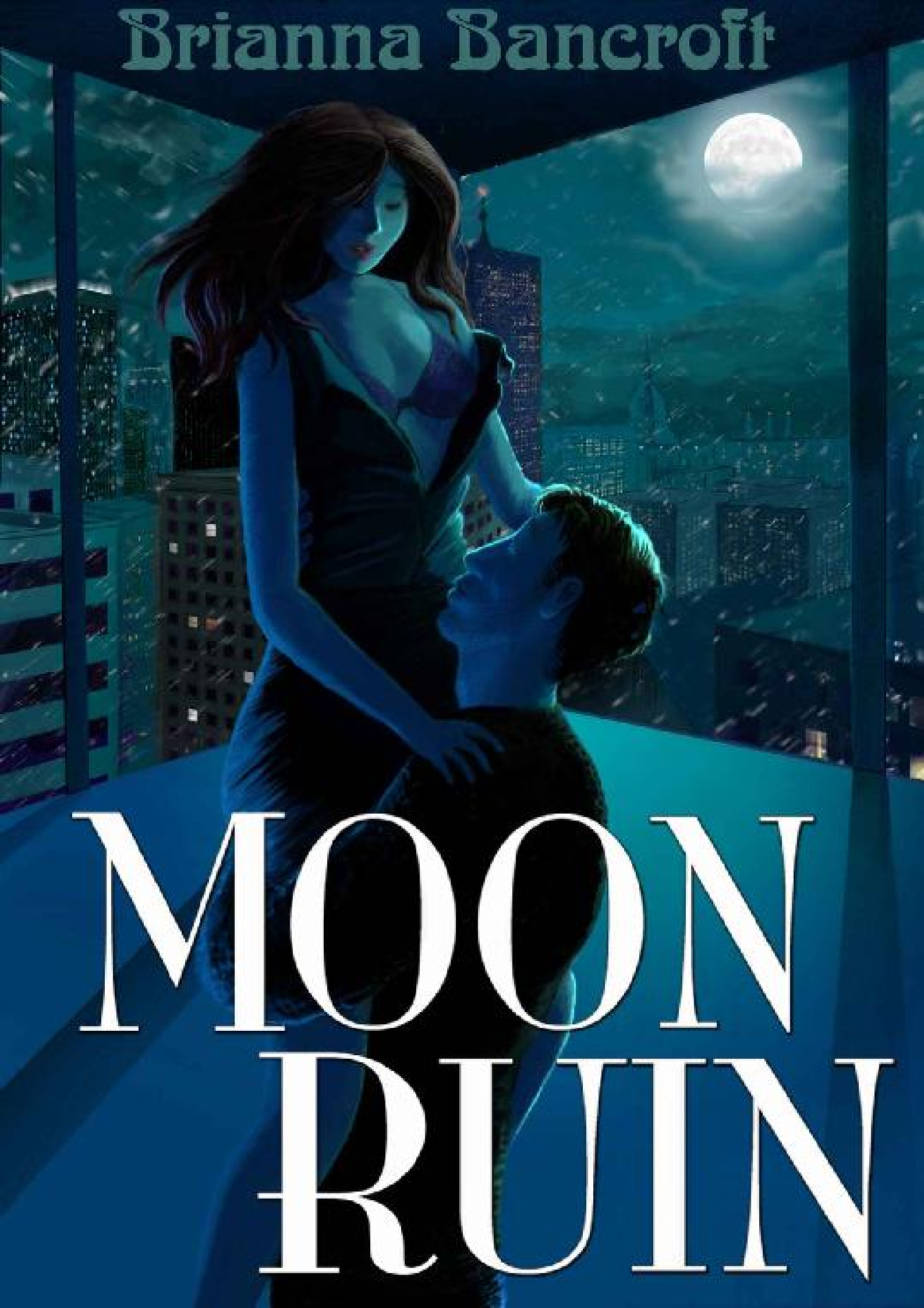


Brianna Bancroft



MOON RUIN

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BRIANNA BANCROFT

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For my parents, who always encouraged me to write.

(This may not be what you expected, but I did it!)

CHAPTER ONE



“Thank you all for coming.”

Georgina Spaulding paused, expecting something horrible like a screech from the microphone or boos from the crowd. Instead, there was silence.

She glanced up from the flashcards that contained her speech. Originally hopeful that the lights at the Quinn Theatre would drown out the mass of people, she unfortunately saw everyone clear as day. She could make out every extravagant gown and every tailored tuxedo lingering around the high-top tables on the vast proscenium stage. And all eyes were on her.

Georgie took a few deep breaths. It was too late to turn back now, so she willed herself to get her nerves under control. Despite years of society parties, fundraising events, and performing a role that had been thrust upon her at birth, being a public figure never got easier.

She returned her attention to the flashcards. The words were there, but she stared at them, unable to connect her brain to her mouth.

“Sorry,” she blurted out. “I’m a little nervous. I told Daryl backstage that just because I come from a family of politicians doesn’t automatically make me a good public speaker.”

A rumble of polite but genuine laughter flittered across the crowd. Georgie glimpsed at her audience, emboldened by their reaction. As small as it was, it gave her a crumb of confidence. She’d hold on to that crumb and treat it like a five-course meal.

As she scanned the flock of partygoers from the constructed dais upon the Quinn Theatre's stage, she noticed one face that was decidedly not amused by her comment. A very handsome, rugged face, with sharp blue eyes that pierced her with contempt. Unnerved, she glanced to the right and saw her employer, Daryl, who raised his champagne flute in a gesture of support. *You got this*, he mouthed to her.

As the administrative coordinator and social media manager for Two Battlegrounds, a nonprofit that provided resources and support to unhoused and displaced veterans, Georgie always stayed comfortably behind the scenes. But when Daryl lamented how they were dismally short of their yearly fundraising goal and suggested that a high-profile speaker at the annual holiday gala would give their efforts a bump, Georgie knew she had to step in.

Daryl had taken a chance on her when she applied for the position; she'd used a fake name on her application in the hopes that nepotism wouldn't rear its ugly head. But he'd recognized her the second she had walked in for an interview. She was easy to spot, between her height and unruly mass of red hair that was indicative of the influential Spaulding family. Everyone in Moon City knew Georgina Spaulding, daughter of the mayor and the closest thing to royalty this metropolis possessed.

She knew she was offered the position because of her last name, since she had no experience to speak of. But she'd been determined to prove herself, and over the past few years, she had become an integral part of the Two Battlegrounds team. She owed it to Daryl and the rest of the organization to do everything possible to make the gala a success. Even if it meant stepping back into the spotlight—something she hadn't done in years.

Georgie straightened her posture, knowing she'd get an earful from her grandmother if pictures of her slouching appeared in the society section. And thanks to her conscious efforts to completely withdraw from public life, she knew the gossip columns would salivate at any sight of her.

Memories threatened to overtake her, but she pushed them down. No use revisiting a stinging betrayal, and certainly not during a public event with hundreds of people staring at her.

She collected herself and started her speech in earnest. “I’ve had the opportunity to be involved with many charitable organizations over the years. All of them with honorable missions. But it should come as no surprise that Two Battlegrounds is special to me.”

Georgie glanced back over at Daryl with a soft grin, and he responded with a broad smile, his perfect white teeth a direct contrast to his dark-brown skin. But seeing as his husband, Rohan, was a dentist, a flawless set of pearly whites was to be expected. Rohan stood beside Daryl and winked playfully when Georgie moved her gaze over to him. Their supportive presence helped steady her.

“Moon City is a complicated place,” she continued. “We were once considered the jewel of the East Coast, but time has not been kind to our home. Not to everyone, at least.”

She paused and raised her eyes to the audience to hammer home her point. Although the speech she’d prepared was basic, and she was never one to shake the rafters, she’d been compelled to take a minor swipe at her father. Even though, deep down, she wished she had the nerve to go rogue and rail against his policies: How he ignored the needs of the city’s unhoused population, how he didn’t care about the economic struggles of people downtown, and how he turned his cheek to the urban decay that had only worsened during his unprecedented amount of time in office.

Not to mention how much of a travesty Election Day had been.

No use opening up *that* can of worms, so she refocused on her flashcards. “It can be easy to turn our cheeks to the suffering. Especially those of us who keep to North Section, surrounding ourselves with glitzy townhouses and designer stores. But a few blocks away, there are people who don’t know where they’ll get their next meal or if they’ll have a roof

over their heads that night. And some of those people are veterans—men and women who fought for our country.

“For the past sixteen years, Two Battlegrounds has helped provide services to this city’s unhoused and displaced veterans. We offer shelter, supportive housing, alcohol and drug treatment resources, and mental health assistance. However, we can’t accomplish our goals without the support of the community and our generous donors.” Georgie smiled and said, “Daryl’s already told me we’ve nearly doubled our fundraising goal tonight.”

She blinked, stunned at herself for going off script. But as the audience clapped in response to the good news, a wave of strength surged through her. Daryl was right. She totally had this, and she didn’t need these flimsy flashcards either. Just speak from the heart. That was what mattered.

“Thank you all for your support, and let’s make sure we officially double our goal. In fact, let’s triple it,” she encouraged with a laugh. “Oh, and I’d be remiss if I didn’t remind you all to please use our hashtag on your social media channels if you post photos from tonight’s event. Thank you again for coming, and enjoy the rest of the evening.”

With the final round of applause, she breathed a heavy sigh of relief. She did it. She got through her speech, and she did it without fainting or vomiting, both scenarios that had seemed likely when her anxiety spiked while waiting backstage. She waved to the crowd, and just as she opened her mouth to say a final thank you, a large, hard mass of man slammed into her.

Seconds before the back of her skull cracked against the dais, she heard the most gut-wrenching sound.

Gunshots.

And then all hell broke loose around her. Screams, shouts, and absolute pandemonium. Lying on her back, she looked behind her at the Two Battlegrounds branded backdrop across the rear of the platform and saw where the bullets had hit.

Because they hadn’t hit her.

That man had saved her life.

The screams from the crowd continued as this man, whoever he was, pulled her across the dais. One arm wrapped around her rib cage, holding her tight, while the other dragged them to stay low and get to safety. As they moved, she looked at the crowd and saw people fleeing, using all the available exits in the vaudeville theatre turned event space. She searched the horde of chaos, terrified of encountering the shooter. Whoever it was must have bolted because there was no one with a gun following Georgie and her savior.

Once safely in the wings, the man kept her close and guided her further into the backstage area, twisting and turning through the behind-the-scenes maze. He led her behind a piece of scenery, and she fell to the floor, her legs shaky and her head pounding. She brought her hand up to check for blood but—thankfully—felt none. The chignon her hair stylist had created was an absolute mess, but that was the least of her worries.

The man crouched in front of her, and she saw him clearly for the first time. If she hadn't already had the wind knocked out of her, being transfixed by that familiar sapphire stare would have done the trick. It was the same set of eyes she'd stared into at the beginning of her speech—the ones laden with disdain. But now they searched her with concern, looking for injuries.

“Are you all right?” he asked, his rich baritone voice soaked with adrenaline.

She gaped at him, completely dazed and disoriented. *Of course*, she thought mockingly. *Of course I had to be rescued by an absolute hunk of a man!*

Even while squatting, Georgie could tell he was insanely tall, which was saying something, coming from a woman who was five foot ten. His hair was too long to be fashionable and was a shade of black that made those vibrant blue eyes pop. His jaw was strong, nose slightly crooked, and his entire body, from thick thighs to muscled arms, screamed of potent strength. Georgie wondered why he was at this event, as nothing about him gave off the air of a philanthropist. He was

way too rough around the edges—all sharp angles and unrestrained energy.

“Did you hear me?” he asked when she didn’t answer.

She nodded, mentally chiding herself for lusting over a man mere seconds after she’d been shot at. Her head wanted to explode from the slight movement, but she took a deep breath and tried to speak. She hadn’t had the wind knocked out of her since she was a kid going through a fairy phase and continuously jumped off her bed, hoping to sprout wings and fly away. Considering her fractured relationship with her family, the idea of being a changeling didn’t feel all that preposterous.

“I’m okay,” she gasped.

A few seconds of silence ensued, and then the man’s gaze traveled down her body. She followed his line of sight and realized her skirt had bunched up around her thighs when she’d fallen to the ground. Not to mention, her bust was pushed against the illusion neckline of the emerald gown she wore.

Georgie wasn’t sure if it was the adrenaline of having nearly been killed, the smoldering intensity reverberating off this man, or simply the fact that she hadn’t had sex in over four years, but she suddenly felt overwhelmingly hot.

She gawked at him as a fantasy slammed into her head. It was as if her libido unexpectedly appeared after years of chronic celibacy. She imagined spreading her legs as this man pushed her back against the floor, hitching her skirt higher and entering her roughly. He would move her head to the side with a large hand, one of her cheeks against the cool ground, and then he’d whisper in her free ear. And Georgie would completely forget who she was. Her identity would melt away as he took her, covering her mouth to muffle her screams of pleasure.

She let out a ragged breath. *Get a hold of yourself. Thoughts like these are what nearly got you in trouble years ago.*

Despite her mental deterrents, the space between her thighs tingled. Equal parts mortified and thrilled that her body had caught this man's attention, she quickly tried to right her outfit.

The man jerked his head, almost as if he, too, had been lost in another reality. He rose back to his full height. She watched him grow taller, trying not to swoon. Although, if she were to swoon, at least she had the recent near-death experience to blame it on.

The man looked down at her and nodded his head once. "Good."

Then he turned and walked away.



THIS FUCKING CITY, VICTOR CANNON THOUGHT TO HIMSELF with disgust as he slipped out the Quinn Theatre's stage door. Approaching sirens blared in the distance. Moon City PD was synonymous with incompetence, but the Quinn Theatre was close enough to the outskirts of South Section that there were surely patrol units nearby.

Vic walked down the narrow alley, dodging piles of trash, determined to get to the main roads and find a silver taxicab to take him back to his place—even though he'd regret spending the money later. He knew he should stick around and provide a statement to the police. But if he identified himself, it meant his name would reach the papers, and he'd get a load of attention he frankly didn't need. Hell, they'd probably come up with some bullshit nickname for him. Something stupid that would paint him as the mayor's daughter's savior.

Which, technically, he was. He had saved her life. He hated the Spaulding family and everything they stood for, but what was he supposed to do? Let that goon kill her? Vic was a heartless bastard when it came to Moon City's most prominent family, but he wasn't *that* cold-blooded. He'd never take

pleasure in the death of a woman, especially not one as pretty as Georgina Spaulding.

He sure as shit didn't frequent galas, but he was a longtime donor to Two Battlegrounds, albeit a modest one. As a promotion this year, the organization randomly selected ten donors to receive two complimentary tickets to the holiday gala. Vic was a lucky winner, and he figured he might as well go. He wasn't one to turn down free food and drinks, especially not when purse strings were tight.

He had invited his little sister Alexandra to accompany him, knowing she'd love an excuse to dress fancy and drink champagne, but Lex had turned him down flat. Her favorite soap opera was airing a primetime holiday special that night, so Vic found himself flying solo, looking out of place among Moon City's high society. That was why he'd noticed this would-be assassin almost immediately. He hadn't fit in either.

Vic turned the corner and noticed a cab stopped at the red light. He whistled loudly and waved to get the cabbie's attention. The taxi honked in response and lingered at the corner as Vic jaywalked across the avenue and opened the car door.

He stuck his head in. "Mind taking me to Sullivan and Smythe?" He didn't live deep into South Section, but he was far enough downtown that some cabbies refused to make trips, especially late at night.

The man behind the wheel begrudgingly nodded and gestured for Vic to get in. Once settled in the back of the taxi, he pulled out his phone and called Lex. He knew the shooting would hit the news soon, and she would give him hell for not cluing her in immediately.

"You're lucky you caught me at a commercial," she answered. "How's the gala?"

"Uh...it's kind of a crime scene right now." He kept his voice low and loosened his tie. The cabbie had the radio up and an earpiece in—presumably on his own call to help pass the long night of work before him.

“What?” Lex screeched, panic in her voice. “What’s going on? Where are you?”

He hesitated before answering. “Is Marcy with you?” he asked, referring to her roommate. The last thing he wanted was more people getting involved.

“No, she’s with her latest boy toy. Now answer me.”

“I’m fine. I’m in a cab heading home. But yeah, there was a bit of an...incident.”

“What *kind* of incident?” she pressed, always lacking patience.

“Someone tried to kill the mayor’s daughter.”

“Jesus Christ. Is she okay?”

“She’s fine. At least she was when I left her.”

“When you left—? Vic, hold on a second. What the hell happened?”

He rubbed his forehead. He had a headache coming on. Adrenaline still coursed through his veins after saving the city’s princess from a sea of bullets. But in truth, Vic couldn’t blame his racing heart and rushing blood solely on the fight or flight response caused by the gunfire.

It went beyond that. It was intertwined with the sensation of Georgina Spaulding’s shapely body beneath his own. They’d been in that position for a split second, as his main goal had been to pull her off the stage to safety, but he couldn’t escape the memory of her ample chest pressed against his own. Or how she’d moaned and gasped, and he wished that reaction had been provoked by his cock driving deep.

He was fucked up for thinking such a thing. The woman had nearly been killed, and his dick had been halfway hard.

He couldn’t recall the last time he’d had a torrid fling. Thanks to his job, he was much more likely to find himself burning off energy amid a brawl with dodgy characters than between a woman’s legs. That was how he rationalized this inconvenient reaction to a woman who should have made his skin crawl thanks to her surname.

Clearly, he needed to get laid.

Shaking off the flashback, he knew the fatigue of the adrenaline crash was approaching. Lex's panicked voice certainly didn't help. He didn't feel like talking about this now, but knowing his sister, she would head over to his apartment and demand answers if he didn't explain.

"There was this guy...I had a funny feeling the second I saw him. He seemed out of place—all sweaty and jittery. And he was so damn eager to get near the platform where she was giving her speech. So I stayed close and noticed the butt of a gun under his jacket. I hoped that maybe he was a cop or her bodyguard, or something. But then he pulled out the weapon, and I just...reacted. I got her to the ground quickly enough and then backstage to safety."

"Did they catch the guy?"

"I don't fucking know. I saw him run off before the princess and I made it to the wings. And I didn't stick around long enough to find out."

He glanced out the window as the taxi entered South Section. Just like that, the atmosphere changed. Abandoned buildings, homeless encampments, and flickering neon signs from a bygone era passed by his eyes. It was darker and rougher down here, a world of perpetual poverty, and the weight of the suffering settled over his body.

"Are you telling me that you saved Georgina Spaulding's life and then...*left*?" Lex practically shrieked.

"Don't you have your show to watch?" he asked in a snit. He was already tired of this conversation.

"Screw the show! I'm recording it anyway."

"Recording it? So you could have come with me tonight? Real nice, Lex."

"I clearly made the right decision to stay home." He could practically hear her rolling her eyes through the phone. "Vic, you can't leave a crime scene!"

"Everyone else was leaving and running," he grumbled.

“But you might look suspicious.”

“Suspicious of what? Saving some society tart’s life? Listen, if I can ride this out and stay some anonymous hero, all the better.”

“Victor Francis,” she admonished. “I love you, big brother, but are you out of your mind? Think of what this could mean for the business.”

He sighed loudly and leaned his head against the seat. *The business*. The one thing he had to show for himself.

Vic was a born and raised resident of South Section, and yes, he’d swing at anyone who dared to look at him funny. Although there was always love in his home growing up, there was never any money, and he didn’t have many options after high school. He planned to work in construction alongside his father, but his mother convinced him to join the military to give him the chance to further his education.

Several years and a whole lot of discipline later, Vic was honorably discharged. After one class at Moon City Community College, he knew he wasn’t suited for higher education. So, instead of construction, he did what he thought was the next logical step for a vet. He joined the Moon City Police Department Academy.

He internally struggled with the decision every day. As a South Section resident, he’d seen firsthand how the MCPD abused its position of authority. The rot of Moon City permeated everywhere, but nowhere was it more apparent than in the police department. But Vic, still possessing a spark of optimism within his soul, foolishly thought he could make a difference working within a corrupt institution.

His father hadn’t voiced his concerns, as he was always one to keep his opinions to himself, but it was clear his mother hadn’t been thrilled with the idea and still harbored hope he’d return to his schooling. And Lex? Hell, she refused to speak with him for over a month.

But then his association with the MCPD ended a few months into his time at the academy after a senseless tragedy

destroyed the life he and his sister had known. That was when his tiny flame of optimism had been smothered completely—never to be relit.

His parents had never indulged in anything frivolous, except on their wedding anniversary. It was the one day of the year when they dressed swanky and took a cab up to North Section for a luxurious dinner. But that year, on the way back to the apartment, a horrific crash claimed the lives of everyone in the car.

Joshua Spaulding, hotshot political consultant and the younger brother of Mayor Spaulding, had been responsible for the accident. After getting hammered at the Spaulding family townhouse during one of their weekly Sunday dinners, Joshua got behind the wheel of his fancy sports car instead of calling a cab and leaving his vehicle there for the night. The Spaulding spare walked away without a scratch.

Joshua called his big brother, who was in his first term as mayor. Mayor Spaulding called the police commissioner, and the whole thing was swept under the rug. No charges were ever filed.

After he buried his parents, Vic quit the academy and planned to pick up work with his dad's old construction crew to support Lex, who was in her final year of high school. One morning, she had one of her self-proclaimed brilliant ideas. *Why don't you become a private investigator?* she had asked him over a bowl of cereal. *Might be like being a cop but less soulless.*

He expected a rigorous training process to get his PI license, but the whole thing was a rather shady affair. The Private Detective Unit of the MCPD was responsible for PI licenses, and the person who reviewed his application was a fellow military man. Vic leaned into that sense of camaraderie, and the man in the Private Detective Unit embellished on his application, pulled some strings, and handed the license over with a knowing wink.

This was Moon City, after all.

Cannon Investigations was formed soon after, with Lex coming on board as the office administrator. Most of his work was still soulless, but it was a living. And more than that, he was good at it.

If only he hadn't had to resort to acting like a criminal to get there.

"Think about it," Lex continued, snapping him out of memories. "If we advertise you as Georgina Spaulding's savior, or whatever goofy nickname the press winds up giving you—"

"Please don't start."

"We'd see cases roll in like crazy. Why go to any old PI when you can go to the one who saved the mayor's daughter?"

"We do fine without any fanfare."

"Why settle for fine when we can do better?" she countered. "Shit, maybe I want a raise."

He groaned, aware his baby sister was goading him at this point. "I'm hanging up."

"Vic, wait. You're..." He heard a slight tremor in her voice. "You're okay, though, right? Really, you are?"

"I'm fine, Goober," he said softly, using his old childhood nickname for her. "Not a scratch on me. And I'll be home in ten."

"Message me when you get there."

"I will. And I'll see you at the office tomorrow."

Lex said goodbye, and Vic hung up, stuffing his phone back in his pocket with a grumble. He couldn't wait to get this suit off. He felt like a goddamn idiot, attending a gala and trying to pretend like he belonged with those people. People who threw money at charitable causes every so often, patting themselves on the back for being so philanthropic while they still hoarded their wealth.

People like Georgina Spaulding, with her top-notch education, heaps of money, glossy red hair, and a set of tits

that made him ache for a satisfying hate fuck.

Vic exhaled heavily and glanced out the window, watching the grime and hopelessness on the streets of South Section. Savior or not, this was where he belonged.

CHAPTER TWO



Georgie knew better than to argue with the paramedics. Once the police secured the scene and confirmed the shooter had fled, EMTs surrounded her, insisting she go to the hospital to get properly checked out. She was able to grab her purse and jacket from the coat check before being hauled into the back of an ambulance.

She nearly asked if anyone had called her father, but she knew the answer. On the road to the hospital, she mentally prepared herself for the moment her father would burst into the hospital, shouting demands like a dictator.

Georgie had never been a daddy's girl. Her father was much too cold and aloof and focused on the Spaulding dynasty to ever connect with her on a meaningful level. And as she got older, she only distanced herself from him further. She vehemently disagreed with his politics and was disgusted by his practically tyrannical hold on the city. As far as the papers were concerned, Georgie and Mayor Spaulding were on different ends of the political spectrum but still respected and loved one another, as families do. As far as she was concerned, they were essentially estranged.

Once at the hospital, doctors confirmed she had a mild concussion and some bruised ribs. It was a lucky outcome, considering what would have happened if that man hadn't knocked her to the floor in time. When the nurse left to gather her discharge paperwork, Georgie sat alone, listening to the bustle outside the room. Every loud sound had her on edge. Her breath quickened with a panic attack on the horizon.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

There was a knock, and Georgie lurched her head to find a man standing in the doorway. Dressed in a well-tailored suit, he showed her the badge attached to his belt. He was a few inches taller than her, with auburn hair cut close to his skull and a proud Roman nose that only added to the severity of his presence.

“Ms. Spaulding, I’m Detective Samson,” he said, entering and extending his hand.

She limply shook it in greeting. “Is everyone all right? Was anyone hurt?”

Detective Samson shook his head. “People fled once the shooting started, so we’re still trying to track everyone down. But those still close to the scene who we’ve spoken to all appear to be fine.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“Do you feel up to answering a few questions? My understanding is that your father is on his way here now, so we can wait until he arrives.”

“I’m thirty years old,” she said testily. “I don’t need my father to supervise.”

If Detective Samson was put off by her attitude, he didn’t show it. He nodded and took out a tiny notebook from his pocket. Grabbing a nearby chair, he pulled it close to the hospital bed where she sat before sitting down to get to business.

“First things first. Did you get a good look at the shooter?”

She shook her head. “No. I was doing my speech and, I mean...I was looking out at the crowd, but I sure didn’t see anyone with a gun. Just a bunch of faces. Nobody suspicious.”

“Did anyone give you problems earlier in the night? Anyone following you or giving you odd glances?”

“No. I got there early and helped set up the table for the silent auction items and the raffle. I was on raffle duty for

forty-five minutes and then went backstage to practice my speech.”

“No one seemed suspicious when you handed out the raffle tickets?”

Georgie shook her head once more. “No one.”

Detective Samson scratched his chin and wrote a few notes down in his notepad. Then she spoke up.

“What about the man who saved me? Have you asked him? He must have seen the shooter since he knew to pull me to the ground in time.”

“We haven’t been able to locate him yet. He didn’t stick around.”

Georgie didn’t like the detective’s tone. There was suspicion in his demeanor, and she felt compelled to defend her rescuer. “He clearly wasn’t involved.”

“You’re familiar with this man?”

I sure wish I were familiar with him, her libido muttered. “Well, no,” she admitted, willing her poorly timed sexual urges to stay under control. “But if he was involved, why would he save me?”

Before he could answer, her father burst in. Detective Samson rose to his feet as she tried to wave her father off. A hard task to do, as Mayor Henry Spaulding was the definition of formidable. Georgie got her red hair, height, and broad stature from him, but thankfully, the similarities ended there.

“I’m fine,” she insisted. “It’s just a mild concussion.”

“Mild concussion,” her father practically roared. “You could have been killed! When I get my hands on whoever did this—”

Detective Samson cleared his throat, and Mayor Spaulding noticed that they weren’t alone. Maintaining his professionalism, Detective Samson once again reached out his hand in introduction.

“Mayor Spaulding, my name is Detective Ace Samson from the Major Crimes Unit. I’m the lead on this case. It’s nice to meet you, although I wish it were under different circumstances.”

“Samson...” Mayor Spaulding said, racking his brain. “You’re that whiz kid detective who transferred from out west, aren’t you?”

“One and the same,” Detective Samson confirmed with a slight blush.

“Good. We need the best of the department on this case. Whoever is responsible must be punished to the fullest extent of the law. And then some,” her father added as a dark afterthought.

“Absolutely, sir. I’ll need some more time to question your daughter about what she remembers. I’d prefer we do it now while her memory is still fresh.”

Mayor Spaulding gestured for him to continue. Georgie was surprised when Detective Samson locked eyes with her, silently asking if she wanted to continue with her father still in the room. When that was, in fact, the last thing she wanted to do.

“You don’t have to stick around,” she said pointedly.

“I’m not going anywhere. I need to make sure you get home safely.”

“I’ll take a cab.”

“Over my dead body, you will,” Mayor Spaulding shot back. “In fact, I want you to stay at the townhouse tonight. Sleep in your old bedroom. Your place isn’t safe.”

“I live in one of the best apartment complexes in the city. One with twenty-four-hour security,” she argued, patience waning.

“You live alone,” her father stated as if that settled everything.

Steam practically burst out of her ears. “And what does that have to do with anything?”

The fact that their youngest child—and only daughter, no less—lived alone, *unmarried*, drove her parents through the roof. Instead of getting a proper job following graduation, Georgie did what every young woman in the upper echelon of Moon City did. She assisted her family with society endeavors and events, and, most important of all, she looked for a husband.

She spent years dating some incredibly boring men—bankers and burgeoning politicians who salivated at the possibility of joining the Spaulding family. No one and nothing sparked her passion. And once she hit her midtwenties, she realized with heartbreaking clarity that she was pitiful and purposeless.

When she gained access to her trust fund on her twenty-fifth birthday, granting her true financial independence from her parents, a possible new future welcomed her. And Georgie, a miserable bird in a gilded cage, was desperate to fly into its open arms. She moved out of the family townhouse, much to their chagrin, and bought an apartment in a sleek luxury skyscraper on the east side of North Section.

All these years later, it was still a point of contention between Georgie and her father. He had expected her to follow a specific, respectable path from childhood to adolescence and into adulthood. Spauldings did things a certain way. And the fact that she wanted to create her own way was mind-boggling to a man who thought he knew what was best for everyone.

As Georgie and Mayor Spaulding held their respective glares, Detective Samson cleared his throat and said, “I’ll give you both a minute.” He slowly backed away and exited the hospital room, lingering outside in the hallway.

“I don’t want to argue with you, Georgie,” her father sighed.

“Then don’t. I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine! Someone tried to kill you. That never would have happened if you had agreed to the damn security detail you’re entitled to.”

Entitled. Good God, how she hated that word. She clenched her jaw and seethed through gritted teeth, “I just need to rest. I’ll be perfectly safe in my apartment. If it makes you feel better, I’ll ask Detective Samson to have a team watch my building for the night.”

“I’ll leave if you agree to a full-time security detail. At least until they catch whoever did this.” Mayor Spaulding clarified the last bit when he saw Georgie ready to argue.

She deflated, an intense wave of fatigue hitting her. She was too tired to fight with him. And even she had to admit that, as much as she hated the idea of a security detail, it was the safe thing to do. She nodded begrudgingly, and Mayor Spaulding swelled with satisfaction, having won this battle.

“You always refuse my help until you actually need it,” her father said.

He gave her a pointed look, and Georgie bristled at the implication. She had run to him for help once in her adult life, and he would never let her forget it. She couldn’t believe that he enjoyed rubbing that in her face, reminding her of the pain and panic of that time. But it certainly spoke volumes about their relationship.

“Don’t go there, Dad.”

“This is why I didn’t want you working for that organization. It’s a mistake to hang around downtown at those shelters and that soup kitchen you’re so fond of. It’s full of unsavory characters.”

Her blood boiled at his arrogant tone. “I wouldn’t have to devote time to these causes if you wielded your influence properly. But no, instead, you decide to cut funding for social services, and you didn’t step in when the South Section Psychiatric Center had to shut its doors. Then you allowed developers to build these outrageous complexes in North Section instead of creating affordable housing.”

“Oh yes, my daughter who has dozens of years of experience in policy. How have I governed this long without your expert advice?” His dismissiveness was palpable. Then

he raised his eyebrows. “And lest you forget that you live in one of those outrageous complexes.”

He knew how to hit her where it hurt. Swallowing her guilt, she argued, “Don’t make this about me.”

“I can’t wave a magic wand and make things better, Georgie.”

“I know it’s not easy. But you don’t do *anything*. Not unless it serves you or the people like you.”

Mayor Spaulding heaved a bored sigh. “I can’t wait until you grow out of this nonsense.”

“I have grown. That’s what you don’t like.” She shook her head to curb her temper. “You can go now.”

“Your mother and I will come by tomorrow afternoon to bring you to police headquarters. You’ll have to make an official statement, and we can figure out the details for your security unit then.”

“I can get there myself,” she grumbled, crossing her arms across her chest. Her father had a way of triggering her to regress into a petulant child, and this moment was no different.

“We’ll call when we’re on our way,” he said. He straightened his tie, left the room, and then spoke to Detective Samson in the hallway.

Once her father departed, Detective Samson returned to finish his questioning. Georgie answered as best she could but feared she wasn’t much help. Detective Samson arranged for a local patrol unit to drive her home and for an officer to stay in the lobby of her apartment building throughout the night. He assured her that she’d have constant police surveillance until they caught whoever was responsible.

And who was responsible? She racked her brain as she sat in the back of the police vehicle on the way home. She had no true enemies to speak of and lived a relatively simple life, all things considered. Her days consisted of work, weekly happy hour with Daryl and Rohan, a regular routine of barre classes, therapy sessions, volunteering, and a copious amount of television. She had ex-boyfriends, but none of them had ever

been hostile, and she'd pretty much given up on dating altogether once she discovered the perfect vibrator.

That could only mean one thing. Whoever tried to kill her tonight wanted to send a message. To her father.



THE MCPD MUST HAVE WORKED THROUGH THE NIGHT because two detectives came knocking on the door of Cannon Investigations just after ten the next morning.

Their office space was modest and had a private room in the rear corner where Vic worked. Two desks in the front space belonged to Lex and Rhett Young, their associate and longtime family friend who came onboard the business a few years prior. A small kitchen space included an aging mini fridge and a coffeemaker that was pretty much responsible for holding the three of them together.

Lex approached and knocked softly on the door frame. "Jerk alert," she muttered.

Vic glanced up and saw the detectives through the windows of his office. He sighed wearily and nodded, giving her the signal to bring them back. Lex escorted the two men to the tiny room, and they introduced themselves as Detective Samson and Detective Quintanilla.

Samson wore an immaculate suit under his overcoat, making him look like a wannabe film noir detective. He sat down and barely spared a glance back at Lex before asking her, "Can I get a cup of coffee?"

"No," she said bluntly before walking away.

Vic tried not to grimace. "Please excuse my sister. I'm sure you can understand that those of us downtown are never thrilled to interact with the police."

"We could have avoided this situation if you had stuck around last night," Samson said, his hazel eyes narrowed with

suspicion.

“I find it hard to believe I was the only one who fled once the shots rang out.”

Samson didn't appear satisfied by that answer, but Quintanilla pulled out a notebook and explained that the founder of Two Battlegrounds had supplied the MCPD with the gala's guest list. The detectives were able to narrow down the search for the man who saved Georgina Spaulding, bringing them to Vic's place of business.

Quintanilla began a series of basic questions as Samson watched Vic carefully. He answered as best he could and gave a thorough description of the shooter. He was aware of the good cop-bad cop routine Quintanilla and Samson were playing, but if Samson thought he could rattle him, the dandy detective had another thing coming.

“Would you be willing to come by the station today to give an official statement and work with a sketch artist?” Quintanilla asked.

Vic hesitated, and Samson jumped on that immediately. “Not trying to cover for someone, are you?”

“No,” he said firmly. “I've already said I have no clue who the man was. And I have no problem working with a sketch artist. I was merely considering my work schedule. I'm supposed to meet with a client this afternoon.”

“Oh, I'm sure your little sidekick can handle that,” Samson mocked, gesturing with his head toward the windows of his office. Beyond the glass, Lex was staring, obviously attempting to eavesdrop.

“I'll see if I can push it back. What time works?” Vic asked, returning his gaze to Quintanilla since Samson was nearing his last nerve.

“Any time after one would be best.”

“Fine. I'll be there a little after one. Anything else?” he asked as he rose to his feet.

Samson remained in his seat. “You have any reason to hate Mayor Spaulding, Mr. Cannon?”

The detective’s question caused his stomach to lurch. Where to even begin? But instead, he steeled his face and said, “I’m not fond of him. But I think you’d find a lot of folks down here in South Section who agree with me. Last month’s election wasn’t exactly what you’d call free or fair.”

Mayor Spaulding had recently been reelected for a record-setting fourth term. But Election Day in Moon City had been an absolute mess, with last-minute changes to polling locations, long lines, and faulty voting machines. When news came in that Mayor Spaulding had been reelected, small spurts of protests rose in South Section before the police commissioner sent cops in riot gear to quell the unrest. A few weeks later, the city was back to its status quo.

“Besides,” he continued, “if I hated the mayor that much, saving his daughter’s life wouldn’t be at the top of my to-do list.”

“Maybe you have a hero complex,” Samson said with a shrug. He seemed to not recognize the irony of that statement as he sat there with a puffed-out chest and a gun on his hip. “Saving a pretty girl from a politically connected and influential family can do wonders to enhance your profile.”

“That’s the last thing I want. Hence why I left last night. And I know your department has more leaks than an ancient septic tank, but I’d appreciate it if my name didn’t make its way to the press.”

Samson chuckled and finally got to his feet. “No promises, Mr. Cannon.”

Quintanilla at least had the decency to shake Vic’s hand before following after his partner. Vic stepped out of his office to watch them go as Rhett walked through the front door. Rhett had been out until dawn working on an infidelity investigation, tailing a socialite whose husband suspected her of having an affair.

Once the door was closed and the detectives were gone, Rhett looked at the Cannon siblings. His eyes were bloodshot from lack of sleep, and he held an extra jumbo cup of coffee. “Jerk alert,” he said, echoing Lex’s earlier sentiment. “What’s going on?”

Sitting at her desk, Lex had her feet up and that morning’s edition of the *Moon City Chronicle* perched on her lap. The cover story was the attempted assassination of Georgina Spaulding, although Vic was only described as an *unidentified man* in the article. He hoped it would stay that way, but now that the MCPD knew who he was, it was only a matter of time before the media came knocking. And considering his past and the choices he’d had to make, the last thing he wanted was anyone digging into his background.

Lex tossed the paper onto her desk. “You want to explain?” she asked, glimpsing back at her brother.

Vic tried not to groan as he returned to his office.



LATER THAT AFTERNOON, VIC HOPPED ON THE UNDERGROUND transit system known to Moon City residents as the Luna. When the Luna opened at the turn of the previous century, it was considered an impressive feat in transportation infrastructure. Now a shell of what it once was, the Luna was notoriously unreliable. Vic factored in an extra twenty minutes of travel time as he made his way up to North Section and MCPD’s headquarters.

The large Gothic structure that housed police headquarters was several stories high and occupied an entire city block. Vic was quickly escorted to the fifth floor, where the Major Crimes Unit was located. He was guided to a tiny conference room, where a sketch artist soon joined him. They worked together for nearly an hour, meticulously replicating the man’s frizzy hair and stern brow until Vic was satisfied with the finished product.

The sketch artist handed the illustration over to another detective, who told Vic to wait until Samson and Quintanilla were available to take his official statement. He glanced at his watch as his stomach growled. He'd been able to push his client meeting back by a few hours, but it meant he had to skip lunch.

“Got a vending machine?” he asked the detective. “Mind if I grab something?”

The detective pointed him in the right direction, and Vic walked through the maze of stylish ultra-modern cubicles. The sleekness of the interior didn't match MCPD's classic Gothic structure exterior, but very little made sense in this city. Real great to see his tax dollars at work, though.

He reached the vending machines located near the restrooms. Pulling out his wallet, he saw he only had a few bucks on him and spent entirely too long trying to decide between chocolate-covered pretzels and gummy bears. In the end, he chose both but let out a groan of frustration when the pretzels got stuck in the machine coils.

“Motherfucking son of a bitch fucking fuck,” he growled, slamming his hand against the glass.

“Hello.”

The hushed greeting came from next to him. He turned his head and saw Georgina Spaulding staring at him, having just stepped out of the ladies' room.

Vic hated the Spaulding family and loathed everything Georgina Spaulding represented, but she was still a fucking knockout. Not even he was immune to her looks. He'd seen photos of her throughout the years—pictures in the society section of her attending fancy charity events, usually on the arm of some finance bro with a receding hairline. Although, she had noticeably disappeared from the public eye over the past few years.

Still, she had never felt like a real, tangible person, so there had never been anything to lust over. Last night had changed that.

Even her voice, lilting and melodic and surprisingly throaty, saying a simple *hello* turned him on. And as stunning as she'd been last night in that tantalizing dress, it was nothing compared to how she looked now—so wonderfully normal.

She wore a pair of tapered gray trousers, a plain white tee, an oversized black blazer, and a pair of simple black loafers. Her red hair fell around her shoulders, and her cheeks were tinted pink. Vic foolishly imagined she was blushing because of him. But he knew better. Probably a chill from the winter weather outside.

Or makeup, you dumbass.

Yeah, she looked wonderfully normal, but she still wasn't his kind of normal. Georgina was tall and stately, with a long, elegant neck and a natural hourglass figure that sent blood rushing straight to his dick. Built like an Amazon queen with the aura of a prima ballerina. A woman like her wouldn't take one look at a guy like him under normal circumstances.

But these weren't normal circumstances.

Vic broke eye contact awkwardly. "Hey, how ya doing?" he greeted in an effort to be nonchalant.

As if she hadn't almost been killed less than twenty-four hours ago. As if he hadn't been the one to save her life.

As if her uncle hadn't murdered his parents, and her father hadn't allowed him to walk free.

He shook the vending machine, determined to get his goddamn pretzels.

"Fine, thanks to you," she answered. "I'm Georgie. Since we didn't get to meet officially. I don't know how to begin to thank you—"

"Don't mention it," he blurted out, rudely cutting her off.

"Oh. Um...are you here to give your statement?"

He glanced at her, unsure why she hadn't walked away the second she experienced his abysmal manners. Instead, she met his gaze, her large brown eyes searching. He turned away

again, committed to giving the pretzels his full attention while ignoring Georgie until she left.

Georgie. Even the nickname made her seem normal—so different from the regal-sounding Georgina.

He found himself answering her question. “Yeah. Worked with a sketch artist too.”

“I see.”

She circled around him and pulled some coins out of her pocket. Feeding them to the machine, she pressed the proper button, and the coils began turning again. His pretzels finally fell, as did another bag. She grabbed them both and held one out to him.

“Thanks,” he mumbled. “Didn’t have lunch.”

“Neither did I.” She opened her own bag. “I’ve been here for hours. Finally finished my statement, but now my dad is going over the details of my security team.”

“Your father’s here?”

“Unfortunately,” she said bluntly.

Vic chuckled, surprised at her response. He snuck another glance at Georgie and found her practically glowing. Almost as if she was pleased she’d made him laugh. And in all honesty, she had accomplished something that didn’t happen all that often. At least not since the death of his parents.

“Surprised you didn’t have a security detail to begin with,” he said as he popped a pretzel into his mouth.

She shrugged. “I haven’t had one since I moved out of my family’s townhouse. The idea of someone constantly supervising me? I mean, I get it. But it makes me feel like a child. Or like I’m being stalked. Besides, it didn’t seem necessary. I rarely go anywhere other than work. Or therapy. Or my barre class. I’m boring,” she added with a self-deprecating smile.

He was sure that wasn’t true but then mentally stopped himself from unpacking that thought further, unwilling to give her any credit. Even though, after only a few seconds of

speaking to her, he couldn't help but wonder if Georgina Spaulding wasn't as much of a pampered princess as he may have thought.

Don't let a pretty face and a nice chest fool you, pal. She's uptown royalty and a snob, just like the rest of them. She's being cordial with you because you saved her life, nothing more.

"Well, I should get back to listening to a bunch of men discuss my safety as if I'm not in the room," she said with an eye roll.

He nodded, keeping his gaze above her head. He wasn't about to show her any empathy, although if he were in her shoes, he'd be as annoyed as she appeared.

He felt her hesitating, waiting for him to say something. But he purposefully ignored her until she turned and began to walk away. Then he couldn't take his eyes off her.

Georgie's waves of hair fell to her mid-back, and Vic indulged in a flash of fantasy. He imagined clutching a fistful of hair—hair that shouldn't arouse him because its color screamed Spaulding—and pulling her head back to allow access to her neck, where he'd nip her creamy flesh mercilessly with his teeth. He'd teach her how things were done in South Section. Rough and hard.

He could barely hold back a sneer. No doubt Miss Prim and Proper fucked with the lights off, under the covers, taking some pretty boy's uninspired thrusts with a few deftly placed moans. Hell, she probably called it *making love*.

If that wasn't proof he should quit fantasizing, he didn't know what the fuck was.

But then Vic recalled the look on her face when they had been alone backstage at the Quinn Theatre. How her mouth had parted, and her expression had darkened, and she'd licked those full, rosy lips of hers.

Suddenly, Georgie turned back to face him, and he couldn't bring himself to break eye contact this time. There

was no way she knew what he'd been thinking, but her eyes were deep and twinkling, and he couldn't look away.

“I just realized I don't know your name,” she said.

“Oh. Right.” He shook his head out of the fantasy. “Vic. Victor Cannon.”

He pulled out his wallet for a stash of business cards. The logo for Cannon Investigations was amateur at best, and the card was frayed around the edges, but it was proof he was someone.

Georgie approached and took the card from his outstretched hand. The split second when their fingers touched gave Vic a jolt of electricity so powerful that he had to look away from her again. Never mind the fact that he noticed the smell of her floral—no doubt super expensive—perfume for the first time and wanted to bury his face in the crook of her neck.

“You're a private investigator?” she asked.

“Yeah. I run the place with my sister and a family friend.”

She nodded slowly and put the card in her back pocket. “Thank you. For what you did. I don't know how I can ever repay you.” He tried to brush off her thanks with a wave of his hand, but she talked over the gesture. “Truly. I owe you my life.”

In that moment, he found it easy to hold her stare. Something passed between them. Gratitude from her, of course. That was all it was. But it was something, and so Vic took it.

“You're welcome,” he said with a brief nod.

“I'll see you around.” She turned and headed back to her father and the men tasked to protect her.

Vic watched her go, knowing full well he'd never see her again.

CHAPTER THREE



Daryl insisted she take the rest of the week off. Georgie wasn't thrilled, as she had a lot of work to complete before Two Battlegrounds closed office operations from Christmas Eve to the New Year. But with some lingering headaches from the concussion and heightened anxiety, it was the right choice. She did a bit of social media work remotely from her apartment and scheduled an emergency therapy appointment for Thursday afternoon.

Georgie had been in therapy for several years and was lucky to have a therapist who saw patients on Sundays. And although she'd learned a lot—what tools to use to manage her anxiety, when to properly compartmentalize, how to create healthy boundaries with her family—being shot at was enough to rattle anyone.

She walked into the warm and inviting office, and her therapist, Lacey, greeted her with a smile. Perched on the plush sofa, Georgie talked through her memories of that night and the coping mechanisms she'd since used. She discussed her pushback against her father's demands to move back home, her mixed feelings about the security detail, and her almost reckless desire to return to work and pretend like nothing had happened.

Lacey listened intently, jumping in now and then to ask for clarification or to encourage Georgie to expand deeper on a specific thought or feeling. As the session wound down, she admittedly felt better. At least she was able to maintain some

semblance of control over the situation by talking through her feelings.

“Anything else you’d like to discuss?” Lacey asked.

She glanced at the clock. There were only about fifteen minutes left in the session. She hesitated but then said, “I actually...um. Yes. There’s something I’d like to discuss, but I feel a little silly talking about it.”

“Why is that?”

“Because it’s about a man.”

Lacey leaned forward in her seat. “Why does it feel silly to talk about a man?”

“I suppose because it’s been so long since I’ve dated anyone. And it’s not as if this is even a dating thing. I’ll never see this man again, so it’s not like it matters.”

“If you want to talk about it, then it seems like it matters,” Lacey countered gently.

Georgie paused, trying to work up the nerve. How odd that after years and years of speaking to Lacey—knowing full well she was protected by client confidentiality—she still struggled with sharing her thoughts and feelings, petrified that somehow her deepest secrets would end up on the front page of the tabloids.

Fool me once...

Finally, she spoke. “It’s the man who saved me. The one who saved my life. He’s, um...well, I’m very attracted to him,” she finished in a whisper.

Lacey nodded and wrote in her notepad. “It’s natural you’d feel immense gratitude toward him, considering the circumstances. And attraction can easily be intertwined with that.”

“It’s more than that. It’s...” Georgie stopped and collected her thoughts before resuming. “The night everything happened, he got me to safety and took off. We barely spoke. But there was this moment where we...” Heat rushed to her face. “I don’t know how to describe it. I mean, everything was

heightened—the danger, the adrenaline. But there was this... chemistry.”

“Go on.”

“I saw him yesterday at the police station, completely by chance. And we talked briefly, but he was sort of...he wasn't rude, exactly. But he didn't seem interested in talking to me.”

Lacey quirked her head. “Oh?”

Georgie had ruminated on their discussion at the vending machines nearly a hundred times since that afternoon. It was serendipitous how she ran into him during the only time she'd left the oppressive conference room at police headquarters. She'd stepped out of the restroom, and there he'd been, with a mouthful of curse words that made her entire body shiver.

“He refused to look at me. He was curt with his replies, kind of gruff. Perhaps that's simply how he is, but I still got the impression that he doesn't like me. And that makes him even more attractive to me.”

She cringed and waited for Lacey to admonish her for such a twisted viewpoint, despite knowing her therapist would never do such a thing. Instead, Lacey gave her a thoughtful glance and waited for her to continue.

“I know that's messed up,” she said with a shake of her head.

“It's not messed up,” Lacey assured her. “You've often talked about how you feel undeserving of praise. How you've struggled to infer whether people like you for *you* or only because you're a Spaulding. How it's difficult to trust people's intentions. But he wasn't immediately won over by your last name. That makes him different.”

“It's silly. Like I said, I'm never going to see him again. He lives in South Section. We don't move in the same circles.”

The joke, of course, was that Georgie didn't move in many circles at all anymore, for exactly the reasons Lacey had just laid out. Ever since she was born, people had bent over backwards to impress her or do her bidding. And it always made her uncomfortable, as the devotion was undeserved.

As a result, she found it difficult to connect with anyone. Until Erin came along. And then that friendship had imploded, and Georgie pulled away from attachments almost completely. It had taken her years to let Daryl and Rohan into her life. Their weekly happy hours didn't begin until she'd been working at Two Battlegrounds for several years, and each week, she told little white lies about her life, expecting the information to show up in the papers. But nothing ever did, and she started to trust the couple more as time passed, although she still kept them at arm's length.

Oddly, one of the few places she felt safest was at the Prince Street Soup Kitchen. She began volunteering at the organization while still in high school, and never once did anyone there—whether her fellow volunteers or the South Section residents in need of a hot meal—treat her as anything other than an average person.

The session was almost at an end, so Lacey said they could pick up where they left off during her regularly scheduled appointment on Sunday. Georgie agreed halfheartedly and returned to her apartment.

That night she did a load of laundry. Her mother never understood why she didn't send it out for someone else to handle, but it was a tedious activity that helped soothe her. As she separated the colors from the whites, she checked the pockets of her trousers and jeans and found the business card Victor Cannon had given her. She stared at the logo, address, and his name in bold font.

We don't move in the same circles.

In truth, she'd never felt like she belonged in the circle she'd been born into. Sitting alone on her bedroom floor, she wondered what his circle was like.

And that was why she made the impulsive decision to visit Cannon Investigations on Friday evening.

Her security team wanted to scope out the place in advance, but Georgie reminded them of the terms she'd agreed to during negotiations with her father. She understood that they had to follow her in heavily populated areas, but she

insisted they hang back when she was at the office, her therapist's, or similar indoor spaces. She also insisted on using taxicabs instead of commandeering a police vehicle as her personal car service so she could try and hold on to some piece of her prior life before the attack had uprooted everything.

Hailing a silver taxicab, she headed down to South Section with an SUV trailing not far behind.

Cannon Investigations was located on Castle Street, tucked between a laundromat and a rough-and-tumble tavern. The business card listed their hours as Monday to Friday from nine to six. Georgie opened the front door and stepped inside at a little after five thirty, the chime of a bell announcing her arrival.

The space was modest, with mismatched secondhand furniture and computers that looked nearly a decade old. But the office was well kept and charming in an eccentric way.

A petite woman stood on a ladder, putting Christmas lights up around the perimeter of the office space. "Welcome to Cannon Investigations. Be with you in a sec. Unless you're press, in which case turn around and keep fucking walking." The woman reached to tape the last section of string lights before turning to glance back at Georgie. "Oh shit," she whispered, and then jumped down from the ladder.

This had to be the younger sister Victor mentioned. There was a resemblance—the black hair and blue eyes, for one, but also noticeable differences. Whereas he was likely six foot five, his sister was barely five feet tall, and her complexion was noticeably paler. With her sleek black bob, milky skin, and long, thick eyelashes, Georgie thought she looked like a porcelain doll with attitude.

"Hi, I'm Lex. Well, Alexandra. Lex for short. Or Lexi. Or Alex. No one calls me Alex, but I guess people could if they wanted to," Lex rambled, extending her hand.

She shook it and smiled. "I'm Georgie. Nice to meet you."

"You too!" Lex grinned and gestured for her to take a seat. "Uh, can I get you anything? Coffee? I don't really have any

food unless you count the expired yogurt at the back of the fridge.”

“Coffee sounds great. I’d appreciate something warm.”

“You got it.” Lex quickly moved to brew a new batch of coffee at the kitchen nook. “Vic’s not here. I assume he’s who you came to see? I’m his sister, by the way.”

“I figured. I can see the resemblance. He and I ran into each other at the police station, and he gave me his card. I thought I’d come down and see what you guys do.”

Lex glanced around the office. “Not much to see, unfortunately. Vic is meeting a client to drop off some photos. Some socialite stepping out on her much older hubby. Poor sap hired us to get the money shot.”

“Is it Carolina Markus?”

Lex narrowed her eyes. “Uh...no...” she said, trailing off.

Georgie held her gaze. Eventually, they both giggled. “Yeah, that doesn’t surprise me. Her husband, Luther, is a fossil.”

“You can’t say anything,” Lex pleaded, putting her hands together in a little prayer. “Client confidentiality.”

“I won’t say a word.”

“So how are you holding up? If you don’t mind me asking.” Lex pulled two coffee mugs from the cupboard.

“I’m doing okay, all things considered. Trying to push through and keep things as normal as possible. If I don’t, I’ll likely collapse into a bundle of nerves.”

“I’m sure no one would blame you if you did.” Lex looked above her, nodding to the front windows. “Looks like the jerks in blue are keeping an eye on you.”

The windows were frosted from the outside, allowing for privacy, but once inside Cannon Investigations, Georgie could see a clear view of Castle Street. The SUV had parked right outside, and one member of her security detail lingered close to the building, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible.

Although the car was unmarked, and the police officer was in plain clothes, they weren't fooling anyone. Folks in South Section could recognize a cop with their eyes closed.

She sighed. "Necessary evil."

Lex let out a burst of air, a cross between a laugh and a scoff. "Tell me about it. Does that clown who acts like he's in a film noir have any leads yet?"

"Ah, so you've met Detective Samson. Nothing solid yet. At least as far as I know."

As the coffee brewed and dripped into the pot, Georgie considered how to turn the topic of conversation without appearing too obvious. "I only got to speak to your brother for a few minutes the other day. He barely even let me thank him."

"That's just Vic. Doesn't like attention." Lex poured a mug full of coffee. "Milk, sugar?"

"No, black is fine." She took the mug and inhaled the heady smell of freshly brewed coffee before taking a tentative sip. "Still. I wish I could do something to show my thanks. Maybe something to help the business?"

Lex's eyes lit up as she splashed some milk into her mug. "What were you thinking?"

"I'd have to run it by Daryl, but maybe a partnership of some sort with Two Battlegrounds? Typically to sponsor a gala, the cost starts at five thousand—"

Lex choked on her coffee.

"But we can waive the fee and have Cannon Investigations listed as an official sponsor for all our events next year. Might get your name out and get you some more exposure. Although I can imagine you've had an influx of cases since Victor's name made the papers. Or Vic, I mean," she amended, trying out how his nickname felt on her tongue.

"We'd have more if Vic agreed to be interviewed," his sister mumbled. This must be something they'd already argued

about. Lex sat on the top of the desk closest to Georgie, crisscrossing her legs.

“Well, your bother seems like a man of few words.”

The bell above the door jingled. “Motherfucking no-good piece of goddamn shit!”

Vic walked in, pulling his jacket off in anger. He hurled it against the wall before noticing his audience. His eyes narrowed when he saw Georgie.

“Hi, Vic!” Lex greeted him brightly.

He ignored his sister. “What are you doing here?” he asked Georgie bluntly.

Lex grabbed a pen from the desk and chucked it at him. “Rude: Party of one! She’s our guest, Grumpy. What’s got you so pissed? The Luna again?”

“I was stuck on a train for twenty minutes. And between stations, so I couldn’t even get off to walk. So I’m a little fucking wired, to say the least.”

I’ll say, Georgie thought. His entire body pulsated with power, and she relived the last time she’d sensed that same intensity during their moment backstage. Her own body began to hum with energy as if his presence lit a match within her.

The one good thing about his inability to maintain eye contact with her was that it allowed Georgie to blatantly stare at him, just as she had while they’d talked at the police station. She had admired how his biceps flexed when he manhandled the vending machine. Now she watched appreciatively as he bent over to pick up the jacket he’d thrown in frustration.

She once again had to force herself not to swoon as he rose to his full height. He was such a tall tower of a man, and his chest was so broad and muscular. Lord knows she’d spent years working through her own body image issues with Lacey, but as someone who’d always had a bit of a hang-up about her height, she loved how he loomed above her. Yes, this man checked all her boxes and then some.

Too bad he could barely bring himself to look at her.

Vic reared back, finally noticing the Christmas lights. “The fuck is this?”

Lex glared. “It’s festive, you big grump.” Then she gestured over to the kitchen nook. “There’s fresh coffee if you want some.”

Grumbling, he folded up the ladder Lex had left in the corner and walked past them. He placed the ladder in the closet, tossed his jacket into the back office, and then grabbed a mug. With his back to her as he poured the coffee, Georgie watched his muscles clench through the tight cotton shirt he wore.

“Georgie and I were talking about how we can partner with Two Battlegrounds,” Lex continued, giving her a wink. “She has to clear it with her boss, but she suggested we sponsor all their events next year.”

“We don’t have the money to sponsor anything,” he said, back still turned.

“It would be in name only,” Georgie explained. “As a thanks for what you did.”

“Not necessary.”

“I think it’s a good idea,” Lex chimed in.

“I didn’t ask you,” Vic snapped, taking his mug and walking into his office.

Lex stuck her tongue out at her brother. Then she turned to Georgie and whispered, “I’ll find a way to convince him.”

She smiled softly, but she had a feeling Lex had her work cut out for her.

“Say, you want to grab a drink?” Lex asked. “We could pop next door for a beer.”

“Absolutely not,” Vic barked from the back office.

“O’Leary’s isn’t bad, Vic,” Lex called back.

“Someone was stabbed in there two days ago!”

“Yeah, for like the first time in six months. That’s a good record for them.”

As much as she’d been enjoying Lex’s company, the prospect of grabbing a drink where someone had recently been stabbed didn’t thrill her, especially after being shot at mere days ago. However, the more she looked at Lex’s face, it was clear she was goading her brother.

Vic stalked over to them. “It’s not happening. You think those coppers outside would let the city’s princess walk into a place like that?”

Georgie winced at hearing the nickname, as she often did. Although her father hadn’t been elected mayor until she was in her late teens, she’d been dubbed the city’s princess long before he took office.

The Spauldings were one of the first families to settle in Moon City. Her ancestor and namesake, George Spaulding, had been a publishing mogul. He founded the city’s flagship paper, the *Moon City Chronicle*, and established a media empire that still reached beyond the scope of Moon City. All the more convenient to control the narrative when the Spauldings turned to politics in the ensuing years, keeping their clutches tight on the city.

No Spaulding girls were born for generations, so when baby Georgie arrived and infused some seriously needed estrogen into the family, every newspaper began calling her the city’s princess. The name stuck, much to her embarrassment. Although people often used the title in a cheeky way, when Vic said it, the scorn was unmistakable.

Finding her backbone, she spoke up. “I’m actually pretty wiped. But a drink sounds like fun. Maybe we can do something tomorrow? I’m happy to host at my place. I think I’d be safer doing a girls’ night in, at least for the time being.”

“Cool,” Lex chirped, giving Vic a triumphant look out of the corner of her eye. “Here, let me get your number.”

Lex handed her phone over to Georgie, who programmed in her number. Vic watched them, bewildered. Then he turned

and walked back into his office.

A jolt of anxiety hit her. *Am I making a new friend?* Her natural inclination to isolate herself had softened, as Lex had a way of putting her at ease.

As she was about to return Lex's phone, it rang with a call. The name popped up as **RHETT YOUNG**.

"Your boyfriend?" Georgie asked.

Lex looked horrified. "Ew, gross. No." She answered the phone as she jumped off the desk. "Yo! What's up, loser?"

As Lex listened to her call and brought her coffee mug over to the kitchen sink, Georgie glanced back at Vic. He sat at his desk, still ignoring her. She admired his side profile, the harsh line of his jaw, and the black stubble that seemed to have emerged since she'd last seen him.

"Uh, hold on a sec," Lex said into the phone. She walked to the other desk and grabbed a set of keys near the computer monitor. "Yeah, bozo, they're here. You gotta quit doing this."

"Forget his keys again?" Vic asked.

"Yeah," Lex called before speaking back into the phone. "I'll swing by your place on the way home. This is the last time I'm doing this, though." She grabbed her jacket and purse. "Georgie, why don't you message me your address and what time I should swing by tomorrow? Can I bring anything? Tequila?"

Georgie laughed. "Believe it or not, I have plenty of that. Just bring yourself. And yes, I'll send you my address."

Lex gave her a thumbs up and then yelled to her brother, "Vic, I'm leaving. Going to Rhett's place since he can't remember his keys to save his life."

"Are you taking the Luna?" he asked.

"No, figured I'd ask a serial killer for a ride," she said, making a funny face at Georgie, who held in a laugh. Her brother quietly growled in his office as Lex left.

With Vic still in the back office, Georgie brought her coffee mug over to the sink. She washed it out and cleaned the mug Lex had used as well, placing them in the dry rack. Slowly, she approached his office door.

“I hope you’ll reconsider.”

His head jerked up as if he was surprised she was still there. But then he averted his eyes and asked, “Reconsider what?”

“The sponsorship,” she reminded him. “Daryl will love the idea. He checked his records and saw you’ve donated to Two Battlegrounds several times.”

“I don’t give much.”

“As we like to say, every little bit helps. I understand you’re a vet yourself. Thank you for your service.”

“It was a long time ago,” he grunted as he placed a few manila folders in a nearby filing cabinet. “I didn’t join to find glory or serve God and country. I was a poor kid with no other options. I’m not a hero.”

She shifted her stance, shrugging one shoulder meekly. “You’re kind of a hero from where I’m standing.”

She waited for him to continue the conversation, but all she received was an eye roll. An odd silence settled over the room.

“I’ll consider the sponsorship,” he finally acknowledged.

He looked up at her, then to the windows of his office, his gaze on the front door. Clearly giving her the hint to beat it. Georgie felt the bite of his dismissal. She turned and went to leave.

“That’s right, run back to your kingdom,” Vic muttered.

But she heard him loud and clear, and something snapped within her. She spun back around and said, “I’ve been in South Section many times before, you know.”

“Oh yeah? Congratulations,” he mocked.

“I frequently visit shelters down here because of work, and I’ve been volunteering at the Prince Street Soup Kitchen since I was a teenager.”

He stared at her blankly and then shrugged his massive shoulders. “You want a medal or something?”

“No! I’m trying to explain that—”

“Save your explanations for someone who gives a damn.”

“Have I done something to offend you? I’m sorry the press has been giving you a hard time if that’s what this is about.”

“It’s not,” he began, but she was revved up and talked over him.

“Or if you have a problem with my father, which, let’s be honest, everyone does.”

“Yeah, I’m not a fan of his politics,” he sneered.

“And you think I am?” she snapped back.

“You’re a Spaulding.”

“I understand that. But I’m more than just a last name. And I’m not my father.”

“Okay, fine.” He held up his hands in mock surrender. “You’re not your father.”

“And as someone who’s dealt with anxiety her entire life, I know it can be difficult to maintain eye contact. But with you, that’s obviously not what the problem is.”

“Eye contact? What are you talking about?”

“You don’t look me in the eye. You don’t look at me at all,” she cried out, cringing inwardly. She sounded like a spoiled brat who craved attention. No wonder he hated her.

“I don’t look at you because when I do, all I think about is hauling that insanely tight skirt up over that perfect ass of yours and fucking you hard against this desk.”

The air left her lungs. She blinked rapidly, rendered speechless by his words. Words that should have gotten

someone an indignant smack across the face. She'd never been spoken to like that in her life.

But coming from Vic, it made her thighs clench together.

He finally looked at her, his eyes dark, and Georgie understood. He didn't hate her. He wanted her. But he hated that he wanted her.

"Oh," she breathed out. "I see."

He gave her a sarcastic smirk before perusing through another file. He must have been satisfied he had shocked her, imagining such a blunt declaration would scare her off. Instead, she wanted to hear more.

She grabbed hold of all the courage she possessed. "Would you lay me down on the desk or make me bend over?"

He froze momentarily before turning back to look at her, a stunned expression on his face.

And the puzzle pieces clicked into place in her mind. She realized why she'd felt so out of sorts in her past relationships. Why she'd never been able to find what she craved. Because those men had wanted nothing more than to try and impress her to get in the good graces of the Spaulding family.

Identical magnetic fields, unable to properly connect.

But the man before her was her antithesis. The opposite magnetic energy she could connect with. Because Georgie knew she had power, money, and status. She had never wanted any of those things and had desperately wished she could transfer that power over to someone else.

Vic was the exact person she could do that with.

She thought back to her mad fantasy backstage at the Quinn Theatre and how she wanted to lose her identity in his lovemaking. But perhaps she wanted to be punished for her identity. Punished for all the things she had but didn't deserve.

Before he could respond, the front door slammed open, the bell jingling. The two men from her security detail rushed over to the back office.

“Ms. Spaulding, you have to come with us. There’s been another incident.”

CHAPTER FOUR



Deck the halls with boughs of holly, *fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck, fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck*, Vic thought as he sauntered through the aisles of Kane's Department Store on Saturday evening. The store's soundtrack of jolly holiday tunes grated his nerves as he attempted to finish his holiday shopping.

Admittedly, he didn't have too many presents to buy. In the years since his parents' death, the holiday season had lost any magic it once contained. Nowadays, he only purchased gifts for Lex, Rhett, and the Goldberg family.

Jacob Goldberg was the taxi driver who perished alongside his parents, leaving behind a wife and two-year-old twin boys. Every year since the crash, Vic brought the twins and Jacob's widow, Esther, gifts for Hanukkah.

Lex had forged a genuine friendship with Esther since the tragedy, bonding through the mutual trauma. But he resisted, despite Esther's constant invitations to Shabbat dinners. He'd never admit it to anyone—could barely admit it to himself—but he was scared. He was thirty-four years old, a whole ass adult who could knock a man out with one punch, and yet, he was terrified of getting close to a family after half of his had been taken from him so senselessly. And every year when Vic dropped off the gifts, Esther gave him a warm hug, and he could feel the ghost of his mother's arms around him.

Squashing the memories, he perused the massive department store, still utterly lost on what to buy Lex. He'd already gone up to the electronics section to ask Marcy for gift

advice, but he learned she had worked an early morning shift and had already left for the day. Then he moved over to the fragrance section and balked at the prices. Knowing he couldn't afford to purchase perfume, he still lingered over the bottles, compelled to sample every single scent until he could pinpoint the intoxicating fragrance Georgie exuded.

Then he silently chided himself for acting like a fucking chump and moved over to the home section. He meandered through shelves of candles, checking the price tags as a shopgirl approached.

“Can I help you?” she asked, a large smile on her face.

He sniffed the wax. “Uh, yeah. Don't know much about candles.”

“Are you looking to buy for your wife? Girlfriend?”

He glanced warily at her, unsure if she was gunning for a date alongside a sale. “Sister,” he clarified.

The shopgirl smiled wider and gestured to the candle in his hand. “That's one of our most popular scents. Actually, if you'll follow me?” She led him to a different display shelf. “We have these prepackaged gift baskets. Each one has been arranged around a different fragrance group. Citrus, florals, even winter scents like peppermint and balsam.”

The packages were within his budget, so he shrugged and agreed. The shopgirl selected a popular choice and led him over to the checkout counter.

As she began ringing up his gift, she kept glancing at him. “You're the man who saved Georgina Spaulding, aren't you?”

Fucking Christ. He hadn't thought anyone would recognize him. The only photo the press had managed to dig up was a military portrait from his early twenties—back when he'd been considerably more fresh-faced. He'd dodged media calls and interview requests over the past few days and hoped any interest in him and his history would fade quickly.

“Nah,” Vic said, playing it cool as he handed over some cash. “I just look like him.”

The shopgirl eyed him, then winked. She handed over the gift, all snuggled in a fancy Kane's shopping bag with its signature gold color and fanciful lettering. Before he grabbed the bag, she placed a business card in his hand.

"My personal number is on there," she purred.

He smiled politely and then beelined for the door. He still had to purchase something for Rhett, but he'd come back another day. Exiting Kane's, he stepped onto the glitzy streets of North Section's shopping district.

As he strolled past busy shoppers and a group of carolers, his phone rang. Since it was Lex, he answered it in typical sibling fashion. "Hey, Goober. You finally finished playing around as high society maiden?"

There was a small silence, and then a different voice replied. *Her* voice. "Hi. It's Georgie."

He silently cursed and dodged around a group of people, stepping away from the crowds to linger outside a designer shoe store. "Uh, hi. Sorry, I...what are you doing with Lex's phone?"

"She's still at my place. But she's pretty drunk. She mentioned taking the Luna home, but she's really in no state. And I'd happily pay for a cab, but even that—"

And just like that, big brother mode was activated. "I'll come get her. I'm in North Section anyway."

Georgie provided her address and said she'd notify her doorman and the security detail that he would be swinging by. Vic grunted that he'd be there in ten minutes and abruptly hung up. He clutched the shopping bags and trudged through the crowds.

You literally told the woman you wanted to fuck her on your desk, and now you have to pick your drunk little sister up from her multimillion-dollar apartment.

He had no idea what the hell had gotten into him last night. The fact that he'd said such a crass thing to her left him dumbfounded. But what shocked him the most had been her reply.

Would you lay me down on the desk or make me bend over?

He was grateful the two cops had rushed into his office. If they hadn't, he wasn't sure what would have happened. But the men had whisked Georgie out quickly, talking about some suspicious package found at her brother's office. Once they were gone, Vic locked the front door of Cannon Investigations and went into the bathroom, where he stroked one out in a haze of lust, imagining her lain out on the length of his desk, taking his furious thrusts.

After last night, he had to admit it. Georgina Spaulding was, to put it lightly, not what he had expected.

That morning, he went out to grab breakfast and a copy of the *Moon City Chronicle*. As he sat at the small bar counter in his kitchen, shoveling the bacon, egg, and cheese sandwich down his throat, he read the front-page story about a pipe bomb exploding in Edward Spaulding's office. Thankfully, no one was hurt, as Georgie's eldest brother had already left for the day. As per the reporting, the bomb was rather amateur, and the damage to the office was minimal.

Nevertheless. Two attempts on the lives of two of the mayor's children, both within a week. There was another Spaulding son, Charles, and Vic could only imagine that his security detail was now on high alert.

He turned onto Georgie's block, deep in the heart of east North Section. She lived in a high-rise luxury building named Orchid Place, and as he entered the polished lobby, he noticed that the complex was decorated with lofty art and, of course, dozens of potted orchids. He nearly leaned over to sniff the flowers to discover if perhaps orchid was the unknown scent that had haunted him for days.

Feeling insanely out of place in such an opulent space, he gave the doorman his name. The man called up to Georgie's apartment to notify her and then told Vic to take the elevator to the fortieth floor. He walked over to the elevator bay, noticing a plainclothes cop at his post close by.

As he stepped onto the lift, his stomach stirred. He wished he could blame it on a fear of heights as the elevator began ascending, but he knew that wasn't true.

Butterflies. He was going to see Georgina Spaulding again, the daughter of one of the men he hated most in this world, and he had fucking *butterflies*.

Play it cool, he thought as he knocked on the door to her apartment. But when she opened the door, dressed in black yoga pants and a thin T-shirt, he realized that was going to be difficult to do.

“Hi,” Georgie said, her face flushed. “Thanks for coming.”

Don't look at her tits. Don't look at her tits. “Thanks for calling me.”

“Lex is in the bathroom.”

She stepped back so he could enter the massive apartment. Past the foyer, the living room was perfectly color coordinated with soft blues and silvers, in addition to the largest television he'd ever laid eyes on. But the real kicker was the breathtaking floor-to-ceiling windows that showcased a spectacular view of the city.

Also breathtaking and spectacular was the sight of her backside in the skin-tight athletic wear she had on.

Don't look at her ass. Don't look at her ass. “I'll go check on Lex,” he said.

He placed the shopping bags in the foyer. Georgie pointed him in the right direction, and he walked down a corridor to a closed door. He knocked softly, and the door opened a crack.

Lex peered back at him, her typically pale face a shade of green. “So. This is embarrassing.”

“Since when do you have a problem holding your liquor?”

“Since today. We've been drinking mimosas since two in the afternoon. Do you have any idea how expensive the champagne was?” she whispered, practically scandalized. “And I think the orange juice was hand squeezed. Hand squeezed!”

“Don’t get bougie on me now, Lex.” He looked her over as she burped quietly. “Are you good to get in a cab with me?”

“Uh...give me a few minutes. I think I feel another wave of barf coming on.” She shut the door quickly, and Vic heard the faint sound of retching.

He returned to the living room and found Georgie on the couch, sipping what was left of her mimosa.

“Is she doing okay?” she asked.

“She needs a few more minutes.” He walked back over toward the front door, keeping close to the exit.

“You can sit. Can I get you anything while you wait?”

He shook his head and looked around the apartment, refusing to look at her straight on—just as she’d called him out on the night prior. “How’s your brother?” he asked, desperate to lead them away from the elephant in the room.

She scoffed. “He’s alive. He wasn’t at work when the bomb went off. Although, according to my sister-in-law, he was supposed to be at work.”

“Ah,” he murmured, understanding the implication.

“Yeah, Christmas is shaping up to be interesting this year. Two assassination attempts with a sprinkle of infidelity. Not to mention my father’s recent voter suppression. Makes me glad I stopped celebrating Christmas with them years ago.”

He chuckled. The city’s princess kept surprising him. “I always assumed you were close with your family.”

“I used to be,” Georgie admitted. “When I was young and ignorant and stupid. Not that I’m much better now. I know how this looks. This apartment.”

He nodded, whistling through his teeth. It was no secret that the upper class of North Section lived like this, but it was a whole other thing to see firsthand. And considering how he had been late on his electric bill last month and had been without power for three days, this was like an elbow to the teeth.

She put her glass down on the pewter coffee table and approached him. “Vic...” she began.

He cut her off. “I was out of line last night. Way out of line. I apologize. I don’t know what got into me.”

“Oh.” She nodded in a slow, pensive manner, looking down at her feet. “I mean, I don’t think there’s anything to apologize for.”

“Of course there is. I don’t speak to women like that. Not unless...”

“Not unless what?” Her big, doe-like eyes were slightly glazed. She wasn’t completely bombed, but it was obvious she was a bit tipsy. “Not unless you know it’s what the woman wants to hear?”

He let out a noncommittal sound as a lame answer, something between a grunt and a sigh.

Georgie pushed further. “Did you miss the question I asked you last night?”

“I heard you fine,” he murmured, his cock stirring at the memory.

“But you never answered.”

She leaned back against the wall, a tempting picture. He could easily step forward, grab her wrists, and pin them above her head. His groin could be grinding against her pelvis in a matter of seconds. And Vic understood that she’d let him. She’d likely welcome it. But she’d been drinking, and she obviously harbored misplaced feelings of heroism when it came to him. He would never take advantage of that.

“You’re drunk.”

A little giggle burst from her. “Oh. Yes, I suppose I am. But trust me, I thought you were handsome long before I opened the champagne today.”

Emotion jumped in his throat. He’d never been called handsome in his life. He’d been called rugged and rough. But handsome? No. The men in her world were handsome. They

wore tuxedos and owned country homes and had clean fingernails. He was not that, and he never would be.

“I think you’re just...confusing gratitude for attraction.”

“Why can’t I feel both?” she whispered.

The sweetness and sincerity in her question caused him to snap, anger taking the wheel. “Listen, your highness, I know exactly what this is. You think a quick roll in the hay would be fun, don’t you? Get yourself a bit of South Section strange and laugh with your girlfriends when you tell them how a loser like me fucked you down good.”

His words were harsh, but he spoke the truth. Women from prestigious North Section families did not associate with men like him. Not unless they were paying for the night or wanted a quick bit of adventure before returning to their spouses.

Vic knew the game. Thanks to his job, he was no stranger to the advances of wealthy socialites. After years of investigating philandering husbands, more than a handful of scorned wives had propositioned him. And while there was satisfaction in knowing he could rock the world of these women with a few strokes of his hips, he never indulged in the temptation.

Outside of the bedroom, those women wouldn’t spit on him if he were on fire. And that was too much for a prideful man like him to bear.

But damn, the more he saw of this statuesque redhead, the more his pride dissolved.

“I wouldn’t do that,” Georgie argued, her chin down against her chest. A somber smile curved her lips—ruddy lips he’d imagined wrapped around his cock way too many times to count. “I don’t really have any friends.”

The quiet disclosure was so sad that he immediately wanted to kick his own ass. And yet, it was the first time he felt truly connected to her. Because when he quickly glanced at Georgina Spaulding’s bewitching face, he saw wealth and prestige. But when he looked deeper, he saw a shared emotion.

Loneliness.

He stepped forward and took her hand, recognition of a joint experience driving the intimate action. He looked down at her elegant fingers, the perfect manicure, her soft palm. Her delicate hand looked amiss in his grip. She sighed quietly at his touch, a brief but beautiful sound of bliss that he wanted to replicate again and again. Preferably with his head between her spread legs.

And then, because apparently, he was possessed, Vic brought the inside of her wrist up against his nose. “What is that scent?” he rumbled.

That glorious chest of hers raised as her breath caught. “My perfume?”

“I don’t know what it is. It’s been driving me mad.”

“It’s jasmine.”

He knew he should let go of her hand. That he absolutely should not bring the inside of her wrist down a few inches to linger near his lips. But he did it anyway because *fuck*, she smelled so damn good.

“Remind me to stick to beer from now on,” Lex announced, appearing out of nowhere.

He yanked himself away from Georgie, the connection severed. His heart was rocketing against his chest as he staggered back, putting distance between them. Thankfully, Lex was too busy putting on her jacket to notice their intimate moment.

“You good?” he asked.

“I am. Although I would like to say, for the record, that I did not *actually* need your help,” Lex declared, pointing at her brother.

He made every effort to hold back an eye roll but was unsuccessful. There was nothing Lex hated more than asking someone for help. But when little Alexandra Rose was born—before she’d been able to talk and get into mischief and drive her older brother crazy—his mother had placed the squabbling newborn in his arms at the hospital. *Make sure you always look after her, Son*, his father had whispered in his ear. And, as

much as Lex could test his patience, he'd taken his role as big brother seriously since that moment. He would always look after her. Even if it meant breaking the law to do it.

Lex turned to Georgie. "Sorry again. I'm not usually such a lightweight."

"Champagne can be deceptive," Georgie said as she rubbed Lex's back. "I've been there before, trust me. Thanks for coming over. I had a lot of fun."

"I did too." Lex leaned in to give her a hug. "Let's do it again soon."

"Definitely." Georgie glanced at Vic over his sister's shoulder. Then she grabbed her purse from the hall tree close to the front door. "Here, let me give you money for a cab."

"No," he snapped immediately. She recoiled, so he softened his voice. "I got it."

"Okay."

He felt like an asshole for snapping at her yet again, not to mention the fact that he should have just accepted the money. It would be his second cab ride this week, and between that and his recent Christmas shopping, his bank account was dismally low.

Georgie opened the front door for them, and he left without a word, grabbing the shopping bags quickly as his sister trailed behind. As they rode the lift back down to the ground floor, Lex peered up at him.

"What?" he barked.

"Nothing," she replied blithely. Then she shrugged. "Kind of crazy seeing how the other half lives. But she's so nice. I can't help but like her."

He almost begrudgingly agreed, but then he thought of his parents, and the concession got stuck in his throat.

Georgina Spaulding might be nice, but it was because she felt indebted to him for saving her life. And because she found him attractive. Big fucking deal. She wasn't the first hoity-toity broad to make a pass at him, and she wouldn't be the last.

And this newfound friendship with Lex was nothing more than an extension of that. So Vic vowed to get his sister—and the small part of himself that still wondered what it would be like to capture Georgie’s mouth with his own—back down to earth.

“Don’t get used to it. This ain’t our world.”

They reached the ground floor, the elevator chiming. Better to leave the princess in the highest turret.

CHAPTER FIVE



When Georgie returned to work, she was pleased Daryl agreed with her idea of offering a sponsorship to Cannon Investigations. And she could have kissed him when he contacted Vic and asked him to stop by the office on Thursday to discuss details.

Georgie sat in her cubicle, attempting to focus on work. She'd already been late to the office that morning after taking forever to decide on an outfit. She hoped the silk blouse and pencil skirt she wore would trigger Vic's memory of the night at his office, especially since she knew Daryl was planning to invite Vic to their weekly happy hour. So, naturally, she had concocted a harebrained scheme to try and seduce him that evening.

She had no doubt Vic was attracted to her. But she recognized that there were complicated feelings surrounding that attraction. He disliked her for some reason, and as much as that should have been off-putting, it was the exact opposite. It intoxicated her. She reveled in his distaste, enjoying the descent from the undeserved pedestal she was placed on at birth.

And yet, she still *desperately* wanted him to like her.

The conflicting sentiments hurt her brain. Did she want him to like her or loathe her? The two emotions were more entangled than she had ever realized or experienced. As someone who hadn't been involved with a man in so many years, she was undeniably out of her element.

At five o'clock, she powered down her computer and grabbed her jacket and purse. Vic and Daryl were still chatting in the conference room, so she walked down to the front lobby to wait.

She found Rohan there, finishing up a phone call. His dental practice was a short walk away, and he offered teeth cleanings and other dental work pro bono for vets who utilized Two Battlegrounds' services. They greeted each other with a hug.

"How are you doing?" Rohan asked.

"Meh."

He laughed. "Sounds like you could use a drink then."

"You have no idea. I'm going to give my shadow a heads up that we're leaving soon."

She had given her security detail advance notice about her plans to get drinks at Mulligan's, the pub around the corner. When she stepped outside to let them know they'd be leaving within a few minutes, one of the men assured her that his partner had already gone ahead to properly scope out the space before her arrival.

Georgie walked back into the lobby and found Vic talking jovially with Daryl and Rohan. His face immediately grew serious the second she approached.

"Hi there," she said brightly. Best to act as if nothing significant had happened between them. "Are you joining us for happy hour?"

"Yes, join us, Vic." Daryl gave him one of those manly slaps on the back. "Thursday drinks are tradition for the three of us, but we'd love to add a fourth. The pub's around the corner."

"Should you be going to a pub right now?" Vic asked her.

"My security detail's aware."

He appeared resistant, but upon more goading from Daryl, he agreed to grab a beer. The foursome left the lobby and began the short walk. Even though most people Two

Battlegrounds helped were downtown, the office was technically in North Section, seven blocks away from The Line, where South Section officially began on the map of the city.

The group entered Mulligan's, a typical Irish bar with a plethora of beer options, low-maintenance decor, and delicious pub grub. Rohan found an available booth tucked in the back corner, and every inch of her skin tingled when Vic slid into the seat beside her.

Everyone ordered their drinks and turned their attention to the football game on the televisions scattered around the pub. She smiled to herself as the men animatedly watched. And while she knew this wasn't a proper double date, she was secretly delighted how it probably looked like that to anyone who might glance their way. She felt so wonderfully normal sitting beside Vic.

She wished she could reach out and hold his hand.

After he threaded their fingers together on Saturday night, she hadn't been able to stop thinking about how such a simple act felt so intimate. And it wasn't until then that she realized how starved for touch she had been. Sure, she would have preferred for Lex to leave so she could steer Vic to her four-poster bed and let him have his way with her, but she would never turn her nose up at holding his hand.

About an hour into the outing, a waiter dropped several plates, and the loud crashing sound reverberated throughout the entire establishment. Georgie nearly jumped out of her skin, memories of the gunshots barreling back. Vic grasped her hand as Daryl and Rohan looked on, both concerned.

"It's okay," Vic assured her, his voice calm and steady. "Just a crash. You're okay."

She put her free palm over her heart, feeling the frantic beats. After several deep breaths, she nodded. "I'm fine," she told the group with a shaky smile.

"Do you want to go?" Daryl asked.

She shook her head vehemently. "No. I'm having fun."

Minutes passed, and things returned to normal, but Vic didn't let go of her hand. In fact, he lightly stroked his thumb over her knuckles, the soft touch soothing her nerves. It wasn't until Daryl eyed them that Vic gently pulled away and took a hefty swig of beer.

After two hours, two drinks a piece, and a couple of shared appetizers, Daryl and Rohan announced they had to head home. Vic agreed, mentioning he'd catch the Luna at the closest station. As they settled their tab, Daryl insisting he'd pay for the group, Rohan offered to hail Georgie a taxi.

"I was thinking of walking. Since the weather's been so pleasant today. I'll tell the security team, don't worry," she said quickly, immediately responding to the cautious glances from all three men. "Vic, maybe I can walk with you until you catch the Luna?"

"Uh, sure. We can do that."

They departed Mulligan's, with one member of her security detail staying close and the other grabbing the SUV to slowly crawl after them from street to street. After a few blocks, they reached the nearest Luna station. Georgie held her breath until he finally spoke.

"I'll walk you the rest of the way," Vic mumbled. "Another person looking out for you won't hurt."

She smiled, relieved that the first part of her plan had come together. They continued their walk uptown. Georgie had taken care to tuck her hair into her jacket, and with a hat on top of her head and her most noticeable feature out of sight, no one took notice of them. During the walk, they reached a block transformed into an outdoor Christmas tree shop. They passed through, Georgie relishing the smell of pine and this magical little corner amid the city.

"Do you have holiday plans?" she asked him, finally breaking the silence that had plagued them.

"Spending Christmas with Lex and Rhett. Like I spend most of my days."

“Your sister is great. I had a lot of fun the other day.” She grinned at the memory of their afternoon together, chugging mimosas and talking about their favorite soap opera. And as she’d done with Daryl and Rohan years ago, she fed Lex a few lies about her life. Yet, none had shown up in the tabloids or gossip blogs.

“She had fun too. Clearly.” He smirked her way. “Your fancy champagne really got to her.”

She nearly insisted that the champagne wasn’t *that* fancy, but it would have been a blatant lie. Not wanting to dive into a discussion about her extravagant habits, she turned to a topic that seemed like a safe option.

“Tell me more about your job. I’ve never met a private investigator before. How did you come into that line of work?” she asked as they waited for the light to change to cross over a busy intersection.

He shrugged with his hands in his pockets. “I could have been career military, but my heart wasn’t in it. I didn’t like being away from home—from my family. I was planning on becoming a cop, but that didn’t work out. It was Lex who came up with the idea to open the agency.”

“Ah, brilliant Lex.”

A hint of a smile emerged on his face. “Yes, brilliant Lex. So I got my license and started advertising and picking up cases. Worked out of my apartment for a while before I was able to afford the office space.” The minor grin was now gone, his expression transformed from amused to something different. Something troubled. “It wasn’t always easy. Still isn’t easy. And it’s not nearly as exciting as movies or hard-boiled novels make it out to be.”

“Except when you’re saving women from attempted murder,” she quipped.

His smirk returned. “I do that every Tuesday night.”

She giggled, delighted he was responding to her basic flirting attempts. And then, naturally, she put her foot in her mouth. “Have you investigated what happened at the gala?”

The dark slashes of his eyebrows narrowed. “You looking to hire me?”

She hadn’t given it any thought, had just trusted the police to do their job. But as a full week had passed with no arrests, she was keen to get back to her normal life. A life that didn’t include a security team trailing after her every move.

She’d learned from Lex that the agency made a decent profit, but there were still some months when they struggled. However, something on Vic’s face suggested that hiring him wouldn’t be a wise move. Georgie knew well enough that money complicated things, and whatever was between them was already complicated enough. So she tried to backtrack.

“I just figured, you know, detectives like mysteries, and it’s still a mystery, so…” she rambled.

“I don’t work for free,” he said bluntly.

“No, of course not. I wouldn’t expect you to. Sorry, I was trying to make a joke. And I failed, clearly. I wasn’t thinking.”

They kept walking in silence, her spirits low. She heard him sigh before he asked, “What about you? You like working at Two Battlegrounds?”

Georgie perked up at his question, a clear olive branch after the tense moment they had shared. “I do. I love it. I never felt like I had a purpose in life until I started working. My years following university were rather pitiful.”

“How so?”

“I did what everyone expected of me. Went to charity galas, to the ballet, the philharmonic, party after party, trying to find a husband. It was always understood that I’d marry, become a perfect society wife, and pop out a few kids. Not that I have anything against getting married and having children. But if it happens, I want it to mean something. I don’t want such important life choices to be nothing more than status symbols.”

He didn’t reply. She watched him out of the corner of her eye as she matched his long steps.

“What about you?” she asked.

“What about me?”

When his name hit the papers, the press had dug up the basics. He was a Moon City native, had served in the military, his parents had died in a car crash years ago, and he owned and operated a private investigative business in South Section. There had been nothing about any type of romantic partner. And while they’d had some sexually charged moments, Georgie still wanted confirmation that she wasn’t encroaching on another person’s man.

“Anyone special in your life?” She posed the question as casually as possible.

“No. No one special.”

He didn’t provide any elaboration, but it was all the response she needed. And it was perfect timing, as they were a block away from her building. Time to pull out the acting chops.

“Oh, I almost forgot. Lex left her hat in my apartment. The one with the geometric print? Do you want to grab it?”

“Uh...”

“Or I can swing by your office tomorrow night. Bring it then.”

Vic shook his head. If he had a hunch about what she had planned, his face didn’t show it. “No, it’s fine. I’ll grab it.”

They entered her building, Georgie nonchalantly saying hello to the doorman on duty. She checked her mailbox before they rode the elevator up to the fortieth floor. They stood on opposite sides of the lift, staring straight ahead.

Anticipation twisted her gut, and her palms grew sweaty as the elevator chimed and the doors opened. She stepped out into the hallway, Vic trailing behind her. When she pulled out her keys and unlocked the door to her apartment, the heavy turn of the lock loudly cut through their silence.

She stepped inside, turned on the lights, and placed her jacket and purse on the hall tree. “The hat’s in my bedroom.

Let me grab it. Make yourself at home.”

He lingered by the door the same way he had the other night. Not an encouraging sign. Knowing her seduction scenario was essentially dead in the water, she walked down the hallway into her bedroom. She grabbed Lex’s hat and took a moment to collect herself.

Oh well. You’ve been alone every night for a long time. Tonight will be no different.

But her morale rose when she returned to the living room and saw that Vic had moved away from the front door. He had even removed his jacket. He stood at the windows, looking out at the view, something Georgie often took for granted. But watching him appreciate the skyline put it into perspective. Not many people got to see the city from this extraordinary vantage point. It was a reminder of how lucky she was.

He heard her approach. “You face South Section.”

“Oh.” She moved beside him and stared out at the city. “I guess I do.”

“Looking down on us all.” The hint of bitterness in his voice was impossible to ignore.

She winced. “I don’t think of it like that. But I can understand why you would,” she conceded quietly. She handed Lex’s hat over to him, and he stuffed it into his jacket pocket.

“People are going to talk.”

“About what?” she asked, confused by the change in subject.

“About how I’ve visited your apartment twice in the span of a week.”

“The doormen here are professionals. They’re not gossips.”

“Maybe not, but the police department can’t keep its fucking mouth shut. Sorry,” he said quickly.

She rolled her eyes. “I’ve heard that word before. I’ve heard it from you, as a matter of fact,” she added in a whisper.

His head dipped with acknowledgment before he glanced over at her, scanning her body from head to toe. The timbre of his voice changed. It was darker, huskier. “You wore that skirt on purpose, didn’t you?”

Georgie nodded, heart pounding. “Yes.”

His jaw clenched, and he returned his gaze to the skyline. She watched him intently, examining the shape of his mouth. His lips were full, the only soft piece of an otherwise hard and weathered face.

“I’ve never done this before,” she confessed.

“What’s that?”

She cleared her throat, barely able to speak the words. “Um...seduced someone.” One corner of his mouth curved an inch, and she released an awkward laugh. “Clearly, I suck at it.”

He tossed his jacket to the side and reached out to capture her waist. She gasped as he maneuvered her so she leaned back against the windows. And then he studied her, finally past the phase of denying eye contact.

“I guess you’d rather someone do the work for you?” His tone was playful but still accusatory.

The connotation wasn’t lost on Georgie.

Still, she nodded in reply. Leaning against the city backdrop—this perplexing and exhausting but still beautiful place that had delegated them to exceedingly different worlds—she looked up at him, grateful that the universe had thwarted the rules of Moon City and brought him into her life. Their connection had been forged in a traumatic moment, but she felt nothing but peace when he leaned down and kissed her.

She expected the kiss to be bruising and bitter, but Vic surprised her. He was hesitant, brushing his lips against hers in a movement that was virtually a whisper, as if he didn’t believe he was allowed to do such a thing.

But she wanted more, so she leaned into him, trailing her hands up his muscular chest to lock around his neck. Feeling her immediate reaction, he pulled her closer, his big hands gripping her waist possessively as she opened her mouth to allow him full entry. She tasted a hint of beer on his lips and inhaled the simple scent of soap, so unlike the men of her past who doused themselves in upscale colognes.

He pulled away abruptly and rested his forehead against hers. “What the hell do you want?” he asked between heavy breaths.

What a loaded question. Georgie didn’t know where to begin. So she said the first thing that came to mind.

“We could, um...make out. On the couch.”

She wanted to slap herself the second the words came out of her mouth. *Way to sound like a virginal teen who just discovered heavy petting!* But Vic smiled, tiny flickers of mischief in his blue eyes.

“Make out, huh?” he asked.

Groaning, she rested her head against his chest, too embarrassed to look at him. “I told you I wasn’t good at this.”

He hauled her up off the ground and into his arms, and she felt dainty for the first time in her life. He walked a few steps over to the couch and sat, pulling her down to straddle his lap. “You hear me fucking complaining?”

With her skirt pushed up around her thighs, his arousal brushed against her. She whimpered and leaned in to reclaim his mouth. But before she could initiate another kiss, he pulled his head back.

“Wait a minute,” he rumbled.

She obeyed, hanging on his every word and action. Slowly, one of his hands coiled around her hair. Because she’d been late to work that morning, she’d hastily fixed it in a braid that fell over one shoulder.

There was a simmering energy in the way Vic grasped her plait. He stared at her hair as if it were its own entity,

completely separate from Georgie herself. The fraught moment continued, and right as apprehension started to invade her emotions, he released his grip and carefully unfastened the elastic tie. Freeing her hair from the braid, he ran his fingers through the crinkled locks. His motions were gentle, and he took care to neither pull nor tug. He simply arranged her hair around her shoulders and down her back.

But despite his careful touch, Vic's features were clouded with enough spitefulness to spook her. "Is everything okay?" she asked carefully.

The question yanked him out of whatever thrall he'd been under. His attention refocused, and he nodded calmly. "Yeah. Everything's fine."

She wasn't confident that was true until he cradled her face delicately and finally resumed kissing her. Her jitters turned to white-hot lust when Vic didn't hold back. He ravaged her mouth and palmed her ass greedily, grinding her down onto his erection. But the tightness of her skirt made it difficult to fully enjoy the position, and she soon found herself pushed onto her back. The weight of him hovering over her sent new pulses of excitement through her body.

She pushed up his Henley, but he stopped her. "I thought we were just making out," he murmured.

"Oh, we can make out with your shirt off." She persisted in her pursuit, determined to see him shirtless.

With an amused smile, he tossed the shirt to the side. "That's good to know."

She was able to stop herself from sighing wistfully when she looked up at him. But just barely. Because his body was incredible and brawny, and his biceps practically made her feel faint. Arms were her forever weakness, and the man had *arms*.

She pulled her eyes away from his chest and the fine black hair that covered it, trailing down his taut abdominals and into his jeans. "You are stupid good-looking," she blurted out.

Not an eloquent moment, but an honest one, nonetheless.

Vic laughed and looked away. But this time, his avoidance was different. Her heart fluttered when she saw the bashful look on his face. The last thing she wanted was to embarrass him, but there was something special about seeing this strong man show softness.

He leaned back in, and time passed. She couldn't tell if it was five minutes or five hours, but she basked in his insistent kisses, the strokes of his tongue, and how he wasn't afraid to hitch her body closer to his. In an odd way, he still kissed her as if he didn't believe he was allowed to do so, but he was determined to get his fill if it was the last thing he'd ever do.

Although his shirt had come off, he didn't make a move to remove her clothing. All her shameless writhing caused her blouse to untuck from her skirt, but that was the extent of it. A part of her wanted things to move faster, but another part was so dizzy with happiness that she didn't want to break the moment. But as the massive bulge against his jeans indicated, he was ready for more.

Unsure why he was holding back, she broke the kiss. But before she could stutter out a question, he peppered kisses against her neck and collarbone, finding the sweet spot that elicited mewls from her.

"Fuck," he groaned into her ear, nipping at the lobe.

Hearing his deep voice only made her hotter. Despite his standoffish attitude and frequent taciturn behavior, she knew he had a mouth on him. And she ached to hear it unleashed.

"If you want to, um..."

"If I want to what?" he prompted.

"If you want to...run your mouth. You could do that. If you, you know...wanted to."

The twinkle in his eye returned. "Run my mouth," he repeated.

She nodded demurely. "If you're interested in that...sort of thing."

"I'm interested in what you want. What turns you on."

He waited for her to articulate what she needed. But her nerves got the better of her, and she couldn't elaborate further. Thankfully, Vic understood and took control. And that was exactly what she wanted him to do—take control.

“You know how many filthy fantasies I've had since the night of the gala?” He leaned down to speak directly into her ear, like a devil on her shoulder. “That day at the police station, when you turned and walked away from me? I imagined grabbing your hair and tilting your head back to kiss this fucking delicious neck of yours. And that night, I jerked off thinking about eating you out in the conference room, the entire police force none the wiser.”

Georgie shuddered and closed her eyes to imagine the scenario, the throbbing between her legs intensifying.

“And you heard about the desk in my office, of course,” he continued. “And for the record, you were on your back with your legs up on my shoulders.”

Curse the security detail for interrupting!

“But my latest fantasy has to do with this apartment. This view. I want to fuck you from behind in front of these windows. You looking out at the city, knowing everyone is watching you get taken by a low-class loser like me.”

Her breath was raw and uneven. She was too crazed with lust to fully unpack why that statement made her almost burst into flames. She didn't think he was a loser, couldn't care less that he didn't have money like her. And yet, his words, the way he spoke so coarsely about their innate differences, made her already damp panties even wetter. She should stop and assure him that she didn't view him that way. That would be the sensible thing to do. But Georgie wasn't feeling sensible at the moment.

“I've thought about you too,” she confessed. “When we were backstage at the Quinn Theatre, the way you looked at me...I imagined you taking me on the ground behind that piece of scenery.”

His eyes flashed. Apparently, those words were what he needed to proceed further because he finally reached out to fondle her breasts. Her nipples were tight buds pointing through the layers of clothing, impossible to ignore. She could barely breathe as his rough hands covered her, kneading her flesh and pulling at her sensitive peaks through the silk.

“Please do it,” she whispered hoarsely. “Do all of it.”

He moved to unbutton her blouse. One button, then two. And that was when the front door slammed open.

Both glanced up, and her stomach dropped as she looked into the eyes of her furious father.

CHAPTER SIX



As far as nightmare scenarios went, this one was a doozy. “Dad,” Georgie exclaimed. “What do you think you’re doing? Haven’t you heard of knocking?”

Vic jumped off her and grabbed his shirt as she got to her feet. He reclined and snatched his jacket, holding it in front of his lap to cover up the raging hard-on he sported. She stalked over to her father while tucking her blouse back into her skirt.

That goddamn skirt.

“How did you even get in here?” she demanded.

Mayor Spaulding dangled a key in one hand. “You gave your mother your spare, remember?”

“Yeah, years ago. And for emergencies,” she grated through her teeth.

“Your security detail mentioned that you walked home with a man. I was concerned.”

She laughed, not an ounce of mirth in the sound. “Concerned. Sure, you were concerned. I’m fine. Please go.”

Mayor Spaulding peered over his daughter’s shoulder to glare at Vic.

He’d never thought he’d look into this man’s eyes. And there was a moment, a small cluster of seconds, when he wondered if Mayor Spaulding knew who he was—if he had any clue how he and this family had profoundly altered his

life. He wondered if Mayor Spaulding ever thought about the South Section couple and dedicated taxi driver who'd been killed by his own brother.

But there was no inkling of recognition on Mayor Spaulding's arrogant face. And Vic could have laughed at the irony— if only it didn't make him feel so devastatingly insignificant.

"I need to get going anyway," he said, breaking the silence.

"No!" She shook her head, eyes pleading. "Please don't."

"Victor Cannon, is it?" Mayor Spaulding asked, finally addressing him.

"Yes, sir." The words slipped out. Even though he loathed the man, Vic's military training to respect his superiors had been hammered into his skull.

"Also known as the man who saved my life." Georgie gave her father a pointed look. "A man you couldn't even be bothered to contact to express your gratitude."

"That's not necessary," Vic said. He attempted to move past them both and make a run for the door.

Mayor Spaulding stopped him. "My daughter is right. I should have reached out. She wouldn't be here if it weren't for you." He held out his hand. "Thank you for what you did."

Vic nodded once and shook his hand, noticing how Mayor Spaulding used the handshake to show his own strength. But Vic wasn't fooled. Mayor Spaulding was nothing more than a privileged rich kid who had grown into a ruthless man.

Georgie was still on a mission to get her father to leave, gesturing toward the front door. "As you can see, I'm perfectly fine. I'd also appreciate it if you didn't use my security detail to spy on me."

"I wasn't spying," Mayor Spaulding insisted in a clipped tone. "Simply concerned for my daughter's welfare."

The glower on his face spoke volumes, and Vic couldn't help but feel amused in a petty, childish way. Mayor Spaulding was obviously incensed to have found his precious daughter

with someone like him. And while Vic had never been one for revenge, there was a twisted satisfaction in this encounter.

You think I'm lower than muck on your designer shoes, but your daughter thinks I'm good enough to fuck her.

A gust of air escaped his lungs. Yeah, there was no denying the night had been heading in that direction, but that thought of his didn't sit well with him. Especially not after she had been so genuine and vulnerable with him. For shit's sake, he had blushed—fucking blushed!—when she said how attractive she found him. He'd been at a loss for words, dumbstruck at how her sweet confession made his chest swell.

But as his attention darted back and forth from father to daughter—both with that quintessential Spaulding stature and emblematic red hair—Vic recognized that there were still two versions of Georgie in his consciousness. He'd been slowly discovering the real her, but the symbol of the Spaulding princess persisted.

Like the rest of her family, she was the embodiment of everything he loathed, and he wasn't certain he could fully shake that. Because as Mayor Spaulding shot him another death glare, a sordid sliver of Vic's personality wanted to drape his arm over Georgie's shoulder and tell the leader of this godforsaken city to beat it.

A part of him wanted to corrupt this perfect little world of hers, with the expensive rugs and original artwork and state-of-the-art sound system. He wanted to run his dirty hands over every inch of her shapely form, ruin her life in the same way his had been ruined.

And despite the fact that a Spaulding was responsible for their untimely deaths, he knew his parents would be ashamed of him for thinking such things. They raised him to be better than that. There were enough cruel men in this city. Vic never wanted to be one of them.

"I have to get going," he said, inching toward the door.

"Please don't go." Georgie blushed and said, "We have to finish our, uh, conversation."

“Didn’t appear to be much talking going on when I got here,” Mayor Spaulding said under his breath.

“It’s none of your business,” she snapped.

While he did enjoy that Georgie wasn’t afraid to give her father hell, Vic cringed at the juvenile nature of this entire incident. Even in his youth, he had never been caught by a girl’s parents, and he never thought he’d experience such mortification at his age. At least it meant his erection had deflated. This whole scene was the very definition of a boner killer.

“I didn’t realize you two were so well acquainted,” Mayor Spaulding said dryly.

“Vic came into work to meet with Daryl. His agency is going to sponsor all our fundraising events next year, to get his business more exposure. We’re doing it as thanks for what he did.”

Mayor Spaulding raised an eyebrow. “How nice. However, I’m sure that’s thanks enough, Georgina. No need to show gratitude with your tongue.”

Her eyes sparked with anger. “Okay, you know what? I need to speak with you alone.”

“Good. I’ve been meaning to discuss the preliminary city budget proposal for the next fiscal year with you.”

Her eyelashes flapped with puzzlement. “With me? Why in the world—?”

“I have a meeting on the books in a few weeks with the head of the Homeless Services Bureau,” her father said, but there was a measure of smugness in his tone. As if he was dangling a sumptuous banquet in front of a starving man. “I’m very much looking forward to hearing how I can better serve and fund the department. Considering your job, I’d welcome your counsel when the time comes.”

Georgie’s stunned expression gave Vic the perfect opportunity to make his way to the front door. This was both family and rich people business, and he was neither. “I’ll see myself out,” he murmured.

He opened the door and stepped into the hallway, bypassing Mayor Spaulding's own security team lurking outside the apartment. He was nearly to the elevator when Georgie caught up with him.

"I'm so sorry," she said, keeping her voice low. "He's always been terrible, but he's never pulled something like this."

He shrugged one shoulder. "Not a big deal. He did us a favor anyway."

She looked taken aback as he pressed the button to call the elevator. "Did us a favor?"

"He stopped us from starting something that can't last, you know?"

Her perfectly groomed eyebrows knit together. "What are you saying?"

"We're very different."

"I'm aware of that."

Glancing at the elevator doors, he willed them to open so he wouldn't have to have this conversation. "Listen, I'm not going to take you out on fancy dates or buy you flowers or whatever. I'm not cut out for that kind of shit."

You could be cut out for that kind of shit. If only you had the means to do so.

"When did I ask you to do any of that?" she countered.

He let out an annoyed breath and muttered, "Where is this fucking elevator?"

"I'm not asking you for anything. I'm just letting myself be happy."

"Happiness is fleeting."

"Perhaps. But I almost died last week," she reminded him. "Kind of puts things into perspective."

Vic finally brought himself to look at her. Her lips were still swollen from his unrelenting kisses, and the sight

mesmerized him. She tugged on a strand of her hair restlessly before throwing it over one shoulder. He got a whiff of jasmine and felt his resolve start to deteriorate.

Sure, they could have a passionate one-night stand or a short-term fling, but that would be the extent of it. He wasn't about to join her at some high society function, and she sure as hell wasn't going to spend evenings eating takeout in his dingy South Section apartment. It was better to pump the breaks now and avoid any hurt feelings down the line.

Because Vic had a hunch that the person who would be hurt the greatest would be him. She'd get tired of slumming it and fall for some pompous prick who lived in the right zip code, whereas he'd probably spend the rest of his life haunted by the swish of her copper-red hair and the curve of her body in a pencil skirt.

If he had any goddamn sense, he would call up the shopgirl from Kane's Department Store and work through this sexual frustration with her.

But every time he laid eyes on Georgie, his good sense seemed to disappear.

The elevator chimed, and the doors opened. Once he left, he wouldn't see her again until February, when the next fundraising event was scheduled to take place. He assumed Georgie and his sister might continue to cultivate their newfound friendship, but that didn't involve him.

He hoped two months was long enough to get his head back on straight. Hopefully, he'd forget how much her skin blazed when he whispered his nasty thoughts into her ear.

"I'll be seeing you," he said vaguely. Then he turned and walked into the elevator.

As the doors closed, her stare said she'd hold him to that.



VIC WAS FIRST TO ARRIVE AT THE OFFICE THE NEXT MORNING. He brewed a pot of coffee, checked his voicemail, and went through emails. Rhett and Lex showed up together soon after and rushed over to the coffee pot, roughhousing to get to the mugs first. Rhett was victorious, so Lex held up a brown paper bag and announced that breakfast was served.

Vic glanced into the bag and then looked at his sister. “You forget the cream cheese?”

“It’s at the bottom of the bag, Grumpy.” She moved past Rhett to pour her cup of coffee.

They set up a small breakfast buffet on Rhett’s desk and went to town on the first meal of the day.

“How’d it go yesterday?” Rhett asked, his mouth full of sesame bagel.

Vic froze, his brain going haywire. Had the press caught wind of his visits to Georgie’s apartment already?

“The meeting with Two Battlegrounds?” Rhett prompted.

Christ. Get it together, Cannon. He chewed his bagel, trying to pass off his delayed answer as proper manners. “We’re officially a sponsor for all four of their fundraising events next year. There’s one in February, a summer event that’s usually at the end of July, something mid-October, and then the annual holiday gala.”

“We should upgrade our logo before February,” Lex said. “It looks amateur.”

“That’s because it is amateur.” Rhett laughed before she elbowed him in the ribs.

“I don’t know if we have the funds to hire a graphic designer to create something new,” Vic admitted.

“Why couldn’t you have any artistic talent?” Lex asked Rhett, crossing her eyes at him. “Why’d we even hire you anyway?”

“I’m a tech whiz, not an artist. Hell, you two would be using carrier pigeons instead of email if it weren’t for me.”

As Vic watched the two of them, it was easy to slip into memories of their childhood. Rhett and his parents had lived two floors down from the Cannon family apartment. Rhett was four years younger than Vic and clearly idolized him, whereas Lex was a year younger than Rhett and idolized them both. They got into basic mischief growing up—everything from playing ding-dong-ditch on the crotchety old woman on the sixth floor to drinking beers out on the fire escape.

They'd truly become as close as family when Rhett moved into the Cannon apartment after his mom took off and his dad got put away. Vic had been deployed during those brief months of cohabitation before Rhett went off to university on a full scholarship, but Lex often joked about the injustice of how she got one brother out of the apartment, only to be stuck with another.

The three of them stayed in touch throughout the ensuing years, but it wasn't until Rhett showed up at Cannon Investigations looking for a job that they truly fell back into the family unit they once were. Last Vic had heard, Rhett had been rising up the ranks in the IT department at one of North Section's biggest financial firms. His unceremonious departure from that job was still a topic of mystery to the Cannon siblings.

But Vic had his own secrets, so he knew better than to push Rhett.

"Maybe I'll ask Georgie if she knows someone," Lex suggested. "Two Battlegrounds must have a designer on staff. Maybe they freelance."

"You shouldn't ask her for favors. It makes us look needy," he said.

His stomach churned uncomfortably at the memory of their walk last night, when she'd casually asked him if he was investigating the assassination attempt. He might have acted unnecessarily surly with her—and Lord knows he couldn't turn his nose up at work—but he didn't want her to turn into those other women. The women who hired him and then

crossed their legs just so. As if he was some sort of novelty, an experiment, or mere curiosity.

But in the end, it didn't matter. He'd made his position clear last night. There'd be no hiring him, no money from her would ever make its way into his hands, and there would be absolutely no more making out on her couch.

Vic pulled Lex's hat out from his back pocket and tossed it to her. "You left that at her apartment, by the way."

"Did I?" his sister questioned, trying to look innocent.

He glared and went to refill his mug.

"Georgie this and Georgie that," Rhett said in a high-pitched voice. "I think you have a crush on her, Lex."

"Oh, I'm not the one with the crush."

Vic slammed the mug down on the counter, coffee sloshing everywhere. He heard Lex and Rhett behind him, both trying to hold in their laughter.

"All right, breakfast is over," he barked. Time to play the boss card. "Lex, reach out to your contact at Buchanan and Vause. They haven't hired us recently. See if they have any cases they need us to dig into."

Lex rolled her eyes and saluted him. She walked back to her desk as he turned to give an order to Rhett, but the tolling bell stopped him. Detective Samson walked through the front door, bringing in a blast of cold winter air.

The glances the detective received from Lex and Rhett were just as chilly. But he fixed his attention on Vic and asked, "Got a few minutes to catch up?"

Vic gestured for him to come back to the office. As Samson walked past her desk, Lex spoke.

"There's coffee if you'd like some, Officer."

Samson stopped in his tracks and scowled. "It's Detective."

"My mistake!" she said in a chipper voice.

Vic shook his head, and Rhett bit his bottom lip to keep from snickering. Vic was relieved when Samson continued back to the office without further incident. Once the door was closed, both took their seats and settled in.

Vic was unsure what this visit was about. Perhaps they'd narrowed in on a person of interest and needed his help making an eyewitness identification.

"Tell me about your parents," Samson said.

Shit. Fuck, shit, fuck.

"They're dead," he said bluntly after a beat.

"But there's a bit more to the story, isn't there?"

"You clearly already know the story." Samson didn't let up with his pointed stare, so Vic continued. "They were killed by a drunk driver on their wedding anniversary. Joshua Spaulding plowed into the taxi they were taking home from dinner, killing all three in the car."

"And Joshua never faced any legal consequences. Mayor Spaulding saw to that."

"As did your boss," Vic reminded him, not about to give the MCPD any credit.

Samson conceded to his comment with a small nod. "I would have appreciated honesty from you earlier."

"Honesty? You never asked me about my parents."

"I asked if you had reason to hate the mayor."

"And I told you I wasn't fond of him," Vic said. "If you wanted me to explain all the reasons why, I could have written you a list. Letting his brother off the hook without even a slap on the wrist would have certainly been at the top."

"Tragic, isn't it? How Joshua Spaulding perished of cirrhosis only a few years later."

"Sorry. I'm all out of tissues."

Samson laughed. "Here's the deal, Mr. Cannon. Mayor Spaulding called last night and asked me to personally look

into you. I didn't ask questions, but he hinted that he wasn't fond of your newfound *friendship* with his daughter."

Vic scoffed. "He's looking for ammunition."

"I'd imagine so. Personally, I'm a bit surprised no one has made the connection yet. I'm sure others on the force know what happened, but why did the press never report the specifics of this?"

"A free and fair press is a bit harder when the largest newspaper in the city was founded by the mayor's ancestors."

Not to mention the other reason why. The reason that still ate at him. Vic held his breath, waiting for Samson to confront him on the other part of his past that he refused to speak of. But the question never came, and the tension in his shoulders relaxed slightly. Even though that chronic emotional pain never truly went away, not since that day he confronted Joshua Spaulding on the steps of City Hall.

"Maybe that's the benefit of being the new guy in town," Samson said. "Everyone's jaded. With so many tragedies in a place like this, it's like they fade away. No one remembers. But I want to learn everything about this city."

"Hope you have the stomach for it." Vic leaned forward, placing his forearms on his desk. "Why'd you move here anyway? From what I understand, you were making a name for yourself out on the West Coast."

One of Samson's russet brows quirked. "You've been doing your own digging then."

He couldn't help but grin. "Background checks are a gumshoe's bread and butter."

Samson kept his mouth shut, but Vic caught him squirming in his seat as if secret memories ate at him. That was certainly telling. Vic knew he could do another check, dig deeper and discover more of the copper's past. If Samson tried anything funny with him, Vic was glad to know he could pull that out of his arsenal for retaliation.

But until then, he wanted to get a handle on this unfortunate turn of events. "So how long do I have before this

shit about my parents hits the press?”

“I’m the only one who knows. I haven’t even told Quintanilla. Nor Mayor Spaulding.”

“What are you looking for, a bribe? You want something to keep your mouth shut?”

“I’m here to tell you the press is the least of your worries. We have a few working theories about who’s behind these attacks on the mayor’s family, but nothing concrete yet. And City Hall has been breathing down our neck.” Samson gestured to Vic. “You have a motive.”

“I was the one literally hauling her to the ground when the shots rang out. What you’re suggesting is absurd. Besides, my parents were killed years ago,” he argued, trying to stay calm. “And if I wanted vengeance against the Spaulding family, why wait this long?”

Samson held up a hand to calm him. “I know I gave you a hard time the other day. For some reason, I’m always delegated to the bad cop role during questionings.”

Vic snorted. “I wonder why.”

Samson cut him a look before continuing. “Nevertheless. I know you’re not behind this. I’m trying to show you how easily things can be twisted against you. And your life may become more complicated if you continue, well...whatever it is you’re doing with Georgina Spaulding.”

“We’re not doing anything. Not anymore. There’s nothing there, okay? There never was.”

“If you say so.”

This meeting had not proceeded how Vic had expected. He rubbed his temples and tried to unclench his jaw, annoyed at Samson’s unconvinced response.

“However, I have to give the mayor something. Anything unsavory in your past you might be able to give me?” Samson asked. “To tide him over as Quintanilla and I continue to work this case.”

“Jaywalking?”

Samson was not amused by the halfhearted joke. So Vic racked his brain. He could reveal how his investigative license was pushed through the approval process quickly, but it would put the business in jeopardy. And after everything he'd done to get Cannon Investigations off the ground—the good and the bad—he wasn't about to risk it.

“Typical teenage shit. Busted for underage drinking a few times. My associate, Rhett, his father is in jail for murder two. Killed a man during a drug rip.”

Samson nodded. “That should work for the time being. And do you own a firearm?”

Although he'd been fortunate enough to never see combat, Vic had had enough of guns thanks to his years in the military. “I don't, no.”

“Good, that's good.”

Vic assumed the police had recovered shell casings from the Quinn Theatre. Linking those casings to a gun would be imperative to the investigation.

“What are these working theories you mentioned?” he asked, unable to hide his curiosity.

Samson smirked. “You know I can't talk about that. I'm surprised you're not doing your own detective work on this.”

“I don't work for free. And I can't imagine the MCPD bringing little ol' me on as a consultant.”

Samson chuckled and rose from his chair. “Fair enough. I'm sure we'll speak again soon. Just remember what I said about Georgina Spaulding.”

Vic nodded begrudgingly and shook the detective's hand. He still didn't like the man, but he had to admit that Samson had more integrity than he originally gave him credit for. Vic watched him leave and noticed a flair of arrogance in his step.

Lex and Rhett hurried to the back office as soon as Samson was out the door. “Only a few follow-up questions,” Vic said before either could open their mouths. “Get back to work.”

They both started to return to their desks, but he had a thought and called Lex back. She leaned against the doorframe with one hand on her hip.

“You didn’t talk to Georgie about our parents, did you?” he asked. “About how...”

She shook her head. “No. It didn’t come up. Why?”

“Let’s keep it that way.” When Lex gave him a look asking for clarification, he created a quick lie on the spot. “The press has still been hounding me. I want to keep things as private as possible. The less people know, the better.”

Lex shrugged. “Fine by me. I’m not one to try and score sympathy points anyway. You know, since I worked through my grief and trauma.” Her pointed look was impossible to ignore, yet somehow, Vic managed to do just that. She went to leave but stopped short and turned back. “You going to Esther’s tonight?”

He’d seen Esther earlier in the week when he dropped the Hanukkah presents off at her apartment. She had invited him to Shabbat dinner, and Vic had vaguely said he’d check his schedule, which both knew meant he wouldn’t attend. Nearly ten years of invitations, and he never showed up, but she never stopped trying. In fact, he had received a text from her the following day.

Vic, thanks again for the gifts. You always make the holiday special for the boys. Hope you’re able to make it to dinner on Friday. You are always welcome.

He shook his head. His decision was the same as always. His wordless and disappointing response elicited a huff from Lex. She returned to her desk, and he sat back in his chair, trying to recalibrate and focus on the workday.

Instead, Vic pulled out his cell phone to reread Esther’s text message, his heart beating against the stronghold he’d built around it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

After Thursday night, which was arguably one of the most mortifying moments of her life, Georgie wanted nothing more than to continue to ignore her father's existence. Instead of discussing his alleged plans to meet with the forever neglected Homeless Services Bureau, their conversation had devolved into a rip-roaring fight. But her father knew her soft spots, so he sent Georgie's mother to do damage control.

Although she had stopped attending Sunday evening dinners at the family townhouse years ago, she hadn't been able to fully cut ties with the women in her family. She still frequently met her mother and grandmother at a nearby tearoom. And when Mrs. Spaulding called her on Friday night as she was leaving her volunteer shift at the Prince Street Soup Kitchen, Georgie agreed to meet that Sunday afternoon.

She spent Saturday morning in the barre studio near her apartment, trying to stretch out the frustration of the days prior. She was disappointed Vic had left, but there was nothing quite like a visit from a woman's father to kill the mood.

After that incredible make-out session on her couch, she'd been certain they had made true progress. But the strained conversation that took place by the elevators had left her with another round of discouragement.

Listen, I'm not going to take you out on fancy dates or buy you flowers or whatever. I'm not cut out for that kind of shit.

Initially pretty peeved that he assumed she'd have certain expectations of him, she eventually composed herself and analyzed the rift rationally. Considering their differences and how they'd used that disparity as foreplay, she could understand why it preoccupied him. But a simple conversation could clear the air between them. Not to mention, it might also help her sort out her thorny thoughts surrounding that topic.

Of course, if she'd been smart enough to ask for his cell number, they could have had said conversation by now. Alas, the number listed on his business card was the office phone of Cannon Investigations. It felt foolish to call him at work and even more foolish to ask Lex for his contact information. So Georgie found herself at a stalemate, wondering how and when she would see him again.

After her barre class, she grabbed a juice at the nearby health store and bought a Christmas tree at the outdoor market a few blocks away from her apartment. Unable to carry the tree home by herself, she arranged with the seller to have it delivered that evening for an additional fee.

The tree was delivered after supper, so she poured herself a glass of wine before she pulled Christmas decorations out of storage. As she draped the tree with lights and ornaments, the silent apartment weighed heavily on her. It was no different from any other night alone at her place, but somehow it was. The loneliness she'd been able to ignore for so long now ached in her bones. But she had no one to blame for that but herself. Her distrust and anxiety had constructed the isolated world she now inhabited.

Her phone chirped with a message from the coffee table, and a snippet of the solitude disappeared when she saw it was from Lex.

Hey, G! Random question. Do you know any graphic designers? We want to upgrade our logo before the next fundraiser event, but purse strings are a bit tight right now. Wanted to see if you know anyone who might do us a solid.

Georgie assumed Vic wasn't involved with this request. He struck her as too proud to ask for any favors, even one as inconsequential as this. Still, it warmed her heart that Lex had reached out. It was like they'd reached another level in their newly formed friendship.

Hi! The designer I work with freelances on the side. I can talk to him on Monday and see if he can give you a friends and family discount.

She sent the message off and sipped her wine, waiting for Lex's reply. After a few seconds, the overenthusiastic response arrived.

Oh, awesome!!! That would be so amazing, I really appreciate it!! Feel free to give him my number. You're THE BEST!

Georgie replied with a smiley face. She wanted to ask after Vic but thought better of it. So instead, she finished decorating, consumed one more glass of wine, and watched a bit of television before falling asleep.

She went to barre again on Sunday morning, then to Lacey's for another session in the afternoon. Upon leaving therapy, she hailed a taxi to take her over to the tearoom. The weather had plummeted on Friday, and it was now bitterly cold, ruining her original plan to walk crosstown.

Georgie was seated at a table in the back corner, and her mother arrived soon after. Their joint security teams looked ridiculous standing among the tearoom's ruffles and lace and pastel colors. She and her mother ordered their usual: A pot of tea for each and a plate of scones with clotted cream.

Like all her familial connections, her relationship with her mother was complicated. Caroline Spaulding was the epitome of trophy wife and society darling. And while her mother leaned into that identity wholeheartedly, there were times when Georgie saw a woman who yearned to break through. But when push came to shove, Mrs. Spaulding adhered to her husband.

As they sipped their tea, her mother caught her up on the latest antics of the Kane heiresses. Much of the gossip was more of the same, so Georgie's mind wandered, and then her blood boiled as she silently recalled the fight with her father.

Listen to me right now, Mayor Spaulding had thundered. If you want to make a fool of yourself rolling around with South Section dirt, you be sure to keep it behind closed doors.

She settled her rising fury by consuming a gulp of scalding tea. Mrs. Spaulding had yet to interrogate her about Vic, so Georgie wondered if her father had even disclosed what he'd walked in on.

Soon the topic turned to her mother's favorite occasion, the annual Spaulding holiday party. It was the one celebration Georgie still agreed to attend, as it was not a political event. Considering the circumstances of the past two weeks, she hadn't expected the party to take place this year, but her mother was insistent. According to Mrs. Spaulding, security would be heightened, and the guest list trimmed down considerably. But Georgie was always given free rein to invite whomever she desired—although most years, she never asked anyone.

She wanted to beg off this year, considering how angry she was at her father and how the last social event she'd attended had ended with her nearly being killed. But she had spent years attempting to dismantle avoidance coping with Lacey. She knew it was important to face these stressors, so she would grin and bear it.

Mrs. Spaulding pulled an invitation to the party out of her bag and handed it over to Georgie. "For the couple you wanted to join this year. Daryl and Ronnie?" her mother asked.

"Rohan," she corrected. If she was going to see the party through, she figured it would be best to have some friendly faces there, and she was grateful Daryl and Rohan had agreed to attend. She placed the invitation in her purse and then was struck with an idea.

If you want to make a fool of yourself rolling around with South Section dirt, you be sure to keep it behind closed doors.

The Spaulding holiday party was the furthest thing from *behind closed doors*. She knew the chances of Vic attending were slim to none. But after the other night, the possibility of aggravating her father was too good to pass up.

“Thanks, Mom. Actually, can I get three more invitations?”



“ABSOLUTELY NOT.”

“Vic,” Lex whined, forcing the invitation into his hand. “We have to go. We were invited.”

The courier arrived at the office on Monday morning. Lex had squealed in delight when she realized they’d received invitations to the Spaulding holiday party, which was—according to her—*the* social event of the season. The party was scheduled for that Saturday night, so it was obvious they were last-minute additions to the guest list.

“We don’t have to do anything,” Vic said as he tossed his invitation into the trash before making another pot of coffee.

Lex groaned loudly and pulled the invitation out of the garbage bin, placing it on the kitchen counter. “Well, I’m going, and so is Rhett.”

“Yeah, I want to experience this fancy champagne Lex can’t stop talking about,” Rhett chimed in from his desk.

“Fancy champagne, Vic. And I bet the hors d’oeuvres will be divine. Listen, if nothing else, think of it as a free meal,” she said to reason with him.

“You want to spend time with that kind of company?” He lowered his voice and glanced at his sister pointedly. “You really want to be around him? Mayor Spaulding himself? Shit, what if that scumbag Joshua were still alive?”

“But he’s not,” Lex reminded him. “He’s been worm food for years, and I’m glad of it.”

As was he. While the man who killed his parents hadn’t been punished in the usual fashion, Vic had experienced the closest thing to serenity when news broke that Joshua Spaulding had passed away at the age of forty-three. His untimely death meant the Spaulding family had to acknowledge the dirty little secret they’d tried to keep under wraps for years—that Joshua had suffered from alcoholism since his early twenties.

But of course, Mayor Spaulding used the sympathy to his advantage. And as he entered the next election cycle, he had campaigned on a promise to transform Moon City’s Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. It was a promise that never panned out.

But if nothing else, it meant that Joshua Spaulding was no longer walking the planet, and Vic would never have to worry about being in his presence again. Because while he’d only met Joshua once, the experience had been seared into his brain.

In the weeks following the death of his parents, the bills became overwhelming. The funeral expenses had cost a fortune, and his parents didn’t have much in the way of savings or substantial life insurance plans. Through a fog of grief, Vic was trying to get the business off the ground, literally operating out of the family apartment while subsequently struggling with rent payments.

In addition to helping him with administrative needs, Lex had also been working at a boutique bookstore up in North Section. She tried to share her paycheck, but he refused. As far as he was concerned, it had been his responsibility to provide for her.

Make sure you always look after her, Son.

It was such a formative time for her—her final year of high school—and his heart ached whenever he had thought about how their parents wouldn’t be there to cheer her on when she received her diploma. He remembered lying awake at night,

agonizing over how he couldn't help her pay for college courses. It had felt like every time he took a breath, he was failing his little sister.

And then one day, Lex returned from visiting Esther and broke down crying at the news that the family was facing eviction. Esther worked two jobs to try and make up for the loss of income after Jacob's death, but it still wasn't enough.

It wasn't until he watched his sister sob and sniffle, her pale face splotchy with sorrow, that Vic finally snapped.

He approached Joshua Spaulding on the steps of City Hall, and it had taken everything in his being not to strangle the son of a bitch in broad daylight. Instead, Vic quietly threatened to go to the press—and not the *Chronicle*, which was in the mayor's pocket, but the tabloids that printed anything. He named his price, and Joshua arranged for the funds to be wired to his bank account, along with an ironclad nondisclosure agreement that was still binding even after his death three years later.

Vic took only what he needed from the settlement total to purchase a dilapidated building on Castle Street and get the business off the ground. The rest of the money went to Esther. He told her that the Spaulding family had arranged the payout on their own, a preemptive action to keep both families quiet. No one, not even Lex, knew the money was the result of blackmail.

The guilt still sat like a boulder in his gut, the tension always present in his shoulders. The fact that he couldn't make it on his own like his parents had despite all the hardships—that he had to resort to acting like a common criminal to survive—was his deepest shame. His business and entire livelihood had been built on the back of Spaulding's blood money. And that reality was destructive shards to his pride, constantly chipping away at his self-esteem every time he walked through the front door of Cannon Investigations.

“What about the venue?” he said, grappling for any type of excuse at this point. “It's that house—that fucking house—where he got drunk and—”

“Vic, there are dozens of places in this city that are connected to memories of Mom and Dad. You gonna avoid each one of them?”

“The three of us will stick out like a sore thumb if we go. You want to spend time with people who’ll look down on us?”

“And you’re really going to play into their hand? Refuse to go because you don’t think we deserve to be there?” Lex asked pointedly.

“I never said that.”

His sister shrugged and returned to her desk. “That’s sure what it sounds like.”

The phone rang and effectively ended their conversation. As Lex talked to the potential client in her chipper phone voice, Vic watched the coffee drip. Then he glanced over at the invitation, still situated on the kitchen counter.

It was one night. One party. The three of them could go as a united group, drink champagne, and have some food before dipping out. The holiday celebration would be busy, and Georgie would likely have dozens of people to attend to. He could politely say hello before avoiding her the rest of the night.

But then the dark part of his brain conjured a fantasy. Him with his arm draped over Georgie’s shoulder, staring at Mayor Spaulding while daring him to say something. He imagined leaning in to kiss her, his hands tangled in her red hair, and he could almost hear all the whispers from the high society chums as he pulled her off to an empty room and slammed the door. The stares and the gasps as everyone saw the sterling reputation of Georgina Spaulding ruined before their eyes.

Goddamn it. He was doing it again. He was thinking of her as nothing more than the embodiment of privilege as opposed to an actual *person*. As if she were simply a model of wealth, status, and beauty—everything he’d never have. And in truth, she was all that and more, which was why this line of thinking kept seeping into his brain. But it wasn’t fair to whittle the real her down to a mere ornament. It was ironic that he didn’t want

her treating him as a novelty because of how he'd been raised, when he was doing the same exact thing—regularly slipping into viewing her as an aristocratic robot.

He poured his coffee and took a long moment to get his racing brain under control. Once composed, he turned and caught Lex's eye. She was still on the phone, so he held up his invitation and mouthed the words *okay fine, we'll go*. A huge smile appeared on her face before he walked back into his office.

Going to the party was the polite thing to do. Plus, Lex wanted to attend, and at the end of the day, he couldn't deny his sister much of anything. He and Georgie were in each other's orbit for the time being, whether he liked it or not. And one glorious make-out session couldn't trip him up. Nothing had changed since he'd shut things down outside the elevators, and he'd do well to remember that.

He glanced down and saw that she had written a note on the back of the invite. Naturally, her penmanship was utterly perfect and even that, in equal parts, annoyed and turned him on. It was fucking absurd because who was turned on by handwriting? He was, apparently.

Vic, hope to see you there. Georgie.

Vic rationalized that it was the faint smell of jasmine that was causing his rationale to short circuit.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Georgie headed over to her family's townhouse on Saturday afternoon. Her mother always hired a stylist and makeup artist for the holiday party, so she dressed casually and packed her outfit and accessories before hailing a taxi at around four.

Her apartment was on the east side of North Section, known for its new age luxury skyscrapers. The west side of North Section screamed old money, with elegant townhouses and stately mansions. Although technically a west side girl at heart, Georgie enjoyed having several avenues of space between her and her family.

The Spaulding home was a flutter of activity when she arrived. Caterers hurried about while decorators transformed the place into a holiday haven with boughs of holly, evergreen garlands, and mistletoe. The party always took place on the first floor, with security stationed at the two main staircases to ensure that no one wandered into the private areas of the house.

But Georgie headed up to the third floor, where the hair and makeup team were stationed in one of the several guest rooms. She said hello to her mother and sister-in-law, Camille, and asked when Monica, Charlie's girlfriend, would arrive. Her mother relayed that Charlie had recently broken things off, and Georgie shook her head. How foul of her brother to end a relationship right before the holidays.

She wanted to look her best in case Vic showed up, so she spent a fair amount of time talking through her desired look

with the stylists. They fashioned her hair up in a crown braid, which would show off her favorite pair of chandelier earrings. As they moved on to her makeup, her mother asked after the friends she had invited.

“My boss, Daryl, and his husband, Rohan, are definitely coming,” she said. “The other invitations were for some new friends of mine.”

“Oh? How did you all meet?” Camille asked. As much as Georgie had wanted to bond with her sister-in-law, they’d never fully clicked. But today, she felt particularly compassionate toward Camille after learning about Eddie’s infidelity.

“Well, more like one new friend. If you want to get technical about it. Her name is Lex. Her brother is the one who, um...who saved me at the gala.” Interest grew on her mother and Camille’s faces, so she went on. “Lex is great. She came over last week for an afternoon of mimosas. So I thought it would be nice to invite her. And I didn’t want to snub her brother or their other associate, so I invited them too. The three of them operate an investigative agency in South Section.”

Mrs. Spaulding and Camille glanced at each other, and she realized her rambling had not convinced them that the invitations were nothing more than a kind gesture.

“I’m glad you invited some friends this year,” her mother said lightly.

The primping finished an hour before guests were due to arrive. Georgie returned to her childhood bedroom on the fourth floor and scrolled through the headlines on her phone to pass the time. Still no real news, still no suspect. She kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, for another incident to arise, or for someone to go after Charlie or her parents. As much as she acted like everything was normal, she wanted things to *be* normal. Or at least her type of normal.

The party started at seven in the evening, but she waited until a quarter past the hour to head downstairs. Once on the first floor, she saw that a fair amount of folks had already

arrived. She politely said hello to a few familiar faces, including some city officials, a few bankers, and the president of Moon City University. Georgie was grateful that the trimmed guest list meant none of her ex-boyfriends or their family members were in attendance.

She donned a shimmering gold cocktail dress with black lace accents. With a sweetheart neckline and nipped waist, it wasn't a pencil skirt, but it was a good silhouette for her body. But the most daring part of her outfit was the three-inch spiked, black suede pumps. She typically stuck with flats or a modest heel since wearing anything over an inch made her feel like she should start shouting fee-fi-fo-fum, but that wasn't the case when she was next to Vic. She sighed. That was more wishful thinking that he would attend.

After doing a round of greetings, she headed to the dining room to get a glass of champagne. The space was repurposed into an elegant cocktail lounge, complete with a full bar and several high-top tables adorned with delicate floral centerpieces of winterberry branches.

Soon after grabbing her drink, she was delighted to see Daryl and Rohan arrive. They hadn't ever attended the holiday party, so she gave them a tour of the first floor. She showed them the parlor, where a harpist created a calming ambiance of holiday tunes. Next was the billiard room, where her father was holding court with a group of eager sycophants. Then she brought Daryl and Rohan to the library, the place where she'd spent many hours as a child, living vicariously through fiction. She decided to skip the kitchen, as the caterers wouldn't appreciate any distractions, so she brought them down the hall, pointing out the bathroom along the way to the outdoor patio. They huddled under the heaters to chat until it became too unbearably cold. Georgie encouraged Daryl and Rohan to hit the bar, as she had to find her grandmother and say hello.

As expected, she found her grandmother in the parlor, having just arrived. Granny Spaulding sat on a sofa next to Detective Samson, of all people. Unaware he'd been on the guest list, she tried to hide her surprise.

“Hello, Granny,” she said, leaning down to kiss her grandmother on the cheek.

“Hello, Georgina, dear.” Granny Spaulding gestured to Samson. “Do you know Ace here?”

Samson got to his feet to shake her hand. “Good to see you again, Ms. Spaulding. And under better circumstances this time.”

“Good to see you as well. Have the night off, I suppose?”

He smiled a bit sheepishly. “Your father insisted I come as thanks for the work my partner and I have been doing. Quintanilla’s daughter has the flu, otherwise, he’d be here.”

“I see. I hope his daughter makes a speedy recovery.”

“I’ll give him your regards.”

“Such a fashionable young man,” Granny Spaulding said, looking Samson up and down. Once again, he wore an impeccably tailored suit, this one a deep burgundy wine with a black bowtie and matching pocket square.

“Certainly not as fashionable as you, Mrs. Spaulding,” Samson countered before returning to his seat beside her. “Will you tell me about that brooch? Is it an heirloom?”

As her grandmother launched into the story behind her favorite accessory, Georgie rolled her eyes at Samson’s blatant flattery and snuck away. As she walked back to the dining room, her heart thundered when she found Vic, Lex, and a man she assumed was Rhett in the foyer. The group handed their coats over to an attendant. Vic wore the same black suit he had on at the gala, whereas Rhett wore a gray one. Lex was decked out in a little black dress, with her lips painted a deep red and her short hair curled.

“Hi,” Lex exclaimed, stepping forward to hug Georgie. “Thanks for inviting us. We never go to fancy parties. This is so cool.”

“I’m glad you could make it. You must be Rhett?” she asked the man standing to the right of Lex. In her heels, she was just about his height. He was much leaner than Vic and

had boyish features—dimples and all—and unruly ash-blond hair.

“And you must be Georgie,” Rhett replied, shaking her hand. “I’ve heard a lot about you. Glad we finally get to meet.”

“Likewise,” she agreed. Then she glanced at Vic and gave him a small smile. “Hi.”

He nodded. “Thanks for the invite.”

A fierce blush spread over her face. “My pleasure.”

They held gazes for a moment before Lex cleared her throat. “Okay then, where’s the bar?” she joked.

Georgie shook herself out of her Vic-induced trance. “Oh, of course. I was heading to the dining room; it’s this way.”

She gestured for them to follow and found Daryl and Rohan enjoying their beverages when she walked through the door. Once all her guests had a drink, the group of six mingled around one of the cocktail tables. Lex thanked Georgie for referring her to Two Battlegrounds’ graphic designer, prompting Daryl to talk about his plans for the February fundraising event.

Throughout the conversation, Georgie stole glances at Vic as he stood directly across from her. Seemingly tuned out from the chatter, he regularly peered around to observe the party guests. A decidedly sour expression resided on his face as he took in the scene.

But then his focus latched on to her, and she found it hard to breathe when he stared at her intently, his gaze smoldering. It was a huge change considering she’d once complained about his inability to look at her. She was so pleased he’d simply shown up tonight, but the fact that he looked like he was mentally undressing her while sipping his scotch was a bonus.

The waiters frequently passed through the reception. Everyone sampled the hors d’oeuvres, everything from bruschetta to stuffed mushrooms to bacon-wrapped dates. Georgie giggled when Lex’s eyes lit up each time a waiter came by with something new.

Once the waiter carrying grilled shrimp skewers walked off, Georgie saw Granny Spaulding enter, escorted by Detective Samson. He brought Granny Spaulding over to a group of guests before heading to the bar. As he passed by Georgie and her friends, Samson stopped short when he saw Vic.

The two men looked at each other, something unspoken passing between them. Then Samson approached their table with a sardonic smile. “Why, look at this motley crew,” he drawled.

“How’s your girlfriend?” Lex asked, skillfully removing a shrimp from the skewer using her teeth.

Samson watched her movements carefully, his eyes sharp on her scarlet lips. “Girlfriend?” he repeated.

“That old biddy you walked in with,” Lex taunted. “She seems lovely.”

“She is lovely,” he ground out. Then he threw Lex a haughty look. “She also happens to be Ms. Spaulding’s grandmother.”

Lex cringed at her slipup, but Georgie laughed it off. “My grandfather’s been gone for years, so she is single. In case you’re wondering, Detective Samson.”

He gave her a good-natured smile and then glanced around the group. “I’m heading to the bar. Can I get anyone a drink?” Everyone declined, but Samson turned to Vic. “Join me?”

Although Samson posed it as a question, his tone made it clear it was a demand. Vic followed Samson, and Georgie watched them go.

“What’s that about?” she asked.

Lex shrugged, still enjoying her shrimp. “Detective Dandy came by the office a few days ago for some follow-up questions. Could have to do with that.”

Georgie observed them, wishing she could read lips and deduce what they were talking about. Whatever it was, both

looked slightly heated, which gave her the impression that this was more than simple follow-up questions.

Suddenly, her mother stepped into her line of vision. “Georgina, there you are. Come along. I need to introduce you to someone.”

Her mother took her arm and began pulling her toward the door. She quickly apologized to her cluster of friends before being spirited away.

“There’s a reporter I’d like you to meet,” Mrs. Spaulding said as they walked down the hallway.

“A reporter?” Georgie stopped dead in her tracks, her mouth suddenly dry. “Mom, no. Come on.”

Undeterred, her mother gripped her tighter and nudged her along the hallway. “She’s the new society reporter for the *Chronicle*. Lovely girl. She wants a simple quote from you about tonight. Nothing to do with that unpleasant business from earlier in the month.”

Leave it to her mother to refer to an attempt on her life in such a pragmatic manner.

Mrs. Spaulding led her into the library and approached a woman around Georgie’s age. She was of average height, with stunning curly dark hair and radiant olive skin. Although she wore a modest cocktail dress in a jeweled royal purple, her amber eyes were shrewd. She exuded a level of confidence that Georgie admired and wished she possessed.

The woman extended her hand. “Hello, Ms. Spaulding. I’m Nicole Silva with the *Moon City Chronicle*.”

“It’s nice to meet you. Call me Georgie, please.”

“I’ll leave you to it,” her mother said, smiling widely before walking off.

Nicole pulled a small notebook out of her handbag. “I won’t take up too much of your time. I’m just looking for a general quote for my article. Maybe you can tell me the designer of the dress you’re wearing or comment on the

crowd's spirit." She gave Georgie a knowing smile. "I'm sure you're no stranger to these types of articles."

She agreed and gave a simple quote, praising her mother for pulling off another year of festive holiday fun. Once Nicole got her words down in the notebook, she gave Georgie her card.

"I know I'm the society reporter, but I'm thinking about pitching a new monthly column. I won't get into details right now because I know you have people to see. But I think you'd be interested in it. Give me a call whenever you can."

It would be a cold day in hell before Georgie ever cozied up with a member of the press, but she smiled politely. She placed Nicole's business card into her dress pocket alongside her phone. "Pleasure meeting you."

She exited the library and nearly ran into Vic, who was walking down the hallway. "Oh! Hi. Where are you coming from?"

"Bathroom," he answered. "Bit of a line, though. Figured I'd try again in a few minutes."

"There's another bathroom off the billiard room," she said, pointing, but then she reconsidered. "Actually. I think my father's pretty much set up shop in there."

He chuckled. "I'll be sure to avoid it the rest of the night then."

She smiled, glad they could find some levity in the embarrassing moment they had shared last week. Although Vic's invitation to this event had been prompted by a desire to defy her father, she didn't want his ire to ruin the night. Especially if it meant she could spend more time with Vic.

Struck with an idea, she said, "No need for you to wait for the bathroom. I'll bring you to one on another floor."

"Some pretty mean-looking dudes are guarding the staircases, last I checked. I know they'd step aside for you, but considering everything going on lately..."

"There's no way they'd let you past. Here, follow me."

She walked to the back of the house, around the corner toward the kitchen. With the rear hallway clear of guests, she pushed against the wall, revealing the secret staircase.

He shook his head in disbelief. “Secret passageways? Really?”

She ushered him through. “It’s been here since the house was built. Designed for the servants.”

“Ah. To keep them neither seen nor heard.”

She followed him and closed the door, enveloping them in darkness. “You guessed it. But when I was younger, I used to hide in here whenever I was upset.”

Vic continued up the stairs, and she instructed him to climb to the fourth floor. Last she heard, the second-floor bathroom was being renovated, and she wasn’t sure if the stylists had departed the third floor yet. Once they reached the fourth floor, he pushed the door open, and they stepped out into the dimly lit space.

They turned a corner, and she pointed and said, “It’s the second door there.”

“Thanks.” He entered the bathroom and closed the door behind him.

Leaning against the banister of the main staircase, she waited patiently. Even from several floors up, she could hear faint sounds of party revelry. She instantly felt happier up here, away from it all. She liked being separated from the brown-nosing guests, silly gossip, and the absurdly expensive food—most of which was destined to go to waste when there were people starving downtown.

After a minute, Vic exited, turning off the light in the bathroom on his way out. He stood beside her and mimicked her position, leaning against the banister.

“Is everything okay with Detective Samson?” she asked.

“Nothing for you to worry about.”

She gave him a sideways glance. “That doesn’t put my mind at ease.”

He wavered for a beat. “I don’t want to cause any more trouble between you and your father.”

“There was trouble between my father and me long before I met you.”

“Fair enough. In that case, Samson came by last week and mentioned that the mayor asked him to gather some dirt on me.”

She sucked in a breath. “You can’t be serious. Oh, that absolute—that piece of—” Georgie stomped her foot, unable to come up with the words.

He laughed at her childish display. “Samson was surprised to see me here. And I explained that you invited all of us and that your father probably didn’t even know.”

“I cannot deal with him meddling in my life. He’s always been overbearing, but he’s never pulled something like this with the other men I’ve dated.” Her head jerked to look at him, flustered by the slipup. “Not that we’re dating or anything. I know we’re not. You made that clear.”

Something resembling regret flickered over his face. “Well. I’m sure he’s never had a problem with the other men you’ve dated.”

Georgie shook her head, still annoyed. “It’s no excuse. I’m sorry.”

He shrugged. “Not your fault. Just don’t go confronting him about it, okay? I don’t want Samson to get in hot water, nor do I want you fighting with your father over me. I’m not worth the trouble.”

A tiny twinge struck her heart in response to that comment. He was worth the trouble. He was worth that and a whole lot more. It saddened her that he didn’t see that.

“I won’t say anything,” she promised.

They stood in comfortable silence for a moment. Georgie looked down at their hands, both clutching the banister. So unbearably close.

“I’m glad you came,” she whispered.

“I’m glad too,” he admitted after a few seconds. Then he cleared his throat and looked her up and down. “Is there someplace we can be alone?”

“We are alone.”

“Somewhere behind a locked door. Preferably one your father doesn’t have the key to. Where there can be no interruptions.”

With a rapidly racing heart, she pulled him along to her old bedroom, utterly thrilled to forget about the party and the shallow world below.

CHAPTER NINE



The instant the door closed and the lock turned, Vic kissed her. He'd lasted less than two hours before caving to the urge, and considering how inviting she looked in that dress, he considered that a true feat.

Granted, when he had stepped inside the Spaulding townhouse, he'd been on pins and needles. His blood had run cold with the knowledge that this was where Joshua had gotten plastered on that fateful night. As he handed his overcoat to the attendant working the door, Vic had wanted to bum-rush each member of this detestable family and berate them: *Why didn't you cut him off? Why didn't you take away his keys? Why didn't you force him into a cab? Why don't you fucking care that he ruined my life?*

But then a copper-haired stunner appeared in the hallway, all long legs and rosy cheeks, and his long-held grudge was trampled upon by bone-deep desire.

When Georgie suggested bringing him to another floor, he agreed because he truly had to use the restroom. But as they stood together by the staircase, he remembered his latest fantasy, and those beast-like impulses took over.

Besides, nobody in this godforsaken city did the right thing. So why should he?

He pushed her against the door and gripped her waist fervently, his fingers digging into her flesh with a level of craving he'd never experienced before. Kissing her deeper, he

swept his tongue over hers and detected the taste of champagne.

“How much have you had to drink?” he asked, breaking the kiss.

“A glass and a half.” She nodded reassuringly. “I’m fine.”

“Thank fuck for that.”

She giggled, but the sound morphed into a moan when he pressed his lips to her neck. “I didn’t plan this,” she said breathlessly. “Just so you know. Although I might have, um... planned the other night at my apartment.”

He smirked into her neck and then traced the tip of his tongue up to her jawline. “Oh, I know.”

“I was that obvious?”

She had been, but he didn’t want to embarrass her. “Nah. But I can read you well.”

She was trembling in his arms, and he pulled back to catch her gaze. With those fuck-me heels she wore, she had a few more inches on him. He loved how he didn’t have to lean down far to kiss her and how she was able to look him straight in the eye. As polished and sophisticated as she was, the fact that she was tall made him feel like less of a giant oaf whenever they were together.

He moved away from the door and finally looked at where she had pulled him into. The space was massive, larger than his entire studio apartment. In the center of the room was a canopy bed with an antique storage trunk that sat parallel to the bottom of the bed frame. There was a vanity to the left, and along the right wall was a wardrobe and a door that he suspected led to a walk-in closet. The entire space was accented with pastel colors and old-world elegance.

He whistled quietly through his teeth. “Nice.”

“My old bedroom. Can you imagine little me growing up here?”

He thought of Lex’s childhood bedroom. The posters of teen heartthrobs from her favorite soap opera, the strips of

photo booth images of her and Marcy, the bottles of nail polish scattered all over her dresser. Compared to this place, it was like night and day. In truth, he couldn't imagine a young child feeling happy in this carefully curated space. And as a forever South Section resident, it was easy to believe that everyone up north lived perfect lives. Money solved many problems, and he'd choose wealth over poverty any day of the week if given the chance, but it still didn't guarantee happiness. And the more time he spent with Georgie, the more he realized that.

She walked over to the trunk by her bed, presumably lost in memories. She sat down on the padded seat and looked around the quiet room. "It could be really lonely. I mean, don't get me wrong. I'm lucky. It's just..." She shrugged, then laughed. "Poor little rich girl."

He sat down beside her, enveloping the rest of the space on the trunk. He wanted to remove the melancholy look from her face, so he leaned over and gently kissed her temple. His tenderness surprised him, but her lips curled at the gesture.

A flicker of mischief lit her eyes as she said, "Will you knock me off my pedestal?"

"You want me to run my mouth again?"

"Please." She took in a shaky breath. "And don't be polite."

"You like listening to me act like an animal?"

She nodded slowly in response, but that didn't satisfy him.

He growled, "I need to hear you."

"Yes," she replied. "I do like it."

He placed one hand on her thigh, softly playing with the lace hem of her dress. "Can I?"

Georgie nodded her head urgently but then remembered his need for verbal confirmation. "Yes. Please."

He slowly pushed her dress up, but then his brain nearly exploded when he realized her tights weren't typical tights. They were thigh-highs. And his dick, which had been half-

hard since laying eyes on her earlier, was immediately ready for action.

“Stand up,” he ordered, his voice hardly more than a rasp.

She shot to her feet on shaky legs. A shiver ran down his spine as he saw her immediate response to his command.

He hesitated, but he had to ask. “Do you like when I tell you what to do?”

She was wringing her hands, a blatant nervous signal, but he got the answer he was looking for when she whispered, “Yes. I do.”

And that was when Vic recognized that whatever was brewing between them was much more dynamic than anything he’d experienced before. Admittedly, his romantic life had never been much to write home about. A bunch of one-night stands and relationships that didn’t last longer than three months before his cowardly self jumped ship were his norm. He enjoyed sex as much as the next person, but it had always been nothing more than a release. It had never *meant* anything.

But as he watched Georgie wait for him, he fully understood the level of trust inherent in this act. And he suspected that her adherence to him went even deeper than that. That it was a way to establish parity between them, and a way to give a destitute man some semblance of power.

She had everything, and he had nothing, but she was giving him this.

“Then lift your skirt.”

She obeyed, gathering the fabric in both hands, and silently stood before him with the skirt above her waist. Vic leaned forward, inspecting the patterned thigh-high stockings and the black lace panties. The entire ensemble was chic and classy—exactly what he’d come to expect from her. But there was something deliciously obscene about her standing in her childhood bedroom, dress gathered in her hands, allowing him to look his fill.

“You always wear stuff like this?” he asked, palming his cock through his pants.

She watched the shameless action, her chestnut eyes wide and laced with lust. She sputtered a bit before replying.

“Sometimes I do. I don’t like regular tights. They always bunch up around my belly, and they’re uncomfortable. But these have little adhesives so they stay up.” She moved to show him, but then she shook her head, seemingly embarrassed at how she’d launched into an explanation.

“Uncomfortable is never good,” he said, trying to hide his smile at how damn cute she was.

“I didn’t know if you’d come tonight. But I hoped you would and that you’d...”

“See this?”

Georgie nodded, and instead of chastising her for not properly answering, he beckoned her toward him. She followed his direction and approached the trunk.

He took hold of her hips. “How do I get this dress off?”

“A zipper in the back.”

He turned her around. But before pulling the zipper down, he spoke. “You okay? We can slow down if you want. Just make out again like before. I’ll even take my shirt off.”

She let out a strangled laugh. “I’m okay. I’m just... insanely turned on. And I’ve never been good with talking. Or with any of this.”

With deft hands, Vic tugged the zipper down, and her dress fell to a puddle at her feet. She stepped out, and he immediately picked it up, like some servant tending to the lady of the house. Mindful that she’d have to go back into it, he carefully laid the dress out on the bed. As much as the idea of Georgie returning to the party looking thoroughly ravished appealed to him, this wasn’t one of his fucked-up fantasies.

No, this woman before him wasn’t the stereotypical snob he’d always imagined her to be. This was the real Georgie. And despite the complicated feelings he still carried toward her, he knew deep down that he never wanted to humiliate her.

He spun her around once more so she could see the sincerity in his expression. “You don’t have to talk if it doesn’t feel natural. At least not in the way I do. But please tell me if you ever feel uncomfortable.”

“I will. I swear.”

And with that promise, he leaned back and absorbed the sight of her in the tasteful yet sinful lingerie. Black lacy bra, matching panties. Those thigh-highs, the heels, and that braided crown of red hair made his mouth water. Her body was a goddamn work of art. Nipped waist, full breasts, and round hips that made him want to drive deep inside her until he lost all semblance of thought. The real thing was lightyears better than any fantasy he’d conjured since first meeting her.

He looked and she waited. She stopped twisting her hands nervously, but her magnificent chest still rose rapidly with breath after breath.

“Back up onto me,” he said, turning her to face away from him. Positioning her on his lap, he wrapped one arm around her waist while his other hand seized one heavy breast. He took turns tweaking each taut nipple through the lace of her bra. “Grind down on my cock and feel what you fucking do to me.”

She moved that sublime ass of hers against him. “Oh my God,” she breathed. “This is so hot.”

Her head tilted back against his shoulder, giving him direct access to rumble into her ear. “Yeah, it is. And you know why? Because you’re so damn beautiful and proper, and you shouldn’t be touched by a guy like me.”

She shook her head. “I want it. You. To touch me.”

“Yeah?” His hand went lower, palming her mound through her panties. He wanted to roar when he felt the heat of her pussy. She was already so wet for him. “You want to be touched while everyone’s downstairs? All your family and friends and people who believe you’re the city’s princess. What would they think if they saw you like this? Being ruined by me.”

“I don’t care.” She emphasized her response by grinding harder against his erection.

“And how many of your little trust fund boyfriends have tongue fucked you in this room?” He lightly smacked her pussy through the soaked lace, extracting a gasp as her hips bucked.

She shuddered uncontrollably at his vulgar words but didn’t respond.

“Answer me.”

“Oh, God. None! None of them.”

“Good.” He picked her up and placed her beside him on the trunk. “I’ll be the first.”

And the last. Vic swatted that foolish thought away. At this point, there was no avoiding a sexual relationship of some kind—so much for his conviction to resist her—but there was also no use entertaining any possessive thoughts about this woman. This was a phase for her, a delayed rebellion she never had the chance to indulge in during her youth. She was not for the likes of him.

He stood up and removed his suit jacket, tossing it to the side. He grabbed a few pillows, intending to use them to prop her up higher. “Take off your panties and spread your legs for me.”

Once again, Georgie leaped to her feet and obeyed his command instantly, pulling the scrap of lace down.

Maybe she is for the likes of you.

She perched herself on top of the pillows and opened her toned legs. They spanned the length of the trunk and beyond, and Vic dropped down, his knees weakened by the thin strip of red hair above her lower lips, the rest of her waxed bare. He ran a knuckle slowly through her wet folds, and she whimpered softly. The whimper intensified when he leaned in and licked her swollen slit.

Heaven. Fucking heaven.

With his cock painfully strained against the zipper of his dress pants, Vic knew he'd torture himself for hours to give her pleasure and taste his fill. The memory of this would likely torture him for the rest of his days, but it was worth it. So he licked with abandon, savoring every drop of her. He focused on her clit, stroking and sucking the little bundle of nerves until her hips started jerking uncontrollably.

He draped his forearm across her lower body, holding her still as he pulled his mouth away. He pushed one finger inside, hissing at the tightness, practically unhinged at the thought of that snug grip on his cock.

"This is fucking quality pussy right here," he praised, pumping the digit slowly.

He was damn near obsessed with how she reacted to his words—how she slowly unraveled, eyes fluttering and lips parting. And the assumed knowledge that no one ever spoke to her like this, that he was the only one she allowed this type of crude language with, cracked his facade, making it harder and harder to resist her.

She arched in pleasure, leaning against the edge of the bed, the curve of her body reminding him of some ancient sculpture. Adding a second finger to join the first, he could sense that she was trying to speak, but lust kept her tongue-tied.

"You like this, don't you?" he prompted, knowing the dirty talk would help get her off.

"Yes," she sobbed. Her eyes were closed, and her hands clutched the sides of the trunk. "It's so good."

"Play with your tits while I lick you." He went to help her, but she was lightning fast, removing her bra with record speed. He smirked and murmured, "Good girl. God, you look so fucking sexy. Look at you."

He hauled himself up to quickly suck one nipple in his mouth before moving on to the other. Still plunging his fingers into her wet heat, he returned his tongue to her clit. He

hummed with happiness as she roughly caressed her breasts, still heeding his instructions.

She bit her lip, eyes still closed. “I’m so...”

“You’re close?” he asked, pulling away to drag his teeth along the inside of her thigh.

“Yes, but I...” She writhed on his fingers, which hadn’t stopped moving for an instant. “Sometimes it’s been hard for me to...you know...with a man.”

He saw red at the thought of another man touching her, some rich asshole leaving her unsatisfied. “I’m not stopping until I feel this sweet cunt of yours clench around my fingers; I promise you that.”

She quivered and said, “Keep talking to me.”

He faltered for a second. “How nasty do you want me to get?”

“If you go too far, I’ll tell you,” she assured him frantically. “Just please don’t stop. Don’t stop any of it.”

“Then, first of all, I want you to open your eyes. Look at exactly who’s doing this to you. It’s not one of your privileged, uptown, good ol’ boys. It’s me.”

True to form, she followed his instructions and locked her vibrant gaze with his. There was so much emotion in her deep chestnut pools—everything from lust to wonder to elation. And the way she looked at him...Christ, he could drown in her if he wasn’t careful.

He brought his thumb to circle her clit. “How’s that pressure feel? Harder, softer?”

“Oh, it’s perfect,” she whispered. “Keep going.”

“I tried to avoid all this. I really did.” He used his free hand to reach up and embrace one plump breast, pulling the stiff rosy peak. “But I can’t help myself. Not when it comes to you.”

She couldn’t speak, but her eyes pleaded with him to keep going.

“I can’t wait to fuck you,” he hissed through gritted teeth, as if his dirty talk and frantic worship of her body weren’t enough to convince her. “And I’ll give it to you whenever you want. I’ll fuck you here in this bedroom or in your apartment. On my desk, in the bathroom at Mulligan’s, wherever you want it, you’ll have it. We can go to the Quinn Theatre and fuck right behind that piece of scenery. Just like you wanted.”

Her legs were quaking, and he could tell she was on the edge. He prolonged the pressure on her clitoris and continued the unrelenting pumping of his fingers. And although he wanted to lick her again, he kept talking, knowing he may take it too far but finding himself unable to stop.

“And I’m going to make it my mission to absolutely wreck this pussy. Every. Single. Time.” He enunciated the words alongside thrusting his fingers and then moved to kiss her belly gently as if in atonement. “I’ll ruin you for every man who comes after me. When you’re married to your perfectly respectable husband, having your scheduled weekly sex, you’ll be thinking about how much you loved being a filthy little slut for a South Section bastard like me.”

She cried out in climax, her body seizing up. Vic couldn’t take his eyes off her as shudders racked her while her pussy pulsed around his fingers. Her lips emitted sexy sobs of pleasure, the type of sound a man would remember on his deathbed. And as he watched Georgie reverently, he knew without a doubt that if anyone were to be ruined, it would be him.

CHAPTER TEN



Lex sighed and placed her phone back in her purse. This was her second text to Vic that had gone unanswered. He'd left to use the bathroom some time ago and hadn't returned. She cringed thinking about how he might have been accosted again by that pompous police officer.

As the bartender placed a glass of champagne in front of her, Rhett swooped in and snatched the flute, taking a huge gulp. Lex elbowed him in the ribs.

"That's mine!"

"It's free. Order another." Rhett rolled his eyes at her pout. "Damn, you weren't kidding. This shit is good."

"Have you seen Vic?" she asked, glancing around. "He's been gone for a while."

"Probably necking with Georgie somewhere."

"You think?"

"They're both conspicuously absent. And you said they have a thing for each other."

Lex made eye contact with the bartender and gave them a pleading look for another glass of champagne. She turned her attention back to Rhett and the topic at hand. "I mean, I don't know for sure. Neither of them admitted to anything, at least not to me. It's just a hunch I have."

He nodded knowingly. "Yeah, they're probably banging it out in one of the eight hundred rooms here."

She glared and said, “That’s my brother you’re talking about, you freak.”

“Speaking of freaks,” Rhett said, turning to lean against the bar. “The lady in the red dress has been making eyes at me all night.”

Lex looked in the direction of his nod and spotted the woman, likely a twice-divorced socialite. And she absolutely was stealing glances at Rhett while she chatted with a group of partygoers.

She crinkled her nose. “That woman’s probably twenty years older than you.”

“Maybe I’m looking for a sugar mama.”

“Rhett. You are so gross. Seriously.”

He grinned and downed the rest of what should have been her champagne. “Wish me luck.” Then he headed over to introduce himself to the group of women.

“Men are so disappointing, aren’t they?” she said to the bartender, who finally returned to replace her glass of champagne. But the bartender gave her an odd look and walked off to serve another guest. It figured that the staff at this party wouldn’t commiserate with her the same way the bartender at her local dive did.

A man approached her left, and Lex looked up, hoping for her brother, but she groaned when she realized who it was.

“Speaking of disappointing men,” she muttered under her breath.

Detective Samson ordered a scotch from the bartender and then scowled in her direction. “Enjoying yourself?”

“I was. Don’t you have some social climbing to be doing?”

“Isn’t that what you’re doing? Social climbing?”

She recoiled, offended by the implication that she had anything in common with him. “You’re kidding me, right?”

Samson shrugged lightly and sipped at his drink. “You and your brother have gotten pretty close to Georgina Spaulding.”

“Yeah, because she’s a nice person who doesn’t look down on us just because we’re South Section. Which is a lot more than can be said for some people,” she said, eyeing him pointedly as he stood there all arrogant in a suit that probably cost a fortune. Whereas she’d found her dress years ago at a thrift store.

Something passed over his face that she couldn’t pinpoint, and Lex found herself wondering what he was thinking.

Um, no. Not your problem.

She tasted her champagne and sighed blissfully, loving the crisp chill of bubbly on her tongue. The sound made Samson’s head swerve to look at her intently. Lex squirmed as he carefully observed her as if she was about to be interrogated.

At the end of the day, cops were still cops.

He thankfully broke the stare and looked over his shoulder. “Your boyfriend seems to be making friends.”

She followed his nod toward Rhett, who was in the middle of his charming class clown routine. The society ladies were eating it up.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” she grumbled with an eye roll.

“Ah. Unrequited love?”

“He’s like my brother. So, no. There’s nothing unrequited about us. God forbid men and women be friends,” she sneered, not bothering to hide the attitude in her voice.

Samson nodded, taking in her words. He glanced down at his drink and swirled the amber liquid around, and Lex watched, the motion hypnotizing. It must have cast a spell on her because when she pulled away to look at his profile, she marveled at how his cheekbones literally looked like they were cut from glass.

She shook her head at the injustice of it all. Handsome men always wound up being such assholes.

Silence stretched between them, even as the rest of the party carried on with lively conversation and festive music. Lex wasn’t exactly sure when it happened, but eventually,

Samson's presence stopped irritating her. And as the stillness continued, she could pretend they were both someone else. She could pretend he wasn't a cop.

Eventually, he finished his drink with a hefty gulp. Pushing the glass forward, he turned to face her. She looked at him as well, gearing up for a fight, knowing that the quiet moment between them had been a fluke.

"It's not going to mean much coming from me, but..."

He trailed off, and his gaze fixated on her mouth. She briefly panicked that her lipstick had smudged, but then his eyes dipped lower, taking in every inch of her. That intense examination again. And she instantly felt insecure in her budget dress and well-worn heels. He looked so damn put together and immaculate, and all she wanted was to muss up that perfectly positioned bowtie and scuff up his blindingly shiny shoes.

"What?" she practically barked at him.

"You look damn good."

Lex was grateful that he immediately turned and left the room. Because otherwise, he would have seen her stagger back, rendered speechless for the first time in her life.



WITH TREMBLING LIMBS AND LABORED BREATHS, GEORGIE slowly recovered from the intense waves of pleasure. Vic still kneeled between her legs, and sweet aftershocks coursed through her as she watched him bring his hand to his mouth, licking her juices clean off his fingers.

The long untapped wild side of her rejoiced. Because most of the sex she'd experienced had been simple, civilized, and—as much as she hated to admit it—boring. But what she had just shared with Vic was the exact opposite. It was raw and reckless but full of an abundance of passion and trust. She

remembered how he had ensured she hadn't consumed too much alcohol and stopped his dirty talk to check in with her. How he had called her sexy and beautiful and a filthy little slut, and how each utterance felt like a declaration of pure adulation to Georgie.

Disdain and devotion—a complex combination so suited for her. For them.

And then the sensible side of her brain slapped her across the face as reality infiltrated.

You're going to get caught.

Anxiety choked at her as she imagined the reporter, Nicole Silva, standing outside the door with notepad in hand, asking for a comment on her sexual proclivities. Or the worst thought of all. Vic going to the tabloids himself, detailing every second of this encounter.

No. He's not like that. You can trust him.

Her face must have shown her worry because he frowned. "Hey. Georgie," he cooed, grabbing her attention. "I'm sorry if I took that too far."

She shook her head hastily. "No, no. You didn't."

"I should have asked about some of those words and if you were okay with them," he mumbled nervously before she cut him off.

"Vic, no. Please don't worry. It's fine."

Unsure, he brought his gaze down to the floor as he stood up. Georgie noticed he'd reverted to this habit again, and her heart clenched painfully.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket. "My sister's been texting me. Your family might also be looking for you."

Her family. How easy it had been to forget them and the rest of the party downstairs. And goodness, she was still naked. She quickly collected her panties and bra, pulling them back on. Then she retrieved her dress from the bed, stepped into it, and reached behind to pull up the zipper. A jolt of

surprise hit her when she felt his hands on hers, and she jumped before she could stop herself.

“Sorry,” he said quickly.

She turned to face him. “No, no. I’m sorry. I was startled.”

Vic stayed silent, and she winced, unable to believe how quickly she’d messed this up. She’d had the most gratifying sexual experience of her life and then spurned the man responsible for it not moments later.

Relief flooded her when he finally spoke. “I was just trying to help. With the zipper.”

“I know, I’m sorry, I...I wasn’t thinking.”

She raised her gaze, and they locked eyes. She wanted to apologize for her standoffishness, for acting like some sort of ice queen, but her thoughts were a jumbled mess. So instead, she turned around, showing she’d accept his help. He stepped forward and finished zipping up the dress.

“Thanks,” she whispered.

Her phone, long forgotten in the pocket of her dress, buzzed against her thigh. She checked the messages, and sure enough, her mother had been searching for her. Georgie quickly typed out a text that she’d gone to touch up her makeup and would be down shortly.

“My mother needs me downstairs. For a family photo,” she said. “We take one at this party every year. It’s stupid. But I...”

He stood stoically with his hands in his pockets. “But you have to be there.”

She nodded and walked over to her vanity to look in the mirror. Her face was flushed, and her hair a bit tousled. She reinforced the bobby pins that held up her braided crown, now hating that she’d asked to be styled with any type of crown at all.

“We should go down separate staircases to be safe,” he said, grabbing his suit jacket. “You use one of the main ones. I’ll go back down the servant staircase.”

Her stomach dropped at his words, hating the significance of what he said. He saw the mournful look on her face and smiled reassuringly.

“It’s okay,” he murmured.

It wasn’t okay. She wanted to stroll back down to the party on his arm, but she knew it was too soon. Not to mention all the problems it would cause. Problems she didn’t have the strength to deal with tonight. But she imagined another day, another night, when she might walk through this townhouse or down the streets of the city, holding his hand.

“Can I give you my phone number?” she blurted out.

Georgie watched him tilt his head, confusion swirling in his eyes as he realized he didn’t have her contact information. And then he grinned, a genuine smile that weakened her knees. She beamed back at him, feeling giddy, as if they were two preteens in a school cafeteria who just discovered they liked each other.

“Yeah, of course.” He handed over his phone, and Georgie entered her number. Butterflies reappeared in her stomach, fluttering something fierce with the knowledge that this wouldn’t end here.

She opened the door a crack to make sure the coast was clear and then turned back to Vic.

“You go first,” he told her. “I’ll wait a few more minutes to, uh”—he gestured down to his crotch—“get this under control.”

She had been so swept up in her own worries that she hadn’t taken note of the erection tenting his dress pants. She wished she had time to drop to her knees and take him into her mouth, show him the same pleasure he had given her. There was so much disparity between them already, and she didn’t want it to seep into this piece of their connection. She didn’t want the two of them to concentrate on only her pleasure.

“I’m sorry—”

He shook his head. “Nothing to apologize for.”

“Still, I...I don’t want you to think that I believe you’re a bastard or anything like that,” she babbled. “Or like you’d ruin me. Not really, you know? I know that sort of stuff turns me on, but I don’t *actually* think of you that way.”

Orgasm brain was apparently still holding strong, since she had contradicted herself. If she didn’t view him as inferior, why did a powerful climax engulf her when he’d referred to himself as just that? Ever since their interaction at his office, she’d been linking her response to his crassness as a symptom of her desire to be dethroned from the Spaulding pedestal.

But in acknowledging the pedestal at all, there could be no denying that he sat below it—at least in the eyes of everyone in this city.

Cognitive dissonance. Years ago, Lacey had explained that term to her when she’d been struggling with her inconsistent feelings about her family, especially her mother. Evidently, that mental conflict applied to Vic as well. Because while she knew in her heart that they were equals, the hierarchy of Moon City said otherwise. And to a woman like her who’d been born and raised with specific expectations, a relationship with someone like Vic was the ultimate middle finger to that predetermined destiny.

It was no wonder he made her hotter than a whistling kettle. Being with him stimulated the rebellious side she’d never indulged, the portion of her that delighted in defying her father, her family, and every resident of North Section. But Georgie knew that wasn’t the be-all and end-all. Those feelings could exist alongside something deeper, something that was already starting to take root in her soul.

“You don’t need to explain,” he said tersely.

“No, I do. I want to. I mean, I guess we should talk about it more another time, but...” She took a deep breath. “Anyway. I think you’re great. And I like you.”

A smile twitched his lips, but there was still uncertainty in his striking eyes. Her words hadn’t convinced him, but he handled her blubbery sentiments by placing a kiss on her forehead. Then he said, “You should head back.”

And even though Georgie didn't want to return to the party and everything that was wrong with the world she'd been born into, she left Vic standing in the doorway of her childhood bedroom and traveled to the staircase at the back of the townhouse.

Once downstairs, she sidestepped around the security guard and turned the corner, eager to get this family photo over with. But as she walked down the hallway, she found Detective Samson and Nicole Silva in the middle of a hushed conversation. As they saw her approach, both halted the discussion and smiled politely. Georgie smiled back and kept walking, curious as to what that was all about.

She entered the dining room, and her mother immediately grasped her by the arm. "There you are," Mrs. Spaulding exclaimed. "I was about to send a search party for you."

She tried not to cringe at the thought. "I needed a little break. Got a bit overwhelmed."

Mrs. Spaulding harrumphed and then began corralling each member of the family. Mayor Spaulding had finally left the billiard room, and soon the group posed alongside the decorated Christmas tree in the corner. Once the photos were finished, Georgie found Lex's face in the crowd. She attempted to make a beeline to reunite with her friend, but Granny Spaulding stopped her.

"Georgina, I've barely seen you this evening," her grandmother tutted.

"Oh, you know. Lots of socializing to do," she replied casually, surely blushing when thoughts of Vic reentered her mind. "But why don't we get some tea tomorrow?"

"Yes, let's. We can talk about that handsome Detective Samson. He's single, you know."

"I didn't realize you were into younger men, Granny."

Joyfully scandalized, Granny Spaulding tittered. "Not for me, darling. For you."

"He's not my type," Georgie said, grateful Samson wasn't around.

“Come now. Between those good looks and flattery skills, that man will be commissioner one day.”

Power and prestige. That was all anybody in this family seemed to care about. Before she could reply, Vic walked in. Their eyes immediately locked, and she lost her train of thought, watching as he held in a smile and joined his sister by the bar.

Granny Spaulding followed her line of sight and gave her a knowing glance. “Yes, we will definitely talk tomorrow, Georgina.”

As her grandmother walked off, her nerves spiked when she realized that her father and Vic were now in the same room. Gingerly, she glanced over her shoulder, hoping Mayor Spaulding was too busy being courted by his cronies to notice.

No such luck. Her father had spotted Vic and was marching toward him. She knew he wouldn't behave how he had at her apartment, at least not with an audience, but she wasn't about to let him destroy the progress she'd made with Vic.

She stepped into his path. “Dad, he's here as my guest.”

“And as host of this party, I'm supposed to greet our guests,” Mayor Spaulding responded with a calm smile. The calculated smile of a true politician. Then he leaned in and said, “Next time you decide to invite the dregs of society to our home, I'd like a warning first.”

She ground her teeth with rage. “That's how you're going to refer to the man who saved my life?”

“One heroic action does not a man make.”

“How would you know? You've never done anything heroic in your life,” she spit out quietly.

But before her father could answer, she heard a deep and familiar baritone from behind her. “Good to see you again, Mayor Spaulding.”

Vic extended his hand, not a hint of gloating on his face. And her father had no choice but to accept the handshake,

especially once eyes slowly turned toward them. Partygoers who hadn't batted an eye at Vic suddenly started to realize exactly who he was.

She glanced around nervously, and her gut swirled with alarm when she saw Nicole Silva enter. Good God, Georgie could already see the headlines.

There was a flurry of activity around Vic. All of her family members introduced themselves. Nicole Silva handed him her card. The photographer asked if they might get a photo of Mayor Spaulding and Vic, which both politely shot down. And through it all, Georgie found herself teetering on the edge of a panic attack. She couldn't handle all this scrutiny disguised as pleasant curiosity, especially not after experiencing a full-blown tryst.

Heart beating rapidly, she was distracted by a light caress on her pinky finger—a delicate touch, perfectly subtle, no one at the party any the wiser.

It was Vic, silently telling her that he was there for her. And eventually, her heart rate stabilized, and her breathing slowed.

One of the event planners approached their group and whispered in her mother's ear. They were about to progress into the final portion of the night, which would include hand-passed mini desserts, mugs of eggnog, and a performance from a group of carolers.

Vic carefully dodged all the invasive questions from both her family and members of Moon City's high society. Thankfully, everyone's attention shifted when the carolers entered the room. Dressed in historical garb, the group jumped into a rendition of "O Come, All Ye Faithful," and the crowd hushed to listen.

Georgie watched as Vic retreated and rejoined Lex near the bar. She wanted to follow, but she still felt the watchful eyes of Nicole Silva on her. So she stayed in place and listened to the carolers' routine, just as she had listened to them ever since she was a little girl. Every year was the same—identical

entertainment and food and mindless conversation. And like always, Georgie felt empty and hollow standing amid it.

As the carolers launched into their last song, two singers started to unfurl the large banner, right on schedule. Like every year, the banner cheerfully declared **HAPPY HOLIDAYS!**

But this year, a collective gasp sounded from the crowd. Because below the holiday greeting was a message written in spray paint, and her blood ran cold.

RESIGN NOW. BEFORE SOMEONE GETS HURT.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



With a few days until Christmas, things were quiet at Cannon Investigations. The three of them took turns holding down the office, while the others made the rounds to try and drum up some new connections. They dropped off business cards at a few insurance agencies and law firms they hadn't yet worked with, hoping some jobs might come their way after the holidays. However, this time of year was always slow, and Vic knew the month of January would be tight.

On Tuesday afternoon, Vic and Rhett were in the office together since Lex was on rotation to leave early that day. Vic was flipping through the *Moon City Chronicle*, which had finally stopped sensationalizing the incident at the party on Saturday night.

Naturally, he thought of Georgie. Nicole Silva, the society reporter he had met briefly, mentioned in an article that he had attended the Spaulding holiday gathering. But there was no suggestion in the write-up that he was Georgie's guest or that a possible romance was brewing. And that was a good thing, since Vic knew if news got out that he and the city's princess were involved, investigations into his background would only increase. After carefully dodging the press the past few weeks, the last thing he wanted was another turn in the spotlight.

But oddly enough, he was also rankled that not one publication had written anything about them possibly being an item. He was a single man, and she was a single woman, and he had literally saved her life, but he was still considered so far

beneath her that even the absurd gossip blogs hadn't speculated.

He pulled out his phone and stared at her number listed in his contacts. The longer he waited to reach out to her, the more difficult it became to take the plunge.

Rhett knocked on the doorframe. "Let's close up early and head to my place. Beer, junk food, and video games await."

"Someone should stay until six. Those are the advertised office hours."

"It's not like people are banging down the door, man."

Vic heaved a weary sigh. Rhett was right, of course. They closed up shop and walked to the Luna, taking the train two stops deeper into South Section. When Rhett worked at his prior job, he'd been able to afford a decent studio apartment in the lower region of North Section. Now he shared a two-bedroom with his stoner roommate who, much to Rhett's luck, spent most nights at his girlfriend's place.

A homeless encampment was constructed in the Luna station closest to Rhett's place. As they got off the train, Rhett stopped and greeted a woman whose haggard face and emaciated body hinted at years of drug abuse. But as the child of two addicts, Rhett's compassion ran deep, and there was an easy camaraderie between him and this woman.

"Josie, haven't seen you in days. You had me worried there. Is Gangly Ray still missing?" Rhett asked.

The woman nodded. "Going on a month now. Police haven't done a damn thing, surprise, surprise."

As Rhett and the woman continued to chat, Vic noticed a man nearby. He sat on the ground, propped up against the wall with a tiny mutt of a dog in his lap. On his head was a tattered military baseball hat.

Vic nodded to get the man's attention. "You heard of Two Battlegrounds?"

"Some do-gooder organization, I imagine?" the man asked with a crooked grin.

Vic chuckled at the jaded response. People in South Section were resilient, but they knew the game. No matter how many charitable organizations attempted to level the playing field, the deck would always be stacked against folks in this neighborhood.

Nevertheless, he handed the man his business card. “I know the folks who run it. They’re good people. If you’re interested, let me know.”

The man nodded his thanks and placed the card in his jacket pocket. Rhett finished up the conversation after quickly introducing Vic to Josie, then they both headed up to the street and walked three blocks to Rhett’s building. Vic breathed a sigh of relief when Rhett pulled out his keys.

Inside the apartment, both got comfortable. Rhett immediately opened two bottles of beer while Vic looked at his phone again.

“Heard from your girl lately?” Rhett asked.

“She’s not my girl,” he grumbled before taking a swig of beer.

Rhett laughed and flopped down onto his shabby couch. “Sure, man.”

Despite years of friendship, Vic and Rhett never discussed romantic relationships. Probably because there had never been anyone special for either of them. But Rhett was one of the few people he trusted, so Vic swallowed his pride to confide in his friend.

“I got her number on Saturday, but I haven’t reached out. I...I don’t know what to say.”

Rhett looked at him like he was straight up stupid. “Why don’t you, I don’t know, ask her how her week has been?” he suggested, speaking to Vic as if he was a child.

That seemed so easy. Too easy. Georgie was so cultured and sophisticated, and Vic felt like anything he could say would fall short. Besides, how the hell was he supposed to ask after her week when the last time he’d seen her, he’d called her a slut? In what world was that normal?

“You guys hook up on Saturday?” Rhett asked, as if reading his mind.

“Shut up,” he growled.

Rhett cracked up. “I knew it. Yeah, either ask about her week or ask when her father’s planning to resign,” he joked. “And grab the chips from the cabinet, will you?”

Vic walked into the narrow kitchen and retrieved a bag of potato chips. He noticed some pretzels and pulled those out too. “You got any dips?”

Rhett gave him a look. “The fuck you think this is?”

With an eye roll, Vic returned to the couch and dropped the snacks onto the scuffed coffee table. As Rhett powered up the video game console, Vic typed out a message to Georgie and sent it before he could stop himself.

Hi, how has your week been?

After a few seconds, he realized she wouldn’t recognize his number since they hadn’t exchanged contact information. He’d only gotten hers. So he sent a second message.

It’s Vic, by the way.

After what felt like forever, but was likely only three minutes, his phone buzzed. He checked it immediately, trying to ignore Rhett chuckling under his breath.

Hi there! My week has been good. Trying to get some work done before the office closes for holiday break. How are you?

He cringed and replied: **Oh, okay. Sorry for bothering you at work.**

Vic and Rhett began playing the video game, the sound of virtual gunfire echoing through the apartment. “You tell her about your parents?” Rhett asked.

He cursed when his player missed a kill shot. “I assume she knows they’re dead. It was in the article when the press identified me.”

“That’s not what I’m asking.”

“No,” he said after a beat. “She doesn’t know. And she’s not going to.”

“Why not?”

“Because she’s still a Spaulding.”

Rhett peered over, looking way too astute for his liking. “And what does that mean?”

In truth, Vic didn’t even know anymore.

His phone buzzed again, and he dropped the controller to check the reply. Now it was Rhett’s turn to curse as his character sustained an injury.

You’re not bothering me. It’s good to hear from you. Maybe we can catch up on the phone tonight?

He typed out a quick message agreeing and then stuffed the phone in his pocket, determined to focus on the video game. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Rhett smirking.

“Don’t say a fucking word.”



VIC RETURNED TO HIS APARTMENT JUST BEFORE SEVEN THIRTY and immediately changed into sweats. Then he checked the fridge and cursed when he remembered he forgot to stop by the mini-mart. All he had was nearly stale bread and slices of cheese, so he made a grilled cheese sandwich and hoped that all the chips and pretzels he’d consumed at Rhett’s place would help get him through the night.

He let out a beer burp and looked at his phone, hating how he was constantly checking it like a lovesick teenager. To try and pass the time, he turned on the television for some background noise and began doing sets of push-ups and crunches.

A little after eight o’clock, his phone vibrated with a message from Georgie. **Okay to talk now?**

He began typing a reply immediately, then decided to wait five minutes before responding, then chastised himself for being ridiculous with these arbitrary rules. He confirmed it was a good time, and then his phone lit up with a call about half a minute later.

“Hey,” he answered, taking a seat on the couch.

“Hi. How are you?” Her voice was as potent through the phone as it was in person.

“I’m fine. How are you? Are you okay after Saturday? After the way the party ended, I mean.”

She hummed with weariness. “Yeah, that wasn’t great, was it?”

No, it hadn’t been. When the banner unfolded and the threat had been revealed, Vic had charged toward Georgie, his protective instincts kicking in once again. But before he could reach her, the entire Spaulding family was whisked away by the security personnel carefully placed throughout the townhouse. The guests departed almost immediately after, as no one was in a particularly festive mood after such an ominous spectacle.

“Any news? Have the police made any headway?” he asked.

“No, still nothing. At least, as far as I know. But enough about that topic,” she murmured. He sure couldn’t blame her for wanting to ignore everything. “How was your day?”

“Not bad. Things are quiet at work, so I closed the office early. Spent some time hanging with Rhett.”

“Oh, that sounds nice.” Through the phone, he heard her pouring a glass of something. “I didn’t get to spend much time with him on Saturday, but he seemed like a good guy.”

“He is. He can act like a court jester at times, but he’s a real one.”

Georgie made a sound of acknowledgment, and then there was a lag in the conversation, a brief silence that made him wince. Vic couldn’t recall the last time he’d spoken to a

woman who wasn't a client on the phone. Never mind one he was infatuated with. He suddenly realized that he had no clue what he was doing, and that loss of power made insecurity rush to the surface.

Thankfully, she continued the conversation. "I have one more day of work, and then we're closed until the new year."

"Any plans for your time off?"

"Nah. My family typically goes to our ski lodge, but I haven't gone in years. So I'll probably do the usual. Barre class, reading, television. I told you I was boring," she said with a chuckle.

"Far from boring."

"Well. Since I'll be free, and if your work week remains quiet, perhaps we can find some time to get together."

"If I visit your apartment again, your father will surely hear about it."

"My father can go scratch."

He laughed, the sassy response sending blood straight to his prick. "Maybe I can disguise myself as a delivery man."

She giggled. "Ah, so you have a package you need to deliver?"

If he wasn't hard before, he sure as hell was now. He gripped his cock through the thin cotton and closed his eyes, imagining prim and proper Georgie on her knees before him.

"He'll be out of town, so we won't have to worry about anyone walking in on us uninvited," she said, snapping him out of the dirty reverie. "Maybe Saturday night? My family leaves that morning. You could come over in the evening, and we could, um...watch a movie or whatever."

He smiled at her attempt to be coy. "Sure, that works. I can make dinner," he offered.

"You cook?"

"I'm no master chef, but I know my way around a kitchen. Anything you don't like?"

“That sounds lovely, thank you. I like everything. As long as you let me pick up the ingredients.”

Pride surged, and he almost argued with her. But then he considered it. There was no food here at his place, and he still had to purchase groceries for the Christmas dinner he shared with Lex and Rhett every year. With business on the slower side, he’d be a fool to pass up any help, even if it didn’t sit well with him.

So he eventually agreed. “Thank you for offering. I’ll make one of my favorites. I’ll message you the ingredients tomorrow.”

“Great.”

Silence settled over the call as if they were both waiting for the other to bring up Saturday night. Vic finally spoke just as she began talking.

“Listen, about Saturday night—”

“I’m sorry I got so weird—”

They both stopped and laughed, trying to release some embarrassment. He told her to continue.

“I just, you know...I’m sorry again that I got kind of awkward and weird and standoffish.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” he assured her.

“Even still. I want to explain. My therapist says communication is key,” she said with a light laugh. “I know I’ve sort of, um, pursued you. But I still worry about getting close to people. It’s a bit hypocritical of me, I’ll admit. I panicked when reality came rushing back, that my parents were downstairs, a reporter from the *Chronicle*, all of it. Even the simple thought of intense public scrutiny can send me into a tailspin.”

“I understand. I hope you know I’d never say anything publicly about us. Or about you, rather.”

Because there is no us.

“I know,” she replied, her tone warm. “But I’ve been burned before, so it can be scary sometimes.”

There was a story there, but Georgie didn’t offer up any more information.

“But I also…” She trailed off and took a deep breath. “I feel like we should talk about some of the…stuff that was said on Saturday. I know I tried to get this out then, but I don’t want you to think that’s how I view you. As inferior, or something absurd like that.”

Vic closed his eyes and leaned back against the couch. He wasn’t sure if he was emotionally mature enough to have a conversation like this, but she sounded so sincere that he didn’t have the heart to change the subject.

“Not that I’m trying to shrink you or anything,” Georgie said. “But there have been times when I’ve felt like you don’t believe you deserve to touch me.”

Moving the phone from one hand to the other, he tried to speak, but nothing came out. Talking about his feelings in a productive, healthy way was not his typical course of action. When his parents had been killed, he’d channeled his anger and grief into building the business, looking after Lex, and a series of no-strings-attached affairs. He was out of his element when it came to the type of genuine vulnerability Georgie showcased.

When she didn’t receive a reply, she kept talking. “And maybe that correlates to our rocky start. How you weren’t fond of me.”

His chest was heavy with the memories of his initial rudeness toward her. He should clear the air and fully explain the antagonism that had slowly started to chip away the more he was in her presence.

But there was a piece of him that disliked how the animosity was gently fading. His hatred for the Spaulding family was part of his DNA, something that had defined his entire existence for so many years. His identity was wrapped up in that resentment, in the bitterness that came with being

born downtown, with watching undeserving people receive everything and more. And without the hatred and resentment and bitterness, Vic's whole being was untethered.

"Nevertheless," Georgie said. "I meant what I said the other day. I think you're great. I like you. And I don't want you believing anything other than that, no matter what we might say in bed."

Vic tried to swallow down the thick ball of emotion lodged in his throat. Anything he imagined expressing was so inadequate compared to her heartfelt declarations. He inhaled slowly, hoping some brilliant sentiment would emerge with the exhale. Not so much.

"Okay," he said.

But apparently, it was enough for her. "Okay," she repeated. He heard her release a sigh of relief. "I don't want to screw this up by not talking about things, you know? Because I've never had the kind of sex I've wanted. Or needed."

Every inch of his body perked up at that statement. "And what kind of sex might that be?"

There was a nervous lilt to her voice. "I suppose my anxious nature gets the better of me with everything. I get sucked into my head. But it wasn't like that with you. With how you are." Her voice became breathier. "Like the, uh...the dirty talk I liked. That was probably clear, huh?"

A soft chuckle escaped him. God, she was cute. "It was, yes. But still, I was pretty crass—"

"I liked it," she interrupted.

"Even when I called you—"

"All of it."

Keep your hand out of your pants, Cannon. "Good to know. For future reference."

Georgie giggled again, and knowing that he produced that captivating sound made him want to pound his chest like a barbarian. "And when you told me what to do and took

control, it was like I could turn off my brain for a little while and depend on you,” she murmured.

Vic couldn't give her anything, but at least he could give her that.

“Have you always been so vocal with your past girlfriends?” she asked.

“Honestly, I don't do girlfriends.”

“Oh. Lovers, then? Partners?” Georgie laughed awkwardly. “Or whatever term you use.”

His prior sexual liaisons were distant and hazy memories at this point. All he could see was Georgie arching against the bed, back bowed, crying out in pleasure. But instead of leaving the question unanswered, he said, “Depended on the woman, I guess.”

“I see. My ex-boyfriends were pretty silent in bed. Not that I have a lot of ex-boyfriends or anything.”

A tide of jealousy overtook him. Willing himself to get that inconvenient emotion under control, he clenched his fist and grunted as a meager response.

“Still, I want to ensure that this is the type of sexual relationship you're also interested in having. And are comfortable having,” she added thoughtfully. “I don't want you to just go along with things because it's what I want.”

“Have you already forgotten the fantasies I shared with you?” he replied.

“Ah. Touché.”

“I think we're very much on the same page, Georgie.”

“Good. I'm glad we talked about this,” she whispered.

Fuck it. He was ready for even more talk. Preferably with his dick out, his hand squeezing and stroking. He was about to direct her to remove her panties before she spoke first.

“So what time on Saturday night? Maybe seven?”

Recalibrating, he shook his head silently at himself. He had to get his head on straight and stop thinking like such an animal. Sure, she enjoyed that he had a vulgar mouth and was rough around the edges, but this was still a woman who lived in a doorman building, went to the opera, and knew what type of wine paired best with each entrée.

She might claim to not think he was beneath her, but at the end of the day, he wasn't her equal. That was the world they lived in; those were the rules of this city. It was easy for Georgie to make such declarations and to downplay things by simply announcing that she liked him—as much as that made his heart kick into a sprint. She had the ability to look at things with a glass-half-full viewpoint, but Vic didn't live in that reality.

And no matter how kindhearted she might be, she was still using him. Using him and his crude words to scratch an itch and to assuage her guilt over her unearned advantage. As long as he kept that in the forefront of his mind, that stubborn organ in his chest would stay fortified.

“Yeah, seven works. I'll be there.”

“Perfect. Well, I know it's still a few days away, but Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas, Georgie.”

They said their goodbyes, and Vic hung up the phone, dropping it onto the couch beside him. He ran his hands through his hair, which he'd let grow way too long. Not to mention the stubble that had formed since the last time he saw her. He should clean himself up by this weekend and at least attempt to be a gentleman.

Oh, why fucking bother? That wasn't what she wanted. She wanted the South Section ruffian who took her down a peg and didn't treat her like some delicate maiden.

Still. He rubbed a hand across his jaw, mentally committing to a proper shave. And as for an outfit, he'd have to wear a button-down shirt instead of his typical uniform of worn tees and shabby sweaters.

Christ. Is this what having an identity crisis feels like?

Screw it. He'd deal with it later. Right now, he had better things to do. He closed his eyes and slipped his hand down his pants, gripping his cock with the fantasy of Georgie on her knees before him.

CHAPTER TWELVE



On Georgie’s last day at work before holiday break, her office phone rang. Expecting nothing more than a spam call, sheer boredom compelled her to answer.

“This is Georgie.”

“Ms. Spaulding, hello. This is Nicole Silva. We met on Saturday night?”

She gulped and sat back in her rolling chair. Her employment at Two Battlegrounds was common knowledge, but Nicole reaching out to her at work showed a considerable amount of tenacity. Still, there hadn’t been any tabloid fodder surrounding Vic’s attendance at the holiday party—no coy remarks about them making eyes at each other on Saturday night.

She had felt Nicole’s astute gaze on her in the dining room and wasn’t stupid enough to think the reporter hadn’t noticed the connection between her and Vic. Which meant Nicole had deliberately chosen not to write about their entanglement. And that was the only reason why Georgie didn’t hang up the phone in a panic.

“Of course,” she said, keeping her reaction tempered. “How are you?”

“I’m doing well, thank you. I’m sorry to bother you at work. And so close to Christmas, at that. But is this a good time?”

Her thoughts began to run amok, once again imagining worst-case scenarios. But she pushed down her unease and

said, “Sure. What can I help you with?”

“I mentioned my column idea, but I wanted to give you more of an overview. As a society reporter, I’m always covering who attends these fancy fundraising galas, but I never get to highlight the actual good work that the charitable organizations do. So that’s the ultimate goal of the column, and I’d love to kick things off by featuring Two Battlegrounds.”

Georgie released the breath she’d been holding. “That sounds like a wonderful idea.”

“I’m so glad you think so. Obviously, I’d love to speak with your other colleagues, but I’m sure you can understand that having your name attached will go a long way.”

“Of course.”

Georgie heard a bustling newsroom in the background as Nicole lowered her voice and said, “The thing is, I’m keeping the idea discreet for now. The column hasn’t been approved by my supervisors, and I want it in a strong place when I pitch it to them. I don’t want anyone thinking I’m ignoring my current assignment or overstepping.”

“I understand.”

“Why don’t we meet for coffee after the holiday to discuss?” Nicole suggested. “If you’re not comfortable being in a public place after everything that’s happened, perhaps I can come by your office?”

“I’m afraid we’re closed from tomorrow through New Year’s Day.”

“I see. In that case, I’m happy to host at my apartment. Although I do live in South Section.”

Georgie had to stop herself from huffing like a child. Yet another person who thought she was some princess who wouldn’t dare leave her uptown kingdom. “Going to South Section isn’t a problem for me.”

“Why don’t we touch base on Monday? We can see how you feel and what times work during the week. What’s the best

number I can reach you at?"

She gave Nicole her cell number, and they ended the call with the intention of talking again soon. It was refreshing to have a reporter show interest in her professional life for once, as opposed to her personal life, and it lifted her mood considerably.

But then it came crashing down when news came in after lunch. The police released the facial composite of the suspect in the gala shooting. Georgie was surprised they'd waited this long to release the sketch but presumed political machinations were attached to the decision. The police commissioner was in her father's pocket, as was par for the course in this city, but the need to ask the public for help on such a high-profile case presented a tiny crack in the impenetrable force that was the Moon City PD. It showed weakness and suggested incompetence, but if releasing a sketch of the suspect got the perpetrator behind bars and put these threats for his resignation to bed, then her father would allow for a brief bout of bad publicity for the MCPD.

Georgie stared at the sketch, examining the face of the man who had tried to kill her. Thinking back to that night, she tried to recall the faces she saw before heading backstage to practice her speech. She had an odd feeling she'd seen this man before, but Georgie had trouble placing him at the gala.

Frustrated, she searched through pictures attendees had posted on social media, trying to locate him. But after a few seconds, she forced herself to put her phone down. Surely the police had already done all of this. It would only send her into a spiral if she continued to obsess. Her heart rate had already accelerated, so she shook her head, determined to erase the sketch of that man, whoever he was, from her mind's eye.

At the end of the workday, she said goodbye to her coworkers and promised Daryl that she'd meet him and Rohan at some point during the week off, whether at Mulligan's or elsewhere.

She spent Christmas Eve at her apartment, watching a bunch of cozy holiday films and reading her latest book. The

Spaulding holiday festivities typically began on Christmas Eve, but since separating herself from her family, she always spent Christmas Day volunteering at the Prince Street Soup Kitchen. And during those few hours down in South Section, Vic was never far from her mind.

Saturday morning consisted of a quick visit to the grocery store to pick up the ingredients Vic had sent over. She had plenty of alcohol at home, so she skipped the liquor store and headed back to her place to wait in excruciating anticipation.

She showered that afternoon, meticulously shaving her legs. It took several hours for her hair to dry naturally, so she blew it out and ran a curling iron through to give it some bounce. Then she moved on to makeup, cursing like a sailor when her eyeliner smudged, and she was forced to reapply it. She assumed wearing a pencil skirt would be akin to beating a dead horse at this point, so she kept it casual with a pair of high-waisted jeans and an ivy-green cashmere sweater.

With excitement thrumming through her, Georgie opened the bottle of sauvignon blanc she'd chilled earlier in the day. There was still a half hour until Vic was due to arrive, so she sipped the wine slowly. Her home phone rang at two minutes after seven, the doorman alerting her to his arrival. She bounced back and forth on her loafers, waiting for him to make his way up to the fortieth floor.

She waited half a second after the bell rang before opening the door. "Hi," she said, face already heating with a blush. Vic greeted her with a subdued hello, and she stepped aside to let him into the apartment.

Trying to be a proper hostess, she asked for his jacket. He handed it over, and she placed it on the hall tree before sneaking an appreciative glance at him. He wore a pair of jeans and a white button-down shirt that strained against his muscles. She could detect the faint smell of aftershave, and his strong jaw was smooth, suggesting he had shaved right before heading over to her place.

"Can I get you something to drink?" she asked. "I'm having white wine since I saw shrimp was on the menu. But I

have pretty much everything.”

He gestured to her half-full glass. “I’ll have what you’re having.”

She led him into the kitchen and poured him some wine. He thanked her with a nod as she topped her glass off before placing the bottle back in the refrigerator. “How was your Christmas?”

“Nice. Had dinner with Lex and Rhett at Rhett’s place.”

“Did you cook?”

A hint of pink emerged on his cheeks. “I did. Baked ham with a brown sugar glaze, steamed green beans, and mashed potatoes. Not much, but it was good. Are you hungry? Did you want me to start cooking?”

“I’m okay right now. Although I also, um, bought appetizers.” Georgie returned to the fridge and pulled out the wedge of cheese and package of salami she had picked up at the grocery store. “I thought about making a cheese and charcuterie plate, but then I was like, it’s only two of us, that would be excessive. I get excited at the idea of hosting. I rarely have people over.” She shrugged sheepishly at her babbling and put the cheese and meat back in the fridge. But then she pulled it out yet again. “Unless you want some cheese?”

Good Lord, Georgie. What a comedy routine. But then Vic smiled, a true-blue smile that lit up his entire face, and legitimate goose bumps rose over her body. The man didn’t smile often, but when he did, it was a sight to behold.

He took the cheese and salami from her with a wink. “I never say no to cheese. Want to grab a plate?”

She nodded eagerly and pulled out the bamboo cheese board she’d purchased ages ago, giving it a quick wipe down after years of no use. Vic consulted her pantry and fridge, pulling out crackers, almonds, honey, and olives. Together they plated the cheese, salami, and accompaniments. It was so simple and domestic, sharing this space with someone as if it

was the most natural thing in the world. She loved every boring second of it.

He brought the board over to the living room, placing it on the coffee table, and she followed with their wine. As they settled on the couch, her face flushed with memories of their first kiss and subsequent make-out session in that very spot.

“Nice tree,” he said, pointing over to the corner.

“Oh, thanks. I love having a Christmas tree, even though no one sees it but me. And now you, I suppose.”

He nodded and spread some cheese over a cracker. “I haven’t had a tree since—” He abruptly stopped.

“Since when?” she prompted, although she had an idea of the answer.

“Since my parents died,” he finally said. He popped the cracker into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully, almost bewildered he was sharing this with her. “They were killed in a car crash. Long time ago.”

“I know. I mean, I read about it in the papers once your identity came out. I’m so sorry.”

Vic took a hefty gulp of his drink, clutching the wineglass so tightly she was concerned it might shatter. He grabbed some almonds, focusing on the food, but she sensed there was more he wished to say.

“What were they like? Your parents?” she asked gently.

His eyes softened, as did his grasp on the glass. “They were good people. Decent, normal people who worked hard. Dad worked construction. Mom taught first grade. They loved each other. Loved us. Taught us right from wrong. I couldn’t have asked for anything more.”

Silence settled between them and lengthened. She could almost see moments of his past flash across his handsome face. She let him sit in the memories, waiting for him to invite her in, to confide in her. But when he didn’t, she tried not to take it personally.

Understanding he wasn't ready to elaborate, she said, "I'm sorry you lost them. You said you spent Christmas with Lex and Rhett. Have his parents also passed?"

"No. Well, I suppose his mother could have. She ran off years ago. Rhett hasn't heard from her since. And his father's in prison for second-degree murder."

Poor Rhett. All three of them had experienced substantial loss, the kind of trauma Georgie could barely fathom. She had her fair share of family drama, scrutiny from the media, and an attempt on her life to contend with, but she recognized that, in many ways, her life was a cakewalk compared to theirs. The only family members she had lost were her grandfather, who passed of a stroke when she was five, and her Uncle Joshua, whose dependence on alcohol got the better of him soon after she graduated university. She hadn't been close with either, as was the way with her familial relationships, and so their deaths had been minor events in the course of her life.

She looked over at Vic with a contrite glance. "Sorry I brought us to Bummer Town."

He chuckled and placed down his glass. "No, it's my fault. I was the one who turned a compliment about your Christmas tree into the story of my parents' murder."

"Murder?" she said, nearly sputtering her wine.

"Drunk driver," he said, shifting restlessly. "So that's how I view it. Anyway, we can stop talking about this."

She nodded and picked up his nearly empty glass. "Of course. The last thing I want is to upset you." Rising to her feet, she said, "Let me get you a refill."

Georgie entered the kitchen and replenished his wine as he joined her in the room. But when she offered him the glass, he placed it down on the marble countertop behind her. Then he stepped toward her, positioning his sculpted arms on both sides, effectively trapping her against the kitchen island. Slickness formed between her thighs as he crowded her.

"The last thing you want is to upset me," he murmured, repeating back her words. He considered her for a long

moment, and her breath hitched at the hunger in his eyes. “That’s interesting.”

“How so?” she choked out.

“Because it feels like you were sent to fucking torture me.”

Unsure how to answer that, she licked her lips and waited for him to say more. Or better yet, to touch her. But after a few charged seconds, he hung his head, as if already emotionally exhausted. She didn’t want him to retreat and switch course, so she shifted her stance closer. Practically presenting her breasts and the hard pebbles protruding through her sweater. Still bent over, he peered up with a steamy stare, a look that conveyed he knew exactly what she was doing.

“Here’s how this is going to go.” He reached for her, his fingers lightly brushing the waistline of her jeans. “If you’re uncomfortable, tell me. Immediately. And I’ll stop.”

She nodded as he slowly popped open the button of her pants, but then she remembered his directions from last week. “I understand,” she said.

He smirked, pleased he didn’t have to prompt her. “That includes anything physical or spoken. If you don’t like it, you tell me. And if you’re not able to speak, then I want you to pinch me. Anywhere. And I’ll stop. Is that clear?”

She forced herself to focus on replying instead of on the sight of his large fingers freeing her zipper. “Yes. Very clear.”

“Good. Glad we understand each other.”

In a flash, her jeans were pulled down to her ankles. She kicked her loafers to the side, and their movements were fluid as he removed the denim completely. His attention homed in on the crimson triangle of lace, and his hand shot out to cup her there, making her legs tremble.

“Always the picture of elegance, aren’t you?” His grasp on her mound became firmer, almost harsh, forcing her to rise onto her toes. “But not tonight. Tonight you’re just wet and fucking needy.”

She couldn't argue with that. And if anything, his raspy words only made her wetter—only heightened her need. Georgie reached for him, intending to pop every button on the crisp shirt he wore. But he caught her wrists and shook his head.

“Not yet,” he said gruffly. “I need to lick this rich pussy again. Been dreaming about it all week.”

Before her knees completely turned to jelly, he grabbed her waist and lifted her onto the counter. His powerful arms shoved her legs apart, and she leaned back with a gasp. He softly placed her panties to one side, exposing her dripping lower lips, and Georgie whimpered at her lewd position, half-clothed and perched on her kitchen island, completely open to him.

A lusty groan thundered from his chest as he leaned in and rhythmically licked and sucked. She was lost to sensation in no time at all as he tongued her slit from bottom to top, stopping just shy of her clit. He moved again and again, teasing her by ignoring the pinnacle of pleasure until he finally captured the sensitive bud between his lips and sucked so deeply her hips lifted.

He pinned her down with his forearm and didn't miss a beat, his attention never wavering from the most intimate part of her. She held her eyes on his face as long as she could, basking in the sight of such a masculine creature tending to her pleasure so expertly. He maintained his tempo, licking and sucking and licking and sucking, and when two of his fingers pushed into her and curved just so, she erupted into satisfying quakes.

Before she could fully recover, Vic pulled her close, and she immediately wrapped her legs around his waist and clasped her hands behind his neck as he lifted her. She kissed him frantically, and he shoved her against the doorframe, his sturdy arms holding her up.

“Where's your bedroom?” he ground out. “Quickly. Otherwise, you're getting railed against this wall.”

She certainly wasn't opposed to that, but she pointed him in the right direction, and his gigantic hands gripped her bottom as they moved through the apartment. Once in her bedroom, he placed her on the edge of the mattress with a delicacy she didn't know he was capable of. Georgie stared up at him, the streaks of moonlight through the blinds illuminating the planes of his face.

"How bad you want it?" he asked.

His rumbling voice sent another pool of wetness straight to her core. "Badly," she answered honestly. "But only from you."

She saw something close to wonder creep into his expression. But the moment was fleeting, and he reached to remove her sweater, exposing the matching lace bra she wore. And while there were no thigh-highs this time, his reaction to the ensemble was no less heated than it had been in her childhood bedroom. His gaze zealously raked over her form as he undressed.

His shirt dropped to the floor, and she wanted to run her hands up and down his chest and revel in the hard muscles and soft tufts of dark hair on his body. Not to mention the substantial bulge pressing against his jeans. She went to drop to her knees, desperate to reciprocate and eager to see him unravel in the same way he had made her lose control.

"And where do you think you're going?"

She halted, stuck in a bizarre position halfway between sitting and kneeling. "I, um. I was going to—"

"I don't think so. Ass back on the mattress."

Slightly disappointed, but also delighted by his scolding, she obeyed. He pulled his wallet out of his back pocket and removed a condom, tossing it onto the bed beside her. She said a quick internal thanks to the universe that he'd come prepared. It had been so long since she'd been intimate with anyone that she didn't have any protection at her apartment, and she'd completely forgotten to put condoms on her list of items to pick up that morning.

Soon his jeans were on the ground, and she felt faint at the sight of him in black boxer briefs, his arousal straining against the fabric. He was big in every sense of the word, and she struggled to take in a full breath at the sight of him towering over her.

He climbed onto the bed and guided her deeper into the space, laying down in the middle of the massive king-sized mattress. She was captivated by the sight of him relaxing against her frilly pillows and lavish lavender comforter. The contrast was so acute that he should have looked out of place, but somehow, he didn't. He was made to be in her bed.

“Straddle me,” he demanded, reaching for her.

She swung one leg over his body, silently lamenting how they both still wore undergarments. But she also adored this slow and tortuous foreplay he'd created, especially considering how their last encounter had ended so abruptly. They'd had so many stolen moments, but now they could truly savor their time together.

He removed her bra, letting her breasts spill free. Mewling quietly as his hands covered her, tweaking both nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, she gyrated against his hardness. She placed her hands on his pecs to brace herself, and he smiled wolfishly.

“That's it,” he praised. He reached around to clutch her backside, encouraging the erotic movement. “You sounded so shy on the phone the other day. But you know exactly what the fuck you're doing.”

She did know what to do with him. With every second she spent in his presence, her inhibitions thawed. All the negative beliefs and anxious thoughts disappeared, shattered by his words and caresses. She leaned over to kiss him, and he raised his hands to tangle in her hair.

Once they pulled away, she summoned her nerve, channeled his talent for dirty talk, and whispered against his lips, “Can I suck you?”

“No.”

Insecurity threatened to return, and her brow furrowed. “Why not?”

He let out a nondescript noise, something between a laugh and a groan. “Just the thought of your lips around my cock has me about to lose my fucking mind. And I’m trying to be a good guy here.”

“You are a good guy,” she said with a soft smile.

He flipped her onto her back, pinning her body to the mattress. “You won’t be saying that tomorrow when you can barely walk,” he growled in her ear.

That pledge quickly sent her into a frenzy, her prior desire to reciprocate completely forgotten when his hand swiftly removed her panties. But two could play that game. She grabbed the condom packet lying nearby, determined to at least get her hands on him in some way. She pulled down his briefs and freed his erection. Another rush of lust surged as she stared at the size of his shaft, swollen and jutting out from a thatch of black hair. Her gaze moved up his body as she pumped him a handful of times before sliding the condom down over him.

“You shouldn’t look at me like that,” he said.

“Like what?”

The dark slants of his eyebrows tightened, and he shook his head once, seemingly trying to dispel the thought from his brain. “It doesn’t matter. Spread these legs of yours.”

She did, then whimpered when he ran the tip of his cock up and down her slit. He gently sunk into her with slow and shallow strokes, invading inch by inch. It had been so long since she’d experienced this feeling, but it was even more overwhelming because it was him. She savored how her body stretched to accommodate him and how his breath got harsher the deeper he went.

Once he’d plunged to the hilt, he leaned in and kissed her collarbone. “Holy fuck,” he said in a pant. “You feel—Jesus Christ—how are you this tight?”

“It’s been a while,” she admitted faintly.

He reared his head to look at her, surprised. “How long?”

“A little over four years.”

“That’s a damn shame.” He commenced with an easy rhythm, moving in and out of her like they had all the time in the world. “Poor princess. You need to have this royal pussy fucked regularly and by someone who knows what they’re doing.”

Oh, good God, he knew what he was doing. As his thrusts picked up speed, she canted her lower body to give him better access. “Yes,” she gasped out.

“And that’s what I’m here for.” He retreated, then slammed into her to accentuate his point.

She cried out with a mixture of pleasure and pain. “Yes! Oh, Vic, please.”

His eyes darkened at his name on her lips, and he pulled her hips up further, resting her weight on her shoulders. He rose onto his knees, clutching her as he used the new angle of her body to drive hard and fast.

“Fuck, I’ve never had pussy this good,” he grunted.

Her toes curled at his raw remark and the sound of their bodies lewdly smacking together. She grasped at the comforter beneath her, frantic to cling to something. He saw her need and moved his hands higher to support her back as he dragged her up to meet him. Raised in his arms, she squeezed at his shoulders. He sat back further on his haunches to drive up into her, never missing a stroke as she subsequently found her own cadence.

“What do you need?” he asked harshly.

“I need—I need—”

“Tell me. Say it.”

Her mouth was dry, and her brain was going haywire, but she answered, “I need to come. Oh God, I need to. Please.”

He gently pulled her hair and tugged her head back so he could watch as she slowly lost control. “And who’s gonna

make you come?”

“You,” she sobbed. Her peak was within reach, the promise of pleasure so close.

“None of those stockbrokers, high rollers, or entitled goddamn millionaires know how to fuck you properly.”

“No! Only you, Vic.”

“Yeah. You need South Section cock to get off, don’t you? You dirty fucking girl.”

Her answer was caught in her throat as an orgasm ripped through her body. She clutched at him, her fingernails digging into his back as her cries rang out through her once lonely bedroom. Vic stopped moving as she convulsed with pleasure, and through the haze of euphoria, she heard his booming groans as her inner walls clamped and pulsed around his member.

She started to regain her senses when he softly placed her back down on the bed. Hovering above her, he leaned down and kissed her so sweetly that she had to wonder how this was the same man who’d just pounded into her roughly and spoken to her salaciously.

“You’re so pretty,” he whispered.

A sheen of wetness sprung to her eyes at his unexpected pronouncement. She knew tears would spook him, so she cuddled into his neck to ensure he didn’t notice. “Give it to me slow for a few seconds.”

He heeded her instructions, pushing into her lazily. “Whatever you want, sweetheart.”

The endearment made a lone teardrop escape, but she brushed it away swiftly. She swathed her legs around him as he moved over her at an easy pace, enjoying the tenderness and reveling in his duality. She adored that he wasn’t afraid to be crude with her and didn’t treat her like some demure damsel. It made these romantic moments all the more poignant. He was so much more than what people might think of him. He wasn’t South Section dirt or the dregs of society. Far from it.

“What were you going to say before?” She moved her head back to catch his stare. “How was I looking at you?”

He clenched his jaw and closed his eyes, unable to look at her when he answered, “Like you want to be mine.”

I do.

She kept that answer close to her heart until she was ready to say it. Overcome with emotion, she pushed her hands up through his hair, her fingers dancing with the sweat on his brow. Then she reached up to snare his lower lip, nipping at it with her teeth.

His eyes shot open and flared. “Oh, now you’re going to act cheeky?”

She grinned and teased, “Maybe.”

But then she gasped when he grabbed the back of her thighs and pushed her legs up toward her ears. She’d never been so grateful for her childhood dance lessons and the flexibility she’d retained. Because her body was completely at his mercy, obscenely spread open and available for him to use.

“Knew you were a spoiled brat,” he said through clenched teeth.

His thrusts became frantic as his orgasm approached. She took the onslaught of his aggressive movements, mesmerized at how he worked her over in search of his own pleasure. An animal-like sound emerged deep in his chest, culminating in a wild roar as he reached his own finish.

Both gasping for air, they watched each other with astonishment for several seconds until Vic pulled out and disposed of the condom in the wastebasket next to her nightstand. When he returned to the bed, she wanted more than anything to snuggle next to him and sustain the intimacy they’d just shared. But cuddling wasn’t for everyone, and he probably wasn’t the type. She certainly didn’t want to make a fool of herself by acting like some clingy ball and chain. So Georgie stayed put and stared at the canopy of her bed.

Pure elation unfurled through her already satiated body when his hands reached for her. “Come here,” he uttered

hoarsely, pulling her to rest her head on his brawny chest. He hitched her hip so her lower body draped over his and gave her backside a squeeze with one large hand. “Holy fuck, that was good.”

She hid her overjoyed smile and listened to the frantic sound of his heartbeat, knowing it was a result of what had transpired in bed, the physical exertion of it all. But as his fingers lightly glided up and down her back, and his strained breaths tickled her temple, she secretly hoped there might be more to the thundering of his heart.



THE FIRST THING VIC NOTICED UPON OPENING HIS EYES WAS A light snowfall outside the window. But before that, he felt the warmth of Georgie’s body and the sound of her steady breathing in the otherwise silent bedroom.

Last night, once the afterglow had faded, he had redressed in his jeans and finally gotten around to cooking the shrimp scampi he’d planned for dinner. They had revisited the bottle of wine, and Georgie sat on the counter, watching him work with playful eyes. It was no secret that she enjoyed his physicality, so he made a show of preparing dinner shirtless. And he was more than happy to do so, considering how she wore his shirt with nothing more than a pair of panties, swinging her shapely legs back and forth.

They ate dinner in the dining room alcove, talking about everything and nothing at all. Once they finished eating, she started to do the dishes, but he wouldn’t hear of it. He wrapped her in a blanket on the couch and took care of loading the dishwasher and washing the pans. He returned to the couch to find her watching a sappy holiday movie, and he sat beside her, pulling her close.

“Was that okay?” he had asked, breaking the silence.

“Dinner? It was delicious.”

“No, I mean how I was. In bed. If I was a bit much—”

She had turned to face him for a kiss, silencing his inarticulacy. “You were just what I needed. You are just what I need,” she told him simply. And then she snuggled back against him, and they watched the rest of the film in calming silence.

That serene moment was when Vic realized he had to be more careful. After years of suppressing feelings, they had started to infiltrate, brought on by a woman so thoroughly unsuited for him. And these emotions were too multifaceted for a simple dope like him to fully wrap his head around. He wanted to shove his South Section background in her face, but he’d also spent hours agonizing over which button-down shirt he owned made him look the most presentable for her. Once they were in bed, he’d tried hard to be gentlemanly. Especially when she offered to suck his cock, when he really wanted to face fuck her and then gently kiss away her tears. But as soon as he was inside her, he couldn’t hold back his desire to dominate the moment. To make sure she never forgot this night, and to ensure thoughts of him would haunt her for the rest of her privileged little life.

But during this quiet moment in bed, while Georgie was still asleep, the complexity of those tangled feelings didn’t matter. Because all that mattered was how good she felt in his arms. How soft her skin was and the lingering scent of jasmine. And how every time he made her laugh, strokes of unfiltered happiness ran through him.

He wished it could stay that simple.

She stirred, and he kissed her forehead as her eyes fluttered open. “Hi,” she murmured sleepily.

“Morning,” he replied. He reached down to palm her ass, his hands sliding under the fabric of her panties. Since he’d been rough with her last night, they’d gone straight to bed without a round two. But now his cock was as hard as a diamond.

She leaned in to kiss him, but then stopped and crinkled her nose. “I have morning breath.”

“I don’t care. You’re still sexy. Get over here.”

As their mouths moved together, he rolled her onto her back and wedged his thigh between her legs. But before things could escalate, a sharp ring broke the early morning spell between them.

Vic pulled away and said, “Shit, I think that’s me.”

The clock on the nightstand said it was only seven thirty in the morning as he jumped out of bed to get his phone from the pocket of his discarded jeans. He was surprised someone was calling so early, and that surprise only grew when he saw it was Lex on the other end.

He answered as he climbed back into bed. “Goober, what’s up?”

“Uh, hi. Someone broke into the office.”

“What?” he barked.

“What is it?” Georgie asked from beside him.

“Are you with someone?” Lex asked suspiciously.

“No. Yes. No, whatever.” Too many goddamn questions for his sleep-addled brain. “Lex, what are you talking about? Why are you at the office on a Sunday?”

“I left my boots under my desk after I changed shoes before going to the bar on Friday night. So I ran over to get them before the snow started to get bad. The door was unlocked, so I knew something was up—”

“You better not still be there,” he said sternly.

“Calm down, Grumpy. Whoever it was is gone. But someone clearly picked the lock.”

“Was anything taken?” He got out of bed and began dressing. Georgie did the same, pulling some clothes from her closet.

“It doesn’t look like it. But your office, um...your office windows are shattered.”

His stomach dropped as he shoved his feet into his boots. “Is that the only thing destroyed?”

“Yeah,” his sister confirmed. “I guess we should call the cops? Not like they’d fucking do anything, but I suppose we have to report it.”

He cursed and grabbed his wallet, pulling out Samson’s business card. “Listen, I want you to call Detective Samson. I have his number here.”

“What? Hell no, I’m not calling him. And it’s not like this classifies as a major crime.”

“Lex, I’ll explain when I get down there, but just call—”

“I’m not calling him,” she refused. “I’m not giving him the satisfaction.”

“What are you even—you know what, fine. I’ll call him. Stay there and keep the front door locked,” he ordered as he left the bedroom with Georgie following. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

He hung up the phone and walked into the front foyer of her apartment. She stopped him as he grabbed his jacket and said, “Tell me what’s going on. Someone broke into the office?”

“Yeah. Whoever it was smashed the windows of my personal office.” He stuck his arms into his coat and then ran his hands through his hair in frustration. “Break-ins are par for the course in the neighborhood. At least it doesn’t look like anything was stolen.”

“So someone vandalized your office for no reason?”

“There’s always a reason.”

He didn’t want to say it, to voice his suspicions, but she put the pieces together before he had to. “My father.”

“There’s no way to know for sure. I just need to get down there.”

“I’ll go with you,” she said, reaching for her jacket.

“No, no. You stay here. Let me handle this, sweetheart.”

“Will you please call me?” she asked in a whisper. “So I know everything is okay?”

“Of course.”

She opened the door for him, and Vic walked through before turning back to face her. He attempted to say something, but the words didn't come out, as seemed to be the case with him unless they were in bed. As he looked at her makeup-free face and drowsy eyes, Georgie waited for him expectedly.

So instead of trying to communicate properly, he kissed her. It was a possessive kiss—a frantic attempt to claim her outside the bedroom, even though he had no right to do so. She melted against him so easily, pliant and willing, and he forced himself to pull away. With one more promise that he'd call, he walked to the elevator.

The snow was a light dusting outside, and he called Samson on his short walk to the Luna. Vic had just enough time to explain everything before he had to jump on the train, and Samson agreed to meet at the office. When Vic arrived at Cannon Investigations, he found his sister sitting with her feet up on her desk, drinking a cup of coffee. She eyed him knowingly as he walked in and assessed the damage to his office.

“Took you a while to get here,” Lex noted casually.

“I was uptown. Running an errand,” he lied.

She winked. “Running an errand. At seven thirty on a Sunday morning. Sure.”

“Don't start with me, please. Do me a favor and take a few pictures of the damage. For photographic evidence.”

He walked to the back closet to pull out a broom as Lex used her phone to take a bunch of photos from several different angles. Seconds later, there was a knock on the front door. They both turned to find Samson outside. Vic gestured for him to enter as Lex groaned under her breath.

Samson was dressed casually, for once, in a pair of jeans and snow boots. Underneath the winter coat was a T-shirt with

a vintage album cover graphic. It was a rock album Vic's father had listened to constantly throughout his childhood. In some odd way, that felt like a sign. Vic had been on shaky ground with Samson since their first interaction, but perhaps this meant he could trust the dandy detective.

"Merry Christmas, huh?" Samson said, surveying the damage.

Vic couldn't help but chuckle at the sarcastic comment. Lex, however, rolled her eyes and moved to the kitchen to wash her coffee mug in the sink.

"Thanks for coming," Vic said.

"No problem. Nothing else damaged? Anything taken?"

"I'll have to go through all our files to make sure, but it looks like this is the extent of it. I mean, obviously, it wasn't a robbery. Our computers are ancient, but they could still be pawned for cash. Not to mention the extensive camera collection." He gestured to the storage cabinet where they kept various professional cameras and camcorders used in surveillance work. Nodding to Lex, he asked, "None of them were missing, right, Goober?"

His sister turned her head and shot him a look deadly enough to eviscerate an entire civilization. "Everything is present and accounted for." She clenched her jaw. "Grumpy."

Okay, then. No nicknames in front of Detective Dandy.

Samson ignored the sibling tiff. "Any security cameras recording the office?"

"You think we have the money to afford something like that?" Lex snapped.

Samson stared back at her, both of them wearing a new level of antagonism in their expressions.

"No security cameras," Vic confirmed after a tense few seconds.

Samson broke the stare to focus on Vic. "There might be some exterior ones on this block," he said as he pulled out his

phone. “I know someone at the closest precinct. I’ll call him and ask him to take this on. He’s one of the good ones.”

“No such thing,” Lex ground out between clenched teeth.

“You got something you want to say to me, pip-squeak?” Samson rumbled.

“Yeah, I do.” She stepped forward, addressing both men. “A couple of smashed windows is no major crime. Ergo, there’s no reason for you to be here. Something else is going on, and I want to know what you’re keeping from me.”

Vic and Samson shared a brief look before the detective backed away. “I’m going to make the call outside,” he said, letting himself out of the office and into the snow. Vic didn’t blame him. A blizzard seemed like a better option than Lex’s rage.

Once the front door was closed, he fessed up. “Mayor Spaulding isn’t thrilled that Georgie and I are, uh, friends.”

“Friends, right.” She laughed. “Friends who have weekend sleepovers.”

“Didn’t I tell you not to start with me? Listen, Samson came by the other week to warn me that the mayor asked him to dig into my background, get some dirt on me. Samson knows about our parents.”

“So what?”

“So it means I have motive to hurt the Spaulding family. As do you, I suppose,” he added. “And if Mayor Spaulding puts the pieces together and realizes who we are, he could use that against me.”

Panic set into her eyes. “Vic...”

“Samson hasn’t told the mayor. He’s the only one who’s put it together.”

Lex walked back over to her desk. She sat down and took a moment. “So what is this?” she asked, gesturing to the broken glass. “A threat?”

“It might be. I don’t know. I’m sure I’m the first man in Georgie’s life who isn’t a preapproved North Section bachelor. It seems wild that Mayor Spaulding would go to such lengths to keep his daughter away from me, but—”

“But he’s Mayor Spaulding,” Lex said. As if that explained everything.

Vic approached her desk, sitting on the edge of it. “Look, once Samson figures out who’s behind these attacks on the Spaulding family, I’ll be off the hook.”

“Yeah, maybe you won’t get railroaded for this crime, but you said yourself that Mayor Spaulding won’t approve of you and Georgie together.”

“Georgie and I aren’t going to last.”

She tilted her head in confusion. “Why not?”

“Lex, come on. You know why not.”

Scowling, Lex huffed with exasperation. “Don’t be a goddamn idiot, Victor Francis.”

Before Vic could reply, Samson reentered the office. “My guy is on the way,” he said, shaking off the snow that had collected on his shoulders. “He’ll write up the report, look for cameras, and canvas the area.”

“Thanks, man,” Vic said gratefully.

Grumbling under her breath, Lex removed her sneakers and started pulling on her boots, preparing to go back out into the snow. She thrust her arms into her coat and threw her bag over one shoulder.

“Samson, would you mind walking Lex home? It’s only a few blocks, but—”

“I got here all on my own,” she snapped. “I do *not* need his help.” She departed the office quickly, leaving a gust of feminine indignation in her wake.

“She really doesn’t like me,” Samson mused in a voice so hushed that Vic suspected he wasn’t supposed to hear.

He started to apologize for his sister's behavior but decided to keep his mouth shut. Vic began to sweep up the shards of broken glass while Samson's eyes stayed glued on the door.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



The snowfall continued most of Sunday, leaving behind a foot of fluffy snow that covered the city. After therapy, Georgie hunkered down in her apartment, grateful that Vic touched base just as he had promised. He'd cleaned up the office and filed a police report, and she'd simmered alone in her apartment, incensed by the possibility that her father could be responsible for the damage. To deter herself from jumping on a train and heading out to the country to berate him in person, she contacted Nicole Silva and made plans to meet with the reporter.

On Tuesday evening, Georgie headed over to the *Moon City Chronicle* offices. Nicole wanted the security detail to know she took Georgie's safety seriously, so they met there first and then shared a taxicab to Nicole's apartment in South Section. On the ride downtown, they talked pleasantly about basic topics—the holiday season, the weather, and the like. Nicole's curly brown hair was pulled back in a bun, and she wore horn-rimmed eyeglasses that made her look even more distinguished.

Nicole lived in a six-floor walkup that had been renovated recently. Her place was a true one-bedroom, with a galley kitchen and decent sitting room area. The entire space was tidy but devoid of any personal touches that may have given Georgie more insight into Nicole's personality.

They removed their jackets, and Nicole headed for the kitchen. "Feel free to take a seat," she said. "Can I get you

anything to drink? I'm afraid I don't have much. Just water and milk. Or I could put the kettle on for tea."

"Water works," Georgie said, taking a seat on the sofa.

Soon after, Nicole approached with two glasses of ice water. She passed one over and then sat down in the armchair.

"I'm excited to hear what you have planned for this column," Georgie said. She took a sip of her drink and placed it on the coffee table.

Nicole shifted in her seat. "There isn't a column idea."

Alarm bells roared in her brain. *This is a trap. She knows about you and Vic. She knows every dirty secret, every dirty thought you've ever had.* "But you said—"

"I know what I said." Nicole's face showed a touch of remorse. "I lied."

Georgie gulped down her fear and said, "Then what's this about?"

Nicole settled back in the armchair. "Before I joined the *Chronicle*, I was a reporter at the *Satellite*. I imagine you've heard of it."

Georgie confirmed with a quick nod. The *Satellite* was a smaller publication based out of South Section, and while some viewed it as more of a tabloid rag, it had broken some big stories since its inception five years prior.

"I joined the *Chronicle* simply because it pays better. My career goal wasn't to report on society events and charity functions, but a job's a job," Nicole said with a shrug. "However, when I was at the *Satellite*, my articles ran the gamut. And before I left, I'd started researching a story that I believe is even bigger than I had initially assumed, considering the last few weeks' events."

Georgie's heart smacked against her rib cage with worry, but something told her to listen intently to what Nicole had to say. "Go on."

Nicole hesitated, appearing to choose her words carefully. "I'm sure you understand that after Election Day, things got

heated down here. At least, there was more unrest than there usually is.”

“Yes, of course I understand. What happened on Election Day was a disgrace, if you want my opinion.”

Nicole regarded Georgie thoughtfully. “I wasn’t aware you felt that way.”

“Everyone knows my politics don’t align with my father’s.”

“I’m not sure I’d agree with that,” Nicole said diplomatically. “I think if you asked any random person down here about you, they’d assume you were a supporter of the mayor. Just based on familial connection alone.”

“I’ve never publicly endorsed my father, and I haven’t participated in any campaign events since his second term.”

“But you’ve also never publicly denounced him.”

Nicole said the statement with utmost respect, but Georgie’s face flushed with shame. Nicole was right, of course. But Georgie had never truly thought about the weight her words might carry until it was pointed out.

“Don’t worry,” Nicole said with a knowing glance. “This is all off the record.”

Georgie cleared her throat, feeling cowardly beyond measure. “So what was this story you were getting at?”

“Prior to Election Day, there were whispers on the street. About a group of people—a very loosely organized underground operation—who oppose the leadership of this city. People who are desperate for change.”

Goose bumps emerged over Georgie’s skin. She had always believed that one person was behind the attacks. It had never occurred to her that there might be a group of people involved.

“You saw me talking with Detective Samson at the holiday party,” Nicole said. “He and I are, well, not working together, not exactly. But when I found out he’d been assigned to your case, I reached out. Surprisingly, he listened to me.”

“He’s full of surprises.”

Nicole laughed, her usually serious face lighting up. “That he is. Naturally, he can’t do much since I don’t have any concrete proof. But he knows that even if he finds the person who tried to shoot you, or he finds the one who planted the bomb in your brother’s office...these attacks likely won’t stop after someone’s been put in jail.”

She understood. “They won’t stop until my father resigns.”

“I believe so. Your father’s been in power for over a decade. And during that time, things down here have only worsened with no end in sight to the suffering. And then when our vote, the one thing we had to try and change things, was sabotaged?” Nicole sighed heavily, the sound full of exhaustion and sorrow. “Please don’t misunderstand me. What happened to you was horrific. But I’m not surprised it’s come to this.”

The revelation felt like an avalanche on her spirit. How foolish Georgie was to think this could be wrapped up so easily, with Samson making an arrest and her life returning to normal. When her normal life was the very picture of privilege. How easy it was for her to retreat from society and sit pretty in her apartment, her only fear being whether her personal life and hidden desires would one day be exposed to the public.

“Anyway, after meeting you at the party, I told Samson I wanted to let you into the loop. I know he thinks very highly of you, but he was hesitant for you to get involved,” Nicole admitted. A twinkle of mischief settled into her appearance. “But I reached out regardless because I’m South Section through and through, so it’s fuck the police at the end of the day.”

Georgie laughed, appreciating the levity. But the break in tension was short-lived. She rose to her feet and paced back and forth. “Thank you for telling me. I know they say ignorance is bliss, but it’s better I know. Even if I do feel a new level of powerlessness.”

“Perhaps not. Everyone knows your father is much too proud to ever resign, but I thought perhaps if you knew what was happening, you could talk to him—”

Georgie scoffed. “I doubt he’ll listen to me.”

Nicole shrugged before also rising from her seat. “Then I guess you can decide what you want to do with this information.”

There was hidden meaning in Nicole’s words, but Georgie’s head was already spinning. She glanced at the clock and noticed it was nearing six in the evening. Vic was finishing up his workday. And she knew his presence was one of the few things that could ease her restlessness. Just the thought of resting her head on his chest calmed her.

“Do you mind if I make a quick phone call?” she asked.

“Go right ahead.” Nicole headed to the kitchen. “I have to take out the garbage anyway, so I’ll give you some privacy.” She pulled out the trash bag and grabbed her jacket and keys before exiting the apartment.

All alone and still shaken by this new information, Georgie fell back onto the sofa. She called Vic, and he answered on the first ring.

“Are you okay?” he asked immediately, already sensing she was troubled.

She forced herself to put on a perky voice. “I’m fine. I’m in South Section, so I thought of you.”

There was a quick moment of silence before he spoke in a concerned voice. “What are you doing in South Section?”

“Visiting a colleague,” she lied. “I know you’re almost done with work, so maybe we can hang out at your place?”

He once again took a second to reply. “My place?”

“Yeah, I thought since I’m down here we could...” Suddenly she realized how entitled she was acting, inviting herself over with no warning. “I’m sorry, this is terribly rude of me. I’ll jump in a cab and head back uptown.”

“Where are you? What cross streets?”

“Cedar and Suffolk,” she said, feeling like a misbehaving child whose parents had to come fetch her.

“Hang tight,” he said. “I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

He hung up, and she took a few deep breaths to settle herself. Several minutes later, Nicole returned to the apartment, rubbing her hands together to ward off the cold.

“Everything okay with your phone call?” she asked politely.

“I hope so,” Georgie mumbled, now remembering her security detail parked outside the building. After the incident at Cannon Investigations, the last thing Georgie wanted was to lead them directly to Vic’s home. She had to get crafty in order to shield him from her father’s ire. “This is going to sound a bit weird, but is there a second entrance here?”

Nicole eyed her curiously. “An alleyway runs alongside the building. You can access it from my street or the block up. There’s a side door since it’s where the trash bins are located. Why?”

“Honestly? I’m trying to ditch my security detail.”

“You think now’s a good time to do that? After everything I just told you?”

“I’m not leaving alone. My friend is coming by...this guy, um...someone my father isn’t thrilled I’m friends with. And my security team has been doing his dirty work and reporting back on who I’ve been spending time with.”

“Ah. That friend is Victor Cannon, I’m guessing?”

“Why didn’t you write anything about us?” Georgie blurted. “After the party. I saw you watching him and me.”

“Part of my job is to be naturally curious, but I try to draw the line at nosy. If you don’t want your relationship with him to be public knowledge, I’m not going to be the one who breaks the story. This is all off the record, like I said.”

“You’re not like most reporters I’ve known.”

That opinion appeared to please Nicole, judging by how she nearly preened. “Considering Victor Cannon saved your life, I know you’ll probably be safe with him tonight. Follow me.”

Georgie redressed in her outerwear, and Nicole guided her to a back staircase. She quickly called Vic again to instruct him to take the entrance into the alley, as opposed to the front door of the building. The ladies remained inside near the side door, listening to the rumble of the building’s nearby laundry room.

“You sure you won’t mind those guys lingering outside your building for a few more hours?” Georgie asked. Once she and Vic were finished, she planned to double back and call a car service to pick her up outside Nicole’s apartment so her team wouldn’t suspect she snuck off.

“It’s no problem to me. And if anyone asks why you were here so long, I’ll tell them we had a proper girl’s night in with popcorn and manicures and everything.”

She smiled as a message from Vic buzzed her phone, alerting her to his arrival. “Thanks, Nicole. For everything.”

“Of course. Please take care of yourself, Georgie.”

She was pleased Nicole had finally dropped her previous formality. With a final goodbye, she stepped out into the alleyway, a cold gush of air hitting her. Vic stood a few feet away, and he breathed a sigh of relief when he saw her. She approached with her tail between her legs, and he reached out to pull her hat further down, snuggling it over her ears. Then he slung his arm over her shoulder, and Georgie breathed her own sigh of relief that he wasn’t upset with her.

“Is your place far?” she asked as they began walking back through the alley.

“Eight blocks south and two avenues over. We can make it in under fifteen if we walk quickly.”

“Walking quickly is no problem. I’ve got long legs,” she quipped, matching his stride.

He smirked. “Oh, I know you do.”

She blushed and withheld a smile as they walked the streets of South Section. While it was still early in the evening, the darkness and cold weather amplified the harshness of the neighborhood. He held her close as they strode down the sidewalk, taking specific turns and crossing streets to avoid certain corners and dark pockets. They dodged piles of snow and skittered along sections still not shoveled.

She followed his lead, trusting him implicitly, while she continued to muse on Nicole's revelation. She should tell Vic what she'd learned, but she had already worried him once today. And she wanted to push this threat to the deepest corners of her consciousness for the time being. All she wanted to focus on was him and their time together.

They made it to his place in just over ten minutes. His building was in worse shape than Nicole's, a perfect example of the urban blight Moon City had suffered the last several decades. He clenched his jaw and wouldn't look at her as he led her up the front steps and into the building.

A mangy tabby cat sat nearby, and Vic meowed at the feline presumably out of habit. He checked his mailbox as the cat eyed her suspiciously. Georgie followed Vic up the stairs, the cat hissing after her. *What a warm welcome.*

"Is that a stray?" she asked as they climbed two flights up to his apartment.

"Yeah. But she keeps the rats away, so we let her roam."

She shuddered with horror at the thought of rats. He opened the door, and she stepped inside his place, mindful to keep her face completely neutral as she looked around. The bathroom was directly to the right of the front door, followed by a tiny kitchen. Beyond that was the main area of the studio, with a closet, ragged couch, small television, a tiered stand with several weights, and a rickety dresser. His bed was tucked into the corner.

"I can take your coat," he said from behind her.

"Oh, sure." She removed her jacket, stuffing her scarf, gloves, and hat into the pockets for safekeeping. "Boots off

too?”

He shrugged. “Whatever. Place is a mess anyway. Really doesn’t matter to me.”

His gruff response proved that this was difficult for him, although she knew he’d never admit it. And she had new clarity of how much of a blow to the ego it was every time he came to her apartment. Nevertheless, this was his space, as meager as it was, and she would treat it with respect. So she removed her boots and placed them near the door.

“You can sit wherever,” he said.

She plopped down on the couch. “Want to order a pizza? My treat.”

Unfortunately, the offer seemed to demoralize him further. He silently went into the kitchen to fetch a collection of takeout menus. He walked around the counter to approach her, and she took the stack with a hesitant nod.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have invited myself over like this. I wasn’t thinking. I just wanted to see you,” she admitted meekly.

He cleared his throat, scowl easing. “I’m sorry I don’t have someplace better to take you.”

“I don’t care about that.” He may not believe her now, but she hoped one day soon he would.

“How long do you think we have before your shadow starts to get suspicious?”

“We probably have another hour and a half before they’ll want to check in.”

He pulled out a particular takeout menu. “This is the fastest spot. It’s three blocks away, so it should get here quickly.”

She called the pizza joint, ordering a large pie with half pepperoni for him and the other half with onions and peppers for her. She added garlic knots and baked ziti to the order, not because she was particularly hungry, but because she wanted

to leave him with plenty of leftovers. As they waited for the food, Vic returned to the kitchen.

“You want a beer?” he asked. “Sorry, no wine. Or fancy champagne.”

She held in a wince and let the slight slide. “I’d love a beer.”

He came back to the couch and handed her a bottle of lager. She took a swig of the cold beverage as he turned the television on and settled next to her. They watched a sports recap show in silence, and she wanted nothing more than to nuzzle up to him, but the tension was still fraught enough to stop her from making the move.

True to Vic’s word, the pizza arrived quickly. They squeezed next to each other at the kitchen bar counter, although her worry over how she’d bungled this visit did a number on her appetite. She nibbled at her pizza as Vic tucked into the meal, scarfing down several slices.

“Do you have New Year’s Eve plans?” she asked tentatively.

He reached for a garlic knot and shook his head. “Nope.”

“I was thinking of having a party. More of a gathering, I guess. Just a few people. You, Lex, Rhett. Daryl and Rohan, if they’re free.”

The idea had been bouncing around in her brain since Vic left her apartment that past weekend. She’d loved hosting him there, the same with Lex weeks earlier. It made her home feel warmer and not so lonesome. And this would be the sort of party that meant something. One where she could spend time with people whose company she enjoyed instead of the soulless events she’d been born into, where the only purpose was to see and be seen.

“Lex will probably want to invite her roommate,” Vic said, dunking the hunk of bread into marinara sauce. “That cool?”

Georgie bobbed her head enthusiastically. “Of course.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll bring an overnight bag this time.”

Hope ballooned in her belly at that statement. As he chewed on the garlic knot, a smile pulled at her lips. A dollop of red sauce was smeared on his face near the crease of his mouth.

He noticed her amused glance and blanched. “What?”

She reached over and wiped the speck away with her thumb. “Just a bit of sauce.”

Vic grabbed a napkin and hastily wiped at his face, even though she’d taken care of it. “Sorry. I’m such a slob.”

Georgie suspected his apology went deeper than an errant trace of sauce. To lighten the mood, she rested her chin on his shoulder and whispered, “I like slob.”

He laughed faintly and then placed one hand on her thigh, giving her a light squeeze. And the strained atmosphere finally dwindled as they finished dinner.

They tossed the paper plates into the garbage, and she took it upon herself to wrap the leftover slices. She felt the weight of his gaze as she pulled and tore at the aluminum foil. She loved this feeling of domesticity as much as she’d enjoyed him making himself at home in her kitchen, and she hated that he had mixed feelings about her being here.

“Can you grab me another beer?” she asked, setting aside a wrapped slice. “If you have one to spare.”

He pulled out a bottle, popped it open, and approached her from behind. He placed it on the counter, and she murmured her thanks before taking a sip. Then her nerve endings sizzled when he leaned in and kissed the side of her neck.

“Thanks for dinner,” he said, peppering a kiss to the other side.

“It’s the least I can do after that delicious meal last weekend. Pizza pales in comparison to homemade shrimp scampi, if you ask me.”

Vic nipped her neck with his teeth, and wantonness ignited within her. She wanted him to do it again, to brand her skin

with his desire. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer, her backside nestled against his already hard crotch.

“Can I ask you something?” she murmured. He made a sound of acknowledgment, still focused on nibbling her skin. “Did you hold back with me on Saturday?”

He stilled, the question catching him by surprise. He pulled away enough for her to spin and face him. “What makes you think that?”

One of her hands drifted between them to seize his belt, the other traveling lower to graze the bulge in his jeans. “Because I didn’t get to do something I wanted to do.” Carefully, she unbuckled the belt and peered into his hooded eyes. “And I’d still like to. If you’ll let me.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Georgie dropped to her knees, and the deferential action nearly blew his head off. He forced himself to focus as she looked up with those goddamn chestnut eyes, but his brain was in utter chaos.

Just minutes earlier, he'd been annoyed at his circumstances, then was annoyed at himself for being annoyed at his circumstances. He had never wanted her to see his apartment or compare how he lived with her luxurious home. They weren't supposed to progress to this level. He wasn't supposed to share his life with her in this way. Although she hadn't said anything about his place, had kept her face completely neutral upon entering, he knew she was secretly aghast. Who wouldn't be?

It was a convoluted feeling. Georgie never made him feel like a loser. But *being* with Georgie made him feel like a loser.

She pulled down the zipper of his jeans. It was clear she was waiting for him to begin issuing commands, but he balked. Vic wasn't about to pretend that he didn't love getting his cock sucked, but dominating her through this act felt too precarious. He didn't even want her kneeling on his kitchen floor—a floor that was always filthy, no matter how hard he scrubbed it. Fuck, he'd squashed cockroaches on this floor. She didn't belong in this environment.

As he tried to collect his thoughts, she pulled his jeans and boxer briefs down to his calves. His cock sprang free, the entire length of him thick and eager. She reached for him gracefully but then stopped before she took hold.

“Is this, um...is this okay?” she asked.

The smidgen of insecurity in her voice stung his chest. It was the sole reason why he didn't haul her up off the floor and put an end to this. Instead, he took hold of both her hands and crouched down to look her square in the eye. “Yeah, it's okay. More than okay. But if it becomes too much, just pinch my thigh. Just pinch me and we'll stop.”

“All right,” she said with a nod.

Vic returned to his full height, inwardly laughing at his words. *Just pinch me.* He had said the same thing to her on Saturday night. It was like he'd been silently asking someone to do that since they'd first kissed. He was still fully unable to comprehend how he had become entangled with this woman.

But then Georgie took his stiff erection between her lips, and he couldn't comprehend much of anything.

Her mouth was warm and wet and absolute perfection. His head fell back with abandon as she pumped him with her fist, matching the movements to the suction of her lips. He compelled himself to watch her work, thinking back to Saturday when he ate that delicious pussy of hers on the kitchen island alongside state-of-the-art appliances that likely cost a fortune. And now she kneeled on the chipped tile of his kitchen floor, fully clothed in corduroy slacks and a modest turtleneck sweater.

It was beautifully distorted and very much a manifestation of their relationship.

He lightly ran his fingers through her soft tresses, and a hum reverberated through his chest as she took his cock deeper. “Fuck, sweetheart. You're good at this.”

She kept her stare locked with his, her eyes gleaming with elation at his praise. When he began to slowly move his hips to match her rhythm, she accepted the repetitive motions with enthusiasm. His body was on fire, so he quickly shed his shirt and tossed it over the counter.

He gripped a fistful of her copper hair and said, “Who knew the city's princess could suck cock like a professional?”

She moaned at his words and squirmed, her arousal obvious. He reached down and pulled the sweater up above her breasts. Then he dragged the cups of her bra down, exposing those gorgeous tits.

“You can play with your nipples, but that’s it,” he said. “You save that cunt for me.”

Whimpering, she tweaked the stiff peaks and continued bobbing her head. With fistfuls of hair in both his palms, he pumped into her mouth, watching her carefully for any resistance, but she took the onslaught, and he picked up the pace. After a few moments, her eyes teared up, and he pulled away.

He bent down and kissed her forehead, a breath away from apologizing. But Georgie gulped air and said, “Why did you stop?”

His cock twitched at the question, his heart swelling to a near explosion. Shit, there was no denying it now. He was obsessed with this woman. He was so fucking far gone, he couldn’t see a way back.

She took his cock back between her lips and flattened her tongue, allowing him to move in and out of her hungry mouth. He pumped his hips, and her eyes never left his.

“That’s right, let me use this pretty face of yours,” he rumbled, pushing back and forth, hitting the back of her throat. And then the tears that had been building in her eyes fell over and trailed down her cheeks.

He wanted to pull away to give her another moment to catch her breath, but she refused, taking him as deep as she could while caressing his balls with her soft hands. Her gaze had the power to completely undo him, so he broke eye contact to try and get his bearings.

He noticed his blinds were open. No one watched from across the street, nor would anyone have been able to see Georgie, as she was hidden behind the counter. But Vic felt that sordid need again. That need to show everyone that he had

her, that a loser like him who couldn't afford a pizza had his cock down the mayor's daughter's throat.

He decisively pulled away from her mouth, hating himself for still thinking that way. Hating how it made his cock about to burst. With her saliva shining on every inch of his shaft, he crouched down to kiss the streaks of tears on her face.

"Anything else you want to say about me holding back?" he asked.

She panted and shook her head. "No."

"You okay?"

"Are you kidding?" She expelled a sound, a mixture of laughter and lust. "I'm great."

He gently pulled her up to her feet, pressing her back against the counter for leverage. Her legs were shaky, and her chest heaved as he took his hand and pushed it down the front of her pants, searching for her pussy. They both groaned when his fingers reached her wet heat.

"You're dripping," he rasped. "Does getting face fucked turn you on?"

"Only when it's you," she whispered.

The choice of words wasn't lost on him. She'd said something similar days earlier. The sensible part of his brain, as small as it was, reiterated the same thoughts he'd been trying to beat into his consciousness since they first met. *She's rebelling, and you're the perfect vehicle for that. She wants to have a bit of dirty fun before she settles down with a member of the uptown elite. You're nothing more than a passing fancy.*

Because Vic couldn't allow himself to ponder the other possibility. That he could be more to her than a man perfectly suited to scratch a particular itch. Because if he did let himself think that, then there truly would be no turning back.

He shook his head slightly and pushed his pants all the way off. He removed his hand from the heaven between her thighs to pick her up into his arms, his chest thundering when

she locked her long legs around his waist. Moving around the counter, he headed into his main living space.

“I love how strong you are,” she murmured into his ear.

Hearing the word *love* on her lips created a peculiar somersault in his stomach. Determined to ignore that troublesome response, he placed her down on her feet and closed the blinds to give them true privacy. Then he sat on the edge of his bed, lying back in his nakedness to observe her.

“Take off your clothes. Slowly,” he barked when she frantically removed her turtleneck. “I want to enjoy this.”

She stood before him in trousers and a simple white cotton bra, her cheeks flushing crimson. She reached behind her and unhooked her bra, letting it fall to the floor. With her chin tucked near her chest, her eyes darted up to look at him hesitantly.

“Are you shy, sweetheart? Now, all of a sudden? You’re going to act shy after you just choked on my cock?”

He relished her reaction, how she sucked in a breath, equal parts scandalized and titillated. But soon a trace of smugness appeared on her face. She popped open the button of her pants and dragged the zipper down. He stroked his dick as she turned away from him.

And then she slowly, painstakingly, pulled her pants down. Over her ass, down her thighs, hinging her entire body down the whole way, showing off her flexibility. He groaned shamelessly and squeezed his cock at the sight.

She stepped out of her pants, kicking them to the side. Wearing only white cotton bikini briefs, she looked back at him and asked, “Are you enjoying yourself?”

“Fuck yes, I am,” he gritted out. “Do that again and lose the panties this time.”

She slid the innocent underwear down her body, bending over again to give him a full view of her most intimate parts. When she returned to her full height, she glanced over her shoulder and smiled at him. Fully nude, standing in his shit hole of an apartment, she still looked utterly regal.

He pounced toward Georgie like an animal, his grin wolfish. And she squealed with laughter as he pulled her onto the bed with him, their limbs tangling. Once she was beneath him, he kissed her until he forgot to breathe. She flopped open her legs to allow him to settle between them, but he had other plans. He flipped her onto her stomach and hitched her hips up in the air, rearranging her body to resemble the show she'd just put on for him.

"I love the way you manhandle me," she whimpered into the shabby quilt covering his bed.

That fucking word again. Needing a distraction, he positioned himself behind her. "Oh yeah?" He spanked her bottom, the sound reverberating through his apartment alongside her gasp. "You love that too?"

"Yes!" He slapped the other cheek, watching her creamy skin turn red as she cried out, "Please, don't stop."

Vic palmed her ass with both hands and gave her several more spanks before he leaned forward to soothe her swollen pussy with his tongue. A scandalized sound escaped her before turning into sighs of pleasure as he lapped at her wetness, bringing her close to the edge.

But before she reached her peak, he pulled away. Georgie groaned and squirmed around, seeking his touch. "What are you—? Oh, please, please..." she begged.

He slapped her ass once more for good measure. "You always get what you want, don't you?" Her chest began to rise from the bed, but he snarled a command that stopped her. "Don't you dare move."

She shivered and remained in the vulnerable and lewd position. Her voice was tight when she answered, "Yes. I always get what I want."

"Poor little rich girl wants to come?"

"Yes! Please."

He rubbed her backside, soothing the heat of his slaps. Teasing her with another possible round of spanking. But

instead, he pulled his hand away and said, “No. Not until I say so.”

She whined with frustration as he moved to his dresser to get a condom from the top drawer. He opened the packet and rolled the latex down over his cock. When he returned to the bed, he saw that her hips had collapsed on the mattress.

“Get that perfect ass up in the air,” he said, dragging her to her knees once more, her arms and chest splayed down on the bed. Her body trembled with unfulfilled pleasure, and he almost felt bad for denying her the orgasm she was obviously desperate for.

Almost. But not quite.

“Are you still with me, sweetheart?” he asked quietly, bending over to her ear. Her crumbled form had given him pause.

She nodded against the mattress. “Please don’t tease me. I don’t think I can bear it. I need you.”

He slid into her, lust staggering through his body, centering at his cock as it plunged into her snug pussy. Their moans mingled together as he withdrew and sunk back in, repeating the carnal rhythm. He was already revved up, thanks to her talented mouth, and any sexual finesse he once possessed was long gone. Her cries of passion grew louder the more he clutched her shapely hips and drove into her, her body taking his aggression as if she were made for it.

And Vic knew, without a doubt, that years from now, he’d hear those sounds while alone in this bed, tormented with memories of her.

He leaned down and lightly nipped at her back, close to her left shoulder blade. He was overcome with a primal need to mark her as his, even though he knew the love bite would fade—much like their relationship.

But to his astonishment, she reacted to his soft nibble with excitement. “More,” she urged him.

His teeth softly sank into her pearly flesh, sucking and worshipping, and she sobbed into the quilt at the sensation.

When he rose back up, he grasped her hair—that goddamn hair he could never escape—and pulled her body upright, arching her back. His other hand reached around to grasp one heavy tit, both of them bouncing with the force of his thrusts.

“This is how we do things down here, you understand?” he grunted into her ear. “You come down to South Section, and you’re gonna get fucked so hard you can’t think straight.”

“I understand,” she panted, helpless in his arms.

“And I’m not stopping until this entire fucking city hears you scream my name.”

“Oh my God. Vic, please.”

“Not good enough.” He pulled at her nipples. “Louder.”

“Vic,” she cried out. “Oh, Vic, please, please!”

Both of their bodies were slick with sweat, and he furiously slammed his hips, the movements bordering on erratic. She chanted his name over and over, an incantation that turned him into no more than a rutting animal. He removed his hand from her breast and trailed it down her shapely form, over the curve of her belly, and searched for the sensitive button. As he massaged her clit, her climax climbed until her body shattered into sweet shakes. He groaned at the sensation of her pussy clamping down on his cock, stealing the breath from his lungs.

He slowed his pace as she rode out her orgasm but didn’t stop taking her from behind. Pulling her as close as possible, he plastered his chest against her back and swathed his arms around her. She turned her head as much as her stately neck would allow in an effort to seize his stare. He beheld her glassy eyes, spellbound.

“Oh, Vic,” she whispered. “I’ll scream your name forever.”

Already on the edge, that winsome vow devastated him. The words sunk into his skin and sent him straight into an abyss of pleasure. His eyes rolled back as his cock jerked and spurted, his chest thundering with an explosive growl.

Heavy breathing from both echoed through the apartment as time seemed to stand still. He still clasped Georgie to him tightly. The last thing he wanted was to let her go because he knew one day he would truly have to. After a while, he kissed her neck and pulled out, quickly moving through his apartment to toss the used condom in the trash.

When he returned to the bed, the sight of her lying there languorously was a punch to his gut. She looked perfect on his bed, like she belonged. She smiled and raised an arm out to Vic, beckoning him to join her. And that made him want to crack open his ribcage, rip out his heart, and present it to her on a silver platter.

He lay down beside her, pulling her close. She nuzzled her head underneath his chin and said, “Wow.”

“Took the words out of my mouth.”

As he slowly brushed his fingers up and down her back, he remembered what he’d done. He’d bitten her. He sat up, looked over at her shoulder blade, and saw the angry red mark.

“I need to get you ice.” He moved to get off the bed, but she stopped him.

“No. I don’t need ice.”

“It looks like it hurts.”

“I like how it feels. Stay here with me.” She purposefully entwined her legs with his, convincing him to lie back down.

But he couldn’t settle himself. He had to do something, anything, to take care of her. Because he couldn’t do anything substantial. He couldn’t give her fancy gifts, dinner out, an evening at the ballet, or whatever other shit rich people were accustomed to. He couldn’t even get her a damn pizza. Rough fucking was all he could provide.

Pitifully, he did what he could and grabbed the throw blanket draped on the side of the couch. He carefully placed the entire blanket over Georgie, but she shook her head and insisted on sharing half with him. They laid together in silence for a while, with the sounds of the city faintly heard from outside. Honking horns, bustling trucks hitting potholes, his

upstairs neighbors in the middle of their weekly screaming match. They were different noises than what she was used to. It was easy to ignore the city from forty floors above when one was practically up in the heavens.

“Was that okay?” he asked.

“You can’t tell that it was beyond okay? Amazing, in fact?”

“But I was a little—”

“You were exactly how I wanted you to be. I appreciate you checking in with me. But you can trust me, too, you know. That this is what I want.” She pulled away from his embrace slightly to look into his eyes. “You’re what I want.”

He swallowed with regret at all of his past actions. “Not sure why.”

“You don’t give yourself any credit.”

“I was a jerk to you when we first met.”

She giggled. “I seem to remember it differently. I would call it heroic.”

“I meant after,” he insisted, blowing out a breath.

“You were being real. And that’s water under the bridge now. Besides, I know you’re a big softie deep down. You show me that all the time.”

He guffawed. “Please don’t tell anyone.”

“I won’t.” She grinned and rested her head back on his chest. “It will be our secret.”

“I misjudged you,” Vic admitted after a moment. “You’re not how I imagined.”

She lightly grazed one finger up and down his abs. “I’m glad I could surprise you.” She drew a deep breath—the kind one took before a confession. “Remember how I told you I’d been burned when it came to my private life being made public?”

“I do.”

“Do you remember the *Whisper Wire*?”

“The tabloid?” he asked.

She nodded. “They used to publish stories about me frequently once I came of age. And especially after I graduated and came back to Moon City. It wasn’t fun, but I dealt with it. Nothing was particularly scandalous. Like I’ve said, I’m pretty boring, all things considered.”

“Far from boring,” he said with a kiss on her temple.

“I had this friend who was originally from upstate. Erin. We met at university. It was different with her since she didn’t grow up here, and we bonded outside of the city, so it felt real, you know? She got a job here after we graduated, so our friendship continued into my twenties. And it never occurred to me that she might have been the anonymous source quoted in nearly all of these tabloid stories.”

Christ, she really couldn’t trust anyone. “I’m sorry, sweetheart,” he murmured into her ear. She was silent for several seconds, so he stroked her hair to communicate that she could take her time. Eventually, the tale continued.

“A few years ago, I broke up with this guy. Some hedge fund guy my mother set me up with. I literally don’t even remember his name. Erin and I had a night in at my apartment, and we commiserated over men. There was a lot of alcohol involved, of course. Alcohol and girl talk. Naturally, the conversation turned to sex, and I admitted that I wanted...”

He closed his eyes slowly. “What we have.”

“Yes. I don’t remember what words I used, but a few days passed, and next thing I knew, the editor at the *Whisper Wire* reached out to tell me about another story they’d be running. And they asked if I wanted to comment on my sexually submissive tendencies or any other perversions I might partake in.”

Vic cursed angrily on her behalf and moved to cradle her head in his hands. “None of this is perverted.”

“I know. And I knew that even then. But I panicked and went crying to my father.”

“What happened?”

“When I told him Erin was responsible, he paid her off. And she took the money without a second thought.” She laughed bitterly. “Hush money, plus the cash she’d been making selling stories, was enough for her to start over elsewhere. She lives out in the suburbs now, married with two kids.”

And here Georgie was, alone in the city.

No, not alone. She has you.

Quickly, she wiped away a tear she clearly didn’t want him to notice. “Several years of friendship ruined. All because of money.”

He shifted uncomfortably. He couldn’t imagine that she’d love to hear how he’d blackmailed her uncle. When it came down to it, he wasn’t much better than her former two-faced friend.

“And my father destroyed the *Whisper Wire*,” she added. “Literally shut the entire publication down.”

“I always wondered why they went under so unexpectedly. It was such a popular rag.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever stop feeling guilty about that,” she said gravely. “All those people lost their jobs because of me. I didn’t think about the consequences when I went running to my father.”

“For what it’s worth, I understand why you did. Your privacy was violated.”

“It was. That’s why I’ve been so alone. For a long time.”

His heart ached for her. A few mentions of his own name in the press over the past few weeks had unsettled him. He couldn’t imagine living with that type of constant scrutiny. Her father had sought power, just as his ancestors had before. But Georgie had never wanted a life in the public eye. Regardless, one had been forced upon her at birth. She couldn’t change her identity, same as he couldn’t change his circumstances.

“I’m sorry. I hope you know I’d never do something like that,” Vic said. “Hell, I’ll sign an NDA if you want me to.” Lord knows he had experience with Spaulding NDAs.

“Not needed. I trust you.”

He should have been overjoyed at her confidence in him. Instead, he felt like a damn coward. Because while she’d opened up and confided in him, Vic still held on to his own deceit.

“You ever think about leaving this place?” he asked.

“You mean the city?”

“Yeah. Easier to hide, I’d imagine, if you went back upstate. Like during your university days.”

He entertained a fanciful image. Both of them living on a farm in the country. Maybe with a dog.

Georgie shook her head against his chest. “Even though I’m essentially estranged from my family, and there isn’t much keeping me here...I could never leave. This is home.”

The farm disintegrated, and he nearly chuckled to himself. Because as nice as that daydream might be, it wasn’t them. Sure, she was a North Section princess, and he was a South Section nobody, but strip that away, and they were both Moon City through and through. They had nothing in common, but they had that.

“If only I could stay the night,” she said, longing in the wistful wish. “Wake up next to you.”

“You don’t want to wake up on this dumpy old mattress. Not when you have that plush bed waiting for you uptown.”

She stiffened in his arms. Guilt immediately punched his gut. He hadn’t meant to take a swipe at her, especially not after she’d confided in him. But that bitter part of him was still holding strong, itching to level the playing field however he could. He opened his mouth to apologize but found he couldn’t.

Vic worked his throat and eventually said, “I’ll see you later this week. And you’ll wake up next to me then.”

“And it will be a new year.”

A new year. Another year of following philandering husbands and investigating insurance fraud. Another year of this tiny apartment. Another year of pinching pennies and worrying about Lex. Another year of South Section suffering and status quo. And sometime in the new year, he and Georgie would part ways.

The prospect of a new year had never felt so bleak as it did now.

He kissed the tip of her nose and said, “We should get going.” She groaned and tried to wiggle underneath the blanket, which earned her a hearty laugh from him. “I know, I know. But it’s getting late. We don’t want your shadow getting suspicious.”

Both redressed, collecting their clothing from all corners of the apartment. Georgie used the bathroom quickly before they stepped into their boots and layered up with outerwear. They departed his place and returned to the grimy streets of South Section.

Three blocks from the alley where he’d met her earlier, Vic noticed a flash of silver. Since it was difficult to find an empty taxicab downtown after dark, he quickly flagged it. He instructed the cabbie to meet them outside of the address Georgie provided so she could walk down the alleyway, signal her security team, and jump into the cab.

They hurried the next three blocks, jumping over piles of snow. She reached for his hand when they approached the alley. They both wore gloves, though hers were heavy and warm, and his were threadbare. But when she naturally linked their fingers together, a tight knot formed in his chest.

Standing halfway down the alley, he sealed his lips to hers, craving one more kiss before they parted way. Then she walked out through the alley, and he kept his distance so her security detail wouldn’t notice him. He positioned himself to ensure she made it into the idling taxicab safely.

It wasn't lost on Vic that he was concealing himself behind a large pile of trash as he watched her go.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



On the afternoon of New Year's Eve, Georgie draped gold and black streamers across her apartment and blew up as many balloons as her lungs would allow. Although she was excited for the party, it was difficult to remain in a cheery state when her thoughts regularly returned to what Nicole Silva had told her.

Although she'd told Nicole she had no sway with her father, she began to reconsider whether that was true. While convincing him to resign was the epitome of a long shot, it was at least worth a try. Especially if she could convince her other family members to speak to him as well, to rely on strength in numbers. As Georgie sprinkled festive confetti onto the coffee table, she decided to stop by the townhouse on Sunday evening, once her family had returned from the ski lodge.

Even if her efforts to convince her father to step down were unsuccessful, she could finally confront him about what happened to Vic's office. She had to stress that he had no authority over her life, including whom she wanted to date. Yes, the family legacy was responsible for her financial security, and her father had saved her from the *Whisper Wire* fiasco, but he wasn't the one living her life—she was. And at the ripe old age of thirty, she had to make that clear to him once and for all.

Thankfully, her holiday spirit sparked back to life when Vic came by early as promised to help her finish setting up. He

wore a thin blue sweater that brought out his eyes, and she kissed him before he made it through the door.

“Easy there, sweetheart,” he chuckled, an overnight bag slung over his shoulder. “We have guests coming.”

She nearly squealed at his use of the word *we*, as if they were a proper couple, a packaged deal. Instead, she was distracted by a grocery bag in his hand. “What’s this?”

“Uh, I baked a cake,” he said, a slight blush tinging his face.

She kissed him again. “You’re the best.”

He mumbled under his breath that it was nothing before he went to put his overnight bag in her bedroom. Once he returned to the kitchen, they plated the appetizers together and prepared the night’s signature cocktail, which was a punch of gin, sparkling wine, and grapefruit juice.

Daryl and Rohan arrived first, right at eight thirty on the dot. Georgie could tell they were pleased to see Vic already there and helping her host. Both were good enough to keep their comments to themselves, but Daryl raised his eyebrows, and Rohan winked at her when Vic’s back was turned.

Lex and Rhett arrived about ten minutes later with Lex’s roommate. When Georgie opened the door, Rhett draped his arms over both women’s shoulders and enthusiastically announced in a booming voice that the party had arrived. Both women elbowed Rhett in the ribs.

Georgie laughed, ushering them inside. Lex made official introductions, and Georgie met Marcy Manolo. Marcy had an identical energetic spirit as her roommate and the same petite stature. But Marcy had golden brown skin, black and purple ombré hair, and a muscular physique that hinted at a history of gymnastics. But what *really* mattered was that all three girls had been watching the same soap opera since they were preteens, which meant instant sisterhood.

With everyone present, Georgie made sure each guest had a beverage and that a playlist of party tunes was on the sound system. The group began drinking and eating, and the night

passed with laughter and friendship, both old and new. At one point, Georgie had to scamper off to the bathroom to take a moment to collect herself. She hadn't expected to get emotional, but after so many years of disconnection, a night like this was akin to a rebirth.

Once the appetizers had been picked over, she brought out the cake Vic had prepared in addition to some store-bought cookies she'd picked up. As everyone munched on dessert, she felt bold enough, after a few drinks, to take a seat in Vic's lap. His arms instinctively wrapped around her waist as she draped her arm over his shoulder.

"Is this okay?" she whispered to him.

He nodded and said, "I think the party's been a success so far. Well done."

"Thanks. Maybe I'll make it a tradition."

At the other end of the living room, Lex, Rhett, and Marcy were sprawled out on the floor, arguing over something that had happened during high school. Rhett was no match for the girls, who were clearly ganging up on him, with Marcy repeatedly poking him in the shoulder with her pointer finger and Lex clapping her hands between each word she spoke.

Daryl and Rohan were snuggled on the sofa. "You two are cute together, if I may say so," Daryl teased cheerfully.

"It's nice something good came out of that terrible incident," Rohan agreed.

Yes, they were something good. And the shy smile Vic sent toward her only made Georgie more besotted—if such a thing were possible. Even a few days later, she could still feel the fading bite mark on her back, the subtle sting of sensual pain. Their coupling on Tuesday night had been raw and revelatory, launching them into a distinct level of intimacy as the new year approached. And this quiet, easy moment of affection felt just as significant, if not more so. It was proof that their connection reached beyond the confines of the bedroom and the explosive sexual relationship they'd established there.

“Say, Georgie, are we having any of that fancy champagne for a midnight toast?” Rhett called.

“But of course,” she answered with a flourish. “I have bottles chilling in the fridge.”

“Oof, when Lex came back from your place that Saturday?” Marcy giggled. “I hadn’t seen her like that since the block party eight years ago.”

Lex gasped. “Curse you! We don’t speak of that day.”

Before Georgie could ask them to take a trip down memory lane, Vic shifted in his seat and pulled his ringing cell phone out of his back pocket.

“Who’s that?” she asked.

He cleared his throat. “Samson.”

“As in Detective Samson?”

“Why is that prick calling you on New Year’s Eve?” Lex cried from across the room.

“Let me take this,” Vic said, ignoring his sister. Georgie rose from his lap, and he answered the phone, walking down the hallway to find a quiet place to talk.

“Probably about the office,” Rhett said to Lex. But Lex didn’t look convinced. In fact, she glimpsed over at Georgie with an unreadable expression on her elfin face.

With Vic gone, Marcy asked Daryl and Rohan how they’d met. Her latest boyfriend had recently dumped her, and she was—as she put it—desperate to believe in love again. Daryl and Rohan launched into their love story, a tale they’d perfected telling after fifteen years together.

Vic returned several minutes later, sitting down and pulling Georgie back into his lap, just as they’d been before.

“Everything okay?” she asked quietly.

He nodded. “I’ll tell you later.”

“What did he want?” Lex asked.

“Don’t worry about it.”

Lex didn't let up. "Why was he calling so late? And on a holiday at that?"

"What do you care? You hate the man, right? I told you not to worry about it."

Lex's arctic eyes narrowed, and she stuck her tongue out at her brother. Gulping at her drink, she returned to arguing with Rhett.

As midnight approached, Georgie retrieved the champagne from the fridge and fetched glasses for the group. She allowed Rhett and Lex to do the honors of opening two bottles. The pops echoed through her apartment, everyone cheering as the bubbly was poured. With drinks in hand, they all watched the countdown to midnight on the television. At ten seconds, everyone began counting in unison.

Georgie glanced up at Vic, and her heart stirred. She'd spent so many midnights alone. But tonight, at the start of a new year, she was tucked into his side. She hoped this would set a precedent and predict all of their midnights to come.

"Five, four, three, two, one," the group chanted. "Happy New Year!"

Vic claimed her mouth in a knee-weakening kiss, equal parts loving and possessive. When they came up for air, she saw that Daryl and Rohan had also shared some sweet smooches, whereas Rhett was pretending to slobber over Lex and Marcy, the two girls screeching with laughter.

A bit of champagne remained in one of the opened bottles, plus a few glasses' worth of punch, so the group hung around to finish off the alcohol. She pulled out some containers to pack up what was left of the cake and cookies since she'd devour everything on her own if the desserts stayed in her apartment. She said goodbye to Daryl and Rohan, sending them off with a care package of sweets.

Soon after, the final three began putting on their jackets. "You guys taking the Luna home?" Vic asked them.

"Should they ride the Luna this late?" Georgie asked, ready to open her purse to offer money for a cab ride.

“Are you kidding?” Rhett laughed. “The Luna on New Year’s Eve is a fucking party.”

Vic glanced at the girls pointedly, his big brother radar evidently sounding. “Make sure they get back to their apartment, yeah?” he asked Rhett.

“Marcy’s got a stun gun in her purse,” Lex said, chewing on some cookies and giving a thumbs up. She still wore a pair of New Year’s Eve sunglasses Georgie had purchased for the party. “We’re good.”

“You wanna see it?” Marcy whispered to Georgie with a grin. She reached into her bag, but Georgie waved her off with a laugh.

Rhett rolled his eyes. “I’ll look after Frick and Frack over here.”

They said goodbye to the trio, Vic calling out for all of them to text him once they got back to their respective homes. Once Georgie shut the door and locked up, they started cleaning up the apartment. He placed the serving platters and glasses in the dishwasher as she began taking down the decorations.

“So what did Samson have to say?” she asked, reaching for the streamers.

“He asked if I could come by the station tomorrow.”

“On a holiday?”

“Crime never takes a holiday.” He left the kitchen and approached her. “Samson has some new information about what happened at the gala.”

“Oh,” she murmured. “I assumed it was about your office.”

“Yeah, I thought so too. I don’t know the details, but it sounds like he may have caught a break. This might all be over soon.”

Her stomach floundered, thinking back to a few days earlier when she’d learned the truth from Nicole. This wouldn’t be over soon. It would never be over, not as long as

her father remained in office. She opened her mouth to confide in Vic but stopped short when she saw how his face had since changed. A surly countenance clouded his presence, and the sight sent her off kilter. He turned away from her and moved to the opposite end of the living room to pull down the last of the streamers, deliberately putting distance between them.

“Can I come with you tomorrow?” she asked.

“To the police station?” He tossed the streamers to the side and picked up a balloon, popping it.

“Mm-hmm. I was the one who was nearly killed, so I’d like to be in the loop if Samson’s found something out.”

Another pop. “You could. But it would look like we’re, you know...”

Unease threatened her confidence. “Like we’re what?”

Vic shrugged. “Like we’re together.”

The popping sound of the balloons wasn’t helping her tense state. Granted, it might be too soon to define their relationship, but she didn’t think it was unreasonable to do something simple like travel to the police station together. It wasn’t as if she was asking him to attend opening night of the philharmonic on her arm.

“You didn’t seem upset when Daryl said we look good together,” she muttered.

“It’s not about that. Just considering your father and what happened at the office, not to mention what you told me about your unease with the press.”

“I understand. It’s fine,” she said. But as it was when many women said that statement, it was totally not fine. She was miffed, no question. But she covered it up with a tight smile. “I’ll talk to Samson another time.”

“I can give you the rundown after I meet with him.”

She nodded, knowing she’d reach out to Samson on her own time. After what Nicole had revealed, she needed to get on the same page with the detective. And while she’d initially wanted to bring Vic into the fold, she now kept quiet.

Oh, it was petty and childish, and she knew that. But tonight, Vic had put distance and boundaries between them, and the irrational part of her wanted to respond in kind. Because every time she felt like she was getting closer to his heart, the clearer it became that he was keeping something from her, that he was hiding some part of himself.

And after telling him about everything that happened with Erin, being shut out by him felt like a smack in the face.

He popped another balloon, and she finally cracked. “Can we do that tomorrow, please?” she snapped.

Raising his eyebrows, he tossed one of the still-inflated balloons back to the floor. “Sure. Tomorrow.”

She inhaled deeply. “Gunshots. It reminds me of that night.”

He looked stricken and reached for her. “Fuck, Georgie. I’m sorry.” He enveloped her in a hug, and all of her frustration disappeared when she laid her head near the crook of his neck. Her nerves settled when he ran his hand up and down her back.

“Any New Year’s resolutions?” he asked, thankfully changing the subject.

She’d never been one for resolutions, but this year already felt different, so she considered it. “Try to live with less fear. You?”

“I like that. I’ll make it my resolution too.”

“I’m not sure how you can be any more fearless, seeing how you jumped in front of bullets to save my life,” she quipped.

He chuckled glumly, and she watched him for a crack in his facade. *Let me in*, she wanted to scream. But he pulled her in for a kiss before she got the nerve. She remembered how he used to kiss her with this specific type of tension, as if he was defying a rule of the universe when he touched her. Like he was waiting for some terrible consequence to befall him. And that tension returned tonight as he tentatively stroked his tongue against hers and squeezed his hands at her ribcage.

Soon the kiss stole all thought and reason from her brain, and she eventually pulled away to compose herself. Sucking in a breath, she turned off the lights in the living room, bathing them in darkness and signaling the official end of the party. But not the end of the night, as far as she was concerned.

“I’ll start on my resolution tonight. Right this moment,” she said.

Vic crossed his hulking arms. “How’s that?”

With a seductive glance toward him, she walked to the windows, leaning back against the panes. She grabbed the hem of her chunky cable-knit sweater dress and pulled the garment up to her hips, revealing what she wore underneath. Nothing at all.

“Are you telling me you sat in my lap all night with your pussy bare?” he asked sternly.

“Yes.”

He approached her slowly, her heart galloping with each step he took. He stopped once he was directly in front of her, close enough to touch. She tilted her pelvis toward him, but he refused to caress her where she ached.

“That’s not the sort of thing princesses do,” he scolded.

“I’m not a princess. I’m yours.”

It took several seconds for him to reply. “I don’t have anything,” he murmured solemnly.

His reaction to her hushed confession nearly broke her heart. Georgie knew that wasn’t the truth. He had his sister and a confidant in Rhett. He owned a business and had a professional purpose in life. It distressed her that he didn’t see that. Nevertheless, she reached out for him and said, “You have me.”

He shook off the melancholic mood with a carnal groan that weakened her legs. His large hand cupped her, his broad fingers parting her slick folds. “Well, you are dripping wet for me,” he rasped, voice guttural and full of gravel.

“I am. I always am.”

One finger sank inside her, and she clutched his shoulders with a moan. “You want another?” he asked.

“I want whatever you’ll give me.”

His mouth slanted into a forlorn smile as he pushed in another finger. “At least I can give you this, huh?”

He could give her even more. He could give her his heart. But his thick fingers began moving, and his thumb settled on her clitoris as he whispered nasty words in her ear, and her wish splintered beneath their passion.

A wish for another day.



FOR AS LONG AS VIC COULD REMEMBER, HE STARTED THE NEW year alone in his bed with a hangover. But when he woke this year, with Georgie’s warm body in his arms, his head was free of any alcohol-induced pangs.

Sure, his heart was aching. He’d been able to ignore it for some time, but the feeling had become inescapable, amplified by the knowledge that Samson had caught a break in the case. Once the investigation was complete, it would close a traumatic chapter in her life. A chapter he was intrinsically linked to. When he ended the phone call last night, he could feel the clock counting down to the end of their fling speed up.

And although he’d worked her over for what seemed like hours after the party guests had left, he woke up with his cock as hard as a slab of concrete. She stirred against him, murmuring with drowsiness until he grabbed a condom and ordered her to straddle him. Georgie obliged with a sleepy smile but then woke fully as she rode him like her life depended on it, both of them reaching screaming climaxes.

Draped across him, she ran her fingers lightly through his chest hair. “You don’t have any tattoos,” she said. “I just realized.”

It was an odd realization, but he chuckled, nonetheless. “How many times have you seen me naked by now?”

She tittered and hid her face against his chest. “Well, I’ve been distracted by other things. But I thought you would. Have tattoos, that is. Because you were in the military. But I suppose that’s stereotypical thinking, huh?”

“It’s common,” he admitted. “But my mother wasn’t fond of tattoos. I promised her I’d never get one.”

The memory fell from his lips without a second thought. It was jarring to realize that he wanted to share remembrances of his parents with her. He wanted to tell her how he’d learned to cook. How he and Rhett had teased Lex about being the only girl in their trio, insisting she sit on the fire escape and pretend to be the damsel who needed rescuing during their childhood games. And how the very next day, his mother had lectured him about the harmful effects of rigid gender roles and insisted he help cook dinner every night.

The topic of his parents had always been off-limits, locked away in the deepest recesses of his soul. And the more he shared, the closer Georgie got to that forbidden place.

“Oh, Vic. You sound like you were the perfect son.”

He didn’t know what to say to that. Not once had he ever felt perfect—especially not in the years following the crash. Georgie’s belief in him was overwhelming. And his mind was so twisted that, instead of drawing strength and confidence from her opinion, the cowardly hole within him grew.

“Can I bribe you to make breakfast?” she asked with a sweet smile.

Finally, something I can emotionally handle.

“Ah, so that’s why you rode me so well,” he joked, tweaking one of her nipples.

She yelped and then laughed, an adorable blush creeping up her face. They dressed and headed to the kitchen. After taking stock of her fridge and pantry, he began making omelets and home fries. She made a pot of coffee, the fresh aroma

wafting through the apartment. Settled in the dining room alcove, they munched on the meal.

“Will you head to the police station after breakfast?” she asked.

“Was planning on it. Mind if I take a quick shower before I head out?”

“Go right ahead.” She sipped tentatively at her coffee and then said, “You should come back here after your meeting.”

He was grateful his mouth was full of potatoes, as it gave him a few extra seconds to formulate a response. A pitiful one, at that. “Oh?”

She shrugged. “I mean, if you’re not doing anything today. I don’t have plans. Do you?”

Vic shook his head and continued eating.

“You could even stay the whole weekend if you’d like,” she offered.

“I only packed one pair of clothes.”

“I have a washer and dryer here. Or if you wanted to, you could head back to your place and pick up whatever you need for a few days.”

She hung on his reaction, so he kept his face as impartial as possible. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to spend the weekend with her, but this was teetering into kept-man territory. Or as if they were...

Like you’re dating. Not just fucking. But dating.

He chewed his food before gulping his coffee as he tried to quickly work through how to play this. But his silence said enough because her features fell.

“You don’t have to,” she said quietly. “I like having you around, that’s all.”

God, he was such a sucker. Just a hint of gloom in her voice, and he was ready to beg for forgiveness. “Sure, yeah,” he said. “I’ll come back after I meet with Samson. We’ll hang.”

Her face brightened with a radiant smile, and his heart ricocheted against his sternum.

Sucker with a capital S.

After breakfast, he took a quick shower, marveling at the water pressure. During that time, she notified the doorman that Vic was her guest for the weekend so he'd be able to come and go from the building as he pleased. He had already started bracing himself. Once Mayor Spaulding found out Vic spent the entire weekend at his daughter's place, there'd likely be hell to pay.

He left Orchid Place and decided to walk up to MCPD headquarters since it wasn't too far on foot. There was still a chill in the air, but the snow from the prior weekend had been shoveled, and the sidewalks were clear. He sent a quick text to Samson to let him know he was en route and continued the trek uptown, the city quiet in the aftermath of the holiday.

After checking in at the front desk, Samson came down to fetch him. They greeted each other with a handshake and stepped into the elevator, heading to the fifth floor.

“Good New Year's?” Samson asked. Vic gave a quick nod, and the detective leveled him with a knowing glance. “Yeah, I bet it was.”

“You boys in blue need to learn how to mind your own business.”

The fifth floor of police headquarters was quieter than the last time he visited, but Samson led him to the same conference room. Vic took a seat as Samson obtained a few things from his cubicle. He returned a few seconds later with a manila folder and notepad.

Samson sat across from Vic and passed the folder over. “Inside here is a stack of photos. The man who shot at Ms. Spaulding may or may not be in there. Take a look and let me know if you recognize anyone.”

Vic opened the folder and glanced at the man in the first photo whom he didn't recognize. He moved to the next photo

and the next but stopped short at the fourth image. He stared at the man from the gala, the recognition instantaneous.

“That’s him,” he said, pushing the photo toward Samson. “That’s the shooter. The man who tried to kill Georgie.”

Samson instructed him to write a quick statement on the back of the photo and sign his name. Vic complied, fired up.

“Who is this guy? Does he have any priors?” he asked.

Samson quirked an eyebrow. “You sound like a cop.”

“Don’t insult me like that.”

A loud bark of laughter burst from Samson. “Listen, I can’t share details of the investigation. You know that. But if all goes well, we’ll make an arrest, and you’ll find out his name soon enough.”

That wasn’t enough to satisfy him, so he pushed further. “But do you think you’ll get additional identifications? Did anyone at the brother’s office see anything the night the bomb was left?”

Concern was etched into Samson’s features. He shook his head and leaned back in the chair with a tired sigh. “Not the same perp.”

Vic tilted his head in confusion, both at the statement and at how easily Samson had given up information. But there was a beleaguered aura around the detective, suggesting he was reaching a breaking point.

“There are two people involved?” Vic asked tensely.

Samson shot to his feet and picked up the stack of paperwork. “I shouldn’t have said that. I appreciate you coming down here—”

“Wait a damn minute, Samson,” he barked, also rising to stand. “If there’s another person involved, then that means Georgie won’t be safe even if you catch this guy.”

“She’s a public figure, a member of the most influential family in this city. I don’t think she’ll ever truly be safe.”

Vic glowered. “You know what I mean.”

Samson pushed past him and opened the door to signal the meeting was essentially over. “I don’t think the immediate danger will be over, no. Not if we put this man you identified in jail, nor the second man...”

The way Samson trailed off was charged with unspoken information, and Vic understood the message. “How many?” he asked, chilled to the bone.

Although Samson didn’t answer with words, his face said it all. He didn’t know.

“I’ll update you as needed,” Samson assured. “And by the way, it looks like leads have dried up concerning the vandalism at your office. You’ll likely have to write it off as a product of the neighborhood.”

“Yeah, sure,” Vic said with disdain, clenching his fists. “Product of the neighborhood.”

“Happy New Year. I trust you can see yourself out.” Samson gave him a pointed glance toward the elevators and then walked in the opposite direction.

Vic exited the conference room, trying to keep his anger in check. Just when Samson started to show a bit of humanity, the copper had to switch course and return to his high-and-mighty self. Riding the elevator down to the first floor, he banged one clenched fist against his thigh to mitigate his temper.

He began the walk back to Georgie’s apartment, conflicted about whether to tell her what he had learned. She obviously knew an inherent level of danger came with her life, which was why she’d spent the last few years living a modest existence, consisting mostly of work and a few social obligations. But a persistent, concrete threat like this was different. And, judging from the menacing message at the Spaulding holiday party, the threat wouldn’t go anywhere so long as Mayor Spaulding continued to control the city.

This was much more complex than he had originally thought. Throw in his complicated feelings for Georgie, and it was a recipe for disaster.

He almost wished he had agreed to investigate the shooting early on in their acquaintance. If he had, he might have uncovered this information sooner, before he'd become so emotionally attached to her. Now he was tangled up in her life with his guard down, and the last thing he wanted was to bring her more stress.

Once the perp was caught, then he'd tell her what Samson had revealed. He would make sure she stuck with her security unit, even though he knew she was sick of being babysat. Hell, he'd be her fucking security unit if it came down to it.

As he continued his walk, he looked up at the extravagant buildings of North Section, marveling at how he'd ended up here. And then he laughed at himself. He was a fool for playing knight to the city's princess. This was some courtly love type of shit, and he was the worst sort of chump.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



It was, in Georgie's opinion, the perfect weekend.

Although Vic returned to her apartment with news that Samson had identified the shooter and an arrest was imminent, she decided to ignore that for much of the weekend. With her secret plans to confront her father and reach out to Samson soon after, she was determined to enjoy her few days with Vic. And enjoy she did.

They spent the rest of Friday at her place, playing board games and watching movies. She assumed Vic was sick of cheesy holiday films, so she put on an action flick. But once that was over, he surprised her by returning to the channel that showed nonstop fluff.

"I like them," he admitted quietly. "They always end happily. Hard to come by that where I'm from."

She could only reply to his vulnerable confession by burrowing closer to his firm chest and squeezing his hand.

Despite his reluctance to go to the police station together, she was able to convince him to spend Saturday outside the apartment. She tucked her hair inside her jacket and covered the rest of it with her winter hat, hiding her most noticeable feature. That, plus a pair of sunglasses and her security detail always close by, persuaded Vic to join her at Crescent Park, the largest patch of green in North Section. An ice-skating rink was erected in the park every winter, and Georgie hadn't visited since childhood.

When they approached the entrance to purchase tickets, she took the lead and pulled out her wallet to pay for both admission and skate rentals. It wasn't until the attendant had taken her credit card that she realized what she'd done. Tension undulated between them when the employee swiped payment, and she quickly signed her name on the receipt, eager to put the blunder behind her.

They took turns around the rink, Georgie wiping out once in spectacular fashion. She laughed heartily when she fell on her behind, but Vic's face crinkled with concern. He helped her back to her feet, and she eventually got the hang of skating, but she reached for his hand as often as possible.

After leaving the rink, they passed a food vendor, and Vic took the liberty of ordering two hot dogs with the works. The cost of the food was next to nothing, but she knew every coin made a difference to him, so she appreciated the gesture. She might have been a little extra, raving about how delicious the meal was since his jaw tightened with discomfort the more she waxed poetic.

They returned to her apartment after a quick pit stop to pick up some more groceries. He prepped a chicken pot pie for dinner, which was the perfect hearty meal after a long day outside in the cold. There were times when they said nothing at all, content with the silence and each other's presence. On the flip side, they often gushed into conversation. She learned that his middle name was Francis, heard the story behind his mother teaching him how to cook, and found out he shared his father's irrational fear of frogs.

And throughout the whole weekend, every morning and every night, he brought her body to such heights of pleasure that she wondered how she'd ever been willing to settle for anything less.

On Sunday, he left her apartment after lunch to head back downtown, and they made plans to meet at Mulligan's for happy hour later in the week. After texting her mother about joining the family dinner that evening, she went off to therapy. Once she left Lacey's office, she saw her mother's enthusiastic reply and began mentally preparing herself for suffering

through a meal with her family in order to clear the air with her father.

She hailed a taxi at six thirty and made the trip crosstown. She entered the parlor and found her mother, grandmother, and sister-in-law chatting over cocktails. Mrs. Spaulding gave her a hug, and Granny Spaulding gestured sassily that she wanted a kiss on the cheek.

“I’m so glad you decided to join us, Georgie,” her mother said, fixing her a drink at the bar cart in the corner. “We missed you at the lodge.”

Georgie tried not to scoff. She hadn’t been to the lodge in years. Her mother mentioning she’d been missed, as if her absence was a first-time occurrence, reeked of insincerity. But she took the cocktail from Mrs. Spaulding with a contained smile.

“Your father and brothers are out on the patio, having some cigars,” Mrs. Spaulding said with a shake of her head since she loathed the habit the men of the family indulged in.

“How was your New Year’s Eve?” Camille asked.

Georgie settled onto the sofa beside her. “It was great. I hosted a small party, actually. Had a few friends over.”

Before she could elaborate, Mayor Spaulding entered the parlor, trailing in the pungent scent of cigar smoke. Her brothers followed the patriarch, both giving their little sister grief about taking so long to return to Sunday night dinners. She didn’t bother to tell them that this would not become a regular occurrence again.

Once the family chef announced that dinner was ready, the group made the short trek to the dining room. They took their usual seats, and the first course of roasted butternut squash soup was brought out.

“Tell us about your New Year’s Eve party, Georgie,” Camille prompted.

She smiled, recalling the high she’d felt that day. “It was a lot of fun. Just a small group, mostly people I invited to the holiday party. But it was a good way to start the year.”

“So that hunky man with the broad chest was there?” Granny Spaulding asked nonchalantly.

Charlie snorted into his soup, and Eddie muttered under his breath, “Jesus, Granny.”

Georgie pushed her shoulders back. “His name is Vic. And yes, he was there. In fact, he and I have been seeing each other.”

She glanced around the table to gauge everyone’s reaction. Granny Spaulding looked impressed, but both her brothers grimaced, as they were never ones to enjoy hearing about their little sister’s love life. Her mother and Camille gave her kind, if somewhat patronizing, smiles.

Her father, on the other hand, never stopped slurping his soup. It was as if he hadn’t heard her.

“But Dad already knew that,” Georgie continued. “Seeing as he’s been using my security detail to spy on my whereabouts. And to find out who’s visited my apartment.”

Everyone turned to the head of the table to look at Mayor Spaulding, who poured himself another glass of wine. He didn’t grace them with his attention.

Granny Spaulding lightly tapped her wrinkled knuckles against the table. “Now, Henry, you let these two gallivant around, dating through half the girls in this city during their youth.” She nodded toward Eddie and Charlie. “Let our Georgina have her fun.”

“It’s not about that,” Georgie broke in before her father could say anything. “I mean, it is about that. Vic and I have fun, but it’s more than fun. It’s not some passing fancy. He’s a good man. He saved my life, for God’s sake, and I care about him. A lot.”

All the heads that had turned toward her father now veered back over to her. It was quiet and awkward as the whole family considered her words.

Mrs. Spaulding nodded her head slowly. “Of course, honey.”

Georgie took a gulp of wine. “I would have hoped everyone would be happy for me. But I suppose that’s too much to ask. So instead, I hope no one will give him any grief. Especially you, Dad.”

Her mother tittered uncomfortably. “We’d never give him any grief. Whatever do you mean?”

“He knows exactly what I’m talking about.”

Mayor Spaulding finally met his daughter’s gaze. His face was impartial, but Georgie knew better. She knew how easy it was for her father to con and deceive, for him to convince someone that he had their best interests at heart, when a second later, he’d throw them under the bus.

Instead of addressing any of the conversation that had taken place, Mayor Spaulding turned to Eddie and Camille. “Now, when are you two going to give me a grandchild?” he asked. “I’ve been waiting long enough, I think.”

Georgie almost gasped at such a rude question, distraught by how Camille’s face turned bright red.

“Not for lack of trying, Dad,” Eddie said with a wink. Whereas Camille blinked rapidly, trying to hold back a sheen of tears. Considering they’d been married for several years, it stood to reason they’d been trying for a while. Never mind the recent reveal that Eddie had been stepping out on her likely compounded Camille’s distress.

Georgie put her utensils down with a clank. “It’s not enough that you control this entire city with an iron fist, but you have to do it with your adult children as well?”

“Georgie, it’s okay,” Camille murmured from across the table.

“No, it’s not. It’s none of his business.”

Mayor Spaulding held up his hands, pretending to act demure. “I don’t think it’s unreasonable to want a grandchild. Eddie and Camille are my only hope since Lord knows Charlie here is determined to stay a bachelor,” he said, gesturing over to the younger of the two brothers. Then he fixed Georgie with

a poisonous stare. “And if you were to ever procreate with that bulking beast from downtown, the child would be half trash.”

The women of the family had the decency to gasp. Charlie hung his head back, knowing a fight was about to break out. Eddie sighed wearily and grabbed the nearby bottle of wine.

Meanwhile, Georgie saw red. If her father hadn't been at the other end of the table, she likely would have slapped him.

“Henry, my God,” Mrs. Spaulding heaved. “Was that really called for?”

Shaking with indignation, Georgie gripped the side of her seat. “You want to talk about trash?”

“All right, let's all take deep breaths,” her grandmother piped in.

“Not only has Dad used my detail to keep tabs on my love life, but Vic's office was also vandalized,” Georgie told her family.

“Oh, the office in South Section? Where crime is rampant?” her father shot back.

“South Section is still a part of this city, as much as you like to ignore it, and if it's so crime-ridden, then that's nothing but a reflection on you and your administration.”

“Ah, here she goes again.”

Georgie clenched her jaw to ignore his condescension. She addressed the rest of her family. “Nothing from Vic's office was stolen. But the windows of his personal office were smashed. As if someone was trying to send a message.”

The group understood her implication, but they all avoided eye contact. The cowardice made her blood boil.

“With the type of work he does, I'm sure he's made a few enemies. Probably something to do with a prior case,” Mayor Spaulding said with a nonchalant shrug.

Mrs. Spaulding turned to her daughter. “Georgie, I know you don't think your father would do anything so extreme.”

She laughed without humor. “Have you met the man? The *actual* man? Not the one you’ve fabricated in your mind to justify staying with him even after all the horrible things he’s done.”

Mayor Spaulding rose from his seat. “Don’t you dare speak to your mother that way.”

“Why? You don’t want her to take a long, hard look in the mirror?”

“Enough,” Granny Spaulding yelled, slapping the table. Everyone gawked, as she rarely raised her voice. “The two of you apologize to each other. Right now.”

Georgie leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. “How about this? I’ll apologize when Dad apologizes to Vic.”

“I had nothing to do with any vandalism,” Mayor Spaulding doubled down. He glared menacingly at his only daughter. “And you have no proof.”

“And I guess you also didn’t demand the police dig up dirt on Vic?”

“Who told you that?” Mayor Spaulding snapped.

Georgie flinched at her slipup, realizing she’d exposed Samson in the heat of the moment. She took a deep breath and said, “Not denying it, are you?”

“The police have more important matters to attend to. Including tracking down the man who tried to kill you and left a bomb at Eddie’s office.” Mayor Spaulding sat back down in his seat. “And from what I’ve heard, they’ve identified the suspect and are tracking him down. An arrest is imminent.”

Mrs. Spaulding placed one perfectly manicured hand over her heart and breathed a sigh of relief. “What welcome news.”

Eddie nodded his head vigorously. “Good. Best police department in the country. I knew they’d get the job done.”

“Are you all dumb?” Georgie blurted insolently. Granny Spaulding rapped her hand again as a warning to cool it, but she kept on. “What did the banner say at the holiday party?”

‘Resign now before someone gets hurt.’ You think one person is behind this? None of this will stop until you step down.”

“I have no intention of giving into threats.” Mayor Spaulding dipped a piece of bread into the soup and pointed at his daughter. “I won reelection, fair and square.”

She burst into a maniacal laugh. “Fair and square? You fucking cheated!”

“Georgina Alice, you watch your mouth,” Mrs. Spaulding chided as if Georgie were still a child.

Georgie ignored her mother and said, “You cheated. Period. You sabotaged Election Day, suppressed the votes, and when people in South Section began protesting, you sent your loyal group of thugs—also known as the Moon City PD—to crack skulls.”

“I sent our police—men and women who risk their lives to keep our city safe—downtown to quell civil unrest,” her father said in a snit.

“Civil unrest that started because of you,” she yelled. “You were the one who couldn’t play by the rules. Because you don’t think the rules apply to you.”

Mayor Spaulding puffed out his chest. “Of course things are different for me. For you. For all of us.”

“So we get to cheat, steal, and subjugate, and there are no consequences?”

Charlie rolled his eyes. “Georgie, don’t be such a goddamn drama queen. That’s not what he’s saying.”

“Then what is he saying?” she countered.

“I know what’s best for this city,” Mayor Spaulding declared.

She laughed once again. “No. You know what’s best for you and your cronies. The bankers, the CEOs, the tycoons. You don’t give a damn about anyone who lives outside this zip code.”

The back door of the dining room that led directly to the kitchen opened. The family chef, colloquially known as Cook, walked through with a smile and asked, "Shall we move to the second course?"

Cook's face fell at the tension, but Granny Spaulding nodded. "And a few more bottles of wine for the table, please," she added, glancing around at the family.

Cook exited swiftly. Once he was gone, Georgie tossed her napkin on the table. "I won't be staying. I can see this was a mistake."

"I look forward to the day when you outgrow this little phase of yours," Mayor Spaulding muttered.

"And to think I came over to try and talk some sense into you." She rose from her seat and shook her head with disappointment. "I thought you might care about your family's safety more than your ego."

Her father's glare turned dangerous. "Don't you ever question my devotion to this family."

"Yes, you're devoted. So long as they treat you like a king." She shrugged. "Couldn't be me."

"And after all I've done for you," he sneered. "You'll get tired of playing in the gutter eventually."

"Leave Vic alone. The man saved my life. He doesn't deserve any of this."

"How about I leave the Homeless Services Bureau alone?"

The threat was akin to tossing a bucket of cold water over her head. Numb, she gaped at her father for what seemed like forever and a day. Until anger returned, swift like a destructive wildfire.

"Are you serious?" she hissed.

Her father lifted his shoulders and sat back. "Our meeting is scheduled for Thursday, but who knows? I'm a very busy man. Something may come up that forces me to push the discussion back. Indefinitely."

Georgie wasn't a fool. When her father mentioned his recent interest in bolstering the work done within the Homeless Services Bureau, she'd suspected it was a way to try and manipulate her. Especially when she never received any follow-up from him asking for advice and guidance.

But to blatantly threaten the livelihood of an already underserved department? All to spite his own daughter?

"You're despicable."

She had to leave before her anger turned into an uncontrollable rage. She exited the dining room as swiftly as her legs would allow. In the foyer, the family butler brought out her coat and purse. She prepared to depart when her mother approached.

"Your food will get cold," Georgie said flatly.

Mrs. Spaulding wrang her hands. "You two need to cool down a bit, then everything will be okay. How about you and I grab tea next Sunday?"

"No, Mom. I'm done having tea."

The finality in her words spooked her mother, but Georgie left the townhouse without waiting for a response. She was past the point of caring. As she stood on the front stoop, lingering in the light of the outdoor sconces, she searched her purse and found Samson's business card. She dialed the number listed, and he answered on the second ring.

"Hi, it's Georgie Spaulding."

"Is everything all right?" Samson asked.

"Yes, I'm fine. I was wondering if I might be able to talk with you. Are you at the station?" She glanced up and down the block, looking for a cab.

"I am. Will likely be here most of the night. Swing by whenever you'd like."

An available taxi turned onto the street, and she waved her hand to flag it down before ending the phone call. With a quick update to her security detail, she jumped in the cab and headed to police headquarters.

After checking in at the front desk, Samson came down to greet her. They proceeded to the fifth floor and into a small conference room. He barely closed the door before Georgie spoke.

“Vic told me that my father asked you to gather dirt on him,” she said. When Samson started to respond, she held up a hand to stop him. “I’m not here to berate you. I just had dinner with my family, and I confronted him about it. It slipped out in the heat of the moment. I didn’t mention you by name, but I still wanted to warn you.”

Samson sat down in a chair and rubbed his eyes with both hands. “I appreciate the heads up. I’ll have to figure out how to spin this.”

“I’m so sorry.” She’d never been one to let her emotions get the better of her, but her father always had a way of making her lose her head. And now that her feelings for Vic had deepened and solidified, any attack on him felt like an attack on them.

“I imagine you’ve heard that we identified a suspect.”

She nodded. “Vic told me, but he mentioned you didn’t share much. Anything you might be able to tell me?”

His mouth curled. “You two really are made for each other.”

Even with all the recent drama, Georgie warmed at that statement.

“I spoke with Nicole Silva,” she said with a raised eyebrow.

He nodded slowly, drumming his fingers on the table. “I see.”

“What does your partner think about her theory?”

Samson chuckled lightly. “It’s not exactly something I’ve advertised.”

“So the force isn’t aware that there’s more than one person involved?”

He faltered, evidently conflicted about elaborating further. But revealing the truth won out in the end. “Right now, the theory is that there’s a duo working together. And that’s solely because the video footage from your brother’s office, as fuzzy as it is, doesn’t match the description Vic gave of the shooter. If I were to suggest that some sort of South Section secret syndicate is behind everything? I’d be laughed out of this building.”

“But you think it’s possible?”

“I’ve only been here a few short months, but it’s become abundantly clear to me that anything’s possible in this city,” Samson said. “And if it is the truth, then we’ll deal with it however we can. But I can’t do much if I don’t have concrete proof.”

Georgie felt a headache developing. She rested her head in her hands for a beat. “Is there anything I can do?”

“Short of convincing your father to resign?”

Her head shot up, and she gave Samson such an exhausted look that he snickered. She had to laugh herself to release some of the mental strain.

“Trust me, after meeting with him tonight, I don’t know if there’s anything that would get him to step down.”

“In that case, just stay safe. Keep your security unit close, even after an arrest is made,” Samson warned. “And mentally prepare yourself. For anything.”

He escorted her back down to the ground floor and hailed a cab for Georgie with the promise to stay in touch. She headed back to her apartment, the events of the past few hours burdening her mind. Go figure such a perfect weekend would turn rotten.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



The man with frizzy hair and a stern brow was named Marshall McDevitt.

Vic was in North Section on Wednesday afternoon, meeting with Cloister Insurance, a frequent client. After discussing some new work with the company, he lumbered to the nearest Luna station to head back downtown. On the way, he passed an electronics store, and the news program playing on the television in the window display caught his eye. He stopped short and watched, grateful for the closed captioning.

Marshall McDevitt was found squatting in the basement of an abandoned warehouse in the Factory District, a desolate area of South Section that had been an industrial hub at the turn of the previous century. Footage of a handcuffed McDevitt approaching MCPD headquarters was shown on a loop as the reporter's voiceover relayed the facts of the case, including that a press conference was scheduled for later that evening. Mayor Spaulding was expected to make remarks. Vic was surprised to see Quintanilla leading McDevitt into the building, with Samson nowhere to be found.

Once he departed the Luna at Castle Street and proceeded to street level, his phone buzzed with a message from Georgie:
Have you seen the news?

He entered Cannon Investigations with a distracted hello to Lex and Rhett. Typing out a reply, he went back to his office, which was still windowless.

I did. You must feel relieved.

His phone buzzed barely a minute later. **I'm not sure how I feel.**

Nor was he. He had to tell Georgie what he knew, how this arrest didn't guarantee her safety. It wasn't fair to keep her in the dark, and he'd want to know himself if the roles were reversed. Although dropping this information via text or a phone call wasn't ideal. They had plans to meet the following evening at Mulligan's, so he decided to wait and tell her in person once they arrived at her apartment for the night.

A few calls from the press came into the office that afternoon, asking for his comment regarding the capture of Marshall McDevitt. Lex handled all the inquiries, continually saying *no comment* before hanging up. That evening at his apartment, he watched clips of the press conference. The police commissioner kept things vague, regularly referring to the need to withhold certain facts to protect the investigation's integrity. Mayor Spaulding gave a standard speech praising the MCPD for their hard work.

There was no reference to another individual being responsible for the pipe bomb, and the entire presser gave the illusion that the threat was fully put to rest. It made him toss and turn with nightmares, imagining another member of this rogue group targeting Georgie while her guard was down.

He brought an overnight bag to the office on Thursday and focused on administrative work throughout the day, watching the clock tick as it neared six. He was alone at the office, as both Lex and Rhett were on surveillance duty for the recent Cloister Insurance cases. Vic had told both of them to head home after finishing surveillance instead of returning to the office to close out the day.

The front door of the office opened, and Samson walked in. Vic was surprised to see him dressed casually in a well-worn pair of jeans and a hoodie beneath his jacket.

"Come on back," Vic called out, putting some paperwork to the side. "Off duty?"

Samson sat down with a long exhale. "Suspended."

That explained why he hadn't seen Samson in any of the recent news coverage about McDevitt's arrest. "What'd you do?"

"You talk to Georgie lately?"

It was startling to hear Samson use her nickname. The detective had always been a sucker for propriety, but apparently things had changed. "I talk to her regularly. But I'm not sure what it is you're getting at."

"She came by the station on Sunday after having dinner with her family. Told me she let it slip to her father that she knew he asked me to dig up dirt on you."

Unease slithered down to the marrow of his bones as he took in this development. "I didn't know she was seeing her family." He could remember every single moment of their weekend together, and she hadn't mentioned any plans to join them for dinner. Nor had she mentioned it in the days since.

This news that she'd gone to Sunday dinner was a knife in the gut. Because even all these years later, he would only ever associate that weekly Spaulding event as the catalyst that led to his parents' demise. It felt like the ultimate betrayal on her part, but common sense clanged in his head.

*And how was she supposed to know this would hurt you?
When you've lied to her all this time?*

Samson cracked his knuckles. "She didn't mention me by name, but the mayor's not an idiot. I was the one he specifically recruited for this task, so he knew I was the leak. I tried to convince my superior that I mentioned it to a few other guys on the force, and someone else could have spilled the beans. But clearly, that didn't go over well."

"You're lucky you weren't outright fired," Vic said, cognizant of how the MCPD would sacrifice their own if needed.

"Trust me, I know," Samson murmured darkly.

The front door opened, the bell chiming. Samson instantly turned around, but his interest deflated when Rhett walked in.

“Forgot my keys,” Rhett called back. “Again.”

Vic nodded absentmindedly as Rhett went to his desk to grab his always-forgotten keychain and left the office for the night.

“Anyway, figured I’d tell you I’ll be out of commission for a while. In case you have any more instances of vandalism,” Samson said with a sarcastic glance.

Vic returned the look in good measure. “I appreciate you coming all the way here. A phone call would have worked.”

Samson broke eye contact and shrugged. “Yeah, well...not like I have anything better to do. I barely know what to do with myself without work.” The detective paused. “Listen, your personal life isn’t my business—”

He groaned. “Samson, I don’t want to hear anything about Georgie.”

“Just be careful. I know she didn’t mean to expose me, but she has a short fuse when it comes to her father. And considering your history with the Spaulding family...”

“I know.”

“But does she know? About how her uncle killed your parents, and her father orchestrated the cover-up?”

“You just said my personal life isn’t your business.”

“But you know how women like that are.”

Vic’s own fuse sparked at Samson’s tone. “Women like what?” he asked in a low voice.

Samson inhaled slowly, regret seeping into his appearance. “I didn’t mean it like...listen, I think Georgie is a great girl. But women like her do and get what they want. They never consider consequences because consequences don’t apply to them.”

For a split second, he almost jumped across the desk to punch Samson square in the nose. But his common sense kept him rooted to his seat. Because Samson wasn’t expressing

anything different than what Vic himself had once thought. Before he'd gotten to know her better.

"I suppose I win the award for misogynistic prick of the day," Samson uttered.

"Don't worry. In this city, someone else will steal the title soon enough."

Samson stood and put his winter gloves back on. "I should head out."

"I appreciate you being real with me, Samson."

"Ace." Off Vic's confused look, he elaborated. "My name. It's Ace."

Vic accepted the declaration of confidence with a nod. Although Samson was a recent Moon City transplant, Vic could see the two of them clearly in another world—a world where his parents hadn't been killed, he'd finished the academy, sold his soul to the corrupt men in power in the city, and became a cop. He could see him and Ace as partners.

No, that didn't sound right. The dandy detective would always be Samson to him.

"See you around," Samson said.

"Hopefully, you won't," he replied, and Samson laughed as he left Cannon Investigations for what Vic hoped was the last time.

Soon after, Vic hit the lights and exited the office, locking up behind him. The promise of more snow hung thick in the air as he made the short walk to the Castle Street station. The ride uptown was uneventful. As he rode through the jerky stops and bumpy commute, a wide breadth of emotions wreaked havoc on him. He'd been so eager to see Georgie and reveal the truth to her, unburdening himself of this information about additional culprits involved in the threats against her family.

And maybe, a teeny part of him was keen to play hero again. He wanted to assure her he could look out for her. He'd been desperate to cling to any reason for her to stay with him

and not toss his ass to the curb once someone better came along. Could he get any more pathetic?

Yet now the pendulum had swiftly swung the other way, and he was ready to remove the rose-colored glasses and crush them beneath his boots. Ready to remember who she really was, refocusing on that red hair and last name. Sure, he may call her sweetheart, and she might have a sweet heart, but her words still had the power to ruin people. And the privileged princess archetype he'd been able to demolish in his consciousness—replaced for a time by the real her—returned with a vengeance in his mind's eye.

Once he arrived at Mulligan's, he found Georgie, Daryl, and Rohan at a high-top table in the main bar area. Mulligan's was much busier than the last time he'd visited, with folks trying to imbibe away the post-holiday season slump. Vic breathed a sigh of relief when he recognized one of the men from her security team nearby.

Georgie jumped out of her seat to greet him. "You made it! I was worried there for a bit."

"Got held up at the office," he said, giving her a peck on the lips.

It was a quick show of affection, the type of easy gesture so familiar to couples. It felt nice, which was why it also made him queasy. Especially when he saw how happy it made her. Her face was radiant, amplified by her hair pulled into a ponytail atop her head, the tresses a flaming waterfall.

Women like her do and get what they want. They don't think of the consequences. Because consequences never touch them.

Why was he keeping Samson's words close to his chilly heart? Maybe because he hated that she looked so beautiful and elated. It made it harder to process his clashing feelings for her. He wished he could revert to weeks ago when she was nothing more than a pretty picture in the papers, some elusive woman who would never associate with the likes of him.

He greeted Daryl and Rohan before moving to a free space at the bar to place his order. Georgie followed, her smile never wavering.

She got the bartender's attention immediately. "What would you like?"

"A beer is fine."

Georgie placed their order and then leaned toward him as the bartender prepared their drinks. The heat of her body warmed him and almost made him forget Samson's visit.

"How was your day?" she asked, raising her voice over the bustle of the bar.

He cleared his throat. "Samson came by the office."

"Oh?"

"He got suspended from the force. Because of you."

Her face reddened as the bartender thumped their drinks down and broke the moment by asking for the name on the tab. Georgie said, "It's under Spaulding."

"No, I've got cash," Vic told the bartender. He pulled out his wallet.

"Vic, I have a tab open."

"And I said I've got it." He handed over the cost, plus a tip, whereas she put her glass of wine on her tab and settled the bill.

Her eyelashes flickered warily as she placed her credit card back in her purse. "I didn't realize you and Samson were such good friends."

"We're not."

"Well, you seem awfully upset on his behalf."

"And you clearly aren't," he scoffed.

"That's not true at all. Of course I'm upset."

Vic noticed Daryl and Rohan eyeing them. "We'll talk about it later."

They both took their drinks and returned to the table to make small talk with Daryl and Rohan. The couple knew something was up, thanks to Georgie's downtrodden expression. After about twenty minutes, Daryl and Rohan reached the bottom of their drinks and said their goodbyes.

Now alone at the table, Georgie crinkled her nose and said, "I suppose this is going to be our first fight?"

A flash of irritation swept through him, bitterness at how her pretty face made him want to forget everything. How her ability to act demure and contrite meant she could get away with anything she wanted.

He gulped his beer. "I specifically told you not to tell your father about any of this."

"I know. I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking. And I apologized to Samson on Sunday," she said. "I went to the police station after my slipup. I felt terrible about it, truly. I feel even worse knowing he's been suspended."

"You expected less from dear old dad?"

"Considering Samson was the lead detective on the case, I didn't think my father would outright retaliate. But I guess that's my greatest folly. I always expect him to be a better man than he is."

"Guess that's why you agreed to have dinner with him."

"I wanted to try and reason with him. At the very least, I needed to tell him face-to-face to leave us alone. No more vandalism, no more threats." She tilted her head, considering Vic. "Why are you so angry?"

"That's a loaded fucking question."

He didn't know where to begin when it came to summarizing his anger. He was angry that his parents were dead, and the person responsible never faced any repercussions. He was angry that he established his meager livelihood due to blackmail. He was angry that a woman like her had gotten under his skin and bewitched him into wishing for something more.

She looked around the crowded bar, the noise level still high. “Why don’t we get a taxi and head to my place? We can talk there.” She slipped off the bar stool and put on her jacket, slinging her purse across her body. “I’m going to run to the restroom.”

She walked to a member of her security team to alert them and then headed down the back hallway. Vic had half a mind to leave but found himself grabbing his jacket and duffle bag to head after her instead.

The noise from the bar was subdued in the back hallway. He stood outside the row of unisex bathrooms until she stepped out of the farthest door.

She smiled tentatively. “Ready to go?”

“Maybe we should talk here.”

Her head moved into a hesitant nod, then whipped to the side. He tracked her gaze and saw her unit glancing down the hallway, keeping tabs on her. She glared until they stepped away and provided her and Vic some privacy.

“God, I’m so sick of this,” she muttered.

“Don’t get rid of the security detail.”

She regarded him for an instant, surprised by his out-of-nowhere request. But then understanding dawned. “Who told you?”

A silent conversation passed between them in a matter of seconds. She knew about the further threats and hadn’t said anything. They were complicit in mutual deceit.

Except for the fact that his deceit ran deeper. *She has no idea what her uncle and father did to you. She has no idea what you did to get the business afloat.*

“Samson,” he said. “I assume he clued you in?”

“No, I heard it from...someone else.”

“Who?”

“Does it matter? Look, it’s also part of why I went to dinner on Sunday. I wanted to try and force my father’s hand. I

thought if I could get the rest of the family on my side, maybe he would start to consider resigning.”

He barked a cruel laugh. “Yeah, and how did that go?”

She scowled at him. “How do you think it went? There’s no need to be so rude, Vic.”

“Really? Thought that’s what you liked best about me,” he shot back.

Disappointment clouded her queenly features. “This isn’t the same, and you know it.”

He cursed under his breath. Sure, he was frustrated with her, but he was equally frustrated with himself. He wasn’t handling this well. He didn’t even *know* how he wanted to handle this. Negative energy sizzled on his skin, and a quiet corner of his brain yelled to step away before he said something he’d regret.

“I’m going to head home.” He hitched the bag higher on his shoulder and turned to leave, but she took hold of his arm.

“But wait, we didn’t even—”

Georgie stopped abruptly when a woman walked down the hallway. Thankfully, she was engrossed in her cell phone and didn’t take note of them before stepping into one of the open bathrooms. The security detail, once again, glanced down to observe them quickly.

“I can tell something’s bothering you,” Georgie said. “Let’s head back to my place and talk about what’s wrong.”

“Why bother talking about it? It’s not going to change anything.”

“It might.”

“No, Georgie, it won’t. I mean, what the hell do you think will happen if your father does resign? Some other crook will take his place. Nothing’s going to change, not in this city.”

“It’s frustrating, I know—”

No, she didn’t know. She couldn’t understand, not when she sat up in that goddamn turret of an apartment. And his

chest was rioting with emotion because she was who she was, and he was who he was, and that wasn't going to change either. Which meant that they weren't right for each other, no matter how much he'd enjoyed living in this ignorant fantasy world the last few weeks.

A side door with an exit sign burning brightly caught his eye. Like a coward, he took off and pushed through the door. Snow had started falling, a light dusting covering the ground. He stepped into the alley and looked around to get his bearings straight. Georgie followed him into the alleyway, although her security detail must not have realized she'd left since no one immediately trailed after her.

“Vic, just stop. Are you...are we...I mean, what is this about?”

He turned to face her. “You want to know the real reason I hated you?” She flinched at the bitterness of his voice. Remorse somersaulted in his stomach, but he pushed it down. “Who the fuck do you think killed my parents?” he asked in a hushed tone.

Georgie blinked in confusion, taken aback by the question and his harsh delivery. “What do you mean?”

“I'm sure you know that your dear old, departed Uncle Joshua liked to hit the bottle.”

He watched as she was stunned into silence, her brain working to try and conjure up memories.

“Don't bother trying to remember,” he told her. “The cover-up was top-notch.”

Her chest hitched. “Cover-up...Oh my God.” Then she hung her head and said, “My father helped do this, didn't he?”

She sounded gutted, and that only made him more flummoxed. He hated that she cared because it made it tougher for him to cast her aside and end this charade. He turned away and threw his bag down onto the grimy ground. He placed his fists against the brick building and took several deep breaths until he felt Georgie's arms swaddle around him from behind.

The easy touch, that simple comfort, made him want to cry. For the first time since that stone-faced MCPD officer came by the family apartment to report that there'd been an accident, he felt his eyes burn with the threat of tears.

He breathed in raggedly with the realization that he loved her. The truth he'd been trying to ignore for days hit him like a shock to the system. Because if feeling her arms around him made him want to weep, then that could only mean one thing.

He loved her. And with that epiphany, he lost all power. Any semblance of control he once possessed thanks to their bedroom games was gone, evaporating into the bitter cold of an ordinary January night.

"I'm so sorry, Vic. My God, I wish you had told me."

"Why, so you could blab to your father like you did with Samson?"

With a snide comment like that, he would have expected her to release him and retreat. Instead, she gripped him tighter and whispered, "I don't know what to say. But I'm here."

He moved to face her, hoping he'd willed his emotions under control enough. He bit the inside of his mouth to ensure he didn't start blurting out love confessions like some besotted fool.

"I'm so sorry," she said again, clearly lost for words. She looked down at her feet. "How did I not...I mean, good God. How did I not know this? Cover-up or not, my uncle killed someone. Not just someone—multiple people!"

"You would have been at school ten years ago, right?"

"Yes, I—oh God, yes, that's right." She lifted her hands to cover her face. Her head shook with painful regret. "But that's no excuse. I should have known. No wonder you hated me."

"Your father will use this against me if he puts the pieces together. Vengeance is a hell of a motive. I could be railroaded for these threats against your family."

"Absolutely not," she asserted fiercely, revealing that covert boldness he adored so much. "I won't let that happen."

She paused briefly. “Is that why you didn’t tell me? Because you don’t trust me?”

“I didn’t tell you because I...” He attempted to find the words. It came so easily to him when they were in bed together. He knew exactly how to talk to her then. But now he grappled with what to say. He finally replied, “Hating your family and everything you represent has been part of my identity for so, so long. Being with you, knowing you... changed that...but I don’t know who I am anymore if I don’t have that hatred.”

She reached for his hand, frigid from the bite of winter, and kissed his palm. The intimate action made the next part of his past bubble in his throat, the words teetering on the tip of his tongue.

Not a soul knew about the blackmail, his disgusting desperation. He was caught between confession and reticence. Georgie would never understand what it was like to feel so helpless and hopeless. His pride had already been battered and bruised when she had walked into his apartment. The memory of how she attempted to act unfazed, when the truth of her reaction was so transparent, constantly replayed in his mind. Or when she’d pretended to be so delighted when he bought her a simple hotdog in Crescent Park. Vic didn’t know if he could withstand watching pity creep onto her face.

“I understand. Let’s go back to my place,” she said before he could fess up. “And if you don’t want to talk, that’s fine. We don’t have to talk.”

There was heat in her proposition, a trap he was all too happy to walk into. Despite his anger and heartache, or maybe even because of it, his cock started to harden. He pushed her gently against the side of the building and grasped her chin with one hand. Tilting her pretty face up toward him, he hummed with satisfaction when she parted her mouth, immediately ready to take him in. And with his free hand, he reached down and cupped her mound through her pants. An impassioned sigh escaped her lips, and her eyes fluttered closed.

“Oh no, you don’t. We’ve been over this. You open those eyes,” he rumbled. She obeyed and latched their gazes. “I’m going to ruin this pussy tonight. Do you understand?”

She licked her lips and breathed, “Yes.”

Behind him, the side door to Mulligan’s crashed open and broke the spell around them. He pulled away from Georgie and turned to find her security detail barreling out into the alleyway with distress.

“Oh my God, will you leave me alone?” she whined. “I’m fine.”

One of the men stepped forward, demeanor solemn. “Ms. Spaulding, your father’s been shot.”

The message was akin to a bomb exploding between them, and Georgie was paralyzed in shock. Until Vic watched her totter around him, uneasy on her feet, to address the security unit. “What?” she breathed.

“We’re unaware of his condition, but he’s on his way to MC University Hospital now. I know you’ve insisted on your own transportation, but we should drive you there.”

“Oh my God. Yes, okay. Where is the car parked?”

“Out front. Right this way.” The man gestured her back through the side door.

She marched back into the pub, and the men trailed after her. And a spear pierced Vic’s heart when she didn’t once look back at him.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Looking back on the night, Georgie didn't remember much. Everything was a blur, a fuzzy group of memories. She knew her security detail drove her to MC University Hospital, but she couldn't remember the journey uptown. She knew she found her family in the waiting room, but she couldn't recall hugging her mother. She knew she heard the details of what had transpired—that her father had been shot outside City Hall, and the perpetrator was still on the loose—but she couldn't remember who told her that information. Things didn't become clearer until the early hours of the morning when her father came out of surgery in stable condition.

Mayor Spaulding was lucky. Although it was assumed his chest was the target area, he had turned at just the right moment, so the bullet hit his shoulder and narrowly missed the axillary artery. He received the highest caliber of care at MC University Hospital, and doctors were confident he'd make a full recovery.

When the doctors said he could receive visitors, the Spaulding family, Georgie included, entered the hospital room. Numbness reigned over her emotions when she saw her father incapacitated in bed, hooked up to beeping machines.

Her mother stepped forward to kiss Mayor Spaulding, her face streaked with tears. They exchanged hushed words until her father gestured for the rest of the family to draw nearer. Granny Spaulding approached, sitting on the edge of the bed and taking her son's hand. Charlie, Eddie, and Camille all

shuffled closer, murmuring how happy they were that he was okay.

Georgie didn't move from her location close to the door. The numbness dissolved, and a battle raged in her chest, keeping her frozen to the spot. While she was elated her father wasn't dead, anger returned as she watched him interact with the family as if he were still an arrogant king. And the ire only grew when she thought of Vic.

Vic, who she'd left alone in an alley without a second thought. After he had revealed such a painful and devastating part of his past, she'd run off. She had run to the father who'd hurt her more times than she could count, the mayor who hurt the people of this city every day, and the person who hurt the man she loved.

Of course she loved Vic. She hadn't admitted it to herself before that moment, but how could she not? How could she resist a man such as him—someone who was kindhearted and tender but still tough and demanding? A man who cooked, looked out for his sister, and was so serious that smiling was practically a foreign concept. But when he did grin, it was like the sun breaking through storm clouds.

She was disappointed he hadn't confided in her and had kept such a substantial secret for so long, but everything came into focus once she heard his confession. His standoffish attitude toward her in the beginning, the mixture of hostility and pain he exuded whenever he was in her father's presence, and how he changed the subject when discussing the circumstances of his parents' death.

And although they were inherently different, she wanted to believe love could overcome the disparity, naive as that may be. Yes, she would always have more money than him. He'd always hate her late uncle for killing his parents and would undoubtedly always hold her father accountable for perverting the course of justice. But if she loved him, and—if she was lucky—he might one day love her, then all that heartache and strife wouldn't matter. Not if their love was strong enough.

“Georgina,” her father called from the bed. “I’m surprised you came.”

She took a few steps closer, biting her tongue at how he still had to take a swipe at her, even from his hospital bed. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“We all are,” Mrs. Spaulding agreed.

“Dad, can we get you anything?” Eddie asked

Mayor Spaulding shook his head. “No, no. When did they say I could get out of here?”

Her mother tittered uncomfortably. “Henry, you were just shot. You’re not going anywhere, not for a while.”

“Have they caught the scum who did this?” Mayor Spaulding asked, attempting to sit up further. His wife admonished him quietly to lie back down.

“I spoke to one of the detectives,” Charlie reported. “Nothing yet, although every cop in the city is out looking. The detective told me to call once you’re awake and ready for questions.”

“Might as well give him a shout. I’d like to get this over with.”

Charlie nodded and pulled out his cell phone, walking out into the hallway to make the call. Eddie departed, too, mentioning he’d grab coffees for the group.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” Mrs. Spaulding agonized in a mumble.

God, how Georgie longed to say *I told you so*. But it was neither the time nor the place, so she continued biting her tongue. After a few minutes of mindless chitchat, Charlie returned with news that the lead detective would arrive shortly. Eddie passed around flimsy cups of weak coffee to the group, plus a water for their father.

“Hopefully, they find this lowlife quicker than they found the man who came after Georgie,” Mayor Spaulding said. Then a scornful grin split his face. “At least this will help the approval ratings. I’m practically a martyr.”

The tasteless joke received paltry laughs from Eddie and Charlie, whereas Granny Spaulding narrowed her eyes, and Mrs. Spaulding shook her head in exasperation. Camille followed her husband's lead and smiled, a hint of unrest in the grin.

"You haven't learned anything, have you?" Georgie whispered with sorrow.

"There she goes again, like clockwork," Mayor Spaulding scoffed to the rest of the family.

And that was all it took. Finally, she didn't revert to acting like an indignant child, forever allowing him to provoke her. The years of condescension and control culminated in this moment when she turned on her heel and left the room. She heard her mother calling after her, the one thing that had kept her tethered in the past, but now the effect was futile. She walked through the hospital hallways and straight toward the stairwell, ready to sever the familial connection completely.

As she stepped outside, she noticed a thin coating of frost covering the streets. She hailed a cab outside MC University Hospital without worrying about her security detail. They'd locate her eventually.

On the ride home, she saw Daryl had texted during the night. Like everyone else in the city, he'd heard the news and assured her that he didn't expect her in the office the next day. She typed out a quick reply, thanking him for being—yet again—so understanding. But there was no message from Vic. She sent a quick apology to him and asked if he could come over to her place that night to talk.

She returned to her apartment in record time, took a shower while crying like a terrible cliché, and then went to bed as the sun rose. She woke after lunchtime, her stomach growling something fierce, so she ordered some extremely unhealthy food from the nearby diner. But her gut clenched restlessly as every second passed with no reply from Vic.

Once the sun went down and he still hadn't replied, she was officially rattled. She grabbed her jacket and jumped in a cab, as there was just enough time to get downtown before

Cannon Investigations closed for the weekend. The security detail had returned to her apartment while she slept, so they were hot on her heels as she traveled to South Section.

Friday night rush hour meant traffic, and Georgie arrived at the office in the nick of time. A small light illuminated the office from behind the frosted windows. She held her breath as she opened the door and walked inside, praying he was still there so she wouldn't have to make awkward conversation with Lex or Rhett.

The bell chimed, and she closed the door behind her, sighing thankfully at the sight of Vic sitting alone. The windows of his office still hadn't been replaced, and he glimpsed over his computer as she walked in.

And then he glanced away. Just as he used to in those early chapters of their story.

Georgie knew she looked a fright. She had fallen asleep with her hair still wet from the shower, and it had dried into a crinkled mess. Her face was devoid of makeup, and she wore her rattiest pair of sweatpants and an oversized sweater. But she knew his avoidance wasn't linked to her disheveled appearance, so she approached him cautiously, waffling over how to begin.

"How's your father?" he asked once she reached his office door.

"Still alive."

"Pity," he said under his breath.

If he intended for the comment to sting, it didn't. She didn't feel anything anymore, not when it came to Henry Spaulding.

She walked into the office and sat down in the chair across from him. "Did you get my text messages?"

"Been busy today."

He was lying; she could tell that much. But she knew it was best to brush it off because she'd hurt him by walking

away after he'd bared his soul and shared his deepest pain—a pain that her own relative had created.

“Well, I wanted to talk about what you told me last night,” she said, her morale still low because he continued to avoid eye contact. “I know there's no way to hold Uncle Joshua accountable now, and heaven knows I'm no lawyer, but I believe you can sue his estate for the wrongful death of your parents.”

He finally whipped his head to focus on her. Then he laughed, the sound harsh and full of pain. “Is that a joke?”

She paused, startled at his reaction. “No. It's not a joke.”

“And where am I supposed to get the money to hire an attorney?”

His brows narrowed when she opened her mouth to answer before snapping her jaw shut. He could read her mind—knew exactly what she was nearly about to say. He knew that she'd say she would pay for it.

She clasped her hands together and exhaled dejectedly. “It was just a thought. Obviously, it's up to you.”

Instead of responding, Vic lifted from his seat and collected the folders strewn over the desk. He moved to the filing cabinet to organize the files, keeping his back to her. The silence was excruciating, crushing her spirits slowly but surely.

He pushed the cabinet drawer closed, the noise screeching through the stillness. “Not everyone can dip their fingers into a trust fund, Georgie,” he sneered, still facing away from her.

The earth was welcome to crack open and swallow her whole right about now. “I know that. I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking.”

What an easy, passive excuse. *I wasn't thinking*. She had fallen back on that justification many times over the years.

“Those of us downtown are used to being trampled on. We're used to people like you taking advantage, abusing authority, hoarding wealth.”

“People like me?”

She waited for him to clarify, to explain that he meant people like her father, her uncle, and the rest of her family, but he let the statement stand. The gravity of it was a boulder on her chest.

Unsure how to fix things, she approached him. He spun around when he heard her advance, and she placed one hand on his chest. His heartbeat was rapid, the pounding vibrating up through her fingertips. But he stepped back, as if he couldn't bear her touch.

Georgie nearly recoiled when she recognized the insidious emotion in his expression. Disgust. But not disgust at her. Disgust at himself.

“Yeah, when it comes down to it, I can't dip my fingers into a trust fund,” Vic went on bitterly. “I have to resort to other methods. Illegal ones.”

Whatever he was insinuating wasn't making sense to her. The idea of Vic—stoic and steady Vic, the big brother and businessman—participating in anything nefarious was preposterous. He might be rough around the edges, but he wasn't a criminal.

“I don't understand.”

“I don't need to sue your dirtbag uncle's estate because I blackmailed him. After the crash. Told him I'd go to the press if he didn't pay up.”

His stare was so fraught and guilt-ridden. And yet, she wanted to shake him by his large shoulders and shout, *Who cares?*

But it was clear he cared. She understood that he had agonized over this decision, and the secret had eaten away at him for years. Because he looked physically ill when he choked out, “I had to reduce my parents to nothing more than a number. A fucking number.”

“Oh, Vic.”

“A number that was life-changing to me. But to your dear Uncle Joshua? He laughed, shrugged, and said, ‘Oh, is that all?’”

She held in a wince. Uncle Joshua’s reaction was not surprising to her. The payout had likely been nothing to him, as inconsequential as the cost of dry cleaning his most expensive suit. How demoralizing to Vic to have to resort to such tactics, only to be essentially mocked. And all while in the midst of grieving.

“Hell, we probably wouldn’t be standing in this place if I hadn’t done it,” he continued, the floodgates now open. “I used the money to get the business off the ground. And every day, when I walk through that front door, I think about how ashamed my parents must be of me.”

“No, no. You did what you had to do. And you’ve sustained this business and created something worthwhile. I’m sure they’re proud of you.”

He scoffed. “Proud? One of the last things I did before they died was join the police academy. That decision disappointed both of them. My mom wanted me to go back to school. My dad probably would have rather I busted my ass on his construction crew than become a cop.”

She reached out and clasped his hands. “You cannot think like that. Sometimes we make choices our parents don’t approve of.”

“I should have known better. I knew deep down it was a mistake.”

“You cannot punish yourself for the rest of your life. Whether it was a mistake or not is irrelevant. If your parents loved you unconditionally, which I’m sure they did, then that’s all that matters. *That* is what you need to focus on, not what you should have or could have done.”

Vic’s massive chest heaved with uneven breaths. “I’m no better than your friend,” he rasped out. “I took money from your family—”

“No, no. Hush.” She carefully placed her fingers over his mouth to silence him. “This is not the same. You deserved so much better than the hand you were dealt. And I want you to know that none of this changes how I feel about you.”

She wished her conviction was enough to persuade him, but she knew from personal experience that years of self-doubt and self-loathing were tough to shake. She could only hope that her presence and support would help him with the healing process.

His throat worked, unable to respond. She kissed him lightly, a silent apology on her lips for every unfairness he’d experienced. His reaction to the kiss was subdued, so she backed away, understanding that perhaps he needed more time, needed to be given space to work through the unprocessed grief.

She turned but didn’t get far as his hand reached out to grab her wrist. Before she could take another breath, their lips fused together in a harsh kiss. She’d spent the past hours reckoning with her identity and parentage, unaware that Vic had been experiencing the same struggle throughout their time together. But now, all she wanted was to lose herself in him, in them.

“So help me God, I’m fucking you against this desk if it’s the last thing I do,” he vowed.

Their kisses were frantic, messy, and unpracticed, with tongues and teeth clashing. She kicked off her boots before he hauled her onto the desk, and they rapidly removed their clothing, the garments flying every which way. With no resistance, he shoved her to lie back on the desk, her head just shy of the computer in the far corner and her legs dangling off the edge.

Georgie watched the pulse pounding in his neck as he reached between her legs and parted her soaked folds. His eyes were hooded as he loomed over her and asked, “Did you lock the door?”

Through a haze of lust, she thought back to a few minutes earlier and shook her head. “No.”

“No?” He slowly pushed a finger into her entrance.

Her breath turned shallow as she shook her head once more against the hard desk. “No.”

His features were severe as another finger joined the first. Until his eyes twinkled with steam. “So anyone can walk in on you getting finger fucked by me?”

Her hips jumped at the words. To think she’d spent so many years afraid of someone discovering this part of her and had literally shut down her entire life to try and smother the erotic abandon in her blood. But now, with the threat of exposure never higher, she was aroused beyond words.

“Yes,” she moaned, writhing on his fingers. His thumb came up to rub the sensitive bud of her clitoris, the pressure and motion exactly what she needed to drive her wild.

“And you love that, don’t you? The idea of everyone watching you take my fingers up your tight cunt. Brings you down to my level, doesn’t it?” He unbuckled his belt and popped the button of his jeans, the sound of the zipper descending heightening her anticipation. But then he stopped abruptly. “Fuck me,” he said under his breath.

An ironic smile curled her lips. “Yes, that’s the idea.”

Vic didn’t appreciate her attempt at humor. “I don’t have a condom.”

“Oh.” She lifted her upper body and shifted her weight onto her elbows. “I don’t either. But I, um...I mean, I have an IUD.”

He didn’t respond, only stared at her reservedly.

She took a few seconds. “I got tested after my last relationship. And obviously, that was a while ago,” she said lamely. “So all good here. Although I guess we should have talked about this before.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I guess we should have. Should have talked about a lot of things.”

She closed her eyes briefly, recognizing the hidden meaning and hating that he’d felt the need to hold on to his

secrets.

“I was tested after my last partner,” Vic said after an agonizing pause. “And there hasn’t been anyone since you.”

“I’m okay with it if you are,” she whispered. “But I understand if you don’t want to risk it.”

Those brilliant blue eyes of his flared with hunger, and before she knew it, he freed his stiff arousal from the confines of his jeans and entered her. His hips drove deep, pulling a moan from her heaving chest.

She broke eye contact to turn her head and glance toward the door, shuddering at how she enjoyed such recklessness. Her security unit was outside, not to mention any random person on the street. If the windows of the office weren’t frosted, anyone would have been able to see their fevered coupling.

“Your kind are down here all the time, you know. Hiring me to follow their cheating spouses.” His mouth hovered by her free ear as he pounded into her, and she was reminded of that first night at the Quinn Theatre, when she had envisioned him in this exact position over her, whispering wonderful filth. “Imagine it. Some good ol’ boy who went to your fancy prep school walks in. Maybe he even had a crush on you and asked you to dance at prom, but you were just too pretty and unattainable. But now he sees what you really needed. To be fucked raw by some downtown lowlife.”

Her lower muscles fluttered at the lewd scenario. And yet, an alarm sounded faintly in the inner recesses of her mind. She couldn’t pinpoint why, but a portentous sensation momentarily pushed through the carnal cloud she was lost in. Because while his words were no different than anything they had already shared, so much had changed in the last twenty-four hours.

She almost pinched him, but then Vic leaned down to bestow a heartbreakingly delicate kiss before whispering, “My sweet girl.” The featherlight touch—especially when coupled with his sweet talk and ruthless thrusts— was the epitome of him. And whatever funny feeling she’d just encountered was soon long gone.

“What would you do?” he ground out, returning to the fantasy. “What would you say to him?”

“Nothing,” she panted. “I’d beg you to fuck me harder.”

That shattered what was left of his self-control. He jerked her legs up to rest over his shoulders, and the air left her lungs at the new angle.

“You need it that bad, huh?”

“I need *you*. Please, please, please,” she chanted. Her hand came between her thighs, knowing that a few caresses of her clit would send her over the edge.

“That’s it. I want to feel it. Come over every inch of this cock,” he demanded.

Dragging his thick length in and out of her heat, she was helpless as tremors and shakes engulfed her body. Stars burst behind her eyelids as she rode wave after wave of pleasure, his bawdy encouragement like a distant, dirty symphony in her ear.

She collapsed onto the desk in exhaustion until Vic hauled her into his arms and moved them to the chair, with him still hard as steel inside her. He sat and positioned her body so she languidly straddled him. It allowed him to slowly push up into her core, permitting her some rest.

With her head resting in the crook of his neck, emotion overtook her. “I love you,” she whispered against his blazing skin.

He stilled. It was proof he had heard her. She didn’t expect a reply, and seconds passed without one. But despite his silence, she felt lighter, the admission freeing. She lifted her head to look at him, a crooked smile splitting her face when she witnessed the man with a plethora of racy words in his arsenal bereft of speech.

She started to move her body, intending to ride him in earnest. “You told me you were going to ruin this pussy last night.”

He snapped out of the daze he'd been in, and his hands gripped her bottom. "I did."

She shrugged one shoulder and bit her lip, intentionally provoking him. "Then what are you waiting for?"

Vic slapped her ass suddenly. "Spoiled little brat."

A throaty laugh escaped her. "You love it."

His motions stalled again, and she held her breath. But then he rasped out, "I love how I'm going to fill up this rich pussy and send you back uptown well fucked and filthy."

She shuddered, and his large hands cradled her face with possession. As he pounded up into her, she met his rhythm, determined to give as good as she got. His grasp on her was grueling, and it only became more frantic as he neared his peak. Then that sound filled her ears, the intoxicating rumbling growl that made her toes curl. As his lower body bucked, and he emptied himself within her, she gasped faintly at the heat of his seed, the sensation unknown territory for her.

He leaned his forehead against hers, their sweat blending. Several blissful minutes passed as their heavy breathing regulated, then he picked her up once again. He placed her on the edge of the desk and tucked his softening cock back into his jeans.

"Wait here," he told her.

Georgie nodded in a blissful daze. He walked over to the bathroom and returned with a damp paper towel, which he used to clean between her legs gently. Then he tossed it into the nearby wastebasket and collected her clothes.

"Oh, I can—"

Vic shook his head once to silence her. "Just let me, okay?"

"Okay," she whispered.

And then, with deliberate care, he dressed her. He helped her slip on her sweatpants, clasped the bra behind her, and pulled the sweater over her head. He even kneeled to tie the

laces of her snow boots. He looked like a knight or some type of ancient warrior kneeling before her.

“You love the way I fuck you,” he said flatly.

“What?”

“You love the way I fuck you,” he repeated. “You don’t love me.”

A piercing chill permeated through her. “Yes, I do,” she insisted in the most assertive voice she could muster.

Aggravation flashed across his face as he stood. “Georgie, get serious. We’ve had a good time, but let’s not pretend this is more than what it is.”

“And what is this?”

He shrugged, the motion callous. “You got a bit of the rough stuff like you always wanted. And I got to dip my wick in the city’s princess.”

By this point, she was no stranger to his harsh words and phrases. But this was different. This wasn’t meant to titillate and tease. It was meant to hurt. And that realization gutted her.

“Don’t do that,” she said. “Don’t take what we have and turn it into something crass.”

“If the shoe fits,” he muttered.

Georgie tried to collect her jumbled thoughts and strained emotions as he retrieved his shirt. He pulled it over his head, and she wanted to rip the piece of cotton off his body again. She wanted to lay her head on his chest and listen to his heart, the thuds sure to calm her, just as they had in the past.

“This is about last night. Because I left. Vic, you must know I regret that. My father had been shot. I wasn’t thinking straight. I was barely thinking at all.”

“It’s not about that.”

“Then what is it about?”

He sat down behind his desk and rested his elbows on his thighs. “I don’t feel good about myself when I’m with you.”

That statement felt like the ground collapsing under her feet. “Oh,” she heard herself say.

Silence materialized like smoke, effectively suffocating her. She waited for him to say more, to take it back, or to do anything. But he just sat and breathed in and out slowly while she struggled to gulp in air.

“Did I, um...” Georgie paused and swallowed down the pain, determined to keep the tears at bay for as long as possible. “Was there something I did? Or something I said... that made you feel...?”

“No.”

“Is this about how we speak to each other when we’re—”

“You mean how you’ve been using me to ease your guilt? How my vulgarity and the way I talk to you makes you feel a little better about how you were handed everything in life?”

Stricken with dread, she stammered out a reply. “That’s not...I mean, maybe at first...but we talked through that?”

“Yeah, we talked. But it doesn’t change the truth of it. This is fun for you. Forbidden, right? You get to stick it to your father, your family, and everyone you grew up with. But when push comes to shove, you’re still a part of that world. You get to have your little rebellious period and play around in my brutish reality before you retreat to your money.”

“That’s not all this is,” she said weakly. “But we can stop—we can stop with all the dirty talk if it makes you uncomfortable.”

“It’s not just that. It’s you. You and that goddamn apartment and the stench of Spaulding covering you, even if you wish it weren’t. And that—” He sucked in a jarring breath and gritted out, “And that fucking hair of yours.”

The tears she’d tried so hard to resist now streamed down her cheeks. “You’re really going to do this? After we”—she gestured to the desk and then to the space between them, the space that had only grown in the past few minutes—“After I let you...”

Vic at least had the decency to hang his head with shame. “None of that should have happened.”

She’d experienced breakups before, the awkwardness and the angst, but this was a death blow. Quickly, she grabbed her jacket and purse, desperate to leave so she could cry her heart out in peace. She hurried into the main office space, beelining for the door.

He followed her. “Hold on a second. Let me get you a cab.”

“No,” she said firmly, turning around to face him.

Concern was etched on his face, but he shut it down the second she spun and confronted him, replacing that worry with indifference. And a swift storm of anger consumed her. How could he throw them away so easily when it was clear he cared for her?

Georgie was far from perfect; she could readily admit that. She thought about all the ways she could have done better but didn’t. She thought of her lavish apartment, obscenely excessive for only her. She thought about how she had retreated from public life to protect herself instead of standing up for what was right. There were so many times she had defaulted to cowardice.

But when she gazed at Vic, she knew she had been brave when it came to him. They had forged a connection the moment he’d saved her, and she hadn’t been afraid to pursue it. She’d opened her life after keeping it closed away for so many years. And in doing so, she’d found a man who complemented her perfectly. It went beyond the physical, despite Vic wanting to boil their connection down to nothing more than something lascivious. While there was sexual harmony, he also took care of her heart and soul.

Until this moment.

Her chin trembled with grief. No matter what she did, that man would never be able to look past her last name, the stupid title of the city’s princess, or the wealth and power she had

over him. And Georgie would give all that up instantly if it meant they could be together.

She wiped the tears from her cheeks and raised her chin as haughtily as she could muster. If he'd only ever viewed her as uptown royalty, then damn him to hell. She'd be just that.

"I don't require your assistance," she said.

His jaw clenched, and his gaze traveled down to her feet, the supercilious command having the effect she desired.

"I'll have my security unit drive me uptown," Georgie told him. "Well fucked and filthy. Ruined. Isn't that right?"

His eyes jolted back up to hers, his mouth agape. She watched as he inhaled, on the verge of replying, but she turned her back to him and left the office, the chime of the bell and the quiet snick of the closing door haunting her the entire ride home.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



The rest of January unfolded as January is wont to do. It was cold and dark and depressing, with no holidays to celebrate and the promise of spring still so far off. But despite the frigidity of winter, simmering tensions lingered beneath Moon City. Between the capture of Marshall McDevitt, the unsolved shooting of Mayor Spaulding, and the promise of more chaos on the horizon, the city once again felt close to a breaking point.

Georgie tried to continue her regular routine through the gloom of heartbreak. She didn't reach out to Vic, and he didn't reach out to her, although Lex texted the morning after the breakup.

My brother is a moron! You wanna grab a drink and bitch about men together?

Georgie smiled softly when she read the message, touched that Lex still wanted to be her friend. But her heart was a little too broken, and she didn't think spending time with said heartbreaker's little sister would help. So she told Lex she was feeling under the weather and suggested they meet up toward the end of the month. She hoped that by that time, their friendship would fizzle out completely.

Although solitude had long been par for the course for her, now that she had experienced a taste of true attachments, the absence of those relationships left her bereft. Her enormous and empty apartment felt cavernous and only added to her depression. Anxious for something to occupy her time, she

decided to move on. From her apartment, that is. It was time to downsize and find somewhere more suitable.

As she researched realtors over a glass of red wine one night, a news notification came through. The reward for information regarding her father's shooting had been increased, the zeros appearing to go on forever.

She thought about the security detail downstairs. The idea of them standing sentry for the rest of her life unsettled her. It was no way to live. That's when a foolhardy idea struck her.

Rummaging in her purse, she found Samson's business card buried at the bottom beneath a packet of gum and a handful of tampons. She called the cell number listed.

"Samson," came his curt answer.

"Hi. It's Georgie."

She heard him let out a long breath. "How are you doing?"

"How long you got?"

He laughed heartily, and they fell into easy conversation. She learned he had been transferred from Major Crimes to the Missing Persons Unit. Her father clearly didn't think a suspension was enough of a punishment, although Samson was just appreciative that he was still a detective and hadn't been relegated back to patrol.

"If I ask you for a favor, how much trouble will you get in?" Georgie asked.

"Depends on the favor."

"I'd like to meet with Marshall McDevitt."

Samson guffawed. "You're determined to get me fired, huh?"



CRATER ISLAND, LOCATED IN THE BAY SOUTH OF THE CITY, WAS considered hell on earth. Home to Moon City's main prison complex, its reputation for violence and neglect was legendary. The facility held pretrial defendants who were later transferred to the maximum-security penitentiary upstate following conviction. The only way to access the island was via ferry, and many a man had frozen to death in the arctic waters in an attempt to escape the brutality.

When she contacted the warden directly, requesting a meeting with McDevitt, Georgie lied and claimed she'd received his contact information from her father. The city bureaucrats knew better than to question Mayor Spaulding, making it easy for her to be deceitful. She wasn't about to get Samson—the one who actually provided the warden's cell number—in trouble for a second time.

She knew it was a long shot, so when she received the message that McDevitt was willing to meet with her, she could hardly believe it. Her security detail nearly blew a gasket when she told them they'd be traveling to the southernmost tip of South Section, where the ferry to Crater Island docked. But she was persistent with her plans to meet with the man who tried to kill her.

The ferry ride lasted forty minutes. Although there was an enclosed area where visitors and prisoners alike could take refuge from the weather, Georgie stood outside and let the frigid air whip her face as they journeyed to the island.

Crater Island did not host high-profile visitors like her often. The entire facility appeared to be in a tizzy when she walked through the sterile, cinderblock hallways. The warden personally led her to a visiting area with her security unit bringing up the rear. The room was small and bleak, with flickering fluorescent lights and depressing gray shadows painting the space.

She sat at a table and didn't have to wait long. Marshall McDevitt entered, handcuffed and escorted by a prison guard. He settled into the seat across from her, the cuffs jangling against the top of the table, and she studied him intently. His pale skin was sallow since his mug shot had circulated

through the press. But she still had this niggling feeling that she'd met him before.

“Thank you for meeting me, Mr. McDevitt.”

He gave her a droll glance. “Might as well call me Marshall at this point.”

Incredibly, Georgie nearly laughed. “Marshall it is then.”

“What’s this about?”

“I want you to call off your dogs,” she said in a low voice, mindful of the eyes and ears around them.

He had a hell of a poker face. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Listen, I’m not here to try and trick you or get you to confess to something. I can’t say I enjoy living with a constant threat on my shoulders, but it’s easy for someone like me to say that violence is never the answer when I can take refuge in a multimillion-dollar apartment.”

Marshall leaned back and considered her. But he did not speak.

“And I don’t want to minimize the desperation so many people feel. My father is a problem, and there’s no denying that. But he’s also a symptom of a larger problem. There are dozens of men like him, so it doesn’t begin or end with him. The dilemma is that you risk martyring him. Trust me, he already essentially views himself as such,” she added bleakly.

By now, she realized that Marshall would remain tight-lipped. She didn’t blame him in the slightest, as it was the safest plan of action for him. But he was listening to her closely.

“The rot of Moon City runs deep, and I don’t have a solution to fix it. I’m sure I’ve been part of the problem,” she acknowledged. “But all I know is I will do everything in my power to ensure this is my father’s last term in office. Because I love this city, despite its flaws. Maybe even because of them. And I haven’t done enough to try and save it because I’ve been too wrapped up in my own problems.”

She idly tugged at the strands of her hair as Marshall breathed in deeply, another slight indication that perhaps she was reaching him.

“That’s why I’m asking you to back down. Not because I care what happens to my father or even what happens to me. But because I don’t know if this city can handle any more turmoil. This place will break your heart again and again. But it can only do that if you love it. And that’s why, as much as I don’t enjoy getting shot at, having to worry if every random person on the street is out to get me, or being babysat by a security team, I can understand why you did what you did. Because you love this city, too, don’t you?”

He stared at her for a long time. Then under his breath, he asked, “Are we done here?”

She nodded. If nothing else, at least he listened to what she had to say. And seeing him in person felt like the closest thing to closure she could get. If only she could figure out why he looked so familiar.

Marshall rubbed one bushy eyebrow with his index finger, and a flash of memory flickered in her mind, a man in a long serving line doing the same simple movement.

“You used to come to Prince Street,” she said, gobsmacked.

A gentle smile curled his mouth. “You remember.”

Georgie had interacted with hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of people at the Prince Street Soup Kitchen. Faces blurred together over the years. But somehow, she remembered him. They’d been linked long before he tried to kill her.

“Went through a rough time a few years ago,” Marshall recounted. “Lost my job, lost my home. The soup kitchen was a real refuge.”

Some unknown force compelled her to ask the next question. “Where did you work?”

“I was a copy editor at the *Whisper Wire*.”

Unable to believe her ears, she hunched over with sorrow, placing her face in her hands. Here was living proof that her actions, her words, had consequences. The chain of events that brought them both to this moment had started so many years ago.

She peered at him through her fingers with penitent eyes. His countenance was still expressionless, and Georgie couldn't glean whether he knew the true circumstances of the *Whisper Wire's* demise. But regardless of whether or not he knew, she now fully fathomed that isolating herself from the world wasn't the answer. Try as she might, she couldn't completely eliminate the possibility of affecting others or of others affecting her. All she could do was try her best and learn and live with the best intentions.

"I'm sorry that you..." Her throat was tight, and she found herself unable to finish.

"Yeah," Marshall mumbled with a tilt of his head. "I'm sorry too."

Both had much to be sorry for. And while she knew this wasn't over, an odd sense of peace soothed her.

Marshall rose to his feet, and the prison guard approached, signaling they were finished. The guard clasped Marshall's arm and pulled him back toward the door. But before he was once again dragged into hell, Marshall turned back to Georgie.

"I see the moon, and the moon sees me," Marshall said, his delivery akin to a political proclamation.

She'd heard the nursery rhyme often enough to know the next line. And as Marshall stared at her, his expression teeming with an unspoken message, Georgie understood that this was of great consequence, even if she didn't understand why.

"God bless the moon, and God bless me," she finished.

Marshall bowed his head, an acknowledgment that she'd passed some sort of test. And then he was gone.

A short time later, she stood on the ferry as it prepared to disembark and return to the city proper. Minutes before the

scheduled departure time, the warden exited the prison. Georgie watched as a guard opened the outer perimeter gate, and the warden hurriedly walked down the path that led to the dock.

“Ms. Spaulding,” the warden called, waving his arm to get her attention. “I just called your father’s office to let him know you were on your way back. And to let them know we took good care of you. But no one at City Hall had any idea what I was talking about.”

She cocked her head in mock confusion. “Really? How odd.” The ferry began pushing away from the dock, and she waved. “So long, Warden!”

She pulled out her phone and made a call, moving to the next step of her plan.

“Hi, it’s Georgie. I’m good, thanks. I wanted to see when I might be able to swing by your office? I need your help with something.”



ALTHOUGH IT WAS A SATURDAY AFTERNOON, SEVERAL *MOON City Chronicle* reporters typed away at their computers as Georgie strode through the maze of cubicles. Finally, she reached her destination and lightly knocked on the side of Nicole’s partition.

“You found me,” Nicole remarked with a tiny smile. Her hair was loose, a heap of sable curls falling around her face. She perched her glasses on top of her head.

Georgie pointed to a chair nestled beside Nicole’s desk. “Mind if I sit?”

“By all means.” Nicole leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs as Georgie took a seat. “How’s your father?”

“You’d have to ask him. We’re not exactly speaking at the moment.” She gestured to the computer. “What are you

working on?”

“Luther Markus hosted a dinner last night to raise funds for the philharmonic,” Nicole said, grasping the computer mouse to save the document. “Typical high society philanthropy event. Your brother and his wife were there.”

“Fun, fun,” Georgie said in a sardonic tone, and Nicole chuckled. “Look, I just wanted to say thank you again. For not, um...not reporting on my relationship with Vic. I’ve been so skittish when it comes to the press. I practically shut down my entire social life because I was petrified of something personal being reported.”

“No need to thank me. I told you things were off the record. But I expect to get the exclusive scoop whenever you two are ready to make things official.”

Georgie grimaced. “Sorry to say you won’t get the chance. Vic and I...well, we didn’t work out,” she said with a shrug meant to convey indifference, but instead, it made her look pitiful.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Nicole murmured sincerely. Thankfully, she didn’t push and ask for more details. “But is that why you came? To say thank you?”

“I’ve written an op-ed. And I’m here to ask for your help.”

Nicole raised an eyebrow. “I’m intrigued. Do you need me to proof it?”

“Not exactly. I need to get it published.”

“Seeing as there’s a portrait of your ancestor in the lobby of this building, I don’t think you need little old me to put you in touch with the right people here.”

“That’s exactly the reason why I need your help. Because the topic of this piece will never make it past the editor in chief here. But...I thought you might be able to put me in touch with someone at the *Satellite*?”

Mischief spread over Nicole’s face. “Oh, it would be my pleasure.”



IT HAD BEEN A GOOD LONG WHILE SINCE VIC HAD GOTTEN INTO a physical altercation that wasn't a result of his profession, but the smarmy man at the end of the bar at O'Leary's tried him on the wrong day. He was already on edge, as it was Thursday night, and all he could think about was Georgie sitting up at Mulligan's. And how, despite his decision to break things off, he still wished he was beside her and holding her hand under the table.

But instead, Rhett was to his left, and Vic had chugged one too many glasses of cheap scotch. The man started badgering him, clearly looking for a confrontation. After a snide comment comparing him to a Neanderthal, Vic replied with a remark about the man's mother, which he knew the second he said it was completely out of line. The man swung and missed, then came at Vic again until Vic's own fist collided with the man's face.

If he was going to be called a Neanderthal, he may as well act like one.

Clearly, he was not handling things well.

The bouncer broke things up before the fight could escalate further, then kicked both men out of the bar. Rhett took it upon himself to escort Vic home. Already drunk, he attempted to wander into another dive bar on the walk back, but Rhett steered him away like a mother guiding a misbehaving toddler.

After stumbling up several flights of stairs, he handed his keys over to Rhett, who unlocked his apartment door.

"Get inside, you fucking Neanderthal," Rhett groaned, pushing him through the open door.

Vic burst into drunken laughter and tottered through the apartment before collapsing on the bed. He closed his eyes, his vision starting to fuzz. He heard Rhett meandering around in

the kitchen, the sound of keys hitting the counter and the fridge opening.

“What are you still doing here?” he yelled out, even though Rhett was a few feet away and could hear him fine.

“Getting your sorry ass some water because you’re gonna feel like shit tomorrow.” Rhett walked over and placed a glass on the window ledge next to the bed. Then he glanced down at his friend pitifully. “Took you long enough to break.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’ve been miserable for weeks, bottling shit up. Pretending like everything was normal—like you didn’t care. It was only a matter of time before you cracked.”

He opened one eye to glare. “You a shrink now?”

“I’m the next best thing. A friend who gives a damn about you. Now drink some water.”

Vic sat up and grabbed the glass, chugging the water quickly. Rhett moved to get him a refill as he laid back down on the mattress, knowing a raging hangover was certain to greet him in the morning.

“You want to talk about it?” Rhett asked as he returned the glass of water to the ledge and sat down on the couch.

“Not particularly.”

The silence stretched, but Rhett remained on the couch as if he knew that eventually, Vic would burst open like a dam.

“Of all the women in this godforsaken city,” he murmured. “Why did it have to be her?”

Rhett tossed him a glance of sympathy. “Why did you break things off?”

Vic fidgeted on the mattress, a futile attempt to get into a comfortable position. “You mean besides the fact that we’re completely wrong for each other?”

“Says who?”

He was too drunk to debate this effectively, so he clumsily said, “Whatever, man. You know the one thing I bought her? A hot dog. A fucking hot dog.”

“I bet Georgie doesn’t give a damn about money or hot dogs or your stupid masculine pride.”

“I care,” he whispered. He’d spent so many years falling short in multiple ways. He didn’t want to do that with her, not with another person he loved.

“For shit’s sake, Vic. You literally saved her life. I think that’s worth more than all the money in the world.” Rhett shrugged and stood. “But if you’re able to live the rest of your life knowing you threw away a good thing because of your own insecurity, then no skin off my ass.”

“Her uncle murdered my parents,” he bellowed. “And her father made sure his scumbag of a brother got to walk free!”

“So, in addition to blaming her for the wealth she was born into, you’re also gonna blame her for the actions of her family members?”

“What, you some sort of apologist for the rotten rich of this city now?”

A dangerous look came over Rhett’s normally carefree face. “I lost my entire career because of blue-blooded bastards,” he said harshly. “So don’t fucking go there.”

Realizing he’d overstepped, had inadvertently referred to a part of Rhett’s past he still wasn’t privy to, Vic’s boiling temper fizzled. “Rhett...I’m sorry...”

His friend held up a hand to silence him. “Just listen to me. And hopefully, you’ll remember this in the morning. You’ve been able to put aside your pride and your past, at least to some extent. Because you spent weeks with Georgie. And sure, at first glance, it looks like the two of you wouldn’t have anything in common. Or that she would be some elitist spoiled brat.” Rhett stared at Vic with an unusual intensity. “But I saw you both on New Year’s Eve. And you two make sense, despite all the reasons to the contrary.”

Vic leaned his head against the wall behind him. He closed his eyes as he took Rhett's words in, the alcohol and wisdom swirling around his muddled head. "When did you become so wise?" he asked.

Rhett heaved a long-suffering sigh. "You're not the only one with hidden depths, dude."

He laughed and started to slink back down, sleep imminent. He heard Rhett move toward the door and opened his eyes to watch him go.

Before leaving the apartment, Rhett turned back. "Sometimes life is hard to bear, especially in this city. I imagine loving someone makes it a little easier." He paused and then said, "And for what it's worth? I think your parents would've loved her."



BRUTALLY HUNGOVER, VIC TRUDGED THROUGH THE DOOR OF Cannon Investigations with his head down. He grunted a greeting to Lex and Rhett and headed straight to the coffee pot. He poured what was left and chugged the tepid liquid before moving to his desk.

His senses tingled in awareness that both Lex and Rhett stared at him. He powered up his computer and checked his voicemail. After he hung up the phone, his sister slithered over to his office door.

She smiled sheepishly. "You look great. Read the paper this morning?"

Vic murmured a prayer for strength before answering. "I didn't have time to pick up a copy of the *Chronicle*. I was too busy trying not to barf in a trashcan on my way here."

Rhett appeared behind Lex, a newspaper tucked under his arm. "Not the *Chronicle*." He tossed the paper onto Vic's desk. "The *Satellite*."

Georgie's dazzling face stared back at him from the front page. A rush of panic overtook him, an immediate assumption something terrible had befallen her until he read the headline accompanying the picture.

A LETTER FROM THE CITY'S PRINCESS

He blinked, dumbfounded, and looked up at Lex and Rhett. "What is this?"

"It's a hell of an article, is what it is," Lex said with a smile. Then she and Rhett backed away, allowing him to absorb the article in privacy.

Some of you know me as the city's princess or as the daughter of Caroline and Mayor Henry Spaulding. My whole life has been defined by that last name. There are only a select few who know me as Georgie.

I was nearly killed in early December of last year. An event like that truly alters the course of someone's life. However, over the past few years, I didn't have much of a life at all. I went to work, took barre classes, volunteered, and watched a bunch of television. My decision to pull back from public life was a direct result of a betrayal by a friend who fed parts of my private life to the press. It can be debilitating to have an entire city watching your every move, scrutinizing your choices, when all the while, you wonder why anyone even cares. I did nothing more than be born into the "right" family and have never done anything to deserve interest or adulation.

All that being said, I recognize that (attempted murder notwithstanding) these problems of mine are not the be-all and end-all. What is also debilitating is the level of suffering in this city. I understand why people feel hopeless, how they've reached a depth of such agonizing desperation that they'd turn to violence to try and shock change into a system that works against them.

My self-imposed isolation was an easy choice. It allowed me to pull away from the things that mattered, to stay silent when I could have used my platform as a public figure—whether I wanted that recognition or not—to support what is right and condemn what is wrong.

That is why I'm using this opportunity to call on my father to resign from his position as mayor of Moon City.

He won't, of course. He'll claim it's because he doesn't adhere to the demands of terrorists or criminals. But it's because he doesn't believe he should resign at all. He thinks this position of power is owed to him simply by virtue of his last name. What happened on Election Day proved that he's not interested in the people's will. He's only interested in what suits him and those like him.

Should my father decide to run for reelection yet again in a few years' time, I will do everything in my power to make his defeat a reality. I will actively support and campaign for his opponent. However, I am not looking to advocate for just anyone. While there is no such thing as a perfect candidate, we need someone who can step up to the plate and be a champion for both North Section and South Section. I won't settle for anything less.

Princesses sit in towers, locked away from the rest of the world. But I'm a proud citizen of Moon City. The moon is a beacon of light within the darkness. And darkness has surrounded this city for a long time, but I have to believe in the return of light.

Vic lost count of how many times he read the article and how frequently he gawked at Georgie's beautiful face throughout the day. The shock of the op-ed meant his head didn't cease pounding, and his hangover didn't subside until nearly three in the afternoon.

A few minutes before six, he heard Lex bustling around at her desk, preparing to leave for the weekend. She pulled a pair of sky-high ankle boots out of a tote bag. He watched as she removed her flat boots and switched shoes.

"Going to Esther's for dinner?" he asked. Lex shook her head but didn't elaborate, so he followed up with, "Drinks with Marcy then?"

She avoided his gaze. "She and I are meeting Georgie at a cocktail lounge uptown."

The battering within his skull returned at the simple mention of her name. “Oh.”

Lex pulled a compact mirror and tube of lipstick out of her bag. She painted her lips a dark plum color, and he observed his sister, annoyed that her usual chatty self wasn't divulging more information.

“I didn't realize you two were still friends,” he commented lightly.

Lex shrugged. “She took a bit of time to herself. Had to wallow, I expect. But it would be a shame to end our friendship just because my brother is a moron.”

Vic couldn't exactly argue with that. “Did you know she was writing the article?”

“Nope.” Lex tossed the lipstick and compact mirror back into her purse. “She texted earlier in the week, said she'd have something to celebrate on Friday and wanted to see if Marcy and I were free for drinks. But she kept mum on the details.”

“So it's just the three of you tonight?” His brain was already imagining the swarms of men a group of women like them were sure to attract. The thought of some smug suit flirting with Georgie made his gut twist.

“Plus someone named Nicole. I think she helped Georgie with the article.”

He racked his brain. The only Nicole he recalled was the *Chronicle* reporter from the Spaulding holiday party. He hadn't spoken to Georgie in nearly a month, so it was possible she'd become close with this woman during their time apart. It was odd she would bond with a reporter, given her history, but Georgie had always been braver than him. Even with everything she had been through, she had been more willing to open herself up, to take a chance on someone—even an emotionally stunted bastard like himself.

He had to take after her and start letting people in.

“Lex, I have to tell you something,” he said carefully. “About something I did when...not long after Mom and Dad died—”

“Oh, for the love,” Lex groaned as she stood and grabbed her jacket. Her eyes went heavenward with exasperation. “Is this about the blackmail?”

He sputtered in surprise. “You know?”

His sister cut him a look. “Victor Francis, I know everything.”

Vic wanted to interrogate her, find out how she’d put the pieces together, but instead, he had to laugh. Years and years of secrecy and shame, and all for naught. It served him right.

“Love you, Alexandra Rose.”

“I love you, too, you big grump.” Lex crossed her eyes at him and departed.

While he might have made some emotional progress in the past few minutes, the absence of a true foundation had never felt so shattering as when Lex left the office. It was Friday night, and he had nothing to do. He nearly entertained the idea of joining Rhett on his stakeout but knew his friend would bust his balls for voluntarily working when he didn’t have to.

The copy of the *Satellite* remained on his desk, buried under a stack of folders. He grasped the paper and studied the photo of Georgie for what felt like the hundredth time, contemplating the ramifications of what she’d done.

Such an explosive article undoubtedly created a line in the sand. She had denounced her father and, as such, the rest of her family. She’d publicly turned her back on the world she’d been raised within. The world Vic had used as an excuse to justify their inherent wrongness for each other.

And here he was. Alone, sitting in the chair where she’d whispered that she loved him a few weeks ago. He thought about her cries of pleasure and how he’d callously turned them into tears of despair with his cruel words. But now the office’s silence was deafening.

And it hit him that, as much as he yearned for Georgie, he wished for more than that. He wished for *anyone*. The detached existence he’d insisted on since losing his parents hadn’t protected his heart. It had hardened it. Georgie had

chipped away at that fortress but hadn't shattered it completely.

Because he was the only one who could do that. It wasn't her responsibility to save him.

And then, like a flash of lightning in the storm that was his life, he knew where he was supposed to be. He grabbed his jacket, locked up the office, and stepped out to the brisk streets of South Section.

He arrived at his destination in record time. The lock on the front door of the building was busted, so he slipped through and walked up three flights of stairs until he reached the correct apartment. Vic took a deep breath, recalled his parents' laughter, and knocked on the door.

Esther Goldberg answered, her face glowing with delight. "Vic! What a wonderful surprise."

"I know, I should have called," he sputtered, embarrassed at his hasty action and terrible manners. "If you've already started dinner, I can leave—"

"No, no, not at all," she assured him. She ushered him inside the apartment and closed the door. "You made it just in time."

A flash of panic engulfed him when he realized he'd arrived empty-handed. "I screwed this up. I forgot to bring something. You're supposed to bring something, right? Wine or—?"

"Victor." Esther's voice sounded so much like his mother's sharpened tone when he used to act up. Then she softened and took hold of his hand. "No need to bring anything. I'm glad you're here."

One of the twins scurried into the foyer, jaw hanging in shock. "It's Vic," he yelled, turning back to call out to his brother. "Asher, Vic is here!"

"Hey, bud," he said as Adam crowded him. The preteen bounced with excitement as his identical twin barreled down the hallway, skidding to a quick halt. Vic smiled down at both, shocked at how much they'd grown. Both had been at

basketball practice when he dropped off Hanukkah gifts in December, so it had been over a year since he'd last seen them.

“Is it true you saved Georgina Spaulding?” Asher asked.

“We told our friends at school that we knew you, but they didn't believe us,” Adam added.

“Can we take a picture?”

“That way, we can prove it.”

“Oh, Vic, do you play basketball?”

“I made a sick three-pointer during our last game.”

“Boys,” Esther called, raising her voice above the commotion. “Why don't we give Vic a second to breathe? Asher, you take his coat. Adam, you grab an extra place setting and bring it to the table. My brother and sister-in-law are also here,” Esther told Vic.

Asher proudly took his jacket and hung it in the nearby closet. Adam hastened off to the kitchen to grab a plate and utensils. Esther beckoned him further into the apartment and made introductions. Even though he'd bungled things by arriving without a gift, let alone any warning of his actual attendance, he felt welcomed.

As the candles were lit and the prayers were recited, wisps of memories overcame him. His mother preparing shrimp scampi for his birthday every year. His father clapping his shoulder with pride before he went off to boot camp. All four members of the Cannon family decorating their Christmas tree, little Lex sitting on their father's shoulders to place the angel at the top.

And in the home of another family, one he'd resisted so long for fear of further grief, the stronghold around his heart finally crumbled completely.

CHAPTER TWENTY



Georgie intended to live life to the fullest on the Friday night her op-ed was published, as she knew a shitstorm would follow in the days to come. She invited Lex, Marcy, and Nicole for drinks at a cocktail lounge not far from her apartment, determined to enjoy herself and not fall back into her old pattern of isolation. But as she bid her time at the office, waiting for the workday to end, the first bout of the shitstorm arrived.

The two men from her security detail approached her desk wearing their typical humorless expressions. The taller of the pair stepped forward to address her. “Ms. Spaulding, as a courtesy, we wanted to inform you that we’re no longer tasked with ensuring your safety as of today.”

Georgie looked away from the spreadsheet on her monitor. “I’m sorry?”

The two men shared a look before the second one spoke. “Only members of the Spaulding family are entitled to a police-issued security detail.”

She almost laughed. Because there was that detestable word she had forever opposed—*entitled*. And yet, she understood the message that had, no doubt, come straight from her father.

She was no longer part of the family.

“Well,” Georgie breathed with a defeated shrug. “Thank you for your hard work.”

The men silently acknowledged her gratitude with sharp nods and turned to leave. But before they left her office, Georgie couldn't help but be petty.

“Gentlemen?” she called after them. They turned back, and she pinned them with a stare intended to incite shame—should they have any. “You shouldn't have snitched to my father.”

The taller man's jaw twitched, and the second one's lips pinched with embarrassment. Georgie threw them a haughty smirk before they exited because it was what they deserved.

Mere minutes later, her cell phone chimed with a message. Georgie thought twice about reading it when she saw the sender was her mother. But she steeled herself and opened the text.

I wish you hadn't done this.

Disappointment choked her as she read the short communication. Although she was no stranger to her mother's way of things, Georgie had secretly craved more. Contrary to all reason and logic, she had hoped her mother or grandmother might follow her lead.

Just as she was about to toss her phone into her purse, a second text from her mother came through.

But I still love you.

Her eyes pricked with tears. It wasn't all she needed, but it was something. Georgie replied with **I love you too** and sent the message off, leaving it at that. She could do nothing more than hope and wait for the moment when her mother might gather the strength to abscond from the life she let rule over her conscience.

Once the workday was over, Georgie had never been so happy to reunite with friends. She'd never been so happy to *have* friends. The girls had a rip-roaring time, drinking champagne well into the night. Marcy went home with a suit she met at the bar, forever searching for her true love. Georgie, Lex, and Nicole made a post-midnight stop at the closest pizzeria. They brought a large pizza back to Georgie's

apartment and devoured every slice while sitting on the floor of her living room.

Nicole passed out on the couch around two in the morning. Instead of waking her newest friend, Georgie removed her shoes and draped a blanket over her before insisting Lex also spend the night. They trotted to her bedroom, and she pulled an extra nightshirt out of her dresser for Lex.

“I always wind up hammered when I’m at your apartment,” Lex joked, wiggling out of her tight jeans.

“I know, I know. I’m a rotten influence,” Georgie laughed, changing into her own pajamas.

They hauled themselves into her bed and burrowed beneath the comforter. Lex burped under her breath, which caused both to burst into delirious, drunken giggles. Then the laughter dissolved, and silence took over.

“I have to tell you something.”

“Oh, I love confessing secrets in the dark,” Lex quipped.

“I lied to you. The first time you were here—the mimosa day. I lied to you about a few little things. I do that sometimes. As a test.”

Lex hummed with understanding. “You wanted to see if I’d go to the gossip rags.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Come on, G. Nothing to apologize for. I understand.”

“Not just for that. I never...” She inhaled a jittery breath. “Your brother told me everything. About your parents, my uncle, the crash. I’m so sorry, I should have known—”

Lex calmed her down with some soothing words and said, “You and me, we’re good. I never blamed you, okay? Although I wish my brother could say the same,” she added as a bitter afterthought.

Georgie could barely make out anything in the darkness, but Lex took her hand.

“He misses you, you know,” Lex murmured.

She closed her eyes before tears threatened to engulf them. “It was his decision.”

“I know, but he’s dumb.”

Lex said it so simply that Georgie released a short laugh. But the sound quickly morphed into a sob, and Lex moved to wrap her arms around her. She’d shed so many tears over the past few weeks, she was right sick of crying. But at least this time, she had a friend to hold her.



ALL THREE WOMEN WOKE WITH MINOR CHAMPAGNE HEADACHES the next morning. They headed to the nearby diner to grab breakfast and consume ungodly amounts of coffee. The Greasy Spoon was one of the few unassuming restaurants in North Section that hadn’t fallen victim to exorbitant rent prices. They waited ten minutes for a table and then begged the waitress to keep the caffeine coming.

“Did you hear from Marcy?” Nicole asked with a nod to Lex.

Lex pulled out her phone. “She texted an hour ago. She said—and I quote—‘Oh my God, I’m in love. He is amazing’ with four exclamation points,” Lex said, reading from the text message. “So naturally, I asked if the sex was good, and she replied with ‘we didn’t even bone, we just snuggled and cuddled all night. He is so romantic.’ Two exclamation points.”

Nicole snorted into her coffee as the waitress returned to take their orders. The young woman stared at Georgie as if trying to place her. Once the waitress moved to the next table, Georgie pulled the hoodie of her sweatshirt up to cover her hair.

“Anything from your family, Georgie?” Nicole asked delicately.

She sighed and leaned back in the booth. “My father canceled my security unit. You might have noticed how we weren’t trailed by a pair of sullen-faced men last night. Before they left, they said a nice comment about how only members of the Spaulding family are entitled to security. I’m sure that’s just the first strike. I imagine dear old Dad will plan some way to discredit me publicly.”

“You think he’d do that?” Lex asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I wouldn’t put anything past my father.”

“At least you know the *Satellite* will be on your side,” Nicole pointed out. “They’re one publication that will never mind giving your father hell.”

“Yeah, and you have us,” Lex added, holding her knife and fork in a mock-threatening pose.

Georgie grinned. “Thanks again for helping me, Nicole. I promise to keep your involvement tight-lipped. I don’t want you getting any blowback at work.”

Nicole waved off her thanks. “I know I seem like a tight ass, but I’m secretly a hellion. This crusade was perfect for me. But what about your job? Did you tell your boss about the article before it went to print?”

“I did. I’m still worried we might take a hit with fundraising. Some of our biggest donors are people in my father’s pocket. I hope they don’t tighten their purse strings just because I work there.”

“Well, if it comes to that, I’m sure the *Satellite* would love to write an exposé,” Nicole said with a wink. “And perhaps I can work it into my own reporting. Not all press is good press, contrary to popular belief.”

They continued chatting until the waitress returned a short time later with their breakfast. All three dug into the food, grateful for sustenance.

“Nicole, did you hear Samson was transferred to the Missing Persons Unit?” Georgie asked.

“I did.” Nicole shook hot sauce on her eggs and said, “He gave me the heads up after it happened.”

“I feel terrible. First, I got the man suspended, then he was practically demoted.”

“How’s his incompetency your fault?” Lex scoffed. Georgie quickly explained the story of her blunder, but it didn’t appear to change Lex’s viewpoint. She shrugged and coldly said, “Whatever. He’s still a cop.”

Nicole chuckled. “Woof, your South Section just jumped out.”

“You know it.”

That prompted them to compare their backgrounds, as they both hailed from downtown. They were a few years apart and grew up in different areas of South Section, but they eventually found a connection. Nicole’s second cousin was dating Lex’s ex-boyfriend from high school. And Lex’s ex was a DJ who’d made a name for himself in the city’s nightclubs where Nicole’s cousin moonlighted as a go-go dancer.

“We should go out to Celestial one night,” Lex suggested, referring to the hottest nightclub in the city. “All four of us. Because last night was a total blast.”

Georgie couldn’t agree more. “Next week?”

Nicole raised her cup in agreement. “Done and done.”

The waitress popped over to replenish their mugs with steaming coffee. Then she lingered by the table awkwardly until finally blurting out, “Are you Georgina Spaulding?”

“Oh. Um, yes,” Georgie answered, bracing for a confrontation.

“I read your article in the *Satellite*,” the waitress whispered. “Are you serious about advocating for a challenger to your father?”

Her eyebrows raised. That wasn’t what she had anticipated. But she nodded and said, “Yes, I am serious. Very serious.”

The waitress looked around before replying. “My aunt was the chancellor of the Department of Education for a short time. Eleanor Cartwright?”

“The one my father appointed last year.” Georgie quickly recalled the circumstances of the chancellor’s appointment and hasty removal. After years of deserved criticism around appointing chancellors with no experience in the public school system of Moon City, her father had selected Eleanor Cartwright to quell the disapproval. The woman was a South Section resident who had dedicated her life to education. She was fierce, tough, and not afraid to rock the boat. Naturally, she’d lasted mere months.

“Her goal is to run for mayor one day,” the waitress continued, keeping her eyes on the rest of the restaurant. “But she has an uphill climb compared to candidates who already have their pockets lined.”

“Lucky for her, my pockets are also lined,” Georgie said with a quirk of a smile. “Let me get your number.”

After proper introductions with the waitress, Angela, Georgie got her contact information and made tentative plans to meet with her and her aunt the following week.

She settled back into her seat and finished the last bites of her breakfast sandwich when Lex’s phone chirped with a message. Glancing at the screen, Lex shook with laughter.

“What is it?” Nicole asked.

The phone was passed over to Georgie and Nicole, who huddled their heads together to read the text from Marcy: **I retract my last statement, we just boned. 6.5/10 with room for improvement.**

All three roared with laughter at the message. As Angela returned to clear their plates, Georgie noticed that she hadn’t thought of Vic in hours. A future without him still stung her heart, but it was clear she was capable of healing. She had a dependable group of girlfriends for the first time in her life, a job she loved, and a major goal that would no doubt keep her

busy over the next several years. Heartache, as debilitating as it could be, would eventually fade.

Later that evening, after her hangover had fully subsided, Georgie headed downtown for her shift at the Prince Street Soup Kitchen. As she diligently scooped bowls of hearty chili, she watched a young girl move through the serving line, declining each course and offer of food. Upon reaching Georgie, the girl presented an innocuous envelope instead of taking the chili.

The young woman didn't look a day over eighteen, her rich brown skin radiating youth. She smiled softly at Georgie's uneasy glance toward the envelope. "I see the moon, and the moon sees me," she said.

Chills overwhelmed Georgie at the reemergence of the nursery rhyme. She took the missive and replied, "God bless the moon, and God bless me."

The mysterious girl bowed her head subtly before turning on her heel. Then she was out the door so quickly that Georgie questioned whether she had imagined the whole interaction.

But proof of what had taken place was in her hand. She pocketed the message and waited to open it until all the volunteers were finished serving. There were no markings on the envelope, no return address or postage. Her hands shook as she broke the seal and read the letter, which was typed instead of hand-written. Air rushed from her lungs in relief.

I enjoyed your op-ed. Now it's time for you to put your money where your mouth is. We won't wait forever. MM.



THE FACT THAT FEBRUARY'S FUNDRAISER FOR TWO Battlegrounds was mere days before Valentine's Day didn't help Vic's nervous tension. Seeing as they were sponsors, albeit in an unofficial capacity, all three members of Cannon Investigations planned to attend the event and spend an

evening hobnobbing with Moon City's high society. And he would see Georgie for the first time in weeks.

In the time since her op-ed hit the papers, he had wanted to reach out to tell her how proud he was of her. But more than that, he'd wanted to apologize for how he'd acted and tell her how he'd been such a goddamn fool to let her go. But no moment ever felt like the right one, especially not when he was still trying to get his shit together.

Esther chuckled at him one evening after dinner when he'd had enough wine to confess he was still struggling to locate his spine when it came to Georgie.

"If you wait to win her back until after you have it all together, you'll be waiting until you take your last breath," Esther said with a seasoned smile. "Nobody has their shit together. Don't let that stop you from living."

The night of the fundraiser, the trio changed into their finery at the office and rode the Luna uptown, arriving at seven in the evening. The reception was in a penthouse event space on the east side of North Section and was decorated in shades of red and pink, leaning heavily into the upcoming holiday. Circular high-top tables with crisp white linens and elegant centerpieces of white and red roses were placed around the room. The floor-to-ceiling windows showcased a spectacular view of the city.

He was reminded of the view from Georgie's apartment. But so much reminded him of her. Every time he saw a flash of red from a piece of decor, his heart leaped with the possibility that it might be her hair. That hair he had hated for so long now felt like his salvation.

True to form, they all headed directly for the bar lining the back wall of the penthouse. With a glass of scotch in hand, Vic glanced around at the guests. It was still early in the night, but a decent number of people had already arrived. As much as he investigated the crowd, he couldn't find Georgie.

Waiters with passed hors d'oeuvres traveled from cluster to cluster of guests. After posting up at a cocktail table, Lex

made eyes at the waiters, always passionate about finger foods.

“Look at us,” she joked, raising her glass of champagne. “Back at it again with these fancy ass parties. Ooh, shrimp,” she squealed as another server approached.

From across the room, Vic made eye contact with Daryl, who signaled he’d come over to chat shortly. He finished up a conversation with a group of guests and headed to their table, arm outstretched for handshakes.

“The new logo looks great,” Daryl said, nodding to the step and repeat banner that showcased the emblems of all sponsors. “We should get a photo of the three of you before the night is over.”

Lex bounced up and down and elbowed Rhett in the ribs. “I’ve always wanted to pose in front of one of those things.”

“Eat your shrimp and give my ribs a break,” Rhett bemoaned.

“We also have a reporter from the *Chronicle* here. I’m sure he’d love to get a quote from you, Vic, seeing as you were the unintentional star of our last event,” Daryl said carefully.

“Lex has always been the better conversationalist. I’ll leave that to her.”

“Nicole Silva isn’t covering this event, is she?” Lex asked Daryl.

“Apparently, some prima ballerina from across the pond has her Moon City debut tonight,” Daryl said. “I imagine Ms. Silva is covering that.”

Lex’s focus was compromised when a waiter bypassed their table. “Oh, shit, are those deviled eggs?” she asked before quickly chasing after them. Rhett tagged along with a laugh.

Alone with Daryl, Vic sipped his beverage and itched to ask where Georgie was. Before he could, Daryl read his mind and said, “She’s not here.”

He winced, not surprised but still hurt. There went his chance to approach her naturally and not make a big deal out of the whole thing. Now he'd have to show up at Orchid Place and beg the doorman to let him up to her apartment. Or he'd have to call her on the phone, perish the thought.

"She didn't want to see me," he assumed regretfully. He swallowed another gulp of scotch, relishing the burn moving down his throat. It was what he deserved.

Daryl shook his head. "I told her to take the evening off. I didn't want bad memories to cause any setbacks for her."

"Of course," he breathed, realizing how any loud noise or sudden movement at this event could have brought the trauma of the shooting roaring back to her.

"I have a few more people to greet, but I hope you have a good time tonight," Daryl said, clinking their glasses. "But if you're not enjoying yourself, Georgie's at the Prince Street Soup Kitchen." Then he winked and walked off.

Vic finished his drink and clanked the crystalware on the table as Lex and Rhett returned. "I'm taking off," he told them.

"But we just got here," Lex complained, her mouth stuffed with a deviled egg. "And we didn't take a photo yet."

"Fine, we can take the damn photo, and then I'm out of here." He gestured for both to follow him to the step and repeat. As they made their way across the party, Lex checked her teeth using the compact mirror stashed in her purse.

"Why are you leaving?" Rhett asked.

"Because Georgie isn't here."

Lex scoffed. "I could have told you she wasn't coming."

He turned back to glare at her. "And why didn't you?"

"Because I knew you wouldn't come if I did," his sister quipped with a smug smile.

A few other guests were waiting for a chance in front of the display, so the three of them lingered off to the side. Lex

fluffed her hair and practiced a few poses.

“Vic, if you’re just gonna leave and be sad and miserable alone at your apartment, don’t do it, man,” Rhett pleaded.

“I’m not. Daryl told me Georgie’s volunteering downtown, so that’s where I’m heading. I’m going to...” He trailed off with the realization that he had no clue what to say and had no actual plan as to how to try to win her back.

“Grovel?” Lex supplied.

“Beg for forgiveness?” added Rhett.

Vic scowled, which, naturally, Lex and Rhett found terribly amusing. Finally, it was their time to shine for the professional photographer. They walked in front of the backdrop, Lex in the center. She beamed, Rhett smirked, and Vic was stone-faced, as was their way. With the photo complete, they stepped to the side and were greeted by a man holding a small notebook.

“I’m from the *Chronicle*,” he said. “Can I get your names?”

Lex took charge. “This is my brother, Vic Cannon.” The reporter’s eyebrows raised with recognition. “I’m Lex Cannon. And this is Rhett Young. We are the *brilliant* minds behind Cannon Investigations, one of the sponsors of tonight’s event. And we’re all proud South Section residents, born and raised. That’s very important, make sure you write that down,” she instructed, tapping at his notebook.

“And on that note, I’m leaving,” Vic said.

“Good luck,” Rhett said with an encouraging nod.

“Don’t fuck this up,” Lex called after him.

He retrieved his jacket from the coat check attendant, rode the elevator down, and stepped onto the streets. As he descended the stairs to the underground train, he prayed there would be no delays.

Wishful thinking. They made good time until the Luna officially entered South Section. Still two stops away from the Prince Street station, the intercom announced that a police

investigation was underway, and they could expect to be stuck for a while. Groaning, Vic hopped off the train and trekked to the street to walk the rest of the way.

The Prince Street Soup Kitchen was a humble building on the corner of Prince and Walnut Street. Cold and hungry South Section residents who were waiting for their turn at a warm meal formed a line outside. A middle-aged woman with slivers of gray hair manned the door, ensuring the space didn't overflow and become a fire hazard.

Vic approached her and cordially said, "Hello, ma'am. My friend is volunteering tonight. Do you mind if I—?"

"Who's your friend?" the woman asked before he could finish.

"Georgina Spaulding."

The woman's glance sharpened as she took in the suit he wore under his winter coat. Suddenly, he realized that he looked like some North Section swell trying to woo the mayor's daughter. When he could have easily been waiting on this line if he hadn't blackmailed Joshua Spaulding all those years ago.

"Are you the reason our Georgie has been in a sullen mood the last few weeks?" she asked, her delivery suggesting she already knew the answer.

"Guilty as charged," he admitted.

She opened the door with a pointed look. "In you go. And try to make yourself useful while you're here."

He thanked her and stepped inside. The space was larger than it appeared outside, with rows of flimsy tables and fold-up chairs. Dozens of folks sat and ate their dinners with quiet dignity. The line continued along the back of the room and led to the food-serving counter.

And there was Georgie, scooping mashed potatoes onto plates. Vic lingered near the door, content to watch her—drink her in and savor the sight of her. The copper hair that still haunted his dreams was pulled back under a hairnet, and she wore a charming smile as she greeted each person. A laugh

escaped her lips when the volunteer next to her cracked a joke close to her ear.

He stepped forward until he was in her line of sight, and her breath caught when she spotted him. Vic braced himself, praying for eloquence. Because while he'd relied on crass words in the past, he knew that wouldn't cut it. Not this time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Behind the serving counter at the Prince Street Soup Kitchen, Georgie was confident she was hallucinating. Because surely Vic wasn't standing a few feet away from her, decked out once again in that simple but glorious suit. He'd worn it during such substantial occasions—the holiday party and the night he saved her life—and a lump formed in her throat with the thought that another meaningful moment might be forming that very instant.

She, however, looked like a disaster. If the hairnet and apron weren't bad enough, she had changed into baggy jeans and a hoodie before leaving the office earlier in the evening. After gazing at him for several seconds, she closed her mouth and centered her attention on the person in front of her. She scooped mashed potatoes onto another plate with a polite smile as Vic cautiously approached the line.

“Hi, sorry, I—” he sputtered as he ran a hand through his hair. “I thought we could talk, but you're busy. Of course you're busy.”

“We serve until nine,” she told him. “Or until we run out of food.”

“I can wait. Or I can help,” he offered quickly, taking off his overcoat. He moved around the serving line and back into the modest kitchen space.

She looked back to where a group of volunteers were cooking the courses and called, “Hey, Marcus, can you use another set of hands?”

“Always,” Marcus answered. He saw Vic walk toward him in formal clothing, did a double take, but then shrugged. “Set your coat in the office over there. Any objection to chopping carrots?”

“I’ll chop whatever,” Vic replied. He tossed his overcoat and suit jacket into the office space where volunteers stashed their belongings.

“He’s an excellent cook,” Georgie attested when she noticed a few people eye him skeptically, no doubt due to his evening dress.

His gaze latched on to hers, and the look he granted her was a mixture of heat and heart. Then he rolled up the sleeves of his button-down shirt, exposing the corded sinew of his forearms, and she forced herself to look away before she felt faint. Several of her fellow volunteers in the serving line suppressed smiles at the interaction.

“You all better leave me alone,” she muttered. A few snorts and subdued chuckles were her response.

Georgie scooped potatoes diligently until nine in the evening, thankful they had enough food this week to serve everyone who had a need. The group began clean-up, rinsing out the serving trays, platters, and bowls. Once that undertaking was complete, the volunteers collected their jackets and bags.

Vic stood to the side as everyone departed. After removing her apron and hairnet, she slipped on her jacket and approached him, noticing something different about his demeanor. He was still as handsome as she remembered, but it was like some quiet loosening had taken place during their weeks apart and granted him a tentative peace of mind.

“Hi,” she said, keeping her voice strong. “Shouldn’t you be uptown at the penthouse?”

“I left when I heard you weren’t there. Daryl told me where to find you.”

“I wasn’t avoiding you or anything—” she tried to explain, but he cut her off.

“No, no, I know you weren’t. I understand why you skipped it.” He glanced around, a thought occurring. “Where’s your security detail?”

“No longer needed. It’s a long story. But I’m fine.”

Worry was written all over his face. But instead of arguing with her, he nodded. “As long as you’re safe.”

“As safe as I can be. Considering who I am.” She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, proud she had the guts to refer to the elephant in the room.

“I read your op-ed.”

“You and the rest of the city.”

The reply came out more hardhearted than she intended. But she was still hurt; there was no denying that. He took her curt comment in stride, always the strong and silent type. Until Georgie watched with amazement as his calm expression melted into one of urgent passion.

“Fuck it all,” he murmured under his breath. “I’m so sorry. And I miss you, sweetheart.” His voice quaked as if the heartfelt admission was ripped from his throat by force. “And I know my sorry ass has no right to come here to tell you that after how I treated you. Not when I used your family name, your background, and your wealth as excuses for why we shouldn’t be together.”

“None of those things have changed, Vic.”

He took a step forward, but then stopped himself from getting too close, seemingly afraid he’d spook her. “I know that. And I don’t want you to change. You’re perfect the way you are.”

She shook her head. “Don’t. Please don’t make me out to be some sort of saint. Or a princess,” she added as an afterthought.

He conceded with rapid bobs of his head. “No, of course not.” Then he lowered his voice, talking to himself. “You’re perfect the way you are? Cannon, you corny fuck.”

Corny or not, Georgie overheard him and tittered softly, her mirth only growing when she saw his cheeks tint pink.

He gestured helplessly as he worked to articulate. “Some of the things I said...maybe you were using me in the beginning, but I was no better. Hell, I lied to you. I straight up lied because I didn’t want any of this to become real. But it did. It became the realest thing I’ve ever experienced. We were good together,” Vic breathed with a degree of wonder. “Weren’t we?”

“I certainly thought so,” she said, unable to keep a measure of contempt out of her delivery.

“No, I know. You’re right; you’re absolutely right. I pushed you away. I was so goddamn cruel and cowardly, and such a punk. And I—” He stopped short and rubbed his eyes with his palms. “And I’m fucking this up, too, aren’t I? Lex said something about groveling, but I don’t even know what that means.”

She chuckled again but then sobered, as she didn’t want him to think she was laughing at him. “Just speak from your heart.”

His mouth tugged with a smile. “I’m still learning how to do that.”

She met his shaky smile with a reassuring one. “You’re doing well so far.”

Vic paused, and she waited patiently, watching him compose his thoughts before speaking. “It’s hard to believe that happily ever after can exist down here, you know? The closest I ever saw of it was my parents, but...well, you know how that ended.”

The depth of his pain washed over her. And even she felt cheated out of the opportunity to have met his parents, to see him prepare Christmas dinner alongside his mother, to listen to his father recount tales of Vic’s childhood.

“So I figured it was safer to destroy something that made me happy before it was destroyed all on its own,” he said. “Because that seemed like the only logical conclusion for a

guy like me. And at least I could feel like I had some control over things, some semblance of power. It was as if I thought I could rule over the pain. But I've already lost so much. And I don't want to lose you too. I'll endure all the heartache, all the grief in the world, to spend one more day with you. Or however many days you'll give me," he whispered.

His ardent monologue had yanked her heart into her throat. But before Georgie launched herself into his arms, she realized she'd been absently twisting a lock of hair around her fingers. And that summoned a flash of a painful memory from weeks prior.

Her hand swiftly fell to the side as she blurted out, "I'm not changing my hair."

Vic's mouth gaped. "You—what?"

"I'm not changing my hair. I'm not dying it or cutting it or anything. I know you hate it, but—"

Growing pale, he shook his head. "No, no, no. Jesus Christ, no." He pressed his hands together as if in prayer and exhaled. "I don't want you to do anything to your hair. That was my hang-up. Because of...well, I think that's probably obvious at this point."

"It is," she confirmed quietly. While she had been able to create a public split with her family, her red mane would forever showcase that she was still a Spaulding.

He stepped forward and gently clasped her palm with his. "I don't hate it. I love your hair," he murmured.

Sparks traveled from their joined hands, up her arm, and straight to her foolish heart. That same foolish heart wished he'd confess his love for *her*. But love was terrifying, the ultimate leap of faith. And it was clear that Vic wasn't ready to jump just yet.

If nothing else, she found gratification in the fact that he'd sought her out to begin again. They could rebuild things slowly, with her family officially out of her life, and his heart a little less guarded.

Before she could speak, the lights were shut off, pulling them out of the intimate moment. “We should get going,” she said, sending Marcus an apologetic look.

Vic nodded, still holding her hand. “I’ll help you catch a cab.”

They moved through the door and lingered on the sidewalk as Marcus locked up the building. Vic glanced up and down the block, searching for a taxi, although she often called a car service when she volunteered. But if calling a car meant spending the night without him, that was the last thing she wanted.

“Can I come home with you?” she tentatively asked.

“You can,” he answered just as cautiously. “Although I don’t mind going to your place if you prefer.”

“Honestly, my place is a mess. There are boxes all over the place. I’m moving next weekend.”

“Why are you moving?”

“Because that apartment, as nice as it was, was excessive. I didn’t need all that space. I found a nice spot further downtown, closer to my office.” She snuck a look at him and said, “I hope you’ll like it.”

“I’ll like anywhere you are.”

Her heart hopped into a hopeful pitter-patter as he wrapped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her to his side. They walked down the street, with Vic keeping his eyes sharp for any unsavoriness.

“Do you mind taking the Luna?” he asked. “We can walk, but it’s a bit of a hike.”

She agreed with a nod, giddy to do another normal and mundane thing with him. They entered the closest station, and the train arrived a few minutes later. The ride was quick and easy. With her hair covered by her hat, and the general mind-your-own-business attitude folks entertained while riding the Luna, no one paid them any mind.

When they reached his apartment, Georgie noticed the same tabby cat relaxing in the building's lobby. The kitty meowed at Vic, who meowed back. She, however, glanced at the feline warily. But this time it didn't hiss at her when she followed Vic up the stairs.

Inside his apartment, they shed their coats and boots. Vic placed his suit jacket in the closet and tossed the tie onto the dresser. "Want a beer?" he asked.

"I'd love one."

Two bottles were cracked open, and they parked themselves on the couch. Conversation unfurled naturally as she updated him on all that had happened over the past few weeks. The visit to Marshall McDevitt—which provoked a protective reaction from him as he growled and then pulled her into his lap—the op-ed, finding her new apartment, and meeting with Eleanor Cartwright, who was an impressive candidate she hoped would run against her father in the next election cycle.

When she was done, Georgie took a deep breath and laughed with the recognition that she'd completely monopolized the conversation. "Anyway, what's new with you?"

Vic answered by pulling her in for a searing kiss. She sighed and opened to him, lips and heart and all. He tilted her head to claim her mouth with profound passion, his tongue stroking against hers eagerly. Georgie could have wept with the awareness that he now kissed her exactly as she wanted him to—as if she belonged to him and he belonged to her, and he knew it, accepted it, and would never think anything differently.

She shifted her position to straddle his lap, their clothing—way too much clothing, as far as she was concerned—rustling against each other. As she squirmed to remove her hoodie, Vic stopped her and pulled away from the kiss, stroking his thumb across her glassy lips.

"In the interest of healthy communication, maybe we should discuss—" he began, but she cut in.

“If you want to discuss the physical, nothing has changed for me. As long as you’re still...comfortable with those dynamics.”

He stared at her with enough adoration to make her head spin. Then he murmured, “I am. Because you’re still you. And I’m still me. Right?”

Nodding, she ran one hand across the black stubble on his chin and cheeks. “And we’re still us.”

“Yeah,” he agreed softly. “We’re still us.”

“I’m glad that’s settled. Because I definitely want you to growl every dirty fantasy to me and fuck me so hard my legs turn to jelly. I want to scream so loudly that everyone in this city hears.”

He laughed and said, “You’ve got a filthy mouth on you for such a proper princess.” Then he picked her up and tossed her onto his bed.

She giggled heartily, bouncing on the mattress. “I learned from the best.”

Vic smirked and stepped to his dresser, pulling a condom out from the top drawer. It was heartwarming that he wasn’t presumptuous enough to assume they’d neglect protection simply because they’d done it once before.

“We don’t have to—” she started, but then stopped herself when a stomach-dropping thought occurred. It had been weeks, and he very easily could have been with someone else in their time apart.

Her shift in mood didn’t escape him. “What is it?”

“I was going to say we don’t have to use one, but it’s been weeks, and we weren’t together, so I certainly wouldn’t expect you to—that is, I understand if—”

He moved onto the bed, crawling closer until he cradled her face. “I did not so much as look at another woman. You’ve ruined me. Know that, okay?”

Jubilation jumped over her skin and seeped into her soul. While it wasn’t a declaration of love, knowing she’d affected

him as profoundly as he'd changed her was the proof she needed to fully place her trust in him again.

Georgie smiled and then tossed the condom packet up in the air like confetti, earning a gruff laugh from him. Their clothes were banished to the furthest recesses of his apartment, and he moved to bear down on her, sinking into the slickness of her cleft with care. But she immediately clenched her inner muscles around him as a signal not to hold back, not to be silent, and to give her everything she craved—to let them be them.

He licked his thumb and brought it to stroke over her swollen clit once he reached the hilt. “Tight and wet, and just as good as I remember.”

The deep baritone of his voice, paired with his rocking hips, weaved heat through her body. Her breasts bounced back and forth as she took stroke after stroke, and his attention locked on the motion as he growled shamelessly. She pinched her sensitive nipples between her fingers, loving how his face contorted with lust as he watched.

He leaned down to take one hard tip in his mouth, sucking like a madman. And when he pulled away, she received her greatest wish.

“I love you.”

If she weren't already lying down and accepting his energetic thrusts, a feather could have knocked her over. “Really?” she wheezed between moans.

“Yes, fucking really,” he gritted out, and she could have laughed at his exasperated expression.

She keened and arched her back in response to his unwavering pace. “I thought—when you didn't say it before, at the soup kitchen, I thought—”

“I've always done my best talking while fucking you senseless.”

Laughing between whimpers, she flailed her arms forward to latch around his neck and drew him down to pepper his mouth with wild kisses. “I love you too. So much. But I'm

going to need you to say it out of bed too. To be sure you're serious."

He howled with laughter and said, "Don't worry, sweetheart. You won't hear the end of it."

Moving together in a carnal rhythm, the pressure in her core mounted and coiled. Everything about this moment was perfect—how they still held on to the dynamic they'd first established so many weeks ago, but now true love entwined with every racy word he uttered. She soon came apart beneath him, her brain and body firing on all cylinders. The pleasure was so great she could barely register the filthy praise falling from his mouth as he followed her into ecstasy.

Both utterly spent, they laid beside each other, trying to catch their breath. She was about to place her head on his chest and cuddle in close when his stomach growled with hunger.

"Pizza?" she chirped after a laugh.

When he turned his head to stare at her blankly for a split second, she nearly crumpled with worry. But then his face stretched into a smile. "Pizza it is. Let me grab the menu."

After she quickly used the restroom, he got her a T-shirt to lounge in and threw on a pair of sweatpants himself. They split the cost of a large pizza, which arrived quickly, and popped open more beer. And as they enjoyed the late-night meal lazily on his couch, her long legs draped across his lap, Vic caught her up on his own activities during their time apart.

"Dinner is on Friday at sundown," he said, after explaining the connection to Esther Goldberg and her twin boys. "If you want to come?"

"Oh, I'd love nothing more. But you think they'll be okay with me, considering everything?"

He squeezed her thigh reassuringly. "Esther never told the boys who the perpetrator was. Maybe one day she will. But she doesn't hold the same grudge I did. She'd be happy to have you."

She felt relieved knowing she wouldn't have to answer for the crimes of her family, although Georgie was determined to

figure out how to atone in her own, productive way. And, at the very least, meeting the Goldberg family was another step in the right direction. “I’m happy to hear that. Then yes, let’s join on Friday.”

Eventually, they cleared dinner away, and the conversation turned to a different topic. “I’m pretty private, as you know,” she said. “And even though I’ve torpedoed my relationship with my family, I’m still a Spaulding. People are going to—”

“Talk about us.” He nodded, linking his fingers through hers. “I know.”

“I’ve become close with Nicole Silva. I don’t know if you remember her? Anyway, she writes for the *Chronicle* and can help control the narrative as much as possible. And I’m sure the *Satellite* won’t give us any grief. But I can’t guarantee that the tabloids or gossip blogs will do the same.”

He caressed her cheekbone with his free hand, the motion a divine whisper. “We’ll handle it. I trust us to handle it.” He leaned in and kissed the tip of her nose. “Love you, sweetheart.”

And with those words, Georgie nuzzled close to his chest and knew he was right. They would handle it.

That night, she listened to the sounds of the metropolis outside the window, her heart filled to the brim with love for him, her stomach fluttering with the knowledge that he loved her in return, and she considered her other love—her love for this maddening, beautiful, messy, exhilarating city. The place that had beat her down and isolated her, only to rebuild her, stronger and more resilient. The place that brought Vic into her life, in a terrifying and life-altering experience. The place where archaic rules dictated people’s paths.

And there was the path all believed Moon City would continue to take. The road to ruin. An avenue of more hopelessness, more suffering, more of the rich getting richer, and the poor getting poorer. But as she laid in Vic’s arms, Georgie took comfort in how she’d diverged to a different road than the one crafted for her. And as she drifted off to sleep

next to the man she loved, she dreamed of a time—whenever it might be—when Moon City would do the same.

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