

NOTHING
to declare

SCARLETT FINN

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To declare
SCARLETT FINN

Also by Scarlett Finn

ROMANTIC SUSPENSE

GO NOVELS

GO WITH IT
GO IT ALONE
GO ALL OUT
GO ALL IN
GO FULL CIRCLE

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ONLY YOURS

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RUIN HIM

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SCARRED
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TO DIE FOR HONOR
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GETTING TRICKY
THIRTEEN
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SLEIGHT MISTAKE

CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE

NOTHING TO...

NOTHING TO HIDE
NOTHING TO LOSE
NOTHING TO DECLARE
NOTHING TO US

LOST & FOUND

LOST
FOUND

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NOTHING TO...

Nothing to Hide

Nothing to Lose

Nothing in Between: One

Nothing to Declare

Nothing to Us

Nothing to Say

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Nothing In Between: One

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Hell yeah!

Was it worth it?

Damn right.

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ONE

If there was one thing Merci Moore sucked at, it was knowing when to stop. Everyone else knew that point. That place where they should stop talking. Moving. Drinking. Breathing.

It was the only way to rein herself in. To stop breathing. Moving. Everything all at once

“I disagree,” she said again, aware her colleagues were aghast at her gall.

Yep, that was her. All gall and no game. Seriously? Had she just disagreed with the multibillionaire CEO of Reid Conglomerates International? Yeah, that would be Matteo Reid, the guy who'd been building his business for twenty years, and probably knew what he was doing.

“Excuse me?”

Yet, in spite of that, she continued. “You stated if your bid is ultimately successful, it would lead to improved work environment and income for employees. Taking over somewhere like Gramercy, there's no way there won't be overlap. To cut costs, and maybe recoup some of the several zillion you'll spend buying Gramercy's assets, there will be job cuts.”

“Redundancies. Perhaps.”

“For us or them? Except if you buy, us will be them. They'll be us. So what you really meant to say was, there will be improved working environment and income for those who survive the cull, right...” His eyes narrowed and his glare sharpened. “Sir?”

Her boss leaned in to whisper in her ear, “And we don't have to look far to know who will be top of that list, do we, Merci?”

Damnit. Damn. Damn. Double damn.

“Merci!”

Did Calista have to screech like that? Those in personnel should understand tact, discretion, right? Hmm, yeah, she was one to talk. Tact was definitely not her specialty.

Supervisors in the HR department got their own offices. Glass-fronted, they ran along one wall next to the open plan office space she and a squad of fifty other grunts worked in.

Some were already gathering their things to leave for the night. If only she'd been quicker off the mark... Except her inbox was overflowing. Somehow, she always got more contacts than the others in her team. How did that work out?

Leaving her desk, she slunk toward Calista's office, hyperaware that everyone else in the space was tracking her progress. Yeah, she'd screwed up. Hardly the first time. Much as she'd like to say it would be the last time, she wasn't that naïve.

Let them watch. She couldn't be fired for telling the truth... could she?

Calista was typing, at the desk, when she crossed the threshold. "Close the door."

Oh, boy, closed door meeting, that wasn't so good.

Doing as told, she licked her lips, bolstering herself for the argument. "Okay, so I know I messed up—"

"I should know better than to put you in the front row."

She went to the desk. "I was right!"

"He's the boss!"

Okay, maybe she had to concede that. "Why invite us to the announcement if he didn't want questions?"

"We were butts in seats for the media," Calista said, shaking her head. "Why don't you get it? Is it that difficult to read between the lines? Everyone else got it."

"I got it, I just... We're the ones on the ground dealing with people. You know who it will fall to when the redundancies start coming down? Us! We'll be the ones offering severance packages. The ones on the aftercare, arranging references, retraining—"

"You think I don't know that? You think *he* doesn't know that? Jesus, Merci, the man built this company from the ground up. He knows how the deal plays out and yes, sometimes that does mean people lose their jobs. Sometimes that does mean

more work for the rest of us. That's business. That's life. You're so goddamn idealistic—"

"I'm honest, there's a difference."

"You just can't help yourself!" Calista declared and pointed to herself. "You get that I'm the boss, right? I'm your superior, this is me disciplining you, and you still can't keep your mouth shut!"

"So I should just stand here quietly and take—"

"Yes! You should just stand there," Calista said, leaning closer, taking a breath. "No, actually, you should stand here and take it, then go upstairs and apologize to the man."

Her eyes widened. "You want me to—"

"Yes! You go upstairs, throw yourself on his mercy, and pray I don't come in tomorrow to an email telling me to fire you."

She shut down her computer.

"This is not as simple as... He won't fire me for this."

"No, he won't, because he doesn't work at our level." Calista stood, bringing her purse from the floor to dump it on the desk. "Remember how we talked about the hierarchy? About those who are more important working higher in the building? Mr. Reid works on the top floor, that's as high as you can get, and we're on the seventh. What does that tell you?"

"That money really can buy anything," she muttered.

"Merci," Calista warned. "You know I don't need his go ahead to let you go right here."

"Fine," she said, holding up both hands. "I'll apologize."

"Now?"

"I have work to do," she said.

Calista pointed at her. "You do not leave this building tonight until you have been up there to tell him you're sorry. Prostrate yourself, I mean it, you want to keep your job? You want to make rent next month?"

"Okay," she said on an impatient exhale, a chill tickling her spine. "You have my word."

TWO

Apologize. She could do that. Damn it. Her boss was right. Just go up to his office, knock, and say sorry. How difficult was that?

Damn, some things sounded easy in theory, practice was a whole different ballgame.

In her HR role, she had access to most areas of the building. Anyone could need her liaison services at any time. That's what she did. Put people together. Resolved disputes. Synergy. That was the key. Everyone part of the same team.

She'd never actually been inside Mr. Reid's office.

She'd walked past it. Been on the executive floor. Quite regularly actually because the office of her executive counterpart worked up there.

Why had she chosen to work so late? Okay, so she knew why. Calista's command was clear... when it was issued a bunch of hours ago. She wasn't to leave the building without prostrating herself to the man she'd insulted. In front of about two hundred witnesses and a squad of business reporters.

Prostrate. Apologize.

Pushing through the door from the stairwell, she stepped onto the executive floor full of gusto, ready to say her piece. Except... She stopped. The lights were low... almost gone. Where was everyone?

Huh.

The silence was eerie. Especially given that the only light emanated from the furthest wall, up the shallow stairs, past the long, daunting desk that served as a reception area dedicated wholly to their CEO. According to RCI folklore, passing the squad of assistants and administrators usually perched there was nigh on impossible. Right then, it was empty. It couldn't be that late, could it?

The whole width of the building was reserved for Matteo Reid's office suite. One corner was his own vast office with smaller conference table and seating area. The other corner was his private, personal boardroom. Lights in the latter were

dimmed, but his office was fully alight. Ablaze like the stage in a theater.

Creeping closer, she snuck around the reception desk, passing the darker conference room to approach his office from the side. The tall glass door was open, but there were people inside. She didn't want to interrupt. Could she knock? It would have to be on the wall, the door hinge was on the other side. Passing would be sort of conspicuous. How many people were in there?

"There are limits."

"This is business, Rei—"

"No, this is personal, Nasir," a woman said.

That last voice wasn't Mr. Reid, so two men and a woman?

"And we need to separate the two," Nasir said. "Massey is essential. We won't win Gramercy without it."

"Who says we'll win Gramercy either way?" the woman asked.

"You've got to be with us, June, external competition is fierce. We can't face it from our own ranks too."

June had to be June McCaskill. VP.

"The true contenders are—"

"This is business," Reid said, she'd know his voice anywhere. "We have to focus on maximizing the potential for success."

"Which means acquiring the Massey asset."

"Damn it," Reid said, almost under his breath.

What was that? Defeat? No. It couldn't be, not Matteo Reid. Fierce. Arrogant. Competitive. Those were words associated with Matteo Reid. Beaten? Incapable? Overcome? No. No one would link those words with the billionaire.

"Look, it's not insurmountable," Nasir said. "We won't be beaten by this. You were engaged to the woman, you've got to know how to turn this to our advantage."

"If you sleep with her, we'll get the Massey asset."

Another male voice. Who was that?

“Pimping me out?”

“Whatever gets the job done,” the unknown male said. “Isn’t that your motto?”

“Fucking her isn’t the problem, Aid,” Reid said. “It’s getting out of her bed after.”

Aid? Aiden Rafferty. Vice President and trusted Reid advisor. The quartet of Matteo Reid, his CFO Nasir Aziz, and VPs June McCaskill and Aiden Rafferty were the real powerhouse behind RCI.

Reid was known for being a tough customer, though she had no personal experience with him... until that afternoon.

“You ended your engagement almost two years ago,” June said. “Primary negotiations with her father were promising.”

“Before Madelyn got involved,” Nasir said. “She’s using this as her chance to get back with you. You were with her a long time, offered her a place here, she never wanted it. She wanted to be your wife, not your partner.”

“Until after the break-up. After you ended it, she wanted to be involved,” June said. “When you wouldn’t let her in here, she started working with her father. Massey Associates is her birthright... It was supposed to be the birthright of your kids.”

“RCI not enough for them?” Reid asked.

“We’re a ruthless bunch, I get that, June,” Nasir said. “Are you suggesting Reid hooks up with her until the deal is in the bag?”

“Would she fall for that?” Aiden asked.

“Her father’s no idiot,” Reid said.

“Would she string him along a few weeks and act like it’s working?” June asked. “Yeah, she’s ruthless herself... But Reid is right, her father’s no idiot...”

“The obvious tactic might just piss him off.”

“And take us out the running for good.”

Someone sucked in a breath. “And we were doing so well,” they said on the exhale.

“How important do you think this is? You’ve put a lot of emphasis on this one small piece of intellectual property.”

“Trust me, it will make a difference to Gramercy,” Reid said. “This takeover, whoever wins the bid, it won’t be about money. It’s ingenuity. Everyone needs something to sweeten the pot. This is my inside track.”

“You’ve known the man a lot of years.”

“Yeah.”

“Have you talked to him about—”

“Madelyn Massey is our agenda tonight,” Reid said. “In good faith, her father has promised to sell a valuable piece of intellectual property to RCI on the proviso we pass inspection.”

“And he says this inspection is supposed to restore his faith in RCI after some notorious hostile and high-profile takeovers?”

“We’re growing exponentially,” June said. “You were almost his son-in-law two years ago. You were golden then, what changed?”

“He dumped her,” Aiden said. “Massey Senior wants to send his daughter to our doorstep for two months, until she’s satisfied she’s seen the truth of RCI. What does shadowing mean in this context? She’ll be up your ass twenty-four seven?”

“You’re right,” Nasir said. “This is her way of rekindling the relationship. She thinks you’ll spend days and nights together. Working together. Socializing. That it will be like the good old days and you’ll end up in bed together again.”

“Which loops us back to, that isn’t going to happen,” Reid said.

“So the question is, how do you reject Madelyn Massey—”

“A proud woman.”

“...without fucking up the deal before it’s had a chance to get off the ground?”

“You need a ringer.”

Was that her voice? Shit, yes, she was in the light, standing inside his office, looking across at them in the seating area. Shit.

Aiden Rafferty was the first one to respond. “Excuse me, are you a—”

“A what?” June asked. “What did you say?”

“A ringer,” Merci said, sucking her lower lip as she stepped forward. “You don’t want to hurt or embarrass Ms. Massey, and you want a chance of making the deal happen.”

“Yes,” Nasir said, peering at her.

“He needs to be involved... with someone else. That way he isn’t rejecting Madelyn exactly, he just has other commitments.”

“Okay,” Nasir said, shaking a finger at her. “I like this, she could be on to something.”

“The elevators are locked down. Where did she come from? Where did you come from?” Aiden asked. “Who are you?”

“She spoke out at this afternoon’s announcement.”

Shit. She winced. That was Reid, his laser focus narrowed on her again. Was it a good thing he recognized her? Probably not.

“And I’m sorry for that,” she said. “I came up here to... to say sorry for that.”

Aiden wasn’t so easily appeased. “And stayed to listen in on a private discussion.”

“Another reason to apologize,” she said, stopping in the middle of the room. “I apologize for that and for today.”

Reid’s attention snapped to Aiden. “Is this possible?”

“It’s more than possible. It’s genius,” he said, sort of impressed and bewildered at the same time. “So fucking simple... it’s...” Getting over his distraction, determination seized him. “A girlfriend is too temporary.”

“Yes,” June said. “She’d expect you to dump a girlfriend for her.”

“Fiancée,” Nasir said.

Reid shook his head. “Maddie knows me.”

“Yeah, so she knows you value your privacy. You’ve kept relationships secret in the past. All of your relationships begin as secrets. You don’t advertise anything about your personal life.”

“No, but she knows I have rules. A set way I do things.”

“You can pull it off for eight weeks. What’s eight weeks? Nothing.”

A tense moment passed. Something hummed between the quartet. An energy. An expectation. She felt it too. They were waiting...

Reid didn’t look at his colleagues, but they watched him. Waiting for a command? For an answer? It was sort of exciting. A buzz anticipating how he might react. Would he go for it or fire her on the spot?

Her eavesdropping had provided blackmail material. Especially if he showed up with a random new fiancée. Funny to think it. Would she ever have the balls to blackmail him... or anyone? No... Not without better reason than a job.

Reid switched to June. “The gem can’t—”

“I’ll take care of it.”

“Good,” he said.

When Reid rose, everyone else did too.

“I love this,” Nasir said, grinning.

Oh, right, uh, what was happening now? Startled by the abrupt shift, she wasn’t quite sure what to do.

Reid took his phone from his inside pocket. “Dinner tomorrow at eight,” he said without responding to his colleague. “Leave your address with my assistant in the morning, she’ll arrange everything.”

Wait. Was he talking to her? Everyone seemed ready to disperse. Was that it? Over? What was...?

“I don’t understand what you... I didn’t mean me.” Everyone stopped. “I can’t do it.”

“Why not?” June asked. “There’s no ring on your finger.”

“No, but—you do it.”

Wearing a smile, June showed her finger. “I am married. Much as my wife loves him, she would object to him in our bed.”

“Look around you,” Aiden said. “We shut this floor down on purpose. Reid values his privacy, especially in his personal life, and Madelyn Massey is a sensitive subject.”

“I can’t... I don’t know anything about him.”

“That’s what dinner is for,” June said. “Sleep on it, you’ll feel better about it in the morning.”

“Bear in mind,” Aiden Rafferty said, “you who was so concerned about job losses this afternoon, if we secure Gramercy with the Massey IP, we guarantee the solvency and expansion of the company for decades. That rests on you pulling this off.”

She sighed and raised her hands to drop them again. “Oh, phooey.”

“Yep,” Nasir said. “Welcome to the inner circle.”

THREE

Engaged to the boss. To a billionaire. Just like that.

It was a dream, right? It wasn't real.

Coming in to work the next day, she anticipated like a banner announcement in the lobby or something. Nothing. Her eyes switched left and right, checking out everyone in the busy space. Did everyone know? Were they all looking at her? No. Huh.

No one commented at the coffee cart.

She thought about going to the deli for a croissant and spotted a couple of people outside whispering. Were they looking at her? Talking about her?

Taking a step that way, they huddled closer to each other. Yeah, they were. What the...?

"Have you got a problem?" she asked of their snickers.

"No," one of them said.

"You're the one that—the woman who snapped back at Reid, aren't you?"

"In yesterday's event?"

Oh. Uh... Hmm. She exhaled. "Yeah, that was me."

Walking away, she headed for the stairwell. No one knew about any engagement. Thank God. Reid must've realized it was a terrible idea. She couldn't stand up to his ex-fiancée, scare her off. What the hell would she and Matteo Reid talk about anyway? What if the fiancée asked something about him? She didn't even know how the guy took his coffee. His assistant knew him better than she did—hell, the coffee cart guy knew him better too.

On the seventh floor, work was easy. Safe. Regular. Routine. People did say their CEO was smart. In that moment, she appreciated his genius. Them? Engaged? No one would buy it.

Relaxed. At ease. Relieved that the nightmare was over, she traversed the corridor to enter her department.

Two steps inside, she stopped. The whole room went quiet. Every single set of eyes landed on her. What the...?

Scanning the room, the reason came on the threshold of Calista's office. June McCaskill, Calista, and another woman stood there. The third woman's face was familiar from the reception outside Reid's office. One of his squad? Assistant? Administrator?

Calista took a step her way. "Merci, I..."

"We need a minute," June said and stepped back to gesture into Calista's office.

Well, shit, maybe he wasn't so smart after all. As if walking to the gallows, her short steps were slow. This had to be the end. Obviously, he'd decided the fake engagement thing was not only a terrible idea, but one that amounted to treason. Okay, so maybe the treason started when she questioned him in the event, but seriously? Couldn't someone have called her? It seemed cruel to drag her in just to fire her in front of an audience.

Even as she went into Calista's office and heard the door close behind her, she could feel the eyes from beyond the glass at her back drinking in the drama.

June went around to sit in Calista's seat. Surprising? For maybe a second. The woman worked on the top floor and probably had an office bigger than their whole department. To get to that level, someone needed a measure of arrogance. Ruthless was the word used the previous night. At least they were honest in their Machiavellianism. Was that a word? Probably better ways to use her brain than wondering about potentially made-up words.

The unknown woman gestured at a chair and sat in the one next to it. Only then did she notice that Calista herself was absent. Wow, this was both barrels.

Merci stayed on her feet. "If you were going to fire me—"

"This is it," June said. "As big as the circle gets. Merci, this is Tara." The unknown woman smiled, clutching a tablet in her lap. "It'll hit the wires in under an hour."

"What will hit the wires?" she asked, licking her dry lips, not that it helped.

“We’ve taken care of briefing your department in the event of press queries. We’ve vetted your social media—”

“I don’t use social media... except Huddle. Everyone uses Huddle.”

June smiled. “Which is one of the things Reid loves about you.”

Was that a joke? The whiplash was dizzying. “You’re talking about the engagement.” The fake engagement. This Tara person was new, what did she know? More importantly, what did her boss know about it. Glancing all around, she was stunned to see Calista out in the bullpen with the masses. “You kicked my boss out of her own office?”

“There are certain things you have to be aware of,” June said, taking on a more serious air. “First of all, you haven’t worn the ring in public because the engagement has been secret until now.”

Tara reached up as though to give her hand a reassuring squeeze. Something hard in Tara’s fingers dug into her, something... Oh, God was that—

“Don’t look at it now,” Tara murmured, wearing a static smile.

“Yeah, you’ve seen it a thousand times already,” June said.

This wasn’t real.

“The box is in the vanity,” Tara said. “In your side of Reid’s closet.”

“His closet,” she said, squeezing the sharp-edged ring in her fist. “This cannot be happening to me.”

“You wouldn’t carry the box around with you,” Tara said. “And he proposed to you at his penthouse.”

“His penthouse,” she whispered.

“Keeps things simple. You haven’t been on any trips together and we can’t provide evidence to the contrary. With your relationship being secret, your dates have taken place in your private homes.”

“In our private homes,” she said, regaining enough of her wits to look at June. “I have never been to his private home and he sure as hell hasn’t been to mine.”

“No one else knows that,” June said. “We’ve checked. You live alone. Your mother’s dead. Your father is married to a woman you don’t like.”

“Where do you get off—”

“You pull this off. We get the asset—”

“Yeah, yeah, everyone keeps their jobs,” she said. “Has anyone even considered what we look like together? How unlikely a couple we make?”

“You don’t have to be attracted to him for this to work. I doubt he’s attracted to you.”

The insult stalled the stream of objections building behind her dam of restraint. “Excuse me? You think I... Okay, I am a catch, whether your boss has a hundred dollars or a hundred billion, there is no excuse for bad manners. If anyone wouldn’t be attracted to anyone in this scenario, it would be me rejecting him. I don’t go for guys more in love with their own bank balance than the people they built their success on.”

June’s nostrils flared a little when she looked to Tara. “Is it too late to back this up?”

The words were amused, not panicked. Still, they gave her pause for concern.

“You know I never said I’d do this,” Merci said. “Yes, I care about everyone’s jobs, but I do not want to compete in some sordid competition for a place in your boss’s bed.”

“He’s your boss too,” June said. “And he says you can keep the ring when this is over.”

“I don’t want the ring,” she said. “I want... I want...”

The VP’s brow arched. “What do you want, Ms. Moore?”

Perfectly reasonable question. Why couldn’t she come up with an answer? She wanted to go back to her life how it had been. Boring. Routine. Normal. But... the acquisition would mean so much to the employees. Winning the Gramercy bid

would bolster fortunes, for those who kept their jobs. In the event of a restructure, what would that mean?

“I want access,” she said, startling June, who probably hadn’t expected her to come up with anything. “To the negotiations. To the meetings, the paperwork, to Reid.” Because this engagement spectacle would be over by the time prospective parties were seating themselves around the Gramercy table. “Someone in those meetings has to be looking out for the people. To see business as more than just numbers on a page.”

“Reid limits—”

“I’m sure he does,” she said. “I have no interest in embarrassing anyone. And, believe it or not, I know that I have a habit of speaking when I shouldn’t. I’m not saying I’ll be in on everything, every second, I just want the ability to say my piece, to have input. Let me look out for the minions. Let me try.”

A few seconds passed before June spoke, “I’ll talk to him. If it’s that or you outing this as a farce, I’m sure he’ll agree.” June stood up, no sign of amusement. “But make no mistake, Ms. Moore, you do not have him over a barrel. You are a last-ditch solution to an impossible dilemma. The business takes priority over everything else. If we have to smear your name, slander you to the press, ruin every person you ever cared about, we will do it. You will not end a victim here. And if sex is Madelyn’s final demand, he will relent. He owes you nothing and will not sacrifice an inch of this company or any negotiations because you shout loud enough. You are an employee. A tool. A means to an end.” Somehow Tara knew their exit was imminent because she stood just before June started around the desk. “And don’t forget this arrangement was your idea. How do you think the press and the minions would feel about you orchestrating and exploiting this for your own gain?”

With a smile, the woman opened the door to depart.

Tara stayed behind. “A car will come to your apartment to pick you up at seven forty-five this evening,” she said and held out the tablet. “You left this at Reid’s last night.” No she didn’t. Reid’s? Yeah. Her fiancé. “Read it. My number’s in there if you need anything. Put the ring on after the news hits. It’ll be about twenty minutes. Keep your head down and ‘no comment’ is your friend, to the press and the public. He’s private. Means you have

to be private about him too. Keep an eye on your calendar, I'll update it later today."

"My calendar?"

"Yes, oh, and..." She opened her hand. "I need the key for your apartment."

"You need—why?"

"We'll need a copy."

"We?"

Her hand dropped. "Mr. Reid has a certain way he likes to do things." He'd said that the previous night. That Madelyn knew he had a set way of doing things. "Do you have something to hide?"

"No," she said, dipping her hand into her purse. "I don't want him rooting around in my stuff."

A smile quirked Tara's lips. "Mr. Reid is incredibly busy. I can assure you he won't touch any of your belongings."

She pulled the key from the bottom of her purse. "That one is spare, you can keep it. But someone's paying to have my locks changed when this is over."

"I think we can handle that."

What was with the smirking? Suddenly, she was hilarious. Yeah, might be easy for others to process this, but she was a step behind. Had this been her idea? Yes. Had she intended to be the sucker lining up to be his decoy? Hell no.

She exhaled, those in the other room were still looking their way. Sound levels rose as Tara departed. People would have questions, but they'd have to get in line.

"Merci?" Calista startled her. "Why didn't you tell me?" Because the last time they'd seen each other, the situation wasn't even on her radar. "That's why you spoke up... He didn't tell you about the announcement."

She winced. "I should just get on with my work." In case she suggested something else crazy and landed herself in another pot of hot water. "It's going to be a day."

“Sure,” Calista said, stepping away from the door. “Okay. Sure.” Work at least should be normal. Did she have appointments? Maybe. Her head rattled. Just as she got to the door, her boss spoke again, “If you want to go home or... upstairs.”

Filling her lungs, it was jarring to realize this was going to be her life for the next eight weeks. “I just want to work.”

Eight weeks. Trailing out of the office, she avoided looking her colleagues in the eyes. What exactly was going to happen when the eight weeks were up?

FOUR

For the rest of the morning, she worked with headphones on. Even when she wasn't transcribing or drafting minutes, she played music or listened to her language tapes. Chances of her learning anything were low, but it saved her from talking to others.

At least until lunch.

A hand landed on her desk so hard and loud that she jumped. Her gaze ascended the arm as she slid off the headset, and, oh, Tonya. Yeah. No surprise.

"We're getting lunch, you coming?"

Tonya and Mariah. Where there was one, the other was never far behind.

"I was just going to work through—"

"Screw that," Tonya said, lunging down to snatch her purse from the floor. "You're screwing the boss. That earns you the right to a long lunch. Come on."

The "plastics" of their department. These two women knew everything that went on in HR and many other areas of the building... At least, they thought they did. Getting a relationship with the boss under their radar wouldn't sit well with the gossip-hounds.

Mariah trotted after Tonya when she turned to stride off. Had her purse been taken prisoner? Kidnapped. Abducted and held for ransom. The cost? Her company.

The ring was in there. Wasn't like she could afford to replace it. If she had a choice, she'd stay put. But those women, Tonya especially, were not shy. Would they search her purse? Did she want to tell Reid's people she'd lost the ring on the very day they gave it to her? Damn it. Wherever the ring went, she had to follow.

Apparently, she was having lunch with the girls.

By the time she got to the deli, Tonya and Mariah had built a posse. More than just the usual HR suspects she'd come across at lunch, there were maybe twenty people congregating in the

corner. How did those people...? Were they there for her? She could try to convince herself they weren't, that there was some other scandal, but there wasn't anything bigger than having a secret relationship with the boss. A secret relationship leading to an engagement.

Yes, she, a regular girl next door, was engaged to a bigshot billionaire. The world was hers. She was Cinderella... according to society anyway.

People sure had a skewed view of the world.

Okay, that didn't save her from facing the posse. Positives? Last time she'd checked, there were just over ten thousand people working in the building. About half of that belonged to RCI directly. The rest was technically leased to RCI affiliates. All the companies belonged to Matteo Reid in one way or another.

So, in the grand scheme of things, what was twenty people? Nothing. No big deal. Maybe if she kept telling herself that, it would become true.

A few yards into the deli, the looks started, the whispering, noise grew. Just keep walking. Breathe and walk.

"Hey! It's the lady of the hour!"

The whoops and cheers were unexpected. Were all these people, most of them strangers, applauding her for being in a relationship? She was being celebrated for letting one specific man into her body. For agreeing when that man asked her to only let him into her body for the rest of her life. Yeah, the situation was weird. It would probably get creepier the longer it went on. Strangers shouldn't care about her life. Though, actually, it wasn't her life they cared about. It was Reid's. Apparently, they were big supporters of the man's romantic life. Her romantic life. Their romantic life.

The oddest part was, of course, they hadn't slept together. They'd never even had a conversation.

Her purse.

On the table.

Something to aim for that didn't require the deconstruction of individual motivations.

“Come and sit down.”

People parted and Tonya slid further along the bench to pat the seat next to her.

Were they besties now? These women were polite, fine, normal colleagues. They talked in passing or at lunch when people were out at the same time, but they hadn't traded numbers and didn't socialize outside work.

As she sat, people closed in around her.

“Spill,” Tonya said, everyone drew nearer. “Is he hot in the sack?”

Laughter went around the group.

“That's your first question, Ton?” Mariah asked.

“We've all thought it. He's hot as hell. That money. The square jaw, brooding thing. Please. You would. I would. Everybody would.”

“She is,” someone said and there was more laughter.

Any chance of a sandwich? They'd asked her to lunch, but no one was eating. Dinner wasn't until eight. That was late. If she wasn't eating at her desk, she liked to eat the minute she got home from work. Well, maybe not the minute. Her routine was to take off her work clothes, get into her jammies and cook something while looking for a Huddle chamber or catching up on work.

Lunch was important. If for no other reason than it was a distraction. Something to keep her mouth occupied. To prevent it from running away with itself.

“Wait, okay, come on, you have to tell us something about him,” Mariah said.

The weight of expectation pressed down on her from all angles. Everyone wanted a piece of her. A piece of him by proxy. Not only was he a stranger, it also wasn't her place to talk about him or dish out private information... if she had any.

That wouldn't satisfy the crowd. Silence wasn't what they wanted. Getting angry or acting offended would just flame the heat of drama people like Tonya and Mariah thrived on. No drama, keep calm... get out of this.

“Okay,” she said, searching for something they might buy.
“One thing about him?”

“Mm hmm.”

“Yeah.”

“He’s not here,” she said and stood up, snatching her purse from the table. “I’m going to grab a salad, I’ll see you upstairs.”

Ignoring their calls of dismay and appeals for her return, she went to buy lunch. If this was going to be her life for the next eight weeks, she’d start brown bagging it for sure.

Upstairs, the skeleton crew left to man phones during lunch luckily weren’t the types to inject themselves into her business.

Thank God.

At her desk, she could find peace. Get herself lost in work. Try to forget what was happening all around her. In a literal and figurative sense. The rollercoaster was barely getting started and already she was nauseous.

But she could handle anything. The whole fake fiancée thing was, after all, her idea. Okay, so she hadn’t been volunteering for the role... It didn’t matter, she was in it now and had to get through it.

First thing was to make sure she couldn’t be dragooned by Tonya or anyone else again. That meant keeping her purse close.

The ring was still in there. Maybe it wasn’t a good idea to leave the diamond just rolling around. Forging some leaves into her mouth, she pulled her purse onto its side to rummage in the internal zip pocket for the ring. There it was. Sparkle, mixed in with the eyeliner and mints, a small fortune. Like it was no big deal. Her keys were in the pocket too and she’d never lost them. Good omen, right?

Concealing the action in the pocket, she connected the ring to her apartment keys, you know, away from prying eyes. When it was about halfway round, something else in her purse caught her attention. The tablet. Did she dare?

Read it. Tara told her to read it.

What did that mean?

With the ring secure, she slipped the tablet out and turned it on. As soon as it powered up, a message flashed on the screen. “*Create password.*” Hmm. Okay. Adding in a password, she was reassured they were security conscious. What did she need to...? A file was already open.

Matteo James Reid. Birthday. City. Parents divorced. Mother remarried. Father deceased. No siblings. Raised in boarding school. First million at sixteen, partnership with Zane Dyce. Investments from Zairn Lomond and Knox Collier. Bought his first company at eighteen.

It was amazing. A full biography of the man she was supposed to marry. Girlfriends. Friends. Scandals. Though, she noted, the scandals were created by those in his life rather than by him.

Madelyn Massey.

They’d been together four years. Engaged for their last year. Only a month before the wedding, he called it off. There were links to media articles throughout. The lack of input from Reid himself was interesting. The press speculated, got quotes from his ex, from her father and siblings, not a word from Reid himself.

Closing the file, she chose to do some searching of her own. Matteo James Reid. The basic facts matched up, but the number of media articles was overwhelming. People liked to talk about him. Especially in the press. It seemed he was catnip to business reporters. The entertainment media often commented on his life too, maybe because of his connection to other high profile business celebrities.

Consuming whatever she could lay eyes on, the department was full by the time she pulled herself out of it. Funny thing was, she still didn’t feel like she knew Matteo Reid any better.

FIVE

Walking into her apartment with her eyes closed and her breath dammed, it was a relief to find everything where she'd left it. How come Tara wanted her key?

She'd deliberately worked late. Yeah, okay, so she worked late a lot. But that night her motive was specific. The longer she worked, the emptier the building became. The fewer people mulling around, the fewer cars in the streets, the less chance she'd draw attention to herself. Not that it was her fault the world of RCI was looking at her. No, that was the fault of the guy on the top floor.

To distract herself from the madness of the day, if it was up to her, she'd probably have kept working most of the night. Wouldn't be the first time she'd used work as a diversion. Or the first time she'd fallen asleep at her desk.

Reminding herself that what she did meant the world to the individuals involved, it was easy to feel justified in putting more of herself into it.

Unfortunately, staying later wasn't an option that night. Though she did lose track of time enough that it was already six after seven when she noticed the time. After running the subway gauntlet, she'd run up the stairs, paused in her anxiety, tiptoed into her apartment and experienced her rush of relief.

Less than twenty minutes to get ready. How much more did she need? None. Stuffing her hair into a shower cap, she washed and brushed her teeth in the shower. Lotion. Deodorant. Makeup took her all of three minutes, she didn't own foundation and stuck to modest eye makeup with a bolder lip.

Earrings.

Necklace.

Clothes? Hmm. What did she wear to dinner with her fake fiancée? They weren't going out, so she didn't have to worry about showing him up by wearing bargain basement rather than designer couture.

Navy bodycon. Yep. That would work.

Shoes? Nude. Maybe. Red... Hmm, she'd have to paint her nails and didn't have time for that. Silver... They would go with her white gold jewelry.

As she slipped her feet into her silvery pumps, there was a knock at the door. Already? Running to her purse, she grabbed the essentials and tossed them into her clutch. Damn, when was the last time she went to this kind of effort for a guy?

Ryan would be the answer to that question. Nope. No way. Not going there.

Rushing to the door, she opened it to a tall man in a suit.

With a smile, he thrust out a hand. "Eamon Elwood," he said. "Just call me Elwood. I'm your driver."

"Okay, let's get on the road," she said.

The fancy Town Car was cool, so clean, and so different to city cabs. She'd seen cars like it gliding through the streets and had never given them much thought. It smelled good in there. Felt good. Not that she'd get used to it. But the novelty was fun. Hey, she had to find positives wherever she could.

Having never given much thought to where Matteo Reid lived, it wasn't a surprise to find out the building was tall, sleek and shiny, even in the Manhattan night.

Elwood opened the car door for her and swept an arm toward the covered entrance. Another guy stood there to open that door for her. Apparently, rich people were unable to open doors. Trotting along, she smiled at the door guy and entered a broad marble lobby.

Fancy.

"Miss Moore," another suited guy said coming toward her.

Was that a suit or a uniform?

"Hello," she said, offering him a handshake.

Was he surprised? She shook hands with people day in, day out, all the time. It was normal business practice. A hug would be entirely inappropriate. After the initial uncertainty, he shook her hand and used the link to guide her deeper into the space.

“I know you’re used to coming in the rear entrance,” he said. No, actually, no rear entrance for her. Did he know that or was he teasing? “Let me show you to Mr. Reid’s private elevator.”

He had his own elevator? Nice!

He started toward the grand triple elevator right in the middle of the space, she didn’t follow. “Where are the stairs?”

The uniformed guy stopped. “Stairs?”

“Yes.”

“You want to use the stairs?” Apparently, this was an odd request. Yeah, it wasn’t the first time she’d got that look. “He lives on the top floor.”

“What is it? Like thirty? Forty floors?”

“Fifty.”

She smiled. “Piece of cake. Show me the way.”

Fifty floors were a trek, sure. To regular folk. Stairs were her friend; they were used to each other. Sure, it took longer to walk up fifty floors, but it was safer. Way safer.

At the top, well, at the floor labeled with a massive 50, the door was propped open a few inches. Good. Security hadn’t been on her mind, but there was a fingerprint reader just by the door. The room beyond was dark. She pushed it open, and the lights flickered on. Motion activated? Billionaires didn’t use light switches either apparently.

Though glancing around, it didn’t take long to realize where she was, even if the room was bigger than her bedroom. Laundry. Belfast sink. Drier. Pants press. Appliances and counters, it was a laundry room. Even the service area of the apartment was impressive. It almost made her reluctant to venture on.

Laughter drew her attention to the door. People. Shit. Okay... Closing in on the closed door, she didn’t want to scare anyone, but couldn’t hide in the laundry room all night.

Opening the door interrupted the laughter. She peeked around it to check who was there. June McCaskill, Nasir Aziz, and Aiden Rafferty, standing on the other side of the long

kitchen island. Damn the place was shiny, how did everything glow like that?

“It was true,” Nasir said. “Wow.”

“Hi,” she said, swerving around the door to close it. “I’m here.”

“Yeah, we got a call from the lobby a couple of days ago,” Aiden said. “You an exercise nut?”

“I have never heard of anyone walking up fifty floors voluntarily,” June said. “That is seriously impressive.”

“Helps with the secret relationship thing,” Nasir said. “There’s no camera on the rear entrance, but one of the lobby cameras does just catch the elevator doors.”

“Do you never use elevators? What about at work?”

“I get a lot of exercise.”

“You’re in HR,” Nasir said. “Your file is an interesting read.”

Despite working in the department, she’d never read her own file. Managers kept the HR employee files under lock and key in their office. The hard copies anyway. The computer files were in a separate drive accessible only to managers... and executives, apparently.

“Did you read the information Tara provided?”

“In the tablet?” she asked. “Some of it at lunch. Matteo Reid’s biography, all available on the internet.”

“We don’t want you doing internet searches.” Too late. “If anyone looks at your search history—”

“Who would look?” she said, glancing around. “I thought I was here to eat.”

“You’re here to strategize, to make sure you understand what’s going on. We can help you. The engagement party—”

“Engagement party?”

“It’s in a couple of weeks,” June said. “Plenty of time.”

Glancing around, she shook her head. “I’m going home to eat.”

Before she'd turned all the way around, they were objecting.

"No, wait—"

"You have to stay!"

"Wait up!"

Looking to them again, she sighed. "I suggested this. I didn't volunteer for the position. I understand we're in it now, and employee job security relies on this, but it's a mess. No one will ever buy it, especially not his ex-fiancée who knows him so well. I can think on my feet, sure, but I'm no actress. What do you expect me to do?"

"Don't think of it as a performance," June said. "Just date him for a few weeks, that's all it is. You're dating a guy, you've done that before, right?"

"Unlike June," Aiden muttered.

"Ignore him," June said, coming around the island to take her hand. "We've been terrible hosts. Here, come and sit down." The VP led her around the island to a stool Nasir pulled out. Her purse was plucked from her hand and put on the counter behind her. "It's a game. Fun. All you have to do is hang out. Enjoy all Reid can provide."

"What he can provide?"

"Sure! You want the tour?"

Maybe later, when she could process. "I'd be uncomfortable with enjoying what he can provide."

"This is the thing..." Aiden said as the three of them got closer. "He's your fiancé. You can't be uncomfortable."

"Yes, everything has to be natural."

With the island at her back, the trio blocked her other sides. "I don't think I can pull it off."

"You're one of us," Aiden said, nudging her. "We're in this together. Reid is a thorough guy. He'll support you. We all will."

"Just keep telling yourself that he's your fiancé and you'll start to believe it."

Yeah, it wasn't that easy, especially when... "All great ideas, with just one hitch."

"What's that?"

She looked left to right. "He's not even here."

"He's working," June said like that was obvious.

"At the office? Why ask me to dinner if he wasn't going to be home?"

"He's in his office."

"His home office."

"Here?"

"Yeah, most of the time he leaves his work office just to go into his home office," June said. "He's dedicated."

And exactly the kind of guy who would ignore a girlfriend.

"Why did I agree to date him?" she asked. "How did we even meet?"

"At work."

"When? How?"

"No one needs to know more than that," Aiden said. "If anyone asks questions—"

"I have questions. I don't know the man. My coworkers asked questions I couldn't begin to answer today."

"He wouldn't want you answering questions."

"Stick with no comment."

"That doesn't work with everyday people. That's not how a person responds when talking about someone they love. Even if I didn't share intimate details, there should still be a reaction."

"Fake it, it's not like you can really fall in love with him."

"I don't even know how he takes his coffee," she said. "You can't ask me to be natural with a man I've never had a conversation with. A man I've never been alone with."

"What do you want to talk about?"

SIX

Everyone turned toward the deep voice that had asked the question. Reid. “Food is on its way and her car’s on the road.”

“This should be interesting,” Aiden mumbled.

The three executives left her and headed for the far corner. As they approached, the lights flooded on over a large dining table. Just like in the laundry room.

“Champagne?”

The lights blocked out the city. The windows were black mirrors, reflecting the inside back on itself.

Also reflected there was Matteo Reid standing in front of the broad opening that led to some other part of the penthouse.

And he was—oh, was he looking at her?

Flipping around, she discovered that, yes, he was looking at her. “Me? Do I want champagne?”

“Yes,” he said. “We should raise a glass to our engagement.”

“Where is your ring?” June called across from her place at the table with her cohorts.

Instinct raised her hand to check like it should be there. It shouldn’t. Couldn’t. Popping open her clutch, her keys jangled as she took them out to show the ring looped onto her keychain.

“You put it on a keychain?” Nasir asked.

“That’s worth twice what you make in a year. Three times.”

“I didn’t know when to put it on,” she said, wiggling the ring under the layered metal loop to free it. “It doesn’t feel like mine.”

“You were told to keep it. It is yours.”

The beautiful cushion cut diamond definitely appeared expensive, but what did she know?

Slipping it onto her hand, the balance struck her. It would take some getting used to. For eight weeks anyway. After that she

could sell it and pay some bills. Was that sordid? Selfish? Should she return it? Was that the expectation?

Reid moved on, though she didn't think much about it until a rush of movement followed. A train of three men pushing trolleys came in and surrounded the table to begin setting out crockery and flatware. Wine glasses, champagne, water jugs. Food was placed and arranged on each plate. This was a private apartment, at least, she thought it was. Yet, there were people scurrying around like it was a five-star hotel.

"She's amazed, look at her," June said.

She didn't have to look to know they were talking about her. So what if the lifestyle was new to her? And, yeah, she decided then and there that no way was she going to get used to any of it. Nope. This was how the other half lived.

"Are you going to join us?" Nasir asked.

Right. Dinner.

Sliding off her stool, she started toward the table. Reid began to work the cork from the champagne bottle. Transfixed by the peculiarity of the setup, she almost didn't register the clack of heels on the tile until a woman came rushing in.

"I'm here! I'm here. I'm here!"

The champagne cork popped, but that didn't take anyone's focus from the brunette who'd joined them, arms up, clutch dangling from her wrist. It took a second for the stranger to roll her shoulders and smooth her hands down her dress. Beautiful. Obviously bold... and vaguely familiar.

"Traffic a bitch?" Reid asked, pouring the champagne.

"Flight was delayed."

He paused in his pouring to raise a curious brow. "By?"

"Me," the stranger said, clearing her throat. "Z gave me a ride to the airport."

The corner of Reid's mouth reacted. It wasn't a smile but was the closest she'd seen yet. "He drove?"

"No, I was on top," the woman said, showing a proud grin. "Now..." The woman's focus tracked around to her. "Wow,

you're gorgeous."

That was unexpected.

"Uh... thanks?"

The stranger came over, sashaying on stiletto heels. "Roxie Kyst, it's a pleasure to meet you."

Still confused, she was polite enough to return the handshake. "Merci Moore."

"I love it," Roxie said.

The red rock on the petite woman's hand was eye-popping. "That's... wow."

Roxie let go and turned her hand to show it off. "Yeah, you'd think he was overcompensating, wouldn't you? As it turns out, the statement was supposed to make his intent obvious... Took me a few weeks to figure it out." She inhaled. "Right. We have work to do."

"We do?"

Without explaining, Roxie took her hand to march her across the room. "No eavesdropping, Reid!"

Roxie pulled her out of the kitchen, across a vast living space, past the elevators, and into a separate room. Even when she flicked on the lights, the illumination was low in the small room. A bar. They were in a bar. Not a regular bar, a private, intimate space, little more than the bar itself with stools and one low table surrounded by chesterfield couches and armchairs.

"So you bagged yourself a billionaire," Roxie declared, attracting her attention. The beauty was already mixing drinks but paused. "That should be the title of my book."

"You're writing a book?"

Roxie smiled. "No, though I'm sure I will when Casanova and I divorce."

"You're married?"

"Not yet," Roxie said, pouring liquor into a cocktail shaker.

"But you're already planning for divorce?"

“Sure, that’s what he’ll get for refusing a prenup. I told him it was stupid, and Ogilvie practically had a coronary right there...” She sighed. “So, yes, I’d divorce him to make a point... doesn’t mean we’d ever break up. He knows I like to keep things interesting... and that I’m crazy in love with him.” Maybe the woman read her confusion. “Don’t use Z and I as your example of a healthy betrothed relationship... Let’s start over.”

She finished making the drinks, poured them, and came around the bar to sit on a stool. After sipping her own drink, she leaned forward to pat the stool next to hers.

“Thanks,” Merci said. The polite thing to do was join her. “What is this?”

“Gin and It,” Roxie said, raising her glass as Merci sniffed hers. “To the men in our lives... egos and all.”

Sliding onto the stool, she took a drink. Hmm, it was actually pleasant. “Thank you.”

“So you bagged yourself a billionaire,” Roxie said, a little more subdued. “The first thing you have to know is they’re masters of their universe... By that, I mean in their own heads.”

“I don’t—”

“They don’t get to where they are by shrinking or cowering. Building themselves up, that confidence... Let’s call it what it is, that arrogance, it’s their wings. They need it. Don’t mistake it. They’re bold. Not shallow. Everyone around will think of him one way, few people, maybe only you, know what’s underneath. They do doubt themselves. Have moments of insecurity. They are...” Pausing to lick her lips, Roxie dipped a fingertip in her drink, then sucked it clean. “You have to see past the legend. You have to see what he is inside.”

If Roxie knew the engagement was a con, these tips made sense. Except she hadn’t said it, hadn’t mentioned knowing Merci hadn’t “bagged” herself anything.

“How long have you known Reid?”

“Me?” Roxie asked. “I don’t. Not even a little.”

“So how do you—”

“Shit, yeah, maybe that would be helpful.” She touched her chest. “I’m Roxanna Kyst.” Holding out her hand, she showed the ruby again. “Fiancée to Zairn Lomond, Crimson playboy, former. Rouge Overlord...” She smiled. “Until I say otherwise.”

And it struck her. “Talk at Sunset. You’re the Talk at Sunset woman...” Roxie nodded as she searched her recollection. What was it...? She couldn’t remember... Oh! “Lola. You’re Lola! I saw that... I didn’t see when you won, I saw when you were on there yourself... When Zairn came out to surprise you.”

“You want to know the big surprise?” she asked, shielding her mouth with the back of her hand to stage whisper, “we were totally broken up when I did that.” Merci’s mouth dropped open. “Yeah, it’s complicated.”

“But he gave you the ring...”

“Yeah, oh, we were totally in love. Broken up at the start of the show, engaged by the end. Quite the turn around.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” Roxie said and picked up Merci’s ring finger. “And to you.” Their eyes met. “I am not here for me and Zairn. I’m here for you and Reid.”

“Well, I...”

When her eyes drifted, Roxie shook her hand to get it back. “I am here to help you. For you.”

“For me?”

“People look at you differently after. They think it means something... and it does, just not what they think. You can’t go through this alone. You need support. Z told me and I told him... you can’t pull this off alone.”

“Pull this off?” As Roxie sat back to drink, Merci searched her awareness. “You know?”

Roxie nodded. “That it’s a great big stinkin’ lie? Mm hmm. Yeah, I know.”

Relief loosened her shoulders. “He must really trust you.”

“Reid trusts Zairn and Zairn trusts me... Also doesn't help that of their little posse, I'm the only permanent female in any of their lives... If you have questions...” Roxie reached over the bar for her purse and fished out a business card. “Z and I have a place by the park... You come by any time. I'll make sure you're in the system.”

“Uh... thank you.”

“Now...” Roxie tucked the card into the neckline of Merci's dress then picked up her hand to take it to her own lap. “Woman to woman, the most important advice I have...” Their eyes were locked, though Merci blinked a few times, surprised to see the woman so serious. “Do not fall for him.” Merci tried to recoil, but Roxie held her firm. “My best advice is do not fall for him. But if you do... if you fall in love with him... you have to go all in.” Surprised, Merci blinked again. “It's all these guys know. They're risk takers. They have powerful instincts and trust them more than almost anything else. See past the bullshit. When he's telling you he's unaffected or that you mean nothing. You have to learn to read him. In your gut... If you fall for him and let him go... it will end you. Finish you. Love, real love, it powers every atom in your body. When it's gone, if they take it away or you fuck it up, you won't be able to function... You won't be able to breathe.”

Obviously, whatever she'd gone through with Zairn hit her hard.

“Reid and I aren't... there's no chance of... you know... feelings... He's said about three words to me in his whole life. We've never even been alone.”

Stunned, Roxie sat straight, absorbing her own disbelief. “Wow, we have more work to do than I thought. Finish your drink.”

Roxie tossed hers to the back of her throat while hopping off her stool, looping her purse around her wrist again. Doing her best to follow, Merci gulped her drink down and had just put the glass on the bar when Roxie snatched her hand to draw her from the room.

SEVEN

The laughter died when they entered the kitchen again. Most of the food was still on the plates, but Roxie marched them over to the table and stopped.

“Is there a problem?” Nasir asked.

“Yes,” Roxie said, her focus locked on Reid. “We need privacy.”

“You have access to—”

“No,” Roxie said, shaking her head. “You need to excuse your friends.”

Bold. Maybe the billionaires weren't the only ones self-assured. Reid considered his guest for a few seconds then nodded once. The order was enough to have his colleagues saying their goodnights and filtering out.

After the sound of the elevator doors closing died, Reid spoke, “You have a flair for the dramatic, Miss Kyst.”

“It's one of the things Z loves about me.”

“I'll bet,” Reid said, pushing his plate away.

Roxie moved behind her to hold her shoulders. “Have you touched Merci?”

A flash of surprise crossed his face, but it quickly became offense. “I have never—”

“That's my point, Reid,” Roxie said, pushing her forward. “Geez, men! Sometimes you just don't get it. You think this Madelyn is an idiot? I'm going to guess she's not because Zairn tells me you're really smart. Discerning. Shrewd... I'd bet you wouldn't propose to a fool. If Madelyn wants you back, and she figures out this engagement is bullshit, you'll piss her off. Not just because you came up with the crazy scheme to keep her away, but because you thought she'd be stupid enough not to see it. We know things. Women. I'd know in a snap if Z was faking it. Your Madelyn will notice awkwardness immediately. She will notice if you are not used to each other.”

“Miss Kyst—”

“Yeah, I know that condescending tone,” Roxie said. “It doesn’t scare me. I can walk out of here and my life stays the same. I don’t blow a twenty-billion-dollar deal because I was too precious to hold hands.”

“Madelyn knows I am not tactile—”

“And Merci? Is she?” Roxie asked. “You have to know her. This is not as simple as facts on a page. Anything could happen, you need to be prepared for it. Do you know what she drinks? How she takes her coffee? If you have a business dinner, do you want to ask at the table if she has allergies or should you know already? What if you’re at an event with dancing? Does she like to dance? Hell, if she hates dancing and you drag her onto the floor, maybe she’ll fall on her face.”

“Roxie—”

“You have to know each other inside out. The stupid stuff. Do you wet shave or are you electric? Is there a tie that means something to you or a color you won’t wear? What part of her body is she self-conscious about? What perfume does she use?”

“I wouldn’t—”

“What about intimacy? Does he snore? Madelyn will know that, Merci needs to know it too. Does she snore? Do you go to bed at the same time? Hell, who sleeps on which side of the bed? Couples know these things about each other. Madelyn knows these things about you. If she shows up here determined to win you back, she will be gunning for Merci from minute one. We need to be her arsenal, and she needs to be stocked with ammunition. Madelyn won’t come for you. She might hit on you, put it on a plate for you, so you need to be sure she isn’t what you want. Think about your hottest moment, the second you wanted her the most, the best your relationship ever was. She knows what turns you on and won’t hesitate to remind you. Now that you’re engaged, she’ll be forbidden fruit. A lot of guys go for that. For a lot of guys that’s enough on its own. I’ve known Merci thirty seconds and already know she doesn’t deserve to be chum. If you want Madelyn—”

“Roxanna,” Reid said, weight in his voice. “Do not—”

“I won’t be—”

“Enough,” Reid said, slamming a hand onto the table as he shot to his feet. She jumped, as did Roxie’s hands on her shoulders. Should they be afraid of him? It hadn’t occurred to her. He took a slow breath, his focus stuck on Roxie. “I... do not snore.”

Despite him being deadly serious, Roxie sounded happier. “Good,” she said. “I’m here to help, Reid. Zairn wouldn’t have sent me if—”

“You’re infuriating,” Reid said.

Roxie’s hands slid away as she came around to Merci’s side. “Blunt was the first word Knox used to describe me. I prefer yours.” Roxie took her hand. “We will get this figured out. We can do this. If we’re a team... Listen to me, I’m Miss After School Special.”

“Not what I expected of Zairn’s woman.”

“I’m dirtier when we’re alone,” Roxie said. “When’s Madelyn getting in?”

“Day after tomorrow.”

“Friday, just in time for the weekend. Okay. We’re meeting back here tomorrow night, just the three of us.” Roxie pulled her around. “We’re going shopping on Saturday.”

“Shopping? I have work that I—”

“Blow it off,” Roxie said, wearing another smile. “You’re blowing the boss.” Her eyes widened. “Today’s assignment...” She pointed to each of them in turn. “Spend some time alone. On a couch. Under low lighting. Talk. Yes, even about the uncomfortable stuff. You want this deal to go through? You want Madelyn to believe this relationship? You have to do this at breakneck speed. Talk about sex.” A lump formed in Merci’s throat. “Talk about it as much as possible.”

“Sex?” Reid asked.

Thank God someone did.

“Yes,” Roxie said, pushing her hair from her shoulder. “Because men like you will talk business all night long if someone doesn’t change the subject.” The beauty faked a yawn. “And it does not melt the panties from a woman. Coming from

one who knows. Zairn starts that shit, I just take off my clothes, doesn't matter who's in the room. It's the quickest way to change the subject." She winked at Merci. "From me to you, tip for the future." Stepping back, Roxie looked from her to Reid and back. "Come over here, Reid. Stand by Merci... please."

Maybe it was the please, but he left his place to come around and stand closer. Obviously not close enough because Roxie leaned over to push Merci closer to him.

"Hmm," Roxie said, clasping her chin.

"What?" Merci asked, despite being almost afraid to.

"Face each other. Look at each other."

"Okay," Reid said, stepping toward his guest. "It's time for you to leave, Miss Kyst."

"Man, rude much?" Roxie said, bowing sideways to look around him. "Guess he's desperate to be alone with you." She held up a hand. "I will see myself out."

The woman sashayed away into the next room and called the elevator. Once inside, the elevator doors closed and silence settled.

"This isn't awkward at all," she muttered.

He was already on his way back to the table. "Champagne?"

"Not for me, thank you."

He'd taken the bottle from an ice bucket and obviously hadn't expected her to refuse because he looked at it for a second before dumping it again.

"What do you drink?"

"Raspberry schnapps and lemonade usually... if you have it." From the bewildered look on his face, it wasn't a regular request. "Or just water. I can drink water."

"Peach," he said. "I think we have peach."

"That works."

When he left the room, she exhaled more breath than her lungs had ever held. How was she supposed to fake an engagement to a guy she couldn't stand in silence with?

Her mouth opened too often for a man like him. Words came out before her mind could snatch them back. If she had to be alone with him, something was going to come out. She'd say something inappropriate. Get herself into trouble somehow. Damn. This wasn't going to end well.

“Are you going to spend the evening in the kitchen?”

What? Was that...? He was calling to her. Right. Damn. Of course they weren't hanging out in the kitchen. Hurrying to the living room, the inset lights around a wet bar drew her to the seating area nestled diagonally opposite the elevator. Drapes covered the floor-to-ceiling windows. Somehow, despite the space being vast, the low illumination fostered intimacy.

Reid was at the bar, overlooking the sumptuous couches and low coffee table. “I don't sit in here often.”

“You spend your time in the office, here or at... you know, your actual office... Your colleagues told me.” Unsure what was appropriate, or where he wanted her to sit, she gestured at the couch. “Should I...?”

“Roxanna is right. If we're going to fool Madelyn, we'll have to get over propriety quickly.”

“Does that mean talking about sex?” she asked, rounding the couch to sit in the middle. “It's been a while for me. Your sex life will be much more interesting.”

“How so?”

“I don't know. Don't billionaires sleep with supermodels every night?”

“Would you marry a promiscuous man?”

“I wouldn't marry a man who even thought about cheating on me. But we shouldn't waste our limited time on me, you're the one Madelyn knows.”

He picked up two glasses and came over to hand her one. “Meaning?”

“She doesn't know me,” she said, trying not to tense when he sat less than two feet away.

“Meaning?”

She smiled, while he remained discerning. “So you could tell her anything about me and she wouldn’t know whether it was true or not.”

“I wouldn’t know either. You could contradict it.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I learned my lesson about speaking out against you.” She winced. “I apologize again.”

“I didn’t expect anyone to speak, I’ll admit... but you spoke up for your principles.”

“In an inappropriate setting.”

“Now you have access...” he said, “you can voice them in private.”

“June told you about my request.”

He nodded once. “You’re smart. Don’t take the first offer. Negotiate.”

“I’ll return the diamond when this is over.” The ring still felt odd on her hand. “I’m not in this for the money.”

“No, you’re in it for the people,” he said. “You take your role seriously.”

“Yes,” she said, inspired by integrity. “It’s my job to make sure people are heard.”

“You’re a conflict liaison.”

She nodded. “You read my file too... I suppose you wanted to know who you were engaged to.”

“I read your file after you spoke out,” he said, surprising her with his candor. “Do you think I would’ve gotten engaged to a stranger?”

It hadn’t occurred to her. “To be honest, I’ve suffered whiplash with this since it happened. Last night I wasn’t sure it was real and then today...”

“Today? You were overwhelmed?”

“I thought I’d come in and never hear about it. That you’d have come to your senses overnight.”

His scrutiny sharpened as he took his next drink. “You disagree with the Gramercy bid?”

“I don’t know enough of the details,” she said. “I know they have a vast network. A network that would be useful to RCI’s current affiliates.”

“We would expand?”

“Long term, yes. Short term... Acquisitions of this size inevitably lead to disruption. RCI gobbles up the smaller companies quickly and efficiently. You’re a pro at that, but this...” She shook her head. “There has to be a reason Gramercy is up for grabs. Are you sure they’re rock solid?”

“You’re worried about our solvency?” he asked like that was the last thing he’d expected.

EIGHT

Trying to articulate herself with any hope of making sense required her to pause, hold her breath, and think for a second before opening her mouth.

“My boss, Calista, she talks about hierarchy. About how the higher up in the building you get, the more important you are. It’s true, I get that, but the way I think about it... You up there, on the top floor, looking down on the rest of us, you’re a macro guy. You see big picture. You do your best to maneuver RCI to an optimum position in the market. What’s good for you at the top, filters down to the rest of us in time...

“From my perspective, where I am, I take a micro view. People are not numbers on a page. They have faces. Names. Families. If their position becomes untenable, if policies change in a way that disrupts their situation, I’m the person called in. I have to follow the rules, while trying to twist and circumvent them to suit loyal staff. At the same time, I can’t set precedent or appear not to toe the company line. I’m the one who has to say no, who has to watch the single mother break down because there’s no one to watch her kids, or the father with too many of them who can’t afford to work extra shifts and pay daycare. I deal with people’s real problems. Their financial woes and family troubles. I get in between supervisors and individuals when personalities clash or hostility rules. Your employees are real people to me. You’re a macro guy and that’s fine, we need you to be, we need someone in charge of the big picture. That doesn’t make the micro any less real to me.”

The first she was aware of talking into her drink was the unexpected slide of his finger beneath her chin to raise it up.

“Look me in the eye when you talk to me.”

Her heart pumped faster. Roxie was right. Sitting on a couch, under low light, she didn’t care he was her boss or that he bounced around at the top of the world’s rich lists. Something in her awoke to him. Just a guy. Like any other. Except this guy had a depth to his voice that weighted it in her gut. Those words, their smooth bass, like the touch of his finger lingering under her chin. Not soft... profound.

“Tell me about your rules.”

As his finger drifted away, he grew rigid. “My rules?”

“You said yesterday Madelyn knows you. That you have rules. A set way you do things.”

He shook his head, downing the rest of his drink to boost off the couch and return to the bar. “No, that’s private.”

Pushing herself to the edge of the couch, she put her drink on the coffee table. “We’re getting over propriety,” she said, reminding him of his words. “If Madelyn knows, I have to know.”

“It’s not as easy as that.”

Something else he’d said before.

“What does that mean?” she asked, taking another gulp of her drink to put it back on the table. Why was he so difficult to look at?

“It’s inappropriate in our situation.”

“Being fake together?”

“This isn’t real. Navigating this takes nuance.”

“It can’t take nuance. Roxie said Madelyn will know if we’re faking. “

“My power only goes so far.” His impatience conveyed frustration. “I can’t make something real that is not.”

Her mind worked as he returned to sit on the couch.

“What if we did?” she asked.

She heard him swallow, then his glass landed on the coffee table next to hers. “Did what?”

“Make this real.”

“You want us to plan a wedding?”

“No!” Shoving deeper into the couch, inspiration fired through her. It could work. Maybe. “I... Like, call me when a boyfriend should call me. Consider each other our automatic plus ones. Argue if we disrespect each other. We do everything as though this is a hundred percent real.”

“No,” he said. “There are rules.”

“There you go again with your rules. How do you expect me to follow them, to respect them, if you won’t clue me in?”

“You’re not ready.”

“That’s up to me.” He still didn’t appear convinced. “Look, it’s all a big act, I get that. But the only way we sell it is if we give each other carte blanche. We treat our relationship as real, with all that real entails. That’s what Roxie was getting at. We need to cut the bullshit. We’re awkward because we’re strangers and don’t know where the lines are. So we erase the lines, while still treating each other with respect. Just pretend to care about me and my feelings for two months. Would that really be so hard?”

“No.”

“Good. Okay.” She smiled. “So if I was really your girlfriend, what would we be doing right now?”

She didn’t think the question through. Not that she ever could’ve predicted... From nowhere, his hand sank into her hair, curling around the curve of her head to pull her mouth to his. The deep press of lips fueled her response. He was kissing her. And damnit, she was kissing back. It had been a while. Maybe too long. Definitely too long. The sweep of his tongue urged her to push deeper, to get closer, to taste more of his curiosity while satisfying her own.

“And I came here to call your bluff.”

A female voice shattered the haze of their lust intoxication. His mouth left hers hanging while he presumably investigated the identity of the intruder. To his home and their intimacy.

“You’re early, Madelyn.”

“Oh, and is that inconvenient? Hurtful...? You broke my heart, we’re nowhere close to even. This is her?”

Her? Right. Her.

“Madelyn Massey,” Reid said, standing up, opening his hand to her. “Meet Merci Moore.”

She took his hand and let him draw her onto her feet. His grip was strong. His long fingers somehow found their way

between hers, showing a confidence in them together, a pride, she wouldn't have expected before the kiss.

“Meek for you, isn't she?”

“You'd be surprised,” Reid said.

What did that mean? Was he proud of them or ridiculing her?

“I am surprised that you're out of the office before midnight,” Madelyn said, focusing only on her ex. “I don't remember us having make out sessions on the couch. Is there something wrong with the bedroom?”

“We're in our home, Maddie,” he said. “We can be intimate wherever we choose.”

“Maybe put the elevator lock on so your guests don't walk in and get immediately nauseated.”

“Discretion and intimacy,” Reid said, “you never had time for either, Mads.”

Finally acknowledging the existence of the other female, Madelyn looked at her. “You'll never be good enough for him.”

Wow, bitch slap. What an introduction.

Reid didn't seem to appreciate it. “Did your driver get lost on the way to the hotel?”

“This is my hotel,” Madelyn said, pivoting without pause. “I thought we should take some time to catch up before we get bogged down with business.”

“You want to stay here?”

“Your fiancée shouldn't have a problem with it... if she's secure in your love.”

That felt like the gauntlet being thrown down.

“Madelyn—”

“It's okay,” Merci said, picking the gauntlet up. “We can't throw her out in the street. If she wants to stay the night, we have room.”

She hoped. In actual fact the number of bedrooms wasn't in any of the Matteo Reid literature.

“She shouldn’t invite herself into our home.”

“Our home,” Madelyn said. “For months you try moving in and he says no. The minute you’re engaged, suddenly, you live here. Without a moment to breathe, he’s absolutely adamant. Him and his rules.” Uh... okay. “Why does she look so trapped? You don’t live together?”

She swallowed, feeling the tension in Reid’s hand as it tightened. He didn’t know what to say. Damn it, to sell this, there was only one possible answer. One of them had to say it.

“Of course we do,” she said, her smile almost becoming a laugh. Holding back, she needed to be real, not awkward. Not awkward. Clasp ing their joined hands in her free one, she tried to be subtle about massaging out some of his tension. “As you’ve seen, we’re used to having the place to ourselves.”

“Adventurous, is she?” Madelyn asked Reid. “Maybe you are a good fit... or it could be she’s so desperate for money, she’ll do anything to please you.”

Massey Associates was a successful, profitable company. Madelyn had no need to dig for gold. Had Reid dealt with that in the past? Most people in his position probably did, male or female.

Merci couldn’t let their relationship be dismissed. “Or my fiancé facilitates my relentless desire for him.”

“If you want to stay in our home, Madelyn,” he said, emphasizing the penultimate word. “You will treat Merci with respect. She won’t throw you in the street, I will.”

The beauty paused, scrutinizing both of them for a score of seconds. “Great, see, no problem,” Madelyn said, letting the threat bounce off, then heading toward the kitchen. “My luggage will be up in just a moment. Reid, we’ll drink through here.”

The kitchen didn’t have a door, the ten-foot-wide space of its entrance bordered the living room, it didn’t give them much privacy.

But that didn’t matter. Rather than drop her hand, Reid used their connection to lead her around the couch. They went a new way, down a wide corridor, past some doors and a

perpendicular corridor. He swung a right into a shallow alcove presenting double doors.

Taking them inside, the auto lights sparked on. Luxe was an understatement.

Reid let go of her hand and went right. She tried to absorb where they were. A huge bed central on the left wall. Glass. The wall behind it was distorted glass and each side was open as though another room lay beyond. Straight ahead, inky floor-to-ceiling windows concealed the city, just the occasional flash of light betrayed it was out there.

The laundry room was bigger than her bedroom, that bedroom, presumably the master, was bigger than her apartment.

“Elwood will take you home,” he called from wherever he’d disappeared to. “Wait a few minutes, then go to the elevator —”

“Your ex-fiancée can stay, but your current fiancée can’t?”

He appeared in the opening. “You want to stay?”

She shrugged. “I’m here. What harm can it do? I’ve slept with a guy before...” Though when she put it that way... “I’ve shared a bed with a guy before.”

That was better.

His brow dropped. Was he angry? Thinking about it? “We’re erasing propriety.” That sort of sounded like him talking to himself. He vanished into the other room for a few seconds only to reappear, striding over to her. “You can wear this.” He handed her a shirt. “Everything you need will be in the second drawer of the vanity behind you.” Behind the glass wall? Ah, the bathroom. “I’ll stay in the office.”

“In the office? I won’t kick you out your bed.”

When her attention drifted toward the bed, he caught her chin with a finger to draw it back.

“Look me in the eye.”

Why was he so hung up on that? Why did she struggle with it? Submerging herself in the sumptuous chocolate of his liquid gaze, she recognized him like he’d always belonged to her while at the same time being intimidated by his mystery.

Her chest got tighter. “I struggle with that.”

“Meaning?”

Oh that wasn't like before. An almost growl laced the words with electric innuendo. The hum continued to her core, sparking and simmering to an agitation she really shouldn't feel in his bedroom.

She paused, stopped talking, breathing, existing as anything other than his prey.

“I shouldn't—”

“Come here,” he said, snatching the side of her head to pull her back.

“I—”

Planting his mouth over hers, the long, hard push of his kiss was fierce, but short. He pulled away before she could absorb the moment.

With his grip still firm on her skull, he tucked it down to kiss her hair. “That's why I'm staying in the office,” he murmured against her and let go on his turn to stride out of the room.

The guy was always in a hurry. Always on a mission. In that moment, she envied his purpose.

His bed. Turning around, she drank it in. Matteo Reid's bed. His bedroom. How had she gotten herself there?

NINE

That's why I'm staying in the office.

The words ran through her mind over and over. Their profound peal penetrated her every thought from the moment he'd left his bedroom.

On waking in the morning, no one else had been in the penthouse. No one that she saw. She'd rushed out, back down the stairs, and grabbed a cab to her place to get ready for work.

So far it had been better in the office. The morning had been quieter, letting her get in the zone. Yet, every once in a while, his comment intruded on her thoughts.

Still, mid-report, distracting thoughts didn't stop her noticing half the office jumping up while the other half screeched. They were all looking at the department door, so she caught a look over her shoulder.

The new arrival had her in their crosshairs.

"Roxie!" Merci said when the woman was close enough. "What are you—"

"We're doing lunch," Roxie said, taking her hand.

"I have work."

"Just downstairs," Roxie said. "We'll be an hour at most."

One of her co-workers came over pen and pad in hand. Roxie didn't even wait for them to ask. Of course when she signed one, another followed and another.

"We love you," Tonya said, muscling her way to the front of the pack of autograph hunters. "Like, totally love you."

"Thanks," Roxie said.

"Can we see the ring?" Mariah asked.

Roxie held it aloft for all to see. More whoops and cheers. "She has one too," her new friend said, grabbing her hand to show off the diamond.

"Is Zairn in New York too?" someone asked.

“He better not be,” Roxie said, signing a couple more autographs. “I woke up alone this morning.”

“Could we have like Crimson passes?” Tonya asked. “Like pretty please.”

“That’s up to my friend,” Roxie said, snatching her hand. “Excuse us.”

Without even waiting for people to part, Roxie forged on. Four guys dressed in black moved people out of their way.

“Oh my God, you have bodyguards?” Merci asked when the guys stayed in tight formation to get them out of the department.

“Zairn insists,” Roxie said. “He’s right, sure, but I don’t praise him too much. His ego’s healthy enough.”

Thank God for bodyguards.

Despite insisting Roxie take the elevator, her friend descended the stairs with her. Seven floors weren’t much... right?

The bodyguards protected them on the walk across the lobby. She expected they’d go to the deli. Instead, Roxie sailed right past and took them to the street, into her waiting car. Before anything else, Roxie put the window down to give food orders to the bodyguard. Less than three minutes later, the guy came back to hand their food through the window.

The car was amazing, leather seats, carpet on the floor and a fridge to the side. Roxie bypassed the champagne to hand over a bottle of water, then folded down the seat between them, revealing a table for their lunch.

“You can’t leave me here in wonder,” Roxie said, retrieving actual real metal forks from a side panel. “What happened last night?”

Merci opened her salad box to stab at the leaves. “Before or after Madelyn showed up at his apartment?”

“She showed up early?” Roxie asked, pouring extra dressing on her salad. “Smart. She’s a smart one. Trying to stay one step ahead.”

“I don’t know if I’m equipped for this kind of battle.”

“You heard what I said last night, right? We’re your arsenal. You won’t get through this by yourself.” Roxie showed a broad smile. “That’s what we’re here for. Take me through it. What happened?”

“Nothing...” Though that couldn’t be further from the truth. “We had a drink. Talked, like you said. Madelyn showed up. Then I went to bed.”

“You went to bed,” Roxie said, her fork poised midair. “With Reid?”

She semi-shrugged. “He stayed in the office.”

“Oh my God,” Roxie said, dumping her fork. “You slept over?”

“Madelyn left us no choice. She was there to call his bluff, that was the first thing she said. She doesn’t believe it. Us, together. I don’t blame her.”

“What a bitch.” Picking up a napkin, Roxie wiped her fingers then grabbed her phone from her purse. “Damn. Dead... Where’s your cellphone?”

“My cellphone?”

Roxie nodded, gesturing at her to hurry. Retrieving it, Merci handed it over unlocked so her friend could dial. As it rang, she put it on the table on speaker.

“Hello?” an unknown male answered after fifty or so rings.

“Tibbs, honey,” Roxie said. “Put him on.”

The answerer said nothing else, another male voice took over. “Astrid is getting on a plane.”

“No, she’s not,” Roxie said, rolling her eyes. “You people are doing work over there, I’m just... hanging out... Don’t I get kudos for memorizing your number? I don’t know anyone else’s number by heart.”

“No one else pays the guys protecting you. They’re under instruction to lock you in the dungeon if you ever can’t call me in times of need.”

Shaking her head, Roxie licked her lips over her smile. “He’s kidding, we don’t have a dungeon.”

“Yet. Who you talking to?”

“Merci,” Roxie said. “Merci, Zairn, Zairn, Merci.” The introduction was short, to the point. “We need to know everything about Madelyn Massey.”

“You think I’m Google? Ask Reid.”

“We don’t ask the guy formerly sleeping with her... You didn’t sleep with her, did you, Skippy?”

“I should say yes, then you’d get invested.”

“I’m invested,” Roxie said. “Merci’s my new girl, she’s coming to the wedding.”

“When is it?” Merci asked.

Sort of bewildered, Roxie shrugged. “No idea. Someone will put it on our calendars eventually.”

“Vegas was a better suggestion,” Zairn muttered.

“Enough about us,” Roxie said. “Tell us about Madelyn Massey, Casanova.”

“Are we launching an offensive?” he asked. “What do you need to know? She’s hot, rich, and entitled.”

Roxie was quick to respond. “Sort of like the rest of you. Did you have to lead with hot?”

“You’re hotter,” Zairn said. “Do I have to add that as a qualifier every time I comment on a woman’s looks? Can’t we take it as a given already? I’m inside you seconds after you walk into a room, means I think you’re pretty.”

“Thank you, Mr. Condescension,” Roxie said. “But I wasn’t thinking about me, I’m the hottest you ever had. Merci is here and she’s competing with this woman.”

Merci raised a finger. “Uh, no, I’m the decoy. If he wants her, they’re welcome to each other.”

“No, they’re not,” Roxie said. “I already told him you’re not chum.”

“Making friends, baby?” Zairn asked.

“Why did they break up? He dumped her, right?”

“Less than a month before the wedding,” Merci said. “According to the information I was told to read.”

“Told to read,” Roxie said and scoffed. “We should write a script for him to memorize too.” Both women waited, their focus on the phone. “Casanova?”

“Oh, it’s my turn? I don’t need to be a part of this, there’s a reason I leave you alone with your girls.”

“Because they drool on you,” Roxie said. “And you do need to be a part of this, you know Madelyn.”

“Not as well as Reid.”

“He’s not going to tell us why he broke it off, is he? We’re like strangers.”

“He’s closer to Kintyre. If you want the skinny, why don’t you bother him about it?”

“I’m not sleeping with Kintyre, am I?” Roxie asked.

“I don’t know, are you?”

Shocked, Merci expected offense, but Roxie just tilted her head to ask, “I don’t know, is he hot?”

“Some say.”

“Cool. Give me his number. I’ve got no panties on and a jet standing by.”

“My jet.”

“What’s yours is mine, baby,” Roxie said. “What guy can resist no panties?”

Zairn laughed. “Okay, Lola, cool your jets. He’s going after Gramercy too.”

Her new friend didn’t follow. “I don’t know what that is.”

“And he’s close to Reid?” Merci asked. “Does he know...?”

Trailing off, Merci wasn’t sure if she should talk about company strategy. Although, Reid had announced his intention to the press, didn’t that make it public knowledge?

“That RCI is going after it too? Yeah. They’re close, but competitive.”

“Will it damage their friendship?” Merci asked. “Why would they both go after the same company?”

“To keep it in the family,” Zairn said.

Hmm, well, that didn’t explain anything.

“Are we going after Gramercy?” Roxie asked, though didn’t seem any the wiser.

“Our portfolio not rich enough for you, babe?” he asked. “We’ll let them duke it out. I have enough going on, I’m getting married this year.”

“You are?” Roxie gasped like that was happy news. “Must be real true love to tempt the great Zairn Lomond into marriage!”

“She’s nothing special. A friend bet me I wouldn’t be dumb enough to do it.”

“No better reason to get married.”

“None that I’ve found.”

Something in Roxie’s warm smile was enviable. There was a comfort between the couple, a rapport that seemed hard won.

“How do I get through the days without you, Scroogey?”

“It’s the nights that keep you going, Lola Bunny,” he murmured, his voice a thick syrup that sent a shiver through even her.

“Will you tell us why Reid called off the wedding?” Roxie asked. “Or do I have to announce we’re opening a Crimson Antarctica just to mess up your day?”

Zairn exhaled. “Reid’s an intense guy.”

“That much we figured.”

“No, but it’s... Madelyn didn’t get it. They weren’t the same. On the same wavelength. On paper, it should’ve worked. They should’ve been perfect for each other, but he was never happy because he wasn’t himself. He made himself be something he wasn’t.”

“You told him to break it off, didn’t you?” Roxie said, apparently understanding her fiancé.

“Yes. We all did,” Zairn said. “And you would’ve too, if he was one of your girls.”

“I know,” Roxie said, almost proud in her smile. “It’s hot when you look out for your friends.” Though that tease quickly vanished. “Any of them told you not to marry me?”

“All of them. Repeatedly,” he said. Roxie’s eyes narrowed on the phone. “Because they want you for themselves.”

Roxie’s laugh was loud and utterly sincere. “Good save, Casanova.”

“Thanks, I’ve been practicing.”

Her friend dipped closer to the phone. “You know how much I love you?”

Now it just felt like she was intruding on an intimate moment.

“Not half as much as I love you.” He paused. “That enough to get an upskirt shot?”

“After lunch, I’ll go home and take off all my clothes for you. How long ‘til you’re at the club?”

“Still got time, we’re getting dinner in a while.”

“We’re having dinner with Reid tonight,” Roxie said, then winked at her. “Merci might even spend the night.”

“ ‘Cause she told Madelyn they lived together already.”

Roxie frowned. “You didn’t tell me that.”

“You enjoy the drama, baby. I didn’t want to ruin the reveal... I didn’t tell you they kissed either.”

As Roxie’s surprise ascended, her mouth opened.

Merci squirmed. “Neither did I.”

“You have to excuse me, my love,” Roxie said. “Phone sex in an hour.” She jabbed the phone to disconnect it. “You kissed him?”

“He kissed me,” Merci said, pushing her napkin further onto the table. “Twice.”

“Oh my God,” Roxie said. “And you didn’t tell me because...?”

She could make an excuse about time or opportunity. Neither would be true.

“I didn’t... I’m still trying to figure it out.”

Roxie slid closer. “Was it like a peck on the cheek or full tongue?”

“There was definite tongue,” she said, Roxie’s eyes lit with excitement. “The first time. Not the second time, but...”

“But...?”

“Madelyn walked in on the first one. We were kissing when she arrived.”

“Good!” Roxie said. “Sent a strong signal off the bat.” Her wide eyes reeked of anticipation. “So...?”

“So what?”

“Was it any good?”

“The kiss?”

Roxie laughed. “Yes, the kiss!”

More squirming. “I... yeah, but I... I don’t want to think about it too much.”

“Why not?” Roxie asked. “Kissing is good. It’s great. Fun! You might be doing this to save jobs, that’s no reason you can’t enjoy yourself in the process.”

“Yeah, but it could be a problem.”

“What could be a problem? Kissing? There’s no...” When she stopped, they made eye contact. Somehow that was enough to change Roxie’s mood. She snatched her arm and yanked them closer over the table. “Oh my God, you liked it?”

On a fake sob, Merci dropped her forehead to the heel of her hand. “I’m an idiot.”

A flurry of laughter escaped Roxie who threw both arms around her to hug her. “This is amazing!”

“No,” Merci said, easing out of Roxie’s embrace. “No because after the second one, he said something that messed with my head then left me alone in his bedroom. Do you know how difficult it is to sleep surrounded by the scent of a guy who’s

just turned you on? What it's like to lie there minutes after he swans on out, leaving you hanging?"

The responding smile was amused and sympathetic. "Yes, actually, I do know exactly what that's like."

"Why do they do it?" Merci asked, shaking her head, at a loss, while at the same time relieved to vent. "One kiss and I..."

"What did he say?"

"What?"

"You said he said something that messed with your head."

"It doesn't matter," Merci said on a sigh.

Linking their fingers, Roxie shook her arm. "Don't leave me hanging. Tell me!"

She drew in a breath. "He said that was why he was staying in his office."

"You told him he didn't have to stay in the office?"

"I told him I wouldn't kick him out his own bed."

"You invited him to go to bed with you?" Roxie said. "Then he kissed you and said that was why he was staying in the office?" Nodding just once, Merci confirmed that was the gist of it. "You know what that means, don't you?"

"No! Why do you think it's been bugging me all day?"

"It means he liked it too," Roxie said, waiting for the truth to sink in. "He stayed in the office because he didn't trust himself in bed with you."

Shit. She gulped. That should probably excite her. Shouldn't it be positive to know a guy was turned on by her? It felt more like a bad omen than a blessing.

TEN

By the time she got through with work, exhaustion was setting in.

Everything from the last few days was beginning to pile up. What she really wanted to do was go home and sink into a bubble bath, which was weird because she wasn't usually a bathtub person.

The moment she walked into her apartment something felt off. Nothing looked out of place in her living room or kitchen, it just didn't feel right. In the bedroom, she didn't see anything missing, but she kept the place neat.

The closet was a different story. The doors and drawers were closed, but her accessories and products on the vanity were missing. In the bathroom, her shower products were still in place, everything from her razor to her loofah, all present and correct. Yet, when she returned to the closet to open drawers, she found them empty. Her shoe rack? Empty. Her underwear drawer? Empty. Everything from her closet was gone. Didn't take a genius to figure out where it went.

She hadn't even put her purse down, which worked out because she turned on her heels and left the apartment again straight away.

When she got to the street, someone jumped out in front of her.

"Elwood," she said after getting over her shock. "What are you doing here?"

He pointed past her to the car parked on the curb. "You didn't call me when you left RCI. I was waiting for you in the garage."

"For me?"

Elwood smiled. "I'm your driver. Wherever you need to go, I'll take you... The number should be in the tablet Tara gave you."

"I didn't look at... contacts."

Tara said she was in the tablet. Maybe she should've spent more time investigating the device.

"That's okay," Elwood said. Still smiling, he stepped back to sweep an arm toward the car. "Where would you like to go?"

The car was there and her mood was hot. Not only did she want to get there quickly, the subway could lead to a confrontation, if she took her mood out on the wrong person.

"Mr. Reid's," she said. "I need to go to his apartment first..." to check her things really were there. "Then we're going back to the office..." because if he thought she would let this go without a fight, he was mistaken.

"Your wish is my command."

Elwood opened the door for her and closed it behind her. Maybe the car journey would cool her off... or she could hunt every crevice. There had to be alcohol in there somewhere.

She didn't often rue stairs, but fifty floors were a lot to ascend when information was needed. About fifteen minutes later, she reached his floor. Uh oh. No key. And the door wasn't propped open for her either. Walking back down to the lobby to request access might be her only choice.

Before doing that...

Going closer, the fingerprint reader tempted her thumb. At work, they used thumbprint access for certain sensitive files and areas of the building. Surely, it wouldn't be possible...

It flashed green and the door popped open. Wow. Possible and complete.

Good. Because she needed to know.

Winding her way through the apartment, trying to not again be awed by its open space and double height ceilings, she got to the bedroom. Most of the apartment was still a mystery, but she remembered her way to his room.

The closet.

The massive space with its inset lights, real wood paneling and leather upholstered benches put elegant hotels and high-end department stores to shame. Ignoring her instinct to be impressed, she went on the hunt for her things. Yep, there they

were. Inside cabinets, arranged on swanky pull-out shoe racks, everything she owned, everything that was missing was right there.

“Looking for something?”

The sudden question startled her. In her shock, she slammed the shoe rack and spun around. Thank God he had his back to her because she needed a minute, maybe more than a minute.

Matteo Reid. A man she'd known just a couple of days. Hell, did she know him? Probably not the best descriptor. Damn it. The man wasn't playing fair. Scaring her was one thing, but there he was, on his side of the closet, his hair damp, wearing nothing but a black towel around his hips.

Tearing her eyes away to stare at the floor, she needed a minute to check this was reality. How did everything change? How did the multibillionaire even know her name let alone have her in his closet... while he was naked?

He closed a drawer and moved to another. What was she going to do? On the far side of the closet, she'd have to go past him to leave. Even giving him a wide berth wouldn't quell the thrum of interest in the way the muscles of his back moved. Mmm, and that towel, how easy would it be to...?

Squeezing her eyes closed, she chastised herself. If a guy was thinking about her ass, about what else might be under her towel, she'd think him a sleaze. She couldn't be a sleaze. Couldn't sleaze on her boss. Curling her fingers around the vanity behind her, she used the solid furniture to anchor herself in place.

Sometimes her mouth ran away with itself. That much she knew. Why was she only just figuring out that her feet and fingers could work of their own volition too? Clutching tighter, it was all she could do to prevent herself going over there to touch his warm flesh, to test how he'd react with her hands on him.

What did it matter? It didn't because they were—

“Merci?”

Opening her eyes, she forced herself to look him in the eye. It didn't help. Gazing into him always did something to her.

Weakness built in her limbs and a warm soup of want poured through her torso to pool deep in her most intimate corner.

Floor. Look at the floor. But she had to do it fast 'cause... Oh, shit. Yeah, the definition in his body, right there, just a few feet away... The curve of his shoulder, the planes of his chest... Why did she look?

A growl lodged in her throat. It didn't escape, she didn't think, but something animal in her wanted to mate with his baser self. If there was one. The body was impressive. Yes. Damn yes. But she wasn't sure if it was those grooves and ridges, the warm tan on his skin, or the line of dark hair that disappeared into the contrasting towel that provoked the tingle working its way through her. Just being there, in a private space, with such a private man... Was it that he trusted her or that she hadn't figured out he didn't actually belong to her?

She hadn't noticed the phone in his hand until he turned to toss it onto his vanity. "If anything is missing, contact Tara, she'll be your point person until you hire your own assistant."

Complaints about the heavy-handed tactics died. "My own assistant?"

"Yes, Tara can put someone on it, if you'd like." Put someone on... "You must have hiring experience."

"I... yes, but I—"

"Your assistant must believe our association is genuine." Which it wasn't. Right. "Madelyn will move to the Crimson complex as of Saturday."

"The Crimson complex?" Why did she always become a parrot around him and his people? "Roxie's?"

"Zairn Lomond's. They have suites for guests," he said, going to select a tie before turning to look at her. "What do you think of Roxie?"

"What do I think of her? I... I think she's great. She's warm, genuine... fearless. I like her."

"Look me in the eye."

Goddamnit, why did he always...? It wasn't deliberate, her eyes just wandered. Looking at anything except him kept her

libido in check.

“You’re not wearing clothes,” she said, then wanted to kick herself. “Oh, God, I’m sorry...”

She started for the door. His need for privacy was implicit, he shouldn’t have to ask for it.

“Stop.” He said it. She did it. A beat went by. And another. “Look at me, Merci.” Drawing in a fortifying breath, her head turned to meet his eye. “Come over here.”

Her gut clenched and heat rushed south. Closer. Why were her feet complying? Why did she step out of her shoes? Why pull the clip from her hair and toss it onto his vanity? Something. More than something. Her subconscious wanted to send a signal. If she’d thought about it for more than a second, she wouldn’t have done either.

Stopping in front of him, her eyes on his, it was harder to maintain her certainty within a foot of him.

“You follow instructions.”

“Yes,” she said, aroused by his authority, “sir.”

A flare of something widened his eyes a fraction. Obeying turned her on, maybe commanding did it for him. Whatever it was, he seemed to check himself. His lips thinned as his finger slid under her chin to tip it higher.

“Is anything missing?” he asked.

Yes, him inside her. That was missing. His mouth tasting hers. His hands on her... What was wrong with her?

Of her things. He meant of the possessions that had been moved from her place to his. Had she been angry about that?

“Not that I can see.”

His hand dropped. “Go get freshened up. Our guests will be here soon.”

Freshened up? Had he called her over there to...? She didn’t get it. He’d kissed her. Was he indifferent? He didn’t seem to care that he had no clothes on or that she was so close to him. Hmm. Turning on her heels, she went back the way she’d come, picking up her shoes and hair clip on the way past.

They had to get it straight.

Her mouth wouldn't stay closed. Just a couple of yards from the door, she spun on the spot to make her declaration. "I'm just going to say it," she announced. "I'm attracted to you." Was she looking him in the eye? She had to be because she saw him blink. What the hell was she thinking telling him that at all, especially when the poor guy was naked. Still, her mouth kept going. "I'm just putting it out there. Saying—I mean I didn't know it at the event thing, and I sure didn't think much about it when I came up to apologize. I don't want you to think I orchestrated this or... To be honest, I didn't give you much thought. I never thought we'd meet, let alone... Last night, something was different, and I just want you to know so that... you know, don't feel you're abusing your power or anything... Though if you dump me and fire me in the same week, I should go on CNN or something." That was meant to be a joke, somehow, she screwed up the delivery. Shocker. In a panic, she gasped. "Not that, you know, I'd blackmail you or... whatever. We know for a fact you're dumping me in a couple of months, and that's fine, so long as you don't fire me straight after..." Her awkward laugh didn't provoke a reaction, he just stood there, looking at her. "Okay, well, I... I said it, I'm attracted to you."

Forcing her lips to stop moving, she held her breath, sucking her lower lip into her mouth. Shit, he had to say something, had to have some response... didn't he?

"Go wash up," he said, bobbing his chin that way.

Okay, so... Hmm. She started to turn, but quickly swung back around. "That's it? That's all you have to say?"

"What would you like me to say?"

Throwing it back on her seemed unfair 'cause she'd said so much and, you know, she didn't actually know what she expected of him. "I don't know, I'd just think... When a woman says she's attracted to you, shouldn't you, you know, I don't know... say thank you or something?"

"Thank you," he said, turning to peruse shirts. "Go wash up."

"Matt!" His head snapped to the side, landing his shock on her. "Sorry," she said of her strangled cry. "I just thought there

was..." Her own attention descended. "Maybe something here, that maybe you felt something, when you kissed me..."

"What I feel is irrelevant."

Well, that was an interesting statement. "Why is it irrelevant?"

"I have self-control," he said, retrieving a shirt to drape it on the bench next to his tie.

The guy wanted to get dressed, that much was obvious. The only reason he wasn't putting his clothes on was because it would mean dropping the towel. Of that she was almost sure, yet, she stayed.

"And I don't?"

"It's not your forte," he said, moving further down the closet.

"So you're being restrained for both of us? If you have to restrain yourself, that must mean you feel something."

"We've known each other less than forty-eight hours."

"Yeah, I didn't mean like emotional feelings, I meant something more... intimate."

And the minute his eyes landed on hers, she averted hers. What was she doing? How the hell did she get onto this conversation track? Her stupid mouth, that was how.

"You are treading dangerously close to the line."

"Was that a warning?" she asked. "What happened to erasing propriety?"

"You made your demands, we agreed with them. You cannot renegotiate your position now."

Yeah, and slapping sex onto the end of the deal definitely took her to sleazy. They'd worried Madelyn might try to get him into bed and there she was practically demanding he mount her.

Go wash up was his order. With nothing better to do, she left to do as told. What was the matter with her? Brazen was one thing in the office, but talking sex in his private closet? Her hormones were haywire.

ELEVEN

Because she'd thought about it before, and because drowning herself was a tempting idea, she filled the tub and soaked herself until the water went cold. Were the guests there? Was dinner underway? Didn't matter. No way would Reid come into the bathroom to hurry her while she was naked. He had more decorum than that. Until that day, she hadn't realized just how low-class and vulgar she was.

Going through the motions to get ready for whatever awaited her, she didn't think much about her outfit until she got to her shoes. Heels. Did she want to spend the evening in heels? No and they weren't going out. Putting on a dress and makeup was way further than she'd go in her own home, shoes could stay in the closet.

Voices and laughter carried as she approached the living room. People were already present. She so didn't want to deal with people.

June, Aiden, and Nazir were on the couches. Roxie was behind the bar mixing some drink and noticed her first.

"Hey!" Roxie exclaimed. "You look great." The others turned in their seats to check her out. "You want a drink?"

"Yes," she said, probably too quickly. "The stronger, the better."

"Guess Madelyn's made an impression already," Aiden said. "She's on her way. Having drinks with someone, apparently."

"Probably hoping to make Reid jealous," June said.

Something she'd learned wasn't possible. The bar was the place she wanted to be, so instead of sitting, she went to Roxie's side.

"Can you make more of that one you made yesterday?"

Her friend was curious, she'd seen that from the moment she declared her need for a drink. Maybe that was why the beauty reached over the bar to retrieve what was probably her drink to hand it over. Merci didn't even pretend to be polite and

refuse. She took the glass, retrieved the rind from the edge and gulped down what was inside.

“Someone had an interesting afternoon,” Roxie said. “Are you okay?”

“You don’t even want to know,” she murmured in response.

“Have you done the tour yet?” June called over to them.

“Nope,” Merci said, spinning around to seek another drink.

“You should use the time to look around.”

A nice bottle of Scotch. Perfect. No need to look any further. Using the same martini glass, she went over to pour herself a measure. Two fingers... no, better make it three. Who could tell in a martini glass?

Everyone was frowning at her when she turned back, sipping her drink. Whatever. It wasn’t even worth explaining.

“You know what I haven’t done for years,” she said to Roxie. “Gone dancing in a nightclub.”

Roxie’s smile was slow. “That’s a travesty.”

“I thought the same thing,” Merci said. “No one would notice if we split, would they?”

“Doubt it.”

“Whoa, hey,” Aiden said, shooting to his feet. “You can’t leave. What about dinner?”

“Right, dinner,” Roxie said, pushing out her lips. “We could go after.”

That would still mean facing Reid at the dinner table.

“Might be late. When’s last entry?”

“Oh, baby, we have keys,” Roxie said, sweeping her hair over her shoulder, relaxing her hand there to stroke her ruby. “You want me to empty the joint of customers and fill it with male strippers, we can do that too.”

The suggestion was funny. She’d never appreciated another person more. Roxie was more than just a good person, she was

perceptive, just what was required.

“You’re engaged,” Aiden said, approaching the bar. “Both of you.”

“So?” Roxie asked over her shoulder. “I didn’t say I’d fill it with male gigolos. Unless Merci needs male gigolos, do you, honey? ‘Cause I can do that too.”

Putting down the Scotch, she went over to throw both arms around Roxie. A hug to show her appreciation. Apparently, if Reid’s reaction was any indication, she’d need to pay if getting laid was her goal.

The elevator doors opened, and Madelyn exited, Reid at her side. Oh, so the drink was with someone. The guy who was supposed to be her someone. Letting go of Roxie, she returned to her Scotch. Would it be too obvious to pour more?

“Dinner’s on its way up.”

Movement behind her suggested everyone else was going somewhere. She stayed there, back to the room, and downed the rest of the Scotch in her glass.

Someone touched her back. Roxie. Thank God.

“You okay?”

“I made an idiot of myself,” she murmured, flattening her hands on the counter. “You think I’d be used to it by now.”

“If you want to get out of here, we can go. Anywhere in the world.”

Exhaling a laugh, she tipped her chin to make eye contact with the concerned woman at her side. “I’d love to meet Zairn.”

“Then let’s go,” Roxie said, stroking her back. “Trust me, he’ll love you.”

For bringing his fiancée to him? Yeah, probably. “I’d only make an idiot of myself in front of him too.”

And she had work the next day. Bills to pay. And, oh yeah, the crazy scheme meant to fool the world into thinking she and Reid were an item.

“How likely would that be? He’s used to me... Besides, I’ll be there to distract him with sex. I told you about the taking my

clothes off thing, right?”

She laughed. Either the woman or the liquor was loosening her up. Maybe a combination of both.

“Ladies?”

Nazir was waiting at the other side of the room.

“Come on,” Roxie said, interlinking their fingers to guide her toward him. She leaned in to whisper, “remember you’re the hostess.” From the blank look she got in return, Roxie elaborated, “sit opposite him and don’t hesitate to lead conversation or issue commands.”

Just at that, the elevator opened again, more trolleys, more servers. The high life.

The formal dining room was smaller than she’d expected. Just big enough for eight around a rectangular table, one at each end, two and three on each side with the place to her left vacant.

Appetizers were distributed, water and wine poured, then the servers left them alone.

“Merci,” Madelyn said from her place to the right of Reid at the head of the table. “You should introduce me to your friend.”

Should? Like it was an order, or she’d made some major faux pas? “My friend?” she asked and pointed at Roxie. “Are you talking about Roxie?”

“Madelyn,” Reid said, taking over. “That’s Roxanna Kyst.” Madelyn’s eyes narrowed in a condescending way, matched by the hitch of her chin. Perfect positioning to look down on someone like a bug. “Zairn Lomond’s fiancée.”

“Ah!” Madelyn said, smiling all of a sudden. “Zairn always had a soft spot for me.”

“Funny...” Roxie said, gesturing with her fork. “Soft has never been a problem for him when I’m around.” She breathed out a false laugh. “I guess with an attitude like yours in the vicinity, even the most virile guy would find himself limp.”

While the table couldn’t quite work out how to take that, Merci thought it was hysterical. Maybe the Scotch hadn’t been a

good idea. Her laughter amused Roxie, but no one else, especially not the guy at the head of the table.

“Sorry,” Merci said.

“Don’t apologize,” Roxie said. “I’m hilarious. Just takes some people a few swings to find my groove. Tell me about yourself Madelyn, are you married?”

“Uh... no,” Madelyn said.

They all knew that. Well, they should, she hadn’t given it much thought.

“Ring on your finger?” Roxie asked, flashing hers. Madelyn’s expression was enough of an answer. “Merci and I are going to tear up Crimson this weekend, you should come with us.”

Excellent plan. At least, in that minute, it sounded like an excellent plan.

“The nightclub?” Madelyn asked. “I prefer the wine bar.”

“Okay, well, we can do that too,” Roxie said. “The Ruby Room is quieter... If quiet is your thing. Security goes nuts when I sit in the wine bar.”

“Yes, there was some... spectacle, about your relationship, wasn’t there?”

A minute ago, Madelyn wanted them to believe she had no idea who Roxie was, now suddenly she was talking about a spectacle. Obviously, she knew more than she’d let on.

“Zairn likes spectacle,” Roxie said.

“So do I,” Merci said in solidarity. “What you did was romantic. Going up there to declare your love for him.”

“Let’s not forget he declared his love first.”

On that she was a little hazier, but Merci nodded along like she was clued in.

“That’s a surprise,” Madelyn said, interrupting their smiles. “Reid is so private. He detests any kind of scandal.”

“Ah, well,” Aiden said, injecting a laugh. “We compromise for those we love, don’t we?”

“We shouldn’t,” Madelyn said, taking her focus to the man at the head of the table. “I didn’t.”

She didn’t even mean to look at Roxie, but her friend offered a roll of her eyes, which was appreciated. It was going to be a long night.

TWELVE

Dinner was easy to get through. Business was the main topic of discussion, which was led mostly by June, Aiden and Nasir. Reid commented occasionally, and Madelyn spent the majority of it making eyes at Reid. Yep, she was a woman smitten.

Some part of Merci pitied the woman's dedication, another envied her knowing Reid in a way she never would.

Straight after the dessert plates were cleared, Roxie dragged her away from the table and told her they were going to Crimson. No complaints from her.

That was how she found herself lying in bed with Roxie somewhere around Sunday lunchtime. Might have been later, there wasn't a clock around.

There was a phone, which she knew because it woke her up.

"Mm, what?" Roxie grumbled, hinting she was as irritated about the intrusion.

"What?" the male voice asked. "I called you this morning."

"You're in Europe."

"Yeah," the guy said. Was that Zairn? "And what's our rule about picking up the phone?"

"I didn't ignore you," Roxie said. "I was sleeping." The covers moved. "Did I drunk call you last night?"

"Yep," he said, drawing out the word.

"From our New Year screw-room," she said and sighed. "I remember, I couldn't get my boobs back in my dress."

"That's not what I assign security for," Zairn said. Recalling the call she'd gotten from Roxie for help, Merci laughed. Not loud. At least, she didn't think it was loud. "You're not alone?"

"No, and I didn't call security. Merci helped me." Roxie nudged her. "You don't care if Z sees your boobs, right? Are you naked?"

"I have no idea," Merci mumbled into the pillow.

“Oh my God,” Zairn murmured.

“Turn over and say hello,” Roxie said, nudging her again.

Merci raised a hand in a half attempt at a wave.

“You know, Lola, the point wasn’t to abduct the man’s fiancée.”

“She’s fun! Who knew? Besides, we were just enjoying ourselves. No harm. You know, Merci hadn’t been in a nightclub for years. Surely my ambassadorship requires I reacquaint her, right?”

“Babe, I love it when you party. I love it when you’re happy. Reid and I are not the same.”

“Has he been bitching?” Roxie asked with immediate offense. “That guy is some piece of work. How can you be on his side? You’re not on his side. You’re on our side.” She got a pat through the covers. “Zairn’s on our side, don’t worry, honey.”

“Why are there sides, Lo? What happened to all that team stuff you were selling?”

“Doesn’t really feel like your friend is on our side,” Roxie said. “I think he likes being between two women.”

“And you decided this after one meal?”

“Merci was having a bad day and it’s a big adjustment going from single to engaged in a day. And you know all the attention we got after our engagement news. Merci might not be world famous, but she is RCI famous and those are the people she has to face every day.”

“Is that why after spending Thursday night at the club, you went out Friday and Saturday night too?”

“Tracking me, Casanova? I thought this was my home. What happened to, ‘*Treat everything that’s mine as yours*’ huh?”

“You’re picking a fight with me, Lo.”

“I am not picking a fight,” Roxie said, though it kind of sounded like she was. “I’m having a good time with my friend, who just so happens to be engaged to your friend. There were no guys involved. Look...” Merci tilted back a little to see Roxie

waving her phone around in the air. “No naked men. No cock involved at all. Is that what you think?”

“You think if I thought that, I’d be on the other side of the world? If I didn’t trust my people to look after you, I’d have got on a plane the minute I knew you were drinking.”

“Trust your people?” Roxie asked, a little deflated.

“Sure,” he said. “Remember what I told you about leaving drinks and going back to them? There are people whose sole job it is to keep you safe... you know that, baby. You know you’re the most important ruby in my crown... I would never let anyone violate or hurt you, no one touches the Empress. Except the Emperor. Not like you would choose to be with another guy, you’ve got the jackpot, can’t get better than me, right?”

“Damn straight,” Roxie said, an obvious smile in her tone. “So slick, Skippy.”

The saucy slant to those words and the movement in the bed gave Merci the signal to slither out from under the covers. As it turned out, she wasn’t naked and wore a guy’s shirt. Zairn’s? Maybe.

Roxie was laughing as Merci crept out of the bedroom and slid the doors closed behind her. If she could find a bathroom, she could shower. If she had clothes.

There were clothes. Lots of clothes. Somewhere. As suggested the previous week, they’d gone shopping on Saturday. The luxury stores made her eyes bug, but Roxie told her it was necessary and that every woman deserved a *Pretty Woman* moment.

She dreaded to think what the final bill would be. Every time she asked or told Roxie she’d repay it, her friend just said it was her and Zairn’s engagement present. Not much of a present for Reid, and the engagement wasn’t real, but she tried not to say that in public.

The floor was cool under her feet. Coffee could come before showers and clothes. As she passed the elevator, the button flashed. When it started chiming, she paused. What was that? Why was it making noises? See? The damn things were possessed.

In hopes of making it stop, she jabbed the button. Silence. Thank God. Before she could turn away, the engraved doors slid apart.

What was...?

Oh, shit.

Right there, Madelyn Massey, as perfect and poised as ever.

Merci wasn't wearing pants, hadn't brushed her hair or teeth, and probably wore smeared remnants of the previous night's makeup in all the wrong places.

When Madelyn noticed her, and the state she was in, the woman was polite enough to seal her lips, probably over the laugh that wanted to burst free.

"Good morning," she said in the worse attempt at acting normal ever.

"It's two thirty," Madelyn said, exiting the elevator. "In the afternoon."

"Okay," Merci said, licking her lips. "Then good afternoon."

When was the last time she slept until two thirty in the afternoon? College? Wow. Though, in her defense, the sun was up by the time they got to bed.

"Is there somewhere we can talk?"

"Us?" Merci asked, pointing at herself. "Reid isn't here and Roxie's in the bedroom."

"I came to see you," Madelyn said, setting her off-guard with her humility. "Please. It's important."

"I was just about to make coffee."

Whether Madelyn knew the way or not, she followed as Merci led to the kitchen. She probably knew Zairn and Roxie's place better than Reid's. Going through the motions of making coffee, she stole the occasional glance at Madelyn who just sat perched on a stool, trying to maintain a smile and make it seem like she was comfortable.

It was very obvious that she wasn't.

“Roxie and I should’ve invited you to join us last night,” Merci said, taking cups from a cabinet. “You moved in downstairs yesterday, didn’t you?”

“Today, actually,” Madelyn said, changing the angle of her purse on the counter. “My things are being unpacked as we speak.”

Of course, because who unpacked for themselves? Not that she could cast aspersions, her closet had been packed and unpacked before she even knew she was moving.

“It’s a wonderful place, Crimson is really welcoming.”

“Yes, I’ve used Crimson services for years. Zairn means a lot to Reid.”

“Right,” Merci said, forgetting herself for a second. What an idiot! Madelyn wasn’t new to Reid’s life. No, that was her. She was the newbie. “Maybe we could get a drink another time. Roxie’s an amazing hostess.”

“Oh,” Madelyn said on a semi-laugh. “It’s safe to say my days of dancing in nightclubs are firmly in my past.”

Okay, well, she didn’t have to be so snooty about it. The suggestion wasn’t actually to go clubbing, a drink could be had in a quiet corner. Roxie loved dancing, but the Ruby Room wasn’t like a packed, heaving, sweaty dancefloor. The woman was a demi-celeb, and her man gave her what she needed, while keeping her safe. Something they were reassuring each other about in bed that very minute, if the call had stayed on the same track.

“Just an idea,” she said, going to the fridge to retrieve cream.

“That’s actually the reason I’m here.”

Wondering what she was about to hear, bracing herself wasn’t easy with an audience. “Okay.”

“You and Reid,” Madelyn said, wincing. “It won’t work out, honey.” Whoa, unexpected much? Both the “*honey*” and the sentiment. “I know this looks suspect, that I show up, and almost immediately warn you off. You just don’t know him like I do.” Madelyn leaned back, her fingertips resting on her

collarbone. “Four years with him, honey. Four years. I know him better than he knows himself. I know what he needs.”

“And it’s not me,” she said, distracting herself by returning to the coffee machine.

“He’s a complex man with complex needs,” Madelyn said as Merci poured the coffee. “He’s a difficult man to read and a difficult one to please. His work is important to him, it’s his life. He puts all of himself into it.”

“And you would support that?”

“I did support that, for four years.”

“Does it sting?” Merci asked, moving around the kitchen island with two cups of coffee.

The woman was no idiot, a wary air grew around her. “What do you mean?”

Keeping their eyes locked, she leaned closer. “That I’m the one sucking his cock now.” Madelyn blinked. “You had your chance with him. You blew it.”

“I didn’t—”

“You can come for him. You can give it your best shot. I trust him.”

Because he’d been adamant about not getting back in Madelyn’s bed at the crazy suggestion meeting that landed them all in this mess.

“You don’t have a clue who he is. You think you can keep him interested? Young and perky doesn’t do it for him.”

“I do it for him,” she said with a hundred percent confidence despite knowing it was a lie. “He wants me. He could’ve had you and chose to let you go.” She straightened. “Is that why you’re here? To win him back? It’s a waste of time. You must know how he feels about people who waste his time.” A total guess, but who liked anyone wasting their time? “Is that what this deal hinges on? Him getting back with you?” The woman seemed off-balance. Not in a caught way, more surprised like... Merci exhaled. “You didn’t know I knew about the intellectual property deal.” What did that say about their relationship? Something reminded her of what she’d overheard

from Reid's office. "You didn't talk business with him? Hell, maybe I can't talk stocks and shares and boardroom meetings, but I can care. Is that beyond you?"

"You don't even know me," Madelyn snapped, her perfect mask slipping. "You don't know what we were."

"And you don't know what we are." Curious, she probed. "Did you think you'd come here and convince me to leave him? How much would I love him if I just gave up?"

Okay, so like she'd told him in the closet, emotions weren't involved... or were they? She cared about her people, loved her job. Standing there, looking at Madelyn, she got a new appreciation for the situation. Madelyn Massey was willing to fight hard, to change herself, reinvent herself, to recapture the heart of the man she loved. Was it obsession? They couldn't be soulmates, or Reid missed the memo. Sometimes maybe guys did. Who knew?

Merci wasn't in it for the love of a man, her love for people in the company motivated her. They may never know what those at the top did to get what they needed. In fact, if the RCI employees never learned of the engagement ruse, she and Reid had done their job right.

"You can't love him," Madelyn said. "You don't know him."

"Know he was going to cancel your wedding just a few weeks before, did you?" Madelyn didn't need to answer. "Evidently, you don't know him." Just when Madelyn thought to reply, Merci cut in. "Roxie and I have plans." She stepped back. "If you don't mind."

It took a deliberate side nod to clue the speechless Madelyn in. Clearly offended, she snatched up her purse and stormed off. Merci followed behind, carrying the coffee. She stood and watched Madelyn get into the elevator and waited for the doors to close.

"Of course you realize..." Roxie's voice carried along the corridor from the bedroom threshold where she stood, "this means war."

She went to join her friend and handed over one of the coffees. "There's a spa here, right? A hair salon or something."

“Mm,” Roxie said, blowing on her coffee. “Both. Why?”

“Because,” Merci said, raising her cup to her sly lips. “We’re at war.”

Throwing herself into the role, Roxie laughed, tossing her head back, giving it the full evil villain hair shaking cackle. Thank God for Roxie. And thank God she’d finally caught up. Everything processed, Merci knew what she had to do.

THIRTEEN

Purpose felt good. Determination right. Coming at this from a reactor role would never work, Merci had to be proactive. To follow her own advice.

Monday morning was full of appointments, she had others in the afternoon too, but skipped lunch to free a window for her mission.

Jogging up the stairs to the executive floor got her blood pumping, perfect adrenaline for her plan. Striding out of the stairwell, her aim was the man. Their leader. Their boss. Her fiancée. This was it. People tracked her movement, she sensed, but ignored, them. Most of those at his dedicated reception noticed her too. Tara, at the end closest to the office, stood up.

Ascending the shallow stairs to their level, she saw his office was empty. From the corner of her eye, she noted there were people in his private boardroom, but didn't turn, just kept on going. Shit, this could blow up in her face.

"I need him," she said while trotting past Tara.

The penthouse allowed her access, now was the real test, would his office allow her entry too?

Despite the flutter of anxiety, she rested her thumb on the lock and held her breath. Green. Yes! Good.

Okay.

She knew that. Was cool. Collected.

Going across the vast room, she stood in the center, looking down on the boardroom. Until that moment, she hadn't realized it was sunken, half a dozen steps lower than the office.

Tara was already inside, crossing to Reid at the top of the table. The score of people around it were reading something. Some papers. When Tara got to Reid, she dipped to murmur in his ear. His attention came up to land on her in the office.

Her smile was less than ecstatic, she played it cool. Damn, was she even capable? Rather than be happy to see her, he frowned. If he told Tara to get rid of her, that would be it. And it was as he rose from the table saying something to those around

it that she noticed Madelyn seated at the position on his right. The woman was everywhere. Pulling this off meant Merci had to step up her game. Seriously step it up.

He ascended and the glass panel between the two spaces slid open to allow him into the office. It closed behind him. Good. Though they were still on show. She didn't have to look to know many people were observing the moment.

"What's going on?" he asked, coming closer, as impatient as ever. "You can't walk in and demand my attention in the middle of a business day."

Deliberately walking one foot in front of the other, she pronounced the sway of her hips. "I think I can," she teased, noting the twitch at the corner of his eye as she put her hands on his chest. "Can we close the blinds so we're not on show to the world?"

Whether he'd noticed or not, she didn't know, her attention was on her hands... on him. He raised his wrist, pressed something on the watch and the room went black. Plunged into darkness, she inhaled, suddenly afraid the walls were closing in. The lights flickered on a second later, too bright, except she forgot that when the heat of his body permeated her. God, she was right up close. Against him.

His finger slid under her jaw to bring her eyes to his. "You're afraid of the dark?"

"No," she said. Raising her chin to unhook it from his digit, she put some space between them. "I'm sorry for this weekend."

"There's only so much you can learn about a person from paper," he said, retreating toward the desk. "Consensus seems to be our relationship being on the rocks could work in our favor."

Why did that hurt?

"We're on the rocks?"

He sank into his chair. "My fiancée disappeared from the dinner party we were hosting and didn't return home for four nights."

Okay, well, when he put it that way.

“I was at Crimson,” she said, tiptoeing closer.

“I know.”

“With Roxie.”

“I know.”

“Nothing happened with... I mean there were no other men involved.”

“I know.”

So he knew everything? If it was that much of a problem, why didn't he get her? “You could've called,” she said. “If you wanted me to come home.”

“Is that what you were waiting for? The chase?” The slight shake of his head didn't give much away. “One of us misinterpreted this. Both of us maybe.”

“Can you blame me if I did?” she asked, rounding the desk to prop herself on the edge. “It's been... Since this began, I've been treated like a thing. I wasn't even involved in the decision to move me from my apartment to yours.”

“That did—”

“It doesn't matter,” she said, showing him a palm. “I don't care about that.” Fortifying herself, facing her humiliation was going to be difficult, she'd ramp up to it. “I was embarrassed my suggestion was ignored. Embarrassed by the way I... what happened in the closet. Your people do a lot of talking for you and all the decisions seem to happen when I'm not in the room. That first night, when I did try to contribute, to come up with something that could make this easier for both of us, I was dismissed.” As ever, when she stole a quick glance at him, hoping for a reaction, she saw only a man composed, cool, at ease, unyielding. “You kissed me.”

“And I apologize that sent mixed signals. It was intended to demonstrate your suggestion was absurd.” Way to sugarcoat it. “Madelyn's interruption...” Cut him off before he could make his point, she guessed. “Was opportune.”

“Because it saved you from laughing in my face,” she muttered, imagining how mortifying that would've been.

So much for her mission. The new information sort of scrubbed that idea.

“Because it saved me from admitting my mistake.”

It took a second to comprehend the words. “Mistake? What was your mistake?”

“Rather than absurd the idea became... tempting.”

A surge of ridiculous hope fired her adrenaline. “Tempting?”

“To call you mine...” His fingers curled around the arms of his chair. “I don’t lose control.”

And he had? Or he’d thought about it? Why did that excite her so much?

“But in the closet you were...”

“Harsh, and I apologize for that. This would be easier if we kept a clear uncrossable line between us. If we ignored whatever we might... feel.”

As she’d said in the closet. “Are you attracted to me?”

If he didn’t want to say it out loud, like she had, he could still give her a straight answer. One way or another.

Though he paused, he did eventually nod. Maybe he read her elation because he became more serious. “Merci, the best way to protect ourselves, to achieve our original goal, is to ignore whatever this might be.”

Of course, he was right. If they ignored their hormones, their feelings wouldn’t get involved. Unfortunately for him, she didn’t find it so easy to subdue her honest reactions. His walls kept him safe, or they had. She couldn’t claim to be sorry he’d admitted the truth, even if it did end up damaging one or both of them.

Whatever the reason for his honesty, it prompted her mouth to action. “Tell me what to do.”

His attention ascended to hers, she was looking him in the eye, never more sure. “Excuse me?”

Sinking to her knees, she rested a hand over his, clutching the arm of the chair. “I understand you can’t trust me with your

rules. With all your rules. We hardly know each other and you have a lot to lose. You don't have to tell me everything, I can follow an instruction. One at a time. I don't need to know the larger reason."

"You don't know what you're saying."

"Don't dismiss me," she said. "Please. I will show you can trust me, and I want to trust you. The next two months can be excruciating for both of us or we can help each other. This is for you. For RCI. I give you, not your people, you, a hundred percent control." His gaze lit, just like before, in the closet. Her gut clenched. "Please... sir."

That had worked in the closet too.

With his lips sealed, he inhaled through his nose. "I can take control. Issue instructions. But you follow them at your will." She nodded. "You understand this is a symbiotic process?" Again, she nodded. For a moment, he considered her, then he was shaking his head. "No. We can't."

"We're two consenting adults. We can do anything we damn well please," she said, sex suddenly on her mind. "We can make our own rules."

Their eyes locked. His appeared darker, hungrier than before. Did his mind go to the same place as hers?

"Do you see where we are?" he asked.

She glanced around. "Your office."

"My office. My building. My company." Was he implying she wanted to take any of that away from him? "Do you know how much work it takes to get to the top? The dedication? The certainty? How hard you have to work? How many people you have to step on?"

"No," she said. "I don't want to take any of your success from you."

"That is not my point," he said, his demeanor hardening. "I like control. I crave control. It can become an obsession. An addiction. I like being the boss. In charge. Decisive. Pushing the limits. Going farther than I should. Taking risks."

So he'd take advantage of her? Yeah, as much as he wanted to make himself clear, she wanted to do the same. "I like it when you give me orders. Guide me, one step at a time, one instruction at a time. I will follow. I want to follow your instructions. Your orders. Your commands."

His hand leapt from under hers to grab her chin, pulling it just a fraction higher. "You can't possibly know what you'd be signing yourself over to."

"Teach me," she whispered, relishing the strength of his grip digging into her jaw.

Of its own accord, her fingers slithered onto his leg, ascending one gliding inch at a time. When his other hand snatched hers, she gasped.

"Not until you're told," he said in a dark rumble. "You understand?"

She nodded. "We'll get there?"

What was with her sudden urge to know sex was on the table?

"That's my decision," he said, which only tightened the ball of urgency in her stomach.

The more he took charge, the more she ached to comply. "Yes, sir."

His hand loosened from her face, his forefinger skimmed to the front of her chin then turned to drift up to the apple of her cheek and down her jaw again. "If you give this to me, I may push you. Hard." She swallowed, but that didn't clear the pulse hammering in her throat. "Understand your power." Confusion must have crossed her features. "You say no and this stops. You walk away, it stops. If it's too much, if you're uncomfortable, you are never unsafe. Do you understand?" Unsure, she sucked her bottom lip. His thumb came to rest at the front of her chin, pinching it to fix her gaze. "Look me in the eye and ask your question."

"I get turned on when I look into your eyes," she said, figuring honesty was a good way to go. "I don't know how you do it, I just... it gets harder to breathe and all I can think about

is..." She blinked, wondering where that line was. "What you'd feel like inside me."

"Be patient," was all he said, taking the confession in his stride. "I have to be careful how far we take this. It can't get messy. We have to walk away clean in eight weeks. It's about more than just the physical." His eyes narrowed. "Do you understand that?"

"Yes."

"It's my responsibility to look after you, to care for you. To ensure your needs are met and only what's best for you is allowed to happen."

What were they talking about? Their relationship? God, it was hot that he was just so damn steady, so sure.

"Can I ask questions?"

"With permission," he said, stroking her cheek with the back of his forefinger again. "Go ahead."

"Can we have dinner tonight?" She paused. "Alone?"

"No."

Disappointment was bitter. "A drink? At home?"

"There's a reception at the opening of the new children's wing tonight." Oh, well, at least he wasn't refusing because he didn't want to. "Be ready by eight thirty."

Be ready? That meant she was going. "What should I wear?"

"Whatever I choose."

Wow, uh... Damn, she shouldn't be so aroused by his attention to detail. It was the anticipation. The unknown. The novelty. Would it always feel so... thrilling?

The cellphone on his desk began to buzz. He didn't flinch. "Look at me."

Still, she avoided his gaze. When she did as told, there was something different there. Maybe it was her. He knew now why she struggled, and he was still asking her to do it. Damn, he'd said if he decided. Did that mean he'd resist this? Was it as difficult for him? Did he want her at all?

Her teeth clenched. This was new to her, they were finding their way. He had control, she'd given it to him and had to be patient.

Something behind her clicked, she didn't know what.

"Call Elwood when you're ready to go home," he said. "He takes you everywhere. Security will escort you too."

"Security?"

"You're safe at home. In this building and at Crimson. That's it."

"You got me security?"

"They're under instruction to cooperate with Zairn's people. You and Roxie will be kept safe." She had thought he didn't like Roxie. Yet, the men must have coordinated if their people were working in tandem. Some part of her heart melted. Maybe he saw it because he softened a fraction and stroked her cheek. "Go back to work."

"No reward?" she asked in a tease, stretching her back as she rose while staying bent over, getting closer.

He stood, stealing her breath, forcing her straight, hooking an arm around her waist to clamp her body against his.

"Be good and you might earn one later," he said into her hair. "Back to the seventh."

And that was exactly what she did. Walking away from him, she cast a glance over her shoulder. Her fiancé... she almost couldn't believe it herself.

FOURTEEN

The dress was gorgeous. Hanging front and center at her side of the closet after she got done blow-drying, it stunned her to a stop. Black silk. Backless, with a slit that ran from hem almost all the way to her hip.

Slipping it on felt decadent, naughty, like she was an imposter in that life. The jewels laid out on her vanity were an indulgence, one she wasn't sure she could live up to.

No bra made sense, but there were no panties either. Was she supposed to select them herself or was he sending her a message?

Eight thirty was his instruction, so she timed her exit from the closet wondering where her date might be. She hadn't seen him at all since returning to the apartment. That made the surprise of him standing in front of the elevator decked out in a tux all the more surprising and alluring. How did he do that without access to his own closet?

He watched her. Every step down the hallway to right in front of him, he watched her, absorbing every nuance as she inspected and admired him in return.

"Good evening," she said after a couple of moments of silence.

"You look incredible."

A compliment. It hadn't occurred to her he'd be the type. Usually, his words were few, but, boy, did he know how to use them to maximum effect.

"Thank you," she said, an immature frisson of excitement bubbling through her. Her smile was broad and glued in place, had she ever been so eager to spend time with a man? "Still don't measure up to you though."

Restraining her admiration wasn't easy. Her hands wanted to explore, her mouth too, but when he wanted that, when it was allowed, he'd tell her.

"Your beauty surpasses all. I wonder if we should go out at all, you'll put every other woman to shame." Whether that was a

joke or genuine, it flattered her. “We should leave before I change my mind.”

Change his mind about...? Going out? Staying in sounded like a good idea, even if it did detract from his other commitments.

When he turned to press the elevator button, she stepped back. “I’ll meet you downstairs.”

His brows rose when she retreated another few inches. “Downstairs?” His inspection grew acute. “June mentioned your aversion to elevators.” She nodded. It seemed stupid to walk away from a man she was so eager to be close to. “Where does it come from?”

“I don’t like small spaces,” she said, shrugging off a shiver. “Being out of control.” The elevator doors opened. “Not out of control like us out of control, but... I spent ten hours in a stuck elevator when I was a teenager...” Licking her dry lips, she didn’t know if anxiety or embarrassment was causing the tremble in her skin. “I’m sorry. I know it probably sounds insane.”

“Would you permit me to try something?” he asked, opening his hand to her.

Her hesitation wasn’t rooted in any lack of trust in him. The aversion was just so strong, so practiced, it was what she relied on. Still, she had promised to follow his instructions, that was the first real test of her trust in him. Wouldn’t it be just her luck for the thrill to fall apart before it got a chance to start?

Sliding her hand into his, she focused on that point of contact, of touching him, nothing else. With adrenaline pumping, his sudden yank caught her off guard. His free hand scooped around the side of her head to angle it up and he was kissing her.

More than before, it was different to be upright, enjoying him. Her balance was off, she stumbled, but he was there to catch her. There to pull her body to his. Dipping low to push harder, he conveyed his control, his dominance, his superiority. The slick heat of his tongue on hers was hypnotizing. The need. The desire. The want. The world moved beneath her feet, yet it faded away too.

Need was too weak a word. It underestimated her true craving to be satisfied by the man holding her, taking from her

what he wanted. Was it enough for him? She wanted more. Wanted to follow him to the bedroom, to keep going, to be joined with him in the night, through to the day. What would it take to tempt him there?

Her forearms were pressed against him, trapped there by the force of his embrace. She wanted the freedom to touch him, to coil her arms around his neck and—

He broke away and she was left there, just like before, eyes closed, hanging in midair, trying to finish her fantasy.

Their mouths were no longer joined, but he still held her, the heat of his humid breath warming her hairline for a few beats before he eased her out of his arms.

“Are you ready?”

The rasp in his voice suggested the kiss was still going for him too. Maybe that was just another foolish hope. Forcing her eyes open, she blinked a few times before registering they were in the lobby. What the...?

Her attention flew to him in shock. They'd used the elevator. His kiss had distracted her from the where. It distracted her from their surroundings. From the fear.

Exhaling a short laugh, she smiled. “I'll have to take you everywhere with me.”

No other man's kiss had so completely erased the rest of the world.

Threading his fingers between hers, he led her out of the building, into the car waiting at the curb. Elwood offered a smile as she passed him and closed the door once they were both safe inside. It wasn't her usual car. This one was bigger with bench seats facing each other. Still, there was space for a cabinet at the side. On top was an ice bucket holding a bottle of champagne.

“Champagne?” Reid asked.

She shook her head. “No thank you.”

“You don't like champagne?”

“I've never tried it,” she said. “Anytime we were celebrating anything, we just got whatever was alcoholic and at a

discount. And I don't think it's a good idea for me to drink when we're out together, I don't want to embarrass you."

"You don't have to worry about that," he said, breaking the seal on the champagne. "You can try this."

"Remember the first time you laid eyes on me?" she asked. "Remember I was questioning you in a room full of people? My mouth opens and disaster spills out."

"It is my responsibility to learn how I can help you," he said, tossing the trash then working the cork out of the bottle. "Our arrangement doesn't involve changing the fiber of who you are. If you have questions, ask them. A valid, relevant point? Make it." He paused to look at her. "I trust Miss Kyst's influence hasn't tempted you into the crude?"

Thinking of her words to Madelyn in Roxie's kitchen, she cringed. Though that was necessary. Bluntness for the sake of high impact.

"I won't be crude," she said.

In the right moment, the right setting, she could be as dirty mouthed as the next person. Her mouth often worked faster than her mind but didn't tend toward the foul.

He filled a flute and offered it to her. She waited a moment and realized he wasn't pouring another.

"You're not drinking with me?"

"There won't be time," he said. "We can share. Try it."

A new experience, interesting for her and for him it seemed. The keen taper of his eyes awaited her response.

Raising the glass to her lips, she sipped. The dry, bubbly alcohol stimulated her tongue, dancing and fizzing like her insides felt being alone with Reid.

She nodded, offering him the glass. "It's good."

"I don't know that it's anyone's favorite," he said, taking a drink almost like he was just being polite, before giving it back to her. "New experiences can be unexpected."

In more ways than one. "Do you support this hospital?"

If she didn't keep the conversation going, she'd be likely to do something crazy. Being in a confined space didn't give her much room to reconsider any hasty moves.

"I donated to the fund for the children's wing, yes," he said, retrieving his phone from an inside pocket. "They struggled to get what they needed, I took them over the mark."

"That's great," she said. "It must feel good to give to such worthy causes. "Did you have an ill friend or family member?"

"No."

"What drew you to—"

"Madelyn," he said.

Right. Yeah. That could be... She felt sick. The champagne wasn't quite as exciting as it had been. She reached over to put it next to the ice bucket.

"You were together for a long time."

The night went from shiny and exciting to something of a drag. The cause was worthy and of course he should be a part of it.

"Yes," he said, distracted by something in his phone. "A friend of hers was on the fundraising committee, I believe. She heard of their trouble to gain traction. It was important to her, so she got a blank check."

They'd been together for years and he'd proposed. Some part of him must have loved her. Must have wanted to spend his life with her. If his friends hadn't been vocal with their disapproval, would he have gone through with it? Would they still be together? Married? Parents?

"She should be with you tonight. She was an integral part of it happening."

"We're picking her up."

Another surprise. If she hadn't gone to the office that day and injected herself into the situation, would Reid have gone to the event with Madelyn? Alone with Madelyn? What would the society pages think of seeing the power couple together once more? She'd never felt more like an intruder, in the way of something that may be inevitable.

“I’m sorry if I... If you’d rather go to the event with her alone, I completely understand.”

“You’re here now.”

Not the most resounding argument in favor of her presence. “We can stop the car,” she said, shifting forward to look around for anything that looked like a button to open the privacy screen to the driver. “I know my way around the city.”

Her preoccupation was interrupted when he took her hand. Her left hand. He examined it, righting the angle of the ring on her finger.

“You are my fiancée.”

“I know,” she said, relaxing. “But I... You know, I’m not really, and if seeing Madelyn again has... Sometimes we think we feel one way and then something reminds us of how things used to be.”

“Do you miss your life how it was?” he asked, returning his phone to his pocket. “You will have it back in a few weeks.”

“I wasn’t talking about me. Yes, it’s been a whirlwind, but I’ve experienced so much already. Meeting you, and Roxie, you’re incredible people and—”

“Stop.” She did. The cocoon of the darkened space heightened his intensity. “Are you withdrawing your consent?”

“My consent? No,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m giving you an out. Madelyn is a beautiful woman. Smart. Probably accomplished. I don’t want to get in between anything that—”

“Stop,” he said again. “You value Roxanna’s counsel?” She nodded. “The night she showed up, she told us to know each other inside and out. We don’t have that yet. You must remember your role tonight.” To be fake. “You are my shield. A shield for all those people you want to protect at RCI. Madelyn is everything you said, but she’s also my past.”

“She’s hot, rich, and entitled,” she murmured, recalling Zairn’s words.

“Yes, that last one especially, which means you have to be entitled too.” The idea of swanning around exuding superiority wasn’t appealing. “To me, Merci.” Had he read her confusion?

Probably, she spent most of her time around him confused. “You are the fiancée. You are my future.” According to the lie. “You can’t be meek or uncertain. You can’t second guess yourself. The woman invited to do this spoke out in a room full of people. Your suggestion was made after walking in on a meeting you were never invited to. You could’ve lost your job both times, but you took a risk. You stood up for yourself. Madelyn will walk all over you if you let her. I need you to be strong. As bold as you were the day we met.”

Confidence grew in the discovery of his support. “I just had to know you weren’t having second thoughts.”

Because when faced with Madelyn one on one, she’d had no problem putting the woman in her place then kicking her out of Roxie’s apartment.

“No,” he said. “It’s your responsibility to sell this. Tonight is crucial.”

It was their first night out together as a couple. All eyes would be on them. Madelyn’s too.

“I won’t let you down.”

“I believe you won’t,” he said, brushing a curled finger down her cheek. “Would you like me to arrange to have Roxie at the event tonight? I should have asked earlier.”

She shook her head. “I don’t need my friend. I have my fiancé.”

“And now Roxie is in my head, I have to ask, do you like to dance?”

“Yes.”

“Are you happy to drink champagne this evening or would you like something else? There will be an open bar.”

“Champagne is fine. It’s easier.”

“You’ll get what you want, Merci, not what is easier. Do you prefer to take my hand or my arm?”

Fixating on the mire of his enthralling eyes, she was getting used to the comfort and arousal she found there. “You’re in control, sir.”

His head tilted slightly. “Everywhere?”

“Everywhere.”

“Any allergies?” She shook her head. “Health conditions.” Other than her elevator phobia, no. Another head shake. “Hard limits?”

That took her thinking in a salacious direction. “I don’t know.”

“Then we better come up with a safe word.”

FIFTEEN

When her chin rose without his assistance, his lips parted. Usually, his focus stayed on hers, but in that moment, he was distracted by her mouth. Slowing her breathing, she tried to keep it steady. Heat filled her head, making it heavy, unbalanced. She wanted him to follow through on whatever was in his mind. Whatever he was thinking, she wanted a demonstration. Right there in the back of the car. Who cared that they were on their way to pick up Madelyn? Let her watch. Let her witness what she'd lost.

That wasn't fair. The woman had her heart broken. Maybe after four years with Reid, she'd feel the same way about losing him. They'd only been "together" for a few days, yet already she loathed the day she'd lose him.

"Matt," she whispered.

No shock or outrage this time, his hand drifted down her face until his fingers curled around her chin. Easing her just a little higher, just a little closer, holding her at an angle that was just a little uncomfortable.

"If I satisfy myself in you, will this go away?"

Whatever *this* was, she didn't know and wasn't capable of caring beyond her desire for gratification. Whatever he wanted, she couldn't imagine denying him.

"I've never felt like this," she confessed in a whisper. "I want to be everything. I want to please you." Closing her eyes, her head would've fallen back if he didn't still have hold of her. "God, it turns me on to think of pleasing you. Of giving all of myself to you."

"This is dangerous," he muttered, the texture of his breath on her lips a moment before they met for the shortest second. "We can't lose ourselves in this. We have a goal."

To strengthen RCI. Even that, she found herself more than invested in succeeding, not only for the greater good, but for the simple pleasure of pleasing the man.

"One minute at a time," she murmured. "We take it one second at a time."

Because already it felt like each and every second with him would be one to relish.

Was this crazy? She didn't know what was going on, what she'd agreed to, what it would be like to let another person be in charge of everything. Already life felt lighter. Other men could exploit the role. Use it as power rather than play. Reid wouldn't. That was obvious. How? She didn't know. Maybe because he had power in other areas of his life. With him, she felt safe. Maybe other women felt that way before embarking on relationships that became abusive, but Reid had already told her she could walk away any time. And her apartment was still there. Roxie was still there. Her safety nets were in place, not that she needed them.

The car stopped. She might have expected him to let her go, to put space between them. Instead, he kissed her again. A light press that heralded another. Short, sweet, yet firing her desperation. His tongue dipped into her mouth on the third and her lips parted to accept him deeper.

All she wanted in that moment was him. Their kiss. Their bodies acting on the endorphins propelling them into an abyss of passion. Grabbing for his thigh, her nails dug into him as she fought not to take more than was allowed.

Begging more with the advance of her tongue, she loved how he battled back, forcing her into submission. Curling her fingers into his lapel to pull him closer, even as she felt his form resist, more was her goal. More.

"Stop." Stealing his mouth, he dipped his attention back and low. "Shit, Reid, get it together," he whispered to himself.

"Matt," she whimpered, pressing herself against him.

Peeling her fingers from his lapel, he took control. "No," he said, capturing her hand in his to raise her knuckles to his lips. "Not yet."

She wanted to ask when, but it would only sound petulant. That was what she felt inside, the need to pout and sulk because she wasn't getting what she wanted. The night was important. The cause. The appearance for the crowd. For Madelyn.

"You have to go in to get her," she said, smoothing his lapel, noticing the creases on his pants. "I'm sorry."

Smoothing those led to a hyper awareness of what lay beneath the fabric, his hard thigh reminded her of the closet. The towel. The body.

“I started it,” he said, his fingers sliding over hers to stall them. “Look at me.” She did. It was like the more commands he gave, the more her body craved them. “I want you. You understand that.” She nodded. “But this doesn’t have to go anywhere. Not anywhere we don’t want.”

She got it. Seeing a gentler side to him, a more open side was a privilege. Her lips curled. Showing him the truth of herself, her vulnerabilities, was so much easier when honesty existed between them.

Guidance. Direction. Orders. Whatever he wanted to give, she’d take. “Tell me what to do.”

“Tempt. Tease. Test my control.” He watched the slide of her tongue across her lip. “Be mine.”

“Yours,” she said.

A lump of unexpressed emotion lodged in her throat. Excitement. Trepidation. Elation. Arousal. Terror. Anticipation. So much.

He didn’t have to say more, she got it. Flirting was allowed, even if not with words, there were other avenues to explore. But she was engaged. To him. It wasn’t about being a slut or offering herself to any man in her vicinity. He wanted to be enticed. Yet, he set the parameters, she had to tempt him into relaxing them. To tease until he wanted her too much to say no.

“Wait here,” he said, kissing the back of her fingers again. “Finish your champagne.”

The door opened without him touching it at the exact moment he moved to get out. How did he do that? How did Elwood do that? Was he listening?

The door closed behind Reid, and she exhaled. This was... She couldn’t even put words to it. Doing as told, she grabbed up the champagne at the same time she took her phone from her purse. Gulping it down, she went to her recents list to dial a friend.

“Hey,” Roxie answered. “You want to party tonight? You are an animal!”

“I think I’m in trouble.”

“No trouble,” Roxie said. “We can have you out of the country in under an hour.”

Though her friend was kidding, her sentiment was true. “Not that kind of trouble. I need you to tell me how to do it.”

A moment passed. “How to do what?”

“Your advice. That first night. The most important advice you gave me.”

Roxie’s voice became tinged with concern. “Yeah?”

“Tell me how to do it.” She squeezed her eyes closed. “How not to do it.”

One beat became two and then her friend laughed. “Well, I don’t know, honey, I fell for mine!”

Exhaling, she slumped against the backrest. “Damn it.”

“Look, honey, it’s not a tragedy. This is the new part of the relationship, I know you were with Ryan for a while, but you remember what it’s like, right? Fun new person, the novelty, they’re hot, you’re in close quarters, it makes sense you’d get caught up. You had sex with him yet?”

“No,” Merci said on a sigh. “We’re going to a kids hospital opening. I’m sitting outside Crimson right now.”

“Okay, if you really think you’re in that kind of trouble and want out, get out of the car and come up here. Walk away from the whole thing, right now. Z and I will see you’re okay. He has whole departments dedicated to the press and PR stuff, that’s all at your disposal.”

“Walk away?” Her attention drifted to the door. Escape. Open the door, get out, and walk away. Was that really the only way to ensure she didn’t lose her senses? “I don’t want to.”

“Then stay,” Roxie said with a warmth that reeked of acceptance. “You can’t know if your heart is in play yet. It always feels like it is when the tease is going and the anticipation is high. This is the fun part. And what makes it even more exciting?”

You've been doing something wrong the whole time. The con, the caper, it's exciting."

Was that it? Her emotion had been high. Much higher than it usually would be at the beginning of a new relationship. Could be the mystery. What did she really know about Reid? From Reid himself? Very little.

"When did you know with Zairn?"

"I probably knew early on. Admitting it to myself took a lot longer. We were just the same at the start, flirting, teasing, playing."

"When did it change?"

"When I got sick. When something real happened and he was still there. He already knew, but I... Even when I was disgusting and pathetic, he protected me, cared for me, put me first... It's easy to be infatuated when things are simple. When it's all fun. The kind of love I was warning you about comes after. The real love that you have to throw yourself into, if it's real, it takes you completely over."

"You're telling me I'm just hot for him?"

"You're hot for him, honey," Roxie said, an obvious smile in her voice. "Jump right in. He's gorgeous. If Z didn't have his security people reporting back every three seconds, I'd have screwed Reid already for sure."

Given how Roxie had supported her in the last few days, it was a wonder she'd ever survived without her.

Even as she exhaled a pathetic laugh, she felt better. "You're a godsend."

"Hey, I've been called worse."

There was a tap on the window. Elwood. It had to be because someone stepped out of view of the window, and there were Reid and Madelyn coming from the Crimson side entrance.

"They're coming," she whispered.

"Call me tomorrow," Roxie said quick. "Good luck."

They hung up and she tucked her phone away quickly. She'd just put the purse at her butt when the door opened and

Madelyn got inside.

Rather than sit in the seat opposite, Madelyn surprised her by sitting next to her. Not like just at her side, but right up close, forcing her to slide along against the opposite door.

The move couldn't be more obvious. Blocking her from Reid was a not-so-subtle attempt to keep them apart.

If her fiancé noticed, he didn't say anything and just sat in the center of the seat opposite, retrieving his phone from his inner pocket.

"Merci," Madelyn said as the car got moving. "I wasn't sure you would join us tonight."

"Where else would I be when this means so much to Reid?"

Pleasant smiles were saccharine sweet and entirely false. "Obviously, he didn't tell you how he got involved."

The satisfaction oozing from the beauty would build resentment if she hadn't been prepped to lob it back.

"Actually, he did," Merci said, arching her back a little. "It was sweet of you to care about your friend's difficulty. Just a shame you didn't care about the cause in the first place."

"Merci," he spoke, raising his focus from the phone to her. "Where should you be right now?"

Where should she be? Ideally, she would... when he glanced at the space next to him, she got her wish.

Popping out of her seat, she turned fast to drop into the place next to him. With him in the middle, her space was limited, but there were no complaints from her. Tucking her purse in the space at the end of the seat, the weight of his hand on her thigh, heating her through the silk, gave more reassurance.

"Insecure?" Madelyn asked, looking straight at her. "Reid doesn't like insecure."

"Feel the need to speak for me?" Reid asked his ex while responding to an email on his phone.

"Perhaps you don't want to hurt the fawn's feelings."

"You know nothing about her."

The edge in his voice took her hand to his leg. “It’s okay,” she said. “Reid has no problem letting me show my love in any way I want to. I understand how difficult this must... no, I don’t. I’m sorry. I can’t imagine losing the love of my life.” She let her head drop against Reid’s arm then raised her chin toward him. “If I lost you, I’d be lost... You’ve taken me over...” Roxie’s words rang in her head. “If we were parted, I wouldn’t be able to function. I wouldn’t be able to breathe.”

Thank you, Roxie. She sent out silent gratitude.

“I don’t need your pity,” Madelyn said.

“No,” Merci said, trying her best to be sincere. “I didn’t mean to imply that I felt sorry for you. Your relationship with my guy didn’t work out. He was yours, in the past. You’re his past and I’m his future.” Now she was ripping off his words. He squeezed her knee while replying to another email. “It must hurt so much to see him happy with someone else.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I don’t?”

“No, you know nothing about what we were. Nothing about what we meant to each other.”

“Enough, ladies.”

He didn’t need to hear them griping at each other. The night was a celebration of the hospital.

“She shouldn’t be here,” Madelyn said, seemingly upset by her presence. “This was about us.”

“This was never about us, Mads. You wanted to play hero and I facilitated that.”

“Do you think the kids care why?”

“No, and that’s why we’re here, to give the donation credibility. I wasn’t going to announce your hypocrisy to the world.”

“My hypocrisy?”

Didn’t they say people only argued if they felt passion? Was there unfinished business between the former couple? Her

momentary wondering was almost immediately answered with Reid's silence.

Finishing his email, she could see enough of the screen to witness him sending it and moving to the next line.

Madelyn was fuming. Silently seething. If provoking an argument was her goal, she'd failed.

Was that what she wanted? Would arguing show he still had desire for her?

Was Reid a man who enjoyed arguing? Heat and high emotion sounded tempting, as did bowing down and giving him dominance. So much to learn and experience with her alluring man.

SIXTEEN

Cars queued at the new hospital wing's portico. Inside there was no mistaking its clinical purpose, the rounded reception area and stark white walls were an obvious give away. The sweeping spiral ramp that took them to the second floor was an interesting innovation that gave the place class and appeal from an accessibility point of view.

At the top they were faced with open double doors and a grand room decked out with freestanding lights and uniformed servers carrying champagne on trays.

Just like she'd said, easier.

"Is it Cristal?" Madelyn asked from Reid's other side.

An orchestra began to play at the head of the room, on a stage that seemed purposeless in a hospital. Merci tried to reach for a flute of champagne from a passing server. Before her hand could get there, Reid tugged her to his side.

"Ask at the bar, Madelyn," he said, stepping away from his ex. "Excuse us."

Excuse them? Why? Where were they going? He stalked through the people with little regard to those they passed, even if they said Reid's name or tried to get his attention.

His pace slowed, then he turned so suddenly, her body collided with his. Turned out that's what he wanted because he put his arms around her and began to move.

Dancing. They were on the dance floor.

Thank God!

It was so much easier to relax when he was the only one she had to interact with.

"First and last," he said. "Always."

"Is that one of your rules?"

"Our rules," he said. "We're scrubbing what was and starting over."

Intrigued as she was about his previous policies, there was something flattering about them building their relationship from

scratch.

“I’m sorry about the car.”

“Madelyn isn’t the easiest of women to get along with.”

“Some people would say the same about me.”

“And me, but we are who we are,” he said, letting her go to take her hands and loosen them from fists to flatten them on his chest. “We’re not staying late.”

She smiled. “Because we have work tomorrow.”

“Because we’re a private couple who date inside. Not in front of others.”

Her smile faded. “You want to keep us under wraps.”

“I want to keep you to myself. I need to get you out of my system.”

Did that mean...?

Resting her forehead on his shirt between her hands, she breathed him in. “I want to be in your blood,” she murmured, aware he’d feel the vibration of the words, even if he didn’t hear them. “I want to be in your head.” Relaxing her neck, her head sank back. “I want to distract you... every minute, even when I’m not at your side.”

People said to be careful what to wish for. Getting each other out of their systems was probably his way of moving past their attraction. She could only live in that moment. Feel what she felt then. Him. All of him against her. Almost all of him.

“In a room full of people?”

“Everywhere.”

The sultry word was meant to remind him of the car, where she’d given him permission to be her everything.

His hand slid around to the back of her neck then relaxed until just the tip of his index finger touched her spine. Drawing it down, the tickle he sent through her tracked from his finger to every corner and crevice of her being. Closing her eyes, she breathed out, absorbing the pleasure.

“We’re going to warm you up slow,” he whispered, splaying his hand low on her back to pull her tighter to him. “I’ll

take my time. Take anything I want. When I want. Tease me with what's mine and I'll pay you back in kind."

She couldn't imagine specifics, but just the promise fired her fantasies into overdrive.

"Matt..."

"Will you give yourself to me?"

"Yes," she breathed.

This was meant to be a con. They were supposed to sell their relationship to the world. But she couldn't see past how he agitated her insides and taunted her with maybes. He could do whatever he wanted, and she'd be powerless against it when lost in the mist of her desperate desire.

"Mr. Reid!"

The exclamation snapped her from his bubble of intimacy and, unfortunately, took her out of his arms. Reid turned in the direction of the call, striding toward them were two men in suits.

"Doctor Danks," Reid said.

One of the men opened his arms as they both came to a stop in front of them. "It's wonderful, have you had the tour?"

"No," Reid said. "I saw the original plans, everything came together... over schedule and over budget."

Danks winced. "Yes, your last minute bail out was appreciated. We had trouble with a contractor. I hope you understand these things happen."

"As I said at the time, you can't put a price on thorough due diligence. Your project manager should be held to account."

Such authority. Such little patience. So fucking hot.

Her fingers brushed his, but rather than take her hand, he put an arm around her to move her across in front of him. Presenting her to the men or protecting her from those still dancing around them.

"Ah, your fiancée," Danks said, probably pleased for the subject change. "She is beautiful. I heard about your upcoming nuptials. Congratulations."

"They haven't walked down the aisle yet."

Oh, that was definitely Madelyn's voice.

The suited men parted, and Mistress Madelyn strode into the space left, sneering at either her or Reid, maybe both.

Keeping her own aversion under wraps was difficult when Madelyn let hers flourish so overtly.

"No, but soon," Merci said, playing it like Madelyn's words were a joke rather than vicious.

"Oh, have you set a date?" the doctor asked.

The man was probably pleased to swerve the conversation about Reid's bailout and the awkward, ex showing her resentment discussion.

"Not yet," Merci said, beaming like a bride-to-be should. "We don't want anything too big and flashy, so it shouldn't take long to plan. The location, the dress, all of those extras matter less than marrying the man I love. That's what matters..." She laughed. "That and the honeymoon. I'm determined to have Matt to myself for as long as I can tear him away from the office."

"Matt?" Madelyn sneered with glib suspicion, "no one calls him Matt."

"Merci does," Reid said. "And she's the only one I'd allow to do it."

"Love," Danks said, shooting for funny, though his uncomfortable laugh missed the mark. "It has a lot to answer for."

"It does," Madelyn said, still bristling. "Though lust seems more accountable. It's amazing what a man will overlook for a young, pretty face."

Was this what they'd have to look forward to for the next two months? The constant barbs and passive aggressive, sometimes direct, hostility were taxing. Reid had to put up with it in the office and now out of it too.

"Madelyn, would you join me at the bar, please?" Merci said, easing her body from Reid's.

"Merci..." Reid said, dubious.

“It’s okay,” she murmured, peeking up at him. “I’ll find you in a minute.”

His expression wasn’t any less certain the women being alone was a good idea. They were in a room with a couple of hundred other people, things shouldn’t get too out of hand. Unless that was what worried him, the idea of handbags at dawn.

He surprised her by taking her chin and dipping lower to kiss her quick. Simple affection that meant so much.

Madelyn hadn’t actually answered, but Merci passed the doctor to head for the bar. If Madelyn didn’t follow, that would say more about the spiteful attitude of her fiancé’s ex than it would about Merci’s ability to coerce.

As she hopped onto a stool at the bar, the bartender came straight to her. “Raspberry schnapps and lemonade,” she said, then hesitated. “If you have it?”

His half-smile showed a dimple. Cute. “You got it.”

Madelyn reached her as he walked off. “I’ve just ordered a drink, if you want—”

“You think pretending to be my friend will win you points with him?” Madelyn asked, without even bothering to sit. “You don’t know him. He likes aggressive. He likes people who go after what they want.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, twisting her body to face the woman. “Did I injure you somehow? I told you in the car that I get it. I know you’re hurting. But what exactly did I do to provoke this reaction? We have to co-exist for—”

“We don’t have to co-exist at all. By the time I’m through with you, you’ll be sorry you ever heard the name Matteo Reid.”

To say that wasn’t ominous would be a lie. Though it was cliché enough not to quite reach the level of terror.

“You want him back,” Merci said, pretending like she hadn’t known it all along. “This whole inspection, withholding the IP, it’s all your little ruse intended to win him back. He dumped you almost two years ago. Why now? What changed?”

“Nothing changed,” Madelyn hissed. “I didn’t believe he meant it when he left. When he told me it was over. I expected

him to come back.”

“You thought it was cold feet.”

“It was cold feet,” Madelyn snapped just as the bartender came over with her drink.

Both women paused the conversation while she accepted it. They waited in silence until he walked away.

“If it was cold feet, he would’ve come back to you,” Merci said.

Madelyn swept her hair from her shoulder to shake it down her back. “He doesn’t like to admit when he’s wrong. When he’s made a mistake.”

Could be true. Except he’d admitted as much to her in his office. He might not like it, but he did admit mistakes, when it was important. That was her opinion anyway.

Merci leaned a little closer, her volume lower. “Do you really think...? Do you really believe that someone like Matteo Reid, someone as determined and powerful as he is, would love a woman and not do everything in his power to get her back?”

That also altered her thinking on the couple’s break-up. Unless he was sure Madelyn wasn’t what he wanted, he wouldn’t have broken it off. As he’d told her, he liked to be decisive. On that occasion, it just hadn’t worked out in Madelyn’s favor.

“And do you think Matteo Reid would expect anything less than complete devotion from the woman in his life?” Madelyn asked. “Obstinate, uncompromising devotion, that’s what he’ll get from me. When he sees what I’m willing to do, the lengths I will go to, he’ll realize the truth, that we should never have broken up. We will be together again.” Straightening, Madelyn perused her with a repulsed curl to her lip. “You’re nothing to me. To him. He’ll forget you exist. He would never choose a nobody like you over his queen.”

“You’re delusional,” Merci said, shaking her head. “Insane.”

“In love with *my* man, yes. I put four years into our relationship, six if you count the last two. I’ve been looking for an in, transforming myself into what he needs. I’ve done my

homework, my studying. I will not give up on my investment in him, I will get my return.”

“Not when I tell him this,” Merci said. “He’ll think you’re a nut, just like I do.”

But Madelyn smiled. “Tell him. Go ahead. I won’t deny it. You’ll be doing my work for me. He needs this IP. *Needs* it. He won’t run me off and all I need is time. Telling him that I am fully devoted to him and his needs, while I’m showing him complete devotion, he’ll see my determination. He’ll be begging to have me back.” Begging, somehow, she knew, wasn’t Matteo Reid’s style. “Getting rid of you is just the first step.”

Without waiting for a response, Madelyn turned to disappear into the partygoers, a glittering smile spread on her face.

Reid had been right. Him and the rest of his quartet. Madelyn wanted him back. Now she just had to work out if telling him was a good idea or if she should keep it under wraps.

SEVENTEEN

“You’ve been quiet all night,” Reid said, a few minutes after they’d dropped Madelyn off at Crimson.

It had taken everything in her to stay in the car while Reid went up to ensure Madelyn got to her room in one piece. At Crimson, they were safe. Reid said as much. At first, she wasn’t sure he’d go up with Madelyn, he didn’t appear to plan it, but when Madelyn asked, he accompanied her.

“It’s been a long few days,” she said, her head rocking on the back rest with the motion of the car.

The city passed by her window, lights, people, movement, it was all a blur. He touched her chin to guide her attention from the window to him.

“What did Madelyn say?” he asked.

Looking into his eyes, losing herself there, her ability to lie wavered. “She wants you back.”

“That’s what she said?”

“Yes.”

“Implied or you’re assuming?”

She smiled. “Directly. She said you would be together again. Getting rid of me is her first step.”

Wary, his expression hardened. “How does she plan to do that?”

“She didn’t say. I suppose she wants to keep it a surprise. Won’t that be fun.”

“Are you worried?” he asked.

Was that question about Madelyn or about him?

“If her plan was to throw me off a building, yeah, I’d be worried.”

“She threatened you?” he asked, suddenly way more severe. “You should’ve told me the second—”

“She didn’t threaten me with physical violence. I’m sure she just means poisoning your mind against me or stepping up

her seduction until it's impossible to resist, I don't know." She sighed and let her head drift back to watch the city again. "You know her better than I do."

"No one will hurt you."

"Yeah, 'cause talk about the bad press," she said, then second guessed her attempt to joke. "Sorry, that was inappropriate."

He brought her focus back to him again. "Why didn't you tell me the moment it happened?"

"I don't want a scene any more than you do. This is probably part of her plan, for me to run back to you with the information proving I'm as insecure as she accused me of being. And of needing a big, strong man to protect me. She seems pretty sure you want a strong woman who can stand on her own two feet. You like aggressive, that's what she said. Not meek and retiring. So I run to you to snitch on her, thus proving I'm all about the schoolyard games."

"So why are you telling me?" he asked, softening.

She showed him another smile. "Because you like being right and this is proof you were. Because Roxie was right that we have to be a team and a team is only as strong as its weakest member. And because I don't want to get caught in a shit-slinging match. If us was real, maybe I would handle this in a different way. But we're not, and any time you want me to leave, all you have to do is tell me. Just please, give me the respect of telling me. I do not want to walk in on you two in bed together or to deal with her crowing."

"If I wanted Madelyn," he said, tracing a fingertip down her cheek, "would we have come up with this ridiculous plan?"

"My ridiculous plan. I hope you're learning better than to listen to me. Somehow, I end up making everything worse."

"I disagree. If you hadn't joined me this evening, I'd have spent the night peeling Madelyn off, refuting her innuendos something salacious was going on between us."

At least she'd done one thing right. "That's my job. To be your shield."

He bowed closer. “If you weren’t here right now, I’d be going home alone.”

It was some reassurance to learn he wouldn’t have slept with Madelyn anyway. Unless he was implying she was his willpower, forcing him away despite his desire to devour the woman. Yeah, that was unlikely. Matteo Reid wasn’t the type of man to apologize for what he wanted.

She licked her lips. “I keep thinking about how we barely know each other...” Her fingers tucked themselves under his lapel. “Yet, I feel like I know you.” Her eyes narrowed. “Why is that? Because you’ve been a part of my life for so long?” Working in his company meant his name bounced around every once in a while. Memos came down with his name in the copy, or letters he’d never have laid eyes on came down with his printed signature. “I’m kidding myself, I think. Imagining intimacy where there is none.”

“Well, that’s disappointing,” he said.

Shifting, her shoulder came into contact with his torso. “What’s disappointing?”

“I imagined that intimacy too.”

What was intimacy? Sex? Was that what he meant? Yes, that had been in her imagination. Her. Him. Them. Together. For years, this man had been a part of her life as the mysterious figurehead of the company she toiled for. Now she was in his car. His home. His bed.

“Why did you walk away from her? You called off the wedding so close to the date. Your friends told you to break it off, but if that was the reason, if they were the cause, wouldn’t you have done it when they first began to warn you about her?”

“It wasn’t my friends,” he said. “I was aware of their advice, but they weren’t the ultimate reason.”

She blinked up into his eyes, almost sure she could read a smile in them. “So why? Why break her heart? Why end it?”

Taking her hand from his lapel, he kissed the back of her fingers as he had earlier. “Ask me again in eight weeks.”

What did that mean? His attention ascended to the window he’d taken her from. Ask him in eight weeks. Okay. But

why? What would be different then?

They rode the rest of the way in silence. Her body moved into the cocoon of his and he didn't touch his phone, even when she felt the vibration of it between their bodies.

Elwood took them to the curb and opened the door. Despite being half asleep, she forced herself to slide along the backseat to depart with Reid. He freed his fingers from her to put an arm around her as they entered the building.

"Do I have to distract you again?" he asked, his mouth descending to her hair when they stopped at his private elevator.

"I can meet you upstairs," she said, tipping her face toward his body to breathe him in again. "Actually, you should just sleep. You probably have an early day."

"That's it?" he said when she extricated herself from him. "You're finished for the evening?"

The time had to be around midnight, maybe a little before. Both of them had spent their day at the office and the night being social. He should be desperate for bed, but when his chin dropped an inch and his eyes darkened, she didn't read exhaustion.

"When we're married, you won't always get a happy ending to every date."

"But I will never return home without you," he said, leaning in to take her hand again. "Come here."

"Matt," she whined when he pulled her closer and pressed the elevator button.

Bending his knees, he aligned their mouths. "Who's in control?"

Keeping her eyes open was impossible. The taste of him. The tantalizing possibility, it was too much to tolerate, too intoxicating to flout.

"You," she said, her muscles relaxing, "sir."

"That's right," he said, brushing his lips across hers. "And I don't walk through that door without you."

"I can't."

“You think I would let anything happen to you?” As his open hands pushed the wisps of loose hair from her face, he bowed away just a fraction. “Look at me.”

“If I look at you, I’ll surrender.”

“Baby, you already did.”

And he was right. Something in him was entitled to her, she felt it because that part of her had become his the moment their lips first met. When he kissed her again, she didn’t resist. Using his body, he turned hers. Instead of backing her into the elevator, navigating her, he wrapped his arms around her and picked her up from her feet.

They were in the elevator. Probably. She didn’t care. Not when the warmth of him, the need from each of them combined to blur the lines of reality. Was this a fantasy? A dream? Life after death? When it felt so good, she didn’t care. They could plummet to their deaths, and she’d never notice. Maybe they’d die together locked for eternity in the ardor of their kiss.

When his mouth left hers, she gasped for breath. Maybe she’d been holding it the whole time. All she knew was that without his mouth devouring hers, living became more difficult.

“We’re home,” he said, stroking her cheek.

Blinking at their surroundings, she rid herself of the daze and drank in their environment. They were home. In his penthouse. The elevator doors were already closed, and the lights flickering on. Not at full illumination, maybe the time of day affected their wattage.

“You know, it’s been more than ten years since I used an elevator,” she said. “And you got me in there twice in one day.”

“I’m honored.”

“I’m amazed.”

Most men from her past, when they learned about her elevator fear, they got annoyed or angry. It wasn’t like she didn’t know it was irrational. Like the chances of being stuck or hurt or killed were next to nothing. Whenever she entered an elevator, her breathing sped up, her heart raced, it really felt as though the oxygen was being sapped from her. Until Reid.

With him, it was different.

Maybe everything would be different.

He opened his hand toward her, and she took it without hesitation. Wherever he led, she'd follow. Geez. Before Reid, she couldn't remember ever feeling such trust in another person. He thought intimacy was sexual. Her body, her mind, was telling her something else. What? She wasn't sure yet. Not exactly. But finding out wouldn't be a chore.

Reid led her to the bedroom. Just as in the living room when the lights came on, the illumination stayed low. He kept going into the closet, pressing a button on the panel by the door. The bedroom lights dropped to what had to be their lowest setting and the closet lights came on just enough that they could see what they were doing.

He stopped while pulling her forward, urging her toward her own side of the closet. Evening. Night. It should be time for bed. Without any further prompting, she went to slip off her shoes to return them to the shoe rack. Her jewelry was next to go.

She paused to look at the ring on her hand. To the world, it meant so much. To Madelyn, it was a curse. What was it to her? Merci admired the solid gem, trying to decide its significance.

"Something wrong?" Reid asked from behind her.

The rumble of his voice actually moved the air around her. It felt like being back in that elevator, like kissing him all over again. For a ridiculous moment, she wished they had gotten stuck. They could still be there, alone, nothing but each other to distract them from their peril.

"Is this the ring you gave her?" Merci heard herself ask.

"No," he said, taking the clasp from her hair.

Running his fingers through its length, he loosened her locks, freeing them from the constraints of society's expectation. That was it. Society expected something of her, of him, of their engagement. But what went on behind closed doors was nothing to do with the con.

“She wants you so bad,” she murmured, still fixated on the ring. “Am I getting in the way of something that should be? I know you say you don’t want her, but it’s the chase, isn’t it? Just in reverse. She’s chasing you. Men chase women all the time and are successful.”

“Why are we still talking about Madelyn?” he asked, drawing her hair from her shoulder to tuck it out of his way when he dipped to touch his lips to the side of her neck.

“Reid,” she whispered.

“No more Madelyn,” he murmured against her as his mouth sought her most sensitive spots. “Here it’s us. Only us.”

Trailing his fingertip down her spine again, the bewitching sensation coupled with the gentle caress on her neck sent her senses into a spiral.

Without saying a word, when his fingertips ascended again, they reached her shoulder blades and began to slide across them. Her dress. The straps rested against her shoulder blades linking to the fabric at the front beneath her arms.

His kisses slowed to a stop and his breath ebbed, his form moved back. She couldn’t see him, so couldn’t tell how she knew. As he eased the straps of the dress from her shoulders, she didn’t fight him. Didn’t want him to stop. Yet, adrenaline coursed through her, fogging her wits. She knew what she was getting into, knew what he wanted. Her anxiety came to a shuddering halt. She wasn’t scared of what might happen if he kept going, she feared he’d stop.

The light fabric drifted down her arms. For a fraction of a second it caught on her wrists, then it dropped, falling past her legs to pool on the floor.

No bra he’d be aware of, her back had been bare all night. For portions of the evening, she’d been pressed against him, he had to know she wasn’t wearing a bra.

No panties? Had he been aware of that?

One second passed. Two. Five. He wasn’t speaking, wasn’t touching her, and she didn’t know what to do. Silence wasn’t easy for her. For every moment he didn’t speak or act, he was increasing the chances she’d do both.

“Turn around.”

Both speech and action. Drawing in a ragged breath, she turned, stepping out the fabric of the dress.

His hunger was unlike any she'd ever seen. At previous times, he seemed preoccupied with forcing her to look him in the eye, now his eyes were anywhere but on hers. If he were any other man, she'd be self-conscious. With him, it was easy to be on show. Her shoulders actually moved back a fraction. In whatever light he was viewing her, nothing about him said repulsed or disappointed.

Then his eyes leaped to hers. “Go to bed.” Disappointment slammed into her so hard, it was impossible to disguise. He brushed the back of his finger down her cheek and bypassed her neck to trace it over her nipple. “I'll join you in a minute.”

Join her? He'd never done that before. Regret became instant elation.

EIGHTEEN

Wearing nothing but her engagement ring, she passed him to hurry into the bedroom. Running might be overkill, so she paced herself and climbed onto the bed, folding the covers down to the bottom before lying down.

Were they going to have sex? Should they have sex? Playing a couple would be easier if the facts they knew were from experience rather than oral accounts. She should be sensible and think it through. Her heart. Roxie said that was safe, at least until the sheen came off the novelty of the relationship.

Did it matter either way?

Roxie had called her bluff in the back of the car. If she wanted out, all she had to do was get up and leave. How likely was that when every inch of her tingled in anticipation of being in bed with him? Already her body prepared for his, the tickle between her thighs emanated from her clit. Swelling and softening, her core was enticed by the possibility dealt in the veiled promise of completion he'd delivered in the closet.

Her hand drifted over her belly, descending as the other rose to her breast. Reid inside her, moving, stimulating, rousing her to climax.

“Who authorized that?”

His voice opened her eyes, but her body continued to move, writhing beneath the fingers she dipped into the well of her body.

“I want to be ready for you.”

“I don't need your help,” he said, getting onto the bed beside her, lying with his back to the door.

Stroking his palm from her throat, down her body, he pushed her hands away and laid one of his on her lower abdomen.

“Matt,” she whispered, reaching for him.

He caught both her wrists and held them against her body. “This is for me,” he said, his eyes on hers. “You understand that?” She nodded. “This body, mine to do whatever I please

with, whenever I please, you understand?” Again, she nodded. “Hold the headboard.” He gave up his grip to allow her to comply. “If you move, I’ll tie you to it. If you fail, or argue, you’ll be punished, do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” she said, her hips moving as her thighs pressed tighter together.

When his hand landed on her lower abdomen again, it pressed harder, pinning her down. “You don’t move until I tell you to move.” Staying completely still was going to be difficult. That was her thought before he started touching her. “You’re enchanting.” His fingertips traced along her collarbone, up her throat, down to her cleavage. Rather than use his hands on her breasts, he slid lower in the bed to use his mouth on her.

God! How was she supposed to stay still? She wanted to follow the rules. To do what he asked. Just the fact he’d told her to stay static was hot. Why? She didn’t know. It didn’t matter. He kissed one nipple, rose just enough to trail his lips to the other, then sucked it into his mouth.

His warmth radiated down to her, but only his mouth touched her. The slick indulgence of his tongue circling and suckling forced her teeth to clench. It was torture. The most wonderful, decadent, frustrating torture.

“Matt,” she said again, this time it came out as more of a whine. “Oh, God...”

“Shh,” he said, his mouth leaving her breasts as he rose. Grasping her chin, he brought her focus to his, within just a few inches. “Do you want me to stop?”

“No. No, I don’t want you to stop,” she panted. “I want you inside me.”

“Not tonight.”

“Not toni—”

He cut her off with a short, hard kiss. “You want me to fuck you?”

“Yes,” she said, eyes wide, never surer of anything else. “Yes. Yes!”

One corner of his mouth rose. “That’s what I want: certainty.”

“I’m certain,” she said and thought about taking her hands from the headboard. Either she moved them or he sensed it because his brow arched as he glanced up over her head. “I’m sorry.”

“Do you want me to tie you up?”

Although she considered saying no, the idea filtered through fast, and it wasn’t a bad one. “I want you to do what you want,” she confessed. “Whatever you want. To me. With me. Any time. Any place.”

“Now you see why certainty is important,” he said, suddenly falling to his back to reach over the bed.

Was he getting something? It was difficult to see without moving. Whatever he did, he got onto his knees, showing for the first time that he was wearing boxer-briefs. Everything on show except one crucial part.

“What are you doing?” At first when she saw the phone, she assumed he was doing his usual, working. Insensitive at such a moment? Yes. But when he moved the angle of the phone down and up her body, she got what he was doing. “Are you filming?” Panic took her hands from the headboard. She covered her breasts and moved her leg to conceal herself. “Matt.”

He held the phone towards her. “You’re not ready. I understand. Delete it.” Giving her the power, he picked up her hand to slap the device into her palm. “It’s okay.”

She really didn’t sense anger or disappointment. “Just wait a second,” she said. “Let me think about this.”

“I will not do something you are uncomfortable with. The memory of the night, of being intimate, it’s something I may want to relive. We may want to relive.”

“What if someone else sees it?” she asked. “I don’t mind you seeing me like this. I don’t want the whole world...”

“Your safety is paramount, which includes your sexual safety.”

“Have you filmed other women?” she asked, relaxing to think how she felt about it.

“Yes.”

“Madelyn?”

He shook his head. “No. And I asked you not to bring her to bed with us.”

Sex tapes hadn’t been raised by her exes. She’d never thought about if it was something she wanted or might enjoy. If it got out there, into the world at large, it would be a nightmare. But Reid watching her, seeing her, even when she wasn’t there, he could be aroused by her. That was an enticing notion.

Madelyn hadn’t done it. Maybe he’d asked and she refused, or he’d just never asked. It was reassuring he wasn’t watching old footage of his ex-fiancée long after they broke up.

“Promise me it won’t get out there.”

“I promise.”

Giving him the phone back, she relaxed. Rather than turn the camera on her again, he opened the nightstand drawer closest to her. Long lengths of dark fabric trailed across her body from his hand.

“What’s your safe word?” he asked, leaving the phone by his knee on the bed as he reached over the top of her and took her hands one at a time to lash them to the bed.

“I thought we weren’t going to have sex.”

He paused. “So I can do anything that doesn’t involve penetration?”

That question had an obvious answer. Did she trust him? Yes. Did she know every single sexual act ever performed in the world? No.

“Madelyn.”

His head tilted. “Yeah, that’ll do it.” On a slow blink, his eyes returned to hers. “That does mean you can’t bring her up in our bed without stopping whatever we’re doing.”

“Double bonus,” she said on a smile.

His fingers skimmed down her arms, tingles of excitement trailed in their wake. He came lower to kiss her mouth, her neck, her chest. Burying his head in her cleavage, he stopped, nestled there, breathing.

How could something so natural arouse her so much? The heat of his breath, the weight of his head, were enticing reminders of his power, his presence.

“Baby,” she said, squirming.

Relaxing his weight, allowing his body to come into contact with hers, he settled on top of her, quelling her movement.

She wanted to run her fingers through his hair, to bring his mouth to hers, to run her hands all over his body.

“Hmm,” he hummed.

Skitters of joy and delight radiated from that gentle sound. “I’m on the pill,” she whispered, her body still trying to move, trying to stimulate itself on the monolith of a man holding her down. “We can have sex... if you want.”

Because boy did she.

Another few seconds passed before his body rose again, not far, just enough for him to insinuate a hand between them. Stroking her thigh, his caress continued higher.

Holding her breath, she waited, eyes closed for him to reach his goal. At the first glimmer of contact with her clit, her lungs gave out and she exhaled only to pull the breath back in with a hopeful yelp.

That was it. Right there. The pressure increased though the circles stayed slow, deliberate, excruciating. What she wanted was speed, authority, completion.

“Matt,” she whispered, her body moving with the rhythm of his caress. “God, that feels so good.”

Her eyes were closed again, which heightened the sensation not only of his stimulation, but the next kiss he laid on her lips.

“Do you like that?” he asked, kissing her again. All she could do was give a slight nod. She raised her head, seeking his

kiss again, but he kept his mouth just out of reach. “What do you want, baby? What do you need?”

“You,” she gasped. “Please. I want you. Inside me. Please.”

His pace increased until her breaths were short, sharp pants of desperation. Suddenly, his digits lunged down, skimming through her to plunge inside of her. Another desperate gasp, her body arched, spasming into the harsh pleasure he delivered.

His fingers went faster, slower, switching between her clit and fucking her. Amazing was an understatement. All she could think about was him. Them. Together. Submerged in the hedonistic glow of carnal pleasure.

His kiss was quick, she tried to grab for more, but his mouth was gone and on her neck. The slow ache of need built in a pressure on the cusp of releasing, then his hand was gone too. What was happening? Where did he go? Her hands throbbed against the pressure of her trying to pull them free. She didn't feel restrained, her eager desire to touch and play tormented by the ties, wrought instinct to fight her restraints.

His pleasure seemed neglected, she wasn't satisfying him, giving to him like he was giving to her. Kissing her breasts, her cleavage, her abdomen, each touch of his mouth delivered more pleasure. She was so caught up in those moments of gratification that she didn't realize his mouth was between her thighs until her clit was in his mouth.

Shit, that felt good. The suck, the flicker of his tongue... the tantalizingly slow circle the tip of his tongue did around the perimeter, he owned her. Control was what he desired, and he had it. All. Over her. Through her. In her.

Matteo Reid was her universe in that second and every one that came after.

“Matt,” she whimpered, the heat of climax firing through her. “Oh! Matt!”

The clench of her body stayed tight as he kept stimulating her up and over the peak of pleasure. Somehow it kept going and going, her muscles locked, her breathing stilled, the whole world froze in deference to the sheer bliss of complete ecstasy.

His hand loosened but stayed over her, just resting there at the intimate apex.

It took another few seconds before she could relax. Her breathing was still all over the place, and she couldn't focus. The kiss he laid on her forehead gave a little clarity. Or maybe it was the chill that crept over her when his body left hers.

"Matt," she said, bringing her knees up like maybe they could offer the embrace she wished to give.

"Usually, I'm smarter than this," he said, shifting onto his side next to her. At least he hadn't left her completely. "This can't complicate things."

From the beginning, he'd been clear that their association wasn't real. If he wouldn't play at real, he definitely wouldn't do real for real... Sheesh, her brain was melting.

"I can't even remember the last time I..."

Had she ever come with a guy like she just had? No. And if Reid was using her post-orgasm time to reiterate the required distance, he certainly wasn't going to be interested in hearing how unique the experience was for her.

"The last time you what?" he prompted.

Time was difficult to grasp as her soul returned to her body.

Turning a smile on him, she was attentive enough to tease. "Untie my hands and I'll return the favor."

"Not tonight."

Uh, why not? First, no sex, and then no take of her give.

"Is this like some kind of social experiment?" she asked, only half joking. "If we're going to have this kind of relationship, a fake fiancé with benefits kind of thing..." friends with benefits didn't seem enough. "You will... you know... partake yourself, right? Is there some reason you don't want to climax with me?"

She couldn't imagine for a second that it was any kind of inferiority complex.

"Maybe," he said, like it was no big deal. "We'll see."

“If you weren’t ready...” she said. Men were as entitled to take their time if they wanted to be sure about an intimate relationship. “I’m sorry if I pressured you.”

Was it possible to pressure a man like him?

He touched the underside of her chin to direct her eyes to him. “That was your reward...” He swayed in to kiss her. “Be a good girl or you may not get another.”

In the low illumination, it was difficult to tell, but one side of his mouth definitely appeared higher than the other.

“Are you going to untie me?”

“Maybe,” he said, his palm skimming up the center of her body, coming to rest on her breast.

“I want to know you,” she admitted, arching into his caress. Hadn’t he just said they were physical and uncomplicated. “I live in your home. Socialize with your friends—”

“I don’t have friends,” he said, raising his hand enough to just make contact with her nipple, massaging it in tantalizing circles. “Not at any event instigated by Madelyn’s cronies.”

“But you do have friends,” she said, wriggling closer. “You and Zairn are friends. Who’s Kintyre?”

“Zachary Kintyre. CEO of Eclipse Incorporated.”

“He’s going for Gramercy too.”

“Yes, but he’s your friend.”

“It’s complicated.”

Apparently, everything was. “How did you meet Zairn?”

“A long time ago.”

That wasn’t really an answer. “Do you see your family often?” He shook his head once and watched his hand skim across to her other breast. “If I’m nothing but a sexual plaything, shouldn’t you want to get your rocks off?” Nothing. Just his preoccupation with arousing her body. “I told Madelyn you didn’t like people who waste your time. Was I right?”

Exhaling, he reached up over her to untie her bonds. “Who does?”

She'd thought that too. Eager to get her hands back, she anticipated putting them on the man. But the moment they were loose, he tossed them toward her nightstand and rolled away to get off the bed.

"Matt." He paused to glance back. "Where are you going?"

"We're done."

"We're done? Why are we done?" she asked, sitting up. "What did I say?"

"Your safe word."

She shook her head. "I was just talking..." Reaching for him, she offered a hand. "Stay with me."

"This can't get—"

"Messy, I know," she said and smiled. "I promise to keep my hands above your waist... I want to fall asleep next to you."

"You've had your reward today."

"And what's yours?" she asked. "You've made your fiancée happy today. Tonight... Matt..."

Rather than respond, he walked away. Disappointment loosened her muscles. What else could she do? Naked, in his bed, she didn't hold enough appeal. Her body was the only thing she had to offer. If he didn't want that...

A click raised her head. Was that...? He'd locked the door... while staying inside.

"You sleep in this bed every night," he said, walking toward her again. "We sleep together in this bed every night."

"Yes, sir," she said, unable to contain her delight.

"If you want to stay at Roxie's or anywhere else. Call me."

"I can call you?"

"Yes," he said, getting onto the bed again. "Lie down."

She did as asked, her head sinking into the pillow as she moved to tempt him.

Like she was nothing, he pushed her closer to the farthest side. He lay down with her, narrowing the space she had to sleep

in, which, when he pulled her to him, tucking her head beneath his chin, she was grateful for.

“Matt?”

“Hmm?”

“Thank you for tonight. I’m happy here.”

He kissed her head and held her closer. “Go to sleep, baby. Sleep.”

Closing her eyes, she breathed him in and relaxed. Happy here in his home or there in his arms? Which did she mean?

NINETEEN

“Oh, he’s driving me crazy,” Merci said, catching her hair between her fingers as her head sank into her hands.

“They like to do that,” Roxie said, pouring champagne into a flute. “Drink this. It will make you feel better.”

Boosting her head from her hand, she let it drop to the leather of the backrest behind her. Roxie’s car was their regular lunch spot. Saved both of them from worrying about prying eyes or eavesdroppers.

“I’m still working. I can’t drink alcohol,” Merci said, smiling when Roxie sipped it herself. “You know, my life never used to be champagne and limos.”

Roxie’s lips curled, then released a laugh. “Preaching to the choir, sista. I said it wouldn’t change me...” She opened her arms, flute in hand. “Yet here I am.”

“Changed or not...” she said, taking her friend’s hand. “I’d be lost without you. I like this Roxie.”

“I don’t think I’m so different.” Another smile. “You, on the other hand...”

She sat straighter. “Me? You think I’m different?”

Roxie leaned in. “I think you’ve been sharing a bed with your guy for a whole week—”

“He’s not my guy.”

“And you haven’t seduced him yet.”

On another groan, her head fell into her hand again. “Maybe it’s his plan to drive me crazy.”

“You have to try harder,” Roxie said, gesturing with the glass before drinking again. “He’s presenting a challenge, it’s up to you to overcome it.”

“The guy works all the time. All. The. Time. He doesn’t come to bed until way after me and is always up before I’m awake.”

“Set an alarm.”

“Set an alarm for sex? Do you set an alarm for sex? It’s hardly spontaneous.”

“Hey, my sex life is in Europe,” Roxie said, nestling herself deeper into the corner of the seat. “I get my kicks where I can. Right now that means living vicariously. That means you have to get some.”

“You and Zairn still do it though. Just... in a different form.”

“There is no substitute for the real thing. Believe me,” she said, raising a pointed finger. “My hands do not feel the same as his. Not even close.”

Merci sighed. “I’m sure Reid’s just looking out for us. Nothing is real, is it?”

“It’s real,” Roxie said. “It’s just not permanent... unless you want it to be.”

That drew Merci’s attention around slowly. Her friend tipped the flute in gentle circles, keen mischief in her eyes.

Merci shook her head. “No, he’s been clear about that. We have an end date. We hit that, we’re done.” Before Roxie could reply, Merci took a gulp of oxygen. “And what do I know about him? We’ve been fake engaged for like a week and a half, and we barely see each other.”

“Guess we know why he ended his last engagement.”

“And that’s the other thing,” Merci said, gesturing. “There’s this axe swinging over me. Waiting for Madelyn to make her move is like waiting for the poison you’ve already swallowed to work.”

“So we hit first,” Roxie said. “Get her out of the picture.”

“RCI needs the Massey IP.”

“And there’s no other way to get it? What about her father?”

“What about him?”

“Go to him direct, find out what he wants.”

“No one just strolls up to Lionel Massey’s front door.”

Roxie tilted her head. “Access won’t be a problem.”

“No,” Merci said. “We’re not going to snitch to her father. I’d guess he knows his daughter and her real interest. Why else would he resist the deal? He was open to it initially...” as per her discovery while eavesdropping. “I don’t think circumventing Madelyn will make the situation better or easier. And what would Reid think?” Again, she shook her head. “No, it’s too schoolyard.”

“I still can’t believe Reid didn’t kick her to the curb after what she said to you at the hospital thing.”

“You keep forgetting, this relationship isn’t real,” Merci said, something she’d had to remind her friend of several times. “If Zairn’s ex was shadowing him—”

“Zairn’s ex *is* shadowing him. She’s everywhere. All the time.”

“Oh my God!”

“It’s fine,” Roxie said, wafting the concern away. “We timeshare.” Merci’s eyes widened. “Not the sex stuff, that’s all mine. Kesley fills his neediness quota.” She shrugged. “Sometimes he needs to be needed.”

“And you don’t need him?”

“Oh, every minute,” Roxie said, lowering the flute. “If I let him believe for a second that I wasn’t made of steel, he’d never leave my side. He has to know I’m okay...” Her smile grew again. “I can handle anything... except losing him.”

“And you never worry about them being together? Close, partying, drinking...”

“You think he’d get drunk and slip into her pussy by mistake?” Her amusement didn’t quite reach laughter. “That man went through hell to get me, and we have a zero tolerance policy when it comes to third parties. Does Kesley sometimes get a little closer than I’d like? Sure. Do I trust Zairn to stop any advances before they go too far? Absolutely.”

It was astounding. “He’s on the other side of the world.”

“I knew what his life was, I lived his life with him,” Roxie said. “I knew what I was signing up for.”

“And you never thought to ask him to stay.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere. To setup a home.”

“We have a home. Right here in the Big Apple. I wouldn’t stand for him trying to change me, so why should I change him? Besides, there’s nothing stopping me going to join him...”

“I thought you were editing the documentary.”

She nodded. “But, hey, stop it, you’re changing the subject. What are we going to do about Madelyn?”

“I should talk to Reid about it.”

“You told him what she said, and he didn’t do anything.”

“Maybe he did. We don’t know,” Merci said. “I haven’t asked him. There hasn’t been time to ask.”

“You need to make time,” Roxie said as Merci’s phone chimed. “Call his assistant. Book an appointment. Pin him down. Strip naked. Do whatever it takes to get his attention.”

Fishing her phone from her purse, she frowned at the message. “Speak of the devil.”

“It’s Reid?”

“Tara,” Merci said, turning the phone around to show Roxie the screen. “She wants to meet.”

“Go for it. And while you’re there, ask for an opening.” She laughed. “I’m gonna call Tibbs and reserve me some time too.”

Her friend was hilarious. “Doesn’t Zairn answer every time you call?”

“Him or Tibbs, yeah,” Roxie said, tipping the last of the champagne into her mouth. “But I would be one naked video conference he wouldn’t be prepared for.”

“When he sees your name on the—”

“I’ll use a pseudonym,” she said, leaning closer. “Never hesitate to inject a little spice.”

The women embraced and said their goodbyes with promises to call later. She and Roxie spent quality time together

every day, whether at lunch, dinner, or just on a call, they kept in regular contact.

Back in the RCI building, she attracted the usual interested eyes. Security kept everyone at a distance. Not that they needed to. Dealing with questions was easier. Whenever his name was mentioned, her own private thoughts showed on her expression. She didn't try to hide the coy smiles or the bright eyes, people expected her to be a woman enraptured, so that was how she acted... to the best of her ability.

Being with Reid gave her all the required inspiration. Despite waking up alone in his bed each day, she still had a smile on her face. They slept together every night, just like he'd said, and that in itself was an indulgence.

Her body often gravitated toward his. When she woke in the night, curled against him, she sometimes thought about trying to wake him for some carnal fun. In the end, she always decided it wouldn't be fair given how hard he worked. The few hours of sleep he got were precious. Taking those from him would be selfish.

Lunch with Roxie had been fun. Her friend was a great support. Without her, she might not have gotten through the situation.

Bypassing her floor, she continued up the stairs. Yes, she still used stairs, when handsome, dominant, fake fiancés weren't distracting her with hot, wet kisses and wandering hands. Hers. Not his.

The executive floor filled with curious faces didn't intimidate her. People looked but didn't approach. Her appearance wasn't as remarkable on the top floor. People up there were used to seeing the man himself. She was nothing in comparison.

Heading for the CEO's reception desk, she did a quick scan of the office and boardroom behind. Empty. Oh, well, couldn't win them all.

Tara was there and that was welcoming enough. As she approached, the assistant stood up, beaming, happy to see her.

"Mrs. Reid," Tara said.

The greeting made her laugh. “Not quite yet.”

“Shall we go in the office?”

“Sure, if you want.”

Wasn't her right to give permission, but Tara probably used it all the time.

Going inside, temptation to sit in his chair or peek in his drawers tickled her. If their relationship was real—

“Would you like anything to eat or drink? Coffee? Water?”

“No,” Merci said, following the assistant to the seating area in the far corner.

The same spot the quartet occupied on the night the ruse began.

Once they were seated, Tara unlocked her tablet. “We have a few things to cover.”

“Okay,” she said, smoothing her skirt. “Have I done something wrong?”

“No!” Tara said and laughed. “You haven't advertised for your assistant. Do you have someone in mind?”

“No, I—”

“We can take care of it,” Tara said, her smile broad and genuine. “Would you like to open it up to external applications or keep it in-house?”

“I...” she paused to ensure her words were right. “This will all be finished in less than seven weeks. Should we employ someone we'll have to fire in a few weeks?”

“We'll start with a temporary contract under the guise of a probationary period.”

“So we'll fire them for doing nothing wrong?” she asked, shaking her head. “No, I'll do my own work.”

The assistant's brows rose as the tablet sank. “We receive in excess of five hundred calls a day for or related to you.” What? No way. That was astounding. “Press calls are directed to the appropriate departments, but someone has to manage your diary and take responsibility for briefing you on invitations and events.”

“Invitations?”

“Yes, and you’ll have to take appointments regarding the wedding.”

“What wedding?”

“Your wedding,” Tara said. But, uh, there wasn’t supposed to be a wedding. “Which brings us to this weekend.”

“This weekend?”

“The engagement party. We have to make arrangements to bring your parents into town.”

“My parents?” she asked. “My mother is dead.”

“Yes, I meant your father and stepmother.”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t want them here. I don’t want them involved in this.”

“If this was real—”

“My answer would be the same,” Merci said. “Even if I was getting married for real, I wouldn’t want them here. We’re estranged. We don’t have a good relationship and haven’t for years.”

“Having your family at the party will give it credibility. Your engagement.”

She squinted. “Or the opposite. Anyone who knows me wouldn’t expect them to be there.”

“Who would be there? Aren’t they the only family you have?”

“Yes,” she said. “I thought the engagement party was for Reid’s people. Business associates, colleagues. You don’t expect me to sell this to Reid’s family, do you?”

That would be mortifying. Playing with people, family who cared about him.

“Mr. Reid’s family receive a regular stipend.” Was that supposed to answer her question? “It’s unlikely they’ll attend.”

His assistant knew more about his family than she did. It was crazy that she should be hurt, insulted. Tara had been in his life for... some time, maybe. Long after Merci was a distant

memory, the assistant would still be in his life. Unless she was promoted. The woman saw Reid every day. Was she at the office after hours when Reid was in late working?

“Why didn’t you do this?” Merci asked, confusing the assistant. “The engagement? Why didn’t you play the role of fiancée?”

Squirming, Tara obviously hadn’t been expecting the question. “I wouldn’t be suitable.”

“Because?”

The office door opened, interrupting the conversation. Aiden came in first, with June and Madelyn after. Reid and Nasir were at the back of the group.

Tara stood up, so Merci did too. “We’ll give you the room.”

“Doesn’t she have an office of her own?” Madelyn asked.

At least that was confirmation the woman hadn’t got over her vendetta.

“We’ll go downstairs,” Tara said, gesturing for her to pass.

“Shouldn’t Reid be in on this?” Merci asked, not only to give his input, but to confirm whether or not their families were in play.

“In on what?” Madelyn asked. “I doubt he cares about your frivolities.”

“We’re finalizing plans for the engagement party,” Tara said.

Madelyn laughed. “Oh, he definitely doesn’t care about that.”

According to legend, frivolities were once Madelyn’s wheelhouse. This new business savvy side of her was meant to tempt Reid back to her.

“It’s fine,” Merci said, passing Tara. “We’ll talk about it at home later.”

Next time they were together it would be dark and they’d be sleeping. Madelyn didn’t need to know that. Reminding the woman of her personal, intimate contact with the object of her

affection might be a low blow. Hadn't Madelyn proved she was willing to fight low and dirty?

"Everyone out," Reid said, remaining by the door as his colleagues ushered an affronted Madelyn out. Merci's smile was juvenile, but she didn't expect anyone to see it. She too was heading for the door, expecting to leave and return to work. As she passed her faux fiancé, he caught her arm. Oh, and the look on his face was severe, even for him. "Except you."

Tara went by and exited, closing the door, leaving them alone.

TWENTY

Reid's head tilted. Was he examining her or expecting her to speak?

True to form, if he stayed quiet long enough, she was always going to break first. "What?" she asked. "I didn't call the meeting or request it be in your office. I was at lunch. With Roxie. I got a message Tara wanted to meet." He let her go and headed for his desk. "I didn't know what it was about. I couldn't exactly ignore it, could I?" She went after him. "Tara wanted to invite my dad to the engagement party." Her head was shaking as he sat down and opened his laptop. "I can't invite my dad to this thing. His wife hates me... or she did, I don't know. I doubt they even think about me. Is your mom coming? I didn't consider we'd have to sell this to family. Meeting your mom would be... I can't imagine what she'd be like. I'd guess that she—"

"Unbutton your shirt."

She stopped at his desk. Did he just...? He was typing, not even looking at her, yet... "You want me to... what?"

Dropping back in his chair, elbow on the arm, it swung a little left to right as he assessed her, his fingers settling over his mouth. "You heard me."

Yes, she did, but... Glass walls. Unlocked doors. People. Yeah, the other people on the floor who would... Damn that pulse of pressure awakening between her thighs. Whenever he gave her an order, it was her duty to follow. Wasn't that what she'd promised?

She'd never done anything...

It wasn't nerves that trembled through her fingertips as they rose to the button over her cleavage. Undoing it, her digits were slow to trail to the next. "Should I keep going?"

His head rose in a semi-nod, his fingers still loose on his face. "And keep talking."

Talking and stripping. Guy had interesting tastes. "I wasn't... it's not important. I mean, I guess it is." When her buttons were undone, she pulled the tails of her shirt from her skirt. "We should've talked about this. Before we let everything

out in the open. Before we declared us.” He gestured her around the desk with a finger. Without thinking, she followed his instruction. He turned his chair, tracking her route to his side. “Involving our families is a mistake.” Sitting up, he ran his hands up her outer thighs, pushing her skirt up. She opened her mouth to continue, then noticed the gawkers on the other side of the glass. His back was to them, hers wasn’t. She stood there in front of him, shirt open, facing those on the executive floor beyond his office. “Uh... Matt?”

One hand left her thigh to press that button on his watch again. Plunged into darkness, she didn’t press herself against him this time. Though his hands were forceful about pushing her skirt to her hips, so she may not have been able to, even if she’d wanted to.

The lights flickered on. Low. Intimate. In a corporate office, it shouldn’t feel so... private.

“Keep talking,” he murmured, swinging her around to the desk.

“About what?”

“Anything,” he said, drawing her panties down her legs.

“Should we be doing... this?” she asked as he boosted her onto the edge of the desk.

“Who’d tell us not to?”

Good point. Hmm, being with the boss wasn’t so bad. Instead of wondering about waking him at night, maybe she should’ve just showed up in his office.

“Tell me about your morning.”

Why? Didn’t he want to... He drew himself closer, between her thighs, his hands running up her abdomen to her throat. Tracing her jaw with his fingertips, he tempted her mouth to kiss them.

“I’d rather do something else,” she said, running her fingers through his hair. Leaning back, he crooked a brow. Right. Yeah. She was supposed to do as told. “I had three meetings this morning...” As she got back to talking, his mouth moved against the inside of her knee to guide her feet onto the arms of

his chair. “One secondment matter. An ongoing disciplinary issue that just won’t ever be resolved...”

He yanked her butt to the edge of the desk and kept on kissing her thigh. Damn it, his mouth was... the tease... the delicate touch of his tongue tickling its way north...

“Put your palms on the desk behind you.”

The murmur sent warm vibrations skittering up her leg to the center of her body, the definite destination of his mouth.

“Matt...” she whispered, her eyes closing.

“Disciplinary issue. Keep going.”

How could he remember? How could he even be listening? Swallowing hard, she tried to concentrate. “We have a... a loyal employee, he’s worked for us for...” The higher his mouth got, the more difficult breathing became. “Ten years... he... his wife... she left him with the kids, disappeared six months ago...”

He ran his lips from her leg to the more sensitive flesh just above her clit. Thank God for Crimson bikini waxes.

“And?”

Shit. He was... “He doesn’t have family. No one knows where she went... Daycare is killing him, he’s used every sick day, all good grace,” she yelped when his kiss descended to her clit. Why was he teasing her? He really did want to drive her nuts. “Matt...”

“Disciplinary.”

“I can’t let his boss terminate. Yeah, it leaves us open to...” When his tongue moved around her clit, she gritted her teeth. If the talking was supposed to turn him on, she could’ve picked something sexier to talk about. “...legal action.”

“Meaning?”

Yeah, that’s what she wanted to know, what did this impromptu moment of afternoon delight mean?

“He doesn’t deserve it,” she said, inhaling when his finger slipped between her folds. “Shit, Matt...”

Gripping his hair, the arm still straight behind her buckled, sending her down. Her back arched, her body responding to the indulgence of his mouth. His tongue tracked down to his finger, slipping into her before returning to her clit. Spoiling her with his pampering stripped her of all reason. Nothing existed except his mouth, doing its work, taking her to the precipice of pleasure.

“Matt,” she panted again, the word barely there. Her fingers found their way into his hair again, though they weren’t sure what they wanted. To keep him there, pandering to the need of her pussy, or to pull him away, begging mercy. “Please...” Her heels jumped to the edge of his desk; her shoes lost somewhere on the floor. Her body pushed against his mouth, begging the release he promised. The man knew how to take care of a woman in the most intimate ways... how to drive her crazy. “Matt!”

Orgasm consumed her, sucking her in so deep, her senses ceased to function. How many times did she say his name? How loud did she call for him? It didn’t matter while locked in the spasm of blissful endorphins.

Only when she began to slither back down did she regain her awareness. One hand in his hair, the other in her own, she took long, deep breaths, searching for sanity.

Her fingers loosened when he sat back. For a second, she concentrated on the ceiling. When it was impossible to ignore what just happened, she lifted her head to see him sitting there, in his chair, the same as ever. Maybe not quite the same. His hair was finger combed back, a little more tousled than before, and pride, man, he reeked of satisfaction. Did he love keeping her off-balance?

“That is not why I thought I came up here,” she murmured, her head dropping onto the desk with a thud.

“Your family don’t have to attend the party,” he said, standing up. Though she only caught that in her peripheral vision, the ceiling was keeping her focus. “It won’t be an overly formal affair, Tara’s taken care of everything.”

“Okay,” she said, closing her legs, letting her feet drop from the tabletop.

“I’ll take care of the other issues this afternoon.” Other issues? He appeared above her, at the guest side of the desk. Hmm. Forcing her muscles to work, she reached for his belt. He took a deliberate step back. “No.” All that and he didn’t want to... He walked away. “We’ll work next door. Take as long as you need in here.”

That was it?

Leaping off the desk, she couldn’t let him just walk out. “Matt!” He paused to look at her, his hand near the panel by the boardroom door. Words failed her. For the first time in maybe ever, she couldn’t think of something to say. His brows rose in question. “I don’t know, just give me a second.”

With her shirt open, bra out of place, and her skirt bunched around her hips, she wouldn’t make the prettiest of pictures. Grabbing the edges of her shirt, she held them together while yanking down her skirt.

“You don’t have to hurry,” he said.

“No,” she said, still tugging at her skirt, trying to get around the desk. “I don’t care about that.” Giving up on the fight with her clothes, she exhaled. “What is going on here?”

His hand dropped and he turned to face her. “Going on where?”

Did he really have to ask? She gestured between them. “Here.”

“You’re unsatisfied?”

“No,” she said and actually laughed on reaching him. “I am satisfied. Very satisfied.” Stopping, she laid a hand on his arm. “You are unsatisfied.” He didn’t respond. “Why won’t you let me touch you?” With their eyes still locked, his hand rose to link his fingers between hers. “That’s not what I mean.” Not that she let him go. “I want to know what’s going on.”

“This isn’t what you want?”

“I want you to talk to me. When I said I was attracted to you... when I told you I’d follow orders... I thought it was mutual, that you’d get something out of this too.”

“You don’t know what I’m getting out of it.”

“Are you not attracted to me? Is that it?” she asked. Maybe he was just being polite when he’d indicated otherwise. “When you kissed me, when you used to kiss me, I thought you were into it. That you... I don’t know. Was I wrong?”

“You’re a beautiful woman.”

Ouch. “Are you appeasing me?” she asked, chilled at the thought. “Because you need me to pull off this charade?”

She felt sick. Closing her eyes, her stomach churned. When she cradled it, the feel of flesh reminded her of her undress.

Yanking her shirt closed, she tried to do the buttons. Her fingers were shaking again, though not with excitement like earlier.

She started for the door, desperate to get out of there. Except her purse. Damnit. Spinning around, she kept her momentum on route back to the couch.

It was when she turned back, purse in hand that he startled her by being there. Right there. His fingers bit into her arm a split second before the others lost themselves in her hair, hauling her up to the tips of her toes to consume her mouth.

Fighting her instinct to sink into the kiss, she pushed at him, trying to free herself from his grip.

The pressure of his certainty almost won her round until with a final push, he relented, freeing her mouth, though not the rest of her.

“Please,” she begged, “no more humiliation.”

He took her face in both hands and crouched to her eye level. “I cannot lose myself in you.”

“The deal is too important,” she said, recalling June’s words. The severity of his gaze was confusing. Did he blame her for something? Have a reason to turn on her? A new thought startled her. “What did she say to you?”

Madelyn had threatened to get rid of her. Whispering in Reid’s ear should only work if their relationship was real, which it wasn’t.

“This isn’t about her,” he said, letting her go to pace away. “Why do you always bring her into the conversation?”

Because Madelyn served as a reminder of what was really going on.

“When you don’t give me answers, I can only guess,” she said. In the purse on the floor, her cellphone rang. She crouched to fish it out and read Calista’s number. “I have to get back to work.”

“You started this,” he said, stalking her way.

“I did, but I didn’t think... I thought it would be different, I guess.”

“I sleep in your bed.” His bed, but whatever. The phone stopped ringing. “I pleasure you.”

“Without taking any yourself,” she said. “I don’t want to be selfish. What you do to me is amazing, but if I try to reciprocate, you back off. You should’ve just been straight with me.”

“I pleasure you because I want to, not out of necessity.”

The phone in her hand began to ring again. “It’s easy to say that,” she said. “Can’t you understand I want to pleasure you too?”

“This is ridiculous,” he said, a hand rising to his forehead.

“That I’d want to pleasure you or that you’re Mr. Selfless-Giver-Never-Taker? Say what it is. Tell the truth. When I told you I was attracted to you, you panicked, went to your little posse and cooked up some scheme to string me along, didn’t you? You wanted rid of Madelyn but got two for the price of one. Forget it, I’m done. I’ll be your beard. Your disguise, but I do not need to be mocked for wanting you. I told the truth; too bad you couldn’t do the same.”

She took a couple of steps. Screw the purse.

He caught her arm when they were side by side.

Silence lingered for a second. “The first moment I wanted you... I was standing at that podium, announcing our Gramercy plans.” That was... before the engagement. “I wanted to own that bold mouth...” When she looked up at him, her lips were his gaze’s first stop. “I didn’t look you up, read your file because you were a threat. I looked you up because I wanted to know

more about the vivacious brunette who dared to speak out when everyone else was silent.”

“You wanted me,” she said, dumbfounded, amazed... suspicious. “You’re just saying this. Keeping me sweet—”

“Believe what you want,” he said, touching her face. “Believe it’s a lie.”

“You said you kissed me that first time to show my idea was idiotic.”

“I needed the excuse.”

“You have the excuse to take so much more now,” she said, her fingers sliding over his on her cheek. “If you want me, why wouldn’t you take me?”

“You shouldn’t want me to,” he said. “We should keep this strictly business.”

She smiled. “I think the ship has sailed on that... the way you touch me...”

“We have to walk away from this clean.”

“Why are you so obsessed with that? You say it over and over.” Yet, as he caressed her, she read behind that façade. “You don’t want another Madelyn. To be in that position ever again. To have a woman want you more than you want her. For a woman to want more.”

“When I ended it...”

“Yes?” she asked, her heart speeding up. “When you ended it...?”

“I decided the day I ended my engagement to Madelyn that I would never be in that position again. Marriage isn’t for me. I didn’t want it. Didn’t want that future. Business is my focus. My professional life. I’m not interested in marriage and kids.”

“And you’re scared I might get ideas of a future.”

“Whether you or me,” he said. “It doesn’t matter. Sometimes in the moment something makes sense that...” Her phone started to ring. Stepping back, she checked the screen, her boss was trying to get hold of her. Reid took the phone from her

hand and answered it before she caught up with what was happening. “This is Matteo Reid...” Oh, Calista was just going to love her. “Yes...” Was there a better excuse for tardiness? “When I’m finished with her.”

He hung up and handed the phone back.

“When you’re finished with me?” she said. “That was my boss.”

“My subordinate,” he said. “She’ll do as told or be shown the door. Being with me has its advantages.”

“And barriers. What are we going to do?”

“What would you like to do?”

So much that apparently wasn’t in the cards. “You told me to be yours. Did you mean it?” His lack of answer was enough. “I am. For the next seven weeks, yours, totally and completely. One hundred percent.”

“And you want me to take advantage of that?”

Swaying closer, she leaned against him. “I want to take advantage of you.”

“If you get hurt...?”

She shook her head. “I’m a big girl. You don’t need to be gentle with me. We have clear parameters, an expiration date, nothing changes that.” Sliding a hand up his body, she curled her fingers around the back of his neck to pull him down for a brief kiss. “Think about it, would you rather protect yourself or go the rest of your life never knowing what it is to be inside me. That could chase you... maybe make it more difficult to walk away. You asked once if you satisfied yourself in me, would this go away. There’s only one way for us to find out.”

Kissing him again, pressing for a little longer than before, she backed away, retrieved her purse and left the office. Her shirt buttons were only half done, her skirt twisted and creased. Everyone would assume what they’d been doing... Just further proof appearances weren’t always what they seemed.

TWENTY-ONE

A couple of days later, Calista called Merci into her office.

After the Reid call, she'd expected reprimand. Her boss's position wasn't enviable. How did she manage the CEO's fiancée? Thankfully, that wasn't her job. Merci took pride in her work, a lot of pride, and wanted to do it well.

She poked her head around the door. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes," Calista said, gesturing at the chair opposite. "Come in and sit down." Going inside, she only got a step when her boss spoke again. "Close the door."

Uh oh, that couldn't be good, but she did it anyway. "Is something wrong?"

"I..." Calista again gestured at the chair. "Sit down."

"I'd prefer to stand."

Calista's long blink was ominous too. "Please sit. It makes me nervous when you loiter."

It did? Merci preferred to be on her feet, ready to run from potential conflict. Still, she had to follow her boss's orders so sat down.

"If this is about Monday—"

"It's about your work in general," Calista said. "I appreciate these past couple of weeks must've been difficult for you and I confess... this is not an easy conversation to have. My footing here is... uncertain."

"How so?"

Another long blink, this one accompanied by a head tilt. "You're engaged to the man who owns the building," Calista said. "No one is on sure footing with you at the moment."

So maybe it was about more than her work.

"I'm sorry, I don't... I don't know how to remedy that."

"Maybe you can tell us how to keep our jobs," Calista said with perhaps a little resentment. "I have a mortgage and kids, I

need to know my job is secure.”

She frowned. “How have I made you believe it isn’t?”

“Mr. Reid wasn’t exactly ecstatic when he answered your phone the other day.” Calista reached to the other side of her computer and produced two pieces of paper. Flattening both on the desk, she pushed them to the center. “Then I get these.”

Unsure what they were, she glanced back and forth before scooting to the edge of her chair to draw them closer. Memos to the department heads. The first declared an increase in the marketing department’s budget to create a new position. The second championed free in-house daycare for every employee in the building... to be established within the next six weeks.

She smiled.

Since the office, she hadn’t seen him. He’d worked late and been up early, as always. These were surprises of the best kind.

Clearing her throat, Merci sat back again. “Are you allowed to show me these?”

Calista sighed. “Are you going to tell me you weren’t aware of them?” Tell her? No, that hadn’t been the plan. “These close two of your longest running cases.”

Yeah, that was a good point. Was that his point? Damn, that really wasn’t the right moment to be smiling. “I’m sorry,” Merci said, trying to cover a laugh with a cough to be more serious. “The daycare issue will close a lot of cases. It’s been a problem for many employees... for years.”

“And it just happens to be solved a couple of weeks after your relationship with the CEO comes to light.”

“I’m sorry, what is the problem?” Merci asked. “This is a coup for our department.”

“Did you discuss it with him?”

“You want me to tell you what my fiancé and I talk about?”

Was this becoming confrontational? Yes. It shouldn’t annoy her Calista wanted information that could help the department. Maybe it pissed her off because there was such an accusation in the question.

“Merci, I don’t know if this is going to work out.”

Yep, now she was angry. “What isn’t going to work out?”

Calista’s frustrated exhale was accompanied by her palms dropping to the desk. “Everyone around here is walking on eggshells. No one wants to say anything to you in case it gets back to him.”

Maybe it would reassure her boss, and her colleagues, to know that she actually barely spoke to the CEO. Revealing that could cause problems in the Madelyn situation. Something he’d said about their relationship being on the rocks came to mind. If he’d decided to avoid her, that he didn’t want to use the time they had to maximum effect, she should tell her boss the relationship wasn’t secure.

Even the idea of talking to him about it put her off. What if he said yes? They’d be effectively ending any chance of communication, let alone anything else.

“I’m sorry,” Merci said. “I don’t know how discussing anything with him conflicts with corporate confidentiality. I don’t give him names and details if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“You think that’s what I’m worried about? I’m worried someone says something you don’t like and the next day they get a pink slip.”

Her mouth opened in shock. “You think I would... That I would use my personal relationship against my colleagues. What kind of person do you think I am?”

“I don’t know,” Calista said, exasperated. “Maybe you can tell me. I sure didn’t think you were the kind of person who’d sleep their way to the top!” More shock. She didn’t even know what to... how to... “I’m sorry, Merci, but this puts everyone in a difficult position. Surely, you can’t deny you’ve been distracted since the news.”

“Yes! Yes, I can deny it. I put everything into my job. I’m good at my job.”

“You used to be good at it,” Calista said. “Let’s put aside the long lunches and tardiness that occurs, hmm, almost every day, meetings are being missed.”

“I haven’t missed any meetings.”

Calista held up three fingers. “Three meetings you didn’t appear for at all. Four you were late for, seriously late, not just by a few minutes. That’s a big deal for someone who only has ten meetings a week. I tried to overlook it; I have overlooked it.” She held up her hands in surrender. “I am not talking disciplinary action or anything, I just wanted to make you aware of it...” She lowered her volume. “Just hope it doesn’t cost me my job.”

“I would never...” Merci said, scooting again to grip the edge of the desk. “He would never... He wouldn’t fire someone just because I asked him to. If I had that kind of control, and he had that little integrity, I’d be in charge, wouldn’t I? He wouldn’t be at the top, I would be.”

For a second, Calista considered her. “There have already been rumblings about a raise.”

“A raise?”

“From those above me in the chain... I can only guess it came from further up.”

“You think Reid is pressuring people to increase my salary?” she said, her scoff becoming a laugh. “Seriously?” She showed her engagement ring. “We’re not hurting for money.”

Calista’s chin rose, probably in offense. “Salary can be about status. It doesn’t have to be about money.”

“Okay, then raise my salary, lower it, do you think he’ll notice? We don’t even have a joint bank account!”

Because the engagement was fake. Despite that being the number one reason, her boss didn’t need to know.

“I should be able to call you into my office to discuss behavior and attitude without worrying for my own position.”

“That’s on you,” Merci said. “I have never threatened anyone’s job. You should know that from my work. I always try to resolve issues, to find a work around, rather than terminate someone.”

“And now you have the ultimate work around,” Calista said, grabbing up the memos to wave them around. “You just drop to your knees for the boss!”

Her jaw swung loose. She'd always had the utmost respect for her boss, for her role, for the department. Maybe that was why the sting of tears tingled her sinuses. Speaking, when she didn't know whether to be offended or devastated, was near impossible.

"Noted," she managed to mumble without making eye contact. "Can I go now?"

"Merci—"

"Can I go?"

The weight of tears on her lashes betrayed they were not hidden, but her eyes snapped up to Calista's anyway. Her boss nodded once, so Merci leaped up and stalked out to grab her purse and keep on going. Thank God it was the end of the day because she needed a drink.

"What happened?" Roxie asked, leaping up from the couch, drink in hand.

Merci plodded across the living room. "I'm sorry if I took you away from something," she said, welcoming the drink and a hug.

"No! You can come over any time," Roxie said, directing her to the couch. "You sound so... defeated. What's going on? Is it Reid? Did he do something shitty?"

Her friend was nice enough to stay quiet while she downed the drink, and even had the forethought to have a second waiting on the coffee table for her.

"It wasn't Reid... it was... It was..." She exhaled and met Roxie's eye. "Do you and Zairn have a joint bank account?"

Despite the odd question, Roxie shrugged. "I don't know. I have cards that always work." She smiled. "I still have my own bank account, money for my work goes in there... I don't get a Crimson salary... Zairn has never asked me for money, but I guess... if he wanted to be on my account, I wouldn't care. He'd never spend my money anyway, he's just like that..." Roxie frowned. "Did Reid ask you for money?"

"No..." Merci sighed. "My boss seems to think I'm some supervillain, holding the department's fate in my hands." Roxie frowned in confusion. "She accused me of pulling Reid's

strings... for my own gain.” The affront of Roxie’s inhale offered solidarity. “I didn’t know people thought I was such a bitch. She said they were afraid for their jobs.”

“Oh, honey,” Roxie said, squeezing her hand. “They don’t know you.”

“I’ve worked under Calista for years. She’s never complained about my work. My mouth? Yes, what boss wouldn’t. I never blamed her for that. But can she really think I’m so evil? So vindictive?”

“You know what would make this easier?” Roxie asked, tucking her feet under her as she nestled against the back of the couch. “Sex.”

“You think your boyfriend would like you propositioning women like that?”

Roxie laughed. “My boyfriend expects my proposals to be indecent. He’d be disappointed if they weren’t. But my point was, this would be easier to stomach if you were getting some, right?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head, flopping against the couch. “I don’t care about the sex—”

“That’s why you’ve been shaving your legs every day,” Roxie said, unfurling one of her bare legs to lay it across Merci. “What did I tell you? Laser treatment, it’s the way to go.”

“Doesn’t matter. I won’t be having sex again... ever.”

“You think ‘cause Reid doesn’t want it, no man ever will?” Roxie retrieved the fresh drinks from the table and handed one over. “Once this whole engagement BS is finished, I’ll take you around the world. We’ll hunt high and low for the perfect guy for you.”

“That’s just it,” she said and sipped her drink. “I didn’t come into this looking for love, you know? I wasn’t even thinking about sex. He’s hot. Yes. Of course, but I didn’t... The thing about it is, I didn’t realize I had an ego. At all. And I don’t know if my feelings are hurt or if I’m getting a look at myself for the first time... I know I told him to think about it, but... does he really need to think about it?”

Tipping her head back, Roxie enjoyed some of her drink. “Maybe he’s gay.”

Merci laughed. “Why do you think he’s gay?”

“ ‘Cause you’re hot, honey, and practically putting it on a plate. Want to find out?”

Roxie took another gulp then snagged her cell from the end table behind her to dial.

“It’s charged?”

She turned it to flash the screen. “There are like twenty of them in docks around the apartment. He’s making fun of me, but hey, last laugh’s on him, now I randomly grab them and interrupt his day whenever I want.”

She put the phone on speaker and laid it on the couch between them before tipping more alcohol into her mouth.

“Little Rox,” a male answered.

“Ballard!” Roxie exclaimed. “You’re hot, do you want to come to New York and have sex?”

“Boss not getting you up to speed? I would, but you talk too much to be my type.”

“Not with me. Ha! You wish,” Roxie said. “I’ll set you up with someone.”

While her friend winked, Merci laughed. “If you talk too much for him, I’d drive him insane.”

“You’re hot,” Roxie said again. “He won’t be listening, he’ll be too busy fucking you.”

“Apparently, I’m not that desirable.”

“You are! Stop it! I’d fuck you for sure if I had the equipment.”

“I don’t know,” Ballard said, a little more distant. “She’s talking about fucking.”

“When is she not?” Zairn’s voice grew closer then landed in the device. “Are you naked?”

“No,” Roxie droned, stirring her drink with a fingertip. “I’m sitting here with Merci.”

“Doesn’t mean you’re not naked,” Zairn said. “Hey, Merci.”

“Hello.”

Licking her finger clean, Roxie shifted to her knees. “Can we have a threesome with Reid?”

Anyone else might be shocked, Merci was getting used to Roxie’s way.

“You’re calling for permission to sleep with one of my oldest friends and his fake fiancée? Sure, baby, why would you even ask? Of course I’m cool with it.”

“Mm hmm, now if you’re done having fun, focus on me. I meant us. You and me.”

Okay, Merci wasn’t expecting that.

“You and me,” Zairn said. “Remember that conversation we had about my cock reaching other rooms? How you think that works with different continents? And if you mean you want to video call while you’re—”

“It’s important,” Roxie said. “You’ll be home in a couple of weeks, that’s what you said.”

“You’re not coming to the engagement party?” Merci asked.

“No!” Roxie answered for him. “Don’t worry, I already bawled him out for it. He’s standing you up, me up, everyone up for some stupid meeting in Rome.”

“You love Rome,” Zairn said.

Roxie didn’t accept that. “You love Rome.”

“You jumped me in Rome.”

“ ‘Cause he was begging for it,” Roxie said to Merci. “Like desperate. I had to throw out a little charity... and I was emotionally vulnerable, totally not in my right mind.”

“That and she couldn’t keep her hands off me. One taste and she was addicted.”

“To the high life.”

“That’s right,” Zairn crowed. “I’m five-star luxury, best you ever had.”

Merci swooned. “You are so cute together. Crazy in love.”

“And he knows it,” Roxie said, tracing a fingertip down the edge of the phone.

“I can spare you for the weekend,” Merci said. “I feel awful keeping you apart.”

“It’s the engagement party this weekend,” Roxie said. “Are you uninviting me?”

Zairn got in first. “Don’t do that, Merci. She’ll just crash... drunk... probably hitting on the fiancé she wants to screw. You stacking fiancés in your bed? You want us to take turns? ‘Cause I’ve gotta say, baby, if I ever went anywhere near your—”

“And you never will, lover,” Roxie said. “I don’t want a threesome for me, I want to have a threesome for you.”

“Not making it any clearer, Lo.”

“You’re hot. If Reid is gay, I’d definitely find out in bed. Don’t know a person, guy or girl, who wouldn’t screw you given half a chance.”

“Why are we thinking Reid is gay?” Zairn asked like he had twenty other things on his mind.

In his defense, being a global businessman, jet-setting around the world, switching time zones every day, he probably did have other things going on.

“Because we are,” Roxie said. “I’m not going to tell you secret things about my girlfriend’s relationship.”

“If I call and ask him—”

“Oh, God, please don’t,” Merci said, struck by panic. “It’s just me... being stupid. It’s no big deal. I don’t think he’s gay.”

“So Rox does? Babe, didn’t I say Reid and me are different? We’re not turned on by the same charms. Doesn’t mean you’re not beautiful... Just to check, the hitting on my friends thing, will that stop after we’re married?”

“Don’t count on it. I don’t get a chance to hit on the man. Merci lives with him, works with him, and she never sees him. What chance would I have? I could never have a relationship like that.”

“Uh, we live and work together and haven’t been in the same place for two weeks.”

“That’s different, I see you all the time. You take care of my sexual needs.”

“That how Reid’s neglecting Merci?”

“Oh no, he doesn’t neglect me,” she said, then paused to replay what she’d just said. “Never mind, ignore me.”

“Reid is a private guy. Both of you have to be careful talking about him.”

“Be careful talking about him to who? Are our conversations not confidential?”

“You know what I’m saying, Lola,” he said with a tone of warning.

“You mean Merci should be careful, but she hasn’t divulged anything. I’m working off assumptions.” She sucked in a breath and swallowed the last of her drink before putting her glass on the table. “But it doesn’t matter. After this, we’re doing another documentary.”

“Are we?”

“Sure,” Roxie said, grabbing her hand. “We’ll travel the world to find men for my single lady friends. We’ll get Merci a guy, Astrid, Jane, Toria.”

“You want to be a pimp?” Zairn asked. “Or, I guess it’s a madam if you’re running the brothel. Way to aim high, baby. Way to aim high.”

“Would you love me any less if I did?”

He laughed. “Lola, my love for you couldn’t get any lower... couldn’t get any higher either. It comes at me, consumes me, from all angles.”

“Aww,” Merci said. “Your boyfriend is so sweet.”

“We have an audience. It’s when he does his best work.”

Roxie always brightened her day. If she wanted a distraction though, Reid was the only man who could provide it. Too bad he didn’t feel the same way about quality time.

TWENTY-TWO

After dinner with Roxie, they watched a movie to numb out. She needed it. Her friend offered her a bed for the night, but Merci chose to go back to Reid's instead. If she called him, he might not even answer, so permission wouldn't be possible. She preferred to be at his place anyway, all her things were there, and she had to be at work the next day.

About ten flights from the top of the stairs, she took off her shoes and tucked her earrings and ring into her purse. Maybe a long shower would relax the tension bearing down on her shoulders.

The kitchen lights flickered on as she exited the laundry room. The lights in each space were programmed to go off after a period of no movement, so she didn't have to worry about turning them off and just kept on going.

A black cube-shaped box on the dining table was curious. It's wide golden bow caught the light. Pretty. She passed by, went through the reception room, and down the corridor. The bedroom was her aim, but the glow of the opaque glass walls of Reid's office betrayed he was inside. The lights wouldn't be on otherwise.

Slowing, she paused at the door. The office was off-limits. Or was it? She'd never been inside, but also hadn't been ordered not to enter.

Every night, they slept together, yet they never saw each other. That night he was home. She was home. All that stood between them was a wall of glass. Maybe that was what tempted her hand to the door, why she pushed it open. His desk was to the left, a straight view from her position at the partially open door. Though his angle toward the laptop faced away from the door, he must have heard her because he turned.

For a second, they just looked.

"Come in," he said.

"I don't want to disturb you."

"You were at Roxie's?"

She nodded, approaching the desk. The shiny marble floor was decorated by a huge black rug. The modern desk and high-back black leather chair stood in front of full height shelves and a central closet.

He pushed back from the desk when she closed in and took her hips to slide her along the desk in front of him. He pulled in a little again and reached beyond her to close the laptop.

“I’m so grateful for her,” she said.

Concern creased his brow. “Today particularly?”

“Bad day at the office.”

He sank back again, his hands sliding from her hips. “Tell me.”

“No,” she said, sinking to the floor, casting aside her shoes and purse. “Don’t be my boss right now.”

She’d had enough boss experience that day. Kneeling there, pulled to him by the depth of his gaze, her hands rose to his thighs.

“Take your hair down.”

Pulling the clip and pins from her hair, she didn’t have to run her fingers through it because he took care of that.

He brushed the hair from her cheeks, tipping her head back. His hands came to settle on her jaw, holding her face toward the light.

“You’re beautiful.”

“I’m yours,” she said, unable to resist giving the reminder.

“Only one way to find out,” he murmured.

Drawing her higher, he joined their mouths. She’d come back for bed and was getting something much better.

At any second, he could pull away. Could tell her to go to bed and leave her wanting again. Maybe it was the forbidden. Maybe it was the allure of such a mysterious man. Something drew her to him. She wanted more.

With her hands on his thighs, she boosted herself higher, begging more despite her precarious balance. His hands on her

face guided their kiss. The gentle press grew more insistent. Letting go, giving herself over to the moment, all of her wanted him to seize the opportunity. She'd told him if he didn't take advantage of their time together, he may live the rest of his life in wonder. She didn't want to live in wonder and wanted to know... what? It didn't matter. Answers would come if he just surrendered to their chemistry.

The enigma. The man at the top. The boss. The billionaire. None of that mattered. They could be in her apartment. A basement bar. A cheap motel room. The location was irrelevant. What she tasted in his kiss was the possibility of some reality she couldn't grasp.

Withdrawing his kiss, he inspired a fear that couldn't manifest as she drifted on the lingering sensation of his kiss.

"Take off your clothes," he murmured, sweeping his lips across hers.

Yes, that was promising. He probably didn't mean she should drop back to her knees and fumble with buttons, eager, desperate to follow his instruction, terrified he might change his mind about whatever could come next.

Yanking off her shirt, she shed her bra and rose up to unzip her skirt. He was relaxed in his chair again, watching her, maybe just a hint of amusement in his eye. The lips covered by his fingers were unlikely to be smiling, but her haste hadn't gone unnoticed.

"Sorry."

He shook his head like the apology wasn't necessary. "Stand up."

Good, that made it easier to get rid of her skirt and panties. Just as she was about to sink to her knees again, he stood in front of her, right in front of her. His height dwarfed hers, but she didn't mind being overwhelmed by him. In fact, it aroused her more.

Cupping her jaw again, he descended to join their mouths. Lost in the kiss, when the hard edge of the desk dug into her thighs, she grabbed for it, boosting herself up. But it wasn't enough, the need of her body drove her higher. Without

breaking the kiss, or really thinking about how, she got on her knees on the desk and rose to deepen their kiss.

His hands stayed on her face. Somehow, he kept them to himself while hers searched his torso. The shirt in her way was frustrating, she found the buttons, but only managed to undo one before he broke the kiss again.

“Did I tell you to do that?”

Shaking her head, she didn’t know whether to apologize or beg. “Sorry.”

He swept her hair from her face again. “You want to have sex.” That much she’d thought was clear. “Are you sure?”

How would they know if they didn’t? Consent was important, but he’d asked before, she’d stated as much. In moments like that, it felt like the only way to survive was to be joined with him.

“Please,” she said, without caring the word was laced with desperate need. “Matt.”

Searching her, the heat of his own desire grew with every flick of his eyes across her expression. She was sure and didn’t know how else to tell him that.

Words weren’t needed. He took hold of her hips and turned her around while taking her legs from the tabletop. Bent over the desk, she tried to peek over her shoulder, but his hand landed in her hair, forcing her attention forward again.

The sound of him unfastening his belt was the sweetest music she’d ever heard. “Don’t move.”

What? Staying in place, she watched him cross the room and exit. Uh... how long was she supposed to stay there? Where was he going? If he wanted them to be intimate in the bedroom, surely she had to go with him.

Less than a minute passed, then he came in again. Without looking at her, he returned to his place behind her.

Despite being naked with a man she’d fantasized about night after night, the sexy mood was dwindling. What was...? This wasn’t like she expected. He was doing something but didn’t

touch her. He obviously didn't want her looking at him, the last time she tried he'd pushed her away.

“Ready?”

Her mouth moved, sort of unsure how to respond before she managed a... “I, uh, yeah.”

His palm was cold on her ass, in instinct, she flinched away at what turned out to be the worst possible moment. As he advanced, she retreated. The blunt head of his cock just touched her as she moved. Eager not to appear reluctant, she pushed back, meeting him at the same moment he sought entry again. Plunging deep into her, far further than probably either of them expected in that moment, a yelp of pain left her lips and he stalled.

“I'm okay,” she said quickly. “Fine. Good. Keep going.”

He pulled back and pushed in slower. Nice. Better. Closing her eyes, she relaxed as his rhythm found pace. Yes, that was what she wanted. His hands warmed her hips, claspng her tight, moving her body to unite with him in the perfect tempo. Like the sweet melody held her purpose, she moaned, sliding her hands further across the desk.

“Matt,” she whispered, pushing back, wishing she could kiss or touch him.

“Quiet,” he barked.

Her eyes popped open. Apparently, his mood didn't match hers. Why did he sound so angry and impatient? Eager for his climax? Loosening, she was flattered his control was fraying. Bringing her hand back, she tucked it between her body and the desk, seeking her clit. She barely got a whisper of contact before he pushed in hard, forcing her against the solid surface.

“Hands flat where I can see them.”

Eager or pissed off? Was he still in boss mode? He did like to be in charge.

Smiling, she did as told. “Yes, sir.”

Pulling back, he moved faster. As she breathed in, the whisper of pressure signaled climax could be approaching. She whimpered his name again. Yes, it was—he slammed into her,

stalling, impaling her with a certain purpose, then he relaxed and... withdrew.

“Go to bed.”

Wait, that was it? They were... That wasn't... From what she heard, it was obvious he was fastening his pants again. After his buckle was done up, he pushed her hips to the side, seeming to want her out of the way. When he opened his laptop and pulled his chair back toward the desk, she was forced aside.

Okay, so... backing away a few steps, she was stunned and still expected him to acknowledge her. He didn't. His furrowed brow concentrated on the screen.

Bed. Maybe he was...

What choice did she have after being dismissed?

Turning for the door, she couldn't figure out what had just happened.

“Take your shit.”

Turning back to his voice, she saw him kick her purse and shoes from beneath his desk.

Right, her stuff. Rushing over, she collected everything up, anticipating there would be an explanation for the odd behavior. But he was back to his computer, so intent on it, she may as well have been a million miles away.

Bed. Right.

Leaving the office to go to the bedroom, she, for the first time, didn't want to sleep in his bed. Whatever just happened was... nothing like she'd expected intimacy with him to be. Something was off. Was it her? Was she a disappointment? Was he angry? Or had she just built them up to be something unreal.

Her expectation had been high, too high maybe, he wasn't superhuman. Sometimes, after intimacy, the sheen of another person could fade and the attraction dwindle. It never happened so fast; she'd never heard of a tarnish building so quickly.

That was what she got for hoping. Believing. Matteo Reid was an incredible man in so many ways, could it be he lacked in this one area? She couldn't blame him. Her performance hadn't been too impressive either.

Consoling herself with the truth as she got in the shower, they'd put a lot of pressure on each other. Hadn't they speculated their desire may wither if they gave into it? They'd done that and desire wasn't high on the list of emotions she was experiencing as she washed the encounter from her skin.

It was what it was and they had their answer... even if it didn't match her expectation.

TWENTY-THREE

Saturday night meant engagement party.

She couldn't be looking forward to it any less.

After keeping her head down for the last two days, she'd been keen to avoid Calista at work, Reid at home, and even Roxie's calls. What did she say? She felt like a fraud. Like a rookie teenager.

Whatever happened in his office, it couldn't have meant much to Reid either. From what she could tell, he didn't share the bed with her anymore. Was he embarrassed or as disappointed as her?

Though she'd spent a large portion of the day at the office, Merci had to go back to Reid's to get ready for the much-anticipated party. Tara called to say Reid would meet her there. Fine, she didn't need an awkward car journey to make the evening any worse. And she doubted he'd want to kiss her into an elevator trip either.

So she descended the stairs alone to get into the car and travel to Crimson.

The party wasn't in a public area. Near the top of the building, an entire floor was reserved for private events. It was a reprieve to have the party where there were professional kitchens, massive liquor stores, and staff to cater to every whim. Were they paying for it? Who knew?

By the time she'd ascended the stairs and found the right place, folks were already mulling around. People. A lot of people. When she stepped out of the stairwell, smoothing her dress, those present began to notice her. Some cheered as others clapped. Applause? She hadn't been expecting that.

Caught in the headlights, she wasn't sure what to do. Was Reid there? Was this the plan? Damn, maybe she should've done some research about billionaire engagement parties.

Hope came when a petite woman broke from the crowd to come hurrying over. Roxie. Relief.

Her friend put an arm around her. “Thank you! Yes, she’s wonderful. Now if only the man of the hour could drag himself away from the office. Though the wedding won’t pay for itself, will it?”

Laughter and then people were returning to their business.

Still with an arm around her, Roxie directed her from the stairwell, guiding her through the curious partygoers. Some faces she recognized from work, some she’d spoken to, others she hadn’t. Everyone had to wonder how she’d stolen the heart of the man at the top. Right then, she wasn’t even sure how she’d gotten him to speak to her.

The bar was setup in the main entry space. One of the bars anyway, and it wasn’t setup, it was permanent. Crimson was all about the good times.

“You won’t get away with it,” Roxie said, directing her onto a stool before sitting in the one next to it, facing her.

“Get away with what?”

Without a word being exchanged, two glasses were put down next to them. Alcohol. Thank God.

“You’ve been avoiding me for two days,” Roxie said.

Merci wasn’t even going to deny it, and nodded while sipping her Gin and It. “I have.” Roxie crooked a brow. “I wasn’t sure I could look you in the eye.”

“Why? What happened,” Roxie asked, picking up her own glass. “I haven’t heard whispers of anything.”

“No, you wouldn’t. The shame came in private.”

Her friend scooted to the edge of her stool. “Talk to me. What happened?” She wasn’t even sure she wanted to admit it aloud. Something in her silence inspired her friend to gasp. “Oh my God, did you...?” With her mouth just a little open, Merci surrendered the tiniest nod. Roxie squealed and grabbed her hand. “Good for you, girl!”

“Shh,” Merci said, wishing the floor would swallow her up. “Please. We can’t...”

“What? Talk about it. Of course we can. Forget my fiancé, you can trust me.”

“I do trust you.” That didn’t mean she could put her feelings and memories into words. “We did it, yes, but... it was weird.”

Roxie drew closer. “Weird?” It almost felt like she should be reaching for popcorn. “I love a good kink story.”

“No,” Merci said, shaking her head. “I don’t mean like that, I mean...”

She couldn’t bring herself to say the words. As Roxie’s chin sank lower, her eyes seemed to grow like she anticipated more. There should be more. There was more. She just didn’t understand it.

“Oh my God, was it awful?” Staying silent, Merci didn’t even want to confirm the answer. If she didn’t say it out loud, maybe it wouldn’t be true. “Oh my God, what a disappointment.”

“It wasn’t awful,” she said, pleased her friend’s volume stayed low. “It just wasn’t... what I expected.”

“What was awful? Was he like clumsy? Was it quick? Over before you... Did you come?” Merci cringed, which prompted Roxie to gasp again. “Oh my God, what an asshole!”

“No, he isn’t a... It was good. He felt good inside me and the kissing was... I don’t know, it just wasn’t what I expected. And after he... He dismissed me like we’d just been talking about the quarterly figures.” Roxie’s nose wrinkled. “Yeah... We’ve done stuff before, and it’s felt amazing. This time it was... different. I don’t know, it was late, and I just kind of stormed into his office. Maybe he was just off his game.”

“Have you seen him since?” Roxie asked. Merci shook her head. “Oh, honey.”

Her friend put both glasses on the bar and pulled her into a hug. She’d had more, closer, physical contact with Roxie than the man she was supposed to be engaged to. When she pulled back, Roxie stroked both of her cheeks.

“It’s stupid, I shouldn’t be disappointed,” she said, taking her friend’s hands. “He told me all along it wasn’t real. I didn’t expect anything...” Except, obviously, she had. “I’d never felt

attraction like I felt to him... it felt different, exciting. I guess you were right about being swept up in it.”

“Even if you were, he should’ve taken care of your needs too. Then he has the gall to just block you out?”

“We were never close like that. You know he’s busy. We don’t often see each other. I’m sure he wasn’t avoiding me.” Was she sure of that? No. “I don’t think he means any harm.”

“Why didn’t you call me?”

“And what? Gush about lousy sex? I still can’t believe it really happened.”

“I can’t believe he’s left you alone at your damn engagement party.”

“It’s a con, he knows that.”

“Yeah, and what’s the likelihood he’s cooped up in the office cozying up with Madelyn Massey?” Roxie growled. “I’m tempted to call the damn press myself.”

“No,” Merci said, squeezing her hands. “This will pass. I’m embarrassed and confused, but it’s my own fault.”

“This is not on you.”

“I didn’t exactly take control of the situation,” she said, though he had scolded her for trying to pleasure herself. “And I wouldn’t know what to say to him... I’m happy we didn’t need to have the awkward next day conversation. This is for the best. Honestly. He was right. We did it. It’s done. We never have to think about it again.”

“Just because it happened once doesn’t mean it will happen again.”

“Right,” she said, but Roxie had gone kind of distant. “What?”

Roxie snapped out of her daze. “Nothing. Never mind.” Sitting straighter, her friend grinned. “You have a whole room full of gifts and there’s a basement full of alcohol.”

“Am I supposed to...” She glanced around at the partygoers, most of whom were strangers. “I don’t know, host?”

“Reid isn’t hosting. Why should you bear all responsibility? If he doesn’t give a damn, we don’t either. And this is my house, don’t forget that,” Roxie said, raising a straight finger. “You want me to empty the building, just say the word and we’ll kick out all these freeloaders. Want to dance?”

“Downstairs?”

“If you want,” Roxie said, but noticed something across the room that tilted her head.

Turning on the stool, she followed her friend’s line of sight. “What?”

“That’s my elevator,” Roxie murmured.

There were three elevators in the bank. The central one was a different color and covered in intricate engravings. The light above it was on and a breath later, it opened.

Reid exited with another man. One she might not have recognized if not for the exhale that came from her friend.

Roxie sipped her drink and turned her back to the room. But if that was...

“Who is that?” Merci asked, looking between Roxie and the men, speaking over the applause that greeted Reid’s arrival. “I thought it was—”

“Oh, it is,” Roxie said, smiling at the bartender mixing another drink.

“But if it’s—”

“Putting a ring on it doesn’t suddenly make me easy,” Roxie said, tossing back the last of her drink and holding the empty glass out to the bartender. He took it and poured another from the cocktail shaker in his hand. “I love how efficient they are.”

“How’d I know I would find you at the bar?” a male voice approached; the owner appeared at Roxie’s other side.

Mesmerized, Merci couldn’t blink away from the dazzle of his instant charm, and he wasn’t even speaking to her.

Reid stopped beside her but didn’t say a word. Good. They’d never be able to hide the weirdness. He was there because

he was supposed to stand next to his “fiancée.” They’d stomach it if they had to.

“Lola...” the male sang to the woman ignoring him.

Roxie accepted the drink from the smiling bartender and only glanced up at the man beside her when the younger man was gone. “Oh, I’m sorry, are you talking to me?”

“Yes,” he said, his smile unreserved. “Can’t avoid the Empress.”

“Oh, yes, you can,” Roxie said. “My fiancé doesn’t like it when random men hit on me without permission. Especially in our own house.”

“Oh, he doesn’t?”

“No, he doesn’t. And, unfortunately, you can’t ask his permission because he’s an ocean away at the moment.”

“He is?”

“Mm hmm,” Roxie said, putting down her glass. “I know because he told me he wasn’t coming tonight.”

“Maybe he wanted to surprise you.”

“And maybe she wanted him to work for it,” Roxie said, tipping her focus upward.

“I know how to fix this,” he said, the light in his eyes glittering down at the woman next to him.

“Better be good,” Roxie said. “You get one shot.”

“One’s all I need,” he murmured, raising Roxie’s chin with a fingertip as he descended. “Because I’m so good at it.”

The moment their lips met, a shiver went through Roxie’s body. She actually saw her friend’s body quake under the kiss of the man she’d just been teasing. When Roxie’s arms opened to rise and hook themselves around his neck, he stood, easing Roxie from the stool. When her friend’s feet hit the floor, the couple broke their kiss, but she stayed tucked in against her man.

Transfixed, it took a second to notice her friend was looking at her. “Will you be okay for ten minutes?” Roxie asked, nudging the guy trying to pull her from the bar. “He needs eight minutes of cuddle time.”

“Cuddle time,” her guy murmured and ducked to nuzzle her hair.

That was what love looked like. What soulmates looked like. What every person longed to find. The need. The completion. The forever.

“Of course,” Merci said, waving them away. “Go. Go.”

“Thank you,” Roxie mouthed more than said and let herself be led away.

Her cheeks ached with the smile that grew as she watched the couple disappear into the crowd.

“That’s Zairn Lomond.”

“I figured,” she said, only afterwards realizing Reid was the speaker. “Oh, uh... I haven’t been here long. Tara told me to come myself.”

“There was business to take care of.”

As there always was. “Sure.”

TWENTY-FOUR

Reid took Roxie's stool, so Merci kept her focus on her drink and the bar, the servers, the bottles, everything but him.

"Do we need to talk?" he asked.

"No," she said with a single head shake. "Definitely don't need to do that."

"Merci," he said, surprising her by sliding a hand over hers on the bar.

Turning to meet his eye, she felt that spark again. That need inside her. The pressure of want. How could it feel so real, so visceral, and fall so flat?

"What happened?" she whispered, the words tumbling out. "I wanted it so bad and... What happened?"

He took her hand to his mouth to kiss her fingers. "Disappointing you was supposed to put a stop to this."

So it had been a conscious decision to make the experience so lackluster?

"Did it?" she asked. "I felt used... dirty."

He actually winced. "I'm sorry."

And apology was a good start. "If you wanted to put a stop to it, why talk to me tonight? I know you've been keeping your distance. You haven't been sleeping with me."

"Felt like it was no longer my right... Disappointing you... seemed straightforward. Simple." A con within a con. "We get it over with, it's no good, and we get over it."

"But...?" she asked, still curious why he was breaking the silence. "Are we over it?"

"You're on my mind... at work, business, in meetings, I'm preoccupied... by you. Letting it go, letting you hate me is the smart course. And for the first time in my life... the smart course means less to me than the truth."

Finding out they didn't just suck together was some consolation, but it didn't solve anything.

“What now?” she asked. “Where do we go from here?”

The answer obviously wasn't easy to articulate because he didn't come up with anything before some guy came over to interrupt.

“Reid!” the older man declared.

Reid turned to him. “Frank Kearns.”

The men shook hands. She picked up her drink, grateful to have a prop. The guy, this Frank, smiled while looking her up and down.

“She's beautiful.”

“Yes, she is,” Reid said. “Merci, this is Frank Kearns of Ranby Kearns, they specialize—”

“Auditing and archives,” she said, surprising him by offering a hand, which he seemed impressed by as he shook. “You've been working with Gramercy.”

“That's right,” Kearns said, then looked at Reid. “She's smart.”

Because she knew simple facts? What kind of woman was she expected to be?

“She is,” Reid said.

Someone else approached. Elwood, looking harried, unlike him. “Excuse me for interrupting.” He offered a smile to all but focused in on her. “You're needed downstairs.”

“I'm needed?” she said, sliding off her stool.

“What's wrong?” Reid asked.

From the strict attention Elwood kept on her, she could tell he didn't want to lie to his boss. “It's okay,” she said, smiling. “I'll be back in a minute.” Leaving the men, she fell into step next to Elwood. “What's going on?”

“Your father is downstairs.” She stopped. Was this the night for shocks to the system? Elwood noticed her gone and came back to put an arm around her to get them moving again. “Your stepmother is with him... and their daughter.”

“Oh my God.” If it wasn't just the worst night for... “How did they know about tonight? How did they—”

The answer came when the elevator door opened and her father entered with her stepmother, half-sister... and Madelyn. Rage struck her. Hot, vengeful rage. That didn't last when her stepmother saw her and screamed. She actually screamed.

Anyone who hadn't noticed the crazy newcomers already, was clued in quick.

Her stepmom and half-sister came rushing over to embrace her. Had they ever held her?

Her father, Derek, came over too, beaming with pride. At least he had the decency not to touch. There had always been something standoffish about him, and she was glad for that.

"Barbie, Anais," she said, taking a step away from their clutching, stroking hands. "This is a surprise."

"It is!" Madelyn declared, coming over to link her arm around her dad's. "My gift to you. I can't believe they were almost overlooked."

Even without the previous blatant warning, the smugness on Madelyn's face said it all.

"Maybe we should go somewhere and talk," Merci said because the quicker she could get them out, the better.

Where could they go?

"No!" her stepmom, Barbie, said, passing her, her wondrous gaze tracking around the room at the people and decor. The towering ceiling opened her mouth. "It's so beautiful! Oh, sweetie! You did good!" Her stepmom leaped back to hug her again. "This is incredible. I had no idea you were this high-class."

And she hadn't been until recently. "Thank you, I can take you—"

"They want to enjoy the party."

Except there wasn't that much of a party while they were the central spectacle.

"He's rich? Your husband," Barbie said at the same moment Merci noticed her half-sister making eyes at one of the male guests.

“We’re not married.”

“Right, but you’re gonna be,” her stepmother said.

Her dad and Madelyn were whispering. She didn’t want to imagine what they had in common. Just them having a conversation was more than she could process.

“He’s my fiancé.” And she hoped to God he’d snuck out a back door.

“And you were trying to keep him away from us,” Barbie said.

“What? No!”

“A girl who finds her Prince and forgets her family.”

“No,” she said again.

Her mortification grew in time with her stepmom’s volume. “You forgot all about us. You’re too good for us now.”

Shaking her head, it was like the floor lurched beneath her feet. “We haven’t seen each other for years.”

Were people listening? How could they not be?

“It happens all the time,” Madelyn said, coming closer, still clinging to Derek. “Someone moves to Manhattan and their personality flips around. Suddenly, they don’t care about the people who got them there.”

Her father did the barest minimum for her after her mom died. Getting her there? Where was she supposed to be? She’d loved and worked in Manhattan since leaving college, she hadn’t gone anywhere.

“It’s hurtful,” Barbie said, playing right into Madelyn’s manipulation. “We didn’t even get a call about the engagement.”

Murmurs close by reminded her of their audience. This was mortifying. Everyone was listening. It wasn’t enough that she was the harlot from nowhere, commanding people be fired left and right—according to Calista. And, yeah, if that wasn’t the exact moment she noticed her boss with Tonya and Mariah, standing on the edge of a larger group from HR. Fabulous.

“It wasn’t like that,” she said, though how else could it be explained?

She thought they wouldn't be interested? They wouldn't be if she was marrying a regular Joe with a regular Joe's bank account. If for no other reason than regular Joe likely wouldn't have a conniving ex hellbent on winning him back, even at the cost of her humiliation. For Madelyn, that was probably a bonus.

"You wanted to cut us off," Barbie said, frowning for the first time. "To forget we existed."

"No! I—"

"She's always been this way," Barbie said to the apparently sympathetic Madelyn. "Superior. Thinks herself better than the rest of us."

Her mouth dropped open. Her stepmom could be cruel, but to do it in such a public forum was a new low. She couldn't even defend herself. Every time she tried to speak, someone cut her off.

"Don't stand for it," Madelyn said. "You shouldn't. You have to make yourself heard."

No trouble with that in the room full of gawkers.

"Mrs. Moore!" that declaration came from the man who swanned straight past her to put himself in front of her. Aiden. "Thank you so much for coming!"

What was he doing?

"If you wanted us here, why didn't we get an invite?"

"Oversight, of course," he said, joined by Nasir and June.

"Yes, apologies," June said, taking Barbie's arm to direct her in the opposite direction. "Let us give you the tour."

The trio closed around her family, sort of herding them away. Madelyn stayed put, just smiling at her. She wanted to smile back, to act like the embarrassment wasn't hot. Unfortunately, with the anxiety still clawing at her and the ice of trepidation spreading across her chest, she couldn't muster it.

They were here. God knew what they'd say. And that wouldn't be the last scene of the evening. If they got her alone or cornered, there would be more accusations. The only way to avoid that was to get the hell out of there.

As much as she didn't want to abandon the party, because it wouldn't look good, she couldn't hang around waiting for them to strike again. Next time might be even more explosive if Roxie was back from her reunion with Zairn. Much as she appreciated her friend's need to defend her, Reid would despise a scene. A private guy wouldn't appreciate a spectacle playing out at a party he was hosting. And she'd just delivered exactly that.

Damnit. No.

Her feet took her through the guests who had no compunction about staring. At least before it had been discreet, now it seemed she'd opened herself to brazen scrutiny.

Air. She needed air. Space. Something the party couldn't give her.

TWENTY-FIVE

Bursting into the stairwell, ignoring the blatant pointing of others, Merci needed to get the hell out of there. Damn her elevator aversion. Right then, it actually served her. Being in a small box? No chance of escape? Completely out of control? No thanks.

Descending the stairs, she concentrated on each one, on the progress. Every step, one closer to freedom.

Why did these things always happen to her? It was always something. If it wasn't her mouth, her mind messing up her day, something else always managed to do it.

Calista. Her colleagues, she'd have to face them on Monday. Avoiding Calista those last couple of days had been difficult. At least her boss seemed to be of the same mind and avoided her. This fresh shame would—

“Merci.” That was... “Stop.”

And she did. Was that Reid? Where was he? Glancing around, she leaned out to peek up the narrow void between the flights of stairs. She'd only descended a couple of floors, so it didn't take long for him to appear on the parallel set.

Shame. Embarrassment. The words weren't enough.

“I'm sorry,” she said, turning to where he stood at the top of the flight she was halfway down. “I know you hate drama like that. I had no idea that they... You probably don't believe me—”

“I believe you. It was Madelyn.”

Had his ex confessed already? “She told you—”

“We tolerate her for a reason. I apologize—”

“You don't have to apologize,” she said, ascending a stair. “They're my family.”

“And you were clear that you didn't want them present. I should have realized Madelyn would orchestrate something like this.”

“You had no way to know,” she said, rising another stair. “I'm mortified, but at least I... Waiting for her to make a move

was driving me crazy. I'm just sorry it came at your expense."

"That wasn't my expense."

"It was," she said, her hand sliding higher. "Now everyone knows your fiancée is crazy with a crazy family. I really didn't want you to be embarrassed."

"Merci," he said, touching her jaw. "This was not your fault."

"I hate letting you down."

His fingers insinuated themselves between hers and the handrail. Picking up her hand, he backed away, bringing her onto the landing with him. "Then forgive me," he said, tipping her chin higher.

Before she had a chance to ask for what, he bowed to kiss her. The drug of his kiss intoxicated her in an instant. Light, floating on the bliss of his tongue sliding against hers, she forgot their troubles. The party. Her family. Madelyn. Everything.

Her back hit the wall before she noticed they were moving. Crouching lower, the angle of his kiss changed as he hooked a hand under her thigh to pick her up from the floor. Coiling her arms around his neck, she wanted to hold him and be there forever.

As he straightened again, the solid mass of his form crushed her against the wall and there... pressed into her was the proof of his need. Oh, just the sincerity of that want, and that he shared it with her, told her they were moving to a new phase of their relationship. What would it be? What was this? A beginning or an end?

His lips left hers to track from her cheek to her jaw, to her neck around to her throat.

"Matt," she breathed, her head flush against the wall when she welcomed him everywhere he wanted to taste. "Yes... please..." If it was up to her, they might do it right there in the stairwell. Unless there was a fire alarm, it should stay empty, shouldn't it? Did she care? Only because he would. "Are there cameras here?"

"Top five are Zairn's," he said, pushing her dress up her thighs, forcing himself harder against her. "No cameras. No

security. Staff use a separate stairwell.”

And? Why was he telling her that? Why was his mouth far from her flesh? Because his eyes were on hers. Drowsy yet intense, she wanted to read beyond them, to whatever was in his mind.

“Matt,” she whispered, laying a hand on her cheek. “Can we go home?”

His head moved in a slight loose shake. The disappointment was short-lived. He leaned in to kiss her with a fervor that gave her a head rush. He wanted her, that was clear. Not like before. Not like in his office. But if they went home, they could do it right. Be together the way they were supposed to be. No games. No cons. No plans for anything except embracing each other.

Moving against the ridge in his slacks, she imagined being joined with him. The right way. The way it was supposed to be. They could do it, they could...

When his hips moved away, and his steadying arm strengthened, she worried it was about to be over. That the moment was going to be cut short, as it had been so many times before. Except he didn't set her down, his kiss became more insistent, his need no less potent in the force of his plundering tongue.

A sound. Like she'd heard before only this time... His belt, he was... Infused with excitement, a new heated hope overtook her. Pushing his jacket from his shoulders, she grabbed at his shirt, pulling him to her, speeding her kiss, desperate to convey her certainty. He didn't slow, or ask for permission, he touched her over her panties, rubbing, caressing, tormenting her with the proximity of his flesh to hers.

When his fingers curled around the fabric to touch her glistening core, she moved with them, arousing herself with his digits as they spoiled her with their insistent maneuvers. It was heat. It was passion. It was them.

His arms came around her and he took her from the wall to the floor, coming down on top of her, his mouth still tangled with hers. The cool concrete was a sharp juxtaposition to the

warmth of his body, his promise, but was just as solid in its support.

“Matt,” she begged when his lips left hers.

“I don’t have a condom.”

“I’m on the pill,” she said, probably too loud and too fast, but she was about to trump her own record.

When he plunged into her, all the way to the hilt, the scream wrung from her lips echoed up and down the cavernous space. She bit her lip, opening her eyes to show an apology only to be greeted by the sight of his smile.

He hated spectacle. Embarrassment. His private business being available to the world. Yet it was there. A smile. Focused on her. He didn’t pull away or chastise her. Didn’t second guess what they were doing, he retreated and advanced, his eyes locked on hers, intensifying the sensation of their joining.

Relaxing, she felt his acceptance as she began to move with him. Definitely different than before, her hands found his body, stroking the definition behind his shirt. She wanted more. To be naked with him. Exploring every part of each other.

He slowed and stilled, dipping down to kiss her like he knew what was in her head. With that promise, she knew they’d get there... and doubted she would sleep alone in his bed again.

The kiss ebbed and he started again, speeding his thrusts, pushing them both to the edge of control. There was nothing to hold on for, no reason to hold back. Giving in to the need, her body jerked in the quick, harsh explosion of pleasure that tightened every part of her.

“Matt,” she yelped, her fingers fisting in his shirt. “Oh... fuck.”

The hiss of his breath came as he stilled within her and then they were breathing into the warm air between them. When her eyes opened, they found his, searching her, probing, in something more than they had before.

“Merci.”

Why did he need to say her name? It didn’t matter. Her smile widened and she laid a hand on his cheek, stroking him,

reassuring both of them that the moment was real.

“Amazing,” she said. An immature, ecstatic laugh bubbled up inside her. “Oh my God, that was amazing.”

Maybe it was relief, maybe it was just the hormones still surging through her, but a light, fluffy kind of sensation of wellbeing reached every corner.

He moved from above her and took a second to tuck himself away before sitting against the wall, his legs still tangled with hers.

“Not the most romantic setting,” he said, scanning above them.

“It’s perfect,” she said, pushing down her dress as she got to her knees and crawled between his, resting her hands on his shoulders. “Thank you.”

He exhaled a whisper of amusement. It wasn’t quite like before, but she liked the new light in his eyes. “Wasn’t selfless.”

“You could’ve stayed away,” she said, rising to touch her forehead to his for a second before sinking back to sit on her feet. “Stuck with your plan.”

“If I’d known I was missing out on seeing you this happy, I might have done it days ago.”

She glittered. That’s what it felt like. Happiness, bliss, shimmered from within her. “I was devastated,” she admitted, smoothing the creases she’d put in his shirt. “I thought it was over... We were done.”

“We should’ve been,” he said, stroking her hair. “But I’m not sorry.”

Neither was she. No doubting he was the instigator, that he drove the twists and turns of their relationship while she was just a passenger on the ride. But right then, being a passenger felt good.

They couldn’t sit on the stairs forever, though she was in no hurry to go back upstairs. “I should deal with my family, shouldn’t I?”

“They’re being taken care of.”

“I didn’t mean... I trust your people to be kind to them, but I don’t want them mouthing off, telling stories, being victims.”

“I didn’t mean with hospitality,” he said, easing her around to sit her between his legs, pulling her against him. “They’ll be allowed a drink and then escorted out.” She tensed, intending to turn back to him, but his arms tightened to hold her in place. “Discreetly.”

The comfort of his arms around her shoulders was grounding. “I’m sorry about them.”

“You shouldn’t have to be,” he said. “But I know what it’s like.”

“Your parents aren’t here either,” she said, adjusting the angle of her head against his shoulder. “Your mom?”

“Married a man who detested me,” he said. “Detested children. Before they were married, I was sent to boarding school. I spent holidays there or with friends... We’ve never been close.”

It didn’t seem fair for one parent to give up on their child for the sake of a relationship. Reid hadn’t been given the chance to experience the closeness and security a child could feel within a nurturing familial relationship.

“My mom died just a few weeks before I graduated high school,” she said. “College was already organized, I stayed with a friend’s family to see out the end of the high school year. I spent maybe a month living with my dad and his new family before leaving to start college. After a few awkward holidays, I stopped going to theirs altogether. Not like they were inundating me with invitations, it was mutual. He’d moved on and I wasn’t a part of that new life.”

“Yet, they feel it’s their right to inject themselves into your life now?”

“My dad, God love him, isn’t the dominant one in their relationship. He defers to her.”

“I did notice she was more vocal.” As far as she remembered, her father hadn’t said a word. “I would’ve come over to—”

“That would’ve made it worse,” she said, understanding why he hadn’t. “The situation and my embarrassment.”

“You shouldn’t feel unsupported. Roxie was right. We have to be a team.”

“We’ve tried that and...” She exhaled. With some of the endorphins retreating, her view became clearer. “Are you going to avoid me again? Every time we do something... intimate, you disappear on me right after.”

“I’m used to knowing the course, to being in control. This is an unusual situation, dealing with it isn’t straightforward.”

Something they’d both figured out. “I’m here to support you too. If you need anything, if you want to talk.”

“Would you like to have dinner tomorrow night?”

“A date?” she asked, having not expected he’d yield to something so intimate. Yes, they’d just had sex, but sitting at a table together, alone, they’d have to converse. “You’re not busy?”

“If you’d rather not—”

“No, I want to,” she said, curling her fingers around his embracing arms. “I’d have dinner with you every night, if work could spare you.”

“For a long time, work’s been the only thing in my life,” he said. “I’m not accustomed to making time for anything else.”

Because, as he’d told her, after breaking his engagement with Madelyn, he’d decided against long-term personal commitments.

“I worked a lot too. It distracted me from other things. I always thought I was good at it, so I felt good being productive.”

“Past tense?” he asked.

She shifted closer. “I didn’t say thank you. I didn’t get a chance.”

“Thank you for what?”

“Solving my secondment issue. Childcare for all. That was really incredible.”

“Personnel issues tend to be pushed down the agenda. It shouldn’t be that way. Our employees make RCI what it is, we

shouldn't have been complacent. It's important to show people they're valued. Thank you for reminding me."

It hadn't been her intention, but those it benefited wouldn't complain. "It is very kind and will be a massive cost to the company."

"Losing good workers would be a higher price. I imagine it will close a lot of cases in your department."

She smiled. "I'm not obsolete yet."

"That wasn't my intention—"

"It's okay," she said, dipping her head to kiss his arm. "I was kidding."

"Was your boss happy?"

Suspicious, was that question innocent or had he heard something on the grapevine?

"I'm sure she'll be over the moon about the childcare issue being taken care of. It does heal a lot of headaches."

"There's something you're not telling me."

How did he know that? "What have you heard?"

"That you had a bad day on Wednesday, that you're talking in abstracts and past tenses."

"It's not important," she said, squeezing his arm. "I feel good now, can we keep feeling good?" He didn't respond. Curling her lips into her mouth, she bit down, trying to hold them there. If she could stay quiet long enough... Squeezing her eyes closed desperately trying to keep the words in... "She accused me of plotting."

Oh, shit. Did those words come from her?

"Plotting? Against her?"

"Anyone. I don't get it, maybe that's why I didn't want to talk about it. And I don't want you to feel obliged to do anything about it. If you do, it'll only be worse, but... She seems to think the creation of that position, the childcare thing, that it was all arranged by me to suit me."

"It benefits everyone. But I can't deny you were the cause of it. Without our relationship, it wouldn't have been on my

radar.”

“That doesn’t mean I pushed you into it because I didn’t want to do my job. She said people are walking on eggshells, that they’re afraid for their jobs. She seems to think if someone upsets me, all I have to do is whisper in your ear and you’ll fire them.”

Stroking the soft fabric of his shirt, she appreciated him, and the moment of closeness, even if it was in the oddest of places.

“I might.”

“Might what?” she said on a wistful sigh, closing her eyes to relax her head on his arm.

“Fire them.”

Her eyes opened a breath before she lifted her head. “You would?”

“You were right that you’re good at your job. People should work together. It should be a professional, reciprocal relationship. If someone is causing trouble, upsetting others, it doesn’t suggest they’re a team player.”

“Have you ever fired anyone from HR?”

“Yes.”

Her eyes narrowed at no one. “At my level. Anyone from the seventh.”

A pause, then honesty. “No.”

“Please don’t go firing people,” she said. “Not for me. Remember I still have to work with these people after our engagement is over.”

Over. The engagement. Their association. Their relationship. It wasn’t anything. It was sex with a few formalities. No big deal. But that wasn’t what her words and actions suggested. She wanted to have dinner with him, to talk with him, to lie together in the night. Together, not just side by side.

“Come on,” he said, easing her away from his body before standing up, swiping up his jacket and her hand in the process.

“Where are we going?” Ascending the stairs seemed to be the answer. “Are my family still up there?”

“I don’t know, we’re not going to that party.”

“There’s another party?”

TWENTY-SIX

And it turned out that there was. A few floors above the engagement party, Reid took her out of the stairwell and into a familiar apartment.

“This is Roxie’s place.”

Voices carried from beyond the hallway as they rounded to enter the reception room. And there they were. Men. Seven of them. And Roxie.

When her friend noticed them, she jumped up to hurry over. “Oh my God, there was a drama?” Reid left her to go join the men while Roxie held her in place. “Want me to kick their asses?”

“No ass kicking,” Zairn called out from the couch. “Your guests have already been escorted out, Merci.”

“Thank you,” Merci said, still mortified as she approached. “I’m sorry.”

Zairn motioned at the seated men who took up all of the four long couches arranged around the coffee table. “We’ve got the monopoly on deceased parents and dysfunctional family relationships.”

Roxie left her to walk past the group across the room.

“Except Knox,” one of the guys said.

“Right,” Zairn said, smirking at his friend. “Except Knox.”

“Yeah, I grew up on Walton Mountain,” the friend said.

“Knox Collier,” she said, so stunned she could hardly believe it. “Of the CollCom Colliers?”

“That’s right.”

“More like Trump Tower with all the money they’ve got,” another of the guys said. “Some of them have got anyway. Where is Camden?”

“Working,” Knox said. “Guess it’s something the real people have to do... I think it’s bullshit, I think he doesn’t want to be mocked for his dumb life choices.”

“I think it’s sweet,” Roxie said from across the other side of the room at the bar.

“No, you don’t,” Zairn said. “You’d go insane with a guy like that.”

“I didn’t say for me, did I? In general, I think it’s sweet.”

“Okay,” Zairn said, waving her away without looking at her. “We’re done listening to you.”

Figuring she’d be better sticking near her friend, she headed over there to join her.

“Are you okay?” Roxie asked as Merci laid a hand on the bar.

Without thinking about it, she cast an eye over the talking guys. Before she could ask Roxie who they were and what was going on, she noticed the man on the opposite couch, the one she’d stood behind before joining Roxie.

“Oh my God,” she said, pushing away from the bar. “You’re Kinloch Peake.”

She spoke without thinking. Nothing new to her. But she’d also interrupted conversation, which meant everyone’s attention was now on her. Not that she saw anything except the broad man with his back to the elevator.

“I am.”

“Of Gramercy-Peake.”

The company Reid wanted to buy. That they needed the Massey IP for. The whole damn reason they were caught in this charade.

Her attention tracked around to Reid. “But...”

“It’s okay,” he said. “Come here.”

There wasn’t even a thought of not going to him or taking his hand when he opened his to pull her onto the couch next to him.

“Wow,” Zairn said. “Did you see that, Lo?”

Roxie pointed her nose up. “No. I choose not to.”

“You choose not to?” Zairn said. “Just like I’ll choose to keep my cock in my pants later.”

On a scoff, Roxie tossed him a glare. “Oh, don’t even kid yourself.”

Zairn cleared his throat before trying the command. “Come here.”

Roxie didn’t move. “I’ll come any damn place I please, with or without your help.”

Zairn glanced at his friends. “This is my woman. She can’t even fake it for ten seconds.”

“Uh, which you’ve never complained about before. You think you’re doing it wrong? Try harder. I’ve schooled you enough, Casanova.”

Had she embarrassed herself? Roxie? Reid? It wasn’t easy to keep track. The pressure was on with the CEO of Gramercy in their midst. They had to sell it. How did they do that? Reid didn’t want her slobbering on him, not in current company. Obeying seemed like the least she could do... and it was automatic, she wanted to obey.

“We went to school together,” Reid said, gesturing to the group with a nod.

Roxie came over to hand her a drink and stayed standing to point at each guy. “Other side of your guy is Zane Dyce. Next couch, Kinloch Peake, you know, and Zachary Kintyre.” She pointed to the opposite couch. “Xavien Rourke, my guy.” And she twisted to indicate those on the final couch from furthest to closest. “Knox Collier and last is Xander Gauge.”

“I’m impressed,” Zairn said. “Usually you don’t listen when I talk.”

“Hmm?” Roxie said. “Did you say something, honey?” He just smiled as Roxie dropped onto the couch next to her. “I’m taking mental notes.”

“Why?” Merci asked, sipping the drink.

“I have a lot of single friends.”

“No, you don’t,” Knox said. “You have crazy friends.”

“Did you just call Astrid crazy?”

“No,” Knox said. “I was thinking about Toria.”

“Yeah, hmm, maybe I’ll give you that. I couldn’t hook Astrid up with any of you. Ballard knows all your security guys so could creep in and kill you while you sleep.”

“You think he’d need to?” Zairn asked. “That my friends wouldn’t treat your friends well?”

“Uh... do I see a ring on anyone’s finger? You’re all playboys. Bachelors with egos... My friends can do better.”

“Kintyre was married,” Knox said, pointing at the guy opposite him.

“Was, past tense, he obviously wasn’t that good at it if it didn’t stick.”

“It would’ve stuck forever if Jules had anything to say about it,” Xander Gauge said. “Single is the way to go. The only way to go...” He glanced at them. “No offense.”

“Which one of us are you talking to?” Roxie asked, picking up Merci’s hand to show off both their engagement rings, as she liked to do. “Women in general or just the newly affianced.”

“Don’t be offended,” Zane Dyce said from Reid’s other side. “Xander has a problem with long term relationships.”

“I do not have a problem with—why do I have a problem?”

“Man, you have a different woman every few weeks,” Kintyre said. “The only time they last more than a month is around the holidays or whenever life is event-rich.”

“Don’t. Seriously. Have you been talking to Ethan?”

“Don’t need to. We all know it.”

“It’s not true,” Xander said. “I’ve been seeing Courtney for months.”

Knox cleared his throat. “Note they made it through the event-rich winter.”

“Where on the planet is she right now?” Zairn asked and crooked a brow. Xander wanted to answer, that was clear from

his expression. His mouth closing was a sign of surrender. “Yeah, you’re really committed to her.”

“That’s no way to measure love,” Roxie said. “I thought you were in Rome right up until you walked out of our elevator. Are we not committed? Do we not love each other?”

“I call you fifty times a day,” Zairn said. “I always know where you are.”

“Until my cellphone gives up and his little GPS thingy dies,” Roxie said to her, smiling at her fiancé. “I guess the moral of the story is, you love me more than I love you.”

Zairn leaned Knox’s way, licking his lips, doing a bad job of hiding his smile. “It’s a sore subject. She cries herself to sleep, can’t live without me. Smitten, that’s the word.”

“Are we monopolizing the conversation again?” Roxie said, gesturing at the group. “Merci and I have this opportunity to learn about you all. “Someone tell us something about one of your friends.”

“Kintyre sticks to the rules,” Xander said, smirking. “You need to let go, Zach. Live a little. Stop doing the right thing all the time. Have a little fun.”

“Says the guy who works an eighty-hour week.”

“Is there any other way?” Dyce asked.

As the men continued to talk, taking every opportunity they could to rib each other, her interest drifted to Kinloch Peake. Had he gone to school with them too? He was quiet. Observing. But there was something else, a detachment that could either be superiority or depression.

So much wealth in the room. So much intelligence and charm. These men knew how to go after what they wanted. How to work hard and long to get to the top. Seeing them together, though she hadn’t been aware of their associations, was encouraging. Rather than fighting each other, rather than hate, there was warmth in the room. Affection.

“Do you want to go back to the party?” Roxie asked after Merci took a sip and handed her back the glass. “Or down to the club?”

“I’m fine,” Merci said. “Unless you want to.”

“Who are you kidding? This is far too interesting.”

“Are you sharing a drink?”

Zairn.

“Are you barking at me across the room?” Roxie asked.
“Yes, we’re sharing a drink. Leave us alone, sleaze.”

Zairn got up to head for the bar. “What do you drink, Merci?”

“She likes Gin and It,” Roxie said.

Zairn paused to glance back at her. “I’ve started a revolution,” he said, going behind the bar.

“Your ego is showing.”

“That’s okay, we’re getting married, and these guys have seen it before.”

“So only Merci should avert her eyes?”

“She lives with Reid,” Zairn said, pouring liquor into a cocktail shaker. “His is at least as big as mine.”

“Oh, now there’s an interesting topic we should throw out for debate!”

While he kept working, he smiled. “Keep that sass in check, Lola Bunny. For my consumption only, remember?”

“I have to know whose is biggest before I start setting your guys up with my girls.”

“I thought size didn’t matter,” Kintyre said.

“Which I guess tells us how big yours is, honey,” Roxie said, wrinkling her nose. “That’s a myth.”

“Knox,” Zairn said.

“What?” he asked.

“No, I’m saying you’ve gotta be the richest guy in the room.”

“We’re talking wealth?” Roxie said and leaned in to stage whisper. “That’s so not what I was talking about.”

“Are you kidding?” Knox asked, ignoring Roxie’s quip. “You see Zane sitting over there, right? Cash out your Dyce Technologies stock, see how rich you are then, buddy.”

“If we’re talking cash on hand, Peake’s about to sweep the table,” Zairn said, bringing the drinks over.

“Once the deal is done, he’ll have more money than he’ll know what to do with.”

Peake just shrugged.

“You should sell to Camden,” Knox said.

“Ladies...” Zairn said as he offered the drinks.

It was sweet. Charming that he’d serve them while in a building he owned filled with people he employed.

They accepted them and Roxie handed over the now empty glass, which he took back to the bar.

“Camden has no money,” Dyce said. “Isn’t that the point?”

“I’ll pay for it. Just give him something.”

“To bring him back? You know he doesn’t care about money and big business. It’s been ten years, get a clue.”

“More than ten years.”

“It’s because Caspian is getting cocky. The more decisions he makes, the more he thinks he’s in charge.”

“Family politics is getting more complicated.”

“We already have two brothers fighting over Gramercy,” Zairn said, sitting down, topping off his Scotch before pushing the bottle onto the table. “Do we need a third?”

“All’s fair in love and business,” Kintyre said, raising a glass to Reid who reciprocated.

TWENTY-SEVEN

“I had a good night,” Merci said when they entered their bedroom closet. “I liked meeting your friends.”

The real party happened at Zairn and Roxie’s. They hadn’t gone back to the formal engagement party. When the guys started talking business, she and Roxie retired to Roxie’s closet to peruse the bridal magazines a friend had sent.

“I told you I didn’t have friends connected to Madelyn.”

“You did,” she said, putting her shoes away.

Reid hung up his jacket. “A lot of people at the top levels of business are cutthroat, they can’t be trusted. Those men you met tonight can be trusted.”

“But Kinloch Peake,” she said, removing her accessories to put them away. “I had no idea you knew him. You and Zachary Kintyre are competing for his company. I was so worried I’d say something and screw everything up.”

“About the engagement?” he asked to be answered with a nod. “He knows this isn’t real. They all know.”

Shocked, she twisted to look up at him. “He does? But... does Kintyre know?”

“Yes.”

There was trust and then there was... “Won’t he tell Madelyn? He’ll win the bid if you don’t have the IP?”

Taking off his tie, he was angled away from her. “We don’t win like that in our circle. We win fair and square. We can get underhand with anyone else, not each other.”

He put his tie on the vanity and took out one cufflink. Trust like that came from love, those guys loved each other.

Crossing without thinking, she took his other cuff to remove the link before he could. “Must be nice to have security like that.”

Raising her jaw to join their eyes, he sought something in her. “Look me in the eye.”

“I told you what that does to me.”

“And that’s a problem?”

Being turned on by him? No. Definitely not a problem. “Will you stay with me tonight?” He nodded. “And tomorrow?”

As he inhaled, she thought about the day after that, and every day beyond. How many nights would they have together? All that mattered was making the most of them.

“I expected you to wear something new tonight.”

“Something new?”

“Wasn’t the engagement party your motivation?” he asked. “You didn’t show me any of it.”

Either she was in a parallel universe, or he’d been taking crazy pills. “What are you talking about?”

“Your delivery.”

He went to her closet and slid open one of the panels to reveal the black box with its gold bow on one of the shelves. The same box she’d seen in the kitchen days ago. That part of the closet was empty, she never opened it and wouldn’t have found the box if it wasn’t for him.

“That’s for me?” she asked, going over. “What did you order?”

“I didn’t order anything; it was addressed to you.”

Intrigued, she went closer, seeking a name or address. “I don’t see an address.”

“It was hand-delivered downstairs. We have an account with those jewelers, they’ve done a lot of business with us over the years.”

“Jewelers?”

“Open it.”

Okay. Was he about to reveal a surprise? No, he couldn’t. Since having sex in his office, they hadn’t been talking. Except this box had been in the kitchen that night. Before the disaster.

The bow was attached to the lid, though it was made to appear like it went all the way around. Lifting the lid, she expected glitter, but was confronted by a velvet panel with a satin loop on top. Reid took that from her to put it aside after she

removed it. Unfolding the tissue paper beneath, a sweet perfume floated out, but that was nothing to the mesmerizing dazzle beneath.

Diamonds. A lot of diamonds. Necklaces, chokers, earrings, bracelets. She couldn't take it all in.

"Oh my God," she gasped. "Why did you do this?"

"I didn't," he said, leaving her side.

"I didn't order this. Oh my God, I didn't even know it was possible to order this sort of thing. Did it come in an armored car?"

"According to the invoice, you placed the order." Whipping around, she got his attention from his phone. "And put everything on account."

Looking at the pieces again, they seduced her into a trance. "Oh my God, I wouldn't..."

"Did you and Roxie talk about it?"

Only the sensation of his hand sliding onto her shoulder broke the daze. "What? No! And why would she...? After seeing her and Zairn tonight, it's obvious he'd give her the world."

"Yes," he said, musing as his interest switched to the contents of the box. "There's another layer."

"No," she said, backing away. "I don't want to see it. We have to send it back. All of it. A fake engagement is one thing... I would never do this. Never spend your money like this. I didn't even know you had an account... or that anyone could have an account. There has to be thousands of dollars' worth—"

"Hundreds of thousands."

It took a while for that to sink in. "Hundreds of thousands? Oh God."

Her face fell into her hands.

"Look at me," Reid said. "Merci." Despite her despair, she raised her head to peek over her fingertips. "If you want to keep —"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "No. No. Please don't. I... can't keep any of it. I wouldn't... I didn't do this." Going

back to him, she laid her hands on his chest. “Please believe me.”

“I believe you,” he said, tucking a tendril of hair behind her ear with a forefinger. “As you said, how could you use an account you didn’t know existed? And Zairn has accounts Roxie can access.”

Should it be offensive that he assumed Roxie might be involved? Maybe. If it wasn’t for the fact Roxie had spent so much on Zairn’s cards for clothes without price tags.

“So where would the...?” She trailed off. The twitch of his brow implied he already knew. “This is Madelyn’s work.”

“Likely.”

“Oh my God! She has some nerve.” She wanted to march on out there and find the woman. To scream at her for what she’d done, bringing her parents to the party and now this. “She wants you to think I’m some lowlife money grabber.”

“Hey,” he said, taking her shoulders before she could go anywhere. “Do you plan to go over there right now?”

“Yes! Why shouldn’t I? She can’t—”

“She hasn’t,” he said, so calm it was startling. “She did this to upset you.”

“And to make you suspicious of me.”

“Do I look suspicious?”

Her breathing remained shallow, but some of her bluster waned. “No... You look hot, like you always do.”

“If you storm over there, you’ll only give her what she wants. Like you said, we return the jewelry and there’s no harm done. Although...”

“Although what?”

“How do you think Madelyn would feel if she saw you wearing it?”

Those beautiful diamonds were humbling and far more than she’d ever dreamed of. Especially all at once. “You think we should rub her face in it?”

“I think she has to see that driving a wedge between us hasn’t worked. You’re beautiful. The gems are beautiful. If you

want them, keep them. Show her that even with her interfering, we're still as strong as ever."

"I don't feel strong. I feel manipulated... and weak."

His hands slid down her arms as he descended to kiss her. The reassurance of his certain lips bolstered her confidence. When he pushed her back against the closet and slipped his tongue between her lips, she forgot all about Madelyn and jewels and evil plots.

Breaking the kiss, he stroked her arms, keeping his lips within a whisper of hers. "How do you feel now?"

"Horny," she said, letting her hands find his chest. "And proud... of us."

"We have to take this one minute at a time, that's what you said. We got through tonight, didn't we?" She nodded, hoping he'd take more from her. Instead, he backed away. "Take off the dress."

In the stairwell, there hadn't been time for lingering or enjoying more than satisfying their baser urges. There, in private, they had all the time they needed.

She lowered the zipper and shimmied out of the dress, relishing how his gaze devoured her. "Matt?"

Permission. Before she could go over there and strip him down or throw herself at him, she needed permission.

"Lose the underwear too." As she did, he got a little closer. "You know it slows us down."

"Underwear?" she asked, a laugh in her throat. "I guess it does." His scrutiny heated up, lingering here and there, like he was processing all of her, visually consuming her. Was that satisfaction enough? Would he want more? She did. "Where's your phone?"

His eyes landed on hers. "My phone?"

She smiled and rested back on the door behind her, presenting her body to him. "I trust you."

And there was something incredibly hot about the idea of him reliving the moment over and over again.

“If you’re not okay with it...”

“I’m okay with it,” she said, pushing away from the closet. “Tell me what to do, Matt. Demand it of me.”

“Demand what?”

“Anything,” she said, her arousal kicking up when he retrieved his phone from his vanity and began scrolling through it. “I want to be everything you want.” He aimed the phone at her. Odd, but her excitement grew in time with her smile. “Tell me what to do... sir.”

“Go to bed,” he said, working on his shirt buttons.

“You don’t want me to undo those buttons, sir?”

The flare of his nostrils came in time with that slight lift at the corner of his lips.

His hand dropped. “You should.”

“I should.”

She actually exaggerated the sway in her hips as she approached him, aware of the camera yet completely unfazed by it. Was arousal clouding her judgment or did she just trust this guy more than any other?

Undoing one button and then another, she sought his gaze, allowing it to convey everything she’d restrained herself from feeling before. It was okay to be aroused by him. Just by the way he returned her interest, she could tell he wanted her.

When done with the buttons, her fingers landed on his belt. “Take it off.” A zap of pleasure shot through her. His belt took seconds to erase. “Keep going.” More hope. More gratification. More electricity. Keeping her hands out of his pants after opening them was difficult, but she’d wait for the order. Just the to and fro, the order and acceptance, command and obey, did so much for their arousal. His chin rose just a little, the camera tilted toward her face. “On your knees.”

And that was it. The order she’d waited for, the one she wanted, to submit and pleasure him. Her fantasy. Even as she descended and the camera shifted again, all she saw was him. The lights were on, camera primed and ready, now it was time for action.

TWENTY-EIGHT

For the next three and a half weeks, life was rosy. Sure, most mornings she woke up alone, but Reid always kissed her before he left their sheets. It was different between them. They ate dinner together. Talked on the phone. And every night, whether he went to bed at the same time as her or not, they'd always be intimate.

Roxie still visited RCI for lunch. Zairn was in and out of town, back and forth. The guy did have a business of his own to run, so whether he was in town or not, the women got to catch up in the middle of the day.

Approaching her desk, after one of those lunch meetings, she was pondering whether it would be a good idea to cook that night. Usually, because Reid could never guarantee when he'd be home, they just ordered from the in-house kitchen. The rich food and impeccable presentation may be what Reid was used to, but she was used to something much simpler.

Would it be too intimate? Too presumptuous? Too nineteen fifties housewife? Either he'd be grateful or outraged. Asking would probably be the best idea, though a surprise would mean more... if he liked it. If he didn't, she'd be embarrassing herself. That was nothing new.

“Merci!” The exclamation made her jump. Dropping her purse, she turned to see a fuming Calista outside the office. “Get in here!”

As always, the stares and whispers followed her progress to the boss's office. People watched, people gossiped, it was life. One she was accustomed to now.

Entering Calista's office without a clue about the problem, her boss startled her again by slamming the door.

“What is going on?”

“What is going on?” Calista said, storming around the desk. She didn't bother with sitting down or offering Merci a chair, seemed she was too amped. “You missed the induction meeting.”

“I did not.”

“Really?”

“No,” Merci said and relaxed as she laughed. “That’s tomorrow.”

“Is it?” Calista asked, bending to type on her keyboard. As she straightened, she turned the screen. “What is that in your calendar?”

Uh oh. “Well, it’s...” the induction meeting. In nice red capital letters. Red and bold capital letters. She shook her head. “No, I checked, I planned my week with—”

“So I have a room full of new employees, who are supposed to be credentialed, who are supposed to have had the tour, sitting doing nothing. You were supposed to deal with their paperwork. Supposed to, I don’t know, do what you’ve done two hundred times already.”

“I’ll do it now.”

“I sent Mariah,” Calista said. “When Richard went down there to find the recruits screwing around in the conference room, he called me. We’ve lost half a day’s training on this. They haven’t even had lunch... though I notice you didn’t fail to take yours... More champagne cocktails, was it? Or just emptying your boyfriends’ bank accounts?”

That was offensive in oh so many ways. “I know you have a problem with my engagement.”

“I’m not the only one.”

“And I know *everyone* thinks I’m some evil witch casting spells on you all. Doing my voodoo on Matt, forcing him to restructure his whole company around my mood. But I am good at my job!”

“Not recently,” Calista said. “What did you think? ‘Cause you’re boning the boss you can get away with anything? Have you told him how many man hours it’s taking to get this daycare thing set up or have you noticed? Have you told him how the ad department is threatening a walk out if they don’t get a budget boost too? It’s chaos around here. Chaos! And you can’t show up for a damn meeting.”

She didn’t know what to say. Arguing back would be the usual course, but there was a line, one that was just inches in

front of her.

“You want me to ask him to dial it back?” she asked. “I do that and he does, what does that say about your accusations? I have never asked him to do anything for me as related to this company.”

“This issue isn’t about him,” Calista said. “It’s about you. You’re unreliable. Sloppy. Unstable.”

“I’m unstable?” That seemed like more than just a work complaint. “What are you trying to say?”

“Paperwork is being missed. Colleagues are running around cleaning up your messes and your head is so deep in the clouds, you don’t even notice. You used to take your work here seriously, it felt like you did. Recently... We can’t keep going this way. If you were anyone else...”

“What?” she asked when her boss trailed off. “If I was anyone else, what?”

“You’d get a permanent reprimand in your personnel file,” Calista said. “You’d be demoted... if I was in a good mood.”

“Fired? You want to fire me?”

Calista shook her head and exhaled, folding her arms. “I told you already, I need this job.”

“If you want to fire me, fire me.”

The words came out, but as her skin froze and her heart raced, her mouth couldn’t connect with the panic. In little over two weeks, she’d be back to her normal life. Without a job, how would she make rent?

“I want to be fair. Others can’t see you getting special treatment.”

“I didn’t ask for special treatment. Treat me like anyone else. Like you would before the engagement.”

“Fine,” Calista said. “You’re on probation.” The word hit her like concrete. “For the next thirty days and you’ll have a permanent reprimand in your file.”

She couldn’t breathe. Holding her composure was near impossible. Her jaw locked, maybe it was self-preservation.

Whatever else Calista said was white noise. When her lips stopped moving, Merci turned to leave. Her joints were stiff, her body rigid.

Probation.

Like a sentence handed down in court.

Somehow, she got back to her chair and managed to sit. Colleagues didn't feature much beyond being blurs in her peripheral vision. Probation. Her record was spotless. Or it had been.

The phone rang, shocking her into the moment. She wouldn't get off probation if she didn't do a good job.

"Merci Moore," she answered.

"Are you near a TV?"

Who was...? "Roxie?"

"Are you anywhere near a TV?"

"No," she said, glancing at the whisperers. Yeah, she'd screwed up. "Why? What's wrong? Is it Zairn?"

"Put your name in a search engine."

"Me?" Pulling up the internet, she typed in her name and hit return. A flurry of news articles appeared. "*Mercy from Merci.*" "*More about Moore.*" "What is this?"

"You know how you said your ex wasn't exactly the most scrupulous guy?"

Ryan.

Right there. A tell all interview.

"Oh my God," she whispered, sinking forward as she read about her own relationship right along with the rest of the world. "I can't believe he would..."

"Believe it, honey. Want me to come get you?"

"No," she said, dropping back in her chair, closing her eyes. "My boss is already pissed. I can't leave in the middle of the day."

"This is an emergency."

“No,” Merci said as her phone chortled to signal another call. “Can you hold for a second?”

“No comment is your best friend.”

Putting Roxie on hold, she answered the second line. “Merci Moore.”

“Come straight upstairs.”

“Who is—”

“It’s Tara. Come upstairs.”

“I can’t,” she said. “I really can’t.”

So soon after her meeting with Calista, it was possible her legs wouldn’t work at all. The only way to get off probation was to work better, longer and harder than she ever had before.

“He wants you upstairs.”

“I get it.”

“No one says no. He’s your boss.”

And he screwed her every night. Maybe Tara didn’t know that.

“I know that, and I wouldn’t usually... My actual boss, like my direct boss, is already unhappy with my work. I can’t run off. Not now.”

She was just back from lunch...had she told Calista the champagne cocktail thing wasn’t true? She didn’t drink alcohol at lunch. It was important her boss knew that.

“You can. He’s asked for you.”

“I’m sorry, Tara. I really am. I’ll see him at home later.” If she ever got out of the office. Overtime could win her favor. “Bye.”

Hanging up before the assistant could reply, she returned to Roxie. “I have to go, Rox.”

“What’s happening?”

“I have work to do. I really need to concentrate. I’ll call you later.”

After hanging up, she closed the browser and took a deep breath. Work. She would focus on work.

On top of the file pile at the corner of her desk was a stack of letters. Typical there should be something in the way of her oblivion. Opening the first, she glanced at the next couple. They were addressed to her department, just part of her workload. Good.

Slipping the letter out of the envelope, something fluttered onto the desk as she unfolded it. A check. Who was sending her a check?

Her landlord. Sorry to see her go. Her security deposit. Another blow. Did the guy just assume she was leaving or was this another heavy-handed tactic? If Reid wanted her to give up her apartment, why wouldn't he talk to her about it?

They didn't talk as much as they should. Maybe that was something they should change. Now, with her apartment gone and her job hanging in the balance, suddenly the future wasn't so rosy.

The noise level suddenly dropped, and people started to stand, like the day Roxie showed up. Her friend had just called, so it couldn't be—

Movement drew her eye. The entourage.

Aiden and June were first, but there he was, Reid, with Nasir and Tara behind him. It had to be a dream. A delusion. There couldn't be any way Matteo Reid was striding across her department. His colleagues in front stopped to flank Calista's door. Without even knocking, he strode inside. Tara leaned in to close the door and waited outside with the rest of his trio.

Slouching, she hid, trying to make herself small. Invisible. The private caucus could go either way, it didn't even matter. The chance of getting off probation while Reid went throwing his weight around... No, she didn't want to think the worst. Maybe it was nothing to do with her. Maybe something was going on elsewhere in the building that required him to come down to... Didn't the executive level have their own personnel coordinator? Yes, they did because she often spoke to him.

The office door opened. Reid strode out with determined purpose. He didn't look for her, just returned to the elevator.

Tara was the one who scurried over... smiling. How could she be smiling?

“Now you can come upstairs,” Tara said. “Bring your purse. Anything you need.”

Glancing around at the audience, she couldn't give them more ammunition. If the idea was to push her out, Reid just gave them everything they needed. What was the alternative? To stand there and argue? That would piss Reid off. He could come back and make a scene. No, he wouldn't do that, he hated scenes, and doing what he said was sort of her deal.

Stuffing the check into her purse, she hooked the strap around her arm. “Let's go.”

TWENTY-NINE

Tara didn't complain about taking the stairs. Apparently, word got around.

The trek didn't calm her down, she couldn't be amped, mad... not at Reid. In truth, the day had been so screwed up, it was difficult to focus on one thing long enough to get wound up about it.

That notwithstanding, when Tara showed her into Reid's office, she couldn't sit still. Pacing back and forth, waiting wasn't her strong suit. He'd left before her, how could he not be there first?

What was happening? What had he said to Calista? Did she even work there anymore? If Reid hadn't fired Calista, Merci bet her boss's next task would be to fire her.

And Ryan. What was he thinking? She hadn't spoken to him for almost a year. What gave him the right to talk to the press about her? Whatever he'd told reporters, whatever the story, she wasn't sure she wanted to know. Reading it would be a bad idea. Had Reid read it? Damn it, if he would just get there—

“Sit down.”

On a gasp, she whirled around to see Reid coming in. Alone.

Her mouth opened, ready to speak, and... nothing came out.

He came closer, opening an arm toward the seating area. Okay, a couch. That would be better than something formal at the desk. Going over to sit down, she rested both hands on her knees. All tense and uptight with the drama.

“I don't know where to start,” she said, finding her voice. “Everything's all... messed up.”

“Nothing is messed up,” he said, sitting down next to her, laying a hand on her back, stroking up to her neck. “Come here.”

With a gentle grip, he eased her back, pulling her to his torso. His lips in her hair were a comfort. Her mind began to work again.

“I’m sorry about Ryan.”

“We’ll deal with him,” he said, coiling his arm around her, holding her closer. “I wanted you up here to make sure you were okay.”

“I know,” she said, her hand ascending his body. “I just couldn’t... What did you say to Calista?”

“That you’re vitally important to this business. To ensuring operations run smoothly. And that she wouldn’t get away with interfering.”

Sitting up, she met his eye. “She put me on probation.” He frowned. “I’m telling you so you... I’m trying not to lose my job. That’s why I said I couldn’t come up here. Not because I didn’t want to.”

“Your job is safe,” he said, rubbing her back. “You never have to worry about that.”

“I got a check from my landlord,” she said, unsure how to respond to his certainty. “My security deposit.”

“You terminated your lease?”

At least he looked as confused by it as she did. “No,” she said, shaking her head. “I didn’t. Except I got a letter that suggested I did... Was it your people?”

“Not on my instruction.”

“So now I’m facing losing my job and my apartment in the same day.” Sinking forward, her forehead landed on his chest. “I can’t believe Calista put me on probation.”

“You’re not on probation and you won’t be homeless.”

“In two weeks and four days, I’ll no longer be your responsibility.”

His grip on her neck was stronger than before, maybe because he was pulling her up. As she rose and their eyes met, her anxiety waned further.

“Merci.”

Getting closer, she only hesitated for a second before leaning in for a kiss. And it was exactly the medicine she needed. Parting her lips, she sank into the sweet feeling of his confident

kiss. Nothing dissuaded him. Nothing shook him up. Maybe she should be mad he'd spoken to her boss, but he hadn't meant any harm.

The reminder of their expiry date always heated their kisses. Forgetting completely where they were, she climbed over to straddle him, unbuttoning her shirt as she did. With him, the world had no negatives. There were no troubles or worries. They were all that existed.

Pulling her shirt from her skirt, she rose just enough to talk on his lips. "Can I take off your shirt?"

"Not until we're at home." He squeezed her ass. "You'll work up here from now on."

"In your office?"

"You'll have your own. And Tara is assigning one of the administrative staff to be your assistant. She told me you keep resisting hiring someone you'll have to fire when we're done."

"Can I head the daycare setup?" He crooked a questioning brow. "It'll take the pressure off what's happening downstairs."

"If it makes you happy."

"I shouldn't use our personal relationship for professional reasons."

Pulling her closer, he pushed his hips up, letting her know her attention was working below his belt. "Does that feel professional?"

Wriggling against him, the drowsy light in his eyes entranced her. "Can we go home now?"

A smile flirted with her lips that teased his. She was only semi-serious. Their personal relationship shouldn't involve her being allowed to take half days to get naked with her hot boss/fiancé.

The door opened. She heard it but didn't see it. In no rush to break the moment, she stayed right there against him.

"Things have changed around here." Madelyn. "Used to be whores weren't allowed out in the open."

The disdain was superfluous given the words themselves, still Merci retorted, “Maybe that was why he kept you in your box between dates.”

Even without moving, she could defend herself. If anything, being close to him increased her fire. Right there, she was looking at what she fought for.

The masculine laugh from the other side of the room drew her attention. Aiden noticed Madelyn’s glare and coughed, trying to disguise the noise. Nasir was smiling too, June did a better job of hiding her amusement, but it was definitely there.

Reid’s squeeze communicated she should move. It was sort of a reassurance that his erection had dwindled since Madelyn came in. Maybe it wasn’t caused by her, but Merci chose to take it that way.

As she shifted over to sit on the couch, fastening her shirt buttons, Reid got up and stood in front of her, blocking her view of the room... or rather the room’s view of her.

“Madelyn, we don’t need you for this.”

The woman scoffed. “Excuse me? You are not allowed to dismiss me. Our shadowing agreement—”

“Gives you no rights to my personal life or my fiancée’s personal life.”

“If it did,” June said. “You’d be following him home every night and watching him sleep.”

There was a creepy thought. Rising to her knees on the couch, she tucked in her shirt.

“Madelyn,” Reid said, moving aside so she could see the room again. “Leave by choice. You’ll only embarrass yourself if I make security remove you.”

With an outraged, affronted huff, Madelyn spun around and stalked out. Lots of raised brows and pursed smiles in the room betrayed the control of those present. Laughing in Madelyn’s face wouldn’t get them the IP any faster.

“We have our people on it,” June said, at first Merci didn’t realize she was talking to her. “We’ll find this Ryan guy and figure out his game. If it’s money—”

“It will be money,” Merci said, glancing at Reid who was heading over to his desk. “I’m just not sure if it’s the media’s money.”

“You think it’s Madelyn again?” Reid asked as he sat down. “You’re probably right.”

“She knows you hate spectacle. Hasn’t she tried over and over to prove I’m an embarrassment to you?”

The door opened again, this time, Tara came in. “Sir,” she said, raising something in her hand.

A television in the opposite corner, angled to face the room, flickered on. A remote. Tara changed the channel.

“...over already,” a news reporter stated. “The couple, who got together so publicly on Talk at Sunset are apparently taking a break. Roxie Kyst had this to say as she left just a few moments ago...”

The picture changed to Roxie in almost the same spot as the reporter outside Crimson, speaking into a microphone.

“Some people just aren’t compatible,” Roxie said. “We weren’t clear about our expectations.”

“What expectations are those?”

“Oh, you know, things like a woman’s right to choose, a woman’s right to not spend her life barefoot and pregnant... You know, you think you know a guy...”

“Is the relationship finished?”

“Finished?” Roxie asked, pushing her lips to the side to ponder for a few seconds. “Maybe... probably. Right now we’re just... on a break.”

“Oh my God,” Merci said, leaping off the couch.

“Tara, put in the call,” Reid said.

The assistant got to the desk just before Merci. After dialing and waiting a second, she held the handset out.

Merci grabbed it. “Rox?”

“Hey, honey,” Roxie said. “You’re in Reid’s office? I guess Z put the number in my phone. The media is going nuts right

now, I wouldn't have answered it if the name hadn't come up... I wonder what else Z put in my phone."

"Roxie!"

How could she be chatting as normal? Carrying on like it was any other day?

"What?"

"I saw the news. You and Z are done? What happened?"

Roxie laughed. "Personally, I wouldn't believe everything you see on TV, but that's just me."

"What?" she asked, scowling. "I don't understand."

"Have you checked the other news channels?"

"What? No," she said, turning to Tara. "What else is on the news?"

Tara clicked through the news channels on the mute TV. Some politics. World events. Roxie. More politics. Roxie. Zairn clips and... Roxie at some other time.

"You're everywhere."

"Yeah," Roxie said, glee in her voice. "And who is not?"

Her mouth opened on an inhale. Without speaking, she closed it again. Her. She was not. Ryan was not. No one was talking about...

"You did this for us," she said, her eyes meeting Reid's. "It's bullshit you made up to protect us."

"Z and I are fine," Roxie said and took a dramatic breath. "We're also great at stealing the limelight. This is my city now, honey, I'm the Empress around here." Merci laughed. "Seriously, honey, did you forget we were at war? If she wants to fight dirty, we'll fight dirty."

"I can't believe this. How did you know it was Madelyn?"

"Because I'm not an idiot. Z's put his investigator guy on it. We're gonna dig around, see what we can find out about your ex and about Reid's."

"They're not talking about it anymore. I guess they might
—"

“And if they do, we’ll have a pregnancy scare. Have sex in the middle of Times Square. Whatever it takes. We’re with you. We’re your soldiers.”

Tears came to her eyes. “I don’t even know what to say.”

“This is what friends do for each other. Reid hates drama. You don’t want to be drama? Z and I will be drama. We specialize in drama. No big deal. It’s sort of what we do best... Well, one of the things we do best.”

“You’re amazing. Both of you.”

“Yeah, we know that,” Roxie said on a sigh. “We’ll come over for dinner tonight and work this out.”

“Are you sure the media won’t—”

“They’ll try,” Roxie said, a sly lilt to her voice. “That just makes it more fun.”

They hung up and despite being in a room of people, Reid was the only person she saw. “They did it for us.”

He nodded. “Zairn is good at this. In Roxie, he’s found the perfect playmate.” They were ideally suited, complementary. With the way they played off each other, it was no surprise they played elsewhere too. “Now Tara will show you to your office, get settled in.”

THIRTY

Her office was bigger than Calista's. Size didn't matter to her, as such, but she didn't want her boss catching a glimpse of it. Especially not that day.

The desk was long, solid, expensive... different to the particle board downstairs. Quite the promotion. No, she hadn't been looking for it. Her executive sort of counterpart would no doubt fear for their job. Gossip about her would be gathering mass. And in two weeks, she'd go back downstairs to... hell.

There would be a price. A steep one. But what was the alternative? She fight Reid? Why? He'd only get his way in the end. After his conversation with Calista, the proverbial damage had been done. Whether she followed orders or not, her boss was already unhappy.

Sitting in her sleek leather chair with amazing lumbar support, she swung back and forth. What was it like to be at the top? Did she want to be at the top? Despite loving her job, she'd never been aggressively ambitious. Being on the top floor, officially, tickled that nerve. What was success anyway?

"I didn't give you enough credit." Damn. Madelyn strolled into her office. "You know how to get what you want."

"Why, Madelyn, won't you come in?"

Madelyn closed the door and turned to face her again, folding her arms. "Reid isn't the only money in town."

"Meaning?" she asked, borrowing a page from her fiancé's book.

"You have your hooks in deep."

"Because he didn't dump me for Ryan's stunt?"

"Maybe he'll be upset when he learns you have a foot out the door. Imagine how surprised I was to learn you know all about cold feet, don't you?"

"Do I?"

Full of entitlement, Madelyn perched against the other side of the desk, twisted to face her. "Does he know you kept your apartment? What was it? Worried he'd figure you out?"

“Figure me out?” Merci asked.

“What was it like finding out your safety net had been pulled from under you? I did you a favor getting rid of it... You must be so worried, stressed, has it created tension?”

“Why don’t you just tell me whatever you want to tell me? You’re much better at direct.”

“I’m glad you feel that way because indirect isn’t getting me what I want.”

“Reid knows you’re playing with us,” she said because why ask for it if she wasn’t going to give it? “He’s smarter than you. Smarter than your games.”

Madelyn stood up. “Yes, he is. Which is why I’ll have to be more aggressive.” She smiled. “He likes aggressive. Likes to know the stakes. Gramercy means a lot to him. Kinloch Peake means a lot to him. He won’t let Gramercy-Peake fall into enemy hands. But... he and Kintyre are not the only two interested parties.”

“You’ve done your homework,” Merci said, scrutinizing the enemy. “So you’ve learned messing with me, trying to get between me and my fiancé with petty games, won’t work. Took you long enough.”

After touching her cheek with a fingertip, Madelyn checked her manicure. “You’ve heard the expression, if I can’t have him, no one can?” Merci didn’t get it and wasn’t sure she wanted to. “I have the power here. Something both of you have forgotten. He’s forgotten how well I know him.”

Still, she didn’t understand. “What do you want, Madelyn?”

“I want the man,” she said, tilting her head. “But if I can’t have what I want, I’ll make damn sure he doesn’t get what he wants either.”

Suspicious of what that meant, Merci didn’t want to show her nerves or put any sinister ideas in Madelyn’s head. Any *more* sinister ideas. “You want to hurt him?”

“He hurt me,” Madelyn said, some of her venom slipping out. “He broke my heart. Humiliated me in front of the world... No man should get away with that.” She cleared her throat,

composing herself. “If he’d been willing to apologize, make up for his actions, I would’ve allowed that.”

“But now something else is going on,” Merci said. “You’ve accepted you can’t win him back?”

“I have accepted that his focus is not you,” Madelyn said, her lips rising to a satisfied smile. “Taking you down doesn’t weaken him, his strength lies in his business.”

Did that mean she planned to attack RCI?

“Madelyn—”

“To get through to him, I have to go through the company. It’s the only thing he understands.”

The IP meant everything to him. It was the golden ticket. The sweetener.

Sitting straighter, she didn’t want Madelyn to see the anxiety she caused. “You’re getting desperate. Hurting RCI doesn’t get you anything. Why would you possibly—”

“I won’t lose again,” she said. “If you want to trot back to him and tell him that, go ahead. Make sure he knows I am not the same woman I used to be. I get what I want.”

“And what you want is to win,” Merci said. “Whatever that means... Did you ever love him? How could you be so eager to hurt someone you claim to love?”

“Maybe when he knows what it’s like to feel what he made me feel... He has to know what he’s done.”

“What are you planning? What are you—”

Madelyn’s laugh cut her off. “Telling you my plan has changed doesn’t mean I’ll give you the details. You don’t know me. Don’t forget that.” She started for the door. With the woman’s back turned, Merci swallowed some of her nerves. Madelyn opened the door but swung around before going through it. “Oh, and the shadowing agreement gives me *carte blanche* in this building... so I’ll be shadowing you from now on. See you in the morning.”

Madelyn left, a whisper of a laugh in the air around her.

Shadowing her... What was that...? Did that mean everywhere she turned, Madelyn would be in her shadow? Shit. How was she supposed to deal with that when Calista was already on red alert? Doing her job with current pressures was tough enough. Tossing Madelyn into the mix... Life just didn't want to deal her a break.

THIRTY-ONE

Having Zairn and Roxie over for dinner was supposed to be a happy occasion. Any other time, it might have been. Merci's head wasn't in the game. Distracted didn't equal good company. The food was good. As always. They passed on dessert but were served coffee.

Madelyn's impromptu office visit played on her mind. Despite knowing that was probably exactly what the woman wanted, she couldn't free herself from it. "*To get through to him, I have to go through the company.*" What did that mean? She couldn't even decide whether or not to tell him. What good could come from it? Running to him to rock the boat could be exactly what Madelyn wanted. She didn't want to be pathetic. To expect Reid to dig her out of every hole. She was a strong woman. Independent. She didn't need any man rushing in to save her.

"Merci, I have to say..." Zairn said, grabbing her from her thoughts. "You're not at all what I expected." Relaxed in his chair, he was slightly away from the table, but his arm wasn't shy about its angle, proving his hand was somewhere on Roxie's lap. "The distinct impression I got of you from these two was way off base, seriously off base."

"She's not herself tonight," Reid said.

"No, you're not," Roxie said, setting her forearms on the table to lean closer. Zairn's arm didn't move, it just got sandwiched between his fiancée and the table. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," she said. "I'm sorry."

"We know you better than that," Roxie said. "Do you want to talk in private? We can kick Zairn out if he's in the way."

"No!" Merci exclaimed. "He's not in the way! He's wonderful, I love him, he's great."

"Do you want to go get drunk at the club? We can do that too."

"Is that allowed? Don't the press think—"

“I don’t care about the press,” Roxie said, leaving her seat opposite to round the table and sit next to her to take her hand. “I care about you.” She gestured around the table. “We care about you. I knew this would be a lot.” Roxie touched her face, exuding concern. “You don’t have to put yourself through this.”

“It’s fine,” Merci said, smiling. Roxie was an amazing friend. An amazing person. She looked across at Zairn. “You’re a very lucky man.”

His lips rose, full of warmth and pride. “Careful,” he murmured, his attention sliding to his fiancée. “She’ll develop an ego bigger than mine.”

“Not possible,” Roxie said, squeezing her hand. “Are you upset about Ryan? ‘Cause we can arrange like a hit or something. We have enough money to pay for it.”

“Babe,” Zairn said.

“Stone will know someone,” Roxie said, waving a dismissive hand.

Merci’s smile grew until she laughed. “You always make me feel better, Rox.”

She pulled her friend into a hug, trying to show both gratitude and absorb some of the dynamic woman’s strength.

“Think she’s making a play for my girl, Reid,” Zairn’s voice carried across the table. “Not sure I can compete.”

“You can’t,” Reid said, as composed as ever.

“We should just give up now,” Zairn said.

Reid agreed. “Save face.”

“Maybe we can buy their affection.”

“We can try, but they don’t seem like the types.”

“Damn, that means they’ll want attention,” Zairn said. “Diamonds are so much easier.”

Roxie got in fast. “We’ll take the diamonds and the attention and still leave you both in the dust.”

Glancing at those around the table, she was almost overwhelmed and rested her head on Roxie’s shoulder. “You’re all too sweet.”

“If something’s bugging you, you have to tell us,” Roxie said, putting an arm around her. “Is it about Ryan?”

“No.”

“You didn’t believe me when I said your job was safe?” Reid asked.

“Of course I did,” Merci said, lifting her head. Not that his assurances would make a difference to the attitude she’d face on returning to the seventh floor. “I think we have to break up.” Reid frowned. It was all she saw as Roxie drew back from their semi embrace. “You said it would work in our favor if we were on the rocks.”

“Weeks ago.”

“Madelyn isn’t going to let this go,” she said, appealing to Reid. “If she can’t have you, she’ll ruin you.”

“You’re giving her a lot of credit,” Zairn said, though her focus stayed on Reid studying her. “The Madelyn of old, the Madelyn she really wants to be, is little more than a trophy wife. She doesn’t have the contacts to ruin anyone. Her network is not superior to ours.”

“She came to you,” Reid said.

Merci nodded.

Roxie growled. “Why does the bitch always do that? Seek you out to be evil?”

“Because she knows it won’t work with me,” Reid said.

And because she was the weaker link in the chain. Madelyn wanted rid of her. The best way to achieve that goal was to apply pressure as often as possible.

“As of tomorrow, she’s shadowing me, not you.”

Reid’s blink of surprise at least confirmed he hadn’t authorized the change. “I won’t allow that to happen.”

“She has carte blanche, and I don’t care about that. I mean, I’ll deal with it.”

“I’d be distracted if a woman like that was always behind me,” Roxie said, probably trying to make her feel better. “You want me to come work with you tomorrow?”

“No,” Merci said, comforted by the notion. “But it does mean we can’t have lunch.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Roxie said, affronted. “Screw her. Don’t let her get in your head.”

Except she already was. “I’m worried,” she said, more to Reid than anyone.

“What did she say?” he asked. “You know I won’t let her hurt you.”

“I’m not worried about her hurting me. I’m worried you being with me will hurt more than just her ego. Madelyn won’t lose. She won’t. And I feel awful that we’re here at my suggestion.”

“I have told you repeatedly that you are free to leave any time you choose,” Reid said. “If you leave of your choosing, I will support you. Is that what you’re saying? Do you want to leave?”

Despite their audience and the tense air of anticipation, the heat that filled her was pure certainty. “I don’t want to leave.”

“Then you stay. Madelyn doesn’t make the rules here. Not under my roof.”

Though it was touching, the statement suggested he didn’t get the gravity of the situation. “Didn’t you hear me? If she can’t have you, she’ll ruin you.”

“So your idea wasn’t just to leave, but to put Madelyn back in my bed?”

“No!” How could he be so calm saying something so foul? “I don’t want her anywhere near your bed. Never. I don’t want any other woman near it!” Oops. Too much? Her stupid mouth. Just like always, her words came out before her head processed them. “I mean I…”

Roxie leaned in to whisper in her ear. “Own it, honey.”

When she drew back, her smiling eyes were appreciated, but they wouldn’t change the fact she’d been audacious and in front of an audience too. Reid hated spectacle.

More than that, she had to take a mental step back. Did she mean it? She couldn’t. She just couldn’t. Not after Reid was

so clear about them walking away clean at the end of this.

“She’ll come after RCI,” Merci said, shooting for a subject change. “I don’t know how or... She said you and Kintyre aren’t the only parties interested in Gramercy.”

“She’ll sell to Dawes?” Zairn asked.

“Maybe,” Reid said, picking up his coffee. “Wouldn’t make a difference.”

“Because Kinloch won’t let Gramercy go to him,” Zairn said. “Could be... unless there’s influence on his board.”

“You’re on his board,” Reid said, looking at his friend. “Do you know of pressure?”

“I’ll vote whatever way’s better for the company. And we’re all of the same mind, it has to stay in the family. You want Knox to bid, he’ll bid. Peake will open the forum.” His eyes pinched, Zairn shook his head. “It doesn’t matter anyway. If she sells to Dawes, I’ll call the guy, he’ll pass it on to us.”

“He’s competitive.”

“He owes me one.”

“Everyone owes you one, baby,” Roxie said.

“ ‘Cept you.”

“Oh, yeah, you definitely owe me more than I owe you.”

“The worst thing that happens here is we don’t get the IP,” Reid said. While Roxie and Zairn distracted each other, his focus remained absolute on her. “Security will take down any physical threat to you. We can step it up. Do whatever it takes to make you feel safe.”

Now he was just deliberately trying to frustrate her. “I’m worried about you. About RCI. Not about myself.”

“And I’m telling you not to. If we don’t get Gramercy, Kintyre will. That’s acceptable.”

Except the whole fake fiancée thing started because RCI wanted Gramercy. In the meeting she’d overheard how adamant everyone was that they needed the IP. That Madelyn had to be appeased in order for them to succeed.

Was it just Reid's way to be calm about everything or was something else going on? As much as she didn't want to think about the scenario, it was difficult to ignore how easy it would be to fix the whole situation.

All Reid had to do was choose Madelyn. For a day. For a month. For whatever space of time, he could seduce the woman easily. Madelyn was primed and eager for it. Doing something so underhanded wouldn't be Reid's style. Still, for the sake of the company... For the best of RCI, Gramercy, and possibly Kinloch Gramercy-Peake.

"What is her deal anyway?" Roxie asked. "Why is she like this? Why does she even care?"

"She's in love with him," Merci said.

Roxie held up both hands. "Okay, I'm just going to say it because I feel like everyone else is afraid to..." Optimizing dramatic effect, her friend paused for a couple of beats. "I call bullshit. There is no way in goddamn hell Madelyn Massey is in love with this man." She opened a hand toward Reid at the head of the table. "No way."

"She wants to win," Reid said.

"That's not love," Roxie said. "Everything that she's done has been designed to hurt you or what you care about."

"She's bitter," Zairn said.

Roxie pointed at him. "Now that I can buy. Yes, she's bitter about losing the relationship... about losing Reid. It's not about love... Nothing here suggests love. If she was in love with him, she'd be sad they weren't together. Hurt. Maybe even hopeful something would happen between them. But she can't love him. No one would treat someone they love this way."

"Except, as it stands," Zairn said. "Her attacks are focused on Merci. The shadowing was supposed to give her access to Reid. As soon as she found out about Merci, her focus became getting rid of her. Damaging her credibility with Reid."

"Yes, and how much would he love her if he'd dump her for having a crazy family? I have a crazy family and you've been nothing but amazing with them."

“They’re crazy on a different kind of level,” Zairn said without specifying if their level of crazy was above or below Merci’s family. “And Madelyn isn’t like you. Either of you. Her definition of love isn’t the same as yours.”

“How do you know?” Roxie asked, almost challenging him.

“Because I’ve seen the way you and Madelyn both love,” Zairn said, rising to it. “I was around for their actual relationship. Madelyn didn’t love Reid the way you love me.”

“That’s different. And you’re biased.”

“You always say that.”

“That you’re biased?”

“That whatever doesn’t suit your argument is different. And aren’t we fundamentally agreeing that she doesn’t love him?”

“Yeah, but—”

“So quit arguing with me.”

“Please don’t fight,” Merci said, taking Roxie’s hand.

“I want to know what it was,” Roxie said. “Why were you with her in the first place, Reid? What was so amazing about this woman?”

“Don’t question him on his personal relationships,” Zairn said.

Shock struck Roxie who blinked at her fiancé. “Excuse me? You’re telling me not to question him while his ex drags my friend through hell?”

Looking around, Zairn raised a hand to the room. “What part of this is hell?”

“Oh, so typical. You think money makes up for every hurt? It doesn’t. Madelyn is hellbent on hurting Merci and it’s like you don’t even care.”

“What are we supposed to do? Banish her? There’s still a chance she gives up the IP.”

A bigger chance if they were to end their relationship.

“And is that the be all and end all? No, it’s not. Reid just said that.”

“Okay,” Zairn said. “So end it. Now. Merci walks away, back to her job, to her apartment—”

“I don’t have an apartment,” she said.

“What happened?” Roxie asked. Merci just drew her attention away. “That woman knows no limits.”

“She thought I was holding onto it in case the relationship with Reid didn’t work out. Or because she thinks I planned to take him for as much as I can before leaving him in the dust. She seems to think the more stressed and frayed I am, the more chance Reid will dump me.”

“You know what you need?” Roxie asked, bouncing around to face her, smiling. “You need a vacation.”

She just exhaled a laugh. “Don’t think my boss is in any mood to grant me vacation time... unless it’s permanent unpaid leave.”

“You can take a weekend off at least. Get away from the city. Away from Madelyn.”

Yet, all she heard was being away from Reid. “I can’t.”

“You can,” Reid said. “Roxie’s right. You should get away.”

Because she was causing so much drama in his life. “Where did you have in mind?”

“Your call,” Roxie said. “I’m going home this weekend. You can come with me.”

“Home?”

Her friend nodded. “I came straight here from LA. And I didn’t even bring everything I had there. Zairn brought most of it, but if I’m leaving Chicago for good, I need to deal with the apartment.” Made sense. “With Toria still in LA, everything’s been left to Jane. She’d never complain. She never does. But I need to get things straightened out before we head to the Bahamas.”

“You’re going to the Bahamas?”

Beaming, Roxie couldn't hide her excited pride. "We're going next week... the Crimson resort. All part of the original contest on Talk at Sunset."

"Wow," Merci said, turning to Zairn. "You have an island."

"It's no big deal."

Roxie groaned. "Only a billionaire would say that."

"No, he's right," Reid said, startling both the women, then addressing Zairn. "Did Rourke pony up in the end?"

"For the resort, not the island," Zairn said. "Got his very own private Huddle Hut." The men shared a smile. "Mine is nothing to what Dyce has built in the Pacific."

"Decided what he's going to do with it yet?"

Zairn shook his head. "The infrastructure was the biggest obstacle. After the place was fully Wi-Fi ready, getting the structures up was no problem."

"Saw the plans for the house," Reid said. "Camden's?"

"Yep," Zairn said with an almost smug pride. "The whole thing is Camden. It's breathtaking."

"You've been over there?"

"Oh, yeah, I prefer to be there than on mine."

"Uh..." Roxie said waving. "What are you talking about?"

"Dyce has an island in the Pacific," Zairn said. "South of Hawaii. It's breathtaking."

"You're taking me to the second best island in the world?" Roxie asked. "You need to tell Jane about it before she decides on a venue. Does it have a hotel?"

"There are guest accommodations, a hotel and self-contained villas along the east coast," he said. "And the private house at the southern end of the island. The employee building is extensive, just south of the airstrip."

"The corporate suite up and running?"

"Yeah," Zairn said, showing his friend a smile. "Think he knew none of us would travel out there without dedicated workspace."

Resting against the back of the chair, Roxie took Merci's hand to her lap. "Don't know about you, but I never used to have conversations that involved private islands and whose was bigger than whose."

"Nope," Merci said. "Unless it was about whose fantasy was least likely to happen."

"You should come to the Crimson resort with us," Zairn said. "There's plenty of room."

She didn't have to look at Reid to know he wouldn't want to run away to the Bahamas with her. "I'll think about it."

Because it was as much as she could offer. In ordinary circumstances, she'd be tempted, but would never think to leave work at such short notice. What would she do on a beach vacation? Lie in the sun? She'd go stir crazy and it wasn't Roxie's responsibility to keep her entertained.

But Reid didn't need her. Maybe having her around was complicating things. Going away could simplify his life and it would free her from facing Madelyn day-in day-out. It was certainly something to consider.

THIRTY-TWO

“Do you want me to leave?”

Lying next to each other in almost darkness, they hadn't spoken much since Zairn and Roxie left. Once the elevator doors closed, she'd declared she was going to bed. Reid hadn't been far behind... though sleep wasn't his motivation.

“The vacation?” he asked, his hand warm and heavy on her belly. “It would shield you from Madelyn.”

Shifting her head on the pillow, she looked up into his eyes. “It's my job to be your shield... isn't it?”

“The last thing I want is to hurt you.” Whatever they were talking about, that statement seemed ominous. “Going to the resort would protect you from Madelyn.”

“Would it?” she asked. “Because she's found ways to screw with me without ever being near me. The jewelry stunt? She could've pulled that whether I was here or not. The Ryan article didn't need me around.”

“Do you want to stay? To be shadowed by her?”

“I don't want to be shadowed by her, but if it's what's best for RCI... I got into this because I wanted RCI to be strong. Giving up on the IP when we're already so deep into this... Madelyn annoys me, yes, but I don't worry about me. I worry about RCI... about you.”

His palm skimmed up her stomach and down in a gentle caress. “She can't hurt me. To hurt me, I'd have to care about her.”

“And you don't?” Bolstering her nerve, she took advantage of the intimate moment. “How much did you love her when you proposed?” His gaze drifted to his hand still stroking her. “I know you as a certain guy. A man who thinks things through and only takes...” Well, except for their relationship. He'd said that wasn't smart, yet he was doing it anyway. Was he more driven by emotion than she realized? Than he wanted people to know? “You wouldn't have asked her to marry you unless you were sure you wanted to be her husband.”

“It was a different time. Feels like a long time ago.”

In some ways it was. “Were you sure? When you proposed?”

“Kintyre... you remember him?”

“Mm.”

“The woman he’s now divorced from, Julietta, they met and got married fast.”

“A whirlwind romance?”

“Madelyn and I had been dating for years, and I’d never felt the urge... It seemed like the right thing to do.”

“Because your friend got married?”

“They officially separated around the same time I broke the engagement. I don’t know which came first, they’d been on the rocks for a while... They weren’t compatible, didn’t have the same values.”

“And that made you question your relationship? I guess no one can ever be sure... What did you and Madelyn do together?” she asked, trying to imagine them on a date and happy. “You didn’t talk to her about business and business is all you do.”

“I do some other things,” he said, his touch descending to just graze her clit, reminding her of the pleasure he’d delivered not so long ago.

“Thank you,” she said, scooping his hand up to kiss his knuckle. “I really don’t want to think about you in bed with her.”

“You were chasing me to her bed earlier.”

“No,” she said, snuggling closer. “I want you to stay right here, in this bed.” She closed her eyes, resting her temple against the warmth of his flesh. “If you want me to leave, I’ll leave. It’s something we haven’t talked about. You being the one to...”

“Leave? I live here.”

Tipping up her chin, she found his eyes again. “Asking me to leave.”

He touched her jaw. “You’re exactly where I want you to be.”

In his bed? Naked? Giving her body to him? She was where he wanted her to be, what about what she wanted? Falling for him would be a bad idea. Roxie told her that on day one. Except being in his arms, trying desperately to explore what was behind his façade, she couldn't deny it.

At the start, RCI was her focus because she cared about its people. The reason had grown. Stretched to encompass the man at the top. Not just encompass him but be dominated by him. Just like every other part of her.

“If Madelyn follows through on her threat, if she tries to do anything that might hurt RCI—”

“I'll take care of it.”

Which was what he always said. “I trust you, but...”

His focus narrowed. “But...?”

“Will you stay macro? Keep your eyes on the big picture?”

“What do you fear, Merci? That I'll forget my responsibilities?”

“You know what you're doing,” she said, reminding herself of a similar thought on the day she'd spoken out against him. “RCI is your baby. I don't have any right to—”

“Tell me what you're worried about.”

“Maybe you won't see what she's planning until it's too late. If her hatred of me leads to her doing something detrimental to RCI, you'll hate me for the rest of your life. Walking away clean is one thing, and maybe when this is over, you'll never speak another word to me, but... I don't want you to hate me for damaging your life's work.”

“If Madelyn does something to damage RCI, that will be on her. If I fail to see the threat coming, that's on me. The only one innocent in that scenario is you. And you're in this position because of my maneuvering.”

“This was my suggestion.”

His fingers sank into her hair. “We're a team.”

“I don't want to let you down.”

“And if you feel that way, I have let you down.” He pulled her up as he ducked and pressed his mouth to her forehead. “You could never disappoint me.”

Thank God she had so much faith in him or she might have laughed. “Since she’s been here...” Was it her right to ask? She’d started now and her mouth didn’t know how to back down. “Has Madelyn made a move on you?”

“I heard your request,” he said, holding her head against his throat, stroking her hair. “I will always show you respect and tell you what’s going on.”

Was that a yes or no? So much had changed since her glib request of him to let her know before she walked in on him screwing Madelyn. Oh, yeah, her stomach roiled. “You went on a date with her... Before our dinner party.”

“Is that why you split with Roxie and spent that weekend at Crimson?”

She smiled and kissed his collarbone. “No, I did that because I was too embarrassed to look at you... after confessing my attraction in your closet.”

“And how do you feel about that now?” he asked, his lips moving into her hair. Now that they’d been intimate... a lot, and she’d experienced proof of his attraction to her, embarrassment didn’t feature.

“It got me here, didn’t it?” In his embrace, her body loosened, ready to sleep. “Being here with you makes up for every other stress in my life.”

“I don’t want you stressed,” he said. “Go to Chicago with Roxie this weekend.” She closed her eyes. “She’s good for you. A good friend.”

And one she’d come to rely on. In two weeks, losing Reid would take a lot out of her. Losing Roxie was going to be a blow too. This weekend could be their last chance to spend some time together. Technically, Roxie belonged to Reid’s side. After their relationship was over, Merci would have to learn to live without either of them.

THIRTY-THREE

“I don’t think he wanted you out of the way,” Roxie said. “He’s thinking of you, wants you to have a break. It’s sweet. Two days of Madelyn is too much to endure without some kind of relief on the other end. I don’t know how you put up with it.”

“I ignore her as much as I can.” Something the woman didn’t like, but that was a long list. “You put up with Kesley.”

“She’s not over my shoulder... Actually, I have my own relief from her right now. She’s dealing with the Queens dinner.”

“What’s the Queens dinner?”

“You don’t want to know,” Roxie said. “She’s delaying it this year for my benefit. Nice of her, huh?”

Given she didn’t know what it was, she couldn’t comment. “Maybe.”

“Oh, but, hey, we’ll have to Queen you too. I should’ve spoken to Zairn about it. He won’t hesitate for the fiancée of one of his best friends.”

Not long ago, she’d have jumped to remind her the relationship with Reid wasn’t real. It wasn’t any more real now, but saying it wasn’t as easy as it used to be.

She slanted to look past Roxie and out the side window of the car. “Chicago is great.”

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” Roxie said.

Since leaving New York on a private jet, everything she’d seen was incredible. The plane was like a home, not anything like a typical plane. Chauffeur driven cars. Champagne. Private jets. It was a head-spinning lifestyle.

“I can see why you love it already.”

“It’s almost nine. We’ll go to my place first. Jane’s probably already done most of the organizing. Hopefully. Whatever, we’ll worry about that tomorrow. Tonight we turn on the tunes and get ready for fun. I’ll show you around the new Crimson site, what will be the next Crimson, it’s not finished yet. We’ll stop by there, then I’ll take you to my favorite bar. It’s been my favorite bar in the city forever. It’s under new management these days.

Zairn. I didn't know he bought it at the time, but he did. Rouge bought it. Only because he was worried about my safety. Owning the place means he can control who gets close to me... Sometimes the press pays close attention."

"Sometimes? I saw the pack of reporters outside Crimson. And now you're coming back to your old apartment..." She hadn't considered how that would look in the current circumstances. "Oh, God, should you have left New York this weekend? They might think you're leaving Zairn for good."

But Roxie was smiling. "Providing Zairn doesn't think that, we're good. Being away this weekend is perfect. The press will think we're through and then we'll show up together for the resort winners. Drama at its finest. And Hatfield will get his scoop."

"Hatfield?"

"Never mind," Roxie said, sliding to the window and the edge of her seat. "We're here."

The street wasn't anything special. But Roxie's smile grew and her eyes glittered as she gazed out at the building by the curb they pulled up to.

"I'm glad Zairn's not here to see that face," Merci said. "I guess this is your place."

"Sure is," Roxie said, lunging over to grab her hand as the door was opened. "Come on."

They got out and immediately a short guy in a big coat came running over. "Roxie! Is it true—"

"I really need to find out who's on your payroll at the airport," Roxie said to the guy. "You know we can pay him more than you do."

"Does that mean you're patching things up with Zairn?" he asked. "Why are you here if you're not broken up?"

"Maybe I'll pay in sexual favors," Roxie said, starting for the stairs.

The stranger wasn't done. "Merci! Does Reid know you're here? Did he kick you out because of Ryan?"

God, these people knew everything. Either that or Madelyn was his source.

As she tried to turn, Roxie pulled her back. “Don’t entertain him.”

They went up the stairs.

“I’ll be out here!” he called after them. “I’ll be here... waiting for a quote.”

“You’ll be waiting ‘til hell freezes over,” Roxie called back just before entering the opening door.

The broad communal door swung shut behind them. As she turned away from it, she saw Roxie hugging a big guy. Tall, wide, formidable.

“There’s two of you,” the big guy said as they broke their embrace.

“Trevor, this is Merci. Merci, Trevor.” When they started up the stairs, Merci followed. “What did I miss? Where’s the drama?”

“Never far behind you,” Trevor said. “How long you in town?”

“As long as I have to be. Z and I are away next week. The resort prizewinners arrive on Monday. We don’t go until Wednesday.”

“This your big Bahamas trip?” he asked. “You know I can do security anywhere?”

Roxie laughed and put an arm around his waist. “Talk to Ballard, I don’t make those calls.”

“Damn, he’s going with you?” Trevor said, seemingly dejected. “You won’t need us if his team is there.”

“I’m sorry, honey,” Roxie pouted, stopping at an apartment door. “Maybe next time?”

Her friend opened the door to stride inside. Merci was so close behind her that when Roxie came to an abrupt stop, she walked right into her back.

Before she could apologize, she peeked around to see a guy standing behind the couch, wine bottle in his hand. Though,

the bottle was less interesting than the steely abs and broad tan chest. Yep, only wearing sweats, the guy was making himself at home.

“Roxie,” he said, his eyes going left to right. “This isn’t what it looks like.”

It was only when he spoke that she looked at his face, and it was one she recognized. “Knox Collier.”

“Merci,” he said in greeting, though his focus never strayed from Roxie.

“Babe, what’s...? Oh! Uh... Oh!”

“Oh?” Roxie said, whipping around to the woman who’d just appeared at the mouth of the hallway to their left. “Jane! Are you kidding me?”

Wrapped in a sheet, good money would go on the newcomer being naked beneath the fabric. “This isn’t what it looks like.”

“I tried that,” Knox said.

“You know, I don’t even know what is more upsetting about this,” Roxie said, pushing the hair from her forehead. “That both of you lied or that you just ruined my weekend.”

“We didn’t lie,” Knox said. “It just sort of... happened.”

“Believe me, I know these things don’t just happen. There’s a moment when one or both of you could’ve turned it around and you chose not to,” Roxie said, focusing on the woman again. “This is like reverse *déjà vu*.”

“I was fine with you and Zairn... I was shocked, but Toria —”

“Does she know about this?”

The woman shifted, her shoulders sagging forward. “No.”

Roxie took one sure step toward Knox. “Why are you ashamed of being with my friend?”

“What?” he asked, his brows rising. “Who said that?”

“If you’re not ashamed, why keep it a secret?”

“You and Z started out secret.”

“That was different. We had no choice with the contest hanging over us. Jane is the nicest, sweetest, kindest human being you’ll ever meet. What the hell gives you the right to use her for your own sick pleasure?”

“Sick pleasure?”

“Rox,” Jane said, coming closer. “Don’t be mad. Please.” The slight woman trembled as tears gathered on her lashes. “Please, Roxie.”

On an exhale, Roxie pointed at Knox. “You don’t move.” Roxie snagged her hand before storming toward Jane. “Girl talk.”

In charge, Roxie pushed Jane along while pulling her by the hand to get the three of them into what turned out to be a bedroom. Roxie let her go to go close the door.

“Merci Moore,” she introduced herself, offering Jane a hand.

Though the woman seemed winded, she did shake. “Jane Simmons.”

“What happened?” Roxie asked, marching up to Jane to put her butt on the bed. “When did you...? In Chicago? He lives in LA!”

Jane squirmed a little. “It was in LA,” she said. “The night when you were missing... that you spent with Riot Guy.”

“Oh my God, I was missing and you were screwing—”

“No! I kissed him. Just a kiss. One kiss.”

“How did that happen?” Roxie asked. “You were all together when I got there. All in the same room.”

“I was in the restroom, and I guess he didn’t know... He came in and I was crying, then I just... kissed him.”

Roxie inhaled, held the breath for a few seconds, then laughed. “Go get what you want, girl. Wow, you’re amazing.” Lunging forward, she gave the sort of stunned Jane a tight hug. “You surprised the hell out of me.”

“You always go after what you want,” Jane said.

Roxie released her. “I’d tell you not to take a page out my book, but it seems to be working for you! Good going. Now you can plan two weddings! Two for the price of one.”

“Oh no, shh! Shh! He’ll hear you.”

“Hear me?” Roxie asked, frowning. “Who cares if your boyfriend knows I’m talking about—”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Jane said, color rising in her cheeks. “I think he’s my... buddy.”

“Buddy? Fuck buddy?” Roxie’s head dropped to the side. “Jane, honey, you don’t do casual... ever. You do heart on your sleeve, not fuck me ‘til I love you.”

“I know.” Jane stood up, clutching her head in both hands. “I know. I know... I think I messed this up.”

“Is this him? He thinks because he’s some super-hot billionaire, he doesn’t have to play by the rules?” Roxie surged to her feet. “I’ll tell him. He won’t get away with using you for sex and casting you aside.”

Jane grabbed Roxie’s arm and got in close. “I think I’m using him for sex.”

“You think?”

Glad Roxie was confused, Merci didn’t get it either.

“I... I don’t know.”

“Honey...” Roxie said, taking Jane back to the bed to seat both of them. “You’re gonna have to help me out here.”

“I really don’t...”

“When did you have sex? You said the first time was a kiss.”

“The night in Crimson, after you and Zairn got together... you left the club and Toria was hooking up with Logan Lowe.”

“She told me about that... That was the night before I left for New York...” Her head bobbed in a side-to-side nod. “Okay, so you didn’t have time to get into it... Though...” She pushed her friend. “You could’ve told me about the kiss.”

“It was stupid,” Jane said. “I wasn’t even listening to what he was saying. I just thought... I wanted to...”

“And that’s okay,” Roxie said, taking her friend’s hand into her own lap. “You went home with him from the club?”

“Toria made him promise to get me back to the hotel safe. We were in the car... I said something about where he lived or... something. Just thinking it would be cool to see a billionaire’s house.”

“Wow, that is such a corny line.”

“I know!” Jane wailed, her head falling onto the laughing Roxie.

“So you went back to his place... Wait, does Z know about this?”

“No. No one knows,” Jane said, without lifting her head.

“I thought Kintyre lived there. With Knox.”

“I met him,” Jane said on an inhale as she sat upright. “In the morning... I didn’t know anyone else lived there and I was trying to get out, to get back before Toria.”

“You said no one knows.”

“He doesn’t know who I am... that I’m your Jane... He didn’t say anything. Knox said he wouldn’t even know your roommates names.”

“Probably not,” Roxie conceded.

“I’m sorry,” Jane yowled again. “I really am! I don’t know how this happened.”

“Shh,” Roxie said, shifting closer to give her roommate another hug. “He’s sort of smug and superior, but he’s cute... Wait, what happened to the coffee cart girl?”

“The who?”

“Hmm...” Roxie said, her discerning attention sliding away from her friend.

Maybe seeking comfort, Jane looked at her. Merci wasn’t sure what to say. “I... don’t know the coffee cart girl either.”

“How did he get here?” Roxie asked, suddenly snapping back to Jane. “I thought Knox went back to LA with Kintyre.”

“A couple of days after the club, when I was home I... He just showed up here. He did go back to LA before the engagement party and flew to New York with Kintyre.”

“He flew from Chicago to LA and then to New York? He does know where Chicago is, right?” Roxie asked. “He came back here after the engagement party?”

“Not right after,” Jane said. “He’s only been here a few days.”

Roxie’s smile grew. “Stop looking so scared. This is okay. I’m just confused why you wouldn’t tell us. He’s solvent and from everything I’ve heard, his family are okay people... most of them. They’ll love you.”

Jane was shaking her head. “We’re not together like that, Rox. We don’t talk about the future... We have sex... talk about you and Z, other things going on.”

“I don’t mind being part of your sex talk, but it might freak Z out, so we’ll just keep that to ourselves.”

Jane laughed. “Rox...”

“It’s okay,” Roxie said, tucking her hair from her face. “Really, honey. It can be a thing or not a thing, that’s your call... But we should tell Toria.”

“No! No, we can’t tell anyone... You can’t tell Z either.”

Leaning back, Roxie’s incredulity was obvious. “I won’t lie to Zairn. Why does it have to be a secret?”

“Zairn isn’t my friend, I can’t—”

“Right,” Roxie said, leaving the bed to head for the door. Merci leaped out of the way to let her throw it aside and go out. Jane was hot on her heels, so Merci followed too. “You want me to lie to Zairn?”

“I don’t give a damn what you do,” Knox said.

Merci stayed by the hall.

Jane kept on going to get between the two in the living room. “Please don’t fight,” she pleaded.

“You think being with my friend messes up some precious reputation?” Roxie demanded. “You think you’re special?”

“I think you need to get back in your box,” Knox said. “This is none of your goddamn business.”

“She’s my best friend! He’s your best friend!”

“And we didn’t tell either of you,” Knox said. “Again, it’s not your fucking business.”

“Oh, swear at me, Collier, please. You think I won’t tell the man I love because you—”

“I wanted to keep it a secret!” Jane shouted over Roxie. “It was me. It wasn’t him. I didn’t want to tell you or Toria... or Zairn.” The mood in the room switched as Jane’s volume lowered. “I wanted this to be a secret.”

Roxie’s head moved, suggesting a switch of her attention from Knox to Jane. “Oh.”

“Yeah, oh,” Knox said. “You dial up fast, Kyst.”

“We don’t keep secrets,” Roxie said to Jane.

Apparently, registering the hurt in her friend’s voice, Jane blinked, and her color dropped. “I’m sorry.”

“Is this because of me and Z? It wasn’t a thing and then it was, I... I never meant to hurt you.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you either,” Jane said. “I just... this is so different, so... out of character. I thought you would judge me.”

“Honey,” Roxie said, going to take her friend’s hand. “I would never judge you, neither of us would.”

“You and Toria or you and Zairn?”

Roxie looked at Knox. “Do you know how close he was to coming with me?”

“I talked to him last night.”

“He stayed in New York to be in the Gramercy negotiations.”

“Yeah, Kinloch’s in town,” Knox said to Roxie’s nod.

The Gramercy negotiations...? She was... Access. The one thing she’d asked for as part of the deal was access. Reid hadn’t even told her the negotiations were starting. Zairn was in

there, Madelyn would be too, and Reid had sent her to Chicago... Was that deliberate?

“You want to worry about anyone,” Knox said. “We should worry about her.”

Still trying to figure out Reid’s motivation, it took Merci a second to notice everyone looking at her. “What?”

“Merci’s cool,” Roxie said. “She doesn’t care about this drama.”

“I told Z your whole fake break-up thing was only a good idea if she didn’t know about it,” Knox said. “In a few weeks, she’ll be on her own again. Why do we trust her not to sell everything she knows?”

“You are so paranoid,” Roxie said. “You need to learn to trust people.”

“I trust people who have proved themselves.”

“And you think Merci hasn’t?” Roxie asked. “She went into this knowing it was a lie. Hell, it was her idea.”

They were talking about the engagement. About her and Reid’s relationship. In front of this Jane person she’d just met.

“I don’t think we should talk about this,” Merci said.

Roxie just carried on. “You think the worst of everyone, Knox,” she said. “And, by the way, what happened to Coffee Cart Girl?”

“That’s nothing,” Knox said.

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Roxie said. “Are you still seeing her?”

“None of this is any of your business.”

“That means yes,” Roxie said. “I won’t let you hurt my friend. You won’t make a fool out of her.”

“This is our relationship,” Knox said, gesturing between himself and Jane. “Our business. You want us to get into yours with Z?”

“If you were protecting him, yes, I would want you to.”

“Cool, then I’ll call him and tell him what a busybody you are.”

Roxie scoffed. “You think he doesn’t know that already? When it comes to people I care about, yes, I will get in amongst it.”

“Both of you have to realize you’re family now,” Jane said. Knox didn’t look too happy with the statement, she couldn’t see Roxie’s face. “Both of you love Zairn. You can’t be weird because... You’re family.”

“Yeah?” Roxie asked. “And you’re my family. I’d never let a guy screw around on you, no matter who he is.”

“I know and I love you too,” Jane said on a smile. “I do. I know you’re just looking out for me.”

As the women hugged, Knox seemed to relax. “Has everyone dialed it back now?”

“We can call a truce, with reservations,” Roxie said. “If you hurt my friend—”

“And if you hurt mine...” Knox said without elaborating because their sentiments matched. “Jane is right.”

“She always is,” Roxie said on a sigh. “With the exception of men. She makes terrible decisions when it comes to men.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Knox said. “I hear you.”

Jane backed away. “Now you two hug and make up. For everyone’s sake.”

“Can he put a shirt on first?” Roxie asked.

Both Jane and Knox looked at his torso. He shrugged and crossed the room, passing to go into the hall behind her... probably into Jane’s bedroom.

“Are you okay?” Jane asked, focused on Roxie.

“Me? Yes.” Roxie spun around. “Merci, sorry, this is... Yeah, you didn’t know the madness you were walking into.”

“Neither did you.”

“Can’t say life with me is ever boring.”

No, it was definitely fast-moving. People were hooking up left, right, and center. Did that include her? Jane knew her dalliance with Knox wasn't forever, it was sex. Just sex. If only clarity was so forthcoming for her and Reid.

THIRTY-FOUR

The closer they got to New York on the private jet that Monday morning, the more trepidation grew over the looming conversation she'd have to have with Reid.

Maybe coming back to New York on the same day she was due at work was a bad idea. Roxie assured her it would be okay. But it did mean rather than going back to the apartment to talk in private, the first time she and Reid would see each other would be as professionals at the office not as... whatever they were.

"Are you okay, honey?" Roxie asked as they walked to the door a pilot was opening.

The guy flew them across the country and still got up to let them out. Pure class.

"I'm fine."

"Thank you, Dennis," Roxie said, blowing the pilot a kiss as they filtered through the door.

The shiny black Town Car that awaited them was expected, strange how her expectations had altered while being with Reid. They weren't permanent. It was the man she'd miss, not the trimmings.

She didn't expect the back door to open, but when Zairn emerged, she wasn't surprised. It was like he didn't even see her. Standing there, looking their way, his smile set on the woman behind her, love radiated from him. She could feel it from Roxie without even turning around.

As they crossed the tarmac, Zairn gestured inside. "Merci."

"You're looking for beaucoup brownie points, Skippy," Roxie said from behind as Merci got in.

She didn't expect the car to be occupied. "Matt," she said to the man seated with his back to the closed privacy screen. The amorous couple outside would want to sit together, so she sat next to him. It wasn't a chore, but she wasn't exactly comfortable either. "What are you doing here?"

Roxie got in with Zairn behind her. The door closed and the car got moving.

“This is a surprise,” Roxie said. “What did you two do wrong?”

“We can’t just miss our girls?” Zairn asked, putting an arm around Roxie to pull her closer.

“I like it,” Roxie said. “We’re the jetsetters and they are the worriers waiting at home.”

“Wouldn’t go that far,” Zairn said, nuzzling Roxie’s hair. “Worrying about you is pointless. I worry for the people you meet.”

When Roxie tipped her chin his way, he was quick to capture her mouth in a kiss... and not the most discreet kind.

Giving them their privacy at least provided her a chance to look at Reid. “I thought you’d be at the office.”

“This was Zairn’s idea,” he said. “If I’d known it would make you unhappy...”

“I’m not unhappy,” she said, forcing a smile. “I just... the Gramercy negotiations are important.”

His focus narrowed. “We’re only in the preliminary stages. No one has been awarded anything yet.”

Did he sense why she was distant? “I didn’t know they were starting at all.”

“Kinloch’s in town. Much of the later negotiating will be done without him. Given he’s here, it seemed prudent to get the ball rolling.”

“I understand. Is that why you sent me away?”

“We have a secret,” Roxie said, stealing her mouth from Zairn.

“Do we?” Zairn asked.

Roxie gestured to her. “Not us. Merci and me.”

They made eye contact as the men waited, Roxie just smiled.

“Tell us,” Zairn said, pinching his fiancée’s waist. “What’s the big secret?”

“We’re not going to tell you,” Roxie said. “It wouldn’t be a secret if we told you. We just want you to know, so if maybe sometime you do find out, we can say we warned you.”

“Is it about you offering sexual favors at the airport?”

“I do that at every airport, Casanova. I’m super friendly.”

“And your secret?”

“Is staying secret.”

Her friend was relishing being in the know. It was funny, these guys were used to being in the loop.

“So you told us this secret exists to wind us up?”

“Something like that,” Roxie said.

“Chicago’s Crimson site is amazing,” Merci said, not feeling very playful. “Roxie gave me a tour. It’s huge.”

“They always look bigger empty,” Zairn said. “Demo is the fun part. We take the building back to the studs and build it back up again.”

“Roxie’s a celebrity there,” Merci said. “The guys were tripping over themselves for her.”

“Men trip over themselves for me everywhere,” Roxie said with a mock hair toss.

“I don’t know how much time we’ll spend there with her girls in New York full time.”

“You’ll love Toria, Merci,” Roxie said. “They’re moving into the Crimson apartments... It’ll be fun when we can all party together.”

Swallowing, Merci had to remind herself of their predicament. “I doubt we’ll get that chance.”

Roxie frowned. “Why wouldn’t we? You live in New York too.”

“Yeah, but...” Glancing at Zairn, she could see that he got it. “It’s unlikely.”

“When the engagement is over...” Zairn said, “you won’t be hanging out anymore.”

“Why not?” Roxie asked. “No one decides who my friends are.”

And it was sweet of Roxie to say so. Reid said they had to walk away clean. Hanging out with Roxie, if and when the woman was in town, could lead to their paths crossing. Seeing Reid after their engagement, not being with him, maybe seeing him with other women... it was more than she'd be able to tolerate.

“Did Jane get away okay?” Zairn asked.

“Yesterday,” Roxie said, suspicious. “The winners are congregating in Florida.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Toria meeting her?”

“Your people are down there with the Triple Seven. Astrid called this morning. It's hectic organizing so many people.”

“She can handle it.”

“Z's people are amazing,” Roxie said, leaning closer. “You'll get to know everyone when we're back after this Bahamas thing, which you are still totally welcome to, by the way.”

She smiled. “You've been reminding me of that all weekend.”

“I don't like you being by yourself,” Roxie said. “Maybe I should stay.”

“You keep saying that too and I keep telling you I'll be fine. I want you to go and have fun. It will be an incredible experience.”

“I'm marrying my guy. As soon as we say I do, that island is half mine, and I'll totally get it in the divorce.”

“Rox—”

“My point is, I can go hang out there whenever I want.”

“She's right,” Zairn said.

The agreement startled her. “You don't want Roxie with you?”

Maybe the men found their lives easier without their women around.

“Yes, I want her with me... and in bikinis all day long. But her friends are important to her. Very important. She cares about people. If she wants to be here, I prioritize her wishes.”

Roxie just nodded along. Both accepted it as an option, but she wouldn't ruin their plans.

“I'll be fine,” she said, sliding her hand under Reid's. “I have Reid and I'm on the top floor now, where he can keep an eye on me. With the Gramercy negotiations being brought forward, I imagine Madelyn will be more interested in being a part of those than harassing me with her questions.” As the words came from her lips, clarity crept in. Turning to Reid, she blinked. “That's why you brought the negotiations forward?”

He nodded once. He'd been thinking of her, trying to lessen her burden. Why hadn't he just told her that? And it still didn't explain why he'd sent her to Chicago.

“You know who else will be on this holiday?” Roxie asked into their charged energy. “This woman Zairn wants to sleep with.” Shock brought her attention around. “Mm hmm. I mean, I say *woman* she's a teenager. She was one of the other finalists on *Talk at Sunset*.”

“You never told me how that happened,” Merci said, welcoming any discussion that wouldn't involve her questioning Reid in front of others. “How you got to the show and ended up winning.”

“It's quite the story,” Roxie said, taking a deep breath.

For the rest of the trip, Roxie recounted the tale. Every once in a while, Zairn would jump in to correct her about something. Seemed the couple had different perspectives on aspects of their world tour.

They got all the way to the Crimson building without her or Reid having to say much. When the car pulled through the gates and came to a stop, Roxie shifted toward the door, her hand in Zairn's.

“I'll settle Lola in and come over for the noon meeting,” Zairn said.

Translated, that meant the couple were going upstairs for sex. After being apart, they seemed to make it a point to be

intimate as imminently as possible.

“Do you want to do lunch today?” Roxie asked her. “Or will you be in the meeting too?”

She had no idea and didn’t want to assume anything. “I’ll text you.”

“Be good,” Roxie called as she and Zairn got out.

The door closed. Silence lingered. She couldn’t handle it. Couldn’t keep her lips together after the car started moving and they pulled out onto the street, merging into traffic again.

“You didn’t have to send me away if the point was just to get Madelyn off my back,” she said.

“Look me in the eye.”

Always this. Edging around, she kept her chin down, almost incapable of doing it. If she looked at him, she’d want him, then she’d forget all about her questions.

His finger slid under her chin to draw her attention up to his. And there it was, those eyes, that bottomless abyss that sucked her under. How would she live without him?

Madelyn’s official eight week stint had begun on the Monday after their engagement announcement. Time was ticking down to the inevitable.

“When is Madelyn leaving?” she asked.

Would it be Monday to Monday or would the woman leave on a Friday at the end of the working week?

“Is that what you want to know?”

Because whatever day Madelyn’s scrutiny ended would be the same day their relationship disintegrated to ash.

Without an ounce of uncertainty, he leaned in for a kiss. Nothing about him was indecisive. Nothing reluctant. Nothing hesitant. They’d agreed to make the most of their time together... and to walk away clean. If only she could be as sure.

The adamant press of his lips forced hers to relax. Losing herself, letting them sink deeper, all concerns and insecurities ebbed.

“I didn’t send you away,” he murmured against her. “Your access is absolute.”

Sliding her hands onto his neck, she basked in his proximity. “You didn’t tell me. You told me to leave, and I find out after I’ve gone that you’re entering the negotiations I wanted to be a part of.”

“Nothing happens in the first couple of days. Everyone’s just sizing each other up.”

Angling her mouth, she stole another short kiss. “You and Kinloch have known each other forever.”

“Yeah, my people need to know his.” Their lips stayed close as his palms ran up and down her arms, to her back, down and back up. “If I thought it would upset you, I—”

“I trust you,” she breathed, rising higher. “I should’ve trusted you.”

“Take off your panties.”

A surge of excitement spurred her movements, taking her from his kiss to wriggle out of her underwear. With his sure grip on her waist, he guided her onto his lap, her legs open over his.

“Your belt?” she gasped as his mouth worked on her neck.

“My belt,” he said.

All she needed was his command. Fighting with his belt and his pants, she took him in her sure fist and angled herself over him.

Tearing herself from his mouth, she sought his heavy gaze. “Can I?”

“You better,” he said on a slight smile.

Slithering down onto him, she felt completion from her core to her heart and everything between. Every doubt or uncertainty she had withered with the sweet slick union of their bodies.

“Matt,” she whispered, rising and falling with the steady support of his hands.

Being away for the weekend, three nights without him, it was supposed to give her relief. Space. Time to forget about the

drama of Madelyn and fake engagements.

In that moment, riding the man whose ring she wore, she absorbed the truth of what the distance had taught her. She didn't want to be without him. Didn't want to walk away. Didn't want to wake up anywhere but in his bed. Some might consider him severe. Might think he couldn't inspire warmth and comfort and security, but that was exactly what he did.

His confidence, his control, it gave her a safe space. Somewhere to exist that would always be hers. Theirs... Not always. For two weeks. That was all she got. Two weeks and then she'd be without him forever.

Maybe that was why as she yelped into the bliss of orgasm, tears tumbled from her lashes. Every day, every thought she'd had over their separation was easy to ignore, to shrug off, until she'd been without him.

She stole a kiss and worked faster, harder, until she'd delivered him to his own climax. When the journey ended, her forehead found his. She breathed him in, eyes closed, reminding herself she'd still have him tomorrow. But that wouldn't always be the case.

"What's wrong?" he asked, stroking her hair, clasping her face. "Merci? Babe?"

"I can't," she said, climbing from his lap, righting her skirt as he put himself away.

"You can't, what?"

"Explain."

"Because?"

Because he'd told her more than once that their physical relationship couldn't become messy. Meaning it couldn't be confused for anything other than it was: two people sating an attraction.

"I should start looking for an apartment," she said.

"That's why you're upset?"

"I'm not upset," she said, swiping the tears from her cheeks to show him a broad smile. "See."

One of his brows arched. “If you tell me what is wrong, I can fix it.”

Like he did with the daycare. With starting negotiations to get Madelyn off her back. A man such as him didn’t hear problems, he only envisaged solutions. But this was one thing he couldn’t fix. Just imagining what he’d say if she confessed her love for him was enough to seal her lips.

Funny. Once upon a time, she’d believed nothing could silence her. Matteo Reid had proved otherwise.

Inhaling, she kept her smile. “Well, I need to get an apartment without Madelyn figuring it out. That’s a problem you can help fix.”

“There’s no rush for you to leave mine.”

“And what would I do,” she said, “move into a guest room?”

There were so many grey areas. They weren’t sleeping together for Madelyn. They were sleeping together because they wanted to, and because they had to share an apartment anyway. Once Madelyn was gone, they would be freed from that constraint.

“If you like.”

What did he like? Always being so reserved and in control, he didn’t give away much for nothing. Most of the time, it was alluring. Enticing. The brooding man of few words exuded a mystery that she lapped up.

Being in the dark, so close to the end, it was no wonder she hadn’t been able to stem the tears.

“I’ll talk to Roxie,” she said. “Maybe I can stay at Crimson for a couple of days... until I get something else organized.”

“I didn’t realize you were so eager to leave.”

Is that what he thought? Madelyn said Reid understood aggressive. He understood direct. They’d met under exactly those circumstances. Still, she kept the truth to herself.

When the car stopped, she looked out to see they’d reached RCI.

“A week on Friday, Tara will arrange to have your things packed and moved to a Crimson suite,” he said, shifting closer to the door, straightening his cuffs. “I’d recommend traveling with Roxie this week. Madelyn will simply believe you’ve taken a vacation with your friend. Things will be smoothed over with your superior.”

The door opened and out he got, leaving her in the dust. Just like that, he was ready and willing to end their relationship. Roxie was traveling in two days. Somehow her time with him had been shortened from two weeks to two days in the blink of an eye. No one could say she wasn’t good at sabotaging herself.

THIRTY-FIVE

He didn't wait for her. Why would he after an exit like that? They both needed the space anyway, and she had stairs to ascend. After issuing such crisp instructions, he wouldn't be interested in kissing her into oblivion. Her heart wouldn't be in it anyway.

No, actually, her heart was in it, which was exactly the problem.

She wasn't mad. Not at him. He'd been crystal clear about what they were. And what they weren't. Her smug words cursed her. Had she really told him that she was a big girl and that he didn't need to be gentle? Even at the time she'd been in danger of falling for him, but she'd been so damn sure.

Her laptop was on. She must've been the one to turn it on but couldn't remember opening it. Standing by her desk, sorting through paperwork, she was glad delegation wasn't her forte.

Catching up would keep her busy. The assistant wouldn't have time to get used to her. Especially not with her shipping out in two days.

Shouldn't she be excited by a trip to the Bahamas? Why wasn't she on the phone with her friend squeeing about coverups and sunblock?

Her adrenaline was going. It shouldn't be, but that jaunt up the stairs obsessing about what happened in the car left her with a burning desire to scream.

There were no answers. None that she wanted to face. Two nights with Reid. It just wasn't enough.

Busying herself wasn't good enough. Going around the desk, she slumped in her chair, closing her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose. Get it together. She needed to get a damn grip.

"Decided to come back, did you?"

Madelyn. Without even looking up, she registered the contempt. Even the air in the room got thinner when she walked in.

“Unfortunately, so did you,” Merci said, her hand dropping. “Let’s cut to the chase here. You want him. Can’t have him. So you’re going to trash his company. “

Clarity blurred the world and sharpened her mind. Madelyn was talking, but her words were mute.

Want him?

Check.

Can’t have him?

Check.

Trash his company...?

They’d got into the engagement to appease Madelyn’s ego. The woman wasn’t magnanimous in defeat. The opposite. Reid being involved with someone else wasn’t helping, it was hurting.

Had she turned into Madelyn?

She was no better, that was for sure. Hanging on to morsels of affection. Seeing every positive reaction as a sign of hope. That what? He’d become a different person and suddenly embrace marriage, commitment, and all that came with it.

Autopilot took her to her feet. Without a word, she left, passing the objecting Madelyn. They were just words and inconsequential ones at that.

The executive floor was its usual buzzing self, but she focused on his office and kept on going. Only one course of action made sense. It was insane she hadn’t taken it sooner.

On entering Reid’s office, all words stopped. Yeah, it was rude to walk in on the quartet’s meeting, but that didn’t slow her down. She went to the head of the small conference table, hand going to hand to slide the ring from her finger to set it down in front of him.

For a beat, no one said anything. His eyes rose from the jewel to hers, his expression as inscrutable as always.

“What’s going on?” that was Aiden’s voice, but she didn’t flinch. “You’re not... you can’t!”

Reid’s composure was enviable. “Everyone out,” he said, steady and calm.

“But what—”

“Leave them to it,” June’s voice cut Aiden’s off.

Drawing from him, her own heartrate slowed. Now that she’d figured it out, there was no need to be tense or frantic. Hurt? Yes. Heartbroken? Absolutely. But both were her own doing.

After the door closed behind the others, Reid waited for her to speak.

“It’s the only thing that makes sense,” she said, her volume low. “We set this up because we thought it would give you cover. Instead, it’s pissed her off more. RCI was our priority. The IP was our priority. The only way we get it now is if she thinks she’s won... that means getting rid of me.” His silence churned her up. “If you want to tell people you ended it, that’s fine. But me splitting up with you has the added bonus of letting her think you’ve gone through what she did when you broke her heart... And you won’t have to worry about going to bed with her while this betrayal’s still so fresh.”

All good points. She thought anyway. He didn’t speak and didn’t look to be considering it.

Inhaling, she accepted he had no response. “I’ll take today, get my things out of yours and go to a hotel. Tomorrow, I’ll go back to work on the seventh. The daycare will still be my responsibility... if that’s acceptable.” Though that would really be Calista’s decision. “I’ve had... I’ll miss you, Matt. It’s been amazing.”

Turning to depart, some immature part of her wanted him to stop her. That wouldn’t happen. He was probably already strategizing about how to make the best of the scenario. He’d told her she could leave any time she wanted. While this might not be exactly what she wanted, it was for the best.

RCI was their priority. The company. The success. The people. Her ridiculous personal feelings were irrelevant. Their engagement was a mission with a goal. It was important to adapt. So what if that course change broke them up? So what if heat was already threatening her eyes?

It made sense.

But it was torture. Walking away... from him...

Her feet were moving, her legs working, but her head was getting dizzy.

The elevator doors closed in front of her.

Elevator... she was in the elevator and didn't even care. If it wasn't for the others in there, she might have hit the emergency stop. If only there was one of them in life. Sometimes it became too much. Emotion. Need. Movement. It was too much. More than she could handle.

Rather than call Elwood, she got a cab. It seemed only right. No longer being his fiancé meant what was his was no longer hers to take, to use, to exploit.

Had she done that? Exploited their relationship?

Details were difficult to hold onto. It was just lucky the lobby staff of Reid's building came running over to pay the cab from their petty cash. That would be added to Reid's account, so she made a mental note to repay it before she left.

Left. Yes, she had to leave.

Going up to the apartment, she kept her head down, ignoring the environment as best she could. It had only been her home for a short time, it wasn't hers, just a quick stop on her journey of life.

In the closet, packing gave her something to focus on. Her mind and body were so numb that she lost track of what was where. Did it matter? Providing every scrap of her existence was erased from his life, she'd have done her work.

Opening another section of the closet, she pushed hangers up the rail, trying to figure out what should go first.

The dress.

There at the end was the dress Matt gave her. The one she'd worn at the hospital function.

The delicate fabric slipped through her fingers, just like the man. She couldn't take it. Having only worn it once, it could probably be returned, or he could toss it in the trash. It seemed such a waste. Maybe he could give it to Roxie, she'd look amazing in it.

“What the hell happened?” As though thought of the woman conjured her, Merci turned in the direction of her friend’s voice. Roxie dumped her purse by the door and came marching over. “You broke up with him?” Merci nodded. “Why?”

Being asked the question outright gave her mind reason to click into gear, to admit the truth. “Because I’m in love with him,” she said, swallowing some of her grief. “I broke your rule.”

“Oh, honey,” Roxie said on a sigh. “No judgment. I broke it too.”

The warmth of the woman’s embrace gave Merci the excuse to relax. The tears had wanted liberation for a while. Holding them in only allowed them to gather mass. As the moisture ran from her eyes, a sob escaped her lips.

Love.

She loved him.

And she’d given him up.

The weight in her chest grew as she cried. How could she have walked away? A minute was better than nothing. Another night, another hour, she could’ve kept him close, even if it was only for two days.

And what next? Would she really have to go back to RCI? To hear of him. To see him?

Her eyes would barely open. Sniffing, she eased out of Roxie’s arms. They were on the floor, somehow, she didn’t even know how long she’d been there packing, let alone crying.

Roxie reached up over her head to grab a box of tissues from the vanity. “You know what I did when I figured out I loved my guy?”

“What?” Merci asked, taking a proffered tissue.

“I went and got him.”

Shaking her head, she blew her nose, then sagged against the drawers beside her. “It’s not that simple.”

“It’s that simple,” Roxie said. “I did what you did. I made it all complicated. I believed it could never work out, our lives were

too different, we had an expiry date and that was that. We were apart for months and ended up together anyway. If you want Reid, go get him.”

“Like Madelyn?” As Merci looked up, Roxie’s unconvinced head dropped to the side. “We had an agreement. Fake being engaged for eight weeks and that’s it.”

“The eight weeks isn’t up, is it?”

“No, but it didn’t work. Madelyn was supposed to get the message, not threaten to go nuclear on RCI.”

“Reid’s a smart guy, he won’t let her cause damage.”

“Just refusing to sell RCI the Massey IP will cause damage. Reid wants Gramercy.”

“Reid wants Gramercy because it belongs to one of his closest friends. The guys were completely flattened when Kinloch said he was getting out. They didn’t believe he would really sell and then... They’ve always helped and supported each other. Zairn says that’s why they’ve all reached their levels, because they didn’t leave anyone behind. Whether it was money or advice, an asset or venture, they were always there for each other.”

“It’s Kinloch’s choice.”

“Yeah, and the guys think he’ll change his mind. They want to be there, to support his vision, so it will be waiting for him when he wants it back.”

“I guess that’s sweet,” Merci said, wiping her nose again.

“It’s arrogant and presumptuous, but... yeah.” Roxie smiled. “I think it’s sweet too.” She sighed. “The problem is, they’re not sure Kinloch will be smart enough to sell to their posse. If he knows, which he probably does, that he’ll want it back, he might sell to someone else, erasing the chance he can backtrack.”

“Others might not sell back to him?”

“Others might break it up and sell it off or change the essence of it. If our team gets it, they’ll be caretakers of the company for Kinloch... even if it’s only his kids who want it.”

Considerate. Sentimental even. But it did beg one question. “Why are Reid and Kintyre going against each other? Why worry about sweetening the pot?” As Reid called the IP. “Why compete?”

“Because they’ve gotta make it look real,” Roxie said. “If Kinloch thinks the bids are not genuine, he’ll exclude them. He’s the majority shareholder, sure, but he does have a board. If they like an offer, he may have no choice but to follow them...”

“Zairn’s on the board,” Merci said and got a nod in response. “What if a third-party bid is more attractive? He said he’d do what’s best for the company.”

Roxie smiled. “What’s best for the company is for someone he trusts to be at the helm.”

Talking business did get her over the upset of her loss, even if it was just for a minute. Maybe that had been Roxie’s plan.

“Doesn’t change the fact Reid needs the Massey IP,” Merci said. “And the engagement wasn’t going to get him it.”

“Is that it? The whole reason why you ended it? For the company?”

“I got into this for the company,” Merci said. “I want it to be strong.”

“And you’re being a martyr to that?”

“No,” she exclaimed, astonished. “It’s the smart choice. Reid and I are never going to be real... we’re not real. And he told me to join you and Zairn on vacation. We’d only have two days together anyway, so... Why not end it and give Madelyn the win?”

“Okay, let’s say it works and Madelyn hands over the IP,” Roxie said. “What then?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re in love with him.”

“And?”

Roxie groaned. “We need a plan. Okay, Madelyn sells him the IP, she thinks she’s in with a chance and that’s when you

make your move.”

“My move on what? Reid doesn’t love me. He doesn’t want to be with me. He never wants to be married or committed to anything except RCI.”

“I want to argue with you,” Roxie said, losing some of her optimism. “But if anyone tried to tell me they knew the man I love better than me...” She took her hand. “Want to come to the club and get drunk?”

Her head bumped onto the drawers holding her up. “I so can’t deal with people.”

“We’ll close it.”

“Have you ever actually done that?” she asked, because it wasn’t the first time Roxie made the suggestion.

“No. But I could if I wanted to.”

“Thanks. I have to finish packing and find a hotel.”

“A hotel? Shut up! You’ll stay with us.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Yes, you can.”

“Zairn is Reid’s friend. I’m done injecting myself into his life and if the media—”

“I’ve been sneaking in and out of there all week,” Roxie said. “If we get caught, we’ll just say we’re there to cut up Z’s shirts... and it’ll be on to Reid next.”

“I left him,” Merci said, accepting Roxie’s help pulling her to her feet as she stood up. “Shouldn’t he be cutting up my clothes?”

“If you want to set him up, we could totally do that too,” Roxie said, grinning. “Guy shouldn’t go around making incredible women fall head over heels, should he?”

Though it was weak, she managed a laugh. But when Roxie put an arm around her to head for the door, she had to resist.

“I have to stay and do this.”

“You don’t need to put yourself through this,” Roxie said. “If you want to stay, I’ll stay too, and we’ll pack together. Or...”

she drew out the word, “we can go over to my place, drink some wine, and send someone over to do the work for you.”

Releasing her breath, her muscles loosened. “I’m exhausted.”

“Option two it is then.”

Once again, Roxie caught her before she fell. A drink would be in her future too. Maybe more than one. Whatever she chose, Roxie would be by her side... for the time being at least.

THIRTY-SIX

“I don’t know how they do it, you know?” Merci asked, her martini glass loose in her gesturing hand. “How they can just switch off.”

“Men are wired differently, honey,” Roxie said, on her knees at the coffee table, mixing more cocktails. “They see you as a sex object in the bedroom and a corporate tool in the boardroom. I don’t think they mean it, it’s just the way they’re made.”

In Roxie’s living room, seated on the floor between the couch and the coffee table, Merci was aware of her rambling. Either it was the liquor or the heartache, but something was juicing her speech.

“You found a good one. He wouldn’t treat you as a corporate tool,” Merci said, gesturing with the glass again. This time, Roxie caught her hand to slide it free. “Zairn’s a really good guy.”

“He has his moments,” Roxie said. “I had to kiss a lot of toads before I got there... No, not toads, that’s not fair. Just... incompatible bedfellows.”

Proud of her description, Roxie smiled before filling their glasses again.

“I don’t want to kiss toads... You know what? I mean, really? I was totally fine on my own. Completely fine. I wasn’t even looking for a relationship... What we had wasn’t a relationship but—”

“Yes, it was,” Roxie said, putting the glass back in her hand, steadying it before completely letting go. “You slept together, talked together, ate meals together, it was a relationship. Maybe it didn’t start out like that, maybe it wasn’t what either of you intended, but it was a relationship.”

“Was. Exactly. Past tense.”

“If he’s too stupid to see how incredible you are, that’s his loss. You deserve better. Deserve someone who will appreciate you. Deserve the chase.”

Merci groaned. “That’s probably the most embarrassing part... one of the most embarrassing parts.”

“What?”

“Turning into Madelyn. I can’t believe I got that desperate.”

“Loving the same man does not make you the same. You’re nothing like Madelyn. For one thing, Reid was with you by choice.”

“Fake choice.”

“Choice all the same.”

“We were so mean to her. I was so mean to her. All she did was love him.”

“No, I still don’t agree with that.” Roxie leaned closer. “And don’t go pitying her yet. Reid might have initiated their breakup, but he wasn’t the one at fault. Not totally.”

She frowned. “What does that mean?”

“Madelyn cheated... She went out there, spending the guy’s money, day in, day out, building this fake life for herself that he wasn’t a part of and then... she screwed around.”

Merci gasped, hit with fury. “Oh my God! Why didn’t he tell me?”

“Uh, male pride? I’ll be the first to admit I don’t know Reid well—”

“He would be too proud,” she said. “He probably sees it as his fault.” Because he took responsibility for everything. “What a bitch. And she thought there was a chance she could swan back into his life like nothing happened?”

“Massey is rich, not Reid rich. I don’t think her pursuit is about love.”

“You think it’s about money?”

Roxie shrugged. “Like I said on our double date, her actions don’t scream love. You just broke up with Reid, do you want to ruin him and his business?”

“I wasn’t with him for four years. And I left because it was best for the business.”

And maybe for her heart. Losing him was agony but ripping off the Band-Aid was the only way through.

Despite noise coming from behind her, she didn't turn to see what was going on. Thoughts drowned her. Focusing was difficult, not that she really tried. Numbed out, indifferent, all she wanted to do was forget. It was the only way to survive.

“How are you ladies doing?”

Sounded like Zairn had joined them.

Roxie took care of answering. “Just fine without—damn, do you always have to look so hot? Why did God make men and women so different? Our brains are not even remotely wired the same.”

“You don't believe in God,” Zairn said, snickering.

“Would you rather it was your fault?” Roxie asked.

There was a pause. “God is a real jerk, isn't he, baby?”

“What are you doing up here anyway? I thought you were working.”

“It's two a.m., Lola. That's a full shift. I came upstairs to distract you.”

“Distract me with what?” Roxie asked. “There's no sex for you tonight. You should be more considerate. Merci is staying with us indefinitely. She doesn't want to hear us having sex while she's heartbroken. Use your head, Skippy.”

“So no sex indefinitely?”

“Please,” Merci said, worried their teasing might be serious. “You guys don't have to worry about me. I'll figure it out, I'm not going to crash your life.”

Roxie wriggled closer. “Come on vacation with us and you'll have your own villa. Refresh yourself, you deserve the break.”

“I have work.”

“If there's one thing my life proves...” Zairn chimed in, drawing her attention around to him sauntering closer to the couch. “It's that you can work from anywhere. You have an assistant, right?”

“Meant to help me with being engaged.”

“What does she care?” Roxie asked. “She’s being paid. It’ll be a lot easier to work in the sun, surrounded by sandy beaches, coconut cocktails, and sexy shirtless servers than it will trailing in and out of RCI while Madelyn’s still hanging around.”

Madelyn. Was she that stupid? She’d worried about seeing Reid. Madelyn hadn’t featured. Once upon a time, she’d told Reid that she didn’t want to face Madelyn’s crowing. Would she be able to handle that for the next two weeks? While at the same time, she’d be dealing with her colleagues and boss probably relishing how she’d screwed up the best thing that ever happened to her.

“She doesn’t have to decide now,” Zairn said. “But you do have to get up and come with me, Lola.”

“No. Why would I...?”

The elevator behind Zairn opened. When Roxie’s expression hardened, Merci leaned sideways to peek around Zairn and was shocked to see Reid entering.

“Why is he here?” Roxie asked, leaping to her feet. “I can’t believe you—”

“Maybe we just give them a minute to talk,” Zairn said, raising an arm toward Roxie.

Her friend looked at her without budging. “Do you want to be alone with him? I’ll go or stay, it’s up to you.”

“It’s okay,” Merci said, bracing herself on the couch to slide up onto it.

She’d dumped him, not the other way around. If anyone should be protected, it would be him... if he actually felt something for her. Something real. Which he didn’t.

Her friend went to Zairn. The men nodded at each other before Zairn put his arm around Roxie to lead her away.

Silence.

Why was it always silent?

“If you’re waiting for me to say something,” she said, “you’ll be disappointed. I don’t know what else there is to say.” A

thought struck her. “Unless this is a show for Madelyn. Is she in the building?”

If he’d accompanied Madelyn back to her suite, it might follow that he’d tell her he was coming to talk to his other ex-fiancée too. That was believable on the day they’d broken up.

“I only tried to give you what you wanted.”

“I know,” she said, wrapping her arms around herself. “This isn’t about you. You didn’t fail...” She took a second to steel her confidence. “I did.”

“Meaning?”

She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It does. I want to know what led you to take this course of action.”

“It’s the right thing to do. To give Madelyn the win.”

“Your reasoning in my office made perfect sense. You were calm. Cogent. Objective.”

“Something must have rubbed off on me,” she said, turning away to rest her back on the couch. “I’m sure it will pass.”

“Merci, you lead with your heart,” he said, appearing at the end of the couch. “Since the day we first met, that has been obvious. You are never calm or objective.”

“Two out of three. No one hits a perfect score.”

He sat next to her. She shifted, giving him more space.

“What changed your heart, Merci?”

This softer, gentler side of him unnerved her. “Roxie says I can stay here or go on vacation with them. I’ve already screwed up my relationship with Calista, and Zairn says I can work from there, so... I think it’s a good idea for me to get out of the city for a couple of weeks. Clear my head, you know?”

“Merci—”

“The office won’t fall down without me, I know, but I don’t want to drop the daycare ball when so many people are depending on it. I’ll do my job from the island; my assistant can do whatever in-person stuff is needed.”

“I didn’t come here to talk about work.”

“It’s almost done,” she said because work was easier to talk about than the alternative. “Just a few ends to tie up. We’ll need to hire or promote someone to be a full-time manager, someone with childcare experience...” His finger curled around her chin to draw her head around. Closing her eyes so she didn’t have to look at him, a tear trickled free. “Matt...”

The warm press of his mouth on hers gave more than she could convey with words. Both bliss and torture, pulling away was the smart choice. Her mind screamed at her to resist, to push him away, but when his insistence grew, instinct gave what he demanded. Their tongues touched and the overwhelming need that swamped her gave way to her mind’s sense.

Leaning back, she couldn’t open her eyes. “Matt—”

He kissed her again, his hand scooping around the side of her head to pull her back to him.

They could give in to their attraction, surrender to the desire pulsing between them. Except the moisture on her cheeks foreshadowed the truth they’d have to face after. Time wasn’t just running out, it was gone, over. They were finished.

“No,” she said, holding his wrist as she eased away. “We can’t do this.”

“What changed?” he asked, his thumb moving on her cheek. “What’s—”

“I’m in love with you.” Her eyes opened to meet his. Honesty could be a blessing or a curse. Raw surprise struck his expression, his gaze had never revealed so much. Freeing herself from the clutch of his hands, she stood up to walk to the end of the coffee table, putting some much-needed space between them. “You were right, okay? You said I’d get hurt, that this couldn’t get messy... I thought I could do it. I thought it wouldn’t... that I wouldn’t...” She exhaled and turned to look at him. “I’m sorry, Matt. Ending it today, everything I said in your office, it’s true. Finishing our relationship is best for RCI, which is how we got into this... But it wasn’t the whole truth. I was hurt when you sent me to Chicago, when I found out the Gramercy negotiations started and you didn’t tell me. I was hurt today when you told me to spend our last two weeks together on

some tropical island without you... You did nothing wrong. Your heart was never in play. I didn't think mine was but... If you need to say we're together or patching things up, fine, but I can't be here for it. I can't share your home and your bed without... I'm not strong enough to be with you without being with you."

She could keep talking. Part of her wanted to. As long as she talked, as long as the air was filled by something, she didn't have to witness the pity in his eyes or hear platitudes from his lips.

"Merci—"

"I know," she said. "I'm beating myself up enough for both of us. Please don't give me the gentle letdown, I don't want to put you in that position, and I don't want to hear it. You did nothing wrong. I did this. To myself. You didn't hurt me, I hurt me. I just... I didn't know it was possible to feel this way."

"If we'd kept our distance, this wouldn't have happened."

"No," she said, though neither of them could know that for sure. "You were right... I appreciate you coming. Really, I do. But there's nothing more to say. We're over now. You're free... I loved every minute I spent with you."

"That's it?" he asked, surging to his feet. "We just say goodbye and walk away?"

Why was he angry? Because she broke the rules? Maybe he thought she'd lied when it hadn't been that way. If she'd known her heart would open to his, and that it could be so painful, she'd never have walked down this path... would she?

"Whether it's now or in two weeks, we'll have to do it one way or another. And you told me to go away, which I'm doing. We're really only ending this a day early."

"I didn't think you'd—" He stopped himself. Sealed his lips and held his breath for a second. "Goodbye, Merci."

Calmer. Abrupt. But more composed.

She envied how he could switch it on like that. "Goodbye."

The word was barely out of her mouth when he stalked to the elevator. It opened the moment he pressed the call button. Without looking at her, he entered and pushed a button. Then he was gone. Vanished. Erased from her life.

They were over.

THIRTY-SEVEN

From car to plane to helicopter to another car. The scenery got progressively better and more tropical throughout the journey.

Zairn stood back to let her and Roxie get into the vehicle before he did. After the door closed, they started moving, but at a much more leisurely pace than in the city.

“It’s beautiful here,” Merci said, swiping the hair from her eyes. “Can’t we walk to the hotel?”

The helicopter gave them an incredible birds-eye view of the greenery and the resort. The crystal clear water lapped at white sandy beaches. While drinking it all in from above, her decision to come was validated. In the air, fragrant scenes mingled with the salt of the sea, anyone could be renewed in such a beautiful place... she hoped anyway.

“We don’t know who’s around,” Zairn said.

And they wouldn’t want to be mobbed. They probably wanted to keep their secret a little while longer.

“We could’ve walked,” Roxie said. “Z likes to take advantage of me in the back of cars.”

Something she had a little experience with herself.

“You’re being insensitive,” Zairn said, dipping to kiss Roxie.

Her friend left her fiancé to move over and sit by her. “Sorry, he’s right. How are you doing?”

“Good,” she said because it was semi-true. “I’ve never been in a helicopter before.”

“It’s amazing fun, right?” The women shared a smile that showed neither of them were entirely sure of that. “We have to go to the hotel first. Z and I will do a bit with the contest winners and then we’ll get settled in and meet for dinner later.”

“I don’t want to crash your romantic vacation.”

“You’re not crashing,” Roxie said, scooping up her hand. “For one thing, this is work, not a vacation.”

“If it was a vacation, a bunch of random strangers wouldn’t be our first stop,” Zairn said, taking his phone from his pocket.

“There wouldn’t be a bunch of random strangers here. Period.”

“You are both so kind,” Merci said. “But I don’t want to play gooseberry—”

“No gooseberry,” Roxie said. “Toria and Jane are at the hotel; you can hang with them while Z and I work the crowd. Hatfield will get his scoop, he’ll be happy, then you get to meet Z’s entourage.”

People? Lots of people? Was she up for that? “His entourage?”

“Ballard, his head of logistics and something. Tibbs. Z’s own personal scut boy.”

“He is not a scut boy,” Zairn said, still typing on his phone.

“Astrid,” Roxie continued, paying her guy no heed. “She’s amazing. You’ll love her. And then there’s Ogilvie... you don’t have to like him. We only like him sometimes. Hatfield is our documentary director, he’ll have some kind of crew. They’re not exactly part of the entourage, we usually send them where the story is not, but...”

“Knox is flying in tomorrow,” Zairn muttered.

Hadn’t Roxie said Jane was at the hotel? The women’s eyes met.

“Knox?” Roxie asked. “Is he your stalker now?”

Showing up uninvited might be Knox’s style, she didn’t know. But if it wasn’t and he was coming to spend time with Jane, their fling wouldn’t stay secret for long.

“He needs a vacation.”

“Does that guy ever do work?” Roxie asked. “He seems to fly off to far flung places with little notice all the time.”

“He mentioned he might join us a while back, this is just the confirmation.” Zairn looked at his fiancée. “I thought you and Knox were over your whatever.”

“I’m over my whatever,” Roxie said. “That guy has serious trust issues. Just saying.”

“It won’t impugn your sex life,” Zairn said. “We have our own private villa. Round the clock security.”

“I don’t think the security is meant to keep Knox out. And *‘private’* is a relative term. Your people wander in and out of our space all the time.”

“And all of them are prepared to see us in any state of... whatever. You suddenly shy? We’ll do it in the bedroom. They all know that’s off-limits now.”

“Some of the time.” His brows rose in question. “Nothing. It’s nothing. Did you get Merci a bunch of hottie guys to serve her every whim while we’re here?”

His attention went back to his phone. “We’ll line them up and have them strip after the meet and greet.”

Horrified, her eyes flared. “I wouldn’t—”

“He’s kidding.” Roxie rolled her eyes. “He’s Mr. Funny today.”

The car came to a stop in a sheltered portico. It couldn’t be the main entry point. Without a grand lobby or eager staff, when they got inside, they went upstairs and into a room filled with round tables all laid and ready for guests who weren’t there.

Before she could ask any questions, a door at the opposite end of the room opened and two women entered. One of them she recognized as Jane. Roxie squealed as they screeched. All three ran to each other for a group hug.

Zairn leaned in. “They’re not used to spending so much time apart.” She smiled. It was sweet that the friends loved each other so much. “You want a drink? Something to eat?” As if on cue, the door behind them opened and a young guy came hurrying in. “Tibbs, this is Merci. You know her drink and get her something to eat... just bring in food, Toria will want to eat too.” The young guy disappeared back the way he’d come. “Jane’s too polite to eat unless it’s mealtime. You met in Chicago, right?”

“Mm hmm,” she said, keeping her lips together to stop any secrets spilling out.

“Jane’s a sweetheart. Quiet. Diplomatic. Timid.” In some circumstances, not when it came to kissing kind, consoling billionaires out of the blue. “Torcia’s more full on. Don’t be afraid of her and you’ll get on just fine.”

“Merci!” Roxie called and gestured her over. “Come meet Torcia.” Glancing at Zairn, she got a reassuring smile, then started across the room. “Torcia, this is Merci.”

“I’ve heard a lot about you,” Torcia said, snatching her into a hug.

Did that mean Torcia knew the engagement had been fake? It would be more than rude if Jane clued Torcia in about Merci’s love life while neglecting to enlighten her roommate to her own.

“We have to go do our thing,” Roxie said, giving each of the three women a hug. “Get to know each other in here. We’ll come back when we’re done.”

“I thought we were having dinner later,” Zairn said as his fiancée started toward him.

“We are,” Roxie said. “We have a lot of time to make up.” She stopped in front of him. “Are you complaining about going on a date with four beautiful women?”

“Depends,” he said with a half shrug. “Will I get lucky at the end of it?”

“Not with that attitude,” Roxie said, swanning past him.

Zairn’s smile was tight but bursting with pride. “Ladies,” he said, tipping his invisible cap before turning to go open the door for the waiting Roxie.

The couple was already talking to each other about something else before the door closed.

“So...” Torcia said, snatching her hand, stealing her attention. “You stomped on Matteo Reid’s heart?”

Whoa, boy, she rethought her previous assessment. If Jane or Roxie told Torcia the truth, she wouldn’t be in this corner, faced with questions about the relationship.

“Give her some space,” Jane said, taking her hand from Torcia to lead her to a table by the window. “It’s amazing here, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Merci said, appreciating the subject change. “Incredible.”

“I have to keep reminding myself that half of this is Roxie’s,” Jane said, pulling out two chairs.

As she sat, Merci did too. “I don’t think Roxie cares about the money.”

“Oh, she definitely doesn’t,” Jane said, smiling. “That doesn’t stop me imagining little Roxies and Zairns running around in the sand, playing in the surf.”

“Roxie won’t want her kids raised like that,” Toria said, sitting opposite them. “Entitled and spoiled.”

Jane laughed. “Isn’t that how Roxie is with Zairn?”

“Yeah, some of it’s an act... and she’s paid her dues.”

“Kissed her toads.”

“She ain’t the only one,” Toria said. “You met all Zairn’s friends at your engagement party?”

The tone rose at the end like a question, while at the same time sounding like a statement. “Uh, I don’t know if it was all of them, but, yes, I met a few.”

“Any of them cute?”

“Toria!” Jane chastised.

“What? She’s newly single. Aren’t we all ready to mingle...? Zane Dyce is cute, I know that. Zach Kintyre too, but he’s on the rebound. Who would want to deal with all that divorce baggage...? Knox is hot, no question, but he’s too high maintenance.”

It might have been her imagination, but it felt like Jane tensed.

“It depends what you’re looking for,” Merci said. Jane had changed the subject for her, it was only right she do the same. “One-night stand or forever man?”

“Somewhere in the middle,” Toria said.

“You can’t make it your mission to work through all of Zairn’s friends,” Jane said.

“Ho, hey, did you just call me a slut?”

Uh oh, was conversation taking a negative turn?

“No!” Jane exclaimed. “I’m worried they’ll get jealous of each other and you’ll start a brawl.”

“You’re right,” Toria said, running her fingers through her hair. “They wouldn’t be able to handle me.”

Diplomatic was right. Jane knew how to communicate with her friend... on some things.

“Maybe if you fell in love with one of them...” Jane said.

“Like Merci?” Toria asked. “I was surprised to hear you were through. Roxie said you were really good together. Did he cheat on you?”

“No!”

“Takes a lot of balls to walk away from a guy like that,” Toria said. “Rich. Handsome. Successful... Sure, the money doesn’t matter, but he’s a grown up. A catch. Not like the losers we pick up in bars... The losers I pick up in bars.”

“You picked up Logan Lowe in a bar,” Jane said.

“Rock stars don’t fall into the category of reliable. He’s hot. Wild in bed. But, really, do I want to be with a guy who spends his life around screaming beautiful women?”

“Zairn has a lot of admirers,” Jane said. “It’s never been a problem with Roxie.”

“Yeah, because Zairn is a grown up. He’s mature. Successful. Smart. You know, all the things a woman needs in a life partner.”

“Wow,” Jane said. “I’ve never heard you talk like this.”

Toria shrugged. “If Roxie’s growing up, we’ll have to think about it too. You’ve wanted to grow up forever, I don’t want my kids left behind.”

“Who’s having kids?”

“Roxie will soon,” Toria said and snorted. “Come on, the amount of sex they have, it’s inevitable.”

“They’re careful.”

“That’s what they all say,” Toria said and looked at her. “Did you and Reid plan to have kids?”

Uh, what to say?

“Don’t harass her,” Jane said. “They just broke up.”

“I know,” Toria said. “But she dumped him, she had to be sure. It was really brave. I couldn’t do it. Date the boss, fall in love, and dump him. What if he makes her life hell?”

“Reid isn’t like that.” She didn’t think. “And we don’t work on the same floor.” Anymore.

“Yeah, but you must have everyone speculating on what happened, what went wrong. Sometimes there’s press on him. Sometimes there’s work events. And everyone will want to tell you everything about him. Every time he’s dating someone. Probably every time he smiles at someone. People take pleasure in that, tormenting others about their failed relationships.”

“Oh my God, you make it sound awful,” Jane said. “She’ll never want to go back to work.”

“I wouldn’t,” Toria said. “No way. Go back to the same building as my ex? Maybe if he was a grunt like the rest of us, people wouldn’t care so much. Even then it can be tough. But to be surrounded by everyone thinking he’s so great and so special. To hear about his jetting off with supermodels or spending millions on new assets. Every time there’s a company change, it will be her instinct to want to talk to him about it. She’ll be left out. Ignored. Shunned. She won’t even have the same chances as everyone else.”

“Why not?”

“Her boss won’t want to piss off the guy on the top floor. Merci dumped him, remember? That means he gets the sympathy and she’s the pariah. There’ll be no invitations to parties, to meetings, no being on the inside of company secrets. He’ll be protected by the people he pays, she’ll be lucky to be served in the lunch line.”

She couldn’t deny any of it. Hearing of Matt had occurred to her. Of him with other women. Of his successful life going from strength to strength while she watched from afar. It felt

unlikely she'd ever be strong again. That she had any kind of future. Heartache blinkered her.

Toria was right about Calista too. That relationship was already damaged. Now that she'd be back on the same level as everyone else, and without access to the CEO's ear, it would be impossible for her to advance. Her thoughts and ideas would never be embraced.

RCI had been her life. The people she helped were important to her. But it was over. Done. Leaving Reid meant leaving RCI. He wasn't ever going to leave, so what was the alternative? Languish in her misery alone for the rest of her life. No. There was only one thing she could do. Resign.

THIRTY-EIGHT

There was sun. Sea. Beauty everywhere. Why did she still feel so hollow?

Walking away was supposed to renew her. She didn't feel renewed. After two days, she should be feeling something, shouldn't she? Sending her resignation had been impulse, but not one she regretted. The island may not be medicine for everything that ailed her, but it had given her clarity. Her love for Reid was as potent as ever.

Each day, she awoke with the sea air surrounding her in the artificially chilled cabana, and all she wanted to do was curl against Reid. Where was he? What was he doing?

How could she have been so stupid?

Sitting on the covered porch of her cabana, laptop on her lap, her attention kept drifting to the sand and sea in front of her. In her mind's eye she pictured him there with her, walking on the beach at sunset, kissing in the sand.

It didn't even matter. It didn't have to be there.

She could be sitting opposite him at his desk at work, at home, it didn't matter. Didn't have to be physical. Just being in his presence gave her something no one else ever had.

More than security or acceptance, some part of her was at peace with him. Because he was in control? Because she could trust that integrity rushed through the blood in his veins. Believed in the value of his heart, not his bank balance.

She had to stop obsessing. Stop thinking about him. Enough.

Over was over. Done.

Finished.

"I disagree."

The male voice interrupted her thoughts, but she didn't move. That sounded like... Was she hallucinating? Had her need conjured a delusion? Only one way to find out...

Twisting in her seat to look at the rear door, she couldn't believe it was really... "Matt?"

"I disagree," he said again, leaving the doorway to come over and sink down onto the lounge by hers. "You resigned."

"Yes," she said, unsure if blinking would clear the fantasy or if she wanted it to. "What are you doing here? Are you here?"

"I don't accept."

"You don't accept?"

"Your resignation." Her mouth opened. "You're too valuable to RCI."

"I'm too..."

"I told your previous superior you're vitally important to the business. To ensuring operations ran smoothly. What makes you think that has changed?"

"Matt, I'm not vitally important to anything," she said, sliding her laptop onto the table at her other side. "As this vacation proves. Someone who's vitally important can't drop everything and leave at a minute's notice. What are you doing here?"

"By that reasoning, I am irrelevant to RCI too."

Okay. Fair point. Since he was sitting right there... not answering her question.

"You are the most important component of RCI," she said. "Therefore, you have the pull to relocate operations any time you want to."

"As do you," he said, scanning the beach. "And you chose a beautiful location."

"I didn't choose anything," she said, moving to take her legs from the lounge to plant her feet on the deck. "What are you doing here?"

His focus drifted back to her. And damn, there he was, his eyes probing hers. She needed to look away. Needed to distract herself before she did something insane. Before she forgot the truth of their situation, forgot they needed distance. Except he was there. Right there. Why was he right there?

Without saying a word, he reached over to catch her loose hair between his fingers, scooping it back behind her ear as his hand settled there, his thumb moving through her locks.

“I don’t accept.” The murmur wasn’t as certain as she expected from him. Yet, there was no hesitation. No doubt. “You’re beautiful.”

“You came here to tell me I’m beautiful?” she asked, not buying it.

“I came here to tell you I don’t accept your resignation,” he said, sliding to the edge of his lounge. “And to tell you we forfeited the Massey IP.”

She couldn’t be—did he...? No. “What?”

“Madelyn Massey was escorted from the premises and told never to return.” Shock loosened her jaw. Her response curled his lips. “Does that make you happy?”

“No!”

He frowned. “It doesn’t?”

“No,” she said again, rising to walk to the wooden rail. “I can’t believe you would...” Turning to face him, she could barely catch her breath. “Why would you do that?”

“Because it was unacceptable,” he said, surging to his feet. “Unacceptable that she, or anyone unrelated to RCI, should hold so much sway over our operations.”

“It was temporary,” she argued. “A means to an end. We always knew that. Everyone knew that. All you had to do was—”

“What?” he asked, marching over. “Give her the world? I do not yield. I do not beg.”

“You didn’t have to beg,” she said, shaking her head. “You just had to bide your time.”

“Time that took you further from me. Time for you to leave. Relocate. Resign.”

“My relocation was temporary.” Though, technically, no ties linked her to anywhere. She could go wherever she pleased. Live anywhere. And given her current predicament, it wouldn’t

hurt to pick somewhere cheap. “And I resigned because...” His eyes opened a fraction wider. “You know why I resigned.”

Except when she tried to turn away, he grabbed her arm to pull her back around. “I don’t know. There was no explanation in your email.”

He’d seen her email? “Calista didn’t respond,” she said. “I got a read notification. I assumed there wouldn’t be a problem. We weren’t exactly on the best of terms. I assured her I’d work my notice here and guaranteed everything would be in place for the daycare opening.” It seemed fantastical that the CEO would personally visit to advise her of a contractual breach when email would’ve worked just as well. “She didn’t trust me to follow through?” The two having a conversation was unlikely given they didn’t move in the same circles. “How did you even know I resigned?”

“The media reported it.”

“Oh my God,” she said, grateful to be so far from that existence. “Why do they care?”

“It’s news,” he said. “News Madelyn enjoyed too.”

“I thought you said she—”

“The straw that broke the camel’s back,” he said. “She was in the room when I heard the news and didn’t have to say a word. The satisfaction on her face was enough for me to put a stop to it. No one gets to enjoy us being apart.”

“If you call her—”

“I don’t want to. She’s irrelevant.”

“No, she’s not,” she said, her hands opening on his chest. “You need the IP to bid—”

“We don’t *need* anything to bid,” he said. “We can put together a compelling offer without Massey help.”

“And if you lose?”

“Kintyre will win,” he said. “That’s acceptable.”

Something he’d said before, but she wanted him to have more than acceptable. “That’s not good enough.” He frowned again. “RCI has to be the best. It’s strong. You are the best bet

for Gramercy. The only way it stays strong is with you at the helm.”

His frown relaxed. “You are biased.”

Because she was in love with him? True to the point of undeniable.

Noticing their proximity, she stepped back, stealing her hands from his chest. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” he asked, his fingers running down the back of her arms to draw her hands to their previous place on his chest. “I want you to be biased.”

Because he got a sick kick out of her heartbreak? No. Sadism didn’t light his warm eyes. They were easier than she remembered, somehow more content. Peace wasn’t exactly the right word. Their burden was just lighter.

“Why did you come here, Matt?”

“Because you’re here.”

“I’ve been here for days. You told me to come here. Alone.”

“And then you said goodbye.”

“I did.”

She didn’t get it. Was this still part of the scam? Did he want the media to think they were reconciling? But why? If Madelyn was truly gone—

He laughed.

Not something she heard often.

In that moment, the juxtaposition was startling.

“Can you be as confused as you look?” he asked, bowing to kiss her hairline. “Ask me again.” Ask him what? “The question I told you to ask again in eight weeks.”

The question... “Why break Madelyn’s heart? Why end it?”

“Because she wasn’t you,” he said, stroking her face. “I broke her heart and felt nothing. Maybe there wasn’t a heart to break. Madelyn is vapid. Shallow. Selfish. When I broke the

engagement, her anger wasn't hurt, it was embarrassment. It was vanity. She didn't know who I was, she didn't care. She knew what I could provide. That was what these last few weeks have been about for her. Hurting me? Yes. Trying to regain her previous standing? Maybe. With my bank accounts. The society that coveted my attention. Yes. Because she loved me? No. It was never about love."

"Why didn't you tell me this?" she asked. "Why didn't you...?"

"When I said it couldn't get messy between us, I was talking to myself. It wasn't a warning for you, it was meant for me."

"I don't—"

"I was already falling for you. From that first moment you spoke up, to you walking into my office and making such a bold suggestion... You're fearless, Merci Moore. Determined. Every damn time you took the stairs instead of the elevator... Every time you opened your mouth in defense of your clients... Your willingness to stand up for what was right... The way you speak your mind."

Which she'd always thought of as a failing. "I wasn't suggesting I—I didn't mean for it to be me."

"And maybe I jumped on that quicker than I should have. But I can't deny recognizing the opportunity to get to know you better."

"You were worried Madelyn would see through the charade."

"Because she knew I'd want you to live with me the moment we got engaged. Living together... having you close... Merci, there wasn't a moment I didn't want you."

"But you wouldn't let me touch you. Until I brought it up —"

"Things couldn't get messy. It was for me. I couldn't trust myself to stay in control."

So much took on a new hue when facing the truth. He'd tried to put distance between them. Tried to be awful to deter her. Pushed at her to protect himself.

“Is that why you sent me to Chicago and told me to come here?”

“I was in love with you by then, I only wanted to protect you.”

Matteo Reid spoke with certainty. Knew his mind. His heart. But she still couldn't quite... “You were what?”

He smiled, touching her brow. “I tried to say goodbye, Merci. In Zairn's apartment, I thought about fighting, then told myself if I walked away, this would go away.”

“This? Love? You thought it would... because you don't want to get married.”

“Marriage is inconsequential. If we get married, we get married. If not, it's fine. All I do know is... if it's important to you, I'll find a way to make it happen. To make anything happen.”

Matter of fact.

Backing up a step, she didn't know if the fantasy was coming to life or if this was all some sick game. If Madelyn could've orchestrated it to be, she would. But this wasn't a con, this was Matteo Reid in front of her, with no reason to lie, no audience to appease. None but her.

THIRTY-NINE

The sudden chime on her laptop shattered the moment. The timer. She went over to turn it off and closed the lid.

“I have to get ready for dinner.”

Everyone would be waiting. Roxie, Zairn, their friends, their entourage, people.

Going inside, she went to the bedroom to seek something to wear. She should shower. She should... Driving her hands into her hair, she couldn't stop the ringing in her ears. Love. He loved her? How could he...?

“I'm not going anywhere.”

She spun around and there he was in the bedroom doorway this time. Why should he go anywhere? This was his friend's island. If anyone should leave, it should be her. Except the man she loved was telling her he loved her too. All the heartache and uncertainty could be put in the past. Except...

“I don't know what you want,” she said. “I don't know what I want.”

“You love me,” he said, moving deeper into the room. “And I love you. Whatever comes next, we decide together.”

Marriage? Did she want to get married? What about kids? What about RCI? About work? About...?

“I love you,” she whispered, accepting the truth she'd tried to erase. “You sent Madelyn away. Came all the way down here... It didn't go away.”

He picked up her hand to guide it to his shoulder. “No, it didn't.”

“You love me.”

“I do.”

Processing their reality, her head began to swim. “What do you want, Matt? What happens next?”

He'd brought it up and must have thought about it.

“Whatever we decide,” he said, putting his arms around her. “We have a couple of weeks here with our friends.”

He was staying? Taking a vacation? She’d been working, it stood to reason he could too. But it would be easier just to go back to the city. Having him there, with her, was more fun than responsible. Though she couldn’t say she didn’t like it.

“And then?”

“Then we go home.”

“I already quit my job.”

“Which works out given I need a new VP?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “You don’t. You can’t promote me like that.”

“I can do whatever I like,” he said. “Why wouldn’t you want it?”

“Because I didn’t earn it. I don’t want to earn a promotion on my back.” The harsh slap of offense hit him so hard she smiled. “I appreciate it. I’m not angry, I... Roxie said I could work at Crimson.”

“If that’s what you want,” he said, though his frown was still in full force. “If you’d rather work for their children’s legacy than ours.”

“You want to have children?”

“I want to do what makes you happy.”

He’d been pretty clear on that. She took a second to think before making a suggestion. “I could manage the daycare... until it’s on an even keel at least... There are other things I could do to make general working conditions better for our people.” She shook her head. “Your people.”

“Our people,” he said, tightening his embrace. “You’ll continue to work from your office on the top floor... or we move executive operations to the first floor... Saves you taking the stairs.”

She looped her arms around his neck. “We are not doing that... I’m getting better with the elevator... Now I have nice memories to distract me.”

“VP or not, I want you in on meetings anything strategy of forward planning. Your perspective is vital.”

“To whom?” she asked, warmth growing inside her. “You managed without me for years.”

“Yet in the last two days, I haven’t accomplished a thing. I need you with me, Merci.”

“No con?”

“No con,” he said. “I want you to work with me. Live with me. Be with me.”

“You know, we’re not technically engaged,” she said. “So I shouldn’t live with you.”

“*Our* rules,” he said. “I don’t give a damn about anything or anyone who came before. This is our life. We make our own rules.”

“Yes, sir.”

The smile that grew on her lips encouraged his. They might be together, a team, ready to build a future, but there was only one person in charge. It was her joy to obey and if he wanted to make all her wildest dreams come true... who was she to refuse?

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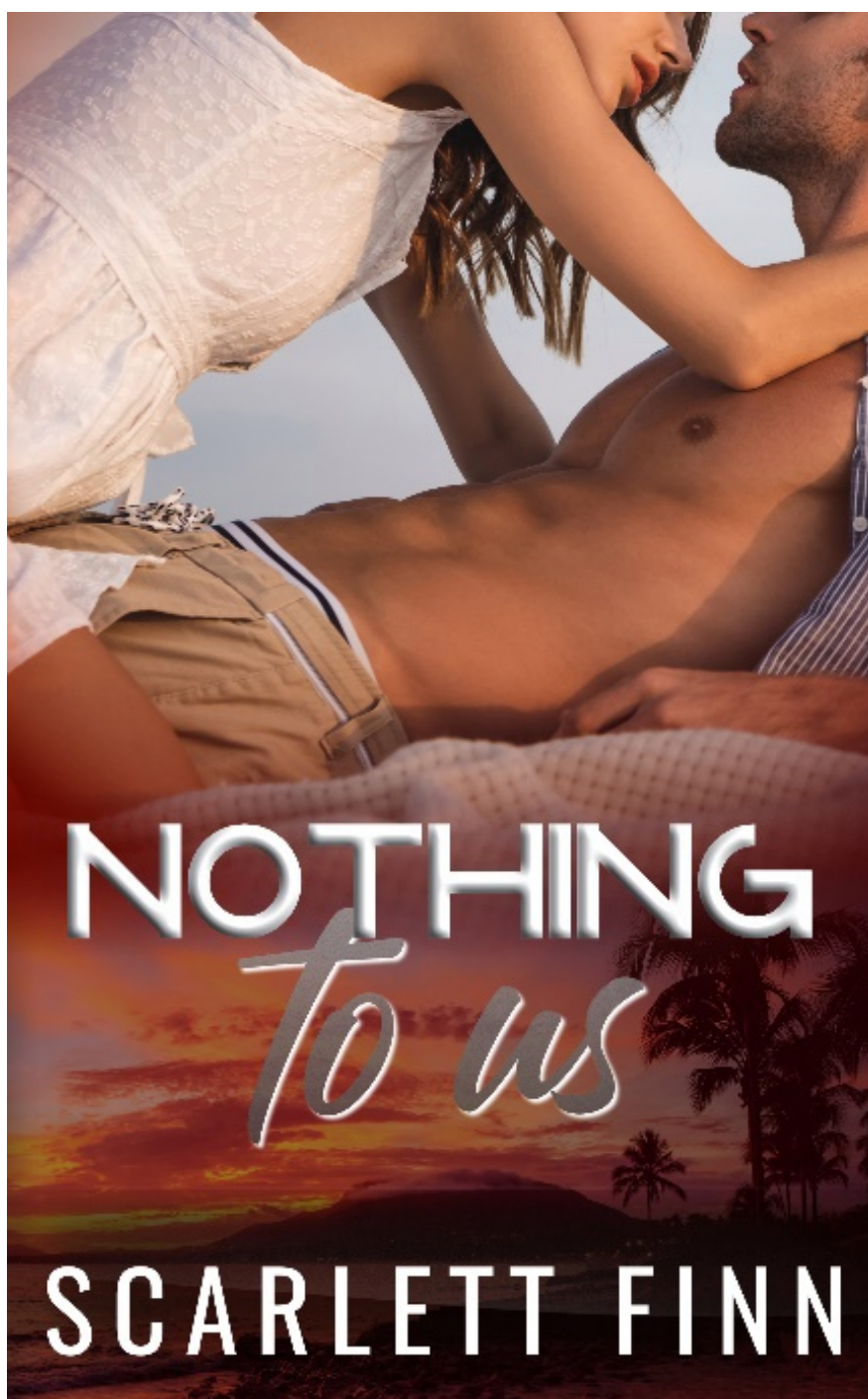
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Yeah, okay, so he's one of Zairn's best friends and has a right to hang around. Except... no one knows about our fling. How am I supposed to find love with him popping up everywhere?

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