rewiring done in the back of the shop, and the electrician found some dodgy

panels on the ceiling. Next thing I know, he's telling me it's a highly dangerous form of asbestos."

I chew my bottom lip as my stomach somersaults at the words 'highly dangerous.' "But that's just in your shop, isn't it? My flat should be okay?" I ask hopefully.

"Sorry, darling. The electrician said it's likely the building is riddled with it, including the flat. I've got a specialized team coming in to investigate it further, drill holes, and such. It'll make a right mess. I'm having to close the shop, and you, darling, well, I'm afraid you've got to get out."

"Get out!" I cry. My stomach feels as though it's cartwheeling down a hill. I can't get out. I've got nowhere to go to. "Umm... when have I got to be out by?"

Lucy shoots me an alarmed look.

"Right away, darling. It's not safe."

"Right away," I repeat, unable to believe my ears.

"I'm not sure how long it's going to take to sort out." In the background, I hear a doorbell ring. "Oh, darling. Sorry, that's the front door. I'll pop by the flat tomorrow so we can talk more then. See you." And after dropping that bombshell, she hangs up.

I stare down at my cell in disbelief as my brain tries desperately to digest the information dump I've just been subjected to.

"Did I hear right?" Lucy swivels round on her chair to face me. "Your batshit crazy landlord has just phoned to tell you she's evicting you from your flat?"

"Asbestos," I reply quietly, dropping the phone on the desk with a clatter. "What the fuck am I going to do, Luce? I've got



to get out. It's dangerous."

"I've heard it is pretty bad, to be honest," Lucy says. "What about staying with your mum and Martin?"

I frown. When Mum and my stepdad married, they downsized to a two-bedroom terrace, and his love of miniature railways means there's little room for anything else. "Apart from the fact I'd go utterly crazy, they haven't got the space."

"You can always stay with Mark and me till you get something more permanent sorted," Lucy offers.

I'm already shaking my head. "No, but thanks."

"It'll be fine. You can have the spare room if you don't mind being surrounded by wedding stuff. To be honest, it'll be nice to have a bit of company. Mark's working until all hours at the moment."

"Thanks for the offer, but it's not fair to do that... not now. You've got enough on your plate with the wedding coming up, you don't want me in the way." I smile, grateful for the offer but pretty sure I'm not going to play the third wheel between my best friend and her fiancé.

They met at university, the same time I met Theo. While our relationship went from light to dark pretty quickly, then crashed and burned four years later, Lucy and Mark went from strength to strength. They looked after me when I left Theo, offering me a place to stay, a shoulder to cry on, and whiling away many nights putting the world to rights over a bottle of wine. I couldn't impose on their pre-wedding bubble.

"I'll sort something," I nod, trying to keep positive. "There's bound to be something available." My positive vibe is already slipping before I've finished my sentence. My rent

is cheap, and finding another place I can afford will be a challenge.

“The offer still stands.” Lucy pats my hand in a way that suggests she knows the struggle I’m facing. “Something will come up. Things can only get better.”

*I bloody hope so.*

The deafening sound of a bass beat over the top of a throaty car engine shatters the peace of the hotel grounds.

The front doors are open, providing a view of the sunbaked gravel driveway and the car careering toward us. The noise intensifies as it gets closer. I grip the corner of the desk as panic slices through me. For a second, I fear the car won’t stop and will tear straight through the front of the building, but at the very last minute, it swings into a space right outside, sending gravel spraying everywhere. The roar of the engine quits, and a few seconds later, the ear-splitting thud of the bass is silenced.

“Someone needs to learn how to drive.” Lucy says, sounding as unimpressed as I feel. “Prick.”

I silently agree. The driver is obscured by one of the tall, twisted box topiary trees placed on either side of the doors. I can no longer see the car either, but I know it’s a sports car by the roar of the engine and the speed at which it hurtled down the driveway. The car’s matte gunmetal gray finish and everything about it suggests it’s a male driver.

“Whoever it is needs to move their bloody car because in exactly...” I twist my wrist and glance at my watch, “... three minutes, the bride and groom will be having their photos taken out in front. Haven’t they seen the ‘No Parking’ signs?”

We're both staring at the door, waiting for the driver to walk in. My patience dissolves swiftly with each second that passes. My fingers drum against the wooden desk. After the day I've had, whoever it is better watch out because I'm in no mood for messing about. They've got exactly five seconds. Otherwise, I'm going out there.

The slam of a car door echoes through the entry hall followed by the crunch of gravel. The tall, broad figure of a man appears. It's darker in the entry hall, and the bright sunlight beating down outside casts him in shadow, so it's difficult to clearly make out his features.

His wide shoulders nearly fill the width of one of the doors, and his head stops only a few inches short of the top frame. His broad upper body gives way to a slender waist and long legs that seem to go on forever. Even from this distance, he screams powerful and intimidating, and there's an air of foreboding to him. My thoughts about giving him a piece of my mind are swiftly dissipating. He's six foot two at the very least.

"Who the fuck is that?" Lucy says under her breath.

I'm about to say I have no fucking clue when he starts to move in our direction with slow, confident strides and a swagger that suggests he's aware he is being ogled and is not in the least bit fazed. The soles of his black suede boat shoes hit the tiled floor, sending the sound of his footsteps reverberating across the entry hall, causing my heart to skip a beat. My mouth dries as my eyes travel up long muscular limbs encased in deep gray tapered chinos. A black cotton polo shirt clings to a ripped upper body and tanned biceps. I shift from foot to foot uncomfortably, knowing I'm acting way out of character, staring at him like some love-struck teenager.

I should have averted my eyes about thirty seconds ago, but I can't help myself. His smart casual look does nothing to play down his sizzling physique. Part of me doesn't want to look any further because if his face is as hot as his body, I'm in trouble.

*Maybe he's not that good-looking, I tell myself.*

*Maybe he's got a physique like Adonis because God let him down when he dished out good looks.*

*Maybe... if I just take a little peek...*

I'm so fucking wrong, I want to cry out that it's not fair.

Black facial hair adorns a square jaw. It's longer than stubble, but it's not long enough for a beard and does nothing to detract from his fine features. My upper teeth snag on my bottom lip as I can't help wondering what it would feel like against my cheek, and there's a horrid churning feeling in my stomach at the thought of getting that close to him. Thick, glossy black hair is styled shorter on the sides and swept back longer on top, just the right length to run your fingers through.

He's so good-looking it hurts, and the staccato beat of my heart tells me I'm in trouble.

Disappointingly, his eyes are obscured by black Ray-Bans, meaning he can see me openly staring at him, but I have no way of knowing where he's looking.

I'm brought back to earth with a painful bump as Lucy grips my hand, digging her fingernails into my knuckles. It seems I'm not the only one the handsome stranger has cast his spell on.

My heart continues an erratic rhythm, and I focus on my breathing as he stops a few steps short of the desk and tilts his head upward at the ceiling as if inspecting the place. He

reaches up and pulls the sunglasses off his face. For a few seconds, he surveys the entry hall then a pair of chocolate brown eyes stare straight at me.

As he shows no signs of looking away, my chest tightens. It feels as if he's reaching into my rib cage and squeezing my heart. I'm overcome by a lustful hungry feeling as I stare back, pinned by his eyes—dark pools with unknown depths—captivating and dangerous. Dampness clings to the palm of my hand pressed against the top of the desk as heat prickles my body, causing me to flush from head to toe. My heart is hammering so hard, I'm pretty sure he can hear it. I should look away because I'm making an idiot of myself, but guests who look as good as him don't grace us with their presence very often. And besides, he doesn't seem to be making any move to look away from me, either.

The guy folds up his sunglasses and slides them into the back pocket of his chinos, all without taking his eyes off me.

“Good afternoon, sir. Welcome to Gladstone Country Manor. Would you like to check in?” Lucy whimpers.

The interruption breaks the moment, and the guy pulls his eyes from mine to look at Lucy. I take the opportunity to steady my breathing.

*Get a grip.*

I glance at his car parked where it shouldn't be and straighten up. I'm here to do a job. He needs to move his car. Pronto. Even if he is delicious.

A slight frown dances across the man's dark brow for a second as if perplexed by the question. “No, thank you.”

Deep, velvet tones slide across my skin and have me wondering what my name might sound like coming from those

perfect lips.

*Get a fucking grip.*

I clear my throat. “I’m afraid I need to ask you to move your car, *sir*.” My tone is bordering on brusque, and I overemphasize the word ‘sir.’ I’m overcompensating for my physical reaction, but I can’t help it.

A smile twitches at the corner of his lovely mouth. He seems amused, and I’m instantly annoyed by his reaction. This throws me off once again. I don’t know how to act around the guy.

He glances over his shoulder, then turns back to me with a smile. “That car?”

Irritation fires in my gut. He might be good-looking, but he’s coming across as a cheeky asshole.

I glance at my watch impatiently. The photographer will be out in front in one minute with a wedding party of fifty guests waiting. I haven’t got time for this. I’m here to do my job, and he’s getting in the way.

I force a smile and play the game. “Yes, sir. The car you arrived in less than two minutes ago.”

His smile disappears at my patronizing tone. “I don’t understand. I presumed that’s the parking lot.” He looks from me to Lucy then to me again. “Well, is it, or isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is usually, but today we have a wedding, and there are signs out front that say no parking.”

“I didn’t see any signs.”

I’m bringing him down a peg. I can’t help myself. “Given you carelessly careened down the driveway at a ridiculous speed, I’m not in the least bit surprised, *sir*.”

I stress the word ‘sir’ again and fold my arms. He assesses my reaction and copies my body language, crossing his arms over his chest, causing his biceps to bulge.

“Carelessly careened? So that’s what you think of my driving style?” The glint of amusement is back in those brown eyes. He appears to find my response funny, yet again, and waits for me to take the next shot.

“There’s also a very large sign out front, right next to where you dumped your car. Are you telling me you didn’t see it?”

He juts out his bottom jaw and shakes his head. “Nope.”

I don’t believe him. He’s seen it all right and chose to ignore it because he obviously thinks he can do whatever he bloody well likes and clearly has no regard for anything. So, he’s extremely attractive but extremely arrogant to go with it. Almost perfect.

“Then I suggest *sir* needs to have his eyes tested because you’d have to be blind to miss it.”

“You’ve insulted me twice in the past sixty seconds. That’s quite an achievement.” He cocks an eyebrow, but his mouth twitches into a smile, telling me he’s not as pissed off about it as he’s making out.

In fact, I get the distinct impression he’s quite enjoying sparring with me.

I’m never usually this rude with guests, but there’s something about this guy’s cockiness that’s pushing my buttons—both the good and the bad type.

“When we have weddings, cars aren’t allowed to park in front of the building...”

“In the actual parking lot.”

He’s baiting me, and I refuse to rise to it.

“In exactly thirty seconds, the wedding party will be having photos taken out there, and I don’t think the bride and groom will want your fancy sports car in their photos,” I reply dryly.

“It’s an Aston Martin Vanquish.”

I presume he expects me to be impressed because he owns a really expensive car, but money and flashy cars mean nothing to me. I shrug. “I don’t care. It’s in the way.”

The guy tilts his head to the left and smirks. The last thread of my patience snaps. I’m about to give him a piece of my mind when the photographer hurries through the front door.

“Goodness me,” he puffs, red-faced, clearly not enjoying the sunshine. “I need to take the shots out front, and there’s a car that needs moving quickly.”

I glare at Mr. Arrogant. “Sorry, Harry. There’s been a bit of a hiccup. I need to get the assistant manager to remove the problem.”

“No need. Who needs the monkey when you’ve got the organ grinder?” the guy pipes up.

He strolls up to the photographer, takes his hand, and shakes it. “Allow me to introduce myself, Harry. I’m the new manager. I’m so sorry for the inconvenience. I’ll get it moved immediately,” he replies politely.

I hear a gasp from Lucy.

My mouth gapes as I watch him follow Harry out front. Just when I think I can have a moment’s reprieve to make sense of what the fuck is happening, his pace slows, and he



glances back over his shoulder at me. The cocky smirk returns to his lips at my confused expression. “Hey, brown eyes. Get the senior members of staff rounded up and in the manager’s office in two minutes.”

*Cocky asshole.*

“That’s impossible,” I snap.

He frowns and comes to an abrupt halt, turning to face me. “That’s an order.”

I fix him a stern look, determined not to back down. “Then you need to reassess it. We have a wedding taking place right now and can’t afford to pull anyone from their duties. Everything will come to a halt if we don’t attend to the guests, prepare and cook the food, and serve the drinks. We haven’t got time.”

“Then you need to make time.”

I exhale a short, sharp laugh in disbelief. He might be in charge, but he has no idea about running a hotel. “Are you serious?”

“Deathly. Now, go and do as I’ve asked, brown eyes.”

His dark gaze sweeps over me from head to toe, then he turns and heads out the door.

I stare, dumbfounded, as his exquisite behind disappears and my brain struggles to process the information.

“Fucking hell,” Lucy gasps in disbelief. “George is going to have a heart attack.”

*Fuck George. I think I am too.*

## Chapter Three

---

**T**he old manager's office is on the third and top floor of the sprawling manor house. In the three years I've worked here, the third floor has been used for the storage of bed linens and cleaning equipment, and the manager's office hasn't been used for years, not since the late owner frequented the hotel. George prefers to use the office at the back of reception as it allows him to "keep his finger on the pulse" of the day-to-day running of the place.

I send Lucy to round up Olly and the others as instructed by Mr. Arrogant, choosing to break the news to George myself. He's pedantic, but he's got a good heart, so I fear Lucy's blunt approach might finish him. Not that my own is any better.

"I just don't understand," he says for the tenth time in sixty seconds as we reach the top of the wooden staircase and the door to the third floor. "I've received no communication about a transfer of ownership whatsoever. No letter. No email. I mean, who is he?" His cheeks are flushed, and tiny beads of perspiration glisten across the top of his head as he pushes open the door to the top floor.

The musty smell of damp, stale air hits the back of my throat as I follow George along the corridor to the office. God

knows how long it's been since anyone's been up here. It's not exactly inviting.

"This is highly inconvenient," George murmurs, wiping a hand across his brow. "To tie up staff today when we have a wedding going on."

"I tried to tell him, but he wasn't having any of it. He doesn't seem the type who's used to being told no very often," I say. In fact, I get the distinct impression the guy is used to getting whatever he wants whenever he wants it.

Mismatching chairs are crammed into a semi-circle facing the old, battered wooden desk to the left of the office, and everyone else is already seated when we arrive. Olly, Tina, the cleaning team manager, and Rob, the head chef, look as anxious as I feel as I enter the office. Out of my peripheral vision, I see him propped against the desk as I cross the room and take the empty chair beside Lucy, purposefully avoiding looking his way.

Her wide eyes stare at me with pleading. "Who is the Italian Stallion, and who put him in charge?" she whispers out the corner of her mouth.

I roll my eyes. She will not be much use in helping me keep my sensible head on.

"How lovely to meet you. Let me introduce myself. I'm George Middleton, the assistant manager. I've been here for five years," George simpers, holding out a hand for the guy to shake.

His lovely bottom is perched on the edge of the desk, and his long legs are stretched out in front of him, his right foot crossed over his left.

He looks at George's outstretched hand and smiles, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "Great. Could you close the door, please?"

George's shoulders sag in defeat at the snub. He retracts his hand and closes the door, flopping down into a chair and straightening his tie.

*Who the fuck does this guy think he is?*

"I'm here to introduce myself," the guy announces with confident ease as his dark eyes scan the room, checking he's got everyone's undivided attention. He likes this, I can tell—the power and control. He enjoys being the center of attention with all eyes on him, and I have a feeling that's what he's used to, from women, anyhow. "I'm Art Black, the new owner of the hotel. I'll tell you a little about me, then we'll go around the room, and you can tell me a little about yourselves as I'd like to get to know you better." His dark eyes hover on me momentarily, and I shift in my seat, uncomfortable again. "I've inherited this place from my late uncle, James Black. I don't have loads of experience in the hospitality industry, but I do own a chain of successful gyms."

*Is that all he's divulging?* I can't help but feel a little short-changed.

"Go Fitness!" Olly suddenly announces from the other side of the line of chairs. He wags a finger in recognition. "I'm a member of the local gym. I thought I recognized you from the photo in reception."

Of course, I've heard of Go Fitness but have never stepped into a gym. It's all slotting into place—the exceptional physique and the fact he doesn't look like your average hotel manager. I frown as I rewind over what Olly just said. This

guy has his photograph displayed in the reception areas of his gyms. *How narcissistic.*

Art breaks into a broad smile, revealing a set of perfect white teeth. By this stage, I don't expect them to be anything less. Everything about this guy's appearance is perfect, and it's pissing me off because it is making it rather difficult to be annoyed at him.

"Excellent. Keep going," he encourages Olly, who waffles on about his role. I throw furtive glances in Art's direction, studying his side profile, determined to find a flaw. His nose is poker straight and draws into a point ever so slightly at the tip, but it only seems to accentuate his handsome face. *Dammit.* A squiggle of desire ignites deep inside me as I admire how the material of his polo shirt pulls taut across his pecs and six-pack, giving the promise of lean, toned, golden flesh beneath. My eyes travel upward, and a bolt of shock tears through me as I find him watching me. A ghost of a smile dances across his lips, confirming he knows exactly the effect he's having on me.

*Shit!*

I immediately snap my eyes to the floor and focus on the brown stain on the gray carpet tiles beneath the toes of my patent shoes. I focus on breathing in and out and am relieved to see he's no longer looking at me when I finally glance up and find Tina is now talking.

I push myself straight in the chair and cross my legs, noticing his eyes dart in my direction momentarily when he should be focusing on Tina. Within a few seconds, my eyes betray me once more and drop to his large, tanned hands splayed out on the desk on either side of him. He's wearing an incredibly expensive black watch, and I notice his long fingers

are ringless. He's not married. Surely, a guy this attractive and successful should be married. Or maybe that's how he likes it—the expensive watch, flashy sports car, immaculate clothes, and painful good looks all scream the playboy lifestyle. Why should he commit to one woman when he can have a different one every night?

Lucy's voice beside me pulls me back into the moment. It's my turn next. I shift in my seat and place my hands on my lap, the heat from my clammy palms warming my thighs through my dress. I need to prepare for the full velocity of his intense gaze fixed on me in a moment because I'm determined not to make myself look like an ass in front of my colleagues.

“So, that's it, really.” Lucy's final words filter into my thoughts, and I turn to see her beaming across the office and batting her eyelashes at him.

I take in a deep breath to quell the jumble of nerves in my stomach and look up to find him already staring at me, his dark eyebrows raised a fraction in anticipation.

“I'm Sophie Ward,” I say in a clear, confident voice. “I'm the wedding planner, and I've worked here for three years.” His eyes study me as if he's waiting for me to carry on and tell him more. I'm not going to. I'll provide the same stripped-back overview as he did.

“Sophie Ward.” He says my name as though he's testing how it sounds on his lips, and I bite the inside of my mouth to stifle a moan that threatens to escape. My confident façade is slipping through my fingers, and if he says my name one more time, he'll bulldoze it to the ground. Thankfully, he doesn't.

“So, you're a party planner.” His rude statement about my role has me stalling momentarily. I didn't hear him take a dig at anyone else.

*Arrogant dick.*

Irritation at his rudeness spurs me on. “I’ve organized one hundred and twenty-six *parties* that have all gone without a hitch. The hotel is a very popular wedding venue, so I must be doing something right.” I stress the word ‘parties’ and frown, waiting for his comeback. George has turned bright red at my feisty retaliation. I don’t care. I’m no longer willing to endure put-downs and snarky digs from any man. That’s firmly in my past.

Art’s eyes slide over me, and his mouth quirks into a smile. *Is he enjoying this?* “And weddings are the main source of income for the hotel.” It’s not a question but a statement. His head tilts a fraction to the left, suddenly looking deep in thought. “I’d better not let you go then, Sophie.”

His words and the sound of my name on his lips entangle together and set off a peculiar fluttery sensation in my nether regions. *What’s this guy doing to me?*

I’m relieved when his gaze shifts to George.

Once George has finished his overview, Art turns his attention back to the rest of us.

“That’s given me a better idea of your roles. You’ll see me around the hotel a little more because I want to get a real sense of what’s going on here.”

*What’s going on here? What does that mean?*

George slides to the edge of his chair. “Excuse me, Mr. Black.”

“Art,” he responds, causing George’s cheeks to turn red.

“Oh... sorry, Art. I think it would be helpful for the staff team if you could at least give us some insight into what it is

you intend to do with the hotel. I presume you're going to keep it and not sell?" He laughs nervously. "We've all got bills to pay and mouths to feed."

Art drags a hand across his jawline and examines us as if he's gauging the reaction he's about to receive. "I can't make you any promises at this stage, I'm afraid."

I hear a couple of moans from around the room, and anxiety coils in my stomach.

"You're seriously considering selling?" I blurt, unable to help myself.

His dark brown eyes harden at my challenge. It's clear it is not something he's used to. "I need time to look at the books. Work through things," he addresses the rest of the room. "Once I've decided, you'll be the first to know. I'm sorry I can't give you anything concrete today. It was good to meet you all." And just like that, we're dismissed. He folds his arms and lowers his gaze to the floor, signaling the end of the conversation.

A hum of conversation descends as the others begin to rise and disappear from the room.

"Great." Lucy sighs resignedly before climbing to her feet. "Looks like I might not have a venue to get married in. And there was me thinking it would be less hassle to get married here."

"We don't know that." My half-hearted attempt at assurance is met by a weak smile, and I can't think of anything else to say to make it better, so I keep quiet.

"I'd like a guided tour of the hotel now," I hear Art announce to George over the din of chatter as the staff files out of the door.



“Yes, yes, of course.” George jumps to his feet with purpose. “Let me lead the way.”

“I want Sophie to do it.” Art’s eyes land on me.

The three of us are the only ones left in the office.

He’s got to be kidding. He just told us he can’t confirm whether we’ll all have jobs soon, and now he expects me to be all nice and polite.

George’s eyes dart to me and widen in surprise. “Oh, of course—”

“I can’t.” I cut him off mid-sentence. “We have a wedding, and I need to be downstairs with the guests.”

“George can oversee things,” he retorts, his eyes fixed on my face.

He’s not giving up without a fight.

“It’s where I should be.” I meet his gaze straight on, feeling brave.

“I insist.”

George gulps audibly, his eyes jumping from Art to me. “I’ll go and keep an eye on things, Sophie. No problem at all.” He smooths a hand down the front of his tie. “And if you need anything at all, Art, please let me know.”

“Of course,” he replies, not taking his eyes off my face.

I watch George hurry out of the office and almost want to shout, “No, come back.” I don’t want to be on my own with this man because he turns me into a nervous ball of sexual energy, and I don’t know how to act around him.

He puts his hands in his pockets, pushes himself off the desk, and walks straight up to me, standing as close as he can

without physically touching me. My throat tightens, and my breathing labors at the sudden proximity. He's so close, I can smell him. There's a scent of mint and a subtle hint of sandalwood. Not aftershave, it's too delicate—an expensive body wash, perhaps.

He towers over me. In heels, I'm level with his shoulders, so in flats, I'd feel completely dwarfed by his presence. Despite his size, obvious raw strength, and the fact I barely know him, I don't feel intimidated. His eyes are locked on mine, and I realize they're flecked with gold and are a mesmerizing sight to behold. His full lips are parted slightly, and as his gaze lowers to my mouth, my stomach begins to churn. He could so easily kiss me. And if he did, I'd be a goner.

He's beautiful, the sort of guy I'd expect to see on the cover of *Vogue* or in a Dolce and Gabbana aftershave commercial. This is entirely inappropriate—he is my boss.

I'm determined not to show him how nervous he makes me feel.

“This tour,” I begin confidently, but as soon as I start, I realize my mouth is dry, and the words stick in the back of my throat. I run my tongue over my dry lips, and there's a flash of something in his gaze as he homes in on the small action. “Where would you like to start?”

His striking eyes slowly travel up my face and stop on my forehead. “I'd like to start right at the top.” They slide down my face, and my heart misses a few beats, I'm sure of it. “And then go all the way down,” he carries on, his dark gaze roaming south over my throat, collarbone, breasts, ribcage, and waist. My skin puckers as he carries on, and I feel a quiver between my thighs. “To the very bottom.”

His gaze returns to my face, and his right eyebrow arches, his perfect lips pulling into a half-smile. He knows the effect he's having on me, and my cheeks flush at the thought. Alarm bells ring quite loudly in the back of my head. Any guy who exudes this much machismo is bad news. He's beautiful and dangerous. I need to step away.

*Snap out of it, Soph.*

I pull at my dress' slim belt and straighten up, determined to pull the conversation back onto a professional footing. "There's nothing much to show you on the top floor. Shall we?" And without waiting for a response, I spin around on my heel and hurry out of the room.

I hear the thud of his heavy footsteps coming down the stairs close behind me.

"Would you like to be shown the second and first floors?" I pause on the landing outside the door to the second floor. "There are only bedrooms on these floors." I'm hoping he will say no, but I have a feeling he won't.

"I'd very much like for you to show me the bedrooms." There's a glint in his eyes I choose to ignore.

I prevent myself from dwelling on it any further by pushing open the door and walking along the corridor, dodging around the laundry carts outside the rooms being cleaned.

"On this floor, we have the superior rooms and suites which are our premium rooms. I can't show you inside as I don't have a pass key. George would have been a far better tour guide as he has access to all areas," I say pointedly, not looking back to see whether he's keeping up. I'm certain those long legs of his won't let him down. I need this to be over with as quickly as possible, so I can return to my actual job. As I

arrive at the end of the corridor, I draw to a halt and finally decide to chance a glance over my shoulder.

He's a few yards back, watching me, his hands still pushed into his pockets as he swaggers up to where I'm standing.

"I don't mean to rush you, but I've a job to do," I say curtly.

He tilts his head slightly to the right, and a smile flickers on his face. "I was admiring your dress."

I've never been flirted with by a guy this attractive before. I don't know what to say, so I say nothing. He's got me on the back foot again. I can't allow myself to be drawn in. He's bad news, I can just feel it. And I've had enough of that to last a lifetime.

I conduct the first-floor tour in the same whistle-stop fashion and come down the side staircase into the bar. The wedding party is in the Summer Room enjoying their meal, so I lead him into the Orangery and catch him sizing up the place again.

"This is a favorite room for weddings along with the Summer Room and tend to be the most popular choices for ceremonies."

I can almost see the cogs turning in his brain as he surveys the room. *Probably realizing the value of the property*, I think cynically.

"Which is your favorite room?"

The question throws me slightly. "Why does it matter?"

He's watching me carefully. "I'm curious. If you were to get married here, which room would you pick?"

I glance toward the closed double doors of the Summer Room. “The Summer Room, I guess. It’s light and airy and overlooks the gardens.”

He nods once, seemingly satisfied with my answer. “Where is this Summer Room?”

“It’s through those double doors, but we can’t go in. There’s a wedding reception taking place in there as we speak.”

His brows pull into a frown as he glares at the closed doors like he isn’t having any of it. He’s definitely not used to being told no. “I own the place. I can take a look.”

I find myself hurrying after him, swearing under my breath. Before I can stop him, his hand is on one of the brass doorknobs, and he’s turning it.

I reluctantly follow him in, sliding through the door and positioning myself at the back of the room to his left. The meal is in full swing, and the hum of chatter and the clatter of cutlery against China plates fills the air. I can’t help but observe the stares and double takes he receives from the female guests. *He must get this all the time*, I tell myself.

“You’re right, this is a great room,” he agrees, and for the first time, he sounds genuinely impressed.

I’m about to give him a little more history about the room when the hairs on my arms stand at attention as he moves closer. He’s standing so close now his body is actually touching mine. I can feel his chest pressing against my arm, sending a twinge shooting between my thighs. My breathing becomes irregular. I’m actually panting as his left hip nudges into my right ass cheek, and I feel his chinos against the back of my calf. He’s warm and firm all over, and I can’t help the

sigh that escapes my lips. His hot breath tickles my right ear, prickling the hairs on the back of my neck. I sense his mouth is tantalizingly close, so I close my eyes.

It's inappropriate. God knows how I'd react if Olly did this. It makes me uncomfortable, the way he makes me want him.

"We should go." His deep, rich voice is a mere whisper. I open my eyes when I realize with a stab of alarm that I'd probably do whatever he suggested.

He steps back, and the moment is gone. After watching his beautiful behind slide through the doorway, I take a deep breath to try and still the flurry of excitement in my stomach.

I keep my eyes straight ahead as I leave the room, overtaking him, walking through the bar area and into reception.

"So, now that the tour is over..." I say sharply. This guy needs to get in his car and go because I require time to get my head around all this. "I need to get back to my day job now."

He follows me slowly into the reception hall, casting glances about the place as if he's got all the time in the world. "Show me out front, please."

"Out front? But you've seen out front?"

He cocks an eyebrow at the challenge. "Show me out front." It's not a request but a demand.

I glance at the desk to see Lucy watching us wide-eyed, her eyes darting between Art and me as if she's watching a tennis match.

He's being unreasonable. I heave an impatient sigh to let him know he's pissing me off and walk out of the front door.

Thankfully, the sun has moved around to the west side of the building, so it isn't as hot outside on the cream gravel as it would have been earlier in the day. I meander over to the left and spy his Aston Martin parked on the far side of the driveway. It looks as flashy as I suspected and is as immaculately presented as its owner.

"The front of the hotel," I say in as snippy a tone as I can muster. "Which you've already seen."

He stands beside me and seems oblivious to my pissed-off tone. Either that or he's ignoring it. He slides a pack of Marlboro Gold cigarettes from his back pocket, peeling back the white cardboard lid. He pulls out a cigarette between his thumb and index finger, pushes it in the lefthand corner of his mouth, then offers me the packet.

*Aha! Finally. A flaw.*

Scrunching up my face in disgust, I shake my head. Theo used to smoke twenty Benson & Hedges a day. The smell of cigarette smoke can take me back there sometimes. I fold my arms and suppress a shudder at the memory. "No thanks. I can't stand them."

He looks at me thoughtfully for a moment, then plucks the cigarette from between his lips and slides it back into the packet. "I've been meaning to give it up." He closes the packet and slides it back into his back pocket.

*What the hell does that mean?*

"Shouldn't you be the image of healthy living, given that you own a chain of gyms?" I say, unable to help myself with the dig.

He turns his body to face mine, and the light from the clear blue sky above makes his brown eyes glow. "They're a vice."

His gaze slides from my eyes to my neck down to my feet, and a wall of heat hits my body as I stand pinned beneath his captivating stare. “What are yours?”

I’m not going to be drawn into this.

I tear my eyes from him and stare down the driveway. “I don’t have any,” I tell him, aware I need to get the conversation back onto a safer topic. “Are you going to sell the hotel?”

“Like I’ve said, I don’t know yet.” There’s a mild irritation in his voice, and I get the feeling he doesn’t like me pushing him, but I’m not buying it.

He’s a businessman.

So he must have an inkling about what he’s going to do with the hotel.

He does, I’m sure of it.

“You’re going to sell and use the profit for your businesses, aren’t you? You’ve admitted you don’t have much experience in the hospitality industry, so why would you want to keep it?”

“The place is making a fucking loss.” His jaw twitches. “It’s not good business sense to keep it.”

Anger seeps into my thoughts as his statement confirms my worst fears. “So, you’re going to sell it without a second thought for the employees, some of whom have worked here for decades?” I shake my head. “How do you sleep at night?”

“It’s not personal, it’s business.”

If that’s meant to make me feel better, it has the opposite effect. “Oh, that’s okay, then,” I snap. “Isn’t the property part of your family history? Doesn’t that mean anything to you? It



would take a special kind of cold, heartless bastard to sell a property that's been in his family for God knows how many hundreds of years.”

I'm aware that my mouth is running away with me, and I just insulted the guy who gets to decide whether or not I keep or lose my job, but I can't help it. I get the distinct impression no one ever challenges or stands up to him, making me want to do it even more.

There's a twitch in his jaw again. “You don't know anything about me or my family.”

He's right, and I absolutely don't want to.

“And I don't know anything about you, but I want to.”

And just like that, he's shoved me on the back foot again. Thirty seconds ago, I offended him, and now he wants to get to know me better?

I stare back at him blankly. My brain launches into overdrive along with my pulse as he steps toward me, putting us within touching distance. “Are you seeing anyone?”

I frown even though my heart is jumping around in my chest like a demented frog.

*What planet is this guy on?* He's just told me I'm probably going to lose my job because of him, and now he's asking questions about my relationship status.

“What the hell has my private life got to do with you?”

“I need to know if there's anything standing in the way.”

I'm more confused than ever. “Standing in the way of what?”

“Of me having you.”

A red flag pops up in my head. I'm blindsided by his directness. My brain, mouth, and common sense stall as I shake my head in response to his question. *What the hell am I doing?*

His full lips break out into a broad smile, only the second I've seen since we've met, and his dark eyes sparkle in the sunlight, lighting up his beautiful face. He's perfection. "Good. Because if there were, I'd have them removed."

"You can't..." I falter and force my brain into gear to say the right thing. "You can't have me. I work for you. You're my boss. HR would have a field day, not to mention what the other staff would think. It's entirely inappropriate—"

"Fuck what everyone else thinks. I run the place. HR does as I say."

"Oh, really?" I say sarcastically. "So, one minute you're talking about selling and rendering me potentially jobless, and the next you're—"

"I'm what?"

"Whatever this is."

"What do you think it is?"

"I don't know. It's obnoxious, and it's making me uncomfortable."

His smile remains, but the look in his eyes switches from amusement to dark and predatory, and at that moment, I can almost feel raw need emanating from him. Desire blazes fiercely in his eyes as if he might combust if he doesn't have me. I bite my lip to control my breathing because a man has never looked at me like this before.

"I can have anything I want."

I don't doubt that for a moment. Yet another red flag pops up in my head, telling me to step away. "I'm not a possession," I counter.

"No, you're much more than that." His voice has taken on a delicious, deep tone, making my legs wobble. "But I *will* have you."

I don't know whether to feel offended or excited.

"Come to dinner with me." The words hang in the air between us as he studies my face, trying to gauge my reaction.

Excitement and nerves dance in my stomach. This dangerously sexy guy is asking me out. The cynical side of my brain swiftly kicks in and dampens my excitement. Of course, he's asking me out. He wants to make me another notch on his bedpost, and I bet he's got an incredibly tall bedpost.

"No," I blurt. "I don't want to." I sound almost childish, and it's a blatant lie, but it is the best response my brain's giving me at the moment.

He tilts his head again and smiles back. He doesn't look offended by my rebuke like it's almost as if he'd anticipated it. "Okay. But you *will* change your mind, and I *will* have you."

The conviction in his tone sends tingles shooting between my legs, and I'm pretty sure he shouldn't have this effect on me. Before I can assure him he won't have me, thank you very much, he puts out his right hand for me to shake.

I glance down at his forearm, toned and golden with a smattering of black hairs, then to his large hands and long fingers. My mind starts to wonder what it would feel like to be wrapped in those arms.

When I don't respond, he retracts his hand, holds me by the shoulders, then leans forward. For a second, I stop

breathing as I think he's going to kiss me, but he presses his right cheek against mine, and I feel the heat of his breath in my right ear.

“It's been my pleasure, Sophie. Until next time.”

I close my eyes and bask in the sensation of his warm skin sliding against mine. The brush of his stubble against my cheek is soft rather than coarse, and I can't prevent a small moan from escaping my lips. He draws his head back and removes his hands from my shoulders. For a moment, he stands staring at me, a slight frown on his brow. He seems lost in his own world, then he shakes his head lightly and runs a hand down the front of his polo shirt as if collecting himself.

He throws a smile in my direction then saunters past me toward his car, his shoes crunching on the gravel. When I finally turn around, he's nearly reached his car, and he's looking over his shoulder at me, wearing his Ray-Bans. He opens the driver's door, climbs in, and starts the car engine, all without taking his eyes off me. The thud of bass rips through the quiet once more as the car roars to life, then he speeds off down the gravel driveway, leaving a cloud of dust in his wake.

I head back into the hotel in a daze as I try to work out what the hell just happened.

“You lucky cow!” Lucy cries, practically jumping out of her seat.

I frown. “What?” I ask innocently in a bid to play things down.

“What?” she cries as I've asked the most ridiculous question in the world. “The totally hot new boss is into you, that's what.”

I shake my head. I'm still processing the events of the afternoon. "He's an arrogant shit," I say. "And he smokes."

"But think of all the hot sex you'll have." Her eyes widen like saucers.

I press a palm against my forehead. I could do without this level of excitement from my best friend.

"He couldn't take his eyes off you when he arrived, he couldn't stop looking at you in the staff meeting, then he asked for you to give him the tour. And out there..." she flings an arm in the direction of the front door, "... I thought he was going in for the kiss. I mean, I've heard about sexual tension but never actually seen it with my own eyes before."

When my eyes snap to Lucy, she shrugs, looking mildly guilty. "So? I watched you. What did Mr. Tall Dark and Handsome say to you then?"

I roll my eyes. "You spied, you mean. And Mr. Tall Dark and Handsome is far too cocky."

"Define too cocky?" Lucy asks curiously, chewing the top of her pen.

I cross my arms under my chest and heave a weary sigh. I feel physically wrung out. "He's good-looking, and he knows it. He asked me if I've got a boyfriend, then he said if I'd said yes, he would 'have them removed.'" Lucy almost chokes on the pen she's chewing. "He said he's going to have me, then asked me out. When I said no, he told me I'd change my mind."

"You said no!" Lucy bangs her hand down on the desk in exasperation. "You and I are going to have a fallout... you should go out with him." She waggles her eyebrows suggestively. "Let him have you, I say."

Butterflies swirl my stomach at the thought of getting close to him. “I can’t, Luce. He’s too much, too intense, too full on.”

She stares off into the distance, and I know I’ve lost her. “Fucking hell, Soph. I bet he’s one of those dominant controlling types in bed, but it’s okay because the sex is hot.”

I briefly close my eyes as a bolt of alarm runs through me. I’ve already escaped one controlling relationship, and I’m not about to get involved with another. Before my thoughts can go any further, the rational part of my brain kicks in and tells me to stop being so bloody naïve.

Men like Art Black don’t want a relationship.

He just wants to get inside my panties.

## Chapter Four

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I toss and turn all night. My brain is constantly occupied by a myriad of thoughts from Art Black and his cocky gorgeousness to the fact I might be jobless soon and the possibility of a harmful substance in my flat that is going to render me homeless. I wake up irritated and in need of a hot shower.

I step out of my cupboard-size bathroom with a towel wrapped around me and glance out the tiny bedroom window onto the main street below. It's barely eight o'clock in the morning, and the sunny, clear blue sky is signaling it's going to be another warm day, so I need to dress appropriately.

I settle down on the edge of my bed and examine myself in the mirror, tweaking my semi-damp, mocha-brown hair as it falls into natural waves across my shoulders. My eyes lack their usual sparkle because of the bad night's sleep I've had. Five minutes later, I feel a little more human due to some carefully applied makeup and slip into a sleeveless jade-green dress. It's light and summery with a slight V-neck and rests above my knee. I step into tan wedge sandals, sling my bag onto my shoulder, and I'm good to go.

The warm air hits me as soon as I step out onto the grimy pavement and confirms my thoughts that it will be another

beautiful day. I climb into my red Mini Cooper and pull away, my thoughts already turning to the day ahead.

There's a baby shower in the Orangery this afternoon at two o'clock. Hopefully, today won't be as hectic as yesterday.

The center console of the dashboard lights up, and 'Mum Calling' flashes on the display. I roll my eyes. She knows I'll be driving to work, but I'll answer it anyway because if I don't, she'll worry.

"Hi, Mum."

"Hi, Sophie. You okay?"

There's no way I'm telling her about the asbestos or the fact my job's potentially at risk. After everything I went through with Theo, she frets about me.

"Yes, I'm fine," I reply, trying to sound convincing. "Are you and Martin okay?"

I make a point of asking about my stepdad. When Mum started dating him five years after Dad died, my hormonal fifteen-year-old self didn't take too kindly to having another man in the house. Even though we're fine now, I'm still a little embarrassed about my appalling behavior toward him back then.

"Yes, he's good. He's just had a new shed delivered. Are you on your way to work?"

"Yes."

"I'll be quick then. I'm just calling to remind you that it's Martin's sixtieth birthday at the end of the month. We're having a meal at Carluccio's. You are coming, aren't you?"

I suppress another eye roll. I could have guessed Martin would choose to celebrate at their local Italian restaurant,



where they've been hundreds of times. He's nothing if not a creature of habit. "Of course. I'll meet you there."

"Great, wonderful. He will be pleased." Mum is smiling. I can feel it and am glad she's pleased. "Okay, I'll let you go then. Bye, sweetie."

"Bye, Mum."

By the time the call ends, the city skyline has given way to trees and greenery as I head toward the hotel. The blazing sun lifts my mood and makes me forget about my job and the asbestos. But not Art.

My stomach churns with nerves at the thought of him. He's taken up residence at the front of my mind and is proving difficult to budge. I don't think I've got the energy to endure another day like yesterday, full of enough heated looks and sexual tension to make my panties burst into flames. My defenses are waning already, and I haven't even reached the hotel yet. I decide I'm going to stay as far as possible away from him. I'll sit in my office and keep my head down. There's every possibility he won't even be at the hotel today. Surely, he's a busy man. Isn't he?

By the time I turn into the gravel driveway of the hotel, I've convinced myself he won't be there. I'm instantly proven wrong when I spy his Aston Martin parked up right outside the front of the hotel where I told him to move it from yesterday.

*He's probably done that on purpose*, I tell myself as I pull up beside a white transit van.

I climb out of the car, swing my handbag over my shoulder, then stroll through the front doors, passing a guy wearing white paint-splattered overalls and plastic bags on his feet.

Some part of the hotel is being decorated. Art hasn't wasted any time.

I smile politely at Kelly, the receptionist, who's covering Lucy's morning off, then carry on down the corridor, past George's office on the right and to mine at the end.

I push open the door and freeze in horror at the sight of the back of a head of thick dark hair and a set of exquisitely toned shoulders peeking above the padded leather chair. A familiar deep voice is talking on a cell phone. My heartbeat instinctively speeds up at the sight of him. He slowly swivels around and flashes a perfect white smile as he sets eyes on me. Today he's in beige and white—sandy-colored chinos, brown suede boat shoes, a very, *very* tight white T-shirt with a V-neck, and his left foot resting on his right knee. I haven't moved a muscle for at least ten seconds. I'm sure it's obvious I'm checking him out. And as his dark gaze roams over my body, I notice he's doing the same.

*You're fucked off with him*, I remind myself.

I storm over to the spare desk and dump my handbag in a huff. Then pull up a chair and switch on the laptop. He's facing me now, looking over the desk at me with the same annoying smile he had on his face yesterday.

I angrily tap the spacebar and glare at the screen, waiting for the machine to boot up. Every nerve ending in my body is jangling at being this close to him again, and I'm worried my defenses won't hold up for another day.

“Listen, I've got to go. Call you later.” He ends the call abruptly and places the phone on the desk. “Good morning, brown eyes.”

I glare across the desk at him despite the fluttery feeling his voice evokes in my panties. “What are you doing in my office?”

He tilts his head to the side in that way of his, still smiling. “I think you’ll find every room in this place belongs to me, and I can’t sit in my office as it’s being decorated.”

“You didn’t waste any time getting that sorted, did you?”

“What’s the point in fucking about? If you want to do something, do it.” His voice is calm and controlled, but I can’t help feeling he’s not talking about his office being decorated anymore.

“Why are you bothering having your office decorated if you’re selling the place?”

His long fingers stroke the scruff of his jaw. “I’m reconsidering.”

My eyes snap to his in surprise, and I feel a tingle of hope. “Really?”

He doesn’t expand, and before I can probe further, my cell begins to ring.

I plunge my hand into my bag and yank it out, only to see ‘Magda Calling’ flashing on the display.

*Shit!*

I can’t exactly ignore her with everything that’s going on.

I place my elbows on the desk and rest my palm against my forehead, staring at the laptop keyboard. “Hi, Magda.”

“Hello, darling,” she calls down the phone. “I’m just checking it’s still okay to pop around the flat this evening so we can talk about the asbestos? Is six okay?”

*Just what I want on a Saturday night.*

“Yes, fine.” I sigh.

“Have you found another place to stay yet?”

I briefly close my eyes. I was hoping to put it off. “No. I was going to take a look tonight.”

“Okay then, darling, I’ll see you later.”

“Bye.”

I drop my phone on the desk and heave another sigh as the distinct prospect of becoming homeless bubbles back to the top of my priority list. Not that it wasn’t there anyway. I’d just blanked it out, the way I always do when things start to unravel.

“Who’s Magda?”

I lift my head to find him watching me carefully.

“It doesn’t concern you,” I reply with a dismissive head shake and turn back to my laptop.

“Who’s Magda? And why was she talking to you about asbestos and asking if you’ve found somewhere else to live?”

I draw back slightly into the chair. My shoulders tense at the realization he already knows too much about my life. “You were eavesdropping on my conversation?”

He cocks an eyebrow. “She was loud.”

He’s right. There’s nothing subtle about Magda.

I’m annoyed he feels like he can question me about this. I feel like I ought to tell him.

“She is my landlord. They’ve found asbestos in her shop below my flat, and she’s had to close. Apparently, there’s a

chance there could be some in my flat.”

“When do you need to move out?”

“Asap.”

“Have you got somewhere to stay?”

*What is this, the Spanish Inquisition?* “Nope. I only found out yesterday. Haven’t had a chance to look.”

“So, you’re living in a flat with asbestos in it?” He sounds far from impressed.

“Potentially has asbestos, so I don’t have any other choice at the moment,” I correct him.

He frowns. “Asbestos is extremely dangerous.” Now he’s bordering on telling me off.

A knock raps at the office door, and Kelly’s head pokes round. “Art, there’s a real estate agent at reception asking for you,” she says, fluttering her eyelashes.

I frown as he unfolds his long limbs and slides to his feet, straightening his white top. He flickers his eyebrows and gives me an easy smile as if he knows exactly what’s going through my head before he strolls out of the room.

*Reconsidering my ass!*

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Since Magda’s phone call, I’m completely distracted. Instead of working up a timetable for next Saturday’s wedding, I spend the morning trawling real estate agent websites looking for anything that’s remotely in my price range, isn’t in an extremely undesirable area, and doesn’t look as though it

needs to be fumigated before a human steps foot inside. Turns out, there isn't.

By midday, it's time for me to check the final arrangements for the wedding, but my head's aching from too much screen time, and I'm feeling thoroughly depressed.

I spend a few moments checking the room is ready for the baby shower, which will be a low-key affair. The blue balloons I decorated the tables with remain upright, and the blue and white banner is thankfully still attached to the white tablecloth. The waitstaff has laid out the silver buffet serving cloches ready for the food, along with plates and cutlery.

Olly is pouring orange juice into champagne glasses on a round black tray. "My favorite wedding planner." He flashes a cheeky grin as he sees me approaching the bar. "I'm just going to take these through, ready for the guests' arrival, but while you're here, there's something I'd like you to try."

He puts down the carton of orange juice and turns round, reaching into the low-level refrigerator behind the bar.

The murmur of voices makes me look up. Art's standing at the entrance talking to a blonde-haired woman. His hands are pushed into the back pockets of his chinos, and his brow is furrowed. He looks pissed off. An unsettling feeling takes hold of me as I take in the woman. Ridiculously high, black peep-toe heels bring her face level with his. Long, tanned legs stretch upward and disappear beneath an insanely short, tight black dress. She's definitely not a real estate agent. The woman flicks her shoulder-length, platinum blonde hair over her left shoulder, and I can see her red lips are moving quickly. Although I can't hear what she's saying, she doesn't seem happy, either. A lovers' tiff? The woman oozes sexual confidence, and jealousy snakes its way into my thoughts as

she runs a hand down his left bicep. *Maybe she's the trophy girlfriend to go with his flashy car,* I think bitterly.

“Try this.”

I turn to find a tumbler full of ice, clear liquid, and mint leaves on the bar in front of me. Olly rubs a hand through his wavy hair and smiles proudly. “Virgin mojito.”

“Is this another one of your experiments?” I ask, closing my hand around the ice-cold glass.

He leans forward on the bar. “Go on, Soph. You’ll like it. I promise.”

I shoot him an uncertain look, pick up the glass, and take a sip. It’s cold but refreshing and just right for a day like today.

“You know, that’s not bad actually.” I nod, placing the glass back down. “That could be a winner.”

Olly breaks out into a pleased grin, but it’s short-lived as it quickly fades. He straightens as if he’s been caught doing something he shouldn’t. I’m about to ask him what’s the matter when I feel a large, firm hand rest on the base of my spine, and I nearly jump out of my skin. Art sidles up beside me. Every inch of my body tingles from his touch.

“Starting early?” He looks at the glass on the bar in disapproval.

“Do you want to try it?” I offer.

He shakes his head and frowns as though it’s a heinous idea. “No, I don’t drink.”

I didn’t expect that.

“It’s non-alcoholic,” Olly enthuses.

Art's frown remains in place as he regards Olly's enthusiasm with disdain. "No," he replies flatly. "I want two coffees. Bring them out to us on the terrace."

Olly looks crestfallen as he gives a weak nod and turns to the coffee machine.

*This guy is so rude!*

The heat from Art's palm is warming my back through my thin cotton dress and jumbling my thoughts. He leads me outside, and it takes me a few seconds to realize when he said us, he meant him and me.

He steers us outside onto the slabbed area of the empty terrace, guiding me over to a cast-iron table at the far end and doesn't remove his hand from my back until I'm at my chair. Although I've relished the feel of his touch, I can't help but think what the other staff might think of this.

I sit down and cross my legs. "I haven't got time for this... a baby shower is starting very soon."

He pulls the chair a little closer to the right of me so we're sitting side by side and sits. "The difference is the guests can manage without you. I can't."

*What the fuck does that mean?*

My stomach does a three-sixty flip, and I stare out at the sunny rose gardens to distract myself from reading too much into it. "Why are we out here?"

"Like I told you yesterday, I want to get to know you better." He rests his elbows on the arms of the chair and stretches his long legs out in front of him.

"I told you about myself in the meeting..." I begin, but he chuckles, a low, deep laugh that makes the hairs on my arms



stand at attention. His eyes crinkle at the corners, and his face lights up with a smile, totally different from the Art seconds earlier.

“You told me how long you’ve worked here and that you’re the wedding planner. That’s not going to cut it, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, so I’m not a party planner anymore then?” I snap back sarcastically.

There’s a spark in his brown eyes. “I only said that to piss you off.”

I knew he’d enjoyed winding me up. “Why?”

“Because you’re even sexier when you’re angry.”

I press my lips together and silently thank the Lord when we’re interrupted by Olly bringing out the coffees because I have no idea how to respond to that.

I take a sip of coffee and wince. It’s far too strong and hot, but I don’t care because it’s giving me something to do and think about other than him.

He waits for Olly to disappear then puts his hands behind his head and lounges back in the chair, studying the gardens. “So, how old are you?”

“Twenty-eight,” I reply before I can stop myself.

“You look younger.”

I roll my eyes and place the coffee cup on the saucer with a clink. “I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“It’s not a line. What about boyfriends?”

I frown. “What about them?”

“Have you had many?”

“Not really, just one serious relationship.” I silently reprimand myself for giving him what he wants. It’s like an override switch has flipped in my brain, and my mouth has lost control.

“What happened?”

I smooth a hand across the green cotton on my thigh and notice his eyes flick to the movement. “We split up three years ago.”

“What happened?” he presses.

I fiddle with the hem of my dress. There’s no way I’m telling him that my ex was a lying, cheating, abusive asshole who made my life hell for three out of the four years we were together. “It just didn’t work out,” I reply, hoping he doesn’t push it any further.

“What about what’s-his-name behind the bar?”

I glance over my shoulder, perplexed. “Olly? What about him?”

“Have you two fucked?” Tension appears in his voice, and his eyes burn into me as he watches my body language.

I draw my head back slightly. His directness and scrutinizing gaze are proving too much, and I shift uncomfortably in my seat. “Erm... no.”

“He wants to, though.” The tension remains in his voice as he nods briskly as if confirming the thought to himself. “What about your parents?”

“What about them?”

“Tell me about them.”

“My dad died when I was ten. Mum remarried.”

He rests his glorious forearms on the iron armrests of the chair and looks at me for a long moment. “Do you have any brothers and sisters?”

“No.” I sigh, growing tired of his interrogation tactic. “And I don’t really know what my family has got to do with you.”

He casually brushes his hand across his thigh. “Like I said yesterday, I want to get to know you better. I want to know all there is about Sophie Ward.”

My fingers curl around the edges of the cool wrought-iron arms of the chair at his declaration, and the sweat from my palms feels clammy against the metal beneath my hand.

“These gardens are better maintained than the inside of the hotel.” He curls his long fingers around the cup and raises it to his lips.

I’m relieved his interrogation seems to have ended but annoyed it’s been rather one-sided. “So, I’ve shared loads of info about me, and I still don’t know anything about you.”

His dark brows raise a fraction as he sips his coffee then lowers the cup to the saucer. “You haven’t shared “loads of info,” but it will have to do for now. What do you want to know?”

*Everything.*

“How old are you?”

“Thirty.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

A crease appears in his brow as if I’ve asked a really stupid question. “No.”

I want to ask him about the blonde in reception earlier but worry I'll come across as a jealous weirdo, so I don't push it. "Have you ever?"

"No."

Another red flag pops up in my head. "So, you're thirty and have never had a relationship?" I can't believe it's due to the lack of offers, and his response confirms my initial impression that he's a playboy. A commitment phobe. A love-'em-and-leave-'em type.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I haven't met the right woman... *yet*." Those brown eyes are studying me carefully as he emphasizes *yet*.

Excitement and nerves dance in my stomach, and I tear my eyes from his because I can't look at him any longer. I clear my throat. "What about your parents?"

His right eyebrow twitches ever so slightly. "Dad died five years ago. Mum is still alive. I'm an only child."

"Are you Italian?"

He takes a while to reply, and I get the distinct impression he's choosing his words. "I have Italian in my bloodline."

I sense his guard is about to snap up, but I'm on a roll. "What about Art? That's an unusual name."

He drags his fingers through his thick hair, and his left foot begins to twitch. He doesn't like being questioned for some reason. "It's short for Arthur. My dad's name." His brown eyes slide to me. "Enough questions."

There's a warning in his voice. He's telling me rather than asking me to stop. I get the impression I won't get too far trying to push him anymore today, so I decide to switch subjects.

"How come you met with the real estate agent this morning when you told me you were reconsidering selling the place?"

"I arranged the meeting before I came here yesterday and decided to keep the appointment."

"You changed your mind about selling the place after you visited yesterday?"

"Yes."

"What changed your mind?"

"You."

I stare back at him blankly. "Me? What did I say?"

He shifts around slightly in his chair to face me, and my stomach twists as I'm hit with the full force of his beautiful face. "What you said about this place being left to me and it being part of my family history made me think."

I can't suppress my smile of relief. "And there was me thinking I'd shot my mouth off."

"You did, and I wouldn't usually take shit like that from anybody." His tone suggests he's not joking. There's an edge beneath the charming, handsome veneer.

He tilts his head to the left, and his dark eyes search my face as if trying to find an answer to a puzzle. "You've a beautiful smile."

My heart jumps around in my chest, and I know he's reeling me in.

"Let me take you to dinner this evening."

Talk about striking when the iron's hot.

I stare at my hands in my lap because I can't think straight when he looks at me. With my sensible head on, I ask myself what's changed in the past twenty-four hours since he last asked me to dinner, and the answer is nothing. Even though I know a little more about him, my heart can't take that risk.

"I can't, Art."

Five long seconds pass as his dark eyes widen, but he doesn't move a muscle. When he eventually speaks, his voice is deep and breathy. "That's the first time you've said my name."

*Is it? Maybe it is. What does that mean?*

He seems to come to his senses and drags his gaze back to the gardens in front of us. "Right. I have to go. There's some business stuff I need to sort out."

I'm surprised that a tiny part of me can't help but feel a little disappointed he has to leave, and I have no idea where the next question comes from. "Nothing too taxing, I hope. It is Saturday afternoon."

He shifts forward in the seat and rubs his lovely hands together. I notice the expensive black leather watch on his right wrist is a Rolex. The leather strap is showing some signs of wear, and the gold face looks like an older design. It's not as flashy and pristine as the rest of his image and has my interest piqued.

“One of my staff popped in earlier. Tara, the woman you saw me talking to. Something has cropped up I need to sort.”

*How did he know I'd seen him?*

Before I can ask more questions, he gets up and puts his hands in his pockets.

“I'll see you later.” He throws me an easy smile which makes my heart turn over and leans forward ever so slightly, brushing his fingers over the top of my knuckles with a feather-light stroke, sending a weird electrical current zapping through my bones, making them melt. He swaggers away toward the parking lot and leaves me swooning with an uninterrupted view of his gorgeous ass again.

*Shit. I'm in trouble.*

The sound of laughter and lively chatter from the baby shower pours through the entrance hall as I head back into the hotel. Olly is leaning against the desk in reception, deep in conversation with Lucy. They look up as I approach. The guilty looks on their faces tell me they've been gossiping about someone.

“The boss has gone, I see.” Lucy sits back in her chair, and a wry smile spreads across her face as she spins around to face me.

“Is everything okay?” Olly's brow twitches into a frown as he straightens up. “I mean, he hasn't upset you or anything, has he? Because he's a rude twat, and if he has...” he trails off, and I'm not sure what the end of the sentence would be. Olly's misplaced protectiveness is endearing, but his tall, lanky frame would be no match for Art's toned, lean muscular physique.

“No, no.” I shake my head, not wanting him to get the wrong end of the stick. “He's been fine with me.”

“He’s been more than fine with you.” Lucy scoffs, lounging back in the chair.

Olly’s green eyes narrow ever so slightly as he looks from Lucy to me, and I’m not planning on hanging around to see if he works out what she meant.

I carry on down the corridor and make my way back to my office, pushing open the door. Then I stop. Something’s different. A short Mason jar sits on the desk beside my laptop, overflowing with a bunch of forget-me-nots.

Perplexed, I slump down on the chair and twist the jar around, admiring the pretty blue flowers. Who put them here? Definitely not Art. This is far too romantic for someone so cocky and direct. Olly? I could imagine him doing something like this and being too shy to mention it.

Whoever they are from, it’s a nice gesture. I shift the jar onto the window ledge and smile to myself.



## Chapter Five

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“Fucking hell,” I complain under my breath as I finish pinning my hair into a messy updo and give myself a quick once-over in the mirror. I’ve barely had time to come home from work and change before Magda is knocking at the front door. She’s clearly on a mission.

“Hello, darling,” her shrill voice calls from out on the landing. I’ve pulled on the summeriest clothing I own—faded light-blue denim shorts and an off-the-shoulder baggy gray T-shirt. I hurry barefoot out of the bedroom and along the laminate hallway, opening the door with a ready smile.

A green and yellow floral print kaftan swamps Magda’s short, plump figure. Her wavy silvery-gray hair is pulled up on top of her head in a haphazard bun, and her coral-pink lips are smiling.

“Darling!” she enthuses as she bustles past me and begins pacing up and down the hall, pausing every now and then.

She’s always been a little eccentric, but I’m genuinely confused. “Magda, are you okay?”

“Yes, yes, dear.” She waggles her right index finger in the air and peers down at the floor. “I’m just trying to find it.”

I have no idea what she's talking about, and I'm almost frightened to ask. "Trying to find what?"

Magda pauses halfway between the bathroom doorway and my bedroom doorway. "I think it's around about here."

"What is?"

"The spot where the electrician found the asbestos in my ceiling, so it could be underneath your floor."

"It could be anywhere."

Her coral lips purse together, and her gray eyes shine with sadness. "I'm sorry, darling. Have you found anywhere else to stay yet?"

I rub the bare sole of my right foot over the laminate floor and heave a defeated sigh. "I've looked, but I can't find anywhere I can afford that isn't a dump."

"Oh, darling." Her lips stretch into a tight smile that doesn't quite reach her eyes. "I don't mean to rush you, but this asbestos thing is dangerous. You need to get out as soon as you can."

I jump as a rap sounds at the front door directly behind me. I didn't hear anyone climb up the stairs from the street, but then again, Magda is loud.

Her dark, penciled eyebrows shoot up in surprise. "I wouldn't have invited friends over with the asbestos thing in here," she says disapprovingly.

"I haven't." *In fact, I have no idea who it is.*

I swing the front door open wide in annoyance to find Art standing outside on the landing. My mouth drops in surprise, and my heart hammers rapidly at the sight of him.

*What the fuck is he doing here?*

His dark eyes sparkle as they take in my stunned reaction, then he smiles, looking mighty pleased with himself. Without waiting to be invited in, he sidesteps around me into the hall.

*Cheeky git!*

“You must be Magda. It’s lovely to meet you,” I hear him say as I slowly close the door and recalibrate my brain to try and work out what the hell he’s doing in my flat.

A tight gray crewneck T-shirt shows off the lean cut of his body to perfection over faded blue denim jeans and black flip-flops. *God, his feet are huge!* He makes the place feel about half the size. It’s like some effortlessly sexy giant has just barged in.

Magda, who I think is in her late sixties, grabs his outstretched hand and shakes it. “Sophie, who is this?” She gives a tinkly little laugh, which I’ve never heard before. *Jeez! Is no woman free from his charms?*

Magda finally lets go of his hand. After propping himself against the hall wall, he slides his hands into the back pockets of his jeans.

“This is Art, he’s my bo—”

“Friend,” he cuts in, and I frown at him. *Is he really?* “Sophie told me about the situation with the asbestos. I just so happen to have a friend who owns an apartment who is in need of a tenant.”

He’s watching me carefully, and Magda smiles with relief.

“Oh, darling, that’s fantastic news,” she cries. “I’m glad you have somewhere to go because it’s really not safe for you to stay here any longer. It could take forever to sort out.” She

gives an over-exaggerated shrug. “It’s got to go through the insurance, so it could be Christmas.”

*So, wherever I move, I’m going to be there indefinitely.*

He and Magda are waiting for me to say something. I should be jumping for joy, but something seems off.

“Why didn’t you mention the apartment this morning?” I ask him.

“I didn’t know about it then.”

“How much is the rent? You said ‘apartment,’ which tells me it’s already out of my price range.”

He lifts a shoulder as if it isn’t a problem. “We can work something out.”

“With your friend?”

He nods.

I’m not entirely sold on the idea. Something still seems a little off. Maybe it’s because I already know I won’t be able to afford it.

Magda claps her hands in excitement. “Oh, I’m so glad, darling. Now I’ll be leaving you to it.” She begins to walk toward the front door but slows as she passes Art, places a hand on his chest, and gives it a gentle pat. “Such a lovely man.” She smiles, then she seems to snap out it and opens the front door. “Oh, when do you think you’ll be moving out, darling, because I need to let the workmen know so they can start the work?”

“I don’t know... I haven’t even seen the apartment yet. Then I’ve got to pack my stuff—”

“I’ll take Sophie to view it now, and she can move out tomorrow,” he announces as if the decision has already been made.

“Oh, excellent!” Magda enthuses, clearly pleased I’ll be out sooner rather than later.

“Erm, sorry, but don’t I get a say in all this?” I ask, annoyed they’re talking about my situation as if I’m not there.

“You can’t stay here,” he reminds me.

“Wonderful, wonderful,” Magda chimes in, clearly sold on the idea. “You take care, darling, and let me know when you’ve moved out. See you, darlings.” She walks down the stairs, and I hear the street door bang below.

I close the front door and give myself a few seconds to collect the thoughts whizzing around my head. We’re completely alone. We’ve been alone around the hotel before, but not like this, and the thought has me feeling nervous.

“How did you know where I live?” I don’t try to hide the irritation in my voice as I turn to face him.

The oxygen is disappearing from the air, and it’s getting harder to breathe as he flicks a grin and advances toward me. “I looked in your personnel file,” he replies, completely unashamedly. His dark eyes slide down my body to my bare feet. “Now, put on some shoes because I’m taking you to view your new apartment.”

“But—” I begin, but I’m interrupted instantly as his dark brows draw together.

“No arguments.”

“No.” I shake my head. “You can’t walk in here and start taking over my life.”

“I’m helping you out.”

“But why? You landed in my life yesterday. You don’t know me.”

“No, but I’m working on that, and I fail to see how me knowing you has anything to do with me helping you out of a difficult situation.” There’s a twitch in his jaw, wordlessly announcing he’s irritated I’m not falling into line with his plans.

“Why are you helping me?” I narrow my eyes. “Is this all because you want me to go to dinner with you?”

He draws his head back slightly and frowns. “You think I’m helping you, so you’ll somehow feel indebted to me and then feel as if you’ve got to accept my dinner invitation?” He solemnly shakes his head, and I almost feel bad for saying it. “When you come to dinner with me, I want you to be there of your own free will. I’m helping you because from what I overheard yesterday and Magda just now, it seems you don’t have anywhere else to go.”

*He’s right. I don’t.*

“Now, will you please stop being so bloody difficult and go put some shoes on?”

My options are zero.

“Okay,” I agree. “But I’m only doing this because I’ve no other choice.”

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The Aston Martin is parked outside. By the time I get out onto the street, Art is already in the driver’s seat wearing his black Ray-Bans, and the engine is ticking over.

The sun-kissed black leather warms the back of my thighs as I slide into the passenger seat and close the door.

“Is the flat far away?”

“Pimlico.”

Now I know for sure it’s out of my league.

He turns to me. “Fasten your seat belt.”

I do as I’m told, drawing the seat belt around me while he watches. Once it’s clicked into place, he gives a satisfied nod and takes off.

He snakes his way through the busy evening traffic. After a short while, he pulls into a side road, then swings to the right and stops at a metal barrier at the entrance to an underground parking garage. He stretches his arm out of the window and punches a code into a keypad in the wall. The metal barrier buzzes then lifts, and he speeds up with a screech of tires. The engine’s roar bounces off the walls as he climbs up the first ramp onto the next level, and then the next, climbing higher and higher. At the tenth level, we stop climbing, and he steers the car sharply into a marked parking bay and cuts the engine.

I unfasten my seat belt, breathe a sigh of relief the ride is over, then climb out of the car. He gets out, locks the car with a beep of the key fob, then walks up to me.

“Does the apartment come with a parking space?” I ask, knowing that it’s just another reason I won’t be able to afford to live here.

His large hand takes up residence at the base of my spine again. This time I don’t jump as I let him guide me toward a doorway in the wall.

“Of course,” he replies as if it’s the most normal thing in the world.

We head down a flight of stairs, then come to another door. He punches in a key code, removes his hand from my back, and opens the door, stepping backward to let me pass with a smile. “Ladies first.”

I smile politely, even knowing he’s playing with me, then enter the corridor. It’s bright and airy with dark-gray woodwork and a sumptuous silver-gray carpet underfoot. Even the corridor carpet is better quality than any of the carpets in my poky little flat. His long legs overtake me then he comes to a stop outside apartment number 101. He fishes out a key from his back pocket, slides it into the lock, and pushes open the door.

He flicks me a grin. “After you.”

I step inside the apartment and come to a standstill as I take in the luxury of my surroundings. White polished marble floors stretch as far as I can see across the open-plan apartment. Gray doors lead off the short hallway in either direction, but I don’t take a look at what’s behind them because my attention is pulled to the floor-to-ceiling windows stretching all the way around from the left to the right of the apartment, affording me a stunning view of the Thames.

The early evening sunshine pours through the windows and bounces off the floor, making it gleam as I walk through into the lounge and kitchen. I think I’m dreaming.

A modern low-backed, charcoal gray, L-shaped sofa sits to the left pointed toward a huge plasma television. A six-seater glass table with trendy high-backed chairs stand between the living area and the kitchen, and a huge crystal chandelier hangs overhead, glittering in the sunlight.



I run my hand across the black marble kitchen counter and scan the white, shiny, ultra-modern integrated units.

The apartment is exactly what I feared it would be. Perfect.

After wandering up to the floor-to-ceiling windows, I gaze down at the setting sun bouncing off the water. *What a view.*

“What do you think?” Art’s deep voice rumbles from somewhere behind me.

I cross my arms under my chest and sigh wistfully. “I think it’s amazing and totally out of my price range.”

“The rent’s not an issue.”

“Money’s never an issue if you have it,” I counter, turning to find him sitting on the end of the sofa. “I’m not stupid. Look at that view.” I fling my arm in the direction of the Thames behind me. “And it’s beautifully furnished. The rent will be a premium. I can’t expect your friend to do me a deal. If you looked in my file, then you’ll know what you’re paying me.”

He climbs to his feet and pushes his hands into the back pockets of his jeans. “The rent isn’t a concern for him since he’d rather the place be in use than empty. He’s happy to take the same rent as you pay now.”

Hope bubbles in my chest. “Really? But why would he be willing to do that?”

“Like I said, he’s not bothered about the rent and just wants the place to be occupied. He trusts me and therefore trusts you to live here without trashing the place.”

My eyes widen as I glance around the apartment to give me time to consider the possibility of living here. “Will I get to meet your friend? Because I owe him one, big time.”

His broad shoulders roll into a dismissive shrug. “It’s just a guy from work.” He smiles. “Now, why don’t you take a proper look around?”

I practically skip around the rest of the apartment, still unable to believe my luck. The bedroom is lovely and large with a cream and white color scheme and huge bed. The black tiled bathroom is absolutely massive with a walk-in shower and Jacuzzi bath. I feel as though I need to pinch myself.

“This is the security system.” He taps a box on the wall in the hall next to the kitchen. “You can see whoever buzzes your door from downstairs, so it’s very secure. There’s also a concierge who monitors visitors and whom you can contact if you have any problems, and the parking is totally secure.”

*Why is he suddenly so concerned about my safety?*

I wander into the kitchen, admiring the shiny white cupboards and glistening stainless-steel stove top and smile. I’m beaming. I can’t help it. After jumping onto the black marble kitchen counter, I admire my new apartment.

*My new apartment!*

He leans against the kitchen cupboard opposite. “You’re happy?”

“Happy? I’m ecstatic. It’s just such a relief to have somewhere to move to, and this place is so lovely.” I shake my head as I glance around because I’m still in a state of shock.

He breaks into one of his easy smiles, seeming happy that I’m happy. If he were anyone else, I’d be hugging him right now for helping me out massively, but there is absolutely no way I can trust myself to be that close to him.

“Tomorrow, we can pick up your stuff and move you in. I know a guy with a van.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I insist.”

I chew my thumbnail anxiously, aware that he’s swiftly turning into my white knight in shining armor. “Thanks. I’ve barely anything to move, so it shouldn’t take long.”

“How come?”

I look out at the river through the window and see the sun disappearing below the horizon, leaving a burnished amber afterglow. “My ex kept most of the furniture.”

He’s slowly edging toward me, and I realize with a stab of nerves that I won’t be able to get down quickly enough before he reaches me. Sure enough, he’s already standing in front of me, raising his hands to my knees as if he’s going to touch me but stops. His palms hover a few tantalizing inches away from my kneecaps, and a crease line appears on his forehead as he stares down at his hands. It’s as if he’s got some internal battle going on. My breathing becomes short, and every fiber of my being is on high alert as my eyes remain glued to him. After a few moments, he flexes his fingers then retracts his hands, pushing them into the front pocket of his jeans. His eyes sweep up my body, looking like a man defeated.

I have no idea what the hell just happened.

“You’re my kryptonite, Sophie Ward.”

*What does that mean?*

His phone begins to ring, pulling it from his pocket with a scowl. “What?” he barks, clearly not happy at the interruption. “Okay. I’ll be there in five.” He blows out a long breath and shoves his phone back into his pocket, the crease on his forehead returning.

“Is everything okay?”

“Something’s cropped up which I’ve got to go and sort.”

I frown. “At the gym?”

He pushes a hand through his hair and gives me a long look. “Yes. Now, come on,” he urges before I can ask any more questions. “I’ll drop you back home, and you can make a start on your packing.”

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The sunrise peeks through the high-rise buildings on a new day as I stand staring out of the tiny window onto the main street below. A light breeze blows an empty chip wrapper along the pavement, and all is quiet before the chaos of the traffic starts and the shops open.

Two suitcases of clothes and five cardboard boxes containing all my earthly belongings stand in the hallway, and I feel a stab of sadness that this is all I have to show for my ten years of adulthood. The mismatched pieces of second-hand furniture are being left behind because there’s no place for those in my shiny new apartment.

The sound of engines outside pulls my attention back to the street below. A white transit van is parked on the street, and Art’s car pulls up behind it seconds later. Eight o’clock on the dot as promised. I’ve left the front door ajar.

He appears in the doorway and steps into the flat, breaking into a broad smile when he sees me. An army green T-shirt fits snugly against his upper body and shows off his tanned skin and dark features to perfection, and black denim jeans hang from his slim waist. His hair is sticking up haphazardly on top

and isn't swept back in its usual coiffured style. How can he make jeans and a T-shirt look hot? My hormones are being swept into a frenzy. It's too early for this.

"Sophie, this is Big Steve."

I take a few steps back at the sight of him because I'm not sure we're all going to fit in the tiny hall. He's a touch shorter than Art but is a wall of solid, dense muscle. He's bald, but I reckon he was once a redhead. There's a faint smattering of freckles on his cheekbones from too much sun, and the top of his nose is slightly crooked. He could easily be a boxer or a bouncer, or both.

"All right? Good to meet you." He has a strong East End accent, and when he smiles, a gold tooth glistens in his upper jaw. He holds his hand out for me to shake.

"And you, thanks for helping me move." I note what a gentle handshake he has for such a burly guy.

"No bother," he assures me, his bright blue eyes giving me the once-over. "So, you work up at that posh old hotel this one's taken on, I hear?"

My eyes dart to Art looking at me impassively. He's been talking about me. "Yes, I'm the wedding planner there."

Big Steve lets out a deep laugh. "When we heard he'd taken that on, me and the boys laughed. It's just what he's been after."

Art shoots him a look and gives a short, sharp shake of his head as if telling him to shut up. Big Steve's smile dissolves, *and* he rubs his hands together. "That the lot then?" He nods toward the boxes at the other end of the hall.

"Yes, just those."

“We’ll make short work of this.” He strides over to one of the boxes, picks it up, passes it to Art, then he picks up another.

As Art’s hands grip the base of the box, I notice the knuckles on his right hand are covered in cuts and bruises.

I frown. “What happened to your hand?”

“Nothing. I just got a little overzealous with the punching bag in the gym this morning.” I notice the exchange of looks between him and Big Steve, and before I can ask any more questions, Big Steve is already trudging down the hall.

I bend down to pick up a suitcase, but Art shakes his head in protest. “Leave it. That’s what I’ve hired the muscle for.”

I feel like a spare part. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“You just make sure there’s a brew at the end, then we’ll call it even,” Big Steve calls back over his shoulder as he disappears down the stairs.

Fifteen minutes later, the boxes and suitcases have been loaded into the van, and we’re good to go. I give the flat one last quick look-over to make sure I’ve got everything, then lock up and make my way down the staircase one last time. As I get to the bottom, I can see Art leaning against the side of the van.

“You need to be careful,” Big Steve warns, pricking my curiosity instantly. “She seems like a nice girl, mate, but you need to be careful.”

I slam the front door closed to signal my presence, and their conversation predictably grinds to a halt.

I turn around and force a smile to see Art watching me over his shoulder. He cocks an eyebrow and grins. “You ready

to go?”

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Pulling up outside the apartment block behind the Aston Martin, I get out of the car. He rests his hand on my back and ushers me through the glass doors into the foyer.

The polished cream floor shines beneath spot lighting, and two elevators take up the left-hand wall. Directly in front of us is a curved, polished marble reception desk. A middle-aged guy with short, spiked hair and a navy suit acknowledges me with a head bob.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Black.”

“David, this is Miss Ward. She’s moving into 101 today.” Art’s hand moves up my back in between my shoulder blades while I smile politely at the concierge.

“Lovely to meet you, Miss Ward. If I can be of service in any way at all, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Thank you.”

He moves us toward the elevator. “Thank you, David. I’ll see you later.”

We walk into the already waiting elevator, then he pushes the button for the tenth floor. The doors slide shut, and I’m suddenly nervous because I’m aware we’re alone again in a small space.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

“Yes, I can’t still quite believe I’m going to be living here,” I say, fiddling with the edge of my black T-shirt.

“Believe it. The other place wasn’t good enough for you.”

I frown at his snobbery. “Some of us haven’t got the luxury of wealth. It’s what I could afford. Feel free to give me a pay rise.”

His lips quirk into a smile at my quip, but then it’s gone. “You deserved better than your old place.”

The elevator comes to a halt, and as the doors ping open, he walks out, cutting the conversation dead. The apartment door is open, and I can see the boxes and suitcases in the hall waiting to be unpacked.

“Steve’s already brought all the stuff up from the van.” My eyes widen in astonishment. That guy has got Trojan speed and strength. I glance around the empty apartment as a thought hits me. “Has he gone already? I thought he wanted a cup of tea.”

He rubs a hand through his hair, making it look even more tousled. “Yeah.”

“Was he okay?” I ask cautiously. “It’s just... I thought I overheard you two arguing when I came down to the van earlier?”

“He’s fine.” A muscle twitches in his jaw as he looks over into the kitchen. “He just worries.”

Now I’m worried. Big Steve was warning him to be careful about me. But why? I glance around the apartment when an unsavory thought hits me. Money. He must have loads of girls making a beeline for him because of his money. I’ve got to admit, it looks a bit odd when I think about it. He’s a wealthy businessman, and within a few days of meeting me, he’s helped me find a gorgeous new apartment to move into. Big Steve probably thinks I’m a gold digger who’s spied an



opportunity and is exploiting it. He's so far from the truth it's laughable. I know that's not the case and so does Art.

My gaze falls to the cardboard box with *Living Room* scrawled on the side in marker pen, and I'm immediately distracted. I rush over to the box in a fit of semi-panic and peel back the adhesive tape holding the lid down with my nails, pushing back the flaps and grappling the wooden edge of the frame. I slide it out of the box and swiftly give it a once-over, sighing with relief when it appears the painting has made the journey without getting damaged. Satisfied, I place it gently on the marble floor and lean it up against the white wall.

"You paint?" he asks. "That's very good."

The oil painting shows a fishing boat in the middle of a churning gray sea at night with moonlight dancing off the crests of the waves. I always thought it looked magical and mysterious because the painting was set at night, and there's a glow from the lamp of the boat amidst the darkness like a beacon of hope.

"No. Dad painted it. He adored Turner, and we used to have loads of his prints all over the house. He used to hang his pieces up as well when he was in the mood. After he died, Mum took them all down, and I kept this one. It was my favorite." He's watching me intently, listening to my story. "Anyway, I would have been really upset if it got damaged, but it's fine."

"You should hang it here." He nods at the bare wall in front of us. "Give your dad pride of place in the hallway. He'd like that."

I smile, touched at the thought because he's right, Dad would like that.

My phone beeps, signaling the arrival of a text. I pull it out of my pocket.

**Lucy:** *Don't forget drinky poos tonight. I'll come to yours at 7 and we'll go from there. x*

“Shit.”

He looks at the phone in my hand. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. I forgot I’m going out with Lucy for drinks tonight.” She knows nothing about my new apartment. She’ll freak out when I tell her.

A crease line appears on his forehead. “Where?”

“Oh, I’m not sure yet. I’m guessing a few bars. It’s up to Lucy. It’s her pre-hen-do, and we’re running out of weekends for us to go out just the two of us before her big day, so we’ve had to opt for a school night.”

He nods slowly as if digesting the information. “Which bars?” he asks after an age.

“Don’t know. Why?” I’m curious to know why he’s taken such an active interest in my social life.

“You should be careful. There are some dangerous guys out there,” he replies, staring at the blank wall in front of us. “And some clubs are plain dodgy.”

“I’ll just make sure we go to the okay ones,” I reply, feeling as if I need to assure him without quite knowing why. We’ll end up wherever Lucy wants.

He doesn’t look convinced but changes the subject. “Do you need any help unpacking your stuff?”

“No, thanks. I’ll be fine. You’ve helped me enough. I’m sorry if I was a bit off yesterday when you turned up at mine.

It was just... a surprise, that's all." I suddenly feel awkward and don't want to take up any more of his time. "You've helped me get this place. Thank you." I look down at Dad's painting and smile at the weird twist of fate. "This time last week, I hadn't even met you."

His eyes sparkle as he holds my gaze. "People come into your life for a reason, a season, or a lifetime. Which do you think applies to us?"

My mind spins at the depth of the question. Before I can answer, my phone begins to ring again. 'Lucy Calling' flashes on the screen.

He looks at the phone. "I've got a bit of business I need to attend to. I'll leave you to your phone call and unpacking." He bobs his head and retreats down the hall.

## Chapter Six

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**S**crabbling to answer the door, I have a blusher brush poised in my hand.

“I’ve nearly finished my makeup, then I’m done,” I assure Lucy before she can start moaning. But my friend hasn’t seen me, and I don’t think she’s heard me either as she pushes past and walks into the apartment in a daze, clutching a bottle of Prosecco to her chest.

“Are you kidding me?” She gasps as she totters across the polished floors in her black strappy heels and into the living area. Her black sequined dress sparkles beneath the low lights as she pivots slowly, admiring the apartment. “Fuck. King. Hell.”

“I still can’t quite believe it,” I admit. Part of me feels like I’m on holiday, and I’ll have to go home soon.

“This is amazing!” She shrieks, wagging the bottle of bubbly in her hand. “And I’ve brought just the thing to celebrate.”

“The glasses are in the cupboard,” I call over my shoulder and disappear into the bedroom to put the finishing touches on my makeup. Once I’m satisfied, I smooth my straightened hair and tug down the skirt of my black bodycon dress. I step into my black stilettos and walk back into the kitchen to find Lucy

perched on one of the black kitchen stools, poring over her phone. Two mugs stand beside her on the counter.

“I couldn’t find any glasses, so these will have to do.” She puts down her phone and picks up her mug with a sly smile. “Here’s to your fab new apartment.”

I smile and curl my fingers around the Mr. Happy mug.

“And to bagging yourself a rich, handsome piece of gorgeousness.” Lucy knocks back her drink.

“He’s just helping me out.” I take a sip of Prosecco, not entirely believing Art’s done all this out of the goodness of his heart.

“He definitely wants you, you lucky cow. Have you agreed to go on a date with him yet?”

“No.” I realize there’s a genuine chance he’s gotten tired of me knocking him back. I wouldn’t imagine it’s something that happens to him very often. Maybe he’s bored of waiting and has moved on. He must have a string of women waiting to swoop in and take my place. The thought unsettles me, and I take a fortifying drink of Prosecco.

“Why not?”

“Because he’s the sort of guy a woman could really fall for,” I admit. “He’s got the looks, and he’s successful. He says he’s never had a girlfriend because he ‘hasn’t found the right one,’ but I’m not sure that wasn’t just a lie to convince me he isn’t a womanizer, which I still think he is.”

Lucy’s eyes light up as she picks up her phone. “Hold that thought.”

I’d rather not. I take another sip of Prosecco and wince as the dry bubbles hit the back of my throat. My phone buzzes.

It's a text from an unknown number, so I open it.

**Unknown:** *Have you settled in okay? Art.*

My stomach flips. I wonder how he has my number, then I swiftly remember he found my address from my personnel file, so he'd be able to retrieve my cell number from there as well. I glance up to find Lucy too engrossed in scrolling through something or other on her phone to pay me any attention.

**Sophie:** *Yes. Thank you. Please thank your friend for me.*

His reply is instantaneous.

**Art:** *Consider him thanked. Are you still going out?*

**Sophie:** *Yes.*

**Art:** *Be careful.*

He's taken a sudden interest in my safety again.

"Aha," Lucy exclaims. "Here it is."

I put my phone back down.

"I've done a bit of digging on Mr. Italian Stallion," Lucy announces proudly.

"You mean you've cyberstalked him?"

"Researched him," she corrects, sliding her phone over to me. "Read it for yourself. You won't fucking believe it."

I hesitantly pick up the phone and look at the *Forbes* Rich List from a few years back. There's a photo of a clean-shaven Art looking ravishing, dressed in a black suit. The caption underneath reads:

*Net worth: £5 million*

*Founder of the international gym chain, Go Fitness, Art Black's year has gone from strength to strength. The Oxford-educated millionaire and self-confessed bachelor's fortune has seen a fifteen percent rise in shares over the past twelve months. If it's your scene, potential wooers might stop by London's ultra-exclusive Savage Club, where he is reportedly a regular.*

“So? He’s had a good education and is worth a few quid.”  
*I’m not sure what she’s getting so excited about.*

Lucy frowns. “Not that part, the part about the club he attends. Savage.” She’s looking at me like it should mean something, but I’m lost. “Have you ever heard of it?”

“No.”

“Neither have I, so I googled it. Turns out it’s an extremely exclusive S & M club.”

My brain flounders around for something to say. My mouth has suddenly dried as my mind conjures images of black PVC outfits and whips. “S & M?”

“Yeah. You know... latex, rubber, tying each other up, whips, and chains...”

I need her to shut up. “Yeah, yeah, yeah. I get it.” I rub my forehead and take a hefty swig of Prosecco.

“I knew it.” There’s a little too much glee in Lucy’s voice than I’m comfortable with. “When I first saw him, I *said* I bet he’s one of those dominant controlling types in bed, didn’t I? He’s got that strong, silent, brooding thing going on.” She drains her PG Tips mug and smirks. “What do you think of that?”

I look over at the kitchen counter and recall yesterday and how he couldn’t even bring himself to touch my knees before

saying something I still don't quite understand.

"I'm not sure."

The lid has been lifted on Pandora's Box of all things Art Black-related.

"I bet his ass looks mighty tight in leather," Lucy muses.

I bang my mug down on the counter, desperate to change the conversation. "That information was a few years out of date, so it might not be true anymore."

"I think if you're into kink, you're into kink." She nods resolutely. "Chill, Soph. It might be fun."

There's no need for me to consider whether it will be fun or not because nothing's going to happen between us. Being tied up and letting a guy control me sexually isn't something I want. In my eyes, this is simply another good reason for me to stay the hell away from him.

I drain my mug, shooting a look at the empty bottle of Prosecco on the kitchen counter. "Come on, let's go. I need a stiff drink."

And I need to forget about Art Black.

By the time we stagger into Bar Red, I've definitely forgotten about him, drowning my thoughts by drinking my body weight in wine.

The loud thud of bass from some nineties dance number vibrates through my bones as I sway through the crowds, following Lucy up to the bar. My head is cotton woolly, and every now and then, the room spins a little, and I know I've reached my puke limit.



I prop myself against the bar and giggle as Lucy opens her black sparkly clutch and pulls out her phone with wobbly fingers. Her cheeks are flushed. She's reached her limit too.

"I don't think I want any more drinks. I'm going to call Mark to pick us up." She hiccups and holds the phone to her ear. "Fuck knows how I'm going to manage at work tomorrow."

Tomorrow.

Work.

Art.

And just like that, he jumps to the front of my mind again, giving me one of his easy smiles. My stomach twists, and this time it isn't because of alcohol in my bloodstream.

I rub a hand across my forehead to try and ease the banging that's started at my temples and retrieve my phone from my bag. Disappointment pokes at me. I've had no more texts from him this evening. *Probably at his kinky sex club whipping some woman's ass*, I think cynically.

"He'll be five minutes," Lucy slurs, holding up three fingers.

I frown. "Who, Art?"

Lucy laughs and rams her phone back into her bag. "No, Mark." She pushes herself off the bar and wobbles slightly, grabbing the edge of the bar to steady herself. "I'm popping to the toilet."

I start to follow her and begin weaving through the customers crowded around the bar when I feel something grip my left wrist tightly, holding me in place. I turn to see a tall

guy with slicked blonde hair and sly eyes grinning down at me with his hand around my wrist.

“Piss off!” I hiss and try to yank my hand away, but he keeps his thick fingers clamped in place.

Panic begins to rise in my chest as I frantically search for Lucy, but she’s long since disappeared through the crowds, oblivious to the fact I’m no longer with her. The guy starts dragging me through the crush of people hanging around the bar, all drunk and laughing and enjoying themselves, not noticing what’s happening to me. I’m powerless, my body and mind not working together. I want to scream, but my lungs aren’t working, and my limbs are seizing up with terror. Suddenly, he turns, pulling me to him. I push my palms into his chest, using all my strength to try and wriggle free, but his arm is huge in comparison to my small waist, and he’s got hold of me in a firm grip.

“Relax, darling.” The stench of alcohol assaults me and makes me want to gag as he presses his mouth against my cheek.

I twist my head away from him.

Then he’s dragged off me.

It takes me a few seconds to realize what the fuck is going on because the guy’s sprawled out on the floor, and there’s a set of broad, muscular shoulders encased in a black sweater in front of me. The other customers are stepping back, creating space around the guy holding his nose as blood trickles down his hand. He’s slurring and mumbling incoherently. On cue, two hefty-looking bouncers dressed head to toe in black appear and grapple the guy to his feet.

The figure in black turns to face me, and I'm hit with an overwhelming feeling of relief when I recognize Art. The crease line on his forehead is deep, and he's looking all kinds of worried and angry as he looks me up and down. "Did he hurt you?"

I shake my head. My brain and mouth aren't working together, which is probably for the best because I want to fling my arms around him. I fold them instead, fighting it.

"Fucking hell." Lucy appears at my side, her eyes widening as she watches the bouncers drag the guy off toward the exit. "What did I miss?"

"You're both leaving," Art snaps, scanning the club. "Now."

The cold night air envelops me as I step outside onto the pavement, and the full extent of my drunken state smacks me like a hammer between the eyes. He seems to have a sixth sense for it and loops an arm around my waist, keeping me upright. I lean my head against his broad chest, breathe in his fresh scent, and immediately feel safe.

Lucy points over to the other side of the road. "Mark is just parked up over there."

"I'm taking Sophie home," Art announces in a way that suggests the decision has already been made.

I don't even try to raise my head from his chest because it will take too much effort but notice Lucy looking at me to check if I'm fine with him doing that.

"It's okay," I mumble.

"Okay. See you in the morning." Lucy flashes her eyes at me and gives us a drunken wave as she crosses the road.

Art guides me to his car and bundles me into the passenger seat. I lean my head against the side of the seat, my eyelids growing heavy as the engine's vibration tries to lull my alcohol-addled brain to sleep.

All I can think about is how I'm so glad he's here. I shouldn't feel this way about him. My gut is still telling me he's dangerous, and if I let him in, he's going to hurt me.

"Why are you here tonight?"

"I was in the area," he replies evasively, and in my drunken state, I don't have the energy to push him.

I close my eyes. "Are you my guardian angel?"

"If you want me to be."

I sigh. "It's too bad I have to stay away from you."

"Why do you have to stay away from me?"

"Because you're dangerous."

"You're drunk." His reply is curt, as if he's run out of patience.

I am drunk.

I am *very* drunk.

I must drift off to sleep because the next thing I know, we've stopped moving, the passenger door is open, and the cold night air is rushing in.

"We're home," he says softly. He closes his large hands around mine and lifts me out of the car onto the pavement, propping me up against the warm, hard length of his body as he closes the car door. He scoops me up in his arms like a rag doll, carries me over the threshold, and it feels so right. My eyelids become heavy again, and my head rests against the

curve of his collarbone as if it were made to fit. I hear the thud of his heart in his chest as I relax into him, curling my hand around the back of his neck, feeling safe and protected, and close my eyes.

I hear the hum of the elevator as we travel upward, the slide of the doors as they open, the click of the key in the lock, and then the sound of the door closing behind me. He must have grabbed my keys out of my bag. I open my eyes slightly as I'm lowered onto the bed, then his arms slide out from beneath me. I want to cry out in protest, but the softness of the pillow beneath my head has me snuggling into it.

My right foot is gently lifted, and my shoe is slipped off, then the same happens to my left foot. When I open my eyes again, his dark silhouette is kneeling in front of me. He's not taking advantage of me. He's looking after me. He's being kind and caring, not stern, dominant, or anything like I'd expect someone to be who is into kinky sex.

"Are you into S & M?" I blurt.

"I'll get you some water," he says as if I haven't asked the question and strokes his fingertips over my cheekbone, causing my eyes to flutter closed. "Sleep." I feel a brush of lips against my forehead, and then I drift off to sleep.

## Chapter Seven

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**T**he piercing sound of an alarm jackhammers into my brain, jolting me awake. I flail a hand about in the air until it lands on my bedside clock, stab my finger on the snoozing button, and say a silent prayer the noise has stopped.

I wrench one eye open and wince as the bright morning sunshine filters through the cream-colored bedroom curtain. Every trace of moisture has evaporated from my mouth leaving my tongue feeling as rough as sandpaper. I groan, heave myself onto my back, and press a sweaty palm against my forehead to dull the pneumatic drill-like sensation hammering away at both temples.

A glass of water and two paracetamol sit on the glass bedside table. I frown. It doesn't seem like something I'd do when I've come home drunk. Glancing down, I find I'm still wearing last night's clothes. My crumpled black dress has ridden up to my thighs, but my shoes sit in front of the closet, paired up rather than sprawled all over the floor like they usually would be. I frown again. Something seems off, and I don't know what.

I haul myself upright and swing my feet to the floor, glancing at my bedside clock. It's half past seven.

*Shit!*

I've got to get ready for work.

Work.

Art.

Suddenly, the noise from the television in the living room filters through the crack in the bedroom door, and I freeze.

There's someone in my apartment.

My mind lurches into overdrive as I consider various possibilities.

Lucy? No. Why would she not have gone home?

I can't remember getting home.

Please tell me I didn't bring a guy home.

I briefly close my eyes as the horrid thought hits me. I don't do one-night stands, but then again, I don't usually get that drunk. I carefully stand and reluctantly wobble over to the bedroom door. I swear I'm never drinking again.

I take a deep breath, step out into the hallway, then stop in my tracks. Art is standing at the kitchen island buttering a plate of toast as if he owns the place. He's absorbed in *Sky News* blaring away on the television.

Another memory of the previous evening snaps back into place. The guy at the bar. Art showed up. He punched him. Did he bring me home?

An unsettling feeling takes hold.

*We didn't... did we?*

I look down at my clothes then back at the bed behind me before I push the thought out of my mind.

*No, we didn't.*

A million questions swirl around my brain, but all I can think about is what a treat it would be to wake up to his face every morning.

His hair is swept slightly to the side in his usual coiffed style. A black, collared short-sleeved shirt and gray tailored trousers hang from the toned, gorgeous lines of his lean frame. I feel like death warmed over, and my brain isn't firing on all cylinders, but not every part of my body appears to have got the message—there's fluttering between my legs.

“Sleeping Beauty awakes.” He grins as he notices me hovering. “Do you want coffee?”

I suddenly feel incredibly self-conscious and shake my head. I feel rough and no doubt look like I've been dragged through a hedge backward. I'm not getting any closer to him until I've had a shower. “No thanks, I'll get showered and changed first. Umm... did you bring me home?”

He cocks his head to the right as he considers the question. “You don't remember what happened last night, do you?” He doesn't sound the least bit impressed or surprised.

My cheeks flush in embarrassment, and I feel totally ashamed by what I'm about to admit. “I remember the creep in the bar and you showing up, but after that, I can't remember.”

“You were drunk and couldn't walk properly. I brought you home and carried you to bed. I slept on the couch.” He points toward the gray sofa.

My eyes slide to the sofa in amazement. *He looked after me.* “You stayed here all night?”

His broad shoulders roll into a dismissive shrug as if it were nothing. “You could have been sick and choked, so I



stayed. I popped back to mine first thing this morning, but I wanted to make sure you were okay when you woke up.”

I cringe. “Was I really that bad?”

“Yes, you were.” His tone is firm, and I get the distinct feeling he’s not impressed with me getting so drunk. “Now go and take a shower. I’ll make you some breakfast.”

My stomach churns at the thought of food, and I pull a face.

“You need to eat something,” he insists.

I hesitate. The man is standing in my apartment, acting as though he lives here, telling me what to do and taking over. It’s gnawing away at my resolve, and I waver as I weigh up whether I’ve got the energy to challenge him. Because if I don’t, I’m allowing him to get closer. I’m letting him in. I’m giving him a sign that it’s okay for him to take control.

His dark brows inch upward when I don’t move. “Go on. I’ll sort breakfast.”

He’s got a look in his eyes that tells me he isn’t going to take no for an answer, and I’m not in the frame of mind to argue. As I turn and disappear into the bedroom, I can’t deny the thought of him looking after me and preparing breakfast for me in my kitchen gives me a spring to my step.

The hot shower pummels my flesh and wakes me up but does little to dull the ache in my temples. I dry my hair and apply some makeup, so I feel a little more human at least, and take the two paracetamols he’s kindly left for me. I pull on a black, long-sleeved Bardot top over black pinstripe trousers and black peep-toe wedges. It’s Monday, so I’m hoping there’s not much in the work diary for today. I’m never drinking on a school night again.

The smell of toast fills my nostrils as I walk into the kitchen, and I'm relieved that my stomach doesn't turn at the smell of food.

I slide onto one of the black kitchen stools, and Art places a plate of hot buttered toast and a mug of dark coffee in front of me.

"I took a guess that you don't take sugar."

"No, I don't." I take a big gulp of coffee as he leans forward on the counter and turns his attention back to the news on the television. I suddenly feel awkward about everything he's done. "Thank you. For last night, looking after me, and this."

His dark eyes hold mine as his lips twitch into a smile, then no sooner as it appears, it's gone. "Don't go into that club again. It's a dive. And don't drink so much when you go out. It makes you easy prey."

I shift uncomfortably on the stool at the telling-off he's subjecting me to. But he's right.

"So, if the club is a dive, why were you there?"

He turns his attention back to the television, avoiding my gaze. "I was in the area. I know the managers of some of the clubs in town. I just happened to be in the right place at the right time."

I'm not sure I buy his excuse but go with it because I don't need to know any more about the club. I remember what happened there. It's the events of the night after we left that are a bit blurry. "What happened after we left?"

"Lucy went home, and I put you in my car and brought you back here."

I take a bite of toast. There's something niggling away at the back of my mind, and I can't quite explain it. "Was there anything else? Did we talk?"

"You don't remember what you said, do you?"

The question fills my heart with dread and wipes out my appetite. I drop the toast on the plate, my mind frantically turning over, desperately trying to remember what I said. No doubt it was something incredibly embarrassing. The look on my face must say it all because he tilts his head to the left and smiles as he watches my obvious struggle.

"You asked me if I was your guardian angel, which I thought was quite sweet. Then you said you needed to stay away from me because I'm dangerous, which I thought was intriguing, then you asked me if I was into S & M, which I thought was quite funny."

I want the floor to open and swallow me up whole as the mortifying final piece of the previous evening slots into place. I remember him carrying me from the car. How it felt so good in his arms. How he put me to bed. How he made me feel so safe.

*Shit!*

He's watching me closely. The smile has gone, and he's waiting for me to justify myself.

I grab my mug and take a long drink of coffee to buy myself some time to come up with a decent explanation.

"I was drunk," is the best that I can manage. I place the mug down and hope he'll let it go. "I always talk rubbish when I'm drunk. Just forget what I said."

"There's a saying... the drunken mind speaks the sober heart."

I pick up the half-chewed slice of toast. “I’m never drinking again. You’ve got the right idea about not touching the stuff. Do you not drink out of choice or...” I trail off, realizing my attempt to change the conversation might have caused me to put my foot in it.

“Or... am I an alcoholic?”

“Erm... well.”

“No, I’m not an alcoholic. I don’t like the man I become when I drink.” He pushes himself off the counter and frowns. “Why do you think I’m dangerous?”

I look out the window to the high-rise flats and office blocks far away in the distance across the river. I can’t admit it’s because I think I could fall hard for him, and he’d break my heart into a million tiny pieces when he dropped me and moved on to the next adoring female. But I’m stuck because my brain’s still not in top form yet, and I can’t think of a viable explanation to give that doesn’t make me sound like a silly schoolgirl.

“I don’t want to get hurt,” I admit.

The crease line in his brow disappears. “I won’t hurt you,” he says softly. “And I won’t let anyone else hurt you, either.”

I want to believe him, but there’s darkness to this man I’ve never known before, and it leaves me exhilarated and scared all at once.

Suddenly, his phone rings from the other side of the counter, and I see Tara’s name flash on the screen before he cancels the call with a frown.

“Come on, we should head into work.” He looks at me. “I’ll give you a lift. You’re in no fit state to drive. We can talk S & M in the car.”

## Chapter Eight

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**A**s the Aston Martin cuts through the Surrey countryside, I do my best to relax back in the passenger seat. We're yet to discuss his kinky sexual preferences, and although part of me is intrigued, the other part is anxious about what he's going to tell me. What if he tells me he has a sex dungeon complete with black PVC gimp masks and the only way he will have sex with a woman is if she is tied up and subjected to a good spanking first?

*Oh, God. I'm not sure I'm ready to hear this.*

"What have you heard about me?"

I give him a sideways glance. "That you're a member of an exclusive S & M club."

"Where did you learn that?"

There's no way I can get around this question with a lie. "Lucy googled you."

He keeps his eyes on the road straight ahead, his expression giving no clue as to how he feels about being cyberstalked. "When you hear the phrase S & M, what do you think?"

I shrug and stare out of the window. "It's not something I know anything about. Whips, chains, people tied up and

getting spanked, I suppose.” I shoot him a curious look. “Are you a Dom?”

He throws his head back and laughs. “No, I’m not.”

“Are you a sub?”

“No. The Dom-sub thing doesn’t appeal to me.”

I’m struggling. “Then help me out here. Why does any of it appeal to you?”

“Control,” he fires back. “I like to have control in all aspects of my life, and the bedroom is no exception.”

Lucy’s words about him being a dominating type in bed come back to haunt me. “How did you get into it?”

He doesn’t reply for a few moments as if he’s considering his response. “Five years ago, I went through a dark patch, and someone introduced me to the scene.”

I’m not sure whether I should ask the next question. “Are you still... into it?”

“I haven’t been to the club for years, but I still like to be in control. I’m not into anything hardcore.”

I shift uncomfortably against the leather seat, and he throws me a worried look.

“I’ve scared you.”

This is all totally alien to me. I’ve had sex, of course, but I’ve never indulged in anything more risqué than sexy underwear and a blindfold. “It doesn’t matter how I feel.”

He takes a right and turns into the hotel’s driveway. “It matters very much.”

I shake my head and look out the window at the row of sky-scraping oak trees that line the driveway. “No, it doesn’t.”

He swings the car into his usual parking space right outside the front of the hotel and cuts the engine. “We’ll discuss this more tonight.”

“What’s happening tonight?”

“I’m taking you out to dinner.” He’s telling me, not asking me.

“No, you’re not.”

He exhales slowly as if I’m testing his patience. “Why are you fighting this?”

I frown, unsure what he’s referring to. “Fighting what?”

“Me and you.”

My heart stops.

I have no comeback.

“It’s inevitable. We’re going to end up in bed together.”

His brazen reply jolts my brain back into action. “You don’t get to decide if I sleep with you. I do,” I reply tartly.

“Why are you afraid to give in to your feelings?”

My cheeks warm, and I look through the passenger window as we proceed down the driveway, uncomfortable in the knowledge he knows how I feel about him.

“I watch you. When we’re close, when I touch you...” He brushes his palm against the back of my hand, and a warm tingle travels up my arm at the contact. I try to control the shudder that threatens to rise from my core. “Your body lights up, and you feel alive. I know because I feel it too.”

*He feels the same way about me?*

My heart gallops in my chest as my gaze slides to him.

“I want you. You want me. Stop fighting it.”

His words ring in my ears. I feel as if I’m standing on the top of a precipice deciding whether to jump or not. It would be so easy to give in and take a step off the edge, but I can’t get hurt again. It’s taken me three years to get over my last relationship. I can’t let someone else break my heart, and with him, it wouldn’t just break in two—it would shatter.

“I’ll take you out to dinner after work.”

I press my lips together at the thought of an entire evening in his company. Given his expensive taste in cars and clothes, he’s bound to dine at only the finest restaurants. And I bet he looks scorching in a suit. “What if I don’t want to go?”

The crease line on his forehead deepens in irritation. I’m pissing him off. “But you do want to, don’t you?”

The word ‘no’ sticks in the back of my throat and refuses to come to the forefront because it would be an out-and-out lie. I can’t make myself say it, and I can’t be around him any longer because I can’t think straight. I’m dangerously close to leaping off the precipice.

“I need to get to work,” I say, pushing open the car door and climbing out.

I make a beeline for my office, hurrying through reception. I don’t hang around to see if he’s following me. All I can focus on is getting some headspace. I’m aware it won’t have gone unnoticed by the other staff that I’ve turned up to work in the boss’s car, but right now, I don’t care.

Lucy’s head pops up from behind the desk as I walk by. I purposefully don’t look in her direction and carry on walking to my office, but it’s no use. I can hear her shoes against the



tiled floor, hot on my heels for gossip. I'm really not in the mood.

"So?" she cries the second we're alone.

"So," I repeat, dumping my handbag on the desk. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"Shit," she replies flatly. "What are you doing turning up to work with Art?"

"He gave me a lift into work." I settle down in the chair and switch on my laptop.

"Because he spent the night at yours?" Lucy nods eagerly, waiting for me to fill her in. Her patience will soon snap if I don't.

"Yes, but nothing happened."

She scrambles to sit on the chair opposite and straightens her light-blue blouse over her ample bosom. "You expect me to believe that the extremely sexy guy, who swooped to your rescue last night, stayed over at yours, and you didn't end up shagging?"

"It's the truth. Believe it or don't believe it. Nothing happened. I was so drunk I passed out. Even if I hadn't, I was too drunk to have sex with anyone. He slept on the sofa."

Lucy rests her chin on her hands and frowns. "Have you at least kissed?"

"No. Have you forgotten how drunk we were last night? My head's still spinning. I'm never drinking on a work night again," I warn, opening up my emails.

She sighs, clearly disappointed I've no tantalizing gossip to share. "So, what *did* happen?"

“He took me home, carried me upstairs, then he made me breakfast this morning and gave me a lift into work,” I reply. “Sorry to disappoint.”

Her eyes sparkle. “He carried you up to your flat in his arms, stayed over the night to make sure you were okay, then looked after you this morning?”

I throw her an odd look. “You’re over-romanticizing it.”

“No, I’m not. I saw the way he looked at you last night.”

I want to stop her right there. “Don’t be stupid. We barely know one another. We haven’t even... you know?”

“All this romantic, gentlemanly stuff makes up for the kinky S & M stuff, in my opinion.” She pats the back of her chignon. “Have you spoken about that?”

“A little.”

“And?”

“I still don’t quite understand it. He wants to take me out for dinner after work.”

“Excellent.”

“I’m not going.”

She looks at me as though I’ve just landed from outer space. “Why ever the fuck not?”

“It wouldn’t just be dinner, would it?”

“And?” She shrugs. “Jesus, Soph. I think it’s time you had a bit of fun. Go and shag his brains out.”

The very thought makes my stomach turn over with nerves. I scroll through my emails, which I’ve already read. “There’s nothing fun or lighthearted about Art. He’s intense, dark, and passionate.” *And he’ll hurt me. One night with him*

*wouldn't be enough. I just know it. I'd want more, and he wouldn't.*

The ding of the reception bell echoes down the corridor.

Lucy pushes herself up and huffs. "I suppose I'd better get back to it. God, it's hard work today. I'm not touching another drop of alcohol until the wedding."

"What about the hen-do?" I shoot back.

Lucy hovers in the doorway. "Oh... well, apart from that." She laughs. "See you later and... I say go for it." With a cheeky wink, she disappears out the door.

Thankfully, the calendar is quiet for today, and it allows me some prep time for the upcoming wedding on Saturday. Two hundred guests, an outdoor marquee, and a dove coop of five white doves takes some organizing, which I relish because it's provided a distraction from my conversation with Art this morning. I'm thankful I haven't seen him all day because I need time away from him. When he looks at me, and he's close to me, I can't think about anything else but him, and when he touches me...

It's late afternoon when I hit the wall. The temple-throbbing, churning stomach I've suffered from all day is overtaken by tiredness. I stare at the seating plan for next weekend's wedding on my laptop screen for what feels like the hundredth time in as many minutes when an email from him appears in my inbox entitled, "Help."

My heart automatically skips a few beats at the sight of it, and I hate myself for it. I double-click and open the email. *Can you come up to my office, please? I've got a problem I need your help with.*

I place my pen in my mouth and chew at the plastic lid as I try to work out why he might need my help rather than George's. I type my reply. *Be right there.*

The smell of fresh paint hits me as I make my way down the corridor toward his office. The door is ajar, and I knock politely, wait a few seconds, then walk in.

The office has been totally transformed, and I can't help but stare in amazement at the refurbished room. Gone are the old, stained gray floor tiles, battered old wooden desk, and antiquated mismatched chairs. The walls are painted white, making the compact room look huge. A large Scandinavian modern-style desk faces the door with a stylish tan leather chair behind it. A light oak floor gives the room a traditional touch, and a pale brown sofa is positioned alongside the far wall with a glass coffee table in front.

He sits on the edge of the couch staring at his laptop on the coffee table in front of him. "Close the door behind you, please," he says without looking up.

I close the door and wander around the room, admiring the revamped office. "They certainly worked quickly to get this done. It looks good."

"It's amazing what you can get people to do when you put them under a bit of pressure." He moves over slightly on the sofa to make room for me.

I settle myself down, keeping a safe distance away from him. "What's the problem?"

He shifts around so his body's facing me and lays his left arm across the back of the sofa behind my head. "It's not work-related."

There's an intensity in his eyes that's got my heart flapping around in my chest like a headless chicken. Nerves churn in my stomach, and I'm pinned to the spot, unable to move even if I wanted to.

"But I think you can help me." His voice dips low and rich, and my skin prickles in response. My eyes drift from his intense eyes to his beautiful, full mouth. I'm still not used to being this close to a man this attractive, and my brain's short-circuiting. He's cast his line, and I've taken the bait. Now he's reeling me in, and I'm floundering on the end of the hook.

"I've been thinking about our conversation this morning, and I'm torn." He tilts his head to the right, and he's watching me. Right now, I feel as if I'm the only woman in the world, and he's the only man. How does he do this? "I want your opinion."

I detect the slightest movement from his arm draped across the back of the sofa behind my head, and then his fingers shift through my hair. A molten hot tingle shoots to my center and fires up nerves all over my body as his fingertips stroke the back of my neck with a barely-there touch. I part my lips and suck in uneven breaths as his eyes flick to my mouth, then my chest, then back to my face. He knows the effect he's having on me.

"Part of me wants to take you out to dinner tonight." He carries on with the delicious strokes of his fingers, and it takes all my mental strength to concentrate on what he's saying. "But the other part of me wants to take you straight home and fuck your brains out."

I exhale sharply, and my stomach twists as I scramble around for something to say in response that won't make me sound idiotic.

“In fact. I want to fuck you so much, I don’t think I’d be able to make it through dinner, so it might be a bit of a waste.”

*Fucking hell.*

He’s still stroking my neck. “What do you want me to do, Sophie?”

His touch is sweeping away the red flags and silencing the alarm bells telling me to stay away from him. He’s totally in control. His words throw me back to our conversation earlier.

*I like to have control in all aspects of my life, and the bedroom is no exception.*

The thought of him in any kind of bedroom situation is making my insides do funny things.

“I didn’t agree to have dinner with you this evening, so why do you think I want to fuck you?” My voice is weakening as is my resolve.

He laughs softly, and I’m on the back foot, not expecting that reaction at all. “Because in the last few moments, your breathing has become heavier, your sensuous lips have parted, and the pupils in those mesmerizing eyes have dilated. You do want to, don’t you?”

He removes his fingers and presses his palm against the nape of my neck. “Tell me... if I were to kiss you now, would you push me away?” His hushed tones lap their way across my flesh, reeling me in.

My heart rate rockets as he inches toward me, and my body automatically turns to him.

“Or would you submit to me?”

His eyes fall to my lips as we edge closer together.

I'm about to step off the edge of the precipice and plummet into the dark unknown void below, and all I care about is having his mouth on mine.

“Knock, knock.” A female voice cuts through the silence, tearing through the moment.

I jump up like I've been electrocuted and automatically take a few steps away from the sofa and Art.

Big Steve and Tara stand in the doorway, both looking annoyed but for different reasons. Big Steve's clear, blue eyes harden as they swing from me to Art. Tara's dark-penciled eyebrows pull into a 'V' as she frowns and takes a couple of steps forward on her black skyscraper heels. A tight baby-blue sweater strains to contain her large chest, and she's wearing equally tight faded blue denim jeans. Her green eyes narrow into a scrutinizing gaze as they sweep me up and down, her red lips pursing in disapproval.

“There was no one at reception, so we came straight up.” Big Steve throws Art a guilty look.

“What do we have here then?” There's a sneer to Tara's voice, and I instantly don't like her. In fact, I don't much like the way Big Steve is now glaring at Art, either.

He sits forward on the sofa. “Tara, this is Sophie.”

She flicks her platinum blonde hair over her shoulder. “And what does Sophie do?”

Her patronizing tone is pissing me off. “She's the wedding planner here,” I snap.

“Oh. It speaks.” Tara twirls a strand of her blonde hair around a red talon.

“Yes, *it* does. So, what does Tara do?”

She cuts her eyes to me as I fold my arms in determination. This bitch does not intimidate me.

“Sophie, can you give us a minute?” Art asks.

I slowly turn on my heel and walk out of the office, noticing the weak smile Big Steve gives me as I pass him, but I don't smile back. He's probably feeling guilty for barging in, but I'm still irked by the fact he's got a problem with me. Besides, he's clearly Team Tara. I'm nearly at the door when Art calls my name, and I glance back to find him watching me.

“We leave at half past four. I'll meet you by the car.” He gives me a long look before I turn and leave them to it.



## Chapter Nine

---

The knock on the office door causes my heart to lurch in my chest. I freeze mid-packing, my eyes swinging to my watch. It's only four o'clock. It can't be him yet. He said half past. Seconds later, the door opens, and Lucy slides inside.

I breathe a sigh of relief and carry on shoving my phone into my bag.

"Have you got five?" she asks.

I pull a face and switch off my laptop. "Sorry, Luce, not really. I need to go." *Now*. I need to get out of the hotel.

"Oh, okay." She sounds uncharacteristically down and is chewing the corner of her mouth, looking at the floor. I immediately feel bad for brushing her off. "Has something happened?"

Her eyes lack their usual sparkle as she lifts them to mine. "No, not really. It's Mark."

I frown. She's not making any sense, but something's bothering her. "Is he okay?"

She huffs and folds her arms across her chest. "Oh, yeah. He's hunky-dory." There's a sarcastic edge to her voice, and she frowns in irritation.

I sling my handbag over my shoulder and walk over to her. “I haven’t got time now. I need to go. But how about I call you tonight, and we’ll have a chat?”

“Okay.” She smiles weakly. “Have you decided whether you’re going on that date with Mr. Italian Stallion yet?”

“Yes, I have. And no, I’m not.”

Slipping out, I hurry as fast as I can down the tree-lined driveway. I can see the white taxi I’ve ordered parked up the road waiting for me. I gave specific instructions to the taxi company for the car not to come up the driveway, as it would attract too much attention and potentially jeopardize my escape plan.

Art thinks he’s in control, but he’s not.

I’ve taken it back.

The passenger window winds down as I approach the car, and I dip my head and peer inside at the middle-age driver.

“Sophie, is it?” he inquires cheerily, tweaking his gray plaid flat cap.

I’m about to reply when a thunderous noise tears through the silence of the countryside. I catch the alarmed look on the driver’s face as the sound grows louder and louder and closer and closer.

“What the bloomin’ hell is that?” he mumbles, glancing at his rearview mirror.

My heart drops.

The gray Aston Martin tears out of the driveway, the engine’s roar vibrating through my bones. It comes to a screeching halt in front of the cab, blocking its path. The

driver's door swings open, and Art leaps out, stalking toward us, leaving the car engine running.

I catch the worried look on the taxi driver's face as he takes in Art's size.

"It's okay," I assure him. "He's insane."

Art's brown eyes burn into me. "Maybe I am." He turns to the taxi driver. "It's okay, mate. She doesn't need a taxi anymore."

"Yes, I do," I snap, annoyed he's taking over again.

He lowers himself level with the driver's window, and I hear him saying something to the driver, but I can't make it out. He pulls his wallet from his back pocket, takes out a wad of cash, and pushes it into the driver's hand.

"What are you doing?" I cry out.

The driver's eyes light up as he shoves the notes into his coat pocket and grins. "See you, love," he calls cheerily. "Have a nice day." And with that, he pulls the taxi into reverse and drives off.

I stare aghast at the white car as it disappears around the corner. I can't walk home in these wedges, and the nearest bus stop is a mile down the road. "You paid him off! I ordered that taxi. I'm going to phone that guy's boss. What if you were a nutter? He should be fucking sacked." I'm furious.

"People will do anything for money." He opens the passenger door of his car. "Please, get in."

I tilt my chin up in defiance. "No. I won't be controlled and told what to do by you."

His brows twitch in confusion as my words resonate with him. "I'm sorry if how I act comes across like that

sometimes.”

“Sometimes!” I flail my arm in the direction of the road. “You just paid the taxi driver to leave, so I’ve got no choice but to accept a lift from you. How is that not controlling me?”

“It’s not. It’s just...” He steps toward me, looking perplexed. “I’d want to control you in bed, but I don’t want to control you. That’s very different. To do that would be to extinguish your character, and although you drive me crazy with your stubbornness, like now, I wouldn’t want you to change for the world.”

And just like that, he’s pulled the rug from beneath my feet again. He doesn’t want to control me in the same way Theo did. He wants me for me. And I want him for him, not for his money or the niceties it brings. The parts of him I’ve seen are to die for, and I’m betting the parts that are hidden are just as exquisite, but the thought of getting naked with this guy pushes me to a whole new level of anxiety.

I look at the open passenger door and hesitate. He’s like no other man I’ve met before, and it makes me excited and anxious all at once. Going to dinner with him or going back to his place would lead to the inevitable, and I’m not ready for that amount of naked gorgeousness to be unleashed upon me yet.

*Am I?*

“I’m not going to dinner with you.”

“Okay,” he agrees. I’m taken aback by the lack of challenge in his reply. “Please, Sophie, let me drive you home.”

I sigh. “Okay.”

He watches me for a few seconds as I make my way over to the car as if checking I'm not going to do a runner again, then walks around to the driver's side and climbs in.

No sooner have I closed the door than he puts the car in reverse, and we're moving.

"Put your seat belt on," he orders, accelerating down the lane with speed. A cloud of dust hangs in the air behind us as I look at the side mirror.

"Why are you so obsessed with seat belts?" I huff, sliding the belt around me and clicking it into place.

"Because they keep you safe."

I'm not sure whether he means they keep everyone safe or just me.

I clutch the edge of the leather seat as we round a bend, and I glance over at the speedometer to find he's doing fifty.

"At the speed you're driving, I'm glad I'm wearing it."

"You think I'm driving too fast."

"You *are* driving too fast," I cry.

He immediately takes his foot off the accelerator, and I know I've hit home. "Sorry. I've always had a heavy right foot."

I'm grateful for the slower speed and loosen my grip, looking out the passenger window. "How did you know I'd left work?"

"I saw you walking down the driveway."

"So, you ran down three flights of stairs after me?" I ask the question because I can't quite believe it.

He doesn't reply, his eyes fixed ahead on the road.

“How long did your friends stay?” I ask, unable to help myself.

“Not long. I didn’t know they were coming.”

*Clearly, or you wouldn’t have invited me up to your office and tried to kiss me,* I think cynically.

I stare out of the window. “I don’t think Tara’s very keen on me.”

He casts me a sideways glance, and the edges of his lips curl in amusement. “I don’t think you’re very keen on her, either.”

“She looked at me as though I was a piece of shit. What do you expect?” I snap, unable to contain my irritation.

“I’m not debating that. Tara’s just...” He sighs and taps his fingers against the steering wheel. “She’s not a woman’s woman. She’s more of a man’s woman.”

“That doesn’t make me feel any better.”

“You’re never going to get on. You’re too different.”

He’s right about that.

We head onto the highway back into the city. As he takes a left, I immediately know we’re not headed in the right direction.

I frown. “This isn’t the right way to my apartment.”

“I know, but it is the right way to *my* apartment.”

“What? Why?” I shriek in surprise, even though I know why. “I told you to take me home.”

“And I am taking you home. To my home.”

“Shouldn’t we at least go to dinner first?”

He swiftly changes gear, and the car roars to life, gaining speed once more. “You said you didn’t want to go to dinner.”

“Yes, but that didn’t mean I wanted to jump to the sex part.” He’s exasperating.

“Why not? Dinner’s just a prelude to the main act.” The corners of his lips twitch into a wicked smile. “And there’s only one thing I’m hungry for.”

“Actually, now that you mention it, I haven’t eaten since lunchtime, and I’m starving. Maybe we should go to dinner after all.”

I’m purposefully being difficult, and he knows it.

“The only thing you’re going to be tasting on those lips of yours is me.”

*Fuck.*

I turn my head and look out the window so he can’t see my cheeks flush. If he’s taking me to his lair, I don’t stand a chance. My mind whirs with the possibilities of what kinky setup he’s got going on. A sex dungeon with metal chains hanging from the walls? Whips and clamps and... oh, God. Now the nerves well and truly kick in.

Eventually, we’re in Mayfair parked outside a three-story Georgian property with perfectly symmetrical white sash windows.

He cuts the engine. “I’m not going to force you to do anything you don’t want to do.” His fingers curl around the steering wheel, and his brows are drawn into a frown. “If you don’t want this, say the word. I’ll take you home right now, but first, I’ll ask you to be honest with yourself about what you really want. Be true to yourself.”

I stare up at the apartment block from the passenger window. I don't have to think about it. I want him, but my past is holding me back from having him, and if I allow that to happen, doesn't it mean that Theo is still controlling me after all this time? I can't allow it. I won't. He's totally different than Theo in every conceivable way, and I need to keep reminding myself of that.

“Okay,” I blurt before I can change my mind.

As soon as I say it, he leaps out of the car, swings the passenger door open, and offers me his hand, interrupting my thoughts. I stare at it for a few seconds then place my hand in his. He pulls me to my feet, immediately lifts me, and throws me over his shoulder, bumping the car door closed with his hip. I cry out in surprise as my face plants against his shoulder blades.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“I'm not taking any more chances in case you change your mind. No more running.” He's determined not to let me escape from his clutches this time.

He hurries up the two stone steps in front of the entrance and pushes his way through a set of glass doors.

“Mr. Black,” a male voice says, and I briefly close my eyes, conscious of how bizarre this must look. I'm viewing the world from an upside-down, distorted angle but notice the black and white diamond tiled floor beneath his feet as he crosses the foyer, then we're climbing upward. A burgundy carpet lines the steps of the ornately carved staircase, and oak panels decorate the lower half of the wall. This is a beautiful building, and from what I can see, there's definitely a sense of history to the place.



As we reach the first landing, I lift my head and peer back down the staircase to see a gray-haired gentleman wearing a black suit and tie sitting behind a large oak desk. He's peering at something or other on his desk and doesn't seem fazed in the slightest by Art climbing the staircase with a young woman over his shoulder. I can't help but wonder if this isn't the first time he's done it.

We climb up another staircase and then round onto another landing before coming to a halt. I hear the sound of a key in a lock, and then we're moving forward. I can see a light oak parquet floor, and I hear the clatter of keys being tossed onto a table, then I'm lowered. He keeps his strong arms wrapped around my waist as he slides me down the length of his body, and our eyes lock. His eyes are dark with intent as he places me carefully on my feet.

Nerves fire up all over my body at the look he's giving me. I don't have time to gather my senses as his soft lips brush against mine, and we kiss for the first time. As soon as our lips meet, I'm lost. I hear my handbag fall to the floor with a thud as I throw my arms around his neck and press myself against him, desperate to feel his body against mine. His tongue swipes across my bottom lip as if seeking access, and I open my mouth, eager to taste him. A low moan escapes from his throat as he kisses me slowly and languidly. In contrast to his rush to get here, he's got me where he wants me now and seems to be taking his time.

He's warm, firm, and everything I dreamed he would be, and I never want him to stop kissing me, and I never want him to let me go. His arms tighten their grip around me, keeping me close to him as he walks me back through a doorway as if he doesn't want to break the kiss. Then, after a few moments, he pulls away abruptly, and I instantly miss the feel of him.

I open my eyes. We're in his bedroom. It's spacious with pale gray walls and white floor-length voile curtains obscuring the French windows behind me. I'm standing at the end of the biggest bed I've ever seen. It has a dark wooden slatted headboard and plain gray sheets. A deep blue velvet chaise longue sits along the wall facing the bed. The room is exquisitely finished and incredibly stylish, but I'm relieved to find there isn't a whip or chain in sight. Through the two doors in the room, I spy a walk-in closet and master bathroom, not a sex dungeon. I hear the sound of curtains being opened behind me, and golden rays of afternoon sunlight bounce off the parquet floor.

"I want to be able to see your beautiful body." His voice is deep and low at my right ear, and I close my eyes as his hard, warm torso presses against my back. I suppress a shiver at the feel of his erection digging into my buttocks. I've thrown caution to the wind and jumped off the precipice, free-falling into the dark oblivion below, unsure of when and where I might land. And I don't care. All I can think of is how I want to feel his lips and his hands on me. Everywhere.

I relax against him, our bodies molding together as he sweeps my hair over my right shoulder, exposing the bare flesh of my throat. He presses his lips against the curve of my neck, and I close my eyes, dropping my head to the right, inviting him to carry on. As if reading my mind, he plants a delicate line of kisses along the skin of my left shoulder, and I can't stop myself from moaning in delight. He's moving slowly, expertly, taking his time, savoring the moment.

He pulls my top up and over my head in one move. Then he slowly and teasingly glides his palms up the dip in my spine and unfastens the clasp of my black lace bra, tossing it to the floor. I'm naked from the waist up but don't have time to

dwell on it as he cups a breast in each hand and gently kneads, sending pulses of delight shooting to my center. He presses his cheek against mine, and I feel a quiver between my thighs.

“You feel like silk. I knew you would.” Then his hands leave my body, and he moves away. My eyes snap open at the loss of contact as panic shoots through me. “Don’t stop.”

Even before I finish speaking, his hands are on my waist, and he’s turning me around to face him. I’m hit with a full-on view of his gorgeous face, and I worry I’m dreaming and am going to wake up any moment. This man has the face of a god, and he wants me. But it’s more than that. As his carnal gaze roams over my naked breasts, there’s a mixture of adoration and awe in his eyes, and it pushes the air from my lungs and heats my sensitive skin. He’s looking at me as if I’m the most beautiful woman he’s ever seen, and I feel like a goddess. At this moment, I’m the only woman in the world.

He lifts his eyes to mine and kneels in front of me. I breathe harder as he unfastens my trousers, curls his fingers around the waistband, and pulls them down to my ankles. He places his mouth on my right thigh and leaves a trail of kisses down to my knee. His touch is gentle and precise as if he’s got all the time in the world, and it sends my lust-addled brain into a frenzy. He picks up my right foot, pulls off my shoe, and tosses it over his shoulder, then does the same to my left foot. I step out of my trousers, and he flings them to the side as he trails a line of kisses up my left thigh, but this time he doesn’t stop. I bite my lip as he carries on planting kisses over the black lace on my hip then up over the dip of my stomach to my belly, and I think I’m going to combust. His hands cup my buttocks, and he tilts his face upward to look at me. “I love you in black lace. But I love you even more out of it.” He

drags my panties down my legs, and I step out of them as he eases them off my bare feet.

He slowly rises to his feet, taking his time as he draws his gaze up my naked body. At first, I feel exposed and vulnerable, but as his eyes finally reach mine, those feelings are thwarted, and I feel like a goddess once more. I've never felt like this before. It's a feeling I could become addicted to.

"You're a work of art." His tone is hushed. "Lie back on the bed."

I shift back on the gray bed sheet as he crawls up the bed, positioning himself over me. He kisses me deeply and languidly, and my fingers itch in desperation to touch him. I can't wait any longer. I push his top upward over the roped muscles of his back, and he takes my cue, reaching his right hand behind his head and pulling his shirt off in one move. Our lips break contact for a second, then his mouth is back on mine as he takes his time, kissing me expertly, slowly. My core throbs as I press my palms against his toned abs and hear a groan erupt from the back of his throat as he tenses beneath my hands. I glide them lower against his muscles' curves and dips, feeling the scatter of black hairs around his belly button tickle my fingertips. His body feels as if it has been carved from stone, and I never want to stop touching him.

He cups my right breast and rolls the pink bud of my nipple between his thumb and forefinger. I cry out in surprise. The slight pain is followed by an onslaught of pleasure as the blood rushes to my sore nipple, and a moan escapes my lips.

"You're so beautiful," he whispers against my mouth, and I close my eyes and prepare myself as he submits the left nipple to the same glorious assault. "My beautiful Sophie."

Desire tugs deep in my stomach, and at this moment, I want to be his.

His mouth begins working down my body. I glance down to watch him plant a hot, heavy kiss on the sensitive skin between my breasts, then he moves a few inches lower, kissing my stomach before pressing his lips to my belly button, his tongue dipping inside. My eyes snap closed as he scores a molten trail with his tongue from my navel down across my pubic bone. My chest swells as his lips brush against my clit. As my body flushes beneath his touch, I gasp. I've never felt so turned on in all my life, and I fear I might implode.

"You taste amazing." I feel his weight shifting off me and open my eyes. He stands at the foot of the bed and steps out of his chinos. I suck in a long breath as I admire his body. He's the perfect mix of muscular and lean, all wrapped up in dark good looks and taut golden skin. A long, thick erection is tenting the material of his black Calvin Kleins. I notice a silvery scar beneath his navel, about three inches long. Before I can ask any questions, he crawls back up the bed and lays the length of his delicious body against mine. My heartbeat rockets as I wait for his touch, aching between my legs in anticipation of what he might do next. I briefly close my eyes.

I've never ached for a man to touch me or fuck me before. I don't know what he's doing to me. The thought unnerves me a little, but I don't have the opportunity to think about it as I feel the pillow dip, and I open my eyes to be greeted by the sight of his chiseled face inches above mine. He adjusts his position slightly, propping his head on his left palm. His chocolate-brown eyes hold mine. Tendrils of hair have fallen across his brow, and my heart squeezes at the pure beauty of this man. I'll never grow tired of looking at him.

He glides his free hand across my waist and over my stomach, moving lower. I hear my breathing deepen as his hand curls between my legs, sending a bolt of pleasure through my body, and I moan at the feel of him against my most intimate spot.

“You’re so responsive.” He’s studying my reaction closely as he touches me. “And it’s so fucking hot.”

His thumb begins lazy circular strokes around my swollen nub, and my eyes flicker closed as I succumb to the glorious tightness ratcheting between my legs.

“Are you on the pill?”

Pressure is fizzing at my core and smashing my concentration to pieces. I gulp down a lungful of air and try to focus. “Yes.”

“Then I won’t use a condom.”

His response has me snapping my eyes open. “But that doesn’t protect us against STIs and—”

He pushes two long fingers deep inside me, and my brain stops working. “I’ve always used a condom in the past.”

I squirm with pleasure as my muscles tense around him.

He curls his fingers, and I feel my body flush with warmth. “I’m clean, are you?”

I can hear the words, but I’m struggling to process the answer as he strokes the front wall of my vagina in just the right spot, knowing exactly what to do.

After a few seconds, I regain some composure. “You’re good at this.” I pant.

“Very.” His fingers increase their pressure on my sweet spot, and I grind my hips beneath his hand as the slickness builds between my legs. “Are you clean?” he repeats, and I realize I haven’t given him an answer.

“I’ve always been careful.”

“So have I, but I want to feel every inch of you.”

*And I want to feel every inch of him.*

I entwine my fingers through his soft, thick hair and kiss him deeply, pulling his face to mine. My muscles tighten around his fingers, and my thighs begin to tremble as he carries on with steady strokes. I’m slightly unnerved because I’ve never felt intensity like this. My orgasm is approaching like a ten-ton truck, and I’m not sure what to expect.

“Art...” I gasp against his mouth but can’t finish the sentence as a contraction knocks my focus.

“You’re close.” *He knows.* “Come.”

I tear my hands from his hair and slam them down into the mattress as my body arches off the bed, my orgasm crashing through me like a wave. Every muscle in my body tenses, and my limbs vibrate in the grip of the most intense climax I’ve ever experienced. My brain is mush as I dissolve into the sheets, wrung out, disorientated, and totally relaxed.

He kisses me gently as I come back down to earth, then he brings a wet thumb up to my mouth, smearing it across my bottom lip, then licks it. I taste myself, the muskiness coating our lips and dancing on our tongues as he kisses me. He’s filthy, and I love it.

“You taste like honey,” he murmurs against my mouth. “I’m going to taste every part of you. I’m going to touch every part of you. I’m going to worship every part of you.”

And I'll let him. Right now, there's nothing I want more than to give myself to him.

His lips crash against mine as he kisses me hard before pulling his mouth from mine. "I need to fuck you."

*God, yes!*

He shifts his weight over me and places a hand on either side of my head, pressing his lips against the base of my throat. I close my eyes and succumb to the delicious feeling of his mouth on my body. "I could get lost in you."

*What does that mean?*

I don't get to ask as a buzzing noise sounds from the hall, and I jump with a start.

He nuzzles his face against my neck. "Ignore it."

I'm definitely not feeling as relaxed as I was a minute ago. "What's that noise?"

"The doorbell."

I'm no longer relaxed at all. "There's somebody at the door!" I cry, propping myself up on my elbows. The doorbell buzzes a second time confirming my fears. "You need to go and see who it is."

He looks up at me from beneath hooded eyes. "They'll go away if we ignore it."

The doorbell buzzes a third time.

"It doesn't sound as if they're going anywhere."

He glares in the direction of the hall, recognizing defeat. "Fuck!"

He leaps off the bed, shrugs on his top, and steps into his trousers. "I'll be back in two minutes," he says, fastening his



fly as he backs out of the room.

He closes the door behind him, and I hear the front door open. I can hear his deep voice, then a higher-pitched female voice. My ears instantly prick up, and an annoying niggly feeling taps away at my brain. *Who is she? And what's she here for?* They're both talking in low tones, so I can't make out what's being said, but a few moments later, I hear the front door close and the click of heels against the parquet hall floor. Whoever she is, he's not sent her away. He's invited her in!

I scabble off the bed and hurry over to the bedroom door, carefully opening it a fraction. I peer through the gap just in time to see him disappearing down the hall, followed by a blonde woman wearing a familiar tight blue sweater and skin-tight blue jeans.

*Tara!*

*What the fuck is she doing here?* She saw him less than a couple of hours ago.

I watch her place a hand on his upper back as she follows him down the hall and disappears out of sight. Unease and anger entwine themselves in my gut as I process what the hell's happening. He's left me stark naked in his bed while he entertains another woman who clearly has the hots for him.

And he knows I don't like her.

He's making a fool out of me.

Well, I'm not hanging around waiting for him. He's not going to get what he wants from me.

*Bastard!*

I angrily get dressed and quietly tiptoe out of the bedroom, retrieving my handbag from the floor. The mumble of low

voices filters down the hallway, and as far as I can tell, they're at the other end of the apartment. I'm not waiting around to find out. I stealthily slip out onto the landing and close the door behind me as quietly as I can. I don't waste any time, dashing across the landing and down the three flights of stairs. I hurry past the concierge, giving him a sheepish smile and hope he doesn't recognize me standing up instead of upside down. I exhale deeply as I step out into the glorious late afternoon sunshine and retrieve my phone from my bag. Better call an Uber.

*I was just another notch in his bedpost, after all, I think bitterly.*

I tell myself I've had a close shave and keep on walking.

## Chapter Ten

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**A**n hour later, I'm freshly showered and sitting cross-legged on the bed in Lucy's guest bedroom, wearing a pair of her old faded blue denim cut-offs and a white T-shirt.

"Are you sure it's okay for me to stay here tonight?" I ask. I can't help but feel a bit awkward dropping in on her and Mark like this, especially with the wedding coming up, but I've nowhere else to go. Other than back to my place or Mum's, and both are out of the question.

"Of course." She flashes me a reassuring smile, hands me a glass of rosé, and settles down on the edge of the bed.

"I said I wouldn't drink again after last night," I admit but take the glass from her anyway.

"Yeah, but by the sounds of your evening, you need it."

On cue, my cell vibrates on the bed. It's him. *Again*. Calling for the tenth time in an hour.

Lucy casts a knowing look at the phone. "Are you sure you're not going to answer it? I don't think he's going to disappear, Soph."

"I don't want to speak to him. I don't want to see him either." I take a fortifying sip of wine. "That's why I've come

here because he'll go straight to mine, and I can't think straight when he's around me." It's as if he casts a spell on me whenever I'm with him, forcing all sensible thoughts out of my brain, leaving room for only him.

Lucy shifts onto the bed and sits cross-legged, facing me with a puzzled look on her face. "So, which bit *exactly* are you most fucked off about?"

I can tell by her questioning tone she thinks I'm being a tad unreasonable. "I told him to answer the door even though we were in the middle of... things, but she wasn't going away. I didn't expect him to invite her into the bloody apartment and leave me waiting in the bedroom. And Tara..." I take a long drink of wine as I pinpoint just what I dislike about her the most. "The way she is with him makes me think there's more to it than he's told me. He says she works at one of his gyms, but I'm not sure."

"You think they've got history?"

The thought gnawed away at me from the first time I clapped my eyes on her. "Yes. Let's face it, he's not bothered about getting involved with his staff."

"Maybe they have history, but it doesn't mean there's anything going on between them now," Lucy reasons, pulling at her cerise pink pajama top.

"Maybe. All I know is I'm not getting hurt again."

My cell vibrates again, and I swiftly end the call.

Lucy runs a hand through her waves and fixes me a look. "He's got the hots for you bad, and he's clearly worried about you."

"Worried he's not getting a shag tonight," I shoot back.

“Ask yourself this... if he just wants to get inside your knickers, why would he be trying to contact you? If it’s just sex he’s after, then I’m pretty sure he’s not short of offers.”

The sound of the front door slamming closed echoes up the stairs.

I frown and cast a glance at my watch. “Mark’s home late from work.”

Lucy rolls her eyes. “He barely spends any time here anymore. He’s always at the office or the pub.” She knocks back a large swig of wine.

She and Mark have always bickered like an old married couple, even when they first started dating, but there’s a bitterness to her tone that I haven’t heard before. I immediately feel guilty for having burdened her with my problems this evening when there’s clearly trouble in paradise.

“Is everything okay? What did you want to talk to me about this afternoon?”

She glances at the closed bedroom door and shakes her head dismissively. “Nothing. It was nothing.”

“You’re getting married soon and bound to get a bit testy with one another. There’s a lot of pressure.”

“I know, I know. Everything’s fine,” she says hurriedly, sipping her wine. I don’t believe her, but she clearly doesn’t want to be pushed on the matter any further.

“So, what are you going to do tomorrow?” she asks, changing the subject.

“About what?”

“You’ve got to see him again. What are you going to say?”

I haven't thought that far ahead. "I have no idea," I admit glumly. I feared he'd be too good to be true, and I was right.

Lucy gives my hand a reassuring pat. "Don't be too hard on him. Sleep on it." She gets to her feet. "Oh, and don't fret about that Tara woman, either. I saw her leaving the hotel this afternoon, and you're far prettier. The guy she was with was a bit of a beefcake, though." She smirks. "See you in the morning."

"Night, mate, and thanks for tonight."

"No worries, I'm sure I probably owe you one from over the years."

Lucy slips out of the bedroom, and I place the glass of wine on the bedside table and lie down. I pick up my cell. Fifteen calls and five text messages from Art. I open the messages and skim them. They're all of a similar flavor, asking where I am, if I'm okay, begging me to speak to him.

I type a reply.

**Sophie:** *I'm safe. I just need some time by myself to think.*

I send the text, switch off my phone, and settle down to sleep alone in bed.

Not exactly the way I anticipated the night would end.

---

Padding down the stairs at six thirty the next morning, I hear the sounds of raised voices coming from the kitchen. As I reach the hallway, the arguing stops as Lucy and Mark notice my presence, pausing mid-argument. Both have got faces like thunder. I hover uneasily at the foot of the stairs not quite knowing what to do.

Mark throws Lucy an irritated look then strides into the hall. “Morning, Sophie. Lucy said you were upset last night. I hope you’re feeling better.” He stops to inspect his reflection in the hall mirror and straightens his navy tie.

“Morning,” I reply as Lucy slowly follows him into the hall, dressed in a pale pink fluffy dressing gown. Her eyes and the tip of her nose are red from crying.

She gives me a watery smile. “Did you sleep well?”

There’s a definite tension in the air as Mark steps away from the mirror and stoops down to pick up his shiny brown leather briefcase.

“Umm... yes, I did,” I reply awkwardly, glancing at my reflection in the mirror at the bottom of the stairs. My hair is sticking up this way and that from being slept on damp and, with no makeup on, I look pale. “I think yesterday’s events wore me out.”

Mark ruffles a hand through his mop of sandy blond hair. “Do you want a lift? I could drop you halfway home?” He’s worked in the city for years, and I still have no real idea of what it is he actually does.

“No thanks, there’s no need. I’ll call an Uber.” I pull my phone out of my pocket and switch it back on, bracing myself for an onslaught of more texts and missed calls from the previous evening, but none arrive. I stare at the screen and try to work out how I feel about the fact Art’s clearly given up.

“You need to go and sort out your man trouble.” Lucy forces a smile.

I shove the phone back into my pocket. “I don’t think I can be bothered.”

“Hmm... I know the feeling,” she says, casting daggers in Mark’s direction.

He doesn’t respond and, with one last look in the mirror, opens the front door. “Are you sure you don’t want a lift?”

“No, it’s fine, really.”

He frowns and looks distracted as he peers down the front path. “This man of yours... what does he look like?”

“Tall, dark, handsome.”

“*Very* handsome,” Lucy interjects.

“What car does he drive?”

I frown at the sudden questioning. “A gray Aston Martin. Why?”

He nods at something through the front door and steps back slightly allowing me to look. “I don’t think you’ll need the Uber.”

Parked on the opposite side of the road is an instantly recognizable gray car. The man himself leans against the driver’s door. Dressed in a black T-shirt and jeans, his arms are folded, and he’s scowling in our direction.

My heart does a backflip, and I can’t work out whether I’m pleased to see him or not. He’s come for me. “How the bloody hell does he know where I am?”

“Oh my God, he’s tracked you down,” Lucy squawks, immediately brightening up. “Mind you... he looks pissed off.”

Part of me wants to close the door on him, but the look in his eyes tells me he’s in no mood for games. I don’t want to



cause trouble at Lucy and Mark's, especially when they're obviously going through a rough patch.

"I'd better go," I say. "He won't leave until I do."

Lucy is practically buzzing with excitement as I walk down the front path with Mark.

Mark throws Art an uncertain look as he beeps open his BMW and pulls on the door. "Are you sure you'll be okay?"

"Yes, I'll be fine." I force a reassuring smile, even though I'm not sure I will.

I reach up on tiptoes and peck him on the cheek. "Thanks for letting me stay last night. I'll see you at the wedding."

"Yes. Of course," Mark says, without the slightest bit of enthusiasm.

*There's definitely something going on between him and Lucy, and it's not good.*

As Mark climbs into the car, I draw in a deep breath and cross the road.

Art is staring down at the ground and lifts his head when I approach. "Please, get in the car." His tone is firm and warning me not to challenge him.

My hackles rise at the demand. "Maybe I don't want to." I fold my arms.

He can't have everything his way.

Anger flashes in his eyes. "Don't push me. Please get in the car."

His voice hardens. I haven't seen this pissed-off side to him before, and it's bringing out my defiant streak.

"You can't order me around."

His jaw twitches with tension. “I want you to get out of the middle of the road so you don’t get run over. Please get in the car, so we can talk.”

He’s got a point about standing in the middle of the road. It’s fairly busy. I glance up and down the street as if deciding what to do, then slowly make my way around to the passenger side. Lucy is hovering on the doorstep, watching the scene unfold, and I give her a reassuring wave as I climb into the car.

He gets in and slams the door as Mark reverses out of the driveway and pulls away down the road.

“Why did you kiss him?” he asks, watching him drive away.

The question throws me. I can’t help myself. “That’s what you do with *your* girlfriend, isn’t it?”

“Don’t,” he warns.

“Don’t what? What’s your fucking problem?” I snap.

“I don’t like seeing you with other guys.”

I frown at the sheer ridiculousness of his statement. “Mark is Lucy’s fiancé. They’re getting married very soon. Are you seriously going to sit here and lecture me on other guys?”

The scowl returns to his face as the car engine roars into life, and we pull away.

“Where are we going?”

“We’re going home. And we’re going to talk.”

## Chapter Eleven

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The rest of the journey continues in ominous, painful silence. I stare out the window for the entire drive, unable to look at Art, seething from his double standards and comment about Mark.

The car grinds to a halt, and I stare at the Georgian apartment block.

“This isn’t my home.”

“No, it’s mine. Please, come inside so we can talk about this properly.” His voice has taken on a softer quality.

He might have calmed down, but I haven’t. I peer up at the red brick building shuffling through my feelings. I suppose I should be an adult about this. I want him to give me answers, and the only way I’m going to get them is by talking to him.

He grabs my hand, gripping it tightly as we cross the pavement and stride up the steps to the entrance.

We come to an abrupt stop at the concierge desk.

“Derek, this is Sophie Ward. I’d like her to be given access to my apartment whenever she needs it, even if I’m not around. Okay?”

I know he’s making a point with this gesture. It’s an I’ve-got-nothing-to-hide-from-you gesture.

Derek breaks out into a smile. “It’s lovely to be properly introduced to you, Miss Ward. Of course, Mr. Black. I shall make a note of your request in the system.”

I smile politely at Derek as Art leads me up the staircase, his vice-like grip on my hand remaining. I’m not sure why he’s gripping it so tightly. Maybe he’s scared I’ll do another runner. It’s not until we’re outside his apartment and he unlocks the door that he finally lets go. He opens the front door with a push. “Please, go on through.”

The parquet stretches out through the rest of the apartment as I walk down the hall, stealing glances through doorways as I go. I’ve already spied a bathroom, office, and second bedroom by the time I reach the open-plan living and dining area. The walls of the living space are painted a deep blue, and matching wood paneling runs around the bottom half of the walls. An inviting low-back, deep blue velvet sofa sprawls along the left-hand wall, facing an ornately carved white marble fireplace, above which hangs a large television. French windows clad in white voile floor-length curtains lead out onto a short balcony overlooking the street below, and an ornate crystal chandelier hangs from the center of the ceiling. It’s country manor with a modern twist and in complete contrast to the kitchen and dining area, which take up the right-hand side of the space, all gleaming white and space-age in design with shiny surfaces and a circular six-seater glass dining table. The place is immense, and my mind boggles at the thought of the crushing price tag for living in an apartment like this in this part of the city.

He sits on the sofa, resting an arm across the back. His fingers tap against the material, signaling restlessness he’s trying hard to keep under wraps. “Please, sit.”

I perch at the opposite side of the sofa, on the edge of the seat, careful to keep a safe distance from him. There must be no risk of him touching me if I'm going to keep focused.

“Why did you run?”

*Is he serious?*

“You left me naked in your bed while you entertained another woman,” I snap. “She was clearly more important.”

“I hardly entertained her. Tara came to tell me about some work issues. She stayed for five minutes and then left, which you'd have known if you hadn't run off.”

“Why didn't she call and tell you about it like a normal person? Why did she have to come to your apartment?” I shoot back, aware that I'm bordering on sounding jealous.

“She'd tried to, but I'd turned off my phone because I was with you. I'm sorry. Maybe I should have let you know I wasn't going to be long with her.”

I inspect the nails on my right hand. He's apologizing. *There's a first time for everything.*

“What happened this time? More trouble at one of your gyms?”

In my peripheral vision, I sense him shift forward on the sofa and rest his elbows on his knees. “Things can get out of hand sometimes... with guys. It was business, that's all.”

I'm not sure what to think. If I overreacted about him letting Tara in, it's because I'm expecting something to go wrong. Just like when I was with Theo. He was Prince Charming to begin with, but it didn't take long for our relationship to descend into a toxic twister of unhappiness, hurt, abuse, and cheating. Of course, when I think back, the

signs were there at the start of our relationship. His Saturday night drinking fests out on the town with his football-loving mates were a weekly ritual. He'd always return legless in the small hours and blame too much alcohol on his memory gaps of the previous evening if I challenged him the next day. He possessed a wandering eye and was quick to toss out a flirty comment toward any attractive woman who crossed his path. Banter, he'd claim when I got annoyed. The tiny nagging voice at the back of my head, the one I ignored for too long with Theo, is back.

This time I'm not going to ignore it.

"I'm not going to be just another woman you bring back here and shag."

"I've never brought a woman back here before." His body turns to mine, and for the first time since we arrived, I look at him. I falter because I'm not sure what it means, if anything, that he's brought me back here. "What about Tara?"

"What about Tara?"

"You two have history, don't you?"

He drags his fingers through his hair, and an uneasy feeling takes hold of me. The look on his face is confirming my suspicion. "It's not exactly history. Yes, we slept together. Twice, three years ago. I met her at Savage. Nothing else has ever happened between us, and I'm really not interested in her."

His confession does little to ease my unease about the situation. "So, how come she's ended up working at one of your gyms?"

He shrugs. "I just own the places. I don't recruit staff. It's a coincidence."

I'm not sure I believe in coincidence.

Before I can interrogate him further, he slides toward me on the sofa and cups my right cheek with his hand. His dark eyes hold mine, and my heart skips in my chest at the contact. "You have absolutely nothing to worry about with Tara. You have absolutely nothing to worry about with anyone. Why would I want anyone else if I've got you?"

"You don't have me," I state resolutely, trying my best to remain focused.

He's reeling me in, and I'm weakened by his touch. My defenses are crumbling to dust, and I hate myself for it. I swallow hard. "How did you know I was at Lucy's?"

"After hours going crazy not knowing where you were, I realized you'd probably be at Lucy's house."

His detective skills are top-notch, but it still doesn't explain how he knew where she lived.

"How did you get her address?"

"I couldn't sleep, so at about half past four this morning, I drove over to the hotel and got her address from her personnel file." He presses his forehead against mine. "Please, promise me you'll never run again."

I'm not there yet. The niggling voice at the back of my head is telling me there's more to this man. An untold story that I've not even scratched the surface. "I can't... not yet."

His mouth is on mine at once, and I'm lost. My fingers bunch into his hair, drawing his lips firmly to mine as he lowers me backward into the cushions and shifts his body over mine. My T-shirt is yanked over my head and off in one move, and my bra swiftly follows suit. He's not wasting any time. He rears back and presses his lips on the dip of my hips below my

belly button, then teasingly slowly places a line of kisses as he works his way down my body. The dull throbbing between my legs is back with a vengeance. I need him to finish what he started yesterday. The frenetic pace of removing my clothes has now slowed as he takes his time, teasing me as he unfastens my shorts, working them down my legs and off my feet, taking my panties with them.

“I’ll never get tired of unwrapping this.” His eyes are almost black as they sweep up the length of my body as he kneels between my legs. He slides his hands beneath my buttocks, tugging me toward him so his face is level with my hips, and plants a kiss on my inner right thigh. I gasp at the feel of his stubble against my soft flesh as he slowly works his way upward. I moan softly and close my eyes, concentrating on breathing as his heavy kisses get closer and closer. I quiver in anticipation of what’s about to happen. He’s in total control. Right now, he could tell me to do anything, and I’m pretty sure I’d concur. His lips brush my clit with the lightest of touches, and my hips jerk at the contact. I’m on fire, a heated mess beneath him, and he’s barely touched me yet.

His tongue teases me, and my limbs tense, my nails digging into the blue velvet beneath me. His hands tighten their grip on my buttocks, lifting me into his face as he parts my folds with his tongue and laps at my clit with firm strokes. He lets out a deep, low groan of delight, and the vibration against my clit and his pleasure make my muscles contract and tighten. I squirm, tilting my hips upward. He pulls his hand from beneath my butt and presses against my hip, pushing me back into the sofa. He’s keeping me still and reminding me who’s in control.

The tension inside me is building quickly with every lap of his tongue. I’m so close. As if he has a sixth sense, he thrusts



two fingers inside me and soon hits my sweet spot.

It's too much. My eyelids drop, and I gasp as a fresh wave of pleasure consumes me. I'm not going to last much longer.

"Let go." His hot lips press against my clit, and the firmness of his tone, combined with his fingers working their magic, pushes me over the edge. I explode, a quivering, shaking mess riding the crest of my climax then relaxing into the cushions. I close my eyes as a warm, fuzzy post-orgasmic feeling descends over me.

Moments later, I feel the brush of his skin against mine as his lips press against the curve between my breasts. He runs his tongue across my collarbone, up my throat to my mouth, where he kisses me hard. I taste myself as he kisses me before he pulls away to gaze down at me, the dark hair on his jaw glistening.

"I love the taste of you," he whispers, brushing his fingers through my hair. "It's addictive." As I bask in his gentle words of adoration, I realize with a start that once again, I'm sprawled beneath him totally naked while he's still fully clothed.

"Take your clothes off." I pant.

He flashes a wicked grin and climbs to his feet. "I'm usually the one dishing out orders in the bedroom, but for now, I'll make an exception."

He tears his black T-shirt off then steps out of his jeans and boxers quickly. I'm not prepared at all for the exquisite sight before me. A long breath leaves my body as I stare in wonder at his glorious nakedness. I admire the sculptured muscles and lines of his upper body down to his slim hips, where I draw in a sharp intake of breath as I take in the large, thick erection

bobbing against his flat stomach. He's perfection. Totally and utterly fuckable. And he knows it.

He lifts an eyebrow. "Is that better?"

He doesn't need a reply. I'm sure it's written all over my face.

Moving up my body, he takes my left hand and raises it above my head, then does the same with my right. He closes his fingers around my wrists and pushes them into the sofa, keeping them firmly in place above my head.

"I want to hold you down as we fuck." He repositions himself, and the thick, wet tip of his erection slides against my folds.

I'm suddenly nervous.

I've never been held down willfully by the hands.

"I'm not sure..."

"Trust me," he soothes, and as his dark eyes hold mine, I feel reassured. "Restraint is a big thing for me. It's one of the ways I like to be in control, but if you don't like it, we won't do it again."

*So, he's planning on shagging me more than once then?*

He carries on, "Don't speak unless I ask you a question."

*Another strategy for maintaining control, I surmise.*

The thick head of his erection pushes against the entrance to my pussy, and I instinctively tense a little. He's huge. I'm sure this is going to hurt.

"Relax," he whispers, soothing me. "We'll take it slow this time. Remember, trust me. I won't hurt you."

I lower my head back into the deep velvet cushion. I need to do as he says and trust him. He knows what he's doing.

“Wrap your legs around me.”

I do as I'm told, curling my limbs around his back and crossing my ankles.

He slowly pushes inside me, inching his way in, careful not to hurt me. He's being gentle, but I can't stop the cry of surprise at the stretching and burning sensation as my muscles tighten around him. He fills me deeper and wider than I've ever been touched before. I close my eyes and tell myself to keep relaxed as I feel his cock throb against the tightness.

He stills inside me then gently withdraws. “Can you take any more?”

I feel a stab of alarm that he's not fully in yet. Fuck, he's huge. I take a deep breath. I've got this, so I nod. “Yes, I'm ready.”

He rears back and claims me with one thrust, filling me to the hilt. I scream at the sensation of his cock hitting my cervix, and he pauses.

“Are you sure you're okay?”

I nod again.

He withdraws almost all the way before pushing inside me again with a deep, erotic groan that makes my muscles quiver around him and ignites a shimmer of warmth in my groin. I flicker open my eyes to find him lost in his own ecstasy—eyes closed, head titled back, lips parted, hair pushed across his brow. He looks so fucking sexy.

“You feel so good.” He increases his pace with every thrust until he's hammering into me at a ferocious, urgent pace

as if his life depends on it. I can't help wondering if this is a gentle fuck, what the hell a hard fuck would be like. With every thrust, his cock bangs against my cervix and sends my mind spinning and body spiraling out of control. Sweat clings to me, and my legs begin to tremble. I'm so close.

"Look at me." His voice is a barely recognizable rasp.

Through the fog of my looming orgasm, I do as I'm told and open my eyes. Beads of sweat glisten across his forehead and shoulders, and his cheeks are flushed. He's just as close as I am.

"Promise me, no more running."

I can't string any words together. At the moment, my brain is focused on coming and nothing else. My eyes snap closed, and my spine curls against the sofa at the painfully pleasurable pressure between my thighs.

"I need to hear you promise me."

The order registers in my brain loud and clear, and I stare up at him. "I can't."

"You don't come until you promise me."

*Fuck it.*

My head lolls, and I can't even argue because I'm going to come and know I don't possess enough self-control to stop myself. And he knows it. He withdraws completely, and it's as though someone has taken their foot off the accelerator. The temperature has been turned down, and I'm left hanging. He's exercising his control.

"I need to hear you say it," he rasps.

As if to punish me for my defiance, he thrusts into me hard, and my muscles clench around him, making me gasp.

He picks up the relentless pace where he left off. His free hand roughly grips my hip so firmly he'll leave a bruise as he pounds into me, forcing the air from my body.

"I'm going to get lost in you."

I don't know what he means and can't ask him because another contraction sends me spiraling toward orgasm.

"You're close."

I twist my face into his neck and close my eyes as I'm about to lose my mind. "Please."

"Promise me," he demands.

I feel his cock grow even harder inside me, and I'm pushed to the edge as my mouth falls slack and the words tumble out. "I promise."

"Now."

I let go. The build-up of pressure I've tried to keep at bay splits me in two as I dig my fingernails into the flesh of his wrists and scream. My body vibrates as contractions throb deep within me. He explodes with a roar that echoes around the room, carrying me through my climax, his hips thudding against mine, his hot seed spilling inside me.

He releases my hands and lowers the warm, sweaty weight of his chest onto me as our breathing slows. I close my eyes and wrap my arms around him, relishing the feel of his firm muscles beneath my fingers. Our body heat and sweat mingle his subtle scent with mine, and it's intoxicating. We're one. Truly one. As I lie pinned to the sofa beneath his weight, I feel safe and protected, and I know no one will ever hurt me again. Just like he promised me.

“You’re trembling.” I open my eyes to find him watching me. “Has that happened before?”

Nothing that has happened to me in the past fifteen minutes has ever happened to me before. Well, it has, but nothing like what I just experienced. My brain has turned to mush, and I still can’t string a sentence together. I shake my head, still feeling out of it. I hadn’t even realized I was trembling.

His fingers gently stroke my cheek as my limbs relax. “It’s never been like that before for me, either.” He kisses me lightly on the lips, and my heart flutters in my chest at his admission. “When I first walked into the hotel and saw you standing in reception, I felt something here.” He splays his right palm against the middle of his chest and stares down at me with such intensity my heart aches. “And you did, too, didn’t you?”

My attraction to him blows any feelings I’ve ever had for anyone else out of the water. His desire is fierce, and the passion he’s shown is something I’ve only read about in novels and didn’t believe was real. I barely know him, and the more time I spend in his company, the more questions arise, but when I look at him and he touches me, I forget. This power he has over me is frightening.

I can’t lie to him.

Emotion wedges in my throat, and I nod mutely.

He moves his hand and places it on my heart. “Here?”

I rest my hand on top of his. “Yes, there, but how? We barely know one another.”

He shakes his head slightly as if he doesn’t know the answer. “This is new to me too.” He grazes his lips against my

mouth and touches his forehead to mine. “You’re addictive, and I’m going to lose myself in you.”

I close my eyes at the strength of his words. We met four days ago. How can we feel this strongly about one another? I don’t know anything about him other than the little information he’s shared and what Lucy discovered from cyberstalking him. I need to know something... anything.

“What’s your favorite color?” I blurt.

His eyes search my face as if he’s trying to work out whether it’s a serious question or not. “Blue. Why?”

“I’m just trying to get to know you better.”

He laughs softly. “By asking what my favorite color is?”

Now I feel a bit stupid. “Don’t laugh. It’s better than nothing.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry. Ask away.”

I frown. “You’ve put me off now, and I don’t know what to ask.”

“Okay, how about I love watching any type of sport but just don’t have the time. I graduated with a 2:1 sports science degree from Oxford and won the award for Best Young Entrepreneur the year I left.”

I frown. He’s done what I wanted, but it wasn’t exactly what I had in mind.

“That’s not the type of thing you meant, is it?” he asks, reading my expression.

“Not really. It’s all very impressive but a bit, well... formal.”

He smiles. “Okay then, here goes... my favorite season is winter, my favorite cuisine is Italian, I love snowboarding and skiing but never get the chance to do it because I’m always too busy. The most beautiful place in the world I’ve visited was the Duomo in Florence, and I hate cats.”

I giggle. “What have poor cats ever done to you?”

“I’m really allergic.”

I can’t help but smile at the mental image of a big, muscly Art being reduced to a sniffing wreck because of a little cat.

He kisses the tip of my nose. “Is that better?”

I interlace my fingers with his. “It’ll do for now.”

“Go on then... it’s your turn. Spill.” He grins.

“My achievements aren’t as impressive as yours, I’m afraid. I studied art history at Bristol Uni. My favorite color is red, and I like winter too. Cornwall is my favorite place in the world, and most of my happiest childhood memories are from when we went there every year on holiday. I like Italian but prefer Chinese, and I don’t mind cats.”

“Why did you choose art history?”

“My dad loved painting and drawing, so I grew up around it and really enjoyed art at school.”

“Art history’s not exactly the same as planning weddings. How did you end up working at the hotel?”

“Lucy got the receptionist job and called me when the wedding planner job came up to see if I was interested. To be honest, I needed the money, so I went for it.”

“And you’re very good at it.”

“I enjoy my job,” I say. “I hope I’m good at it.”



“All the reviews on Trip Advisor from guests who’ve had weddings at the hotel or attended weddings are five-star. Don’t sell yourself short. You should be proud.”

I had no idea. I’m too busy to read that stuff. I know how booked up the weddings are, so it’s proof enough for me that I must be doing something right. “You have done your research.”

“It’s my job to. Besides, I needed to know what I was taking on with the hotel.”

I remember his comments about weddings being the primary source of income from the staff meeting. “You’d already done all your research before you came to the hotel the other day, hadn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“What were your first impressions of the place when you walked in?”

“I wanted to know who the sexy pocket rocket on reception was.”

That wasn’t what I meant, but I smile. “Pocket rocket?”

He brushes the tip of his nose against mine and stares into my eyes. “I hadn’t had a dressing down like that in quite some time.”

“And there I was worried I’d offended my new boss,” I tease.

“You intrigued me, and I wanted to know more.” He presses a light kiss to my forehead. “I still do.”

I can live with that.

We lie on the sofa, a mass of tangled limbs with him still deep inside me for what seems like forever. Our bodies mold together perfectly as if we were made for one another. A column of sunlight slips through the curtains and creeps across the floor as the sun rises higher in the sky.

“Are you hungry?” he asks after a while.

“Starving.”

He shifts off me and sits on the edge of the sofa. “We’ll take a shower, then I’ll make you breakfast.”

I prop myself up on my elbows and frown. “Is there time? I really need to head home and get ready for work.”

“We’re not going to work today.”

“What?” I frantically glance around the living room for any sign of a clock, but there isn’t one. Surely, he must be joking. I haven’t got any appointments, but there’s planning to get done. “But I’ve got work to do.”

“Your diary was free for today. I checked when I visited the hotel earlier.”

This feels totally alien. I’ve never ditched work before, and my expression must say it all. “Relax. I’m the boss, and I’m telling you you’re staying here with me all day. Decision made. I want you all to myself.”

Part of my brain is querying why the hell I’m challenging spending an entire day with him, but it’s so against my character I can’t help it. “But Lucy will worry, and people will talk, and I’ve got no clothes here.”

He turns to face me in all his delightful nakedness. “Text Lucy. Tell her you don’t feel well, so you’re not going in. Let people talk. And you can wear some of my stuff.”

Before I can argue, he scoops me up and carries me through the apartment into the bathroom. I don't fight it. I love the feel of him holding me and the way the curves of our bodies fit together perfectly.

I'm going to get lost in him, too, and I don't think there's anything I can do about it.

## Chapter Twelve

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A magnificent roll-top bath sits in front of a Georgian sash window, dominating the bathroom. Dove-gray paneling lines the walls, and large white hexagonal tiles cover the floor and decorate the large walk-in shower.

Art sets me on my feet, then turns on the water which cascades from the large chrome showerhead and fills the room with steam. He steps beneath the shower and closes his eyes, slicking back his hair as the water sluices across the undulations of his body. He notices me watching him and holds out a hand. “Come... join me.”

I place my hand in his, and he pulls me to stand beneath the torrent of water, placing his hands on my shoulders and turning me around so he’s behind me. I shut my eyes, push my hair out of my face, and hear the click of plastic. His hands return to my shoulders as he slides cool, soapy liquid across my shoulder blades, massaging it into my back. A familiar sandalwood fragrance mingles with the heat from the shower and permeates the air.

“I hope you don’t mind having to smell like me.”

I breathe in the scent of him and feel strangely content. “I can’t imagine smelling of anything else.”

Large soapy hands sweep across my rib cage and cup my breasts as he shifts closer behind me, and I feel his erection press in between my buttocks.

Turning around, I gaze up at him towering above me. This is the first time I've had the freedom to touch all of him. I savor the sight of his taut, tanned skin as the water cascades down the curves of his muscles. Droplets hang from his unfairly long dark lashes as he watches me, and I feel a fizz between my thighs. I'll never grow tired of looking at him—his body, his face—all of him. I press my palms flat against his chest and note how it rises beneath my hands as his breathing hitches. I keep my eyes on his as I glide my hands lower, across his ribs and abs. His gaze remains on my hands as they work their way down his body. It seems he's just as affected by my touch as I am by his. I brush my fingers across the small silvery scar beneath his belly button. The nagging voice in the back of my mind returns as I peer at the only thing to mar his perfect appearance.

“What happened?”

“I got into a fight.”

“Is it... is it a stab wound?”

“It happened a long time ago.” There's an edge to his voice, telling me to step away from the conversation. Before I can decide whether I'm going to push him further or not, he flashes a wolfish grin. “Do you want to move your hands a little lower?”

My eyes drop to his cock, standing at attention once again. I roll my eyes in mock disgust and can't help but smile. “You're insatiable.”

“It’s what you do to me.” He lands a hot, heavy kiss on my lips and curls one arm around my waist while his other hand slides across my stomach and glides down to cup between my legs. He dips a finger inside me and moans into my mouth. Sparks of desire shoot all over my body, announcing I’m ready for him once more.

“You’re drenched, and it’s so fucking hot,” he breathes. “Turn around and put your hands on the wall.”

My pulse soars at the instruction and what’s about to come as I obediently do as I’m told.

“Open your legs.” His hands are on my waist as I shuffle my feet apart and steady myself against the wall as he pulls my backside toward him. Two hands sweep down my back and circle across each buttock before returning to my hips. “You have a spectacular ass. Make sure you keep hold of the wall. I’m going to take you from behind, and it’s not going to be gentle.”

Alarm shoots through me at the warning, but I barely have a moment to register before he slams into me, pushing me forward and making my hands slide against the wet tiles. “Keep hold of the wall.”

He pauses as I reposition my hands, then pulls out and slams into me again, muttering expletives under his breath. His right hand reaches around my body and between my legs, his thumb on my clit as my muscles tighten around him.

“Not yet,” he warns as he sets a rhythm. Rub, thrust, rub, thrust, working me up into a frenzy. On his next thrust, I push backward with my hips and hear him hiss my name. I match his pace until the delicious tension between my thighs is bordering on painful, and I’m not sure I’m going to be able to keep it together. His fingers tense around my hip bones, and

my wrists are aching from taking my weight when he says the words I've been longing for, "Now, Sophie."

My cry of delight is drowned out as he roars my name, carrying me through my orgasm with his own, emptying himself inside me once again. I'm dizzy as I reach the top, and my legs buckle. I'm caught instantly as his arms swoop around me, keeping me upright.

"Easy," he soothes, holding me to his chest. As our breathing calms, he places a tender kiss on my wet shoulder. "Come on, you need to eat. I don't want you fainting on me."

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I'm left to pick whatever I want to wear from his closet. Rows and rows of clothes hang neatly from the rails of the brightly lit white room. Designer shirts, suits, sweaters, and jeans are hung by color or carefully folded on the floor-to-ceiling shelves. I choose an army green T-shirt like the one he wore on Saturday when he helped me move into the flat. It's more like a baggy dress on me and covers my bum and panties so I don't feel too exposed.

He's standing in the kitchen behind the white marble island, pouring boiling water into two white mugs as I walk barefoot back into the living area. He's pulled on a black T-shirt and boxers, and his hair's still damp and all over the place. He looks rugged rather than his usual coiffed self, and I fight back the urge to jump him.

"I made you coffee." He places the mugs onto the circular glass, Scandinavian-style dining table.

"Thanks."

“Toast?”

I smile. “Perfect.”

He throws me an easy smile and wanders back into the kitchen. “Make yourself at home.”

As I amble into the living area, I realize I’m still grinning like a demented fool. *What the hell has gotten into me?*

The shorts and T-shirt I borrowed are folded in a neat pile on the single armchair. He’s obviously tidy and orderly. Theo wouldn’t even pick up his dirty underpants.

My gaze settles on the two framed photographs on the white carved fireplace. Other than furniture, there are no personal objects or unnecessary knick-knacks in the room. Curious, I take a closer look.

I pick up the smaller of the two. It’s of a clean-shaven, slightly younger-looking Art dressed in black gym shorts, his bare muscular chest on show as he poses for the camera. It looks like it’s been taken professionally, given the pose. I can’t help but smile in amusement at the cheesy grin he’s giving the camera. “Why do you have a photo of yourself in your living room?”

He glances at the frame in my hand. “Ah... that’s from my mum. The photo was taken at a promo shoot I did years ago when the gyms first opened. When the chain became nationally recognized, she sent it to me with a note on the back telling me how proud she was of me. The head of the PR campaign thought it would be a good idea to have that photo of me displayed in the foyers of all my gyms. I hated the idea, but it seems to work, so...”

It makes sense. If guys walk into the gym and see this photograph of Art staring down at them, they’ll want to join



because they will think it will make them look like him, and women will want to join because it will make them think they'll meet guys who look like him.

I put the frame down and turn my focus to the second photograph in an antique-style frame. A man with a bald head and dark mustache and a slim lady with sandy-colored permed hair are standing side by side, with what looks like a teenage Art standing between them. The Colosseum provides a spectacular backdrop. All three of them are smiling at the camera.

“Is this you?”

“Yes, that’s me with my parents when we went on holiday to Rome. I was thirteen.” There’s something about his tone which suggests he hasn’t finished, and I look up to see him raking his fingers through his hair. He considers me for a long moment as if he’s deciding something. “They’re actually my adoptive parents. That was our first proper holiday as a family.”

“Oh.” I quickly place the frame back down on the fireplace because I feel as if I shouldn’t be touching something so important. “How old were you when you went to live with them?”

“Ten.” A definite tension appears in his shoulders as he turns away from me. Questions pop up in my head, but I hold my tongue. He clearly doesn’t want to talk about it, and I don’t want to push him about something so personal.

“I really should text Lucy,” I say, changing the subject. I pick up my phone off the coffee table and walk up to the dining table, sliding onto a chair. “She’ll be going mad.”

**Sophie:** *Don't feel well so won't be in today. X.*

I press send, knowing she won't buy the lie for a second.

“George will be going mad too.” He spreads butter on two pieces of toast, and his brows draw together. “What’s his problem?”

“How do you mean?”

“The guy’s a pain in the ass.” He places two plates of toast on the table and settles in the chair beside me. “He’s checking stuff out with me every second. Constantly asking questions and sending me emails. If he spent as much time trying to think of ways to boost income as he does wasting my time, the hotel wouldn’t be in such a mess.”

I slide the plate toward me. “He can be a bit pedantic, but he’s a good man. For the last God knows how long, your uncle left the running of the hotel up to him. And he carried on doing just that, even though his wife was ill, and he lost her. The hotel’s all he’s got.”

“Now I feel bad.” He takes a bite of toast and chews it thoughtfully. “I didn’t realize that.”

My mind ticks back to what he’s just said. “Is the hotel really in a mess?”

“We need to do something to increase turnover,” he admits, taking a sip of coffee.

I take a mouthful of toast as my phone beeps. It’s a text from Lucy.

**Lucy:** *Liar, liar pants on fire. Don't have too much sex, will you. Seriously, I'm glad you two have kissed and made up.*  
xx

“Lucy hasn’t bought my feeble excuse for not showing today. By tomorrow, all the staff will have put two and two

together,” I say worriedly.

He shrugs dismissively as he finishes his toast and rubs his hands together. “And we’ll confirm it when we walk in together.”

“You won’t try to hide it?”

His brows twitch in confusion. “Why would I want to hide the fact that I’m with you?”

He’s with me. What does that mean? The sensible part of my brain scrambles to take control. “Umm... because you’re my boss, I work for you, and it’s inappropriate.”

“You’re overthinking things. Like I said, HR does as I say. And I don’t give a fuck about what other people think of me.”

I take another bite of toast to occupy my mouth and ignore the flurry of nerves in my stomach.

“How did you find the restraint?”

It takes me a few seconds to catch up with the swift change in conversation. “It was okay,” I admit.

“Would you do it again?”

If it involves getting naked with him again, it’s a no-brainer. “Yes.”

“Good.”

I put my half-eaten slice of toast down on the plate and decide to seize the moment. “Actually, I’ve a few other questions about the whole kinky sex thing.”

His lips twitch into a smile at my choice of words. “Go on...”

“Have you done kinky stuff with all your sexual partners?”

“What I like isn’t that kinky, really, and no, not all.”

“How do you have kinky sex with someone who’s not into it? Surely, not everyone’s up for it?”

“No, you’re right, they’re not. Everything I do is consensual. If the woman doesn’t want to try it, that’s fine. Although I’d prefer it if they did at least try.”

I stare into my coffee. “Have you ever whipped anyone or been with more than one person at a time?”

“I’ve whipped someone because they asked me to. And I had a threesome with two women once when I was younger. Overrated.” He raises his eyebrows and lifts the cup to his lips, taking a sip.

“Who got you into the whole scene?”

“A woman.”

“Do you still have contact with her?”

He places his cup on the table. “No. I haven’t seen her for a long time.” His hand covers mine, and he lifts his eyes to mine. “Everything I’ve done has always been with consent. I’ll never hurt you, and I’ll never make you do something you don’t feel comfortable with. All I ask is that you try it.”

*That doesn’t sound so bad, I reason.*

My phone begins to vibrate on the table beside me. ‘Mum Calling’ flashes on the screen. I hesitate. Her timing is always shit, but I need to answer it because if I don’t, she’ll just worry.

He looks at my phone, smiles, and gets to his feet, collecting the empty plates and mugs off the table.

“Hi, Mum. Is everything okay?”

“I don’t know, Sophie. Is it?”

I frown at the apparent panic in her voice. “What do you mean?”

“I couldn’t get through on your cell. It just rang out, so I tried you at work.”

“I haven’t had any missed calls.”

“Well, I did... bloody modern technology. Anyway, Lucy said you’re off sick. Are you okay, dear?”

“Yes, I’m fine, just feeling a bit... sick.” I’ve always been bad at lying.

“You’re not pregnant, are you?”

I roll my eyes and lower my voice. “No, Mum. Of course, I’m not. Jesus!”

My heart rate doubles when I catch the pointed look thrown in my direction from Art as he’s clearing up the breakfast things in the kitchen.

“Are you sure you’re okay? I could pop by the flat,” she offers.

I press my hand against my forehead. I haven’t told her I’ve moved yet. She’d freak out about the potentially poisonous substance lurking in my old flat. I’ll save that for another time. “No, no. I’m fine, stop worrying. I’ll be right as rain tomorrow.”

“Oh, okay, love, if you’re sure. I was calling to say Martin has his eye on a miniature *Flying Scotsman* model kit, which I think he’d love for his birthday. Do you want to chip in? I’ve got it in my basket, and I’m about to click buy?”

I wouldn't have the faintest idea what to buy him, so I'm in. "Of course. Text me the details, and I'll transfer some money over to you."

"Wonderful, I've booked the table at Carluccio's on the twenty-ninth."

"Yes, twenty-ninth at half past seven," I repeat to make sure I don't forget. "I'll be there."

"Lovely. I'll let you get some rest then. Hope you feel better soon. Bye, love."

"I will. Stop worrying. Bye, Mum."

I end the call and let out a deep breath. I love my mum, and I know she only worries about me because of what happened with Theo, but every time I speak to her, I feel on edge. Her nerves seem to transfer to me and take me back to the nervous Sophie I was when I first left him. I'm not that woman anymore.

Art slips back into the chair beside me. "Penny for them?"

I make a face. "Oh, nothing. Mum just worries."

He picks up my hand in his and brushes his thumb across my knuckles. "What's happening on the twenty-ninth at half past seven?"

"It's my stepfather's sixtieth birthday. We're going out for a meal. Mum was telling me what we're buying him. Some weird train thing he collects." Something Mum said niggles me. "When are we going back to mine?"

"I'll take you back first thing tomorrow morning before work. Why? You aren't bored of me already, are you?" he teases.

Hardly. He's one person I'll never tire of. "No, it's just my pills are there, but I should be okay as long as I take one in the morning."

His brow furrows. "I didn't think about the finer details when I stole you away." He sits back against the chair and opens his arms. "Come here."

I scoot over onto his lap, and he wraps his arms around me, bundling me to his chest. I close my eyes and breathe in deeply as I relax against him. I'm pretty sure I could die happy here.

He presses his lips against the top of my head. "Today, I just want it to be about you and me. I don't want to share you with anyone. That's not exactly rational, but it's how I feel about you."

A shiver of excitement runs through me because it makes perfect sense. I tilt my face upward and look at him. "It's how I feel about you too."

He kisses me, entwining his tongue with mine, and I curl a hand around the back of his neck as we kiss deeply and slowly.

If this is how we'll be spending the day ditching work, then I'm not complaining.

## Chapter Thirteen

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The light is fading when I open my eyes. I roll over to find the other side of the bed empty and the sheets pulled up. I have no idea what time it is or where Art is, and I suddenly feel lost that he's not there. We've been in our own little bubble, glued to one another in every sense of the word for the past twelve hours, and I'm not ready for it to stop.

I fling the covers off my naked body and climb out of bed, walking across the smooth parquet floor. The apartment is in darkness, apart from a soft amber light coming from beneath one door off to the right of the hallway.

I push open the door and find a bare-chested Art sitting behind a glass desk facing the door, typing on a laptop. He immediately stops typing, and a wolfish grin spreads across his face at the sight of me.

I place a hand on my hip and cock my head to the right. "Why are you not in bed?"

"You fell asleep, so I thought I'd let you get some rest." His eyes remain fixed on my body as he stands and advances around the desk toward me. "Why are you out of bed?"

"Because I woke up, and you weren't there." I curl my arms around his neck as his dark gaze roams over my



nakedness.

“I’m a stupid, stupid guy for leaving you. But I’m here now.”

My eyes drop to his erection tenting the black material of his boxers and smirk. “Yes, you are, aren’t you?”

Maybe he’s not the one with all the control, after all.

“We’re going back to bed.” He lifts and tosses me over his shoulder, slapping my bare backside as he carries me out of his office. “You belong in my bed, especially when you look like this.”

I will not protest. Right now, there’s nowhere else I’d rather be.

I tuck my hands beneath the waistband of his boxers as he carries me into the bedroom and lowers me onto the center of the sheets. I push myself up on my elbows and watch as he disappears into the closet for a few seconds, then returns holding two neckties.

“I’d like to tie you up.”

My eyes widen as he circles around the bed, and I feel a stab of alarm at what he wants to do. He studies my worried expression. “Relax. It will just be your hands. It won’t hurt. Try it. If you don’t like it, we’ll stop.”

My stomach dances with nerves as I turn over what he’s just said. Earlier, he told me to trust him, and it wasn’t so bad. Maybe I should give it a chance.

He stands beside the bed, waiting.

“Okay,” I agree. “But we can stop if I don’t like it?”

“If you say stop, I’ll stop,” he promises as he crawls onto the bed and straddles my waist. “Are you sure you’re okay trying this?”

I look at the ties in his hand then back at him. “Yes. I’ll try.”

He breaks into a smile. “Good. Stretch your arms out above your head.”

I raise my arms, and he weaves the first tie through the slats of the headboard and fastens it around my right wrist, then he repeats the process with the left. “Try not to struggle because the knots will get tighter, and I don’t want your hands going numb.”

“Okay.”

“They’re not too tight, are they?”

“No.”

“Good, and just for the record... you won’t tell me to stop.”

He smirks, slides off the edge of the bed, and steps out of his boxers. Turning, he saunters out of the bedroom, leaving me with a wonderful view of his naked ass. Once he’s disappeared, I can’t help but feel vulnerable, tied to a bed stark naked, but he returns moments later carrying a small white dish of something or other.

“What’s in the bowl?”

His brows draw together into a frown at the question. “Do you want me to gag you?”

“You wouldn’t?”

“I will if you keep talking,” he warns, his tone alluding that he isn’t joking.

He places the dish on the floor at the bottom of the bed so it’s obscured from my sight then grips my thighs, yanking them wide open. He’s totally and utterly in control of my body, and my center tingles at the thought. He locks eyes with me as he lowers himself onto his knees between my legs and licks my clit. My body jerks, and I twist my head into the pillow, closing my eyes and pulling down on the restraints around my wrists as a ball of warmth starts to build at my center. He’s so good at this I can barely focus. I gulp a lungful of air as he slides his tongue between my folds, sweeping up and down the length of me, paying special attention to my hypersensitive clit. My hips buck, and his hands clamp down on my waist, pushing me into the bed, keeping me still. As the tension rises at my core, I instinctively squirm beneath him, but his hands keep a firm grip on my hips and prevent me from moving. I’m tied to the bed, trapped beneath his mouth and hands and completely at his mercy, and the thought, combined with his tongue, causes my thighs to tremble.

He stops abruptly, and his hot tongue is replaced by an ice-cold sensation causing me to cry out in surprise.

“Fuck!”

My limbs jolt as if I’ve been electrocuted, and my brain takes a couple of seconds to catch up. An ice cube. He holds it against my clit with his tongue and runs it up and down my folds. Burning heat has been replaced with ice cold, and I don’t know how to process it. I gasp for air as the hard iciness stings my clit, making it ultra-sensitive. I don’t want to give in. I want to carry on and experience this, but I’m not sure whether I can cope with the pain. Just when I don’t think I can

go on, he removes the ice cube and sweeps his warm tongue across my clit. The feel of his hot mouth against my cool, sensitive spot is exquisite, and I groan in ecstasy. This is tortuous heaven, and I can't hold on. "I'm going to come."

"No, you're not. And *no* talking," he snaps.

I am. There's no way I can control it. My body is vibrating with need, and I'm struggling to think about anything but my sweet release. By taking over my body, he's taken control of my mind. I'm a slave to him and whatever he wants to do with me.

The mattress dips, and I feel his weight shift over me. When I open my eyes, he's straddling my waist and holding a strawberry between his teeth. He takes a bite, chews, then offers it to me.

"Bite."

I sink my teeth into the ripe strawberry, chewing it slowly and swallowing it.

His dark eyes zone in on my mouth and the movement of my throat. "That's how sweet and juicy you taste." He drags a thumb across my bottom lip then places the tip in his mouth and sucks. "Do you want me to let you come?"

I want to scream "Yes, yes, yes!" from the rooftops but settle for nodding mutely.

He lifts an eyebrow. "Then you need to do as you're told and not talk." His tone is stern.

His lips teasingly brush against mine as he moves downward, leaving a burning hot trail of kisses along the sensitive skin of my collarbone then stopping between my breasts. I'm a hot, aching mess and beyond frustrated. It's only a matter of time before I lose control of my body or mouth.

I screw my eyes shut as his lips close around my right nipple, and he sucks hard and gently nips at the swollen bud, causing a tingle of desire to shoot straight to my center. I gasp. He can't expect me to remain silent when he's doing things like this to me.

“Shush. Every time you moan or groan, the longer I'll make you wait.” His lips find their way to my left nipple, where he delivers the same delicious assault. This time I'm prepared and brace myself for the feeling. It's no less intense, but I stop myself from crying out and can't help but feel a little pleased with myself.

His body slides against mine as he moves south, licking then nipping the skin above my belly button, then gliding lower to my pubic bone, and my self-satisfied feeling quickly dissolves. My breathing is coming in short spurts, and I'm not sure how I am going to cope as he lowers himself between my legs. I'm a throbbing, aching mess, and I can feel the dampness between my thighs.

His eyes widen as his chest heaves. “You're soaking wet.”

“It's what you do to me,” I throw back his own line at him, but my voice is hoarse from the heavy breathing, and I sound nothing like myself.

He lifts his eyes to mine and frowns. “I meant what I said. If you keep talking, I won't let you come.”

I screw my eyes shut because I can't even comprehend what he's just said. My body is burning for him to finish what he's started, and I'm not sure how I'm going to get through this if he's about to do what I think he is.

He doesn't give me time to prepare myself as he glides his tongue across my swollen folds, and it's all I can do to grab

the restraints around my wrists and yank down on them to stop myself from screaming. His tongue teases my clit, and I'm already there. Knowing he's pushing me, I'm determined not to be beaten, but heat is rising from my core, enveloping my body, and I'm so very close.

And he knows it too.

"Put your feet on my shoulders," he orders.

I hesitate, not totally understanding the direction or how it's going to work. I'm in no frame of mind for complicated instructions. He must catch my confused expression because the next minute, his hands are around the back of my thighs, guiding my legs up as he moves over me and presses the head of his erection against my pussy. I've barely got my bearings when he pushes into me. I cry out as he penetrates me deeper than ever before, and my walls quiver around his cock as they hold him inside me. He's as close to the edge as me, and I'm thankful because I can't take any more, especially not now he's giving me what I so desperately need.

"You feel amazing," he rasps.

I can hear him, but I'm not registering the words. My eyes roll back in my head as he drives into me, and I let out a moan, unable to help myself. I can't hold it back any longer.

"And you're mine."

He thrusts into me again, and I clench around him.

"Say you're mine, Sophie."

I can't take much more of this. I can't. "I'm going to come." I pant.

He pushes into me, his cock pulsating.

"Say it!"

I grip the restraints as my back curls against the bed. Right now, I'll do whatever he wants me to. "I'm yours!"

He withdraws, then slams into me one final time. "Now."

I'm gone. I come apart beneath him and make a noise I've never heard before as my breath leaves my body. Thought and speech are redundant as wave after undulating wave sweeps over my body from head to toe, leaving me dizzy and disorientated. He's with me every step of the way as he, too, tips over the edge, rolling his hips over and over until he's spent. My body sags against the sheets, and my head grows heavy as I slowly come back to earth.

*Fuck!*

He shifts over me and unties the restraints from my wrists, gently lowering my arms to the pillows. Soft lips brush against mine, pulling me from my chilled, post-coital bliss, and I open my eyes.

"Are you okay?" he whispers, brushing his fingertips across my cheek. "That was pretty intense."

I nod. I have come to realize that everything about him is intense. "It was, but it was also pretty good."

His dark eyes search my face. "I'm glad you think so. I really wanted you to enjoy it. It's a bit strange the first time you try something like that." He smiles. "You're perfect." He lowers his mouth to mine and kisses me softly.

So is he. Every inch of him.

I turn onto my side with a sleepy smile on my face and close my eyes. His arms slide around my waist as the pillow behind my head dips, his nose nuzzling in my hair. I'm beaming from the inside out and can't stop. I want to stay here forever.

I drift off into a blissful, contented sleep where I think I hear him whisper, “I’m going to keep you.” But I can’t be sure.



## Chapter Fourteen

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**G**olden shards of early morning sunlight spill across the parquet through the gap in the curtains. A thick golden forearm is draped around my waist, and I roll over to ogle its owner. Even though I've admired every angle of the gorgeous man beside me, my heart races in my chest, and my stomach does a weird backflip whenever I look at him. Long lashes cast shadows against his cheekbones as he sleeps like a peaceful, handsome giant. He looks how I feel—totally content.

The bitter tang of reality creeps unwantedly into my thoughts. Our bubble has to burst when we go back to work. I'm caught off guard at the emptiness I feel at the thought of not having him to myself all day and mentally rein myself in. I can't get carried away with this. It would be so easy to get lost in the romance and all of it. In him. He's a deadly concoction of handsome, charming, and sexy, and his touch turns my body and mind to mush. But I have to remain realistic. Is it all about the sex? Most likely. Despite this, I'm still not prepared for the spell to be broken. I want to lose myself in him one more time.

His breathing changes, and he stirs, blinking open his eyes and focusing on me. He gives a sleepy half-smile, causing my heart to turn over. "Morning, my beautiful Sophie."

A warm tingly feeling dances around my stomach the way it always does when he calls me his. But it's just a turn of phrase, and I'm not foolish enough to read anything into it. It makes sense. He's into control, and by feeling I'm his is just another way for him to achieve it.

He slips his arms under the covers, and his hands find my body, rolling me over on top of him.

"Waking up to your face is as amazing as I knew it would be." He strokes his fingertips across my cheekbone and pushes his erection into my hip.

"You're not too bad to look at either." I let my thighs fall open on either side of his hips and kiss him lightly on the lips. "Someone's awake even though it's early."

"It's the only bit of me that is. I'm knackered. Some beautiful woman wouldn't leave me alone yesterday and kept pestering me for sex," he teases.

I slap him playfully on the bicep. "I think it was the other way around."

His hands skim down my back and knead my buttocks. "And you'd better get used to it, brown eyes, because I'm never leaving you alone again."

*Okay. What does that mean?*

Before I can ask, he lifts his head off the pillow and kisses me, then pulls away a fraction. "Ride me," he says, his lips against mine.

*What better way to start the day?*

"You said you were knackered." I smile.

"Where you're concerned, I can't stay away." He squeezes my buttocks. "We'll have sleepy sex."

I don't need any persuading.

I reposition my knees on either side of his hips so I'm straddling him and spread my hands across his chest, keeping me steady. Reaching behind my legs, I close my right hand around his penis and feel it twitch in my hand as I guide him into me. My eyes lock on his as I adjust my weight and slide down onto him, feeling my muscles stretch to accommodate all of him, and a tell-tale throb sparks deep inside. He lets out a long, contented sigh as if there is no better feeling than us, together.

I roll my hips as his hands slide up my ribcage to caress my breasts.

"You're so beautiful," he pants out, and the look of admiration is back in his eyes, and I'm a goddess again.

I throw my head backward as I grind against him, picking up the pace as my muscles tense around him, and I feel him tighten inside me. I know this is going to be quick. Not slow and sleepy like he wanted, but who cares because I'm in control. I shift upward then slam down hard.

"Sophie!" His head snaps back as he hisses my name.

The pressure in my center ratchets up a notch as I slam down onto his cock again. His hands fly to my waist, and his fingers dig into my hip bone. "I'm close."

"Not yet." I breathe a little harder. Just a little more. I drive myself down onto his length once again, and his shoulders tense.

"Now," he demands.

"Not yet. Who's in control here?"

In a heartbeat, I'm reminded. I'm not sure how it happens, but I'm flat on my back, and he's pinning me down, his thighs in between mine, my hands yanked above my head. "I am."

His dark eyes hold mine as he sears into me, and I gasp. "And you love it."

I thought I'd hate being controlled in the bedroom, but I don't. I like him taking over. And I don't know who I am anymore.

With two thrusts, I unravel into a trembling mass of limbs as he follows me over the edge. His shoulders tense as he empties inside me with a groan, then slowly drops forward on top of me.

He lifts his head from the pillow and looks at me knowingly. "You like me being in control, don't you?"

"Yes," I admit, feeling a little embarrassed. "And while I'm confessing, I trust you."

An easy smile lights up his face, and I can tell I've just told him exactly what he wanted to hear. He slides his hands beneath my head, entangles his fingers in my hair as he presses his lips to mine, and kisses me. Deep and slow. It feels like a kiss with a hidden meaning. I just wish I knew what it was.

Somehow, a little later we disentangle ourselves from one another long enough to shower. I pull Lucy's T-shirt and denim cut-offs back on, and I'm in the process of towel drying my hair at the end of the bed, thinking about the funny looks and gossip I'm going to be the subject of once we turn up to work together in a few hours when he strolls out of the closet. The freshly showered subtle scent of sandalwood follows him across the room as I check him out. A white polo shirt fits his

upper body like a glove, and charcoal gray chinos hang from his waist, fitting snugly around his firm behind. His black hair is slicked back and to the side, and he's back to looking his usual preened self. I want him.

He flings back the curtains, letting the sunlight flood through the windows into the bedroom.

"I've been thinking..." He stands staring out at the street with his back to me for a few seconds, rubbing his palms together as if he's thinking carefully about what he's about to say. "You should bring some of your clothes and things and leave them here." He nods toward the closet. "There's plenty of room in there."

I freeze mid-rub, and my eyes slide to the closet. I'm blindsided. I feel like doing a little dance at what this gesture could possibly mean, but I remind myself I can't get carried away. Okay, so maybe it's not *just* about the sex. It still doesn't mean it's going to lead to a happily ever after.

"So... we'll be doing this again?" I ask.

He settles down beside me on the end of the bed. "Yes, and again, and again, and again, and again, and tonight I'm taking you out to that dinner we never got around to having. I'll pick you up from yours at seven."

He's grinning like a fool, and so am I.

*Have I ever felt this happy?*

This stuff is intoxicating.

He squeezes my right thigh. "Come on, we need to get you back home. If we stay here too long, you'll be naked again."

## Chapter Fifteen

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**I**nstead of waiting outside in the car like a normal person, Art insists on coming up to the apartment while I get ready, like some overprotective bodyguard.

I change into a short-sleeved pastel pink blouse, black capri trousers, and ballet pumps, apply minimal makeup, and pull my hair into a high ponytail, ready for the day. When I walk out of the bedroom, he's leaning against the kitchen counter, idly scrolling through his phone.

Something's different. I hadn't noticed before because I went straight into the bedroom to get ready, but now I'm further down the hallway, I can see something's changed. The space on the wall beside my dad's painting is normally empty, but today a framed picture is hanging there instead.

I frown and stop in my tracks. "How did this get here?" My eyes swing to Art, who's barely suppressing a smile. "Have you got something to do with this?"

He pushes himself away from the counter and sidles up behind me, sliding his arms around my waist and resting his chin on my shoulder. "It's a gift. Look closer."

I tilt my head and peer at the picture, admiring the skillful flicks of the oil and how the artist has worked the paint to achieve the right effect. It's an old-fashioned sailing ship

caught in a squall out at sea and is all gray, blues, and stormy skies. It's very atmospheric and looks similar to the works of J. M. W. Turner, Dad's favorite artist. My eyes travel down to the swirly brushstrokes of the artist's signature on the bottom right edge. I blink, drawing my head closer, and my heart freezes mid-beat. It can't be. It's impossible.

"That's not what I think it is, is it?" I murmur, unable to tear my eyes away.

"That depends on what you think it is?"

"It's not a... it can't be a... a Turner."

"It's only a print."

My mouth gapes open in shock as I stare in disbelief at the large, framed print. The gold Rococo-style wooden frame itself must have cost a fortune. "You didn't have to buy me this. It's huge and no doubt really expensive."

He gives a dismissive shrug. "It's just money. It's what it represents that's invaluable. Your dad meant a lot to you, and this meant a lot to your dad. Do you think he would have liked it?"

And that does it. My face crumples at the mention of Dad, and hot tears blur my vision, running down my cheeks. His gesture is over the top but so sweet and from a good place. No one has ever done anything like this before for me. He's lost his dad, too, and he gets it. There's a void in my life that will never be replaced, and now all I can do is remember him.

He slides his arms around my back and gently turns me around to face him, pulling me close. I sob against his chest as he soothes me and strokes my hair. After a few moments, my tears subside, and I tilt my face to his. God knows what I must look like.

Brown eyes, full of concern, hold mine. “I’m sorry I made you sad. I bought you this because I thought it would make you happy.”

“It does.” I sniffle. “Thank you. It’s made me very happy. It’s just brought it all back. I’m touched. This is such a lovely gesture. You’re right, Dad would love it, but you still didn’t need to buy it.”

He cups my face in his hands and wipes the damp tears from my cheeks with his thumbs. “Yes, I did. When you look at this, you’ll think of your dad and have happy memories. It’s important to have something to remember them by because that’s all we have left of them.”

Something clicks inside my head, and my eyes slide to the leather Rolex on his wrist that doesn’t fit with the rest of his image. “Your watch,” I say slowly. “It’s an older design. Did it belong to your dad?”

His lips twitch into a thin smile. “He wore it every day. When I went to visit him in the hospice the day he died, he took it off his wrist and handed it to me. I wear it all the time. It reminds me where I’ve come from.”

We stand admiring the painting for a few moments in silence. He curls his arms around my back and rests a hand on my shoulder, gently stroking his fingertips across the base of my neck. “What happened to your dad?”

I heave a sigh at the memory that will forever haunt me. “He was driving home late from work one night. It was winter, and black ice was on the roads. A joyrider lost control of a car they’d stolen and plowed into him. Dad died instantly. The other driver was eighteen. He was drunk and didn’t even have a proper driver’s license. He walked away with a broken arm.” I muse over something I’ve thought about most days since he



died. “That morning, Dad left the house, and it would be for the last time. He didn’t know, we didn’t know, but it was, and all our lives changed forever. Life’s funny, isn’t it?”

Seconds tick by, and I’m waiting for him to say something, but he doesn’t. His fingers have stopped stroking my neck. I glance at him, and he’s staring straight ahead at the painting, but there’s a tension in his shoulders that wasn’t there before.

“Are you okay?”

He shakes his head lightly as if snapping out of a trance, and he removes his hand from my neck. “Yes, sorry, I’ve just remembered there’s something I need to go and sort out. Are you okay to drive to work yourself?”

I frown at the abrupt change in conversation. There’s definitely something odd about him, and I can’t put my finger on it. “Umm, yes, of course.”

“Great.” He hastily pecks me on the cheek without meeting my eyes and walks past me.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” I call after him as he hurries down the hall.

“Fine,” he replies over his shoulder and with that, opens the door and disappears.

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“So, exactly how good are we talking?” Lucy watches me closely as she takes a sip of coffee and places the cup on the table.

I throw a furtive glance at Olly cleaning glasses behind the bar on the other side of the room to check he’s out of earshot. “Very.”

“I knew he would be.” She gazes wistfully through the double doors of the Orangery out onto the sunny terrace. “You can tell just by looking at him he’d be good in the sack.”

Given that it’s mid-week, the hotel is fairly quiet apart from the usual few business guests. Lucy and I have seized the opportunity to have an afternoon catch-up in the Orangery. I’m thankful it’s been quiet, as she’s been grilling me like a Russian interrogator over my day with Art ever since we sat at the table for two.

I tap the screen of my phone for what feels like the hundredth time today and nibble my thumbnail. Since this morning, I haven’t heard from him, and there was something about the way he darted out of my apartment that’s bothering me.

“I think he really likes you.” I look up with a jolt to find my friend giving me a firm look.

She’s over-romanticizing again.

“Oh, come on, think about it,” she carries on in response to the look of disbelief I throw her. “He’s bought you a gift he knew would mean a lot to you. He asked you to keep some clothes at his place. He’s practically moving you in!”

I wrinkle my nose, uneasy. “I’m not sure. He took off like a shot this morning, muttering about needing to sort something out. I haven’t heard from him all day.” I stir my cappuccino and watch the white froth disappear into the muddy brown liquid. “I suppose us not walking into work together has saved us from the gossips in this place,” I add, raising the cup to my lips.

“Think positive.” Lucy tucks her curls around her ears and sits up. “Have you ever thought he might actually have

business to sort out? And you'd just been talking about his dad. Maybe he got a bit upset... you know how men don't like to talk about their feelings." She tweaks the collar of her pale blue blouse and shakes her head. "Stop worrying."

I can't think positively where men are concerned. My brain automatically jumps to the worst-case scenario. I'm worried he's too good to be true, and now the novelty of the sex has worn off, he's thinking exactly the same thing about me.

Lucy sighs for the tenth time in fifteen minutes and stares out the leaded window to the terrace.

"So, what's going on with you and Mark?"

She juts out her bottom lip and shakes her head. "Nothing that hasn't been going on for a while."

Not satisfied with her vague response, I push further. Through the five years Lucy and Mark have been together, they've had their ups and downs like every couple, but I've never seen her like this. "Is everything okay between the two of you?"

"Everything is exactly the same as it's always been," she says with a despondent shrug of her shoulders. "We go to work, he goes out to the pub after, and comes home late. He plays golf on the weekends. We're like two lodgers living in the same house. Our paths barely cross."

"You don't think there's anyone else, do you?"

Lucy gives a high-pitched laugh, but there's no humor in her eyes. "I don't think he's got enough about him to do anything like that."

"You've been together a long time. Things are bound to get a bit..." I pause. "Stale. And you've got the wedding in a

few weeks. It's a lot of pressure for you both. Loads of couples have a wobble before their big day," I say reassuringly.

"I know." Lucy picks up the white paper napkin from her saucer and twists it in between her fingers. She looks outside. "That's what I keep telling myself."

There's doubt in her voice which doesn't leave me convinced, but we're interrupted by a flustered-looking George hurrying up to our table.

"Ah, there you both are. No Art again today, I see?" His eyes dart from me to Lucy questioningly.

"No, doesn't look like it, and I'm on my break," Lucy replies before he can ask.

George's forehead wrinkles at her defensive tone. "No, no. I know. Everyone's entitled to a break. Some more than others, it seems. Are you feeling better, Sophie?" He regards me with a smile, and I catch the smirk from my friend across the table. I doubt George has put two and two together.

"Yes, I'm feeling much better. Thanks, George," I smile sweetly.

"Good, good." He glances absentmindedly around the dead bar and fiddles with the edge of his claret and blue striped tie. "It's beginning to feel like old times with all this absent management," he mutters to himself, hurrying in the direction of reception.

Lucy rolls her eyes as we watch him scuttle away. "Old Georgie's on the warpath." She throws her crumpled napkin onto the table. "You'll have to warn Art. Speaking of which, where is he taking you to dinner tonight?"

At the mention of his name, I glance at my phone again to see I've had no messages, and the uneasy feeling resumes

gnawing away at me. I pick up my cell and stare at the screen, wrestling with myself. To text him or not to text him. I put my cell back down on the table. "I've got no idea."

Lucy rests her chin on her hand and stares off somewhere into the ether, daydreaming. "I bet he's taking you somewhere really classy and expensive."

If the gift is anything to go by, then most likely. I curl my fingers around my cup. "I hope it's not anywhere too posh. I'll just feel out of place."

"Either way, you'll have to wear a dress and look absolutely stunning," she tells me. "And wear your hair down, it's sexier."

I roll my eyes at the advice. "Geez, thanks, Mum. I don't need any advice on the clothes front. I know exactly what I'm wearing."

A short, tight little black dress, which I've never dared wear until now. Partly because I've never been anywhere nice enough to wear it. And partly because I didn't feel confident enough to carry it off before due to years and years of snarky comments from Theo about my appearance and my clothes making me look fat. Art makes me feel beautiful inside and out. An untouchable goddess on a pedestal.

I'm lost in my own little world and don't even realize I'm smiling until I glance up to find Lucy watching me from across the table. She narrows her eyes slightly. "You're falling for him, aren't you?"

"Yes," I finally admit it to myself. Hook, line, and sinker. "Yes, I am."

## Chapter Sixteen

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**A**fter I tweak my hair so that it falls in soft curls over my shoulders, I smooth my hands down the satin material of my black dress. I've kept my eye makeup minimal and applied red lipstick because it suits my dark features.

My high black stiletto heels click across the shiny white hall floor as I cross into the kitchen and glance at my phone, which sits on top of the black kitchen counter. Still no new messages from Art, and I've refrained from texting him. *He's obviously been busy*, I tell myself.

I take a deep breath and peer at my watch. It's six forty-five. He's still got fifteen minutes. He'll be here.

By quarter past seven, I've poured a glass of rosé to help ease my nerves and perched myself on one of the black kitchen stools, glaring at my phone and willing it to spring into life.

Fifteen minutes later, I'm on my second glass of wine, and my nerves are shredded. I can't take it anymore. *Where the fuck is he?* That's what I want to ask. Instead, I text the far less angry.

**Sophie:** *Where are you?*

By seven forty-five, I'm halfway down the bottle of wine, and I've already gone over the various possibilities that could prevent him from replying. Maybe he's ill or been in an accident or lost track of time, but each thought lands flat and doesn't push the incredibly real fear I have that maybe he's ignoring me. I send him another text.

**Sophie:** *Is everything okay?*

By eight o'clock, I've taken off my makeup, torn off my dress, and changed into my gray pajama shorts and white T-shirt, deciding even if he did turn up now, I wouldn't go out of principle. I text Lucy.

**Sophie:** *He stood me up!*

She replies in an instant.

**Lucy:** *It must be something serious for him to be a no-show. Maybe he's not well or had an accident. Have you texted him?*

I angrily type my response:

**Sophie:** *Yes. Twice. And I doubt it.*

I carry the nearly empty bottle of rosé and my glass into the bedroom, crawl under the covers, and switch on the television.

I irritably flick through the channels, but nothing pierces my brain because my thoughts are too distracted by Art and his damn lies.

I was right.

He is too good to be true.

---

The first thing I clap eyes on when I arrive for work the next morning is the gray Aston Martin

parked outside the front of the hotel as if nothing could possibly be wrong. My hackles

immediately rise.

He's clearly alive, and there isn't a bloody mark on the thing, debunking Lucy's explanations for his absence. I glare at the car as I stalk past into the hotel, convinced of the real reason its owner stood me up last night. The thought twisted around and around in my mind all last night, and it makes perfect sense. The thrill of the chase is over. He's spun me his lines, had what he wanted from me, and now he's backing away because it was fun while it lasted. The print was probably just an elaborate gesture to smooth the path for his exit. Does he really think I'll hate him less because of it? I've been such a silly cow.

I berate myself under my breath as I walk over to the reception desk.

Lucy shoots me a nervous look. It must be clear from my expression that I'm in a bad mood. "He was here when I arrived at eight."

He was keen enough to get to work this morning but couldn't be bothered to text me back. He'd better watch out.

I arrive at my office, dump my handbag on the floor, and turn on the laptop. No sooner has my bum hit the seat than the office door swings open, and he strides in.

An evening's worth of pent-up anger bubbles to the surface. I want to give him the silent treatment like he's given me, but I need to say something before I explode. "Get out."



A heavy tension descends on the room as he takes a seat in the chair opposite. I can feel the weight of his stare from across the desk but keep my eyes focused on my laptop screen.

“Sophie, about last night, please...”

And that does it.

“Why the fuck didn’t you text me?” I snap.

I throw him an icy stare and immediately wish I hadn’t. A crisp white shirt encases his broad shoulders, and the top couple of buttons sit open, revealing a golden triangle of flesh and a faint brush of dark hairs at the base of his throat. He looks as good as ever, and it’s going to make this a whole lot harder.

The crease line on his forehead deepens as he drags his fingers through his hair, looking remorseful. “I’m really sorry. Something came up.”

*Is he for real?*

“I didn’t hear from you all day yesterday, and then you stood me up. Is that all you’ve got to say?” I bite back.

If this is the extent of his feeble excuses, I will not sit and listen. I stand up and head for the door. “I’m very busy. I haven’t got time for this, and frankly, I don’t want to listen to your lies.”

“Sophie, please.” There’s an edge of panic in his voice as he moves with lightning speed to stand between the door and me. He brings his hands to rest on my shoulders and stares into my eyes. “I’m not lying to you. I was busy with business yesterday, and last night I just couldn’t get away.”

*Couldn’t get away from what? With whom?*

That's not nearly enough information for my liking. From somewhere, a steely resolve kicks into place.

“Too busy to send a fucking text? Are you serious? I know what this is. You've had your fun, is that it? I'm just another woman you've charmed into bed. Now it's time for you to move on to the next dotting woman in the Art Black fan club. It was just sex. I get it,” I snap, hating the words flying out of my mouth.

His eyes turn deadly serious as the frown line on his brow becomes crevice-like. “Is that what you think you are? I'm not just... it's not just about the sex. I'm really, really sorry about yesterday. I was busy with work last night, and I just couldn't get out of it.”

He'll have to do better than that. Theo fed me enough lies to last a lifetime, and I bought them all until the end, when I realized what a cheating scumbag he was. “What did? What came up that was so important you couldn't even text me?”

“I can't tell you yet, but I will.”

“Were you with another woman?” I shoot back.

“Absolutely not.” His thumbs stroke the tops of my shoulders through my blouse. “You said you trusted me, and now I'm asking you to trust me again. I'll tell you in time. I should have messaged you. I'm sorry. I'm still not used to... this.”

“To what?”

“To being with someone.” He looks away and fiddles with his shirt cuff. “You know I've never... there's never been a situation where I needed to call anyone. I know that's a fucking shit excuse.”

There's a conviction in his voice and a look in his eyes telling me he's being honest.

As I look up into his eyes, I'm plummeting into an abyss, and as his hands glide to my cheeks, my resolve wavers. His fingers brush my jaw with the lightest of touches as he breathes three words that make my heart soar. "I've missed you."

I'm mush.

His mouth meets mine, and I don't fight it as his body pushes me back against the closed office door. He kisses me with a fierceness, it leaves me breathless, and I drink him in, bunching my fingers through his hair and pulling him into the kiss. The strength of his need for me translates through his lips onto mine, and I can almost taste it. It's barely been twelve hours, but I've missed every part of this man.

"I've missed you so much," he rasps against my mouth as his hands slide down my back and cup my backside, pushing his erection against me. A tell-tale throb starts between my legs with the knowledge that he wants me, and my rational brain drifts away as a pair of warm lips plant hot kisses along the base of my throat.

I briefly close my eyes and try to focus. "Promise me you won't do anything like that again because if you do—"

He silences my threat with a kiss then pulls away and stares deep into my eyes with a look that takes my breath away. "I promise. No more running. From either of us."

*When did he run? Is that what he was doing last night?*

I don't get the chance to ask because, in one move, he takes his hand from my buttocks and plunges it down the front of my trousers. His lips are on mine, pre-empting and

silencing the moan that falls from my lips as his fingers slide beneath the lace of my panties. I push my head back against the door and take in a shaky breath at the sudden onslaught of pleasure his long fingers bestow on my clit. The coolness against the damp heat between my legs builds an intense ache as his fingers massage me, causing a warm coil of delicious pressure to build. The tip of his nose is less than an inch from mine as he studies my reaction with a look of wonder on his face.

“What are you doing to me?” he whispers.

*What the hell is he doing to me?*

My eyelids flutter closed, and my center throbs around his fingers. I’m so close, so quickly.

“Art...” I pant.

“Come,” he orders.

On his command, I spiral over the edge into oblivion. My hands fly up to his shoulders as my body shudders around him, and he kisses me softly until I return to earth. As far as apologies go, that was pretty good.

He helps me straighten my blouse and flashes me a wicked smile. “Tonight, I’m making it up to you. After work, go home and get ready. I’m taking you out to dinner. A very nice restaurant. Pack some clothes because you’re staying over at mine. Wear a dress.”

I arch an eyebrow at his demands. “I wore a dress last night and looked hot. Your loss.”

“Tonight it won’t be my loss. I’m going to make it up to you.”

The way he looks at me tells me he's not just talking about dinner, either.

## Chapter Seventeen

---

**P**reparations for the coming weekend's wedding occupy all of my time and cause the morning to fly by in a blur. I'm in the process of finalizing the drinks packages with Olly when George appears at our side, hovering by the bar. He tugs a navy and white polka dot handkerchief out of the front pocket of his blue jacket and mops his brow.

"Sophie, Art has asked to see us both in his office right away."

Yesterday George was moaning about him not being at the hotel, and now he's here, his presence has thrown George into a flap.

"He'll have to wait. I'm busy." I glance up and catch the nervous look in George's eyes at the fact I'm not going to do as the big boss asks. "I need to get this sorted before I leave today."

Olly flashes me a smile of misplaced gratitude at my choosing to be with him rather than Art. It's my day off tomorrow, so I really do need to get it done today.

George hesitates as if he's malfunctioning and isn't sure what to do.

I give him a polite smile. “I’ll join you both once I’ve finished.”

He clears his throat and gives an uncertain nod at the prospect of relaying this information to Art. “Yes, very good. I’d better go on up. I don’t want to keep him waiting.” And with that, he hurries off in the direction of the staircase.

“It’s like George is scared of him,” I say in disbelief, turning my attention back to the drinks order on top of the bar.

“Yeah, well, guys like Art Black swan around the place with their flashy cars and designer clothes, and it’s all an image. Underneath, there’s never usually any substance to them, they’re just assholes.” Olly pulls a face to show he’s not impressed, and I want to tell him he couldn’t be more wrong. “He doesn’t intimidate me.”

Olly acts like a cat on a hot tin roof whenever he’s around, and I fear this speech is for my benefit.

“What do you think of him?”

“Nothing much.” I wrinkle my nose and feign a lack of interest, studying the drink order. Clearly, Art’s and my entanglement has gone unnoticed by the rest of the staff, and I can’t help but feel relieved. “So, after the wedding, it’s a champagne reception out on the terrace. The forecast says sunshine for most of the afternoon so that should be fine,” I carry on, eager to steer the conversation back onto work. “The couple has also requested a bucket of Peroni on ice.” I glance up to check Olly is taking notes, but he isn’t. He’s staring at me.

“If I asked you out again, would you say yes?”

Taken aback, my mouth drops open in surprise as my brain whirs to try and find the right words. I must be taking too long

because, before long, a look of resignation appears on Olly's face.

He briskly shakes his head as if he doesn't want me to speak and say the words. "It's okay. I thought I'd put it out there again."

I feel like shit. He's nice, caring, and good-looking in a boy-next-door kind of way. He'd look after me and idolizes me. But he doesn't make my heart flap against my rib cage whenever he looks at me. There's no spark in my bones when I'm in the same room as him. Nevertheless, I feel as if I'm going to kick a puppy.

"You're a nice guy, Olly. The right girl's out there, somewhere."

"It's fine, Soph," he says a little too quickly, which tells me things are far from it. "Just know, if you ever change your mind... well, you know." There's an awkward pause as he stares down at his notepad and picks up a pen. "Anyway, where were we?"

Fifteen minutes later, I knock on Art's office door and push it open. George sits on a black office chair on the other side of the desk, and both men look up as I enter.

"Sorry I'm late. I was just sorting out the drinks for Saturday's wedding," I apologize, sliding onto the empty chair beside George. Art sits back in the tan leather chair, his fingers linked on his lap and a scowl on his face.

"How nice of you to join us." There's a sarcastic edge to his tone which bewilders me. "I asked to see you and George as we need to increase revenue coming into the hotel. It's



making a loss. At this rate, the place will be closed within the next six months. I need ideas.”

I’m momentarily stumped by his foul mood and abrupt nature and steal a glance at George staring at the floor. A sheen of sweat glistens across his bald head, and he looks like he’d rather be anywhere else but here. I don’t have to be psychic to know Art has given him a hard time.

“Okay,” I say slowly. “What ideas have we got so far?”

“I suggested we try Murder Mystery weekend packages for the off-peak season as that would secure room bookings.” George keeps his eyes on the floor. “But Art disagreed with me.”

“I don’t think that’s the right image for the place.” Art’s thumbs are tapping away in his lap, and he’s visibly pissed off. What the hell has happened between this morning and now?

“Actually, I think that’s a good idea,” I enthuse, smiling at George, whose eyes light up at the praise. “The hotel would make the perfect setting, and it would be a minimum two-night stay with meals included. It would also encourage group bookings as people tend to go to those events with friends.”

Art considers me silently for a few moments as if weighing up the suggestion. “I’ll think about it.” Although he’s softened a little, his mood shows no signs of improving as he steepled his fingers and presses them to his lips. “What’s your idea?”

“We’re only in June now, so hopefully, we’ll have the fine weather for a few more months. Why don’t we hold some cocktail evenings? We could open up the bar, Orangery, and terrace for the summer evenings, and it would attract a younger clientele if that’s of concern to you. See how it goes at first, and if it’s a winner, we could branch out and provide bar

snacks. You could also do a ‘buy one, get one free’ on drinks until seven o’clock to get people through the door. Olly’s a good mixologist, so he’d be perfect for it.”

George’s head’s bobbing up and down in agreement like a nodding dog, but Art’s shoulders tense, and for some unknown reason, I sense the shutters come down. He throws a look in George’s direction. “You can go.”

I’m suddenly questioning why he wants just me to stay and can’t help but get the feeling I’ve pissed him off in some way. The difference between the Art in my office this morning and the one I’m faced with now is alarming, and I’ve no doubt I’m about to find out what’s causing his foul mood.

“Oh,” George says in surprise. “Oh, well. Okay. Yes.” He leaps to his feet, clearly relieved at being granted a reprieve from more of Art’s ill temper. “Good idea, I thought.” He smiles at me and hurries out the door.

At least someone thought so.

The scowl on Art’s face remains in place as he leans forward on the table and interlaces his fingers together on the desk. “I asked you to come up here with George.”

I frown. “I was sorting out the drinks order for the wedding this weekend. I told George to tell you—”

“He did,” he cuts me off.

I sigh with frustration. “Are you annoyed because I didn’t drop everything? I was doing my job.”

“No, of course not.”

I really don’t get him. I’m bored of playing the guessing game and annoyed by his attitude. “You know, you don’t have

to be so rude all the time. George was only trying to help and make a suggestion like you'd asked him to."

He exhales in irritation. "His suggestion isn't the image I want associated with the hotel. It needs to be high-end and younger. That generation tells their friends about it, spends money, goes on social media, and checks in."

"So, my idea would be perfect for that," I exclaim.

"Yes, and we'd need the help of your friend, Olly, for your idea, wouldn't we?" He brushes the front of his white shirt with the back of his hand and avoids my gaze. His voice is dripping with insinuation, and the penny drops.

"Is this because... I was with Olly?"

He settles back into the chair and curls his hands around the wooden armrests. "You mean Olly, the guy who wants to fuck you?" His gaze hardens.

Part of me wants to laugh out loud, but I get the impression he's not in the mood. "You're jealous of Olly?"

His eyebrow arches. "No, but I don't want other guys salivating over what's mine."

A flame of desire ignites between my thighs at his possessiveness. He's being cocky and stupidly jealous, but I can't stop the flap of my heart against my rib cage. "I'm yours?"

"Every inch." He tilts his head to the side as he opens his arms, beckoning me to sit on his lap. His gaze softens. "Please, come here."

I hesitate as a surprising thought strikes me. For all his good looks and success, he's massively insecure. Maybe Olly's view of his character was partly true. Perhaps it is all an

image, a shiny veneer to impress and seduce. Now I'm starting to scratch beneath the surface, I am beginning to discover the real him, vulnerabilities and all.

I get up from the seat and walk around to his chair, lowering myself onto his lap. No sooner has my backside touched down on top of his thighs, his hands are on my hips, pulling me back against his chest.

"I acted like an asshole with George. He was the only one here, and I took it out on him."

At least he's admitting it. "It's not his fault. Don't be such a shit."

He rests his head back against the chair and sighs. "I just kept thinking about you being downstairs with a guy who clearly wants you."

I twist around in his lap to face him. I need to reassure him. Like he did to me with Tara. "You've got nothing to worry about with Olly or anyone for that matter."

His eyes slide to rest on mine. "I'm not worried about you. I know what guys are like when they see a beautiful woman. Remember that guy in Bar Red? They're all like him. They're animals." He grazes a fingertip down my cheek. "I've waited a long time for this. Nothing's going to fuck it up."

My heart ricochets around my chest. "What have you waited a long time for?"

"You."

I swoon.

Soft lips cover mine as he kisses me languidly, our tongues dancing in unison. My hand slides down his chest as I feel my way across the peaks and dips of his muscles coming to rest on

the bulge of his crotch. He lets out a deep groan from the back of his throat as I press my palm against him, and he pushes his groin against my hand, increasing the pressure. I unfasten his trousers and slip my fingers beneath the material of his boxer shorts, closing my hand around his thick, erect cock. He pulls his lips away from mine a fraction and sucks in a deep breath as if to steady himself. I feel his fingers in my ponytail as he wraps it around his hand like a rope.

His eyes snap open. Liquid pools of black stare back at me. “Suck me.”

My eyes widen in panic and swing to the closed office door. I want to pleasure him, of course I do, but something about doing it at work makes me nervous. “Here?”

“Right now.”

“What if someone comes in?”

“My next appointment is not for ten minutes.”

His reply abates my nerves a little.

I flash him a smile as I slide off his lap and lock eyes with him as I kneel in between his thighs. “I’d better be quick then.”

He lifts his hips and pushes down his trousers and underwear, allowing his cock to spring flat against his stomach. The only sound in the room is the deep, slow breaths coming from him as he keeps his eyes fixed on me.

I make sure I hold his gaze as I run my tongue over my lips to moisten them and curl my hand around the base of his cock. Thick, purple, and glistening with pre-cum, it’s in need of some special attention.

“Open!”

I part my lips and take him slowly. The warm, musky taste of him makes my mouth water. I feel a flicker of desire in my center as his eyes close and his breathing quickens. I want to give back some of the pleasure he's given me, and I love that I'm in control of his climax for once. I slide him in and out of my mouth, running my tongue across his length, paying special attention to the tip, causing him to hiss aloud.

“Take it all.” He orders. “Relax your jaw.”

I feel slightly panicky at the instruction. He's big, and I'm not sure I can do this, but I want to try. I push self-doubt to the side and focus on what he said.

I tell myself to relax and give myself a few seconds then slacken my jaw. Slowly, I inch him further and further into my mouth until I'm fighting my gag reflex, then I slide back to the tip and repeat the process, massaging his smooth balls with my free hand. It seems to have the desired effect as he throws his head back into the chair, and his body tenses. His cock twitches in my mouth. Emboldened by his reaction, I carry on at a pace, taking as much of him as I can until he's panting like a man on the edge.

He gives my ponytail a gentle tug causing me to lift my eyes to his face.

His head is still pressed into the chair, and two black eyes are boring into me. “I'm going to come, and I want you to swallow.”

No sooner has he spoken than his cock grows even harder in my mouth, and he explodes. Eyelids snapping closed, his body stiffens, and his hips jerk as he spills his hot, salty seed down my throat. I swallow it, then slide him from between my lips, wiping the corners of my mouth with a finger.

He crumples forward in the chair and drops his head in his hands. “Fucking hell.” He shakes his head as if lost for words. “That was... incredible.”

I beam inside and out, happy that I’ve given him back the same level of pleasure he’s provided me so many times.

He raises his eyes to mine and gives me an easy smile as he offers me his hand. I take it, letting him help me to my feet. I smooth my blouse and tidy my hair while he fastens his trousers and tucks his shirt back in. Then he catches my hand in his and pulls me to him.

“You have an amazing mouth.” He kisses me on the lips, and that look of awe is back in his eyes as he gazes down at me. “It’s never felt like that before.”

A tingle of pleasure starts between my thighs, and I slide my hand around his broad back and up to his shoulder blades, feeling his muscles beneath the cotton of his shirt. I want to jump him but know there’s no time. “That’s because I’m amazing,” I tease.

“You are, in every.” He kisses me. “Single.” He kisses me again. “Way.” And again, I’m dizzy, and I don’t think it’s because of all the kissing. I’m dizzy with happiness.

“I’ll pick you up seven thirty tonight. Don’t wear anything too sexy. Otherwise, we might not make it out of the apartment.”

“I can’t promise that.” I smile.

Two big hands glide around my waist and rest on my backside. “Who am I kidding? You look hot in whatever you wear. You distract me, totally.”

I think I hear a movement in the corridor but can’t be sure. I remove my hands from his back, but his hands remain firmly

on my bum, and they don't show any signs of shifting.

“Who's your appointment with?”

“Only Tara.”

I roll my eyes at the mention of the woman's name. What the hell is he meeting her for?

“She's dropping off some paperwork I need to sign,” he says, catching the annoyed look on my face. “That's all. She won't be staying long.”

“You wouldn't care if she walked in on us?” I ask, unable to help myself.

His brow furrows slightly as if he's perplexed by the question. “Absolutely not.” He grazes the tip of his nose against mine. “In fact, you could be straddling me, and I wouldn't give a fuck if she sees. I wouldn't give a fuck if anyone sees.”

His blatant disregard for people finding out about us makes my heart soar.

He kisses me passionately for what seems like forever, and we don't hear the footsteps across the landing or the door opening. When he eventually tears his lips from mine, I'm suddenly acutely aware of a figure standing in the doorway to the office.

Tara. A jet-black, high-neck, body-con dress skims her behind and clings to her curvaceous figure. A cloud of perfume follows her as she moves forward on her black patent platform heels into the room. Her hair is drawn up in a high bun on top of her head, and her crimson lips are pursed in disapproval at what she's just witnessed.



“Ah, Tara. Take a seat.” He turns his attention back to me and smiles. “Tonight. Be ready.”

“I will.” I smile back, then glance in her direction to see she’s sat in the chair, looking distinctly disgruntled. I give him one last kiss, a smile, and walk away, throwing a self-satisfied smirk in her direction.

## Chapter Eighteen

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**B**utterflies flutter in my stomach as the firm double knock on my apartment door reverberates down the hallway. I swiftly give myself a final once-over in the bathroom mirror and spritz my wrists with Miss Dior. I smooth down my straightened hair and pull my red dress across my stomach, silently reassuring myself it's not too tight. It is another dress I've owned for years but never had the guts to wear, and I think it's possibly the most daring one I own. The poppy red color, spaghetti straps, and thigh-length hem give it a sexy vibe. I've pulled out all the stops tonight. It's our first date. I want everything to be perfect.

My black heels click across the shiny floor as I walk up to the door and swing it open. The sight of the six-foot-two hunk of scorching deliciousness standing in front of me sets off a fluttering sensation between my legs.

He warned me not to look too hot...

... maybe I should have given him the same warning.

A perfectly tailored black jacket and stark white shirt hang from his broad upper body. His hands rest in the front pockets of his black trousers, fitting snugly against his slender waist. His hair is swept back, and his eyes travel over my body from head to toe in appreciative silence as he steps into the hall. I

smile to myself at his stunned reaction and take it that the dress is a success but don't get a chance to ask. As I close the door and turn around, his lips crash against mine, and his body presses me against the door as if he can't wait another second to touch me.

I fling my arms around his neck as his hands come to rest on my waist, and even though it's only been a few hours, I've missed the feel of him on me. His freshly showered scent intoxicates me, and he tastes of mint as his tongue licks the length of mine and sets every nerve in my body buzzing.

He pulls away from me slightly breathless, skims his hands up my back, and rests them on my shoulders.

"As hellos go, that was pretty nice." I smile, rubbing my thumb across his bottom lip to remove my red lipstick.

"This is a very sexy dress." His eyes lower to my chest. "I'm not sure how I feel about other guys ogling you in it."

Not this again. "Relax, I'll be coming home with you." I give him a reassuring kiss on the lips.

His eyes glide down my body, and he nods slowly as if coming around to the idea. "I want to throw you down on the bed and fuck you right now, but I also want to take you out to dinner." Dark eyes hold mine and flash with an intent I've not seen before. "I'm going to have every inch of you tonight."

I press my lips together to suppress a shiver that threatens to run down my spine at his words. I'm not entirely sure what he means and don't get the opportunity to ask because he scoops down and picks up the black overnight bag waiting by the door with one hand and grabs my hand with the other.

He flicks me a look. "We need to move because if we stay any longer, we're not going to make it out of here."

I agree.

He keeps a firm hold of my hand down the corridor, in the elevator, and even when we reach the lobby. Dave, the concierge, is already looking our way as we walk past the reception desk.

“Put your eyes back in, Dave,” he growls as he strides by, causing Dave to fluster and turn back to the CCTV monitors.

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Eventually, we pull up outside a large red brick building in Mayfair. Le Gavroche. Eight white sash windows decorate the front of the restaurant, and an ornate, frosted glass canopy overhangs the wooden front door. Troughs overflowing with perfectly tended pink and red roses adorn either side of the marble steps that lead up to the entrance.

This place is expensive. “We’re going here?”

“It’s usually booked up months in advance, but I pulled a few strings and managed to get us a table.”

My eyes swing back to the front of the restaurant. I’ve heard of Le Gavroche, of course. The Michelin-star restaurant is renowned for its French cuisine. I stare up at the restaurant and worry whether I’ve dressed appropriately. I’ve never set foot in a place this expensive before.

“You look perfect.” I glance over at Art watching me with a smile as if he knows the thoughts going through my head. “Come on.”

His hand returns to its usual place around mine as he leads me through the restaurant’s front door, where we’re immediately greeted by a short, bald, forty-something man

wearing a smart black suit and bowtie. He greets us with a broad smile.

“Monsieur, mademoiselle,” he welcomes in a French-English accent, bobbing his head in acknowledgment.

“Table for two. Black,” Art says.

“Of course, monsieur, mademoiselle, this way, please. Follow me.”

My eyes scan the opulent surroundings as Art leads me through the restaurant. Circular tables fill the large open-plan dining area and bottle-green velvet booths line the edge of the room. A low hum of conversation from the other diners fills the space, and faint classical music is coming from somewhere. Dark-green walls, plush carpets, and chandeliers give off an opulent and luxurious feel.

The maître d’ comes to a halt at a booth at the back of the restaurant and presents the table with a flourish of his hand. “Monsieur Black, is this satisfactory?”

“Perfect.” Art smiles and gestures for me to sit. I take a seat, and he sidles up beside me.

“A waiter will be along shortly to take your order.” The maître d’s eyes sweep over me and crinkle at the corners. He breaks into a smile.

“*Votre dame est belle,*” he murmurs to Art, then with a bob of his head, scuttles away.

A ghost of a smile appears on Art’s face as he picks up a dark-green leather-bound menu and studies it.

I’m intrigued. Foreign languages were never a strong point of mine. Now I wished I’d paid more attention at school. “What did he say?”

“He told me my lady is beautiful.”

Heat rises in my cheeks at the compliment. “Oh. And am I your lady then?” I tease.

“Of course, and you’re beautiful. Every guy in this place looked at you when you walked in.” He keeps his eyes fixed on the menu and arches an eyebrow, signaling his disapproval. “Trust me, I noticed.”

I’m not sure what to say, so I don’t say anything and pick up my menu and open it up. Lists upon lists of scrawly writing cover the pages, and I have no idea where to start. I’m overwhelmed.

“What would you like to eat?” he asks.

“There’s so much choice... where do I begin? Have you eaten here before?”

“Lots of times.” He looks at me. “Shall I order for us both? I’m thinking of getting the tasting menu, then there’s a selection of dishes for us to choose from.”

I smile. “Sounds perfect.”

A waiter suddenly appears at the table. “Are sir and madam ready to order drinks?”

“Yes, and food, please,” Art replies.

He reels off a list in fluent French, and all I’m able to catch is his request for a glass of wine and mineral water. He obviously paid attention in class.

“Very good, sir.” The waiter nods his head, collects the menus, and disappears.

He rests his arm across the top of the green velvet booth behind my head and turns his body toward mine.

“I’ve ordered you a glass of pinot grigio. I hope that’s okay?”

“Of course.” I laugh. “That’s the only part I understood. Do you not drink alcohol at all?”

He shakes his head and unfastens the single button of his jacket. “Not a drop.”

I twist around to face him, eager to know more. “When did you stop?”

He rakes a hand through his hair and glances out toward the restaurant. “Five years ago.”

“Why?”

“After Dad died, I drank to forget. It helped numb the pain and blot out... everything. But it changed me into someone else, and I hated that person. I knew I had to stop before it destroyed me.”

My eyes lower to his waist. “Is that when you got your scar?”

He fixes me a long look, wordlessly telling me to back away from the conversation. “I was lost for a while, fucked up things, and made some bad choices which I regret, but I got back on the straight and narrow and launched the gym chain.”

“Why did you go into fitness?”

The waiter returns with our drinks, and Art waits for him to leave before continuing, “I haven’t always been athletic.” He picks up his glass of water and takes a sip. “I was skinny when I was younger. It’s easy to push around the weedy kid who’s in foster care.” He takes a long drink of water, then places the glass on the table and twists it around in his fingers. He stares at the glass as if he doesn’t want to look at me. “So,

one day, after a particularly fierce beating, I decided when I grew up, no one would ever beat me up again.”

The look in his eye tells me there’s far more to this tale than he’s ready to share, and my heart aches for him. My childhood was loving and full of good memories. I can’t even begin to imagine what horrors he experienced growing up.

I place my hand on his wrist in a comforting gesture. “Kids are cruel.”

His jaw stiffens, and he says nothing, slipping his fingers through mine on the table.

I pick up my wine glass and take a sip. The cool, crisp liquid hits the spot. He’s opening up, and I’ve got to push further. “Do you remember your parents?”

“My dad wasn’t on the scene, and my mum was a single mum. She struggled for money and couldn’t look after me properly, so I was taken into care when I was five.” He gazes off into the distance, and there’s a haunted look in his eye for a second, then he seems to snap out of it. “I don’t really remember her.” He frowns and takes another sip of water. “I went to live with Mum and Dad when I was ten. They couldn’t have kids of their own. My life transformed when I met them, and I’ll be eternally indebted to them for that. Barbara, my adoptive mum, still lives in the same house I grew up in.”

He lifts his eyes to mine, and all traces of the pained look from seconds earlier have vanished. He breaks into an easy smile. “She’ll love you.”

I freeze, my glass in hand, and doubt my hearing. The hammering of my heart in my ears now means I truly can’t hear anything. That very much sounded like he’s suggesting I’ll be meeting his mum.



“You want me to meet your mum?” I ask, to be certain I’ve heard him correctly. Of course, I’d like to meet her, but the tiny voice in my head is back and is asking me whether it’s too soon. We’ve known one another for a week, which doesn’t sound very long, but when I think about how I feel about him, it doesn’t seem too soon.

“Of course.”

“I’d like to meet her.” I smile and take a long slug of wine.

He glances around the restaurant. “So, how’s this going so far for a first date?”

I place my wine glass down. “We’ve sort of done things backward, haven’t we? You usually go on a date then have sex.”

He shifts his arm slightly behind my head and strokes his fingers across my bare shoulder. “It was the right way for us. So, how’s it going?”

“What?”

“The date?”

“It’s wonderful. Why are you so keen for the feedback?”

“This is uncharted territory.”

I frown as I realize what he means then laugh in disbelief. “Don’t tell me you’ve never been on a date before?”

He lifts a shoulder into a shrug. “This is my first.”

I blink in surprise, unable to fathom the fact he’s never brought a woman out on a date before. “But you’re thirty.” I take another sip of wine, unsure whether I want to hear the answer to the next question. “How can that be?”

We're interrupted by several waiters arriving with trays and placing various dishes on the table until it's so full I can barely see the tablecloth underneath.

My eyes widen at the sight of all the food. "We're never going to eat all this," I squeak in disbelief.

Art gives a smile of thanks to the waiters as they leave us and rearranges the plates so there's a little more room. "There's a little bit of everything... scallops, artichoke, trout, pulled pork..."

My mouth waters at the delicious smells wafting from the array of dishes. "It all looks divine."

He plays host, placing various foods onto a plate for me to sample, and I sit back and let him, secretly enjoying being looked after.

I spear a piece of broccoli with a fork as he takes a mouthful of fish. "So, we were saying..." I carry on, steering the conversation back to where we were.

He shoots me a quizzical look, and I'm unsure whether he's genuinely forgotten or he's avoiding the question. "What were we saying?"

I still can't quite believe it. "You were about to tell me how come you've never been on a date before."

"Dating's never really come up."

I still don't get it. "But... how? There have been women?"

He flicks me an uncertain look before carrying on. "Yes, there have."

My stomach twists at the thought of him being with another woman. Strange, I know. This man has been in my life for a week, but I feel like I've known him for a lifetime.

I tuck into a piece of salmon. “And I’m guessing there have been quite a few... women.”

“Yes, but it was just sex.” He puts down his fork.

*It clearly wasn't just sex for Tara. She's still on the prowl three years later.* I push the thought of her out of my mind. She's not going to ruin my evening. “For you, maybe, but what happened if they wanted to take things further?”

“Some did.” He wipes the corners of his mouth with a napkin and shifts his half-eaten fish out of the way, sliding a dish of cheese soufflé in front of him. He picks up a spoon and cuts into the fluffy center. It looks delicious, and suddenly, my salmon seems boring. “But I wasn’t interested in taking things further with any of them.” He eats a mouthful of the soufflé and nods in approval. His tongue darts across his bottom lip as he takes another spoonful and offers it to me. “Try it. It tastes nearly as good as you.”

I put down my fork, and my eyes slide to the spoon he’s offering me.

“Open.”

My stomach does a delicious slow flip at his firm tone, and I press my thighs together to stem the growing ache. I keep my eyes on his as I part my lips, causing his gaze to darken as he slides the spoon into my mouth. The warm, rich soufflé is delicious and dissolves on my tongue, and I savor the flavor. He pulls the spoon out of my mouth, his eyes fixed on my throat. “Swallow.”

I feel a twinge at my center as I do as I’m told and swallow it. He reaches out a hand and slowly wipes his thumb across my bottom lip, and I daringly part my lips, taking the tip inside my mouth. I have no idea what we must look like to the other

customers because right now, I feel as though we're the only two people in the room, and the glint in his eyes tells me he feels the same. My breathing is ragged, and I can see the sharp rise and fall of his chest as I suck the tip of his thumb. After a few moments, he removes it from my mouth and places it between his lips, sucking. Every fiber of my being feels like it's on fire for this man, and we've barely touched.

He moves his arm from the back of the booth and straightens in the seat. "We're leaving," he announces, gesturing to the waiter.

Although I'm turned on beyond belief, I can't help but glance at the array of half-eaten dishes on the table and feel a little bit guilty. "All this food must have cost a fortune, and it's all going to waste."

He shrugs. "It's only money." He flicks me a simmering look that makes me melt. "What I want is priceless."

## Chapter Nineteen

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**A**rt drives like a lunatic through the streets of London on the short trip back. The journey is carried out in total silence. By the time we pull up outside his apartment, the sexual tension in the car is almost palpable. I'm helped out of the car by a large, strong hand and walked through the lobby doors.

"Good evening, Mr. Black, Miss Ward." Derek, the concierge, welcomes us with a warm smile, but Art barely registers the greeting.

"Evening, Derek," I call over my shoulder, not wishing to seem rude, but that's the extent of the greeting I'm allowed to give before I'm hurried up the stairs. Clearly, I'm not moving quickly enough because Art wraps an arm around my waist, forcing me to keep up with his pace as his long legs hurry up the stairs.

By the time we reach his front door, he appears completely unaffected by the three sets of stairs we've just run up, while I'm panting as if I've just run a marathon. He unlocks the door, pushes it open at lightning speed, and I'm pulled inside.

I don't get a chance to catch my breath. As soon as I step foot across the threshold, he rounds on me. Hot lips attack mine, and his body covers all of me, propelling me backward

against the door, slamming it closed with a bang. His tongue is in my mouth as he kisses me hard, forcing all the air out of my body. Then, as quickly as the kiss started, he pulls away and tugs me through to the bedroom.

I blink through the spots on the edge of my vision, feeling in a daze as I touch my fingers to my bruised lips and get my bearings. I stand at the end of the bed, panting and confused by the sudden change in pace. He shrugs off his jacket and slings it over the chaise longue at the end of the bed, then swiftly unbuttons his shirt and peels it off his body. He's not wasting any time, and the speed at which he's undressing makes me think he's got something planned. Right now, I don't care. The knowledge that his body will be on mine in a few seconds fans the flames of desire that started back at the restaurant. I drink in his glorious physique as he strips naked. My teeth catch on my bottom lip as my breathing becomes labored, and now I'm panting for a whole different reason as he stands naked in front of me with his erection standing unashamedly at attention. Disappointment shoots through me as he shifts back instead of moving toward me and settles down on one end of the chaise longue. He relaxes, draping both arms along the back of the seat. He looks at me as if he's eyeing up a much-longed-for gift, and he cocks his head to the left.

“Strip for me.”

Panic zaps through me. I've never been asked to do this before. Where the hell do I start? My brain launches into overdrive as I try and think how to be sexy. Big mistake. My mind goes blank. I take a deep breath and give myself a mental talking-to. I can do this. I want to do this.

I instinctively turn around so my back is to him as it gives me a moment's reprieve from his scrutinizing gaze. I briefly close my eyes and tell myself to relax. I flick my hair over my right shoulder and place my fingers on the side zipper of my dress, sliding it down, then peel the straps off my shoulders and shimmy out of the red material, letting it pool at my feet. The room is filled with an intimidating silence, and I have no way to tell whether he's enjoying this or not, but I carry on.

I slide my hands around my back and undo the clasp, catching my black lace bra between my thumb and forefinger. I cast a coy glance over my shoulder and sling the bra over my head, watching it land at his feet. He doesn't move to catch it. His eyes are almost black as he stares at me.

I turn back to face the bed and smile to myself that what I'm doing seems to be having the desired effect. Jutting my backside out, I push my fingers into the sides of my lace panties and tease them down, wiggling my bum a little until they hit the floor. I step out of them and kick off my heels, slowly turning to face him.

His gaze is a mix of admiration and awe. "I can't believe you're mine."

My heart squeezes. *I can't believe he's mine.*

"Well, you'd better believe it," I reply. I'm waiting for him to get up, but he doesn't. He carries on sitting there and does not attempt to move.

"Lie back on the bed and pleasure yourself."

I balk, my mouth gaping at the demand. Stripping for a guy is one thing, but this is in another realm. "What?"

His tone softens slightly as if sensing my unease. "I want to watch you come. You're stunning when you lose control

and let go.”

I glance hesitantly at the bed, then look back at him waiting for me to begin.

“You’ve a beautiful body, and I want to see you take pleasure from it.”

Nerves churn in my stomach as I settle down on the edge of the bed and lie back against the sheets. Of course, I’ve done this before. I’ve been single for three years, but this is the first time I’ve had an audience. Closing my eyes, I once again tell myself to relax. I slide my hand across my hip bone and brush against my pubic hair. My fingers find my swollen clit, and I begin slow, steady strokes, relaxing into it. A warm tingle of pressure is already building, and my breathing is labored. I know this won’t take long as I feel the dampness of arousal coat my fingertips and push two fingers inside the tight heat between my legs, curling them against the front wall of my pussy.

The slickness between my legs increases, permeating the silent bedroom, and I moan as my muscles quiver around my fingers. My inhibitions dissolve with every thrust of my hand, and all I can think about is coming. My eyelids flutter open, and I lower my gaze to find him sitting perfectly still. The only movement is coming from his heaving chest. His eyes burn into me. The tip of his erection is glistening with pre-cum, and the knowledge that he’s getting pleasure from watching me ratchets me even closer to the edge. Warmth prickles across my naked flesh as the tension in my core reaches a peak, and I arch my back into the bed and cry out in ecstasy. My muscles spasm around my fingers as my climax shudders through my body.



A warm, fuzzy post-orgasmic cloud descends around me as my body goes limp and my mind blank. The mattress dips, and I open my eyes as I feel hands grip my thighs and yank them wide. He kneels between my legs, his eyes blazing into mine as he picks up my hand and slides my damp fingers into his mouth and sucks. I moan aloud because he's filthy, and the fizzle at my center tells me I like it.

He releases my hand and lets it drop to the bed.

“You're so fucking sexy.”

His words ring in my ears, and my breathing begins to pick up a pace again as he locks eyes with me and lowers his head between my thighs. I draw in a lungful of air, certain I'll burst into flames if he's about to do what I think he is. He keeps his eyes on me as his long, hot tongue licks my hypersensitive clit, and I whimper in delight.

“I'm addicted to the taste of you,” he whispers, but before I can get used to it, his weight shifts off me, and he slides off the end of the bed.

He can't leave me hanging like this, and I barely manage to pant out the question, “Where are you going?”

He flashes a wicked smile before he disappears into the closet for a few moments, then reappears holding something in the palm of his hand. He crawls back up the bed and straddles me, pinning me to the bed beneath his weight.

“I've bought these for you.” He uncurls his palm and reveals two small metal clips attached to a metal chain.

My eyes slide from the clips to his face. “What are they?”

“Nipple clamps.”

The word puts me immediately on edge. I frown.  
“Clamps?”

“I noticed you enjoyed nipple play. I’d like you to try wearing these because I think you’ll enjoy them.”

I cast a dubious look at the clamps. “Will they hurt?”

“A little at first, but that will turn into pleasure. Trust me.”

I lift my eyes to find him watching me closely. I know he won’t hurt me.

“Okay.” I nod.

“Good. Lie back down,” he instructs. “Now you need to choose a safe word in case they get too much. If you use it, I’ll stop.”

I settle back down on the sheets and think. “Okay, how about red?”

He gives a nod of approval. “Good. Now this will feel sharp at first.” I brace myself as he takes the first clamp, applies pressure to the ends, and opens it up, then holds my right breast and places the clamp on the bud of my nipple.

I draw in a sharp intake of breath and tense at the intense pinching sensation but find I get used to it after a few moments.

“Is that okay?”

I nod.

He does the same with my left nipple, and I’m prepared for the initial discomfort this time.

“Remember to use your safe word if you need to.”

“Okay.”

He closes a hand around each of my wrists, raising them above my head and pinning them into the mattress, using one hand to keep them there as he shifts over me so that his body is covering mine. I feel the wet tip of his cock press against my damp entrance, then he drives inside me with an impatient force, causing me to cry out in surprise.

I twist my head into the bed and draw in a shaky breath as the tell-tale throb of my orgasm quickly builds.

“I’m addicted to the feel of you.” His hot breath caresses my cheek, and he presses his lips to the base of my throat as he fucks me with an urgent need, driving the breath from my body with every thrust. He’s possessing me in every sense of the word and scrambling my brain.

I’m addicted to all of him—his taste, his touch, his scent. I’ve known him a week, but when we’re together like this, I can’t imagine him not being in my life because he’s consumed every part of me.

My eyes snap closed, and I dig my fingers into the hand that’s holding me down. I’m desperate to touch him.

He tugs at the metal chain that links the two clamps together. I let out a squeal as a fizzle of pleasure shoots through to my center, and my muscles tense around him.

“You feel like velvet,” he groans.

All of this is proving too much. The nipple clamps, my over-sensitized nether regions, and the fierceness with which he’s taking me are morphing together and conspiring against me. “I’m going to come.”

“We’re not playing that game. Come, Sophie.”

I don’t question it. No sooner does my name leave his lips, I come undone, trembling beneath him as my second orgasm

tears through me. He releases my hands, and I wrap my arms around his shoulders as he kisses me, bringing me back down. Once my shaking limbs have stilled, he pulls out and shifts backward to kneel between my thighs. I look at him through slitted eyes. Droplets of sweat are scattered across his brow and chest, tendrils of hair have fallen across his forehead, and his cock glistens. He hasn't come yet, but a far-off, glassy look in his eyes announces he's close.

“Get on your hands and knees.”

I start to push myself up onto my elbows, but I must be moving too slowly because as I start to turn, he grabs my hips and flips me over onto my front in one move.

I reposition my hands and legs and feel his knees brush against the back of my thighs. Fingertips graze the length of my spine with a barely-there touch, and I shiver with need.

“I'm going to take you here.”

His fingertips briefly skim along the crease of my buttocks, making his intent crystal clear.

*I'm going to have every inch of you tonight.*

His words from earlier on echo through my thoughts, and I instinctively tense at the suggestion. It's not something I've ever entertained before. When previous boyfriends have suggested it, my response has always been flat-out refusal.

I shake my head. “No. I can't. I've never done... that before.”

“It's okay,” he soothes, sweeping his hands across my buttocks. “I'll go really slow. If you're not enjoying it, we'll stop. Just try it.”

I close my eyes and can't believe I'm wavering so quickly.  
"I'm not sure."

"It'll feel good, I promise. I won't hurt you."

He's very persuasive. And if I'm going to try anything new, then I want it to be with him. Let's face it, he's experienced. I can't believe what I'm about to say.

"Okay, just be gentle."

He kisses the base of my spine as he kneels behind me.  
"Always."

His hands close around my hips, and I feel the head of his cock press between my buttocks. The feel of his erection placed 'there' sets me on edge a little. "Shouldn't you use lubricant or something? Won't it hurt otherwise?"

"We don't need it, but if it helps you relax..." He slides his right hand down between my legs and pushes two fingers inside me, making me whimper. My head sags forward, and my fingers grip the sheets as my muscles quiver around his swirling fingers before he pulls them out. He rubs his now-wet fingers between the crease of my buttocks, then places his palms flat against my cheeks and gently eases them apart.

"Remember, we'll take it slow. If you want to stop, say your safe word. Okay?"

I nod and curl my fingers into the sheets, bracing myself for the unknown. "Okay."

The tip of his cock presses against my opening, and he applies a little pressure, then a little more as he gently slides the tip in. For a few seconds, there's some discomfort, then it disappears as he stills, allowing me a moment to get used to the sensation.

“Is that okay?”

I release my grip on the sheets. It’s not so bad. “Yes.”

“Good. That’s the most uncomfortable part over with.”

He carefully inches forward a little more, stops again, then repeats until he’s all the way in. I close my eyes and feel a flicker ignite in my core at the extraordinary feeling of pressure and wait to see whether pleasure or pain will follow. He withdraws and then pushes into me a little quicker, sliding his right hand round the front of my hip bone and down to my clit. An intense ache starts in the deepest part of me as his fingers thrum against my clit, and I push back onto his cock and moan. A warm, tight glow throbs at my center and begins to rise through the rest of my body as he carries on with firm, steady strokes, and I match his thrusts, pushing back on his pulsating cock. The fact I’m letting him take me in a way no one else ever has sends my mind in a spin and turns me on like never before.

He growls at the friction and pulls down on the chain of the nipple clamps, setting off a bolt of pleasure.

“You feel incredible.” His voice is strained, and I can feel he’s close. “Are you ready?”

Pressure rises between my thighs, and I feel him unfastening the clamps around my nipples, causing an exquisite tingling sensation as the blood rushes back. I throw my head back and gasp. “God, yes.”

“Now.”

A long wail leaves my lungs as I let go and ride the crest of my third and most intense orgasm of the evening. A deep, satisfied groan echoes around the room as both his hands grip my hips, his fingers digging into my hip bones as he spills into

me over and over. My head drops forward, and my body shakes violently around his slowing thrusts as his warm, wet release trickles down the back of my legs.

He kisses my back as he gently withdraws, then I feel the mattress dip behind me as he moves off the bed.

“Don’t move.”

I couldn’t if I wanted to. Tiredness hits me like a wave, and it’s taking all my concentration to keep upright.

I hear the sound of running water coming from the master bathroom, then moments later, I feel the mattress dip again, and something cool and soft is wiping my bare behind. I instinctively tense at the cold dampness against my hot flesh, but then I realize he’s cleaning me up.

“How do you feel about what we tried tonight?”

I nod. “It was different.”

“Different good or different bad?”

*Definitely good.* “Good.”

“It seems tonight’s the night for firsts.” I can hear the smile in his voice. “It’s the first time I’ve been on a date and the first time you’ve tried nipple clamps and anal.”

“Mmm...” is all I can muster in agreement as my focus wanes and my eyelids grow heavy as the need for sleep is winning.

He removes the flannel from between my legs, and I feel his warm palm gently stroke down the center of my back. “You’re tired.”

I nod, too exhausted to speak.

“Come then, Sophie. You need to sleep.”

The mattress moves as he shifts off the bed, then two strong arms slide underneath my naked body, and I'm suddenly being lifted and turned over. Soft sheets are beneath me as he lowers me. I briefly open my eyes to find he's put me in bed, and I snuggle into the pillow under my head. Seconds later, the covers shift, and a hard, warm body presses against the length of mine and an arm wraps around my waist. I snuggle back into him, loving the feeling of his powerful body cocooning mine as he nuzzles his nose into my neck.

He kisses me lightly on the neck and speaks in a mere whisper, "You're adorable like this."

I've never felt so happy, and I want to feel this way forever.

Exhaustion wins, and I start to drift off into a blissful, contented sleep. "I'm going to look after you forever," he whispers in my ear as my consciousness shifts, and I'm no longer sure whether I'm awake or asleep.

*I'm dreaming, I decide... I must be.*

---

Long, lazy summer days stretch into weeks, and we easily fall into a regular routine. I stay over at Art's place most evenings. He drives us to work each morning, and I make a dash from his car to my office, trying not to be seen by the other staff. He continues to not give a fuck. Every day is full of stolen kisses at work, butterflies in my stomach at the mere thought of him, and mind-blowing sex. He fills every inch of my life, my thoughts, and my mind. I'm not sure what we are, and I'm not ready to ask him. He's never been in a relationship before, and I don't want to come across as pushy and scare him off



because I can't imagine him not being in my life. And it kills me to think that could ever be the case.

## Chapter Twenty

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The soft, first light of dawn plays at the edge of the curtains, and the smell of sex fills the bedroom as I'm awoken by smooth, warm flesh pressing against my body and a pair of soft lips brushing against mine. I flick open my eyes to find a pair of liquid brown eyes staring down at me. Art's firm, warm body is covering mine, and I feel his erection between my thighs.

My stomach flips at the sight of his disheveled ruggedness. His hair is sticking up this way and that but does nothing to lessen the impact of his perfect face. He gives me one of those easy smiles as he gazes down at me and makes me feel as if I'm the only woman in the world.

I reach up a hand and graze my fingers against the stubble of his jaw and smile. "Am I dreaming?"

"No." He plants a light kiss on my lips. "But I think I am because I can't believe you're real."

I cup my hand around his jaw and graze my thumb over his cheekbones as I take in the sight of the beautiful man in front of me. "I'm real."

He lowers his head and places his lips against the base of my throat. I close my eyes. "I know a good way we can find out."

He slides into me with one smooth push, and we both groan at the feel of him filling me completely. I tilt my hips, taking him deeper, and wrap my legs around his waist as he takes my hands and presses them into the pillow above my head.

“Look at me.”

I open my eyes at the request. He keeps his eyes locked on mine as he withdraws to the tip and thrusts into me, taking his time. “I love being one with you.”

I bite on my lip to stem my ragged breathing as my core tightens around him.

“I can’t get enough of you.” He pushes into me again, slowly causing my muscles to clench. If he’s planning on taking it slow and steady, then I’m not sure I’m going to be able to hold out.

“Tell me you’re mine.” He breathes in, sliding inside me again and pressing his warm lips to my cheek.

I close my eyes at the beautiful torture he’s subjecting me to as warm, tingling tendrils of desire snake their way up my body. “I’m yours.”

“Look at me,” he says firmly, withdrawing once more.

I snap open my eyes and fix on his scrutinizing dark gaze.

His chest rises and falls as he drives his hips against mine, his eyes hooded with lust. “I want to know everything about you. Please, promise you’ll tell me.”

There are some things I don’t want him to know about my past. Mum and Lucy know some of the bad things Theo did. No one knows the worst thing. No one. But right now, he’s got

me where he wants me, and I'll agree to anything. But this works in two ways.

“Okay,” I pant, maintaining his gaze. “But promise me you’ll tell me everything about you.”

His eyes search my face for a few seconds as if he’s working out the answer to a really difficult question. “I will.”

He dips his head and kisses me hard on the lips, still buried deep inside me. A tingling sensation consumes my core as my muscles contract around him, aching for more. This man’s got impressive self-control because I’m not sure how much longer I can last.

It’s like he reads my body.

He keeps his lips sealed against my mouth as he rears his hips back and thrusts inside me. “I’m close.”

“Me too.”

“Look at me.”

I open my eyes to see his heated gaze fixed on mine. “Now, Sophie.”

We keep our eyes on one another as he drives into me one final time. His mouth goes slack, and his eyes close as he throws his head back and explodes inside me. The sight of him lost in his own euphoria proves too much, and I unravel beneath him, my muscles contracting around his pulsating erection as he fills me with his seed until the tension dissolves from his shoulders, and he collapses on the bed beside me.

Contented silence provides the backdrop to the sound of our heavy breathing as it fills the bedroom.

“I think I’m getting used to waking up like this every morning.”

I smile. “Me too.”

“Everything’s different... with you.”

My curiosity is piqued at his sudden declaration, and I feel the skip of my heart in my chest as I roll onto my side to face him, propping my head against my hand. He lies back, hands behind his head, staring up at the ceiling. Dark brows are drawn together into a slight frown as if he’s trying to work something out.

“What is?”

“Everything because you’re different from any woman I’ve ever met before.” He looks at me. “When we first met, you put me in my place. Gave me a hard time. You told me what you thought of my idea about selling the hotel. I’m not used to women standing up to me like that.”

I roll my eyes in mock disgust. “Don’t tell me. They’re usually all *yes Art, no Art*.”

“Pretty much. They don’t challenge me. I’m not proud to admit it, but I used to take what I wanted from them and leave.”

At least he’s being honest.

My eyes narrow curiously. I don’t really want to know about the finer details, but I want to know all about him, so I’m going to have to ask. “So, what would happen with the others? You’d meet a woman, chat her up, take her somewhere, have sex, and never call?”

He cringes at the memories. “If I saw someone I wanted, I didn’t waste any time. I usually used hotels. Not much chatting happened. And no, I didn’t ever call them. Like I said, I’m not proud of how I’ve treated women in the past.”

My thoughts float back to the evening when he took me to view my apartment and seemed desperate to touch me but didn't. "The first time you took me to show me my apartment, you told me I was your kryptonite." I frown. "What did you mean?"

He rubs a hand through his hair, causing it to fall across his brow. He throws me a hesitant look. "It's going to be difficult to tell you this without me sounding like an asshole."

"Go on," I say slowly.

"Women usually give me what I want. I don't need to be dominant for them to do that. So, if I make a play for a woman, then it's usually inevitable."

"What is?"

"That we'll end up in bed together." He looks at me. "That day in the kitchen, I knew if I made a move, we'd probably end up fucking, most likely on the countertop because I wouldn't have been able to wait, and I didn't want it to be like that with you. I didn't want to take what I wanted from you, then drop you. I didn't want a quick fuck."

He turns onto his side and props his head against his hand. "I've waited thirty years for you. I wanted everything to be perfect. And it is. You're perfect, and you're mine."

My heart twists at his words as his dark, shimmering eyes hold mine. I've fallen hard for this man. "And you're mine."

He reaches out and tucks a wayward strand of hair behind my left ear. "I want to spend the whole day with you, and tonight we'll stay home, and I'll try to cook dinner."

The idea of staying home with him and snuggling up on the sofa sounds like bliss. "I can't tonight. It's Martin's

sixtieth, and I'm going out for a meal to celebrate, remember?"

He studies me for a long moment as if he's deciding whether to say something, then shifts toward me, sliding his body on top of mine. He props his arms on either side of my head, rests his thighs between my legs, and I feel the tip of his cock brush against my labia.

He grazes his fingertips across my jaw as he stares into my eyes. "I don't want to share you with anyone," he says softly. "And I know that's unreasonable of me, isn't it?"

"A little," I admit as I idly trace my fingertips across his biceps and up across the firm muscles of his shoulders.

He brushes the tip of his nose against mine. "It's what you do to me." Dark eyes hold mine. "I worry that one day I'm going to wake up, and you'll be gone."

My fingers snake their way through his thick hair. There's a vulnerability to his voice I haven't heard before that makes me want to kiss him and never stop. "I'm not going anywhere."

He smiles. "Good, because..." he trails off, shaking his head as if he can't finish the sentence, and I really want him to.

Since he waltzed into my life, he's taken center stage, and we've been pretty much inseparable since we met. If I'm being honest, the thought of spending an evening without him fills me with an emptiness I've never felt before.

The words spill from my mouth. "Do you want to come with me tonight?"

His face lights up. "I'd love to."

“Really?”

“Of course. I’ve told you I want to know everything about you.” He kisses me lightly on the lips. “Every... single... part.”

---

The rumble of engines from the street below drifting through the open French doors pulls me from my slumber. The late June sun beats through the open curtains and bathes the bedroom in sunny warmth as I push myself up on my elbows and scan the room. I’m alone, but a square piece of paper lies on the glossy, dark wood bedside cabinet. I reach over and pick up the note.

*You looked beautiful sleeping, so I didn’t wake you. Gone for a run. Won’t be long. X*

I grin as I put the note back down.

Yes, I could definitely get used to waking up like this every morning.

Fifteen minutes later, I’m showered and changed into light-blue denim jeans and a white T-shirt. I’m twisting my damp hair up onto my head in a bun when there’s a knock at the front door.

It can’t be Art because he’d have his key.

I head across the wooden floor into the hall and open the door.

It’s Tara. Every muscle in my body tenses. She’s dressed in sprayed-on jeans and a white, off-the-shoulder top. Her blonde tresses are swept up into a high ponytail, and she purses her lips at the sight of me.



*What the fuck is she doing here again?*

She doesn't even try to hide her contempt as she rolls her eyes and looks behind me into the apartment.

"Is he in?"

I fold my arms across my chest as she tosses out the words at me. "No."

She sighs while inspecting her cerise pink talons, looking thoroughly bored at the fact she's having to speak to me. "When will he be back?"

"I have no idea."

I'm being purposefully unhelpful, bordering on childish, but I don't care. I have no desire to help this woman.

Tara's kohl-rimmed eyes sweep me up and down. "You're not the first, love, and you won't be the last."

I narrow my eyes at her dig. "The last what?" I snap.

"Flavor of the month." Her nose wrinkles as if she's smelled something unpleasant "Although I think he must be having an early mid-life crisis with you, you look far too much like a good-girl Pollyanna."

An unsettling feeling sparks in my head at her words, but there's no way I'm going to show it. Not to her. I cut my eyes. "Yes, well, people change."

"Not Art. I've known him a lot longer than you, love. Actually, I know him very well." Her eyes narrow as she delivers the line, and my teeth clench, aware she's referring to her sleeping with him.

I throw her a withering look. "Maybe he wants someone with a little more class nowadays."

Tara gives me a thin smile. “You poor cow. You don’t know him at all, do you?”

The uneasy feeling is growing by the second, and I want her to leave. A stab of relief runs through me at the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs, and I pray it’s Art so he can put her straight.

I glance down the corridor and see Big Steve walking toward us with a frown on his face. Great, now there are two of them. It’s my turn to roll my eyes.

“Is he not in?” he asks Tara.

She swings her ponytail over her shoulder. “No, he’s gone for a run.”

“How do you know he’s gone for a run?” I snap.

She gives me another one of her smirks, which makes me want to slap her. “I told you. I know him.”

My fingernails dig into the bare flesh of my arms. I hate her.

“I’m off before my big mouth runs away with me,” she says, turning to Big Steve. “I’ll wait in the car.” Then without a second glance, she saunters across the landing in her stupidly high heels.

Big Steve frowns as he looks at me. “Tell him to give me a call when he gets back.” He turns to start to walk away. There’s no please, no thank you. I don’t know who these two think they are, but I’ve had enough of their damn rudeness.

“I know you don’t like me,” I blurt.

Big Steve stops in his tracks and turns around to face me.

“You and her,” I nod toward the staircase.

He frowns in confusion. “Don’t lump me in with Tara.”

He’s not fooling me. He’s probably surprised I’ve called him out. “I sort of get it,” I carry on. “You’ve known and worked with Art a long time, and I get you’re going to look out for him, but if you think I’m only interested in him for his money, you’re wrong.”

Big Steve rubs a hand across his bald head, the look of confusion still on his face. He takes a couple of steps toward me. “I don’t dislike you, Sophie. You seem to be a nice, decent girl. Too nice for him, and I’ve told him so. You’re not like the others. If anything, I’m looking out for you. I’m worried you’ll get hurt.”

I’m on the back foot. The uneasy feeling Tara sparked is now threatening to consume me. *What does this mean? How could he hurt me? His kinky past, perhaps?* But I know about that. “There’s always a risk, isn’t there? But it’s one I’m prepared to take.”

Big Steve considers what I’ve said. “Is it?” He doesn’t sound convinced. “Listen... just ask him if he’s going to be popping into work tonight.”

He turns and starts to make his way across the landing to the staircase.

Now it’s my turn to frown in confusion. “Why would he pop into the gym on a Friday night?”

Big Steve pauses as he reaches the top of the staircase. He opens his mouth and looks like he’s about to say something but then shakes his head as if he’s thought better of it and carries on to the stairs. I watch his bald head disappear out of sight then head back into the apartment.

I'm sitting on a kitchen stool, still mulling things over in my head when I hear the door close five minutes later. Art strolls into the kitchen, his black Under Armor T-shirt stuck to his upper body with sweat and black shorts glued to his toned, muscular legs. He runs a hand through his sweaty hair and places a hot kiss on the back of my neck. "Morning, beautiful."

I stare at my phone as he walks around the island and stands with his back to me, opening the refrigerator door. He looks like a gorgeous, sweaty fitness model, and I need to focus on getting the answers to the questions floating around in my head.

"Your friends visited while you were out," I say.

"Friends?"

"Big Steve and Tara."

A slight tension appears in his shoulders, but he remains silent, staring into the refrigerator.

"He asked if you were going to be popping into work tonight."

He pulls out a carton of orange juice from the refrigerator door.

"Why would you be going to the gym on a Friday night?"

"Friday night's boxing club. I've told you sometimes things can get out of hand with some of the guys. Testosterone and all that." He shuts the refrigerator door. "I'm going out with you tonight, so no, I'm not going."

"He implied that you hadn't told me something and that he was worried I was going to get hurt." I hate the fact I'm about to admit the next bit because it means I've allowed Tara to get

under my skin. “In fact, they both said I didn’t really know you.”

He takes a swig of orange juice and turns around to face me, his dark eyes fixing me a look. “Firstly, Big Steve knows you’re not like the other women I’ve been with. He’s worried I’m going to treat you the same way and hurt you, and I’m not. Secondly, Tara is just jealous of what we have.”

The coil of uneasiness in my stomach is slowly unraveling. “What don’t I know about you?”

He places the carton on the counter and takes my hands in his. “We’ve agreed to share everything about ourselves, haven’t we?”

I look down and watch as he brushes his thumbs across the top of my knuckles. “Yes.”

“And I will, but it will just take time. Like it will take time for you. Do you trust me?”

I lift my eyes to find him staring down at me. More than anything. “Yes, I do.”

“And I trust you, and that’s all that matters.”

He lets go of my hands and walks around the counter to where I’m sitting. I shriek in surprise as he slides his hands under my buttocks and lifts me against his damp T-shirt. He might need a shower, but I’m not complaining.

“What are you doing?” I giggle, giving him a playful slap on the arm in mock protest. “You’re all sweaty.”

He flashes me a wolfish grin as he begins to carry me toward the bedroom. “And I’m about to get even sweatier.”

## Chapter Twenty-One

---

**M**y nerves are already frayed as Art parks across the road from Carluccio's, and I'm beginning to think inviting him wasn't one of my best ideas. Mum could barely contain her excitement when I'd called her earlier to tell her I'd be bringing him along. He's the first guy I've introduced to them since Theo, and I'm really not sure how tonight's going to go.

I glance anxiously through the passenger window at the restaurant with its green and white striped canopies hanging over each window. Whenever there's a celebration or special birthday, Mum and Martin always come here, and it's now a tradition.

"It's not going to be like Le Gavroche, you know."

He frowns at me and looks mildly offended. "I'm not a snob."

"I know, I know," I say, fiddling with the hem of my green dress. "I'm nervous, that's all."

He rests his hand on top of mine in my lap. "Stop worrying. Relax. Everything will be fine. If anything, I should be the nervous one because this is the first time I've met 'The Parents.'"

My eyes slide to him. “And are you?”

“Not at all.”

I wished I possessed half of his confidence.

His hand closes around mine. “Now, come on. Otherwise, we’ll be late, and they’ll be wondering where we are.”

As soon as we walk through the green front door, I see my mum’s hand shoot up and waves us over to a table to the right.

“They’re over there.” I tug his hand as I lead him through the circular tables. The clatter of cutlery against plates and the sound of soft Italian music pouring through the speakers fills the restaurant as we walk over to their table. I glance around. The place looks the same as it did the first time we came here ten years ago. The same green and white décor—green tablecloths and empty Chianti bottles as centerpieces acting as candleholders with a red or white candle sticking out of the neck. There’s something familiar and comforting about its unchanged state, much like my parents.

Mum’s hazel eyes light up as we reach the table, and she and Martin get to their feet.

Martin sticks out his hand for Art to shake, which he takes and flashes my parents a perfect smile. “It’s lovely to meet you, Mr. and Mrs.?”

“Taylor,” my stepdad finishes, pumping his hand up and down. “Martin and Susan Taylor.”

Art maneuvers around him and pecks Mum on the cheek. “It’s wonderful to meet you, Susan.”

“Oh, please. Call me Sue.” Mum’s cheeks flush pink, and she pats the back of her deep brown, shoulder-length bob and gives a high-pitched laugh, which I’ve never heard before.

“Shall we?” Martin gestures for us to sit, and we all take our seats.

“It’s great to meet you, Art! I would say Sophie’s told us all about you...” Mum laughs, “... but I’ve hardly spoken to her for the last couple of weeks. So, you work together?”

“That’s right, I’ve taken over the management of the hotel. It’s a family business that used to belong to my late uncle. Sophie’s one of my best employees.” He glances intensely at me. I feel myself blushing.

“Oh, yes, of course. Such a lovely place. We went for tea there once, didn’t we, Martin?”

“That’s right.” Martin nods toward the window. “Is that your car? The Aston Martin?”

Art grins. “It is... a Vanquish.”

“I bet it’s a bit nippy?”

“It’s got a naught to sixty of just under four seconds.”

Martin gives a low whistle, clearly impressed.

“Very nice. I’ve never been in a sports car,” Mum says, sounding rather wistful.

Art laughs. “I’ll have to take you out for a ride, Sue.”

“Ooh!” Mum giggles. “I’d like that.”

I clear my throat and pick up my menu. “Happy Birthday, Martin. Did you get your card?”

“Yes. Thanks, dear. And thank you for the present.” Martin grins. “How are you?”

I realize it’s the first time I’ve been asked about me since we arrived. They’re both too preoccupied with the guy sitting to my left.



“Yes, great, thanks,” I enthuse.

“That new train will keep him occupied for a few good hours in the spare bedroom. Give me some peace and quiet.” Mum laughs, studying Art over the top of her menu.

“I’ve ordered a bottle of wine for the table,” Martin chimes.

“I’ll just have water, thanks.” Art smiles politely.

Martin chuckles. “We’ve booked a taxi, haven’t we, love?”

My heart sinks to my black wedges as my eyes slide to the already half-drunk glass of red wine in front of Mum. I just know she’s going to be firing questions Art’s way once she’s had a few more.

“Yes, thought it was best. I want to enjoy myself.” Mum laughs. “We haven’t seen our Sophie for ages, and it’s so lovely to meet her new boyfriend.”

I keep my eyes on my menu, inwardly cringing at the word ‘boyfriend.’ Why the hell didn’t it occur to me that she’d say something like this? Art and I haven’t even broached that discussion yet. God knows what he must be thinking. I can’t look at him. This definitely isn’t one of my better ideas.

By the time the main course arrives, the first bottle of wine has been obliterated mainly by Martin and Mum, and the second has been ordered and uncorked. Art has been his most polite and courteous self, charming the pants off them, and I’ve managed to steer the conversation onto the neutral territories of sports, news, and the weather, but the inevitable interrogation is looming closer with every sip of wine my mum drinks.

“If you don’t mind me saying, you’ve got a touch of the Italian about your looks, Art,” Mum inquires between sips of

wine.

He places his fork down and dabs the corners of his mouth with a napkin. "I've some Italian in my bloodline."

I stab a forkful of pasta as he provides the same answer he provided me, and it hits me that I'm still none the wiser about where his Italian heritage is actually from.

"I was going to say you must have with your dark, good looks."

I cringe and concentrate on shoving a forkful of pasta into my mouth.

Please don't tell me Mum has the hots for my boyfriend.  
*Shit! Even I'm at it now.*

"So, Sophie says you own some gyms," Martin pipes up.

"I own a chain of gyms, Go Fitness."

Martin's brow wrinkles, and I can almost hear the cogs turning in his head. "Go Fitness," he says to himself, then his eyes light up as he remembers something. "Ahh, yes, I know. There's one on the main street. I went a few years back. They're very popular." He pats his belly. "As you can see, I don't go very much." He then frowns as if he's puzzled by something. "But you say you own them?"

Art sips his water. "Yes, they're an international chain now."

A stunned silence descends on the table as Martin and Mum exchange looks of disbelief and stare at him.

"Well, I never..." Martin chortles after a while. "Sounds like you're a bit of an entrepreneur."

"You could say that."

Martin finishes his lasagna and gives me a look. “Sophie’s very precious to us. I hope you’re looking after her.”

Art places his hand over mine and squeezes it. His lips curl into a smile as he looks at me. “She’s very precious to me too.”

I melt, and as the waiters arrive to collect our plates, he doesn’t break eye contact with me.

“Whereabouts do you live?” Mum asks, picking up her glass of wine.

Her cheeks have taken on a permanent rosy glow, and there’s a glassy look in her eyes that tells me she’s tipsy. Anything could come spewing out of her mouth now.

“I’ve an apartment in Mayfair.”

Mum nearly chokes on her wine. “Oh, I bet that’s lovely.”

Martin’s bushy brown eyebrows arch. “Mayfair.”

I stare at the glass of wine I’ve nursed all night and pray for them to stop. They couldn’t make it any more obvious they’re impressed with his wealth if they tried.

Mum’s glassy eyes sweep over him as she sips her wine. “How’s Magda, Sophie, love?”

I feel Art’s eyes on me, and I know I need to tell her that I’ve moved.

I tuck my hair behind my ears and shift uncomfortably in my chair. “I don’t know. I haven’t seen her for a while. You see, I don’t live in the flat anymore.”

Mum’s eyes widen in surprise, and she looks from me to Art. “What? You two live together?”

“No, no,” I reply hastily, aware this couldn’t be any more awkward. “I had to leave the flat. A builder found asbestos in the shop, and they said it could potentially be in the flat too.”

“Asbestos,” Martin says worriedly. “That stuff is toxic.”

Mum places her glass of wine down. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I didn’t want you to worry,” I shoot back.

“It’s all sorted,” Art interjects calmly. “A friend of mine had an apartment to let in Pimlico, so Sophie moved in.”

“Pimlico?” Mum gasps as if she can’t quite believe it.

Martin nods approvingly. “Very nice, love.”

“The apartment is lovely. Art helped me move in.”

“It’s extremely secure. Undercover parking, a security system, and twenty-four seven concierge-manned reception,” Art adds. It’s like he knows exactly what to say to calm Mum down.

She beams. “That’s wonderful.”

“Yes, it’s nice to see that there are still some gentlemen out there,” Martin enthuses. “We do worry about Sophie living in the city.”

Art drapes an arm across the back of my chair and rests a hand on my shoulder. “There’s no need. No one will hurt her now she’s with me.”

Mum’s bottom lip begins to tremble, and I’m sure she’s going to cry. I give silent thanks when she sniffs and appears to regain some composure. “It’s such a relief for us that Sophie’s found herself such a lovely boyfriend.” I cringe.

*There's that word again.* “Not like the last one.” Mum’s smile fades.

*Oh God.* I grab my wine glass and gulp the contents. This could go either way.

“He was from a bad lot,” Martin says darkly.

“Humph. That’s an understatement.” Mum’s lips purse in disapproval. “Do you know the things—”

“Mum,” I cut her off before she can do any more damage. “Martin. Sorry, but we should really go. I’ve got a wedding tomorrow.”

Martin nods. “Oh, okay, love. We’ll let you get back.”

“Yes, it’s been lovely meeting you, Art.” Mum beams.

“And you both.” Art smiles and beckons the waiter over and murmurs something to him, which I can’t catch.

I’m already on my feet, raring to go before Mum can spill any of my secrets. I glance across the table to find her flashing her eyes at me and mouthing, “He’s a keeper.”

I already know that.

Art stands and juts out a hand for Martin to shake. “It’s been lovely to meet you, and happy birthday.”

He weaves around to Mum, who is already offering her pink cheek for him to kiss.

“It’s been wonderful to meet you too. I do hope we see you again soon,” she gushes.

Art kisses her on the cheek and flashes a perfect smile. “I’m sure, and as a birthday gift from me to you, this meal is paid for.”

Martin and Mum look at one another, flabbergasted.

“Oh no, son, you don’t need to do that,” Martin says, snapping out of it.

“I insist.”

“No, how can we possibly repay you?” asks Mum, horrified.

He takes my hand in his. “There’s no need. It was lovely to meet you.”

“Art—” I begin.

“It’s done.” He squeezes my hand. “I’ve already agreed to settle the bill with the waiter.”

We pay the bill, say our goodbyes, and leave my parents beaming like fools as we head outside into the night. He slides his hand around my waist as we walk across the road to the car.

I climb in and rest my head against the headrest. My muscles relax for the first time in three hours now the interrogation is over, and it didn’t all go completely wrong.

“You didn’t have to pay for the meal.”

He shrugs. “It’s fine. It wasn’t expensive, and I didn’t contribute to the present, did I?”

I close my eyes and sigh. “I’m sorry.”

“About what?”

“The interrogation you’ve just been subjected to.”

He laughs softly. “They’re your parents. They’re bound to worry about you.”

“Not anymore. You’ve managed to charm the pants off them, I think.” I cast him a sideways look.

“Charm is my forte.” He smirks and pushes a few buttons on the center console of the car. The deep, intense bass beats of the opening lines of Vera Blue’s “Hold” fill the car.

“I’ve always loved this song.” I sigh, briefly closing my eyes.

“Good, because we’re going to make love to it when I get you home.”

*He’s going to make love to me.* My eyes snap open, and I feel a twinge between my thighs as my heart flips. He flicks me a scorching look, then pulls away with a squeal of tires.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

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**A**s I slip into my black silk nightdress and climb under the bedcovers, I stare up at the ceiling. Uneasiness has descended on my thoughts as I go back over the evening in my mind. More than one thing my mum said has made me think. Her use of the word ‘boyfriend’ for a start. We haven’t had that conversation yet, and I’m not sure how it’s going to go, given he’s never had a relationship before. Wanting to share things with one another is one thing. Committing to the same person day in and day out is very different.

“What are you thinking about?” He’s standing at the foot of the bed, and I didn’t even hear him come into the room. He unbuttons his shirt, peels it from his shoulders, and throws it on the chaise longue, then unfastens his jeans and steps out of them, watching me all the while.

“What are we?”

He slips into bed beside me and props his head against his hand. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, if you had to label this... this thing we’re doing... what would you call it? What would you call us?”

His brown eyes stare down at me. “This is because your mum called me your ‘boyfriend,’ isn’t it?” He frowns as if he



has a problem with the word, and my heart sinks.

I shake my head as if pre-empting what he's about to say. "You're not my boyfriend."

"I'm thirty. Boyfriend is playground talk." He grazes his knuckles against my right cheekbone. "But I'm the only man in your life, and you're the only woman in mine."

"We're exclusive?"

"One hundred percent."

"We're a couple?" I ask.

He brushes his thumb across my bottom lip. "Yes. We're a couple of people who love spending time together and care about one another very much, and the sex..." his eyes widen, and he shakes his head slowly, "... is unbelievable. We're a couple."

I need to tell him how I really feel about him. It's now or never. "I'm not saying this because I expect to hear it back from you, I'm saying this because it's what I feel, and I want you to know." This is coming out all wrong, but I can't stop now because his liquid dark eyes are watching me expectantly. "I love you."

He doesn't move a muscle for a few seconds as if he's stuck in the moment, then his chest rises and falls, and I watch his Adam's apple bob up and down. He presses his mouth to mine and kisses me softly, shifting on top of me. Out of nowhere, I hear the soft beat of "Hold," and his hands tug my nightdress up and over my head. He presses a hand into the pillow on either side of my head as he showers my face with kisses. I writhe beneath him in the knowledge that he's telling me how he feels without saying a word.

He pushes my legs apart with his knees as he settles in between my thighs, and his soft lips continue working down my body, planting featherlight kisses over my breasts, trailing down to my waist, and into my pubic hair. I moan as he presses his tongue against my clit and drop my eyes to see him studying my reaction. His gaze fixes on me as he starts to lap at my clit. I gasp and push my head back into the pillow as a molten ball of warmth builds with every flick of his tongue and reach to entangle my fingers in his hair. The mounting pressure at my core becomes almost unbearable as he drags me toward climax with his mouth.

Just when I'm teetering on the brink, the bed shifts, and the weight of his delicious body lays over mine. The head of his erection tickles the tight, wet heat between my legs, and in one push, he's inside me. A satisfied, guttural groan falls from his lips as he enters me, and I curl my limbs around his body, keeping him close. Hot lips press against my cheek, and I can hear his uneven breathing with each thrust. I feel the undulations of his firm shoulder muscles beneath my fingertips as he tenses, holding himself back. I know he's struggling to keep control. He's everywhere—inside my body, my mind, my ears, and I relish the feeling of being completely consumed by him. By the man I love without restraint.

"I want to make love to you forever," he tells me, his breath hot on my cheek. I close my eyes as he stills inside me, pausing to allow my muscles to stop quivering before he picks up the pace again. I don't want this feeling to ever stop.

"And ever."

I scratch my fingernails lightly down his back and grip his firm buttocks in both hands as he drives into me, tensing beneath my touch. No sooner has he started than he begins to

slow down, and I'm not sure whether it's for my benefit or his this time. He repeats the process, pumping into me then slowing, giving me a few seconds before he carries on for what seems like forever. I'm damp with sweat coating my breasts and stomach, and our bodies glide together as one. The track has long since ended as his hip bones grind against mine until they hurt, and my leg muscles ache from being wrapped around his back. He's prolonging the blissful pinnacle of our night together because he doesn't want it to stop, and neither do I. I don't want it to ever stop.

"I can't wait any longer." He drags his head up to meet my eyes. Damp tendrils of hair have fallen across his forehead into a curl, and his face is flushed. "I'm not going to stop next time."

As he thrusts into me, the tension between my thighs spikes and my hands fly up to his shoulders.

"Now, Sophie," he orders in my ear as he pushes into me, and that's enough. My fingernails dig into the flesh of his back as I cry out his name and split in two. And he's right behind me, calling my name as he pumps into me. His head drops to my chest, and I feel his warm breath on my breasts as it slows. We lie entwined as one. And it feels right as it should be. He interlaces his fingers with mine, lifts my hand, and kisses it.

"What happened between you and your ex?"

The question comes out of left field, and in my post-coital haze, I'm floundering. "I... I don't want to talk about it."

He lifts his head from my chest. "Please, tell me."

I stare at the ceiling.

I can't tell him.

Telling him will bring it back, and I'm not ready to go back there.

“You said earlier that we don't know everything about one another yet. Let this be something you don't know about me for now.”

His brows draw together into a frown. “I want to know, and maybe it's time for you to tell me.”

I'm not ready to tell him the whole truth about everything Theo did. I'll give him the edited version.

“We met in my second year at uni. At first, it was great. I thought he was the one, then we graduated and moved in together, and he changed.” I drag my eyes from the ceiling momentarily to find him watching me carefully. “At first, he started saying little things to me that he didn't like what I was wearing or an outfit made me look fat. Then he started getting really jealous if I even said hello to another guy. He was convinced I was having an affair. Toward the end, he started getting aggressive. He never actually hit me, but he threatened to. He'd get right up in my face whenever we argued, which was all the time the last few months. Then he started getting rough in the bedroom, holding me around the neck and choking me. One time, the last time... I passed out. It scared me. I was worried if I stayed, he'd end up killing me.

“So I moved back home. Mum and Martin helped me find the flat because it was halfway between their house and work. It wasn't great, but it was a place of my own. A few months after we split, I ran into one of his friends, who told me what he'd been getting up to. That's when I realized exactly what a lying, abusive, cheating bastard he really was. It turns out while we were together, he'd been picking up women every weekend when he went out drinking with his mates.”

He grazes his fingertips across my cheek. “Poor you. What a bastard. Where is he now?”

I look at him. The crease line on his forehead has appeared, and his jaw is clenched in anger.

“I’ve no idea. The last I’d heard, he’d met someone else and settled down.”

“You should have told me about this. If I’d known what that bastard did to you, I would never have restrained you or tied you up.”

“No, it’s not the same. Besides, I want to do those things with you.” I reach up and stroke his cheek with my fingertips. “You’re not him. I know you’ll never hurt me. I trust you.”

He shakes his head, clearly bothered by what I’ve just shared.

If he’s reacted like this to what I’ve told him, I’m relieved I didn’t tell him everything that happened between Theo and me. I can’t. Not yet. It’s too soon.

He closes his hand over mine on his cheek, slides it to his mouth, and kisses it. “I meant what I said in the restaurant. No one will ever hurt you now you’re with me.”

I smile because I truly believe it. “I know. You’re my protector.”

He kisses me gently on the lips and pushes his fingers through my hair. “I mean it, Sophie. I’ll kill anyone who tries to hurt you, and if I ever cross paths with your ex, I’ll kill him too.” He pauses, and there’s a fierce glint in his eyes which tells me he’s not joking. “Move in with me.”

I think I’m hearing things. “What?”

“I miss you when you’re not with me. I want you to move in.”

A short, sharp laugh falls from my lips because he’s got to be joking, only the serious look in his eyes is telling me he’s not. “We’ve known each other for a month. Isn’t it a bit soon?”

His broad shoulders lift into a dismissive shrug. “Says who? All I know is that you’ve spent nearly every day since we’ve met here. I want your face to be the first thing I see in the morning and the last thing I see at night.”

He’s right, and the thought of waking up with him every day makes my heart do funny things inside my chest. I can’t suppress my smile or what I’m about to agree to. “Okay, let’s do it.”

He breaks into a grin. “Great. Tomorrow, I’ll give you your own key, and we’ll move your things in on Sunday.”

## Chapter Twenty-Three

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The big band strikes the first few chords of “I’ve Got You Under My Skin” from beneath the shade of the pagoda on the gloriously sunny terrace. As I walk through the Orangery, I breathe a sigh of relief, pleased that another wedding has gone without a hitch, and the weather held on to allow the bride and groom to have their afternoon reception outdoors like they wanted.

I hover on the periphery of the terrace. The wedding is due to finish at six o’clock, so I’ll have just enough time to go home, get ready... and tell Art.

The clinking of glasses makes me look to the right, where Olly is collecting empties from the tables in the bar area. I smile at him and watch as he purposefully turns his back on me. It seems the news about Art and me has finally reached the hotel. *It was only a matter of time*, I reassure myself.

I take a deep breath, determined not to let other people’s views put a downer on the happiest I’ve felt in a long time. Nothing is going to pour cold water on this.

My black heels click across the gray slate floor as I cross into the Summer Room, still laid out from this lunchtime ceremony. I scan behind the chairs as I walk down the aisle,

checking to make sure none of the guests have left any belongings behind. Glasses and phones are the usual culprits.

“How’s it going?”

I glance over my shoulder to see Art headed across the room toward me. He looks effortlessly sexy with hands in the front pockets of his chinos, and the sleeves of his black shirt are rolled back to reveal his thick, golden forearms. I still can’t believe he’s mine, and he’s asked me to move in with him. Lucy is going to lose her mind when I tell her.

“Great. Everything’s gone to plan.”

“The band sounds good.”

“Yes, they are. I’m glad the bride and groom got their wish to have it outside.”

He holds my hand in his and pulls me toward him with a smile.

I automatically look toward the door to check no one is around. “Is this a good idea? I think people know about us.”

He pulls me to his chest, wraps his arms around me, and I’m gone. “What people?”

I dare not tell him about Olly’s reaction. “The other staff.”

“If they already know, it doesn’t matter whether I kiss you then,” he murmurs against my mouth as he kisses me. He sways us in time to the music floating through from the band outside, and I laugh as he releases me and takes a step back, twirling me around, then pulling me back to his chest.

I link my arms around his neck and laugh. “You’ve got the moves.”



“I do indeed.” He seals my lips with a kiss and wraps his arms around my waist, swaying us from side to side again, and I’m suddenly lost in the moment. Swept away by the dancing and the beat of the music, in my mind we’re dancing at our own wedding.

“I now pronounce you man and wife,” a familiar female voice declares, snapping me out of my daydream.

Lucy stands in the doorway, one hand on her hip and a massive grin on her face, delighted to have caught us.

I’m not entirely sure what she’s referring to, then realize Art and I are standing at the end of the aisle where the bride and groom usually take their vows.

“You two need to get a room.” She giggles.

He’s gazing down at me with that look in his eyes that tells me he agrees. “Maybe we do.”

“I’ve only come to remind you that I’ve booked the Uber for tonight, so we should get to yours at eight o’clock,” Lucy says, oblivious to the drama she’s about to stir up.

I can feel his heavy gaze land on me. “What’s happening tonight?”

This is what I was working up to tell him.

Lucy cocks her head in surprise at the fact I haven’t told him. “I’m stealing the lovely Sophie away from you for the night. Tonight, she’s all mine, Mr. Black, and she’s going to be looking hot.” She giggles, and I want to tell her to shut up. “See you later, Soph.” She turns and disappears through the doors, leaving me to clear up the carnage she’s left in her wake.

I don’t want to look at him, but I know I’ve got to.

“What’s going on?”

I take a deep breath and look up at him. “We’re going out for Lucy’s hen-do tonight, and I didn’t tell you because I knew you’d get... twitchy.”

His eyebrows arch. “Twitchy?”

“Yes, because we’ll be drinking a lot, and I knew you wouldn’t like it.”

He pushes his hands into his pockets and frowns as if he doesn’t like it, but he doesn’t want to admit I’m right. “What was she talking about you looking hot for? You always look hot. What’s so different about tonight?”

Me going out isn’t the main issue. What I’m going to be wearing is.

“It’s fancy dress.”

“What’s the theme?”

I know he’s going to freak out, but I haven’t got a choice, so he’ll just have to deal with it. “It wasn’t my idea, it’s Lucy’s. She is the bride, after all. It’s her hen-do.”

“Sophie.”

“Burlesque.”

“No way.”

I put my hands on my hips. Now he’s being unreasonable. “You haven’t even seen the costume.”

“I know what burlesque is.”

“Err, excuse me, Art?” George hovers in the doorway. “There’s a call for you.”

“I’ll be right there,” he barks, then pins me with a glare. “This conversation isn’t over.”

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As soon as the bride and groom leave the hotel and go on their merry way to their honeymoon in the Seychelles, I race home. I haven’t seen Art since this afternoon, and I’m not hanging around because I know what argument we’re going to have, and I haven’t got the time or energy for it. Theo used to tell me what to wear, and I’m not going through that again. Anyway, no one tells me what to wear. Full stop.

I hurry through a shower, dry and curl my hair into soft waves, pinning the top section up onto my head, and apply subtle makeup. I don’t need anything too daring with the outfit I’ll be wearing.

I slip on the strapless silky red costume and peer at myself in the bedroom mirror. It has a black lace overlay and a very short black tulle skirt with a ruffle at the back. It looks like a corset but is actually a quite short dress that skims low across my cleavage and accentuates my waist. The black silk above the knee stockings and black stilettos finish off the look. It’s far more daring than anything I’ve ever worn before, but Lucy has never done subtle. I’m seriously considering cracking open a bottle of wine before I step outside in public looking like an extra from the set of *Moulin Rouge*. Thank God Art can’t see me.

I hear a thud at the front door and peer at my watch. It’s only seven thirty. The taxi can’t be early. Lucy’s never been early for anything in her life.

I open the door to be greeted by a fuming Art, nearly bowling me over as he barges past me into the flat.

*Great. Now for argument Round Two.*

“Oh, do come in,” I mutter sarcastically, closing the door behind him.

He stands in the hallway, arms folded as his dark eyes sweep up and down my body, taking in my outfit. His jaw twitches with tension. “There’s no way you’re going out dressed like that.”

*There’s no way he’s telling me what I can and can’t wear.*

If he thinks he’s going to storm in and start telling me what to do, he’s wrong.

I fold my arms, mirroring him. “I told you, it’s a fancy dress. Lucy chose the costume. I can’t not dress up, I’m her Maid of Honor. It is her hen-do. It’s not like I’m going to the shops dressed like this.”

He cocks an eyebrow, signaling his disapproval at my vague attempt to lighten the mood. “I’m serious, Sophie. You’re not going out wearing that. You look like a fucking stripper.”

Anger flares in my gut. That does it. “You cannot tell me what to wear.”

“I can when you’ve got more flesh on show than you have covered up,” he snaps.

“I’m bored with having these conversations with you. This is your issue, not mine. Deal with it.” I push past him into the bedroom and hear him growl in exasperation, then his hand closes around my wrist and spins me back round with such a force I crash into his chest. I don’t have the chance to protest

because his lips attack mine, his hands cup my face, and I'm pushed back against the wall. I tell myself I'm angry with him, but my body is deceiving me and redirecting my anger into need. My hands snake into his hair and push his lips harder against mine, deepening the kiss and igniting my core. The length of his body is pressed against me, and I'm trapped between him and the wall. He pushes his hips into mine, digging his erection into my hip bone, and I gasp at the realization he's pissed off but just as turned on as I am. His right hand slides down my body, curling in between my thighs.

"I haven't got time," I tell him feebly as I carry on kissing him back.

He pushes his hand down the front of my black lace panties, causing another moan to leave me. "Then stop me." He breathes against my lips. "You don't feel like you want me to stop."

I want him, and all rational thoughts have left my brain.

"Don't stop." I groan as his fingers stroke my clit.

He removes his hand from my panties, and two large hands slide beneath my buttocks and lift me against the wall. I loop my arms around his shoulders and link my legs around his waist as he pulls my underwear to the side and pushes himself inside me, forcing me higher against the wall. My head rests back, and my eyes shut as my mind spins into oblivion.

"You drive me fucking crazy," he rasps in my ear as white-hot tension mounts as he pounds into me. This isn't soft and gentle but hard, angry fucking.

"Tell me you'll come home to me tonight."

I flicker open my eyes to see two dark, shimmering pools staring back at me. "I'll always come home to you."

He presses his forehead to mine. “Promise me.”

I run my fingers up into his hair, entangling them into his thick, soft locks. “I promise.”

He kisses me deeply and urgently as my core tightens, and he twitches inside me. The tension at my center peaks, and a warm wave washes over me as I tear my lips from his. Art follows me over the edge, groaning my name against my cheek as his thrusts slow, emptying himself inside me.

After a few seconds, he lifts his eyes to mine, and they’re burning with intensity. “I can’t come with you this evening, but I will be inside you.”

I feel throbbing between my legs at his possessive crudity, and I’m alarmed I’ve responded in such a way.

I haven’t got time for another shower. Part of me is still annoyed that he barreled his way in and tried to tell me what to do.

“My taxi is coming to collect me in...” I glance at my watch, “... five minutes.”

He slides out of me and lowers me to the floor, helping me to rearrange my outfit and fastening his fly. He pulls something out of his back pocket and offers it to me. A key.

“A front door key, as promised. Come back to mine later.” He kisses me lightly on the lips. “I haven’t finished with you tonight.”

My insides tingle at his statement, but I remind myself I’m still cross with him. I take the key and place it on the bedside table.

“Don’t be showing up tonight in any club,” I warn, tugging my skirt down. “It’s a man-free zone.”

“It had better be.” His lips twitch into a smile to show me he’s joking. “Don’t worry, I won’t be. There’s some business that’s come up I need to sort out.” He tucks his shirt back in.

I haven’t got time to ask what he’s got to sort since the taxi will be arriving pronto.

“Text me when you’re on your way home. Otherwise, I’ll worry.” He kisses me once on the lips. “Who am I trying to kid? I’m going to worry anyway.”

My heart melts. “There’s no need to. Lucy’s sister, Sarah, will be with us. If there’s any bother, I’ll just let her loose on them.”

## Chapter Twenty-Four

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**W**hoops of laughter can be heard from inside the taxi before I even open the lobby door. As I cross the road, the taxi's door slides open, and the raucous laughter spills out onto the pavement.

Lucy waves a hand through the door. "Come on, Soph."

I launch myself into the back of the black SUV onto one of the fold-down seats and slide the door closed. Lucy is in the back seat, dressed in a white and black burlesque costume with a glittery pink 'Bride to Be' sash draped around her chest. A short, white veil completes the look. Curls cascade around her shoulders and the rosy flush to her cheeks tells me she's already been drinking.

"Sophie Ward, long time no see!" Sarah, Lucy's older sister, cries from beside her. She, and the other woman perched on the seat beside me, whom I've never met before, are all dressed in the same outfits. The only difference being Sarah's costume pulls a little tighter around her ample bosom. Lucy shares the same blonde hair and blue eyes as her sister, but Sarah is even louder, if that's even possible.

"Hi, Sarah." I smile.

"This is Claire." She points to the other woman with long, straight auburn hair, green eyes, and freckles.



Claire already has a faraway look in her eyes, and as she goes to say hello, she hiccups instead and slaps her hands to her mouth.

“She’s already had one too many white wine spritzers.” Sarah giggles. “She’s such a lightweight.”

“I am,” Claire replies in a small, high-pitched voice.

“So, you’ve all been drinking already?” I ask, knowing I should have opened the wine when I got home from work.

Lucy gives me a reassuring look. “Don’t worry, Soph. You can make up for it when we get to Bar Rumba and meet up with the others.”

Knowing Lucy, she’ll make sure of it.

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Two hours later, the head start the others had is taking its toll. Five different bars, countless glasses of wine, and dodgy-colored spirits served in shot glasses see us losing members of the hen-do along the way, and Sarah and her red-haired friend are lagging behind.

Lucy and I weave past the lines of revelers lining up to gain entrance to the different bars and clubs dotted along the street with Sarah and Claire tagging behind, leaning against one another for support.

I’m currently at the right level of tipsy, which is where I want to stay because I feel an overwhelming pressure to be sensible and ensure Lucy returns home safely this evening. She and Mark have had their problems, and I don’t want to add to them.

“Lucy, where are we going?” I grumble. “My feet are starting to hurt.”

“I want to go somewhere different. Try some place new,” she announces, still surprisingly chipper given how much she’s had to drink. We walk past another line of people, and she casts them a disparaging look. “And I’m not standing in line.”

She pauses and looks over her shoulder at Sarah and Claire. “Keep up, you two.”

As she turns back around, something catches her attention, and her eyes light up. “Come on. We’re going in there.”

I frown and slowly follow her down the dimly lit side street, concentrating on the cobblestones beneath my feet and keeping upright. I’ve never been down here before and not quite sure where she’s leading us. I glance ahead to see a set of black wooden doors in the wall, illuminated by a streetlight. A black sign, backlit with white lights and ‘Dark Desires’ in bold gold letters hangs above the doorway. The unpleasant realization hits me.

“Lucy, we can’t go in there. It’s a strip club,” I hiss.

“Oh, come. It’ll be a laugh,” she calls over her shoulder. “And best of all, we haven’t got to stand in line.”

“What about Sarah and Claire?” I say, trying to keep up with her.

Lucy waves a hand dismissively. “Oh, they’ll catch up.”

She marches ahead like some tour guide, and I know I might as well go along with it because there’s no changing her mind now. *One drink, then we’re going*, I tell myself.

“Well, hello, beefcake,” Lucy purrs, coming to a halt outside the set of double doors at the entrance.

I blink through the yellow hue of the streetlight and, for a moment, I think I'm seeing things. "Big Steve?"

He raises his eyebrows in surprise as he gives us a long look up and down. "Sophie, what are you doing here?"

"It's her hen-do," I blurt, aware of what he must be thinking of our outfits. I peer up at the sign overhead and frown. "You work here as well then?"

"Hen-do, schmen-do," Lucy interrupts. "How's Big Stevie?" She runs her fingers down his right bicep, hidden beneath his black suit jacket.

"I'm sorry, she's a bit drunk," I apologize.

Lucy throws me a hurt look. "Am not!"

The edge of gruffness to Big Steve dissolves as his blue eyes shine in amusement at my friend. "Erm... yeah, on the door."

It figures. I guessed he could be a boxer or a bouncer when I first met him.

He shoots me a worried look. "Does Art know you're here?"

"No."

"Not bloody likely," Lucy announces before I can ask what it's got to do with him. "She's mine for tonight. Now can we come in or what?"

Big Steve rubs a hand across his bald head and looks at me for a long moment. For a second, he hesitates, then steps aside to let us through. "I can't stop you."

He can't. And if he did, I'd want to know why.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

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Lucy grabs my hand and squeaks in delight as she jostles us through the black wooden doors and into the club. A corridor with black carpet and dark walls lies ahead, and the beat of music filters toward us from the other end. Lucy pushes open the door to the ladies' room off to the right. Black, polished tiles line the floor and walls, and three white, pristine ceramic hand basins sit below a large rectangular mirror with a gilded frame. They're spotless and modern, and a floral fragrance fills the air. I'm not exactly sure what I expected the ladies in a strip club to look like, but it wasn't this.

Lucy sets her black clutch bag down on the shiny black marble counter, pulls her dark pink lip gloss out of her bag, and runs it over her lips.

"Big Steve's so burly. I bet he could show you a good time."

I shoot her a disapproving look. I hope it's just the wine talking. "How are things between you and Mark?"

"I can look," she says defensively. "And I'm not talking about bloody Mark on my hen-do."

"You're getting married in a month," I remind her, opening my handbag and tugging out my cell. "You shouldn't feel like

this.”

There’s a text from Art, sent an hour ago.

**Art:** *Are you okay? I miss you xxx*

My heart swells, and I can’t help but grin as I text him back.

**Sophie:** *I’m fine. Stop worrying. Miss you too xxx*

“Don’t tell me. A text from Mr. Italian Stallion,” Lucy teases, catching my reaction. She rubs her lips together and gives me a knowing look. “You’re in love with him, aren’t you?”

I take a deep breath and examine my reflection in the mirror, tweaking the soft curls over my shoulders. “Totally,” I admit. “He asked me to move in with him.”

“What did you say?” Lucy shrieks.

“Yes, I’m moving in tomorrow. He’s given me a key to his place. You don’t think it’s a bit soon, do you?”

“No. You love him, and you can tell he loves you too.”

*He hasn’t said it yet.*

“Do you think so?”

Lucy shoves the lip gloss back into her bag and fixes me a no-nonsense look. “When I caught you two dancing together today, I could tell he adores you by the way he looked at you. He’s besotted.”

I fiddle with my skirt. I really want her to be right, and she is. Since Theo, I’ve kept away from relationships, not wanting to risk getting involved in case history repeats itself, and I end up getting hurt again. But that would never be possible with him. Art swept into my life like a tornado, pulling me into the

eye of his storm. I never stood a chance of getting out of his path in time. It was inevitable, he told me. And he was right.

“This is a rather serious conversation to be having in a strip club’s ladies’ room.” I laugh.

“I’ve always wanted to see what it’s like in one of these places,” Lucy says, fixing her hair in the mirror. “Come on, we’ll get drunk, so we won’t care that there are naked ladies.”

We exit the ladies’ room and venture down the dark corridor that opens into the rest of the club. My visions of a red-lit, dry ice-filled room with crowds of baying men at the feet of some naked strippers are quickly squashed. At first glance, it could pass for a normal club and a sophisticated one at that. The walls are clad in deep purple, plush velvet drapes, and the black carpet carries on throughout. The lighting is soft and low above the tables, and booths are dotted about the room, occupied by both men and women. A bar sweeps around to the right, and to the left is a stage that juts out into the middle of the room like a runway. On center stage is a leggy blonde, wearing nothing but a black sequined thong, winding herself around a pole like a pretzel. Apart from the almost-naked pole dancer, the club has a low-key, relaxed vibe. It’s not as bad as I’d imagined, but it’s still a strip club.

We perch ourselves on black-leather stools at the bar. “Two glasses of white wine, please,” Lucy says to the bartender, dressed head to toe in black. She casts a glance around the bar. “It’s not that bad in here, apart from the naked woman twirling around the pole.”

“To work somewhere like this or to visit these clubs.” I wrinkle my nose. “It’s still seedy though, isn’t it?”

The bartender places two glasses of wine on the bar. “It’s not that bad,” Lucy says, picking up her glass. “Stop being

such a prude.”

“I’m not a prude, but come on, Luce...” I look around at the mainly male-dominated club. “Would you be happy if you found out Mark visited places like this?”

She sighs, indicating all is still not well between them before taking a swig of wine. “I dunno, Soph. It might help fire him up in the bedroom department, to be honest.”

Before I can ask any probing questions, her phone beeps from inside her clutch bag, and she pulls it out.

“It’s from Sarah. She and Claire are calling it a night. I’m not surprised. I don’t know why she bothered bringing her, she’s such a bloody lightweight as are the rest of them.” Lucy rams her phone in her bag. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter. The important ones are left.”

I pick up my glass and take a sip of the cool, dry wine, and we swivel around on our seats and look out into the room. The tempo of the music is rising, and beneath the spotlight on center stage, the stripper is upside down on the pole, thrashing her blonde mane about as her act reaches its crescendo.

“After that prick, Theo, I’m really glad you’ve found Art,” Lucy comments. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m completely jealous because the man is sex on legs, but I’m happy for you.”

I’m happy too—the type of blissfully stupid happy I’ve only seen in romantic movies. A grin spreads across my face, and I can’t help it. I hold out my glass. “Here’s to the future.” We chink glasses, and I take a long drink of wine.

I swivel back around and place my glass on the bar as the music ends, and I hear a round of applause erupt behind me.

“Oh my God, that’s the blonde woman.” Lucy gasps.

I haven't the faintest clue what she's talking about. I frown in confusion and look at Lucy, who's staring at the stage. "Who are you talking about?"

"The stripper. It's that the Tara woman you hate?"

My eyes snap to the stage as I twist around. As the woman straightens, my fear is confirmed. The familiar platinum blonde hair is twice its normal size, coiffed and bouffant, and her dark smoky eyes are completely over the top. Other than the black, sequined thong, she's wearing nothing but black-patent skyscraper platform heels. Her scarlet lips twist into a self-satisfied smile at the applause she's receiving as she turns to exit the stage. As she glances back over her shoulder to cast one final look at her audience, I'm sure she sees me, but I can't be certain.

Lucy sips her wine contemplatively. "She's got great tits, though."

I stare in stunned silence at the stage as the lights dim and the music changes to a pop track. I lift my glass of wine to my lips and take a long drink to try and wash away the horrid gnarly feeling in my stomach. "Art said she works in his gym... and Big Steve... he said they both work in one of his gyms."

Lucy shrugs. "Judging by her figure, she probably does. People can have more than one job, you know, Soph."

I suppose Lucy's right, but I find myself draining my glass of wine, and the gnarly feeling is still there and growing by the second.

"Do you mind if we go? I've had enough of it in here." I put my empty glass on the bar.

"Okay, but we're going to another club," she insists.



As I slide off the seat and pick up my bag, I'm suddenly acutely aware of movement in the corner of my eye and glance up to see Tara approaching me.

"Are you here getting tips?" she spits, folding her arms across her chest, pushing up her breasts, and making them nearly pop out of the black bikini top she's wearing.

Anger simmers in my blood. She's got a bloody nerve. "What are you talking about?"

"You, I saw you watching. Have you come to get some tips on how to keep him satisfied?" she sneers.

That does it. "I don't think he'd be interested in anything so seedy."

Tara cuts her eyes and takes a step toward me. "Oh, you poor cow. You need to know the truth."

"Tara!" A man's voice shouts over the din of the music, and uneasiness prickles at my flesh as I recognize it instantly.

Art and Big Steve are glaring at Tara.

My eyes dart between the two men as my brain struggles to figure out what the fuck is going on. "What are you doing here?"

The line on Art's forehead deepens, and his jaw clenches. His dark eyes slide to mine, and he looks worried. "You shouldn't be here."

Something clicks, and a horrid realization takes hold of me. "Please don't tell me you visit these places."

A cackling erupts from Tara. "He doesn't visit these places, love. He *owns* the place, and he was about to branch out before you convinced him not to sell your precious hotel."

The world tilts in front of my eyes, and I freeze, holding my breath as what I've just learned sweeps over me. She's stirring up trouble. Telling lies. She's got to be. He doesn't own a place like this, he wouldn't own a sleazy place like this. He's a successful businessman. Besides, I've told him how Theo lied to me. He wouldn't hurt me like that.

I look at Art, willing him to say it isn't true, but he's motionless, staring at me. The hope I felt about this all being part of some malicious plan of Tara's to cause trouble between us is extinguished.

*He lied to me! Does this mean he lied about everything?*

"Keep out of it, Tara." Big Steve grunts.

"Oh, come on!" Tara cries. "Someone's got to tell Pollyanna the truth about what he's really like and what he really likes, and it ain't Little Miss Girl Next Door." She stabs her finger in my direction. "You don't have a clue. Who do you think paid for that brand-new apartment you're living in, eh?"

My stomach flips. *Another lie.*

"Shut the fuck up, Tara. You have no idea what you're talking about," Art shouts.

My chest tightens. The thud of the music is echoing through my skull, and I can't think. Or be here any longer. I'm not giving that cow the satisfaction of seeing me cry.

I push past Big Steve and hurry down the corridor toward the exit. Tears spring in the corner of my eyes as a soul-destroying realization rips through my heart. I don't know the man I've given my heart to.

I don't know him at all.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

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**T**he chilly night air hits me as I stumble out onto the street, looking left, then right, as my addled brain works out which way to go.

“I’ve called a taxi,” Lucy announces.

“I need to get out of here,” I mutter, charging forward. I need to get far away from Art Black and his lies.

“Sophie.”

Hot tears well in my eyes and blur my vision at the sound of his voice.

I can’t stop walking.

I can’t look at him.

I can’t be reeled in.

Not this time.

His hand lands on my shoulder, and I shrug it off. “Don’t you dare touch me. You’re a liar, and I want nothing more to do with you.”

He’s not giving up. He darts in front of me, blocking my path. “Let me explain.” I’ve never heard him like this before. He’s pleading, and it doesn’t suit him.

“It’s too late,” I spit. “You should have told me at the start. You should have told me you own a seedy strip club *at... the... start.*” I stab a finger in the direction of the club. “And that you employ the likes of her to get their tits out. Do you sleep with all the women who work for you? Is that it? Do you get a kick out of it?”

“No!” Anger flashes in his eye. “It’s a business. It’s not like that. I don’t feel anything for anyone but you.”

He’s not reeling me in with his words this time. “You know I’ve been hurt by a fucking liar in the past, and you still didn’t tell me.”

His jaw ticks with tension. “I’m sorry.”

That’s not going to cut it.

I stuff my trembling hands under my arms. “And what about the apartment? You lied about that too.”

“You wouldn’t have accepted it if you knew I owned it.”

*He’s right, I wouldn’t.*

“I’m paying a quarter of the actual rent. What are you getting the rest of your rent in, sexual favors? If that’s the arrangement, it would have been nice to have been told.”

“Don’t talk about yourself like that,” he snaps. “I want you to be safe. I care about you, you know that.”

“No, I don’t. I don’t know anything. I don’t know you at all,” I yell. “I thought you’d never hurt or lie to me.” Tears run down my cheeks. “You promised. I can’t be with someone who would do that.”

His Adam’s apple bobs up and down as he swallows. He shakes his head as if he can’t believe what’s about to come. “You haven’t listened to me.”

There's no way I'm going to stay and listen to more of his lies. I push past him. "We're over."

"No!" He grabs my elbow and spins me around to face him. Wide, pleading eyes stare down at me. "I can't let you go."

I yank my arm from his grip. "Well, you need to learn how to because it's over."

"You don't mean this." He reaches out a hand to touch me, but I jerk out of his reach.

"You don't tell me what I mean, and you don't get to touch me ever again."

His jaw tightens as he draws his head back. "Sophie, please." His voice is pained, and I hate the way my name sounds on his lips.

A rumble of thunder cracks overhead, and heavy drops of rain begin falling, chilling my flesh. I bite the inside of my cheek to stop my lip from trembling at what I'm about to say. I fix him a steely look. "It's. Over."

And I turn and walk away with Lucy at my side.

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The taxi journey home passes in a blur of tears with Lucy cradling me like a baby as I sob. As soon as she opens the door to the apartment, I make a beeline for my bedroom and peel off the stupid burlesque outfit, throwing it in a heap on the floor. I stare at my red, swollen eyes in the mirror and wipe off my makeup, removing all traces of the evening, and throw on my pajamas. My clutch bag vibrates from the floor where I chucked it, signaling yet another phone call. I don't need to

check to see who's calling me. I have no intention of speaking to him. His front door key lies on my bedside table from earlier when I was still blissfully ignorant. Fresh tears swim in my eyes, and I tear them away from the key, unable to look at it.

Lucy is sitting on a kitchen stool, and two mugs of steaming black coffee are waiting on the counter when I finally emerge from the bedroom.

"I'm sorry for ruining your hen-do," I say, sliding onto the stool beside her and resting my head in my hands.

"You haven't. We're too old for partying all night anyway." She nudges me playfully and smiles, but I can't muster one up in return.

I curl my hand around the mug and slide it toward me. "You go home."

"I'm not leaving you like this."

"I'll be fine," I say automatically, although I know I won't be. I'm not sure how I'm going to get over this. Get over him.

She folds her arms across her chest and fixes me a firm look, which tells me she's not going to budge. "You're not fine at all. You're totally distraught. You've just had a massive shock."

I stare down at my coffee as silent tears tumble down my cheeks. An hour ago, I felt like the happiest woman in the world, and now a massive hole has been ripped through my life.

"If it means anything, he looked totally distraught, too, when you finished with him."

*I finished with him?*

A double knock sounds on the door to my apartment, and my heart leaps.

“Sophie, let me in,” Art’s voice calls from the other side.

*He’s here.*

I instinctively tense, and my eyes fly to the door. “Send him away... I’m not talking to him.”

His fist lands against the door with a thud, and I jump as the sound echoes down the hallway to where I sit. “Sophie. Please, talk to me.”

Lucy’s wide blue eyes swing from me to the door. “Don’t you think you should speak to him?”

*I don’t believe this.*

“Whose side are you on?” I snap.

“It’s not about sides, it’s about what makes you happy.”

“You’ve got one more chance to let me in,” he shouts from the other side of the door.

*One more chance before what?* I frown at the idle threat.

“Didn’t he say he owns this place?” Lucy asks.

*How could I forget?*

“Yes, it would appear that way.”

“In that case, don’t you think it’s likely that he’s got a copy of the ke—”

Our heads swing toward the door at the sound of a key turning in the lock. Sure enough, the front door swings open, and he charges toward us, kicking the door closed behind him with a bang. I jump from my stool and back away from him behind the sofa.

*He's got a key and let himself in. Just like he did before,* I realize. That time I was drunk and when the picture arrived. He's been letting himself in and out of my apartment since I moved in.

“Get out!” I cry, pointing at the door. “You’re trespassing.”

“Not really, given that I own the place,” he retorts, advancing toward me.

He’s getting closer.

I can’t have him near me. I can’t have him within touching distance. My hands fly out in panic. “Don’t come near me.”

He stops a few feet away from me and jams his hands into the front pockets of his trousers, frustration etched across his face.

Lucy’s eyes dart between him and me as she slides off her stool in the kitchen. “I’ll just be in the bedroom,” she says, slipping away.

I can’t look at him because he’ll manipulate me.

I turn around and fold my arms, staring down at the dark and glistening waters of the Thames below.

“You shouldn’t have bothered coming.”

“Do you really think I’m just going to disappear from your life?”

I hate the words I’m about to say. “I want you to.”

Through the floor-to-ceiling windows, I see the silhouette of his reflection and watch his head bow. “You don’t mean that.”

*He’s doing it again. Telling me what I think.* Anger ignites in my gut. “You don’t tell me how I feel. You don’t get to tell



me anything anymore because *we're over.*”

“Please, stop saying that.” The pleading tone in his voice is back, and I hate myself for making him sound like this, but it’s his fault. It’s all his fault.

“You lied to me. Everything I thought I knew about you is a lie. Our whole relationship is based on a lie. I don’t know you, you’re a stranger to me.” My voice trembles as reality sinks in.

“I should have told you about the club at the start. The longer it went on, the harder it got. I know I fucked that up, and I’m so sorry. But what we have is real, and you do know me.” His voice softens. “You know me better than anyone.”

“I know the version of Art you want to give,” I snap. “But the real Art owns a club where women get their tits out.”

“It’s just a business I own. I’m never usually there. I leave that to the manager, but sometimes things crop up, and I need to get involved.”

*Sometimes things can get out of hand with some of the guys. Testosterone and all that.*

His words echo back through my brain, and it all makes sense now. “No wonder things can get out of hand with baying men watching naked women jiggling their bits about.” I shake my head in anger. “And here I was thinking you were talking about the gyms. I’ve been such a stupid cow, and everyone knew except me.” My brain reveals another piece of the jigsaw. “Big Steve knew, didn’t he? He knew you hadn’t told me about the club, and he knew how I would react when I found out. He was warning *you* not to hurt *me*, he wasn’t warning you about me.”

“He’s a good guy and a good friend.”

*Which is more than can be said of the other 'friend,'* I think cynically.

“Is it just business with Tara?” I hiss as jealousy stabs at my heart. “No wonder you don’t need to shag her anymore, you can see her tits any time you like.”

“It’s not like that. She just happens to work there. Like I said, I don’t go there very often.”

I don’t believe anything he says anymore.

“I’m moving out,” I announce.

“What?” he snaps. “Where are you going to go?”

I shrug. I’ve no idea, but I’m not about to admit that to him. “I’m not staying here. And you can have your gift back as well.”

“Please, don’t do this, Sophie.”

“It’s over. Please leave.”

I see him take a step toward me, and I shift a few steps forward out of his reach. He can’t touch me. I can’t allow it because if he does, I’ll crumble. I need to stay together.

My vision blurs with fresh tears, and I fight to control the tremor in my voice. “You let me fall in love with you, and everything I knew about you was based on lies. What sort of man does that?”

He drops his head. He’s got no comeback.

“I believed you when you said no one would ever hurt me again now that I was yours.” My voice cracks. “And they have. You have.”

“I can’t let you go,” he whispers. “I won’t.”

I shake my head. “You need to.” I draw in a deep breath and fire the last two words out from between gritted teeth. “*Get out.*”

“Sophie... please.”

Tears cascade down my cheeks as my heart breaks in two. “Get. Out!”

I stare through the window at the river below, and I don’t know how much time passes before I hear the front door slam shut, jolting me back to reality. I lift my eyes to see his reflection has gone, and my legs give way from beneath me as I curl up into a ball on the floor.

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Waking with a start, I don’t know where I am for a second. I peer down and see a fluffy cream throw has been pulled over me as I lie on the sofa.

“Are you okay?” Lucy asks. She’s borrowed one of my gray T-shirts and a pair of jogging bottoms and sits in the corner of the L-shape sofa scrolling through her cell.

*I don’t think I’ll ever be okay again.*

I push myself up on the seat and pull the blanket off me. “What time is it?”

“Half twelve. You were exhausted and dozed off about an hour ago.”

I perch on the edge of the sofa and hang my head in my hands as the events of the evening filter back into my thoughts, bringing with them the horrid feeling of emptiness.

“I don’t understand why he owns a strip club. Why couldn’t he have owned a normal club?” I mutter angrily.

“You’ll have to ask him.”

“He says it’s ‘business.’ That’s his explanation for everything.”

Lucy tilts her head thoughtfully. “He is a businessman. It could just be business.”

I flop back on the sofa. “Why the hell didn’t he tell me?”

“That’s pretty obvious. Not many women will want to hear that their boyfriend owns a strip club.”

The thoughts swim around and around in my head like fish in a bowl. “I just don’t understand him. He hates me wearing anything remotely skimpy, yet he owns a strip club where women are employed to show off their bodies.”

“Yeah, double standards. Typical bloody man. I dunno.” Lucy shrugs. “You’ll have to ask him.”

“He said all the right things. He made me think he’d fallen for me, but I never even knew him, not really. The whole thing’s a lie.”

“I think he has fallen for you.”

“How can he have?” I snap.

“You didn’t see his face when he left.” Lucy sidles up next to me on the sofa. “He looked like his world had ended.”

A lump of emotion wedges in my throat, and I swallow it. “That’s how I feel,” I whisper.

“You need to speak to him. You need to ask him all those questions you’ve just asked me.”

I shake my head angrily. “He had his chance when he turned up here.”

“Did he?” Lucy shoots me a disbelieving look. “From where I was standing, it sounded pretty much like you shut him down. You were still angry and in shock. You’d only just found out, so I get that, but he didn’t get the chance to explain. Do you really want to end it with him?”

The thought of having to see him at work after this makes me feel sick. The thought of never seeing him or being with him leaves me numb like an integral part of my life is missing, and I can’t function without it. But I can’t be with him if I don’t know him. If there’s any chance of us working through this, I need to know the truth. I need to know the real Art. I need answers.

I spring into action and jump to my feet.

“Where are you going?” Lucy asks, wide-eyed at my sudden mood change.

“You’re right,” I call over my shoulder and hurry into the bedroom, throwing off my pajamas and pulling on my blue jeans and a gray sweater. “I need answers. I need to know the truth.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“No.” I pick up his front door key and rush into the hall. “Thanks for looking after me, but I need to see him on my own.” I give her a look. “And you need to go home to your fiancé.”

Lucy gives me a rueful look as if she knows I’m right. “Okay. Text me and let me know how you get on.”

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

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The soft glow of a light shines through the windows of Art's apartment, signaling he's home. As I stare upward through the rain-splattered taxi window, anxiety knots in my stomach. He's home. But will he want to talk? I've finished things with him.

I push open the doors and find Derek, as always, sitting behind the oak concierge desk with a warm, ready smile for me. "Good evening, Miss Ward."

I force a smile and ask the question I already know the answer to. "Is he home?"

Derek's eyes flash with concern, and I'm immediately on edge. "Yes, Mr. Black is home." He pauses as if he's choosing his words carefully. "I've received a noise complaint from the neighbor below. I knocked on the door, but Mr. Black didn't answer."

My eyes lift to the staircase. "What type of noise complaint?"

"Shouting, crashing, banging." Derek glances nervously at his computer as if he's revealed too much but wants to warn me.

“Is Mr. Black—” The words stick in my throat because I don’t really want to ask the next question. “Home alone?”

Derek’s warm smile reappears. “Yes, Miss Ward. He’s had no visitors.”

A trickle of relief helps unravel the coil of nerves in my stomach a little. I wouldn’t put it past Tara to try her luck now she’s twisted the knife.

I thank Derek, take a deep breath, and start climbing the stairs. By the time I reach his front door, my nerves are shredded. I turn the key in the lock and push the door open.

Vera Blue’s “Hold” hits me like a sledgehammer, the beat jackhammers into my brain as it fills the apartment, and my heart aches at the memory the song evokes in me. He’s nowhere to be seen. The acrid stench of cigarette smoke hangs in the air as I tentatively carry on down the hallway. His shoes lie discarded on the floor next to a small empty bottle. I bend and scoop it up, peering down at the Irish name on the label I’ve never heard of before. Whiskey.

Anxiety churns in my stomach as I take a few more hesitant steps into the living area and stop in my tracks. The armchair has been upended, and each one of the chairs around the dining table kicked over. All the cushions from the blue velvet sofa have been flung around the room, and the lamp has been knocked over.

I slam the empty whiskey bottle on the kitchen counter and hurry over to the Bose sound system beside the fireplace, turning the volume down. Silence fills the apartment, and my eyes dart around the room as panic slowly rises in my chest, and I immediately fear the worst. There’s no sign of him. Suddenly, I hear a shuffling noise behind me and turn to see

the voile curtain blowing gently in the breeze before it's angrily swatted out of the way with a large hand.

Art staggers into the room, clutching a half-empty bottle of whiskey in one hand and a lit cigarette in the other. His black shirt is hanging open, and he comes to a stop, swaying from side to side as he takes a drag from his cigarette. Unfamiliar, dark, hollow eyes narrow into slits and focus on me.

He blows out a long puff of smoke. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

His hostility spikes at my flesh. He's never looked at me with contempt before. He's never spoken to me like this before. I don't know this man who's staggering toward me.

"Come to gloat, have we?"

I start to move back away from him. "Why would I gloat?"

He spreads his arms open wide. "To see what a sorry state I really am."

The confident, together Art I know and love is unrecognizable. A husk of a man is in his place and doing his best to navigate around the upturned furniture strewn across the floor.

"I came to talk to you."

His laugh is sharp, mocking, and cuts through me. "It's a bit late for that." He shakily draws the bottle to his lips and takes a swig from it.

*I don't like the man I become when I drink.*

His words filter into my mind, and I eye the bottle in his hand nervously. "I thought you don't drink?"

He shrugs his shoulders. "Helps block out the pain."



I mentally will him to put the bottle down but know he's not going to. The drinking, the smoking, it's like a self-destruct switch has flipped inside him. "I think you've had enough."

"Why the fuck do you care? You've finished with me."

The sharp words cut through me.

"Of course, I care." Fresh tears well in my eyes, and I take a step back as he staggers through the carnage scattered across the living room floor getting closer to me.

He narrows his eyes and jabs a finger in my direction. "You don't fucking care because you ran. We promised... no more running."

"I ran because you lied to me," I say, dashing the tears from my eyes with the back of my hand.

He frowns, tripping over the corner of the coffee table and stumbling to regain his balance. "I knew this was too good to be true."

"What?"

"You and me. What we have. How I feel about you. What you do to me." His expression switches from hurt to remorseful. "Something was bound to fuck up, and do you know why?" He pauses, waiting for me to reply, but I don't know what to say. "Because good things don't happen to me." Empty, soulless eyes harden as he stares at me. "Everyone I give a shit about fucks off and leaves me." He stops and sways from side to side, jabbing a finger in my direction. "Then I met you. Thought my luck had changed." He swings the bottle in his clenched hand, and his voice breaks. "Now you've gone too."

My throat tightens with emotion. “Do you think my heart’s not breaking?”

His eyes swim with sadness, and he rubs a hand down his face. “Don’t leave me, Sophie.”

Tears stream down my cheeks as I shake my head and step back into the hall.

He stumbles toward me. “Please... don’t run.”

The one thing we both promised we wouldn’t do anymore.

The final piece of my heart breaks. I look at the nearly empty bottle of whiskey in his hand. I can’t stay here. Not when he’s in this state. Nothing good will come of it. I turn around and hurry down the hall in a blur of tears.

“Sophie,” his voice echoes down the hall, and I hear the sound of breaking glass from somewhere behind me.

I yank open the front door and hurry out onto the landing, slamming it behind me. He screams my name at the top of his lungs as I continue down the staircase, tears streaming down my face, not looking back.

**To be continued..**

**Find out how Art and Sophie's journey continues in Dark Heart, Book Two of The Black Series.**

# About the Author

Writing heroes you love to hate

KT loves writing morally gray alphas. The type you can't help but love to hate. Her books are packed with dark themes, and lots and lots of steam.

