



Sins
OF THE
FATHER
#1

HIS

BETRAYER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LEXY TIMMS

The Betrayer

Sins of the Father Series, Volume 1

Lexy Timms

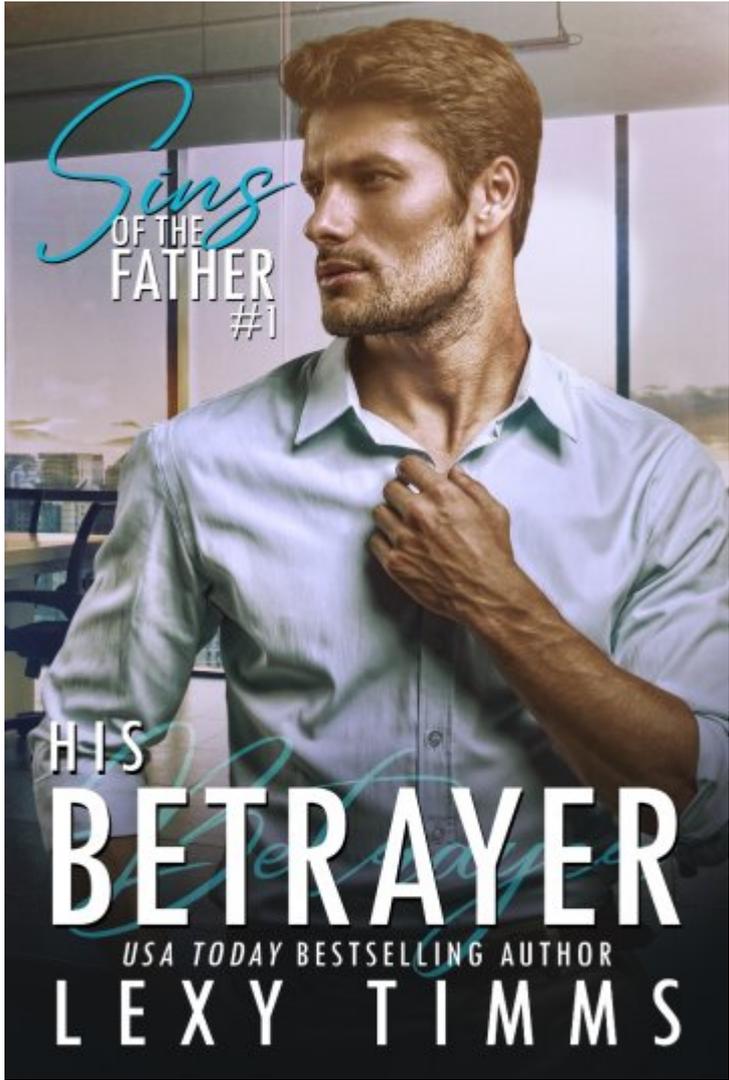
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HIS
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BY LEXY TIMMS

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Sins of the Father Series, Book #1

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Sins of the Father Series



His Betrayer

The Player

The Skillful

His Limits

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The Fallback



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His Betrayal Blurb



WE ARE BORN WITH OUR father's names...

The Father:

I built my million-dollar company from the ground up with hard work and sweat. Now I can sit back and relax as my son takes on more of the burden.

At least, that's what way I see things. My son? Not so much.

He's uptight to my laidback, stern to my loose control, and he worries far too much. He disagrees with my lifestyle, but I've earned the way I live, and I'm not about to change. Unless, of course, it tears apart our already tenuous relationship.



THE SON:

My father might have started our company, but I'm the one who made it what it is—a billion-dollar corporation. It required time and my smarts, but I know how to work hard.

My father? Not so much.

My father is casual and free-wheeling, with a penchant for dating younger women. He frustrates me to no end because he doesn't take life seriously enough. I will never know how we share the same DNA. But what happens when his free-wheeling view of life affects not just the company we built together but also our personal relationship?



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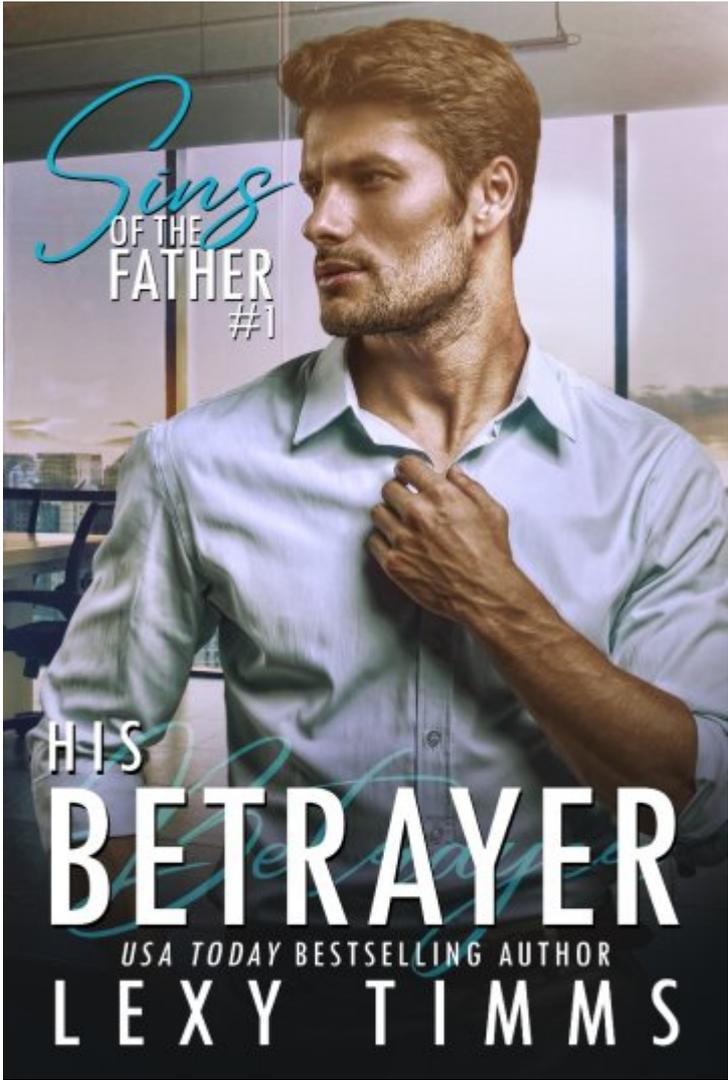
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Chapter 1

Paul



I GLANCED DOWN AT MY watch. It was 4:00 PM, and every movement of the hand inched me closer to the evening.

Behind me, I could see the path in the industrial carpeting I had already worn with my pacing, but it wasn't going to get any better.

Not tonight.

Tonight was my company's major gala. Our first significant gala, and it was going to be one for the records—if everything went well. That wasn't a given, knowing it was our first and who was involved. Or, instead, who we had to rely on.

Every vital member of the company would be out there, all the executives, all the investors, and a ton of media. It was very nearly a circus. In the morning, everything that happened tonight would be plastered across the news channels, newspapers, magazines, blogs, and social media. Everyone, from our supporters to our detractors, would dissect everything from what people—and we—wore, to the speeches, to the auction items, to the pageantry and food.

Everyone would witness our triumph or failure.

My pulse shot up higher, which I had previously thought was impossible. Sweat trickled down my neck, under the collar of my tuxedo shirt. I dug into my pocket and pulled out a small bottle, twisting open the top to pull out a single, small pill that I downed without water.

Everything had to go well tonight—everything hinged on it. Everything I'd built hung on a thread.

My tuxedo and shoes had been specially ordered from Italy months in advance to ensure they arrived on time. My assistant and the event planner had double- and triple-checked everything, from the guest list to the swag bags, to the timing

of the first canapés. They were doing a final walk-through now. I had even gone over the music list this morning to ensure everything was in its proper place.

Everything had been planned down to a T, and no hair was out of place. I had to be ready to bring it home. Tonight, and the success of our company, was on my shoulders.

Because it surely wasn't going to be on my father's.

He was the single wild card I couldn't account for this evening. Would he show up on time or late enough that he missed half the party? Would he even show up at all?

The thought threatened to drench my suit, leaving its glistening fabric damp and dull. Of all the people I should have been able to count on to help make tonight perfect, to want to make tonight perfect, he should have been it. But William Finlay was anything but reliable, even if he was still the CEO of the company.

Truth be told, our titles should have been reversed—I did far more of the job of CEO than he did. In the past five years since I took over as COO, Chief Operating Officer, I had brought the company to new heights. I'd cultivated investment and growth opportunities, courted investors, and, finally, taken the company public.

Tonight's event, a combination of a charity fundraiser and gala event, would serve as a testament to how far we'd come as a company. But it was also a celebration of how far I had taken the company, the accomplishments I'd made as the COO over the high but not lofty heights my father had initially managed to climb.

There was no limit to where our company could go from here, and I was the one who had taken it there. This was my night to shine and show the world my company, and I had arrived. If anything fell flat tonight, I would, too.

My path took me across the room to the enormous picture windows overlooking the bright New York skyline. I grabbed a tumbler of whiskey, watered down now as the ice had melted, and pushed out onto the balcony.

The late afternoon air was chilly for an early Autumn afternoon, the breeze instantly cooling my sweaty skin. I moved to the balustrade, leaning on the top of the railing and taking a deep breath. A sea of buildings stretched as far as the eye could see. Far below, car horns honked, only a part of the cacophony that made up the perpetual roar of the city drifting up from the streets.

I inhaled another breath in through my mouth and felt my chest rising and then falling slowly as I let it out. I was the COO of a major corporation, and I knew how to work under pressure. In fact, it was my favorite place to be, the place where I could most be myself. That was when the ideas flowed, where I could sink to that place where only work existed, where I could follow the single path to the best solution. It was where I could shine, find my best self, and be exactly who I was meant to be.

So, where was that calm now? Why couldn't I find it like I usually did?

My hand shook as I tipped the glass back, and the sip of whiskey burned only slightly as it trickled down my throat. I shouldn't be mixing it with the pill, but it was only one sip, and I needed them both.

I had to be the calm, cool COO everyone expected. The one I usually was. Thankfully, I could feel the pill beginning to work, my shoulders coming down from my ears, and my pulse slowing. With the light breeze drying the sweat, I felt a little more in control.

The past few weeks leading up to this gala had been stressful, to say the least. Throw in a huge acquisition, which I planned to have as the centerpiece of the evening, and I hadn't gotten much sleep lately.

From just a small business drawing in millions six years ago, I'd helped guide the company to becoming a multi-billion-dollar powerhouse. Yes, my father had started it, but this company was my life. I'd started there as soon as I'd graduated, every ounce of my being bent on making it even

more successful, on reaching the dreams I'd set down for myself and for it.

Never mind that this would be on all the society pages and significantly impact the reputation of the company and my career. Never mind that this would set the tone for future galas and fundraisers if there were any at all. I had done so much to build the company, and I couldn't let it down now.

I couldn't let myself down.

Pushing away from the railing, I downed the rest of the watered-down whiskey and strode back inside. I had to be my usual self, the self-assured COO who had made a name for his company and his family. Not this kid who was an anxious, falling-apart mess. I would leave the messes up to my father.

Leaving the empty whiskey tumbler on the table, I checked myself one more time in the mirror to make sure everything looked perfect. I mopped at the dampness on my brow with a few tissues and headed downstairs.

The enormous event space had transformed since I'd been there this morning. The bones had been there, but what had been a small glimpse into the future had become a space worthy of a magazine.

Rows and rows of round tables took up the majority of the space, the less expensive in the back, the more expensive close to the stage. The room looked richly elegant between the flowers, the décor, the draping bunting, and the lavish accents. I stopped halfway down the stairway to admire it from the high vantage point. The museum in which we were holding the gala and to which the charity money was going had generously donated several displays to act as centerpieces for the night. From what I could see, they were magnificent. I would have to have a closer look later when I had the chance.

For a hopeful moment, my spirits rose. This was precisely what I'd been envisioning—in fact, it was even better.

Tara, my assistant, met me at the bottom of the stairs. Her eyes were shining, and she clutched her clipboard folder overflowing with paper to her chest. She was already dressed

in her gown, a deep jewel purple, her immense number of corkscrew curls piled on top of her head and held back with clips that winked with diamond. I had made sure she had what she needed to look good for tonight because it meant a lot to her.

“How do you like it?” Both of our gazes wandered up and around, taking in every aspect of the transformation from museum space to gala.

“I’m incredibly impressed,” I said, still looking around, and I meant it.

Tara let out a sigh of relief. “I’m so glad to hear it. I was worried it would be too much. But we’re almost through double-checking the list. Everything is in place, the food will start coming out as soon as the first guests begin to arrive, along with the champagne, and the band is setting up now.”

The musicians were on the stage, some sitting, some standing around talking. One tuned his trumpet, another was sucking on the reed on his clarinet as he assembled his instrument. The drummer set up his kit and chatted with one of the event planner’s staff.

“Have you heard them play?” I asked.

“Yes, Kacy took me to see one of their performances. They’re wonderful.”

“Kacy is the event planner?” I asked. “You look fantastic tonight, by the way.”

“Yes, Ms. Tannahill. And thank you.” A pleased pink dusted the apples of Tara’s cheeks.

As if the use of her name had conjured her, the young owner of the company strode toward us at that moment, her steps hurried but sure. She seemed young to be the owner of one of the most popular event-planning companies in town. But then again, youth didn’t mean incompetence—I was young.

“Mr. Finlay.” Kacy Tannahill shook my hand.

“Ms. Tannahill. You’ve really outdone yourself.”

The woman looked pleased. “Thank you, Mr. Finlay. It’s been a pleasure working on your inaugural event. I hope it all comes out to your standards.”

“Well, so far, I like what I see. But if this is any indicator, I can’t imagine the rest of the night won’t be spectacular.” I flashed the event planner a warm smile, and she smiled in return.

“Thank you, sir. Everything is here and in place, and I have no doubt it will.”

I left both women talking, their heads bent over their lists. There, at least, I had people I could count on, something I didn’t have to worry about.

Tara, too, had been young to be an executive assistant to the COO, but my instincts had been correct. I could rely on her to see the job done.

Who I couldn’t rely on was the one person I needed to really pull this night off. I needed my father to show up for the night and for the date night auction. He was the star of the show, the dashing, fifty-one-year-old CEO of the company women still swooned over, and he was supposed to bring in a lot for the charity.

My gaze swept the room, finally finding the figure I had been searching for at a far table—my girlfriend, Angela, who was typing away at her phone.

I was glad I had a built-in excuse not to be in the auction and not to be on stage. My father had always been the face of the company. That meant I didn’t have to appear in public myself, with which I was entirely uncomfortable, and instead focus on my job.

Unfortunately, my father had no such excuse, and he *was* the face of the company.

I didn’t know whether that face would show up tonight or not.



Chapter 2

William

I GLANCED DOWN AT MY watch. It was 4:00 PM, and I knew the smart thing would be to head home, change into my tux, and head out so I would get to the gala on time.

But there were far more interesting things going on in front of me. Like the sway of the bartender's hips as she moved behind the bar. She went from one patron to the next, turned to grab something from the mirrored wall of shelves and multi-colored liquor bottles, and spun to pour it with fascinatingly smooth grace, her hips shifting. Even her upper half gave me something to watch as she shook a shaker, handing a multi-colored drink to an older woman sitting down the bar from me, who did nothing but stare with a pinched look instead of extending the standard thank you.

The bartender was a flower among the other patrons at the clubhouse who were, as a rule, old, stodgy, and pinched, surgeries clear on faces that looked old and unnaturally young at the same time. She certainly stood out among the deep oak and leather of the old club, held in a perpetual twilight to help create atmosphere.

Truth be told, this wasn't my favorite place. The people were uninteresting, and I'd had better drinks at dive bars across town. But this was where you came when you had money—new money—and so this club was where I regularly went, instead of those dive bars across town. At least when I wasn't trying to find someone interesting.

Except, today, I found someone interesting.

“Are you new?” I leaned forward as I accepted the whiskey on the rocks the bartender passed across the oak surface of the bar top.

The young woman shook her head, her blonde locks slipping over her shoulder. “No, I usually work in the morning. But I switched to evenings.”

Ah, that was why—I didn't do mornings.

“Better times?” I was sure my eyes twinkled with mischief over the glass as I took a sip. It burned nicely all the way down—good whiskey.

A snort was the reply to my question, one the bartender quickly smothered. “Here?” she asked quietly instead, her gaze flicking to the other patrons and then back to me as she swiped at the bar with a damp cloth. “Better pay, usually.”

“Ah.” I took another sip, thoroughly amused. And in agreement.

But her gaze flicked up to me, lingered, then moved away again.

“Don't worry.” I flashed her a lazy smile. “I won't tell anyone.”

“Oh, you don't have to worry. My bosses know it, too.”

The young woman started at my sharp laugh, surprise flitting across her face for a moment before a small smile and subtle flush of her cheeks chased it away.

I pitched my voice lower and leaned forward conspiratorially, and the bartender mirrored my actions to hear my words. “Well, I have to agree. I certainly wasn't expecting any type of amusement today.”

The young woman stiffened, her gaze flicking to my face again. But her cheeks grew slightly pinker.

“Let me know if you need anything else,” she said, but I didn't miss the pull of a flattered smile at her lips as she turned away.

The whiskey went down smoothly, and it didn't take me long to get through it. It helped that it wasn't my first of the day, either. I'd spent the afternoon talking business and pleasure with several executives as we played a rousing round of golf under a perfectly blue early autumn sky. The leaves were barely changing, the weather had been perfect, and we'd all lingered on the links, taking in the perks of who we were.

Maybe, too, wasting time as we delayed getting to the gala none of us wanted to attend.

These were stuffy affairs with stuffy people, all preening peacocks trying to outdo one another with their stock portfolios, shoes, country houses, and charity boards. Spending time with people like that certainly wasn't why I'd started my company.

No, instead, I'd had an idea, and I'd run with it. It was the only thing I cared about besides drinking and partying in those days, barely out of college and the frat house. I hadn't imagined one day I would be the head of a multi-billion-dollar company.

No, all I'd wanted to do was see my idea brought to fruition.

Not that the money wasn't a fine thing to have, and it came with a whole hell of a lot of perks. Like playing golf on a weekday or knowing picking up a date on the way to the gala would have an almost one hundred percent chance of working.

But the people at the events weren't one of those perks.

Glancing at my watch again, I knew I needed to get going. My son would kill me if I were late. Then again, this was all his idea, his baby, his plan, his event. It was all for him.

I caught the bartender eyeing me from down the bar and smothered my smile. Instead, I held up my empty glass. She nodded, handed her current patron their drink, and headed directly back to me.

Like I'd known she would.

"Can I get you something else?" she asked. Her voice had a warmth to it that hadn't been there before.

"Another one of these would be great. Thanks."

She nodded, flashed me a smile, and turned away to get another glass and more ice without asking me what I'd been drinking. The girl was young, but from what I'd seen, she was good.

And so was I. Almost as good as I was at running a company.

I knew I'd be able to find a date for the gala at the last minute, but I hadn't thought to find one at the club. It looked like I wouldn't need to go to the place I'd lined up after this. Even if this hadn't worked out, there were always options. At least for me, there were always options—I'd never had trouble in that arena.

Well, I'd had trouble once. I had failed at keeping the one woman I had actually wanted to stick around. I'd failed miserably, in all honesty. I'd chalked it up to being too young, to a long-term relationship not being my thing or my strength—those were my ex's thoughts on the matter, anyway.

Not that my ex-wife and I didn't have a decent relationship. The divorce had been mutual. We had both given it a go, we really had, but in the end, it hadn't been worth it for either of us to continue the way we were. She and I wanted different things, and we both wanted more freedom than what marriage provided.

Which was why I'd stuck to short-term flings since. The divorce had been eons ago anyway, and I assumed that had been my one chance at a real relationship. Since it hadn't worked out and I'd proved to be truly terrible at it, I had decided I wasn't going to bother a long time ago.

At least I was good at most of the other hats I wore.

Besides, young women were fun. They didn't have the cares of their older counterparts. Most of the young women I encountered weren't tied down with a career, and they didn't have kids at home to which they had to run back. They still looked at life as stretching out before them, and time was infinite enough that they could waste it having fun in an endless number of ways. I spent my days with stuffy executives, boring lawyers, and severe businesspeople who took themselves far too seriously, and my too-serious son. When the day was over, I wanted someone who was going to see the joy in life.

Even if that meant they got younger every year. Or maybe, I was the one getting older every year.

Unlike my son, I wasn't going to waste my life focused entirely on the business. It had its place in my life, but so did fun. What else was I supposed to do with all my money? One day, I would be dead and unable to do anything with it, so I would enjoy it now while I still could.

The bartender was on the other side of the bar again, expertly pouring an amber liquor into a jigger before adding it to a tall glass. She looked up, meeting my gaze like she'd felt mine on hers. I flashed her a subtle smile and took another sip of my whiskey.

She was back in front of me a minute later, her smile and glance flirtatious.

“Can I get you something else?”

She leaned forward against the bar, and I glanced down to see a small flash of cleavage through the unbuttoned top of her white button-down.

“No, I better stop after this one. Thank you, though. You poured the good stuff.” I held my glass up in a salute to her, then took a sip, my gaze never leaving hers. “So, how long have you been doing this?”

“This?” The young woman's gaze arched up and around the clubhouse. “I've been here for about four months.”

“Bartending, I mean.”

“Oh.” She swiped at the bar with the towel again, even though it was already spotless. “Ever since I turned twenty-one.”

Which couldn't have been that long ago.

“And even before that, to tell the truth. My uncle has a bar, and I started working there at fourteen, serving, doing dishes, that kind of thing. I started working the bar before I was legally allowed to, but I always looked older, so none of the guys there seemed to care.”

“I’m sure there were other reasons none of the guys there cared.” Two of them were straining at her shirt, the middle buttonhole pulled tautly.

I winked, and she flushed again, her gaze dropping to the bar top for a moment—it was adorable.

“Well, you’re good at what you do.”

The bartender crouched and pulled a tiny hotel pan of lemons from the fridge under the counter. She took one out and started sawing at it with a half-dull knife.

“Thanks. It’s getting me through school, anyway.”

“Where do you go to school?”

“Manhattan University. This is my last year, and then I can get out of here.” The young woman’s gaze swept the dim surroundings and the older patrons, their low conversations an ever-present hum. Her nose wrinkled slightly, though I didn’t think she was aware of it.

“For?” I took a slow sip of my whiskey. It was almost gone again, but I wanted to stretch my time for multiple reasons.

“Psychology.”

“Ah.”

She finished one lemon, placed the slices in a second small hotel pan, and started on another.

“And what do you want to do with your degree when you’re finished?”

A shrug was my answer, then, “I’m not sure. I’m trying to figure that out.”

“Well, I’m sure with your sharp mind, you’ll be able to.”

Her gaze flicked up to me, slight surprise echoing in their green depths. Then that same small, pleased smile pulled at her mouth again.

“Would your sharp mind be interested in attending a party with me tonight?”

The young woman stilled again, and I wondered if I'd gone too far or hadn't primed the energy between us enough.

"It's nothing big. Just something my company is throwing to celebrate how well it's done this year."

The gaze slipped up to my face. "You own a company?"

I nodded. "I'm also the CEO."

More interest echoed in her expression, but then she shook her head. "I can't. I'm working until eleven tonight."

I slipped my hand into my pocket and pulled out several large bills and an old receipt. Then I pointed wordlessly to the pen I could see just behind the bar. She slipped it to me, eyebrows drawn in with puzzlement.

She watched as I wrote my name and number down, then slipped the receipt and the large bills over the shiny surface of the bar top to her.

"This is for the drinks and keep the change. This"—I held up the receipt between two fingers—"is if you change your mind and end up getting off early for the night."

I winked, put my glass down, and left without looking back. But I could feel her gaze on me as I left, and I smiled to myself. I knew she was going to call. I just needed to get home and change.

If she didn't, there would be an auction tonight. With any luck, some other beautiful woman would buy me for a night out—preferably tonight.



Chapter 3

Paul



AS THE CREW HOISTED the last decoration around the stage into place, I fidgeted with my watch. I had the urge to jump in there with them to ensure every last tie and fastener was secure and it wouldn't all come crashing down onto whoever was on the stage.

I held myself back because that was simply my anxiety about the gala coming through. I was a leader, and I knew how to lead. But I also knew the desire to lead could become a problem when uncertainty crept in.

Uncertainty was never something I had been good at dealing with because it made me feel like my life or the company was out of control, and the company was my life. Often, the feeling resulted in pulling back on the reins even harder, and I would begin to micromanage, going off the feeling that I was the only one who could take on any job and do it well.

It took me a long time to learn that my instincts weren't right in those cases. It wasn't even my instincts—it was anxiety, pure and simple. Along with that lesson came the knowledge that I had to lead with a light hand on the reins to be a truly great leader. I had to let my people do what they thought was best because, the majority of the time, they did. My job was to lead, delegate, make the final decisions, and steer the ship on the right course. I could never do it alone, and the other half of my job was to know other people were doing theirs and then let them.

But tonight, there were too many variables. I needed things to go well but I simply couldn't trust they would. This event-planning company was the best and had come highly recommended by other segments of the business world. I hadn't worked with them before, and despite my earlier words to the event planner, they hadn't yet earned my trust. Would

decorations fall? Would the guests find everything gauche or cheap? Would the food be cold?

More than that, I still had to rely on my father.

Another glance at my watch told me just how late it was. The guests would arrive soon, and he wasn't here. Some of the board members were already there, and I looked up to see one ambling toward me, one hand in his pocket, the other around a tumbler of something soft yellow from the bar.

"Paul." He pulled one hand out and held it toward me. I took it for the sturdy handshake.

"Wesley."

"Quite a function we have going on here."

The man's eyes, the faded blue of older age, swept the room. I couldn't tell what he was thinking, but his mouth had pulled into a thin line. Did he think it was too much? That I was still too young and not taking my job seriously enough?

"This is going to be the talk of the town tonight," I replied, hoping my voice felt far more at ease than I felt. "It's the perfect way to tell everyone we've arrived and are here to stay. And the perfect time to announce our next move."

The board member made a noncommittal noise in his throat, and I swallowed.

"So, where's your father tonight?"

Of course, I hadn't been the only one to mark the man's absence.

"He let me know he was on his way," I replied mildly, my hands in the pockets of my pants. It hid the fact that they were trembling slightly and clenched into tight fists.

"Let's hope so. Wouldn't be good for our image if the CEO doesn't show up on his night."

It's not his night, I nearly bit out but stopped the words by clamping my jaw shut. The board member wandered back to his wife and their friends, decked out for the evening in the

jewels and clothing they had collected over decades of this rich life.

I watched his back as he murmured to the others in his circle. One of the men grimaced, and a woman's tittering laugh rose into the air. I had to clench my hands tighter in my pocket and force myself to turn and walk away.

Just because they had been doing this for decades didn't mean they knew what was right, or best, or wrong. In fact, because they had been doing it so long, their minds had gotten lost decades ago. Their thoughts on how things should be done were dusty and outdated.

But the board member's thoughts and opinions had been a trend lately. Hell, who was I kidding? It had always been that way, stretching over the ten years I'd worked at the company. People had been skeptical of the CEO hiring his son to work—that kind of nepotism tended to backfire in the long run. Sometimes even in the short run. One of our competitors collapsed entirely within six months when the CEO fell ill and his son took over. Twice my age, the guy had still run the business into the ground, allowing us to neatly swoop in and take it over for billions less than it had been valued six months before.

I had worked harder than anyone at that company, long days, late nights, over the weekends, just to prove I belonged there. More than belong, that I was good at what I did. I wasn't just some rich guy's goof-off son who skated his way to an MBA with beer and his dad's money to fix things when they got bad.

No, I was serious, and I wanted everyone to know.

Then there had been another uphill battle and an outcry when my father made me COO at only twenty-six. The board—and everyone else—had been convinced I would destroy the company. They believed that even after all my work, I was only there because I was my father's son. It didn't matter that I had never once acted like I was my father's son or that the company had been my only focus since I had started there, to the exclusion of everything else, including a life and love. It

had irritated me to no end how no one had noticed I was my own person. Even if my father continued to act as himself, I didn't.

Then I'd shown them what I could do, taking the company from millions to billions in an incredibly short time. Happy with their earnings and potential, the board had finally shut up.

But there were times when I still felt I was the kid who had to prove himself, over and over again, even though I should have already been far past that stage with all I'd done. People expected me to act like my father, though I never had, and refused to believe anything else.

Why did my father always have to enter the equation?

He had, in fact, come up this morning during a meeting with an investor. Lounging back in his expensive suit, he had expressed how impressed he and his firm were with how I'd grown the company over the past six years and our projected growth over the next ten. But he'd added a caveat that had thrown me for a loop: "with all the issues Will has had."

For a moment, I'd uncharacteristically stumbled over my words before I'd found the right ones. "My father? Can I remind you that even though he started the company, he put me in the position of COO, and I was the one who guided it to growth? Not my father."

I had pointed to the charts on the tablet screen in front of him to help make my point.

But the investor had shrugged and taken another sip of his coffee. "He's still the CEO, Paul, and at the end of the day, you're still just the COO. Whatever you did, he's the head of the company, and he can still bring it down no matter how hard you work. Markets can always change."

The words rankled deeply, festering until they felt like a burning wound. Or more like a cloud hanging over the celebration tonight, a warning everything could come down in a heartbeat.

I had called my father immediately after the meeting to make sure he would come and be on time, taking pains to

remind him what this night was all about and how much it meant to the company and our investors. How much it meant to me.

He had been on the golf course—I could hear someone hitting a ball in the background, laughter, and men’s voices. My father’s answer had been distracted, neither a yes nor a no, just a vague indication he’d heard some words over the phone. Then he’d hung up.

For once, please let him show up on tie and act like a CEO. Just once. There’s too much riding on tonight. I raised my eyes to the ceiling, not even sure who I was asking. It seemed like it would take a miracle to get my father to do his job and not let me down.

I wandered across the room to the figure in a draping jewel-blue ball gown, the corset-like top revealing sharply slim shoulders, the sweeping updo of her dark hair showing a long, elegant neck. She sat at one of the large round tables and swiped through her phone like businesses and individuals alike hadn’t paid \$50,000 for just one.

Angela put down her phone as I dropped into the seat beside hers—I didn’t even know which table we were sitting at tonight, come to think of it. This one was as good as any until the guests began to arrive.

Angela looked up at me, her gaze wandering across my face for a moment. “Come on. Turn around.”

I did as she asked, grateful when she began massaging my shoulders.

“Everything will turn out fine. You know that, right? You’ve worked too hard for anything to go wrong.”

“Except the one thing that can go wrong I can’t control.” I sighed, closing my eyes as she worked at a particularly tough knot near my shoulder blade.

“Whether he shows up or not, things will be fine. You don’t need him. Remember—you’ve done this all without his help.” Her words were murmured close to my ear so no one else could hear.

“If only everyone else saw it that way.” I let out an involuntary groan as she hit a painful spot and dug her fingers into it to push it out.

“Everyone does see it that way, and you’ll prove it to them without a doubt tonight.”

A small smile pulled at my mouth. I still felt tight and on edge, but I appreciated the support. “Thanks, Angela.”

“Of course.” The words were a breath across the skin of my neck, and then her lips replaced the words as her fingers curled into my biceps. “Maybe you want to go somewhere? Let off some steam?”

I pulled away from her kisses. “Thanks for the offer, Angela, but maybe later.”

“Come on.” She pressed herself into me over the back of the chair, and she kissed my neck another time. “It’ll help you relax.”

“I really have to focus,” I said gently, taking her hands away from my shoulders as I turned in my chair to face her.

Again, the dark eyes watched me for a long moment. Then Angela turned away, shrugging. “All right. Whatever you want.”

She turned back around in her seat and picked up her phone, her attention on the screen again. I almost gave in, just to have her gaze back on me. But no—what I’d said was true. I had to focus and had no time for what she wanted.

As I stood to return to my duties, I caught sight of her screen from the corner of my eye—Angela was trading stocks.



Chapter 4

Will



I SLIPPED MY ARMS INTO the soft fabric of the white tuxedo shirt, looking in the mirror as I fastened the long row of buttons and tucked it in. Then I pulled on the silk vest on and secured that as well. Smoothing the various fabrics, I inspected myself in the mirror, making sure everything was in place.

Without putting on the jacket that was draped over the back of a chair, for now, I felt satisfied. My tailor had outdone himself this time, and I looked better than ever. The cut and fit of the bespoke set were a far cry from the mall store suits I'd worn when I'd begun the company. If nothing else, this spoke of how far I had come over the years, from barely scraping by to ordering suits and tuxedos made specifically for me.

Looking around the bedroom, it struck me, as it sometimes did, how different my life had become. Just this single room was far more extensive than my first apartment. My entire life was a far cry from where I'd begun.

I hadn't grown up with money as Paul had. Instead, I'd grown up in a lower-middle-class family living on the edge between the city and the suburbs. Both parents had worked and had been too tired to care much about my siblings and me when they got home. Instead, their inattention meant I had decently free rein to do what I wanted, which sometimes got me into trouble. Other times, it had given me the freedom to find my passion, as I had with the company.

What had begun as an idea in my teenage bedroom, fiddling around with ideas, designs, and websites, had become a possibility in college. Working from my dorm room, I'd been able to use what I learned to fiddle around with better, more mature ideas. I'd had to work my way through college, though, and lacked time to play with the idea. I'd also been distracted by things like frat parties, sorority girls, and a lot of very bad, very cheap beer.

It hadn't been until I had graduated that I'd found my way back to my idea. Cut off from the frat parties and free-flowing booze, sitting at a desk in a dead-end job that had bored the crap out of me, I had finally taken my ideas and made them a reality.

Paul hadn't been born yet when I'd begun the company in a single office room. It had just been me for the first two years, working day and night to make it work. Then with six employees and me. Then ten and a slightly bigger office. Then twenty. Then sixty, and another new office.

Those first years were rough, but we'd made it three, then we made it five, struggling, still working late nights and weekends. We'd lived entirely on my wife's salary at the time because the company hadn't been solvent yet. I schmoozed and hustled my way to investors, charging grand dinners I couldn't afford just to get a few words with them.

Paul didn't remember what it was like to live in a tiny apartment with all of us squeezed together. There had been nothing romantic about those early days. Paul, my ex, and I had been piled on top of each other, unable to escape when I was home, which hadn't been often.

The company had finally reached a tipping point, with funding, with investors, with recognition, and suddenly it wasn't such a slog. Suddenly, I was able to leave more of the actual company to others. Suddenly, we had money that gave us a chance to move out of our tiny digs to something with more space, then even larger, then something enormous. We bought another home and a third in a ski resort town and a summer home by the beach. I didn't have to take the subway to work anymore, but I could call a car to pick me up, blending into all the other expensive black cars inching through Manhattan traffic in the morning and evening rush hours.

That was the problem—Paul never struggled as I had. He didn't remember anything from those early years. Instead, the kid went to all the best schools, rubbing shoulders with the city's blue bloods. He went to prep school and an Ivy League to play Lacrosse and sing the same old fight songs the people you see in those old sepia-tone photographs probably sang.

He didn't realize how much work I'd put in at the beginning and why it was okay for me to take it easy now. I'd put in the work and had set up a strong foundation so the company had something on which to stand and run smoothly. Paul had an essential hand in running the company despite his sour expressions and no-nonsense work ethic, which he certainly hadn't gotten from me. It was in good hands, and I could back off a bit. In twenty years, I'd be retired anyway. It was better to start moving power over while there was still plenty of time.

My phone dinged as I hovered close to the mirror. I ignored it and slipped the bowtie's last loop through the satiny folds and pulled it tight before fidgeting with it to make sure it was perfect. Then I reached for the device, hoping it wasn't yet another text from my son asking me where I was.

I frowned when I saw it was an unknown number. My frown tipped up when I read the message.

This is Steffanie, the bartender from the club. I can be off work in ten minutes. That invitation to the party still open?

My slight smile turned into a full grin as I typed back.

Sure is. Looks like my night just got a whole lot less boring.

I typed in an address and told her to get there as soon as she got off work. Then I told her to wait for me. I would pick her up there.

Then I scrolled through my contact list, selected a name, and hit "send."

It rang twice before someone picked up.

"Mr. Finlay. How can I help you this evening?"

"Barker. I have a young woman in need of your offerings tonight."

A chuckle on the other end of the line told me my dirty-sounding quip had been appreciated.

"A young woman, blonde, very pretty, goes by the name of Steffanie, is going to be coming in. She'll give you my name,

so please take care of her.”

“How well, sir? And which dress are you looking for tonight?” came the question on the heels of the laughter.

“Whatever she wants.” My reply answered both questions succinctly.

“Excellent, sir.”

I heard scribbling in the background for a moment. “And how are you, Mr. Finlay?”

Barker knew about the gala, of course. He must have tailored at least half the dresses I would see there tonight.

“Doing well. Got some time out on the links today, although it looks like they’re going to make me late.”

Another chuckle from across the line. Barker and I had been doing business for many years, and after all this time, he knew me rather well.

“And the last young woman who came in here? How is she doing?”

The question was circumspect—the tailor was as famous for the judiciousness of his words as he was for his designs and stitching. Everyone knew he loved the latest gossip, and you had to be careful what you shared around Barker. But he was a good man, and I also didn’t care.

“I haven’t seen that young woman around lately.” I relaxed on the edge of the bed.

“Pity.” I could almost hear the man shaking his head through the phone. “She seemed most interested in you. And you, her.”

“She was a nice diversion for a while.”

“Just a diversion?” More probing in the question.

“Just a diversion,” I confirmed.

They all were, after a time, but Barker had an odd need to want to see me settled and happy. I was single and content, and nothing, no woman alive, could change that.

“I’m happy as a clam, Barker, doing what I do best. I like my life, and nothing you say or do will change it.”

A final chuckle told me Barker disagreed, but he wasn’t going to ask anymore. Despite our long business history, we weren’t so close he could push me as a brother would. Even my brothers didn’t involve themselves in my life—I felt they’d washed their hands of me a long time ago.

“And how is business?” I asked, abruptly changing the subject.

“Business has been doing well. I can’t lie and say an extra gala-fundraiser this year hasn’t been good for it.”

“Well, at least someone is benefitting from this damn pageantry,” I grumbled good-naturedly.

“By the way, your son brought his girlfriend in for her gown for the evening.”

Barker let the rest of his words trail off, inviting me to take up the string. Or not.

“Oh, yeah?”

I’d met the woman once, briefly, and saw her in and out of Paul’s office. She was nice enough, I guessed. Kind of a cold fish. Too old for my son, but he’d always had a thing for older women. Maybe, unlike me, he liked that they were tied down and responsible.

“She ordered an ornate blue ball gown—quite a statement, actually.”

“Oh, yeah?” I asked again.

What Barker hadn’t said had told me far more than what he had.

Our company’s logo was blue, and Paul often wore blue, though whether it was on purpose or simply his preference, I didn’t know.

“Interesting. What did you think of her?”

A pause, then, “She was discerning.”

I couldn't help but laugh. "That bad, huh?"

"I will say that while we enjoyed creating Ms. Levesque's ballgown, we hope she will find another establishment in the future."

Briefly, I wondered if Barker could hear my grin through the phone line. "Well, that's a ringing endorsement. Let's just say I hope the same."

After telling him I would see him later, I hung up with Barker and headed downstairs. The housekeeper had left a light meal out on the counter for me before she'd left. Paul needed someone his own age, someone who would get him out of his tunnel vision with the business and living his own life. My kindest thought about Angela Levesque was that she wasn't any of those things.

I'd never understood why my son felt the need to go for women who were as intense as he was. Why didn't he want someone who was a little bit of fun, who brought some life and light into his world? He was far too serious—always had been—and I only wished he could see that the business wouldn't be there for him at the end of the day. The company wouldn't make sure he wasn't looking back on four sterile walls when he got to the golden years of his life. Stock options wouldn't create happy memories, and no one on the board would hold him with warm, open arms.

Paul and I didn't often get along, but I was his father—I wanted him to be happy above all.

As I ate, I opened the news app, scrolling through the headlines about stocks and the market, acquisitions, and mergers. It was good our news hadn't hit the headlines yet—it had been a carefully guarded secret, but leaks happened.

The food was good, as always, and I finished it knowing it might be some time before I ate again. Even though dinner was part of the deal tonight, I never liked the food at these things. I didn't intend to stay at the gala long, anyway. Not with some pretty girl to chase around—dinner anywhere wasn't likely to be in the cards.



Chapter 5

Paul



THE GUESTS HAD BEGUN to arrive.

It was a thrill as much as it was anxiety-inducing. The people coming through the doors were in their resplendent best. Outside, I could see the carpet and velvet rope—both blue in this case—with the graphics of tonight’s foundation pasted across the temporary wall erected for tonight. As each individual or couple passed, they would stop and preen in for the photographers, their smiles bright, their poses practiced, their gowns and jewelry and tuxes noticeably expensive. They were here to see and be seen.

Angela and I had already gone outside to walk it, posing while cameras flashed. The photographers called our names to get our attention and reporters yelled out questions. My girlfriend had seemed in her element, shining under the praise and the lights. I, on the other hand, had hurried through it as fast as possible, praying my expression didn’t seem half as wooden and fake as it felt.

In preparation for taking on a more public role of COO, and thanks to my father’s comments about being a dead fish on camera, I had brought someone in to help me learn to be more natural on camera. Even though my father was the face of the company and the one more often in the limelight—or on TV—I couldn’t lurk in the shadows. I had to do my own circuit of interviews, magazines, and blogs. This had been especially true when the company had gone public, and every tech publication had wanted me on their cover—my father and me, anyway.

The consultant had helped me learn how to pose, look relaxed, and show off my best side. I hadn’t realized I had a good side, much less all that went into looking natural on camera.

How my father had been the easy, breezy face of the company for so long, I never knew. He hadn’t had any “model

lessons,” as he put it, making me instantly regret having told him about the sessions despite the fact he was the impetus for them. Yet, somehow, he was always picture perfect—the mischievous half-smile, hair perfectly tousled with just a touch of gray, beard and mustache always trimmed perfectly while looking like he hadn’t spent any time on it.

He was the envy of men half his age and the object of affection of women more than half his age. I would never understand why for the life of me. Could they not see past his façade to the man underneath? The one who would rather chase women than be there for his son?

Because the guests were here, but he still wasn’t.

And the people here mattered: they were the investors, the women who sat on the biggest and most important charity boards, the hedge fund managers, the politicians, the celebrities. They were the people who would help put our business on the map. But we had to make a good impression first.

“I cannot believe he’s not here yet,” I bit out between clenched teeth. I managed to maintain my smile while I greeted a city councilor and her husband, followed by a famous socialite who had come with her assistant.

“Relax. He’ll be here. If not, it’s your show anyway,” Angela whispered, smoothly moving to meet the double cheek kisses of a foreign dignitary, greeting the woman warmly and with familiarity.

I was grateful to have Angela at my side, really. She was easily keeping her cool while my temperature had been steadily climbing. Her steadiness and inability to be fazed gave me an anchor I could cling to, and I appreciated it.

Angela and I had been dating for a few months. The attorney had come into my life unexpectedly, and though I knew I didn’t have time for a relationship, our connection had grown without me even trying. It was, I had to admit, nice to have someone to share what little time I had outside of work with. More than that, I could talk to her about the business, and she wouldn’t run away screaming.

Unlike the few women I'd dated who had been my age or younger, Angela was older. But I liked that. It meant she was mature and established, not looking for someone to carry her feelings or her life. She was confident and understood my dedication to my job, unlike others who had grown tired of all the hours we didn't see each other. In fact, she had her own job to which she was highly dedicated, so she understood what was happening during the weeks we barely saw each other, if at all. Like now, she was always beside me when I needed someone to go to one of these dreadful dinners or galas. More than that, she was supportive and would lend an ear.

Angela was also a knockout. The woman was tall with curves in all the right places, with thick chocolate hair and large brown eyes. Her self-confidence showed in everything she did, and I loved how she never let anyone push her around. If there were times she got a bit pushy with me, she didn't crumble the moment I called her on it, either. We had similar political beliefs and enjoyed the same types of music and food.

We made a good couple and a good team.

So why didn't I have actual feelings for her?

At first, I'd been fascinated. That fascination had turned to something more along the lines of interest, but not love. Not even like. I liked being around her, but I couldn't call my feelings romantic. Angela filled a specific need I'd had but nothing more.

The question was, did it matter at all? She represented what I needed from a partner. Did it matter that it wasn't love? That sparks didn't fly when we kissed or when she walked into a room? She was beautiful and had been there every time I needed her for the past few months. She was steady, and our relationship seemed like everything I'd wanted—perfect.

Almost perfect.

But at least she was here.

The evening started well, and everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves outwardly. Tara had been right—the band was good. Wait staff in black were already distributing the

canapes and champagne, and multiple people browsed the auction items. A loud hum of indistinct chatter filled the room beneath the music.

I made my required rounds, shook the right hands, greeted the right people, and said the right things. Despite my earlier nerves, I was able to turn on the charismatic COO, flashing smiles, making small talk, and laughing when jokes weren't particularly funny. I even deflected answers about my father, making smooth excuses I hoped no one could see through. I hoped my shirt wasn't see-through at this point.

Glancing at my watch, I calculated the time until dinner would begin, followed by speeches and the auction. I would need to be at the table with the other large donors, the ones who had paid out the nose to sit at the main table, but the thought of food made my stomach turn.

I leaned over so I could murmur in Angela's ear. "I'm going to go over my speech."

She looked up, both eyebrows rising faintly. "Again? You've already gone over it multiple times."

"Just need to make sure everything is perfect."

My girlfriend's dark eyes watched my face for a moment, her mouth pulling into a line.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," I promised, fidgeting with my watch before I realized and stopped myself. My gaze swept the crowd to find Tara.

"I'll go with you."

I looked over my shoulder—Angela seemed like she was having a good time, and I didn't want to take her away from that.

"No, really, it's fine. You stay here. I'm just going to run through it one more time. It will only take a minute, and then I'll be back out."

I signaled as much to Tara, whose eye I had finally caught. She nodded, understanding the message and giving me a thumbs-up.

“I know you want everything to be perfect,” Angela said, suddenly by my side, her arm looped through mine. “Let’s go over it and get back out here.”

Though grateful for Angela’s help, I wasn’t sure what to think about it. I was thankful for the offer, but I really didn’t need her help. I was, in fact, looking for a few moments alone to breathe. Was she genuinely trying to help, or did she feel like I couldn’t handle the issue alone? Sometimes I wasn’t sure, especially as she began leading me away with something that felt a lot like dragging.

Was that why I wasn’t sure about Angela in the long term? Part of me felt like I should appreciate the forceful side of her even more, the side that let me, for once, take a back seat so someone else could make decisions. Instead of relief, it was simply irritating.

A large part of me could see us together, if not forever, then for the long term. More than anything, Angela understood my schedule and didn’t demand more of it, which wasn’t something easily found. But another part of me was resistant to the idea, as though it sensed something. Or knew something. It almost felt like something was missing from our relationship, or her, or me. I didn’t know. Maybe I was responding to something in her, or perhaps it was something in me—maybe I was broken somehow.

I couldn’t figure it out.

We found a small room with a couch and a few chairs, the change from a noisy room to sudden quiet making my ears ring. It was a relief, and I held myself back from loosening my bowtie as I wanted. Instead, I pulled the papers from the inside pocket of my jacket.

I was just starting to read them aloud when Angela pushed them down with one finger, her gaze catching and holding mine. A light I knew well echoed in their depths, a sparkle that usually succeeded in distracting me from whatever I was doing.

“Angela—” I started.

She drew the papers from my hand and pulled them away as I went to reach for them.

“Come on, Paul. You’re too tense and too anxious. I know exactly what will help—my offer from earlier still stands.”

I tried for the papers again, but she switched hands to keep them out of reach. It was supposed to be a cute game, some sexy flirting, but all it did was annoy me.

“Come on, Angela. Stop.”

She laughed, a deep, throaty sound, and stepped away from me as I tried yet again to grab for the papers.

“This isn’t funny.”

“It could be.” Again, her voice was pitched lower. She was already a throaty alto, and usually, the sound would start my blood boiling in a good way. Tonight, it had the opposite effect. I hooked my arm around her waist and pulled her close, and she melted into me. Before it could go any further, however, I took the speech from her hand and stepped away.

Angela stumbled slightly from the lack of support as I readjusted my jacket, her eyes narrowing for a split second before she schooled her expression. “That was a dirty trick,” she said sullenly.

“So was yours.”

We scowled at one another for a moment, but then Angela sighed. “Fine, let’s practice your speech so we can get back out there. But you owe me.”

“When we pull this night off, I promise I’ll show you how much I appreciate everything you’ve done.”

Angela’s lips twisted up in a smile that was more of a grimace, and she slipped away when I tried to plant a kiss on her bare shoulder. But she seemed mollified for now, at least.

At the moment, I had more important things to worry about than Angela’s moods.



Chapter 6

Will

BARKER LOOKED UP AS I pushed through the front door, the little bell over the door ringing. A display case over which he leaned hid his slight paunch, and several open jewelry boxes, rested on its top. Each box contained a different necklace, each one ornate. They sparkled in the specially rigged lighting that made everyone woman feel as though they looked like a million bucks. The jewels themselves wouldn't fool anyone, especially the crowd tonight, who would actually be wearing millions.

I guessed the woman I was taking out tonight wouldn't notice. Young women like her tended to get blinded by pageantry, lights, and glittering gowns. It wasn't until they'd been to one too many of these things that the varnish wore off, as it had for me a long time ago. Then it was easy to see the scrabbling and unpleasantness behind the glitter.

"Mr. Finlay, it's good to see you." Barker straightened and came toward me like we hadn't talked an hour earlier, grasping my hand to shake it.

"Is she ready?" I asked.

"Not yet." The tailor-made a wry face. "She had some difficulty deciding on the dress—too many options, I think. It was a mistake to tell her she had her pick. Ms. Steffanie hasn't yet decided on the jewelry, either."

I could hear voices rising and falling in the background, one excited, one far more monotone. The second I recognized as Barker's long-suffering assistant, a rail-thin man on the far side of middle age with an unfashionable combover. But his hands were magic when it came to tailoring.

The second voice rose for a moment before I heard a loud sigh. Barker chuckled and shook his head. "He's just hungry."

"I apologize that I made him late for dinner." I stuck my hands into my pockets and ambled back toward the display

case with Barker. Maybe I'd sent a few too many women in here at the last minute, but planning in advance hadn't ever really been my thing. With Paul as my COO, I didn't have to think ahead anymore.

"He will get over it," Barker replied, replacing his glasses to his nose and picking up his pencil so he could make marks in his notebook. "It's been a long day with assistants in and out of here with dresses for the gala and last-minute fittings."

"Speaking of dinner time—" I looked down at my watch and felt my pulse jump despite myself. I was already late for the gala, and I knew Paul would probably have a stroke if I were any later. "Barker, tell Steffanie the limo outside will be waiting to take her to the event. She can text me when she gets there, and her name will be on the list."

"I will, Mr. Finlay."

I turned to leave, then stopped and looked back over my shoulder. "By the way, what's her last name?"

Maybe I imagined the twitch of the other man's lips—it was too fast to see—and then his face was impassively accommodating again.

"Mercer, Mr. Finlay."

"Steffanie Mercer." My hands were still in my pockets as I strolled out the door, repeating her name so I wouldn't forget it before I made sure it was on the list.

I pulled my phone from my pocket and clicked open the app to order the premium service from the rideshare company. When the message popped up that it was on its way, I nodded to the besuited driver waiting patiently on the sidewalk beside his large, black limo.

"Mr. Finlay?" he asked.

"There's a young woman in the shop who isn't quite ready yet, but she should be soon. I told her you would take her to the gala."

"How are you going to get there, sir?" the driver asked.

"I called a car service."

A sleek black Mercedes pulled out of traffic and up to the curb in record time, my rideshare app alerting me that my driver had arrived.

“I will wait to pick you up, sir.” My driver seemed skeptical of the Mercedes but returned to waiting by his vehicle as I slipped inside.

“You’re going to the museum, right?” The driver’s suit wasn’t quite as sharp as the limo driver’s, but it wasn’t bad.

“That’s the one. And I’m late, so anything you can do to hurry...” I let my sentence trail off, hoping the man would get the message.

“Gotcha.”

Thankfully, the man turned around and clicked on the blinker before easing back into traffic. I took out my phone to flip through my emails, only to see multiple messages from Paul. Groaning inwardly, I hit the button for the messenger app.

Noise from the front of the car became words I didn’t hear.

“What?” I asked distractedly.

“Isn’t the museum where that big gala’s happening tonight?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool.”

My gaze flicked up to catch the driver nodding.

“I heard it’s a big deal. Lots of important people there. I took a social media influencer there earlier—looked pretty amazing.”

“Oh, yeah?”

The driver must have taken my non-answer as interest because he kept talking.

“Yeah, totally. I can’t remember her name or handle, but you’d probably recognize her. Blonde, super-hot. Said she’d been invited personally.”

I bet I wouldn't, I thought but decided it wasn't worth an answer.

In all honestly, I hadn't seen the guest list, nor had I cared. Nor did I care as the driver continued to talk, his voice background noise as I read Paul's texts.

Are you almost here?

You're going to be here, right?

Where are you?

Are you coming?

Dad, we have to go over the speeches.

Where are you?

The gala starts in less than half an hour. Where are you?

My son seemed to have forgotten that the later you came, the more fashionable you were. It was like some odd game to the social elite in this city—you weren't anyone if you showed up on time. Which made me the man of the hour, though I was late simply out of laziness and a lack of desire to be at the event at all.

Dad, we have our speeches to give.

I can't believe you're not here yet. Not only are you part of the auction, but we're supposed to announce our acquisition of C Company to our investors tonight. How is it going to look if you're not here?

I could just see my son typing away angrily on his phone. Despite my disposition and outlook on life, and my ex's laidback view of living, our child had somehow ended up as serious as they came. Even as a kid, he'd been quiet and solemn, always anxious, worried about something, and acting too old for his age. It was as though he felt, lacking any other qualified personage in the room, he had to be the adult. Never mind that he had always been cared for, always had food on the table, and always got to school and his extracurriculars on time—we had never let him fall or fail too hard. I might not have been the perfect parent, but I had paid far more attention to him than my parents had to me.

But it had become a defining factor in Paul's personality. As far as I knew, he hadn't had any fun in college but spent all his time studying. Aside from Angela, he'd certainly never had a life outside of the business.

Dad, I swear, if you don't show up—

He would what? I snorted. I was still his father, and I was still his boss. What was he going to do, start an uprising in the company? If things were going well, the board would take my side, not his. Besides, I wasn't there because I knew he could pull it off. This was his night, after all, and he'd earned the spotlight. My being there would only take it away from him.

When I began the company, I hadn't thought about what it would mean. I hadn't realized how much I would have to be in the public eye and in what ways. First, of course, the meetings with investors, banks, and the occasional writer working for a magazine had come. As the business had grown, so had the demands on my image—more important investors, more important members of the industry, and even the political community, and then rivals whose companies I was offering to acquire.

However, the media demands had grown as the company had grown, too. More interviews talking about the next up-and-comer, both the business and myself, and the fundraisers and galas followed soon after. They were mandatory if you wanted business connections in this town. And when the company had grown enough, the requests for profiles and interviews had poured in.

When the company went public, instantly, I was the man to watch. Well, Paul and I were the men to watch. We were a dynamic duo, but I was still the face of the company. My face was the one plastered across the world, on every major news media outlet, on the front of newspaper business sections, and in magazines, scrambling to be the first to get the exclusive interview.

Then, finally, had come the tabloids. I wasn't a socialite by any stretch of the imagination—even I had my limits. But I'd been pictured with several, and even though the paparazzi

didn't waste too much of their time with me since there were much larger fish to fry, they knew they could get an occasional story from me when things were slow.

Paul had hit the roof when the first one had come out, a picture of me holding hands with a visibly younger woman. I still didn't know why he'd been so upset—who cared who I dated outside of the office? Or that I was pictured with someone else just the next week? I wasn't picking up underage kids and stayed away from any woman in the company.

At the end of the day, I enjoyed the attention. The smiles, the small talk, the networking, the joking around with television presenters and writers of back-of-the-book articles in cooking magazines who asked me what my ideal dinner party looked like—it was all fun. It was easy.

Which was why I hadn't written a speech. Not only could I not be bothered, but I preferred to shoot from the hip.

The marketing, on the other hand, was Paul. He was the planner, the crafted façade, the one who made plans and carried them out. The careful planning, the practicing, and the elaborate presentations were all my son's thing.

And it had worked. I enjoyed walking the links with investors and business owners to make the sale or raise more money. But I was a millionaire before Paul had taken over as COO, and now I was a billionaire thanks to what he had done.

I was proud of the kid and knew that whatever happened tonight, it would go off without a hitch. Paul just had to loosen the reins and get out of his own way, and everything would be fine.

The car slowed, and I looked up from my phone at the glittering lights of the museum. The line of guests walking the carpet had thinned, but I was far from the only one coming in late.

“Thanks for the ride. You got me here quickly.” I returned my phone to my pocket and pulled my wallet out instead, leaning forward to slip the driver another few large bills as a tip, just as I'd tipped Steffanie earlier. And the caddie on the

links. And the young kid handling the bar at the golf club. It ensured the best service.

The driver's eyes widened. "Wow, thanks."

I chuckled and pushed out of the car, adjusting my bowtie and jacket cuffs. My gold-and-emerald cufflinks flashed in the floodlights illuminating the marble front of the museum and rising over the sidewalk and street. Then they were flashing in the lights of the cameras as the attention on the carpet swung entirely to me. I paced slowly, stopping to pose multiple times, flashing my most roguish smile, answering questions thrown at me by a sea of faces clamoring for a blue-carpet interview behind the velvet rope.

I was truly in my element.



Chapter 7

Paul

“PAUL.”

I looked up at a man pushing his way through the crowd toward me, a stunning redhead trailing behind him.

“John.”

He slapped his hand into mine, pumping my arm up and down for all he was worth. The man’s grip was firm, almost too constricting, but it always had been.

John Arnold competed at absolutely everything, including handshakes. In college, he was my primary friendly rival for everything from pick-up games of basketball and football to head of our class at our Ivy League. John, built like a football player—a sport he had nearly played professionally—with an enormous heaping of natural charisma and smarts, had usually gained the upper hand. The guy had just beaten me to valedictorian, and there wasn’t any doubt our friendly rivalry would continue even after we graduated. Now, even though he was a partner at a major hedge fund management firm, I was the COO of a billion-dollar company.

I had won this round, and we both knew it.

“Pauley.” From the handshake, he pulled me into an enthusiastic hug, but I could still see the slight edge of envy as we withdrew and he looked me up and down. “Well, look at you. Mr. Big Shot. This is quite a party.”

“Thanks.”

I could hear the envy in his tone, too. John attended events like this but didn’t put them on. I felt a swell of gratification at finally having the edge in this most significant way.

“It’s good to see you.” I grinned. “How have you been? You look good.”

“Thanks, man. Marriage agrees with me.” He tugged the redhead forward, who flushed as she shook my hand. She was

even more beautiful up close, with thick red hair and large green eyes. Despite his reputation as a perpetual flirt and ladies' man, Clarissa had caught John's eye, and he hadn't looked at anyone since, as far as I knew. From the way she looked at him, his wife felt the same.

"I'm sorry I couldn't attend your wedding. Tuscany just wasn't in the card during that last buyout," I told them both.

"Your gift was too generous," Clarissa said, waving away my apology.

"Way too generous." John laughed.

"You've done really well for yourself, Pauley." John clapped me on the shoulder. "Now, the only thing you have to conquer is marriage. Anything in the cards?"

I covered a nervous swallow with a sip of champagne and then nodded my chin toward Angela, who was talking to a couple I didn't recognize. "My girlfriend is over there in the blue gown."

"Oh, yeah?" John's gaze followed mine, lingering appreciatively for a moment before returning to me.

"It's a pretty new relationship. We're happy with the way things are right now," I said, trying to head off any further questions about the future.

"Well, I'm glad to hear it." John clapped me on the shoulder again, this time so hard I nearly pitched forward but managed only to take a balancing step. "We're going to go mingle. Congrats on the success."

Again, I heard that edge of envy. Knowing my old classmate as I did, his gratitude wasn't feigned, either, and I waved them both off with a chuckle as they disappeared into the crowd.

I continued to mingle, greeting old friends and associates and networking as colleagues introduced me to the business elite from around the city I hadn't yet met.

The evening ticked by, the noise in the enormous room growing until I could barely hear the band. Soon, it would be

time for speeches, the dinner, then more speeches, and the auction.

And my father still wasn't here.

"He's late," a voice said by my shoulder.

I looked over to find one of the company's lawyers by my shoulder. She was my father's age, short, her once-blonde hair softened by gray, a dove-gray gown swapped for her usual power suit.

"I know," I sighed. "What am I supposed to do, Rebecca? I've been calling and texting all night, and he hasn't gotten back to me once. The last thing I knew, he was on the course with Mitchell and Lorne."

"But they're here, and he's not." Rebecca's outstretched finger indicated the two board members who had been with my father earlier in the day, mingling with their wives at their sides.

"So, what do you want me to do?"

Rebecca shook her head, swiping champagne off a passing server's tray. "You're going to have to fill his shoes, Paul."

I covered my convulsive swallow by finishing the soft golden liquid in my glass, holding back a grimace as the bubbles peppered my throat all the way down. "I know."

"Good." She pointed at her watch as she slipped past me. "It's almost time."

Filling my father's shoes was my greatest desire and a lifetime's battle. It was the biggest and hardest hurdle, one I wasn't sure I was ever going to get over. Nor was I sure I would ever be allowed to step outside his shadow.

It was a strange place.

I managed to find Tara, pulling her away as she excused herself from her conversation. "Have you heard from my dad?" I bent down so she could hear me.

She shook her head. "No. I haven't seen or heard anything. No one has."

My pulse shot up again, and I had to resist the urge to tug at my suddenly too-tight collar. When I checked my phone, no new messages waited for me.

“He should be here. Where is he?”

Tara gave me a small, tight-lipped smile of sympathy. “I’m sure he’ll be here. This is an important night for the company. He wouldn’t miss it.”

She sounded about as convinced of that miracle as I felt.

With a final smile and a conciliatory pat on the shoulder, Tara moved off to where an event staff member waved her over.

I had to stand there for a moment, the crowd passing me by like a river around a stone, trying to gather myself. Real anger accompanied my anxious surge this time.

For once, I honestly thought my father would come through. At some level, I understood why he had to miss my high school graduation, the family trips, even the board and acquisition meetings. At least as much as I could. Running a company took a lot of time and devotion, leaving little freedom for much else. He usually had a dozen people vying for his attention at once.

But his excuses for being late weren’t always about business. Every time my father missed something important, there was a fifty-fifty shot it was about something—or someone—else. So often that he had a reputation in the business community.

Yet, I continued to believe somewhere in that man was the good, responsible father I needed him to be. That, when it truly came down to it, he would be here. I had talked to him about the importance of this night for weeks. I had cornered him repeatedly, extracting promises. I had sent him emails, reminders in his calendar, and even called him multiple times this week. He had given me his word he would be here—repeatedly.

But he wasn’t.

At the thought, my anger jumped into the lead, the heat building in the center of my chest until I felt like I wanted to explode.

Once. Just this single time, I had asked him to be here for me, for the company, and he hadn't even been able to do that. My father couldn't put aside his wants and needs for someone else. For the company.

For me.

When I finally spotted him, I was ready to rush and tackle him right then and there. I could tell from his body language that he didn't feel an ounce of remorse, either. My father's shoulders were relaxed, his smile easy, and he was greeting everyone suddenly rushing into his orbit with handshakes and words that had the other party laughing, whoever they were.

The way he sauntered down the carpet, grabbing a glass of champagne from a passing tray and taking a long drink, he looked like he was mingling like a guest. There was no coming in a side entrance, apologizing, or sneaking in to pretend like he'd been here all along. His exceedingly late entry could have been marked by anyone who cared to look.

And there were a lot of people looking.

Even those who had shown up fashionably late were here already. My father was the founder and CEO of our company, and he strolled in halfway through the evening without a care in the world.

I stepped forward, my anger boiling over. This time, it was too much. This night, it was too much. I was going to drag him back to that room behind the stage and tell him exactly how I felt.

I only managed a heavy step forward when an arm snaked through mine and jerked me back with enough force I had to find my balance.

“Don't.”

It was Angela. She dragged me back toward the stage.

“He has to—” I started.

“Not tonight, he doesn’t,” she answered tightly. “Besides, the speeches are about to start.”

“But—” I protested again, but Angela shook her head.

“There will be time to confront him tomorrow, but tonight isn’t the time or place. You have a speech to give.”

My time had run out, and the show had to begin. I had to make the presentation alone.

As usual.



Chapter 8

Will



I WAS MINGLING WHEN a voice floated over the chatter filling the room up to the high ceiling. Slowly, the talk died down. The band had already stopped playing, and I turned to see Paul on the stage, a microphone in his hand.

Was I supposed to be up there? I tried to remember the sketch of the evening Paul's assistant, Tara, had sent me at the beginning of the week. Too much had happened between then and now, and all I could see in my head was a list of words, but not what those words said.

Paul's welcome speech was good—he was equal parts funny, charming, and strong. Either those “model lessons” were finally paying off or I was rubbing off on him. Either way, I was proud. The audience responded, laughing when they were supposed to laugh, clapping when they were supposed to clap, and I only heard a handful of conversations still going on.

The thing with this crowd was they were used to being listened to but not actually listening. It wasn't unlike a group of five-year-olds who wanted to keep talking despite the teacher trying to get their attention. Except the people here were grown adults who believed the world revolved around them and what they wanted. Unlike a five-year-old, everything around these grown adults told them it was true, and no one tried to disabuse them of that knowledge—not in this elite crowd.

The fact that Paul was holding their attention was a testament to how far he had come. He was settling into his role as COO of a major corporation. Someday, he would make as good of a CEO as me. If not better.

But I would never admit that out loud.

When the emcee announced dinner would be served after the auction, people moved away from me toward the tables. I

stepped outside the crowd as it shifted forward slowly. I wasn't interested in the auction and certainly didn't want to sit and make small talk.

People lingered around the room's edges, talking as the emcee began the auction. I had to give it to him—he was good. He kept this demanding audience entertained, laughing even as he auctioned off the artwork, the intimate dinners with a famous chef, the vacations, the boats, and even the airplane.

One of the items on the list Tara sent me suddenly popped into my head—I was an auction item. That was what I was forgetting. Included in the auction was an evening with me, which I had remembered earlier in the day. With the promise of a night spent with young companionship, I'd entirely forgotten.

I excused myself from the elderly investor I had been talking with, about to go up and take my place on the stage, when someone slipped through the doors. I stopped short.

It was the bartender from the club, Steffanie Mercer—I remembered her full name. She must have made an impression on me.

My path changed from the direction of the stage to the carpet over which Steffanie walked. The young woman had chosen a slinky red gown, the draping fabric clinging to her in all the right places. She had curled her hair, and someone—Barker or his assistant, perhaps—had pinned it back with a couple of sparkly clips. She also wore more makeup than what she'd had on behind the bar, which completed the ensemble. Steffanie Mercer cleaned up quickly, and she cleaned up well. I'd made a good choice.

“Steffanie, I'm glad you made it.”

With a smile, the young blonde held out her hands to me. I took them, drawing her close for a peck on the cheek that lingered a moment longer than a platonic greeting. I wanted to ensure my intentions for the night were clear from the get-go, if they weren't already.

When we separated, I could see a faint blush on the young woman's cheeks. Her eyes, too, were large as she took in the pageantry of the room behind me. I highly doubted she had ever been to any event that put wealth on display like this.

“Thank you for inviting me, Mr. Finlay.”

“Please, call me Will. Mr. Finlay is too formal.”

“Okay, Will.” A small, uncomfortable giggle accompanied my name.

Steffanie seemed slightly different here than how she'd behaved behind the bar, somewhat less confident, slightly overwhelmed by what was happening around her. I could see her taking it all in, and she seemed to like it.

Most did.

She was also young, seemingly even more youthful when she wasn't behind the bar slinging drinks to rich old people. Maybe slightly ditzy? We hadn't quite talked enough to know for sure.

That was okay—I liked variety in life.

People didn't realize young people added spice to life that faded in middle age. The people who surrounded me daily were boring—they had their set ways, routines, and beliefs. The members of the board, nearly every last one, had gray hair and a gut, and they sat in that board room discussing earnings and portfolios and vacations to far-off places where their wives and daughters could shop to their heart's content while they played golf. It was always the same.

Young people like Steffanie, though, were different. They had their entire lives ahead of them, and that was exciting. They went to underground parties, they tried out new clubs, they went on spur-of-the-moment trips to strange places, none of them exotic but all of them unusual. They didn't talk about children, retirement, their aches, and pains, or divorce settlements. They spoke of experiences, some of them wild, and what they would do the next minute, the next hour, the next day.

For young people like Steffanie, her life right now was all about focusing on the present, and I found that entirely refreshing and energizing.

“Did you like the boutique?” I asked.

She nodded enthusiastically. “It was amazing. I’ve never done anything like that before—everything I wanted they brought to me. They even brought me champagne.”

Steffanie’s eyes glittered with delight, and her gaze still swept the room. I turned, trying to see something that had long ago ceased to have any draw for me through her eyes.

What did she see when she saw the real crystal chandeliers put here for just tonight? When she heard the price of one single auction item going for ten times what she—and maybe anyone in her family—had ever made in their lifetimes? What did she think of the glittering kaleidoscope of the rich and ultra-wealthy in their tuxes and gowns and jewelry that was worth more than half the items in the museum?

Looking at her face, expression starstruck, I wasn’t sure she grasped what was going on here tonight—all the deals that would be made or broken, the socialites who would gain footing or fall back down the ladder, the maneuvering and jockeying for a place at every level of society and business. And all under those same crystal chandeliers that would disappear by morning.

I was glad she didn’t understand because it would ruin her fresh-faced enjoyment of life. It was one of the reasons I didn’t keep women for long—too much exposure to this life, and they changed. Of course, there were a host of other reasons, not the least of which was my dislike of commitment and the way relationships settled into the mundane—one marriage had been enough for me. But that was a big one.

“They took my picture out there, you know. I think they thought I was someone important.” A pleased expression warmed her cheeks. “I gave them my social media handle. Maybe I’ll get a bunch of new followers by tomorrow.”

I only understood about half the words in her sentence, and I didn't disabuse her of the notion she wasn't significant enough to grace the society papers or even the gossip magazines.

A flutter of anticipation went through the crowd as the emcee and Paul auctioned off a weekend at an exclusive resort in Bali. It sold for far more than it was worth, of course, and most of the people here had already been on their own dime, but I knew the museum would be happy.

"So, Steffanie." I watched the next item going up, an heirloom pocket watch. "What do girls in their twenties do these days?"

"Oh, go out at night bar hopping, go out of town for the weekend, meet friends for drinks or dinner." Her slim shoulders rose in a shrug.

"Do you want to know what men like me did at your age?"

Her blue gaze slid up to mine, then away. Could she tell the answer in my head was *girls like you*?

Instead, I chuckled. "It wasn't too different. Although, at your age, I was focusing on getting through school and getting to the end of the day at a dead-end, number-crunching job."

"You were?" Her gaze moved back to me. "How did you get here?"

I slipped my hands into my pocket, standing casually as I watched the emcee quickly end the bidding for the watch. "I got tired of being a pencil-pusher and made something of my own instead."

Though her gaze remained on me, Steffanie didn't ask anything further. However, I saw her eyes widen slightly when the emcee announced my name as the next auction item.

I was curious to see how much some of these billionaires' bored, middle- and late-aged wives would pay to spend an evening with me.

The number ended up being much higher than even I would have guessed, pushed sky-high by a bidding war. It

drove up the price high enough that I was sure the museum's head curator and board would be jumping for joy for their next meeting.

It also looked like I wasn't needed tonight. Paul had pulled it all off without my help, just like I knew he would.

I was relieved and proud at the same time. Now I could focus my attention on other, more pleasurable things.

After the price of the auction, Steffanie's blue eyes and attention were entirely on me. Fake or not, I couldn't tell, but I liked it. There was a possibility she would angle for a sugar daddy, which wasn't my thing, but for now, at least, I could have fun.



Chapter 9

Paul



I STUMBLED OFF THE stage, the sudden change from bright lights to the dim hallway making it difficult to see where I was going. I nearly tripped on a wire, then had to catch myself from slipping down the short set of stairs. Thankfully, no one was around to see me, and I took that moment to catch my breath.

Public speaking had never been my thing, though I had grown better over the years. I'd gone from being petrified to do something as simple as a school presentation to regularly presenting information to potential investors and the board. Those I could do in my sleep now.

But an entire museum full of people who expected me to be my father in the best and worst ways? Aside from simply supporting me and being there for the company's important night, I needed my father here to make most of the speeches. He was, after all, the natural speaker, the one everyone was drawn to, the one who could charm his way out of a snake pit.

Since my father had decided against joining me on stage, I had taken his presentations as well as mine.

The important thing was that I had made it through. Maybe I hadn't been as charismatic as my father might have been, but the audience hadn't seemed too bored. They had even laughed at some of my jokes, including those I'd made up on the fly, and had clapped at the appropriate intervals.

Hopefully, no one had noticed I sweated through my white button-down under my tux—I guessed that was one reason tuxedos were black. It hid the stains and dampness.

Even though my pulse was finally coming down, I was still too hot. I was suddenly desperate to get out of the close heat of the backstage room.

I slipped through the museum behind the stage, dodging around servers and other members of the event staff as I

traveled down a back hallway. Ignoring their strange looks, I finally found a back door propped open with a rock.

The servers crouching down or leaning against the wall as they took drags of their cigarettes looked up as I pushed through the door, ensuring it stayed propped open. I nodded at them, and they nodded uncertainly back, taking in my tuxedo. I was clearly part of the crowd they had been serving, not part of their crew. From the looks they exchanged, they weren't exactly happy about the fact I was disturbing their solitude.

I moved over to the wall on the other side of the door, giving them space. Leaning against the rough brick, I let my head fall back. My eyes slipped closed to the sight of the dark sky visible through the towering buildings.

The sound of the city was all around me: the rush of traffic, horns honking, and people talking and walking by on the sidewalk beyond the museum. Something snuffled under a pile of boxes, and the scent of car exhaust mixed with drifting fumes from restaurants and trash still wet from yesterday's rain.

It all made me remember where I was, in the middle of one of the largest cities in the world. I was just one person among the millions. For a moment, that was all I wanted to be. For a moment, I tried to forget I was the COO of a major corporation, that I had just spoken for forty-five minutes off and on, sharing the stage with an emcee, to an enormous room full of people.

I wanted to forget how badly my father had let me down tonight.

Why did I always expect him to step up and be the man I wanted him to be? That was always the question, and I didn't know why I envisioned a different result. Over and over, my father had shown me that he put himself first, forever and always. He thought about himself and what he wanted. It didn't matter that I was his son or that he was the company's CEO. The only thing that mattered was him getting what he wanted.

I didn't know why I was surprised by my father's actions tonight—he behaved exactly as I imagined he would. Somehow, yet again, I thought, for once, the man might realize how important this night was to the company, to me, even to himself—he was the founder and CEO, after all.

Instead, as I'd squinted into the darkness beyond the bright stage lights, I'd caught sight of him. Had he been rushing toward the stage? Had he been watching me intently to see how I did?

No, he had been chatting with a blonde woman I had never seen before. I hadn't been able to see much through the crowd and with the lights, but she had looked young—very young. Far too young for my father and certainly far too young for him to bring her as his date.

I wasn't sure how I had continued through the blinding anger that had suddenly raged through me.

The problem was I didn't think my father knew what he was doing. His actions weren't malicious—the man didn't have a mean bone in his body. He was everyone's friend. When it came down to the hard decisions he had to make for the company, he did it with a heavy heart and kind words. I'd learned that from him.

But to my father, the entire world revolved around him, so why shouldn't he bring a young woman who was way too young for him to the most significant event for our company all year? Why wouldn't he leave me high and dry on one of the most important nights of my life? My father's needs were met, so everyone else had to be okay with his actions, too.

Somehow, I'd kept going while he chatted with the young woman, joked as he had leaned close to whisper something in her ear, his charismatic half-grin on his face. I knew that grin, and I knew what it meant. The blonde had laughed, and as I helped auction off more items, he had tugged her back beyond the ring of milling guests so I could barely see them. Then I had wished I couldn't see anything at all because my father leaned forward, pressed the young woman back against the wall, and kissed her. It hadn't been just a peck on the cheek,

either. His back had blocked most of what went on between the two of them, but it wasn't difficult to figure it out.

I had looked away, unable to watch any longer. That had only given me a clear view of the disapproving expressions on the faces of some investors and board members who also witnessed the display.

The cool autumn breeze cooled the sweat from my face, the chill creeping under my sauna-like tuxedo jacket. At the memory, the heat roared back through me. Instead of anxiety, this time, it was driven by a wave of hot and heavy anger.

One night. That was all I had asked for—give me one night, help me out for one night, give me your attention for one night. This significant night. Be there for me just this one night.

Not only had my father not been there for me tonight, but he had made a spectacle of himself in front of some of the most influential people in our company and the city. By tomorrow morning, it would be all around town how wildly inappropriate my father had been at the fundraising gala.

Hurt and embarrassment surged with the anger until all three burned, my heart rate rising again. This was supposed to have been a night to remember and celebrate all we had accomplished. We—I—had even announced the acquisition of our biggest rival. We had worked for years on that deal, inching closer and closer at a snail's pace, and with the announcement, I knew our stock prices would soar.

Instead of focusing on our triumphs, all I could think of was my father. All I could feel was my anger, disappointment, and hurt. I felt angry at myself for believing anything could be different.

The door banged open suddenly, startling me and the servers on their smoke break. Angela swept out, her gown incongruous with the back-alley scenery. Her gaze took in the scene before finally coming to rest on me.

“There you are.”

My girlfriend sounded relieved and irritated as she approached me, letting the door swing shut behind her. One of the servers had to grab for it before it closed and locked us all out, but Angela missed the dirty look he shot toward her back.

“I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

“I needed some air,” I said, the only explanation I was going to give.

“You could have at least told someone,” she admonished, brushing invisible dirt from my lapels and inspecting my face with a concerned gaze. For some reason, her concern only exacerbated my annoyance, and I brushed off her concern.

“I’m fine, Angela. I just needed some air. You know I hate talking in front of large crowds.”

Angela didn’t look convinced, her mouth pulling into a pinched line. She watched me for a moment before she shook her head. “It’s your father, isn’t it? I saw him with some blonde kid, all dolled up.”

I took a deep breath against the rush of anger. “He probably bought her the damn dress. What did he do, find her on the sidewalk and take her to Barker’s to get it and that jewelry?”

My voice sounded both angry and plaintive to me, sarcasm lying heavy on the words.

“That’s exactly what he did.” I was sure of it. “He picked her up, maybe at a bar or the golf course, took her to get a dress, and brought her here. *Here* of all places. Tonight, of all nights.”

I paced, and Angela watched me without interfering, a twist of concern at the corner of her mouth.

“I can’t believe he did this. He couldn’t pull himself together for one night. Not one damn night. Not for his son. No, he has to put himself first, always.”

The words snaking through my mind spilled out as vitriolic fury, my anger gaining momentum the faster I paced and the longer the words poured out, heedless of the watching servers.

Instead of calming the storm inside, it worsened until it was a gale I couldn't contain.

This was the last straw, and I wasn't going to keep it to myself any longer. I stopped abruptly, turned on my heel, and headed for the door.

“Paul—”

Angela's startled exclamation followed me, and I heard her heels scrambling on the hallway floor as she hurried to catch up.

“Paul, where are you going?”

“I'm going to tell my father what I should have told him years ago.”

This was it. I was done biting my tongue. I was done waiting for a miracle. I was done hoping he would change and wake up and become a father.

“Paul, you can't. Not tonight.”

Angela's hand snaked around my arm, but I freed it with a jerk. The tap of her heels quickened as I lengthened my stride, servers and other staff members stepping out of the way of my forward motion and the storm brewing on my face. The room's noise, music, and heat hit me full force as I moved from the chilly hallway into the museum's central atrium.

“Paul.”

I nearly ignored my name, but Angela caught up to me at the last moment.

“It's Mr. Johnson,” she hissed in my ear. Her words stopped me dead in my tracks. I turned as quickly as I had toward the door in the alley, pasting a smile on my face as I faced the president of the board.

“Allen.” I took his offered hand and shook it as he put his other hand on my shoulder.

“Fantastic job up there, Paul. The crowd loved you, and I saw more than a few impressed faces in the crowd when you announced our takeover of INT.”

“Thanks, Allen. I appreciate it. But if you’ll excuse me—”

Even the praise from the older man couldn’t cool my anger. I was intent on giving my father a piece of my mind. The older man’s hand on my shoulder grew firmer, denying me my escape. He leaned forward as though to give me more praise, but his words were anything but.

“Your father is making a spectacle of himself. Get him under control now, or we’ll all see consequences. Especially him.”

My blood ran cold, but when the board president pulled back, he had the same jovial grin on his face. His eyes were as chilled as his words as he gave me a firm pat on the shoulder and turned away.

“Paul?”

Angela was beside me, her expression concerned and curious at the same time.

“Paul, are you okay?”

It took her repeated question to shatter the ice holding me still, but I didn’t answer her. I surged ahead, weaving my way through the crowd, my sights set on my father and the young woman with him.

Neither saw me coming, and my father looked startled as I pulled him and his girlfriend for the night away from the conversation he was having with someone I didn’t recognize.

“What the hell are you doing, Paul?” my father asked, yanking his arm away from my hand. I kept dragging the surprised young woman after me, though.

“I need to talk to you. Now.” I herded us to a dark corner off to the side of the hall hidden by heavy draping curtains. A few people wandered nearby, but I didn’t intend to get loud.

“Are you going to tell me what the hell this is about?” My father scowled at me as he extracted the blonde from my hold.

“Me?” I demanded, seething. “Me? You’re asking *me* what the hell this is all about? I want to know what the hell this is all about.”

I indicated the young woman with a sharp gesture of my hand, and she took a step back, her blue eyes widening with surprise. She was even younger than I'd imagined, and I had definitely never met her before.

"Don't talk to her that way." My father's eyes narrowed.

"I'm not going to talk to her at all. She needs to leave. Now." I turned to her, and she stepped away from me. "You need to leave. You can take my limo home, but you can't stay here."

The young woman's blue eyes flickered with apprehension and shifted toward my father. I was being rude, and part of me felt bad about it. But the board president's words still rang in my head, and I was so angry I could barely see straight.

I was not going to let her or my father be our downfall.



Chapter 10

Will

STEFFANIE DIDN'T IMMEDIATELY reply to Paul's demand that she leave. Her gaze darted between him and me, her blue eyes large, confused, and even a bit frightened.

"Paul, I invited her here—" I started.

"I don't care." My son's eyes blazed, the green-gold of the hazel almost glowing with anger.

My son's surprise attack caught me off guard. I couldn't understand his anger. The gala seemed to have gone off without a hitch, and the guests looked like they were enjoying themselves, which was a difficult state to achieve. Even the auction had gone well, bringing in a record amount for the museum if I'd overheard a staff member correctly.

I'd been a little distracted at the time.

"What is your problem?" I asked, stepping between Paul and Steffanie and dropping my voice to a heated whisper.

I wasn't sure I'd seen my son so angry before. Paul had always been serious and steady, maybe even cold, when it came to the necessary difficulties of running a business. But I had rarely seen anger and nothing at this level.

"You and this kid are my problems," Paul hissed, stepping even closer so his face was close to mine.

"You're being rude. Apologize to Steffanie," I said, my tone a sharp rebuke. It was a tone I hadn't used since Paul was a kid. If he was going to act like a child, I would treat him like one.

Somehow, my words only served to make him angrier. I could see it in the way his shoulders and jaw clenched, and his fingers curled into the palms of his hands.

"I want her out of here this second." He turned his piercing gaze to Steffanie. "If you don't leave now, I will have you escorted out."

Steffanie had obviously had enough because she backed up several steps, her cheeks bright red and her eyes shimmering, before she turned and ran, disappearing into the crowd. The last thing I saw of her was the top of her head as she bolted toward the doors.

I turned back to Paul, resisting the urge to shove him as the vision of the night I could have had faded the further Steffanie ran.

“What is wrong with you?” I demanded, using the voice I had used to stop arguments in their tracks when he was a teenager.

But Paul wasn’t a teenager anymore, and he made it very clear he wasn’t about to back down. Instead, he took another step toward me. “What’s wrong with me? What’s wrong with you? I cannot believe you would bring someone like that here.”

“Someone like what?” I felt offended on Steffanie’s behalf. She might not have been a blue blood like the gala’s attendees, and maybe she would never win an award for her IQ, but she seemed nice enough. “A sweet kid who wasn’t harming anyone?”

“You said it yourself—she was a kid.” Paul threw his hands up.

“You would rather I brought someone I picked up on a street corner?” I had intended the question to be cheeky. Paul didn’t see it that way.

“You might as well have. People are talking, Dad. People have noticed. Allen Johnson told me to get you under control before you do any more damage to your reputation and the company.”

“Allen Johnson wouldn’t know fun if it hit him like a ton of bricks.” I rolled my eyes. “And he’s forgetting the age difference between himself and his third wife.”

“And you wouldn’t know decency if it hit you like a ton of bricks.”

My son's words stopped me in my tracks, pulling the breath from my lungs and the air around me for a moment.

"Excuse me?" I finally managed.

"You heard what I said." There was no hint of remorse on Paul's face, only a furious glare that looked like it was trying to melt me down to sizzling fat and bones. "Wherever you picked that kid up, she doesn't belong here, and everyone sees it. Your behavior is going to end up affecting more than just you or me."

I narrowed my eyes. "Who I choose to spend my time with doesn't concern anyone but myself."

Paul's laugh was anything but humorous. "That's where you're wrong, and that's something you've never understood. What you do affects all of us, not just you. People know you, they know your reputation, and soon, it's going to bring the company down."

"Where the hell is this all coming from?" Not once in my son's thirty-two years had he ever spoken to me like this.

"Where the hell is this coming from?" Paul's eyes widened with incredulity before he threw his hands up again. "It's coming from years and years of you doing whatever you want and whoever you want, damn the consequences."

"What consequences—"

"Do you know what happened at my meeting this morning with Emerson?" Paul cut me off. "No, of course you don't because I haven't been able to get a hold of you all day. He said that he wasn't ready to invest in our company because of you and your reputation. And Allen threatened me because people noticed you were making out with a kid barely out of her teens."

For once, I didn't know what to say. This was the first I'd heard of any of this.

Paul unknowingly echoed my thoughts. "You haven't heard any of this, of course. You're off in your own world. You only care about yourself and your needs."

He spit the words at me, and there was fire behind them, which ignited an answering fire in me.

“What I do in my off time and who I spend my time with is no one’s business but my own,” I repeated.

It was my turn to take a step toward my son. He didn’t back away, however, which meant our faces were hovering close together, the anger between us palpable.

“Except you’re the company’s CEO, and what you do matters. Your image matters, and it’s reflecting badly on you, on the company, and me.”

“On you?” I threw a hand up into the air. “I see what this is all about. You’re embarrassed, aren’t you? Poor kid—does my dating other women make you uncomfortable?”

Paul blinked, his mouth opening for a moment before any sound came out.

“Did you not hear what I said? People are noticing—someone didn’t want to invest in our company because what you do in your private life is affecting your business life. What part of this don’t you understand? But yes, if you really want to know, I don’t like it. They are far too young for you. It’s revolting.”

I didn’t hear his words anymore. I was too angry.

“It’s a good thing you aren’t me, then, and you don’t have to stick your nose where it doesn’t belong,” I shot back. “Where is this coming from? Did your girlfriend put you up to this? Has she been trying to turn you against me?”

Paul threw his hands into the air once more and turned away. I could see the physical effort it took him not to do his usual pacing, his shoulders and back tight underneath his tuxedo jacket.

“Angela has nothing to do with this, Dad. I can’t believe you don’t get it, but why would you? You never have. What you do affects me, too. It’s not just you in this.” When he turned to me, his eyes were burning again, but I also saw something I hadn’t seen before—hurt. “It’s all about you, and you’ve never been there for me.”

The words struck me almost as a physical blow, and I took a step back. For a moment, my mind wouldn't grasp the words my son had just volleyed at me.

"I've been there for everything. I put you through private school and college. I gave you everything you could ever want —"

"Except yourself," Paul snarled, his lips pulled back over his teeth.

"You never needed me," I snapped.

"The only thing I needed was you. In school, in college, at the company, and tonight especially." The anger rushed out of Paul's tone in a harsh exhale, his body collapsing with it. Now he just sounded sad. "I needed you tonight, Dad. I told you, in every way I could, that I needed you here tonight."

"You did just fine without me," I pointed out. "You didn't need me, so why should I interfere?"

"That's not the point." Paul's jaw clenched again. "I needed you up there for me, to support me, to do this with me. To show me you care about what I need. To show me you care about me."

Paul's words stopped me still in shock, but my son looked seemed as surprised as I felt, blinking for a moment. Then his eyes narrowed, and I knew that look from when he was a kid—it was Paul at his most stubborn, when he was doubling down on whatever he believed or wanted to go after.

"You've never been there for me, Dad. I needed you, not just tonight, but so many other times. And you were never there for me."

If his first words had been a physical blow, these were a punch to the gut. Anger welled from the place in the center of my chest the words had struck, goading me forward. I managed to pull myself back before I shoved him, before Paul knew what I had almost done.

"You know what? You seem to have a selective memory," I snarled in return. "I've given you everything you've ever wanted—the best schools, science camps during the summer,

trips to Europe, and an Ivy League education. All on the back of what I poured blood, sweat, and tears into to build. And now you have a cushy job people labor their entire lives for. Instead of complaining that I didn't pay enough attention to you growing up, maybe you should just be grateful for what you have."

My voice grew louder, and people nearby were starting to look, but I didn't care. I couldn't believe Paul was saying these things, accusing me of being a bad father in everything but the actual words.

My son, for his part, clenched his fists as tightly as I did. "You're still not getting it—"

"I don't have to get it," I snapped. "You're being ridiculous, and I'm not going to listen to this anymore. I'm leaving."

Paul shouted my name once when I stalked out. Forgoing my usual pleasantries, I pushed through the crowd and the door out.

For a long moment, I stood there on the steps down to the sidewalk, taking deep breaths of the chilled air, letting the sounds, smells, and bright lights of the city wash over me. I wanted them to wash away the anger from Paul's words, but that would take time.

He and I had never fought like this. Sure, we'd had our clashes and brawls, especially when it came to running the company, but nothing like this. I'd never heard such vitriol from him, and I had no idea where it had come from, so out of the blue.

I had never been there for him? That was bullshit, and Paul knew it. I'd always been there for him in some way, but apparently, it had to be in the exact way he expected or he wouldn't be happy.

I let out a huff, unable to remember the last time I'd been this angry.

Or this hurt.

At least I knew the remedy for it, temporary though it might be. Looking both ways down the crowded sidewalk, I sought a deep-red dress and blonde hair, but I didn't see them. Maybe if I texted Steffanie, I could repair what Paul had done and salvage some small part of the evening.

Who knew? I only knew I had to get out of there.

When I took out my phone, a string of angry text messages from Paul took up the entire screen. Letting out a slow, angry breath I replaced the phone in my pocket, turned right on the sidewalk, and walked. I didn't know where to, but away from here and away from my son.



Chapter 11

Paul



THE AFTERNOON SUNSHINE coming through the towering picture windows of my office was bright, the autumn sky intensely blue. From my high vantage point, the city spread out in front of me, the skyscrapers almost seeming to touch the white clouds floating by. The streets were busy below, and I could see Central Park from the corner of one window, the forest of trees taking on their first bright hues of brilliant reds, golds, and oranges.

It occurred to me that I could take a walk, get some fresh air and a coffee, get out of the office and exercise. But I couldn't quite make myself take that first step toward the door. In the back of my brain, I didn't want to leave in case my father showed up, and we could finish our conversation—or argument. He hadn't answered a single one of my texts since last night.

Instead, I sat back in my chair, the blank email field and blinking cursor staring back at me.

I was supposed to take the weekend off, a couple of days to bask in the glory of the fundraiser gala and the knowledge that our company, our corporation, had truly arrived. Angela and I had toyed with driving upstate and taking in the leaves, something we rarely did because work took up too much time.

Instead, I'd been here before dawn, catching up on work and generally fuming. Angela seemed slightly disappointed when I had called off our plans but not quite as upset as I had imagined she would be. With my fight with my father still ringing in my head, there was no way I would be able to enjoy myself.

My father and I had never fought like the previous night—ever. But more than the fight, my father's complete inability to grasp what I was telling him made my blood boil.

I wasn't sure what I had expected from the man. I'd grown up with him, as much as I could have when he was often absent for business. We had spent enough time together in my thirty-two years, however, that I should have known finally sharing my feelings wouldn't get us anywhere.

Did I regret saying them in the way I had? Sure. Anger was never the best way to get your point across. Both parties usually ended up defensive and unable to hear each other. I had a feeling that no matter how I could have approached my father, he would have reacted the same way.

My father knew one reality and one truth—his. When I looked at the problem dispassionately, I supposed it made sense. There were very few ways to build a successful business that didn't involve bulling your way to the top, remaining on your path with an obsessive focus, and ensuring everyone saw things your way, not the other way around. Those were three things my father excelled at because that was essentially who he was.

The problem was that his way of running his business extended into his private life as well. There was no split between who he was in the board room and who he was at home. It had been the downfall of his marriage, and it looked like it might be the downfall of our relationship, too. I wasn't sure we would split on as amicable terms as my parents had.

I wasn't sure I wanted it to.

Every time I thought about everything that had come pouring out the previous night, I felt faint surprise. I had held those feelings in for years, for decades. It had taken me a long time to realize my feelings were normal and the way my father had parented me was not.

It had, in fact, taken going home with friends over the holidays to see how fathers are supposed to act with their children. It was an understatement to say I was shocked at the level of visible affection between my friends and their fathers, the stories of time spent on vacations or cheering lacrosse or football games, of the pictures of the family together, visibly happy. It was impossible not to know this was a thing—even if

I'd only really seen it in movies, TV, or books—but to truly witness it was to realize the way I'd grown up wasn't usual. To understand what my father had shown me hadn't been love but tolerance.

I was that proverbial kid on a stoop, waiting for a father to come to pick him up but had never shown. And when he finally had, it hadn't been because he wanted to be there for me. It had been because my father wanted something from me.

I had never once said anything to him. I wasn't sure whether I was naïve or delusional, but I had always believed that somewhere, deep down, I would find the father I always wanted. Last night showed me how unrealistic my conviction was.

There was no hope for my father, no hope I could find someone who truly cared, who wanted to be there for me of his own volition and out of his love for me. The only thing my father cared about was the company and himself.

And it looked like the company was falling off his radar, too, with how erratic his behavior had been lately. A tiny part of me even believed I should force the man to go to a doctor, but deep down, I knew it had nothing to do with this mental state. He was healthy, physically and mentally. William Finlay was just sinking deeper into who he was the older he got. I didn't want to think about what he would be like in his eighties if things continued the way they were.

It was just luck I didn't have a string of siblings decades younger than me, all scrabbling for a position in the company.

At least my father's antics at the gala hadn't seemed to do any lasting harm to the company. Not in the short term, anyway. After my announcement that we were buying out INT, our stocks had gone through the roof, just as I had predicted. The shareholders and board all seemed entirely happy with the event, our prospects, and even with me. The museum had already sent an enormous thank-you basket for one of the most successful fundraising auctions they had ever hosted.

I should have been over the moon with my victory. Instead, I was holed up in my office, angry at the world.

“Paul?”

The sudden intrusion into my thoughts startled me. I looked up to find Angela in the doorway of my office, her head tilted in a question.

“Oh, hey.”

My heart should have leaped to see her, but it didn't. Instead, I had a fervent wish to be alone. I swallowed it and stood up to give her a small kiss.

“What are you doing here?”

“Just checking on you.”

Angela crossed the room to put her purse onto the leather sofa, then slipped off her coat and laid it beside the bag. She wore tight workout pants and a pullover that showed her every curve, and my eyes followed her as she moved across the room to look out the window.

“Have you even left the office?” she asked without looking back.

“No. Just trying to catch up on all the work I didn't get to do while I was getting ready for last night.”

It wasn't a lie. I had pushed a lot of work to the side to make sure everything was perfect for the gala. But it wasn't the entire truth, either. After all of Angela's recent support, I wasn't sure why I didn't want to tell her the real reason I had called off our upstate weekend or why I still didn't want to.

Angela had been here a couple of times already this weekend, once to bring me breakfast and another to drop off the gift basket from the museum. Now it sat towering over the glass coffee table.

“Have you opened this yet?” she asked, wandering back to it.

“No, not yet. Feel free, though,” I answered, returning to my desk, determined to finish that email. Or start it, at least.

I could hear Angela opening the cellophane and rummaging through whatever the basket held. A box opening accompanied my typing, and I had almost finished the message by the time she was at my desk, a chocolate truffle with a bite out of it held between her fingers.

“Here, try this. It’s excellent.”

She held the truffle out to me, which I could see out of the corner of my eye. I shook my head. “Thanks, but I’m good. Just need to finish this email.”

“Seriously, try it.”

I took a deep breath to quell my annoyance, knowing she wouldn’t stop, and turned my head to take a small bite. It was soft and decadent, melting on my tongue with notes of vanilla, cinnamon, and a spice I couldn’t identify.

“Good?” Angela popped the rest in her mouth.

“Very,” I answered, already turning my attention back to the computer screen.

Angela made her way back to the table, and I heard her rustling around the gift basket some more before the sound of creaking leather told me she had taken her usual place on the couch. I focused my attention entirely on the business at hand, knowing Angela would take it up if I didn’t.

A final email finished, and I blinked at the clock—several hours had gone by, and the subdued quality of the sunlight slanting through the window said it was late afternoon. The clock told me it was right on the cusp of evening and dinnertime.

Angela was still on the couch, scrolling through her phone, and I wondered what she had been looking at for the past hours.

“Hey, you want dinner?”

“What?”

My girlfriend jerked her head up, wrenching her phone down to her side almost guiltily. It was odd, but I let it go. I’d probably just startled her.

“Do you want dinner? I still have work to do, but I can run out and get something from the Italian place down the street.”

“Oh, sure.” Angela had drawn her composure back around her, and she slipped her phone into her bag. “I’ll go get it.”

“No, I’ll go.” I pushed my chair back and stood up, stretching to get the kinks out of my joints and neck. I really did need to get out at least once today. I highly doubted my father would be around the office at this late hour, especially on a weekend.

Angela watched me for a moment, her expression unreadable, then shrugged. “Okay. You know what I like.”

The walk to the restaurant and wait for the food didn’t take long, but the chilly fall air and leaves on the ground were reviving. I could breathe slightly more easily, like my chest wasn’t so tight. As the elevator doors dinged open, I made my way around the outside of the cubicles and desks.

Through the glass wall of my office, I saw Angela still in my office, which I had expected. But I hadn’t expected to see her looking into an open drawer of my desk.

“Angela?”

The woman popped up and jumped away from my desk like she’d been hit by an electric current. Even though the light was dim in my office as the sun dipped below the horizon, I could have sworn I saw a flush color to her cheeks.

But it was gone as quickly as it had appeared, and Angela was back to the same, collected woman I had fallen for. Except that this was the second time I’d made her jump guiltily.

What looked like guilt, anyway.

“What were you doing?” I asked, placing the brown paper bag with our dinner beside the gift basket on the coffee table. From my vantage point, I could see my favorite cookie peeking out, which would make a good dessert.

“I was looking for a phone charger.”

It took Angela’s words a moment to sink in, but when they did, I paused halfway through, lifting an aluminum takeout

container out of the bag. “A phone charger? It’s in the middle drawer, right under the keyboard. You know that.”

“I forgot.” She shrugged as she shut the drawer she had been rooting in and moved around my desk.

I watched Angela walk toward me as though nothing was wrong, entirely nonchalant as she lifted the takeout container from my hands and peeled back the cardboard top before she even sat down. But her words made no sense. My charger had never been anywhere else, and she’d used it dozens of times over the past months—she never seemed to be able to remember to charge her phone at home. Then again, why would my girlfriend lie about something as simple as a charging cord? What point would that serve? It wasn’t like she was looking for anything else.

Right?

My father’s words from our fight popped into my head: *Did your girlfriend put you up to this? Has she been trying to turn you against me?*

Why was my father suspicious of Angela? Did he have a reason to be wary that I didn’t know about? Had Angela been snooping around my office?

It was a fleeting thought, one that left a bitter taste in my mouth. I didn’t want my father to be right about anything, much less my choice of girlfriend, so I let the thoughts and suspicions go.

There was no way Angela had been snooping, at least not in a nefarious way. Maybe just to satisfy curiosity.

We ate without talking much, but that wasn’t unusual. Angela and I discovered early on that we didn’t have much in common outside of our politics, choice of music, and business-first demeanor, so dinners were usually quiet affairs. When we finished, I decided I didn’t want to work anymore, packed up, and headed home for the day.

I was back on Sunday until late that night, still with no word from my father. Fuming, I sent him a text just before I left. It said in no uncertain terms that I needed to see him in

my office on Monday morning. He might have been my boss on paper, but if he were going to act like a child, I would treat him like one.



Chapter 12

Will



EVEN IF I HADN'T REPLIED, I had gotten Paul's text.

Sitting on a sofa on the terrace of my penthouse, a tumbler of whiskey in my hand, watching the sun set over the Hudson, I heard my phone ding. It had taken me a long time to look at it. Somehow, I'd known who it was from, and it was the last thing I wanted to read.

When I finally picked my phone up, it was what I'd imagined: *Dump whoever you're with and make sure you're in my office at 8 AM. Don't be late.*

I put the phone back down and watched the final ripples of orange and yellow fade into the black ribbon of water that was the river. In the darkness, the city was millions of lights glittering, mirroring the barely visible stars in the sky overhead.

Whatever Paul thought, I hadn't spent the weekend with anyone. I hadn't found Steffanie after I'd left the museum, and multiple calls and texts had come up with nothing. I'd stopped, afraid I was veering into stalker territory.

Typically, I would have found somewhere else to go, a bar or a club, where it would have been easy to pick someone else up. After the debacle that was my argument with Paul at the gala, none of that had sounded enticing. Instead, I'd wandered home on my own two feet and spent the weekend alone in my penthouse of cold glass and steel far above the city.

All I wanted to do was brush Paul's words off, to let them bounce off me like problems usually did. If I allowed grudges and displeasure to get to me every time someone was angry with me or didn't like what I'd done, I wouldn't be the CEO and founder of my own company.

But this one, I couldn't shake. This time, the words had sunk beneath my skin, maybe because Paul was my son or perhaps because no one had ever said those specific words to

me. The charges my son had spit at me acted like a pall all weekend, hovering over me, there when I went to sleep at night and there when I woke up in the morning.

As much as I hated to admit it, his accusations and the look of hurt in my son's eyes had finally made me acknowledge I could have been wrong at the gala. Perhaps I had screwed up by not being there during the presentations and the auction. Maybe I had gone a little far, showing up late and bringing Steffanie with me.

I lived my life trying to avoid regret, which was why I lived the way I lived. I wasn't getting any younger, and I had spent so many years with my nose to the grindstone building my business that I had missed out on a lot. I was making up for lost time because I didn't want to go to my grave thinking about everything I hadn't done. I had seen my father work his life away, thinking that one day he would see the world, only to die a month after he had retired.

That wasn't going to be me.

For the first time in a long time, I felt bad about what I had done. I felt regret. I could see I had hurt my son, even if I disagreed with his reasoning, even though that hadn't been my intention.

I was up with the sun on Monday, probably setting some kind of personal record for the last decade. I wanted to ensure I was out the door with enough time to get to the office by eight.

Well, almost enough time. I stopped to get a coffee for Paul and myself, adding the whipped cream my son had loved as a kid. Maybe that would help soften him up enough to get him to listen when I offered to take him out to breakfast as a small measure of apology.

I scanned the headlines of the gossip magazines as I waited for the guy at the street-side stand to fill my order. It was the standard stuff—the celebrities caught with someone who wasn't their partner, the socialites misbehaving, the woman who married a pirate ghost, and someone who claimed to have lost all their weight just by using a bracelet.

Just as the guy handed me the first paper cup of coffee, black, the way I liked it, a picture on the bottom right-hand side of one of the local rags caught my attention. Blonde hair and a jewel-toned red dress were hidden by the bulk of a guy in a suit.

No, not a suit. A tuxedo.

My tuxedo.

For a moment, all my attention was focused on that small square. It was difficult to see much of anything—the lighting was dim and terrible, and the way the two figures pressed together, it was almost impossible to make heads or tails of it all. But the one clear thing was that the two figures, a man and a young woman, were pressed together in an intimate way.

The words beside the small photo read in big, bold letters: **CEO SHARES HIS NIGHT WITH YOUNG BOMBSHELL.**

At the last second, I grabbed the first issue on the rack and handed the cart's owner a large bill before waving away his offer of change. I rolled the rag magazine into a tight cylinder and stuffed it into the inside pocket of my coat before grabbing the coffees and setting off. The stop had cost me time—I was going to be twenty minutes late.

Well, it was better than usual, and several surprised glances followed me as I strode into the lobby of our building.

“Up with the sun, Will?”

One of the company's head lawyers ducked into the elevator just before the doors closed. Not everyone was on a first-name basis with me, but this lawyer and I went way back to the company's beginning. He wasn't only our first legal counsel but also one of our first investors.

Shrugging, I eyed the illuminated numbers on the small pad, increasing the higher we went. “Everyone needs a change in schedule at some point.”

A raise of an eyebrow told me how much my old colleague believed that bunch of crap. But he didn't ask, and I didn't offer. We made small talk up to the top floor, then parted our separate ways.

I could see Paul in his office, his fingers flying over the keyboard of his computer even as his mouth moved—though I couldn't hear the words, I imagined he was on a call. That was my son, constantly multi-tasking to see how much he could fit into one day.

Balancing the two cups of coffee, I pulled open the glass door.

Paul looked up from his computer as the person on the other end of the line continued to talk, his fingers freezing over the keys. For a moment, his eyes widened before his gaze slid to the clock on his desk, then flicked back to me and narrowed.

“Hey, George, I'm going to have to go. I have some business to deal with, but I appreciate your work. Talk more tomorrow? I should be in the office all afternoon.”

The voice on the other end of the line agreed, and I heard the dial tone before Paul pressed a button to hang up.

Then the office was very, very quiet, and I could have sworn the temperature dropped several degrees, despite the morning sun streaming through the windows.

“Paul.”

For a moment, my son continued to glare at me. The only sound in the room was from the office behind us: phones ringing, employees talking, and the usual sound of a busy office muted by the thick glass of the windows separating us.

“Dad.”

Again, a long silence settled between us, and I held up the cup of coffee out of discomfort.

“Brought you some coffee.”

His gaze flicked down to the mug on his desk. “I have coffee already.”

I crossed the room and placed the paper cup next to his keyboard. “But I got you whipped cream on this one, just the way you like it.”

The offering only seemed to deepen Paul's glare. "I haven't had whipped cream in my coffee in about a decade."

My son's tone was flat and decidedly chilly.

So much for the first peace offering.

Paul glanced down pointedly at his watch—why did the kid have so many timepieces in his office? Did time not weigh on him enough that he had to remind himself in multiple ways constantly there was never enough of it?

"I asked you to be here at eight."

"It's eight thirty," I answered. "What's the difference? I thought I could take you out to breakfast. As a peace offering for Friday."

My son's glare deepened further—he was clearly not ready to hear or take an apology, and for the second time, I saw how deep his anger ran.

"I asked you to come at eight because I have a meeting scheduled at eight-thirty," he bit out. "And I have too much work today to take time out for breakfast. I can't just saunter in here whenever I want—things have to get done."

As if on cue, someone knocked on the door. Paul's gaze flicked over my shoulder, and he waved the person in.

"Mr.—" the employee who stepped in looked between Paul and me, clearly confused as to which Mr. Finlay to address.

"Dan, come in." Paul waved me to move so he could see the employee. The kid was young, standing there, shifting on his feet, his fingers dancing on the legs of his pants as though he didn't quite know what to do with them.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Finlay?" The employee had finally settled on my son as the correct Mr. Finlay to address.

"Dan, I have a few messages and complaints here that say those end-of-the-year reports aren't in yet."

My son's tone didn't have the same coldness as when he had been talking to me, but I heard an edge to it. The

employee seemed to hear it, too, because his fingers took up a faster pace.

“I’m working on them right now, Mr. Finlay. They’ll be in next week. I promise.”

“But next week isn’t last week, is it?” Paul’s gaze settled on the young man without blinking.

“No, sir, but I’ve had so many reports to do, and I’ve been sick—”

A sharp shake of my son’s head cut the employee off.

“We’ve had this discussion before, Dan, and I don’t want to hear any excuses. I need those reports by Friday at the latest, or I’m afraid I will have to let you go.”

The young man’s eyes widened, and he fumbled for words, but Paul cut him off again.

“I mean it, Dan. Friday at the latest—”

“Dan, is it?”

Both pairs of eyes moved to me, both wide, but with different reactions—one surprised and one unhappy at the interruption. The young man nodded.

“Don’t worry about the reports. I’m sure you’ll get them in when you can. I’ll vouch for you.”

The employee’s eyes widened further. “Th-thank you, Mr. Finlay.”

I nodded and waved him out, watching as he nearly speed-walked away from the office. I could see the sweat stains under the arms of his blue button-down. I shook my head, chuckling, only to come face to face with a seething Paul. He had gotten to his feet and was leaning over his desk like a big cat, ready to pounce.

“I cannot believe you just did that. I cannot believe you would undermine me like that.” His words were quiet, dangerously so, as though a storm was building somewhere inside and getting ready to explode.

“Paul, you were too hard on him. Obviously, the kid felt bad about it. You have to treat people better, or you won’t have any employees left to run the business.”

“Oh, you think he’ll learn?” Paul came around the desk toward me. “You think so? You think I’m being so unfair? Did you know that ‘kid’ has been late with his reports every single quarter since he started working here a year and a half ago? Which means the rest of the department is late with their reports, including the legal ones. You think that a good thing for the company?”

I shook my head. “I’ve seen plenty of kids like him over the years—he’s young, and he’ll learn. You just have to give him a chance.”

“I’ve given him chances, over and over, but his actions are affecting other people, and it’s affecting the company.”

The words hung between us, nearly the exact words Paul had used on Friday night against me.

Paul shook his head in disgust. “You’ve always been too soft on people. Do you remember what was going on before I took over as COO? The way the company was tanking because you decided you’d had enough of being the rough and tough CEO?”

I had come in to make amends, but Paul seemed to be on the warpath. If he wasn’t willing to meet me halfway, I was just going to have to go to him. I could be just as angry, an emotion building high enough that I was ready to let it all spill out.

“Do I need to remind you who the CEO is here? You may be my son, but I’m still your boss, and I still run this company. I’m telling you to watch your mouth with our employees and me. No one is infallible here.”

Opening his mouth for a moment, Paul looked like he wanted to say more but closed it again. “Fine. I will be more mindful of my tone with you and the employees going forward.”

His words said one thing, but the sarcasm in his tone said another. So much for making amends and fixing things between us.

“You know, you remind me of myself when I’d first started, all piss and vinegar and eye on the prize. Like father, like son, I guess.”

A flash of anger in my son’s eyes alerted me to the storm brewing again, but I continued anyway.

“You’re going to learn just like I did what life is really like. I’m trying to teach you the easy way, but if it’s the hard way you want, there is nothing I can do about that.”



Chapter 13

Paul



“I’M SORRY. WHAT DID you say?”

I couldn’t believe what my father was saying to me. Did he think he had the right to tell me I would learn what life was like? The guy who had taught me the harsh realities of life from the very beginning?

“You heard me. You think you have all the answers, but you don’t. You’re still a kid and have a lot to learn about life and running this business.” He flicked his hand in a dismissive gesture that was almost more infuriating than what he’d said.

For a moment, all I could do was blink. I’d done a lot of that the past few days, but it seemed like my father’s hubris knew no bounds. My gaze flicked over my father’s shoulder to the wall of windows that served as my office wall. The door was closed, and no one seemed to be watching. Which was good because I had a feeling this was going to get ugly.

“Are you kidding me with this? Are you trying to tell me I’m not running the company well? Who took it from bringing in millions to billions? But more than that, do you remember what was happening when I took over?”

“We were fine,” my father replied truculently. “A million-dollar company isn’t exactly anything to scoff at.”

“No, but a company in shambles because of poor leadership is.”

There, I’d said the words. It looked like they had shut my father up for once. This time, it was his turn to stare at me, expression incredulous.

“The company was a mess when I came in because of your management. You say I have something to learn? I’m sure I already did—I learned what not to do, thanks to you. Which means you have me to thank for saving the company. I turned

it around, I took it public, and it's because of my leadership we are where we are today.”

I glared at my father, daring him to challenge me. It was a known fact, at least among the executives here, that the business had been floundering before my father made me COO. Sure, my father had been able to bring in more investors, so the numbers looked good, but within the actual business, he had been losing money at an alarming rate. Employee morale had been low, work had been slapdash, and turnover had been high.

I came in and changed all of that, shifting everything from our business model to producers down the line. I left no stone unturned and weeded out the chaff. If I had a heavy hand sometimes, it was because that was what it took to keep the business running smoothly—you couldn't be a friend to everyone, no matter what my father believed. Now I had an executive team I could trust to run what I couldn't, to pick up the slack where they had talent and I didn't. I didn't have to micromanage because I trusted the people under me, something that hadn't been true at the beginning.

Had everyone made fun of me at first because I had a business degree but little experience? Had they claimed nepotism that would destroy the company? Yes. But I had shown them, and with money lining their pockets, they weren't laughing anymore.

The fact that my father didn't see any of this was beyond infuriating.

“The company wasn't a mess. Just because I ran things differently than you doesn't mean I didn't know how to run a business.” My father narrowed his eyes, daring me to contradict him.

“You know how to build a company, Dad. You know how to draw in investors in a way I will never be able to. But running a company is different.”

“Might I remind you that the business wouldn't be here without me?”

Throughout our argument, my father's expression had gone from annoyed to heated and which was an unusual sight between us.

The truth was, my father and I hadn't done a lot of anything growing up. We hadn't been close—it was impossible when he wasn't often there. Our relationship had consisted mainly of small talk, questions about how my life was going, quiet family dinners before my parents divorced, and dinner with my nanny or in front of the TV afterward when I wasn't with my mom. As I'd grown older, our conversations had centered around the company and business in general, which had seen us develop a closer bond as my interest grew and my father taught me what he knew.

Arguments had been few and far between, but only because I hadn't felt comfortable enough with the man to disagree with him or share my opinion in any contradictory fashion. As I'd grown older, I had gained enough sense to know that arguing with my father wouldn't get me anywhere—he felt he was always right, always knew better. Instead, I found ways to get around him or do what I wanted anyway.

There had always been a part of me, a large part of me, that believed my father knew best. Even if he hadn't been a finalist for the father-of-the-year award, I felt that even if I didn't understand why he was doing something, he had a good reason, and it would work out in the end.

Time and experience as COO had disabused me of that notion. I'd seen too much over the past six years to continue to believe my father knew what was best. Did he have strengths? Absolutely. But he had weaknesses, too, and blind spots—many blind spots and many weaknesses.

When I graduated and joined the company, MBA in hand and an intense need to learn everything I possibly could from my successful father, there were nights when I was too excited to sleep. I was that excited about learning more about my father's business. Instead of finding a sparkling home, I'd found a fixer-upper with cracks in the foundation that were beginning to widen and drag the rest of the structure down. It was a shock to find company in such disrepair, thanks in a

large part to my father's management. For a time, my entire world had felt flipped upside down, and I had felt like I was in some strange mirror universe where nothing I previously believed was true.

I quickly realized my belief that my father could do no wrong was a fallacy of childhood. The revelation, seeing what was happening behind the scenes at the company, was eye-opening, not just about running a business but about the man at the top of the company.

It took me several years and endless hours of work, but I took what I had and turned the company around. Had it been like turning an ocean liner? Yes. But I did it, and I did it in record time before achieving the dream my father never had quite been able to achieve—enough stable growth and promise of more for an initial public offering that nearly broke records.

It turned out my father might have had the idea to build a business and the charm to bring in top investors, but he didn't have a head for truly running a company. That was my gift. I saw things he didn't, understood what he didn't, knew how to reach new audiences and market sectors, and how to create processes so the entire thing worked seamlessly.

And yet, here we were, my father standing in front of me with the gall to remind me he was the one who started the company, that he was still my boss, and to hint that I didn't know how to handle the company I had been running successfully for six years. There was also the vague threat that I was replaceable. This wasn't just any old boss—it was my father. It was as though he had conveniently forgotten or actively ignored everything I had done. Now that I knew who he truly was and, more importantly, who I was, I was done holding my tongue.

“And you seem to forget that you probably wouldn't have a company if it weren't for me,” I shot back. “But you don't want to think about that, do you? You never want to deal with the hard things—you want to be ‘nice’ and believe everything is going smoothly when it isn't, so you don't have to deal with things when in reality they aren't.”

“What the hell are you talking about, Paul?” my father demanded. His color was rising, and eyes the same green hazel as mine flashed angrily. Apart from Friday night, I had never seen him with his hackles raised so high.

I also didn’t care.

“Because you were too nice to people here, Dad. You never wanted to deal with underperforming managers or someone screwing around on the job. So you let it all slide until the business was run by people who didn’t respect you and didn’t do their jobs. I was the one who had to fire them all to get things straightened out. And never mind about your marriage.”

My father’s eyes widened for a moment. “Excuse me? My marriage? What happened between your mother and me has absolutely nothing to do with—”

“It has everything to do with it. You just don’t want to admit it.”

I cut my father off because I knew exactly where his sentence was going to lead—it had nothing to do with their marriage, they were two different people who wanted two different things, they had never blamed each other, blah, blah, blah. I’d heard the same explanation over the years, but it looked different from this new side of the fence.

“You never wanted to talk about anything difficult, Dad, just like now. You never wanted to take a hard look at yourself or a hard look at anything. Whenever Mom wanted to talk, you would find an excuse to run away or throw money at it, so it disappeared. It’s the same with the business. But you can’t have the good things without the hard things. You taught me that.”

My words caught my father off-guard, his mouth half-open on some kind of declaration of his innocence from the charges I leveled against him. He closed his mouth, swallowed, then finally asked, “I taught you?”

This answer wouldn’t be any more expected—or palatable—than the first.

“You taught me exactly what not to do with my life, Dad. How not to run a company. How not to have a relationship with a partner or a child. Watching you taught me that I had to deal with the difficult stuff instead of running away because I saw what happened when you ran away.”

My father flinched as though I had thrown an actual punch and not just a volley of words. For a flicker of a moment, I felt bad. It was clear on my father’s face I had hurt him. I hadn’t meant for today’s meeting to become a dressing down of this magnitude, but whatever emotions and anger my father stoked on Friday night weren’t about to be subdued. My hurt won out on saving my father’s feelings.

His mouth and throat worked for a moment, and his voice sounded rough instead of angry when he finally spoke.

“Where is this coming from, Paul? You’ve never said a thing about it before.”

“Where is this coming from?” I threw my hands up and paced back and forth. “Haven’t you been listening to a word I’ve said over the past few days?”

The man standing in the center of the office didn’t say anything, only watched me pace.

“I’ve been thinking a lot. About the future, not just for the company, but about my life, what I want, and how I can do better. Be better.”

“Are you talking about Angela?”

The question was hesitant, quiet.

“Yes, Angela. I’m thinking of taking the next step with her, getting more serious, and I don’t want to make the same mistakes. I’ve been thinking about what it was like growing up, watching you and Mom, about what I would do differently.”

“Nobody is perfect, Paul.”

“You only get to say that when you’ve actually tried,” I snapped as I stopped pacing and turned on my father. He flinched again but persisted anyway.

“That’s a horrible idea, Paul. You barely know the woman. At least I’d known your mother in college. I don’t get a good feeling from Angela—I don’t think she’s with you for you.”

“Then why do you think she’s with me?” My voice felt like a growl in my throat, a sound of warning my father didn’t seem to hear.

“I think she wants your money and your power, kid. Did you see the blue dress she was wearing on Friday?”

“I am well aware of what she wore,” I bit back. “And I can’t believe you. Are you seriously trying to tell me who and what, and how I should date when that level of commitment is something you know nothing about?”

“I’m trying to keep you safe from—”

“You’re trying to control me and keep me in my place,” I snarled.

My father’s eyes widened before narrowing in flames of anger.

“Fine, you know what? If you know it all, you don’t need me.”

On those final words, my father turned and stormed out of the office, slamming the glass door with as much power as possible without breaking it. He hurled the two cups of coffee into a trashcan before disappearing toward his office.

It would have been comical, except my rage still burned with the intensity of a wildfire. The chasm that opened between my father and me on Friday seemed as wide as the Grand Canyon.



Chapter 14

Will



IT TOOK A FEW HOURS and a lot of thought, but I calmed down.

Maybe I'd overacted—again.

But I wasn't the only one. I still didn't know why Paul was so angry. He said he was unable to understand why I couldn't see why he was angry. Hadn't he shared enough over the past few days?

It wasn't that I hadn't heard him. I had, in fact, heard plenty. Enough that his words were all I could focus on, and there had been so many I had a headache from the pure volume of it all.

What I hadn't understood, what I still didn't understand, was the origin of this anger, all these accusations. I had asked my son the question in all seriousness, and he'd blown up at me, grown angrier, and thrown further charges my way. But I still didn't have an answer. Never once had Paul said a word about anything, from his feelings about me to his mother's and my marriage, to his role with our company.

My reaction was surprise as well as anger at the accusations, and maybe a bit of hurt. But I had to admit Paul was defending his own life choices. He was a grown, independent man, and his choices were his to make, whether he was right or wrong. Even if he was making a mistake.

Whatever Paul thought, my belief was that role of a parent was to make sure their child was independent, and Paul was that in spades.

Even so, I couldn't quite believe he was talking about getting serious with Angela Levesque. I didn't know what it was about the woman, but there was something about her I didn't like, and I had an unfailing sense of people. It was how I brought investors in and made business connections—I could read people like a book.

Except my son.

Paul might have inherited more than his fair share of business acumen, but he hadn't inherited that instinct, apparently, not if he was thinking of a future with Angela. I didn't know why, but I didn't trust her. I couldn't put a finger on it, but something about her made my hackles rise like a dog sensing danger.

Not to mention she was too serious and work-focused for Paul. He needed someone who would get him out of the office and having fun.

Well, it was his choice to make. Even if we had argued, I still felt as I had this morning when I had gone into his office—I didn't want this to stand between us. Whatever Paul felt my shortcomings were, we were family, and we still worked together.

I couldn't get over the idea that my only son was upset enough with me to tell me off like he had.

When I tapped on Paul's door again, he was in the same place at the desk he'd been at all morning. Both Paul and his assistant Tara looked up at the noise, but my son's face instantly creased into a frown. Tara watched me for a beat longer, then looked back at her boss. While I couldn't see her expression, I did see Paul's as he exchanged a look with his assistant. He still waved me in.

"Tara and I are almost finished."

Paul's tone had a flat edge to it, and Tara pressed her lips together, her shoulders tensing as her gaze moved between the two of us.

"Hi, Mr. Finlay," she offered.

"Hello, Tara." I flashed her a friendly smile. One that faded when I caught sight of Paul's warning glare. His eyes moved, and I followed their pointed gaze to the couch.

"I'm just going to wait over here until you're done," I said, pointing to the sofa.

Tara returned my smile uncertainly as I crossed the room and sat down, my son's gaze following me. For the first time since college, I felt like an errant kid or like I'd been called into the principal's office, even though I had been the one to come back in here. As the CEO of a billion-dollar corporation in his fifties, it was a strange and unwelcome feeling.

I sat on the couch and took out my phone, sorting through the emails that had come in over the weekend that I hadn't yet replied to. Just as it had been for the past few hours, concentrating was difficult. No one had ever spoken to me like Paul did, not since my father would take me to task for being too lazy or self-centered. Since the words had come from my son, it was impossible not to feel something. Too disturbed to concentrate, I turned my attention from my phone to the autumn sun slanting outside the windows, glinting off the skyscrapers surrounding us.

I hadn't grown up in the city, and moving here had been a dream, a sign that I had made it. Even now, it fascinated me. Day or night, there was always something to do, something new to see, someone to meet with. The city never slept, and I often went to bed with my windows open to hear the never-ending hum of life.

I was always seeking life, always chasing it, always trying to take more in, as though if I collected enough, it would make a difference to the amount of gray I saw growing in the mirror. I wasn't old by any stretch of the imagination, but I wasn't young, either, and it made me uncomfortable.

On some level, I knew that was why this company was so important to me, and why I sought out young women. They both made me feel young and full of life like I would live forever. Even if I didn't, this business I had built from the ground up was my legacy. No one, not even Paul, would take that away from me, no matter what he thought.

"Have a good day, Mr. Finlay."

Tara was waving from the open door when I looked up, pulled from my thoughts by her voice.

"Have a good day, Tara."

Her smile was far less uncomfortable this time, and she waved again before moving through the door. It swung slowly closed behind her.

I had always liked Tara—she was cheerful, considerate, and friendly, and the amount of work she got done was a sight to behold. Paul relied on her heavily and had never shorted her on appreciation. I might have believed he was too hard on people sometimes, but Paul always made sure to show his appreciation to those who worked hard, whether they succeeded or not.

Paul was typing on his computer, and I waited patiently until he was finished. Finally, he pushed his keyboard forward and looked over at me.

“What do you want this time, Dad? I have another meeting in twenty minutes, so I don’t have much time.”

My son’s tone didn’t hold as much anger as it had that morning. Instead, he sounded weary.

“I came to apologize.”

“Isn’t that what you came to do this morning?” One of Paul’s eyebrows rose in a cynical arch.

I took a deep breath to quell a surge of defensiveness at the biting question, but I still had to fight to keep my voice even and slow. “Well, I’m apologizing again. And you didn’t give me much of a chance to apologize this morning, either.”

Our gazes met and held, and I tried to understand what was happening behind the eyes that were so much like mine. Paul was the one person I should have been able to read better than anyone, but parts of my son had always been an enigma to me, and they still were. Especially right now.

Finally, Paul sighed. “Fine. What’s your apology?”

“Are you actually ready to hear it?”

My son’s head dipped, and he shook it. “I’m too tired to fight anymore, so go ahead.”

While not the answer I wanted, it was better than nothing, so I took it.

“First, I want to apologize for Friday night. You were right—I should have been there and a part of everything like I told you I would be.”

Paul watched silently for a long moment, then I saw his shoulders rise and fall with a breath.

“Thank you, Dad. That’s big of you.”

I couldn’t tell from Paul’s tone what else he thought of my apology, but at least he had seemed to accept it, so I continued.

“And I’m sorry about this morning and our talk about Angela. You’re a grown man. It’s your life, and your choices are yours alone to make as long as they don’t affect the company.”

At this, Paul’s eyebrow rose again. “As long as they don’t affect the company?”

The question had a faint ring of sarcasm, or maybe I heard another note, but I didn’t know why or what for. All I knew was that I recognized a trap when I saw one. Paul, too, remained silent, both of us playing a game of chicken with the other, waiting for someone to reveal something.

Paul was the first to speak.

“But you said Angela wanted me for my power and wealth, and you believe that will affect the company.”

I sighed. “Can you come over here, please? I can’t talk to you when you’re across the room like this. Let’s talk like civilized human beings.

For a moment, Paul looked like he was going to refuse, but he stood with yet another sigh and made his way across the room in only a few strides. When I was standing, or paying attention to something else, or Paul was sitting behind his desk, it was easy to forget just how tall my son was. I still thought of him as a little kid in my memory.

But the man who sat down across from me on the couch wasn’t a kid anymore. He was well-grown and self-possessed, his suit immaculate, his bearing assured. If nothing else, I

knew he had gotten that from me because I recognized it from the mirror.

He was my kid, even if he wished differently right now.

“I said that because I want you to be happy, Paul. I’ve seen my fair share of people like her, men and women, who are only in a relationship for one thing. I’ve seen the toll it takes on their partners. I’ve seen the emotional and monetary fallout of relationships like that. I’m not trying to bully you or put you in your place. I’m trying to be a father and protect you.”

Paul’s mouth opened, and I could almost see his retort forming, something about my suddenly choosing to be a father. Then he visibly swallowed his words.

“Thank you. I appreciate the concern, but I’ll be fine, and so will the company.”

It was a measured response without heat, one that sounded at least halfway candid. Then he continued talking.

“But on the subject of women and Friday, if you keep bringing young women around who look ready for their senior prom, you will affect this company. I wasn’t lying when I told you the investor isn’t ready to give us the money yet because of your reputation.”

I rubbed my forehead. He wasn’t going to give this one up.

“She was too old for prom—she’s a bartender finishing college.”

Another eyebrow quirk greeted my response. “And that makes this all better, how?”

My stare toward my son was flat, but he met my gaze again, entirely serious.

“Dad, she was way too young for you. Being seen with someone that young hurts your image, which hurts the company. As I keep saying, you could seriously jeopardize relationships with the company if anyone sees you.”

I thought about the image in the gossip magazine in my office and decided against telling Paul about it. He was finally

talking to me instead of yelling, and I wasn't going to screw it up by mentioning anything.

“It was just a fling, Paul. Nothing more. A one-night thing. I met Steffanie at the bar at the club. She was the bartender, and I needed a date for the night.”

My son swallowed and licked his lips, and I caught his shoulders tightening under his suit jacket.

“That’s exactly the kind of thing that will affect the company, Dad. I’ve already said it, and I don’t know how many more times I can say it—people are noticing, and not in a good way. If you don’t want me to make choices and mistakes that will affect the company, you have to do the same. Otherwise, it shows me that you don’t care about the company. It shows me you would willingly damage it by bringing a girl you don’t care about to something as important as the gala on Friday.”

Here we were, back at the same difference of opinion that had begun the argument in the first place. If Paul wasn't going to give, I guess I had to be the adult in the room. Nor did I want to continue arguing with my son. I had seen the fallout when family in a business couldn't get along anymore, and it wasn't pretty.

“I don’t want to argue anymore, Paul. That absolutely won’t be good for the company. What can I do to make it up to you?” I asked, biting my tongue and squashing my pride.

Paul watched me for a long moment, eyes slightly narrowed. Then he cleared his throat.

“There is something you can do for me.”



Chapter 15

Paul



I WATCHED MY FATHER as I waited for his response. His shoulders tensed, and a weary light crept into his eyes like he wasn't sure what I was going to ask or whether he would like it.

It was always odd how the power dynamics had shifted since I was a child. My father might have been my boss, but I was no longer a kid looking up to him. Instead, we were two grown men having a semi-civil conversation. It seemed, possibly, hope against hope, my father might have heard what I had been telling him these past days. And maybe, just maybe, he was willing to listen to what I had to say.

His offer to make things up to me surprised me and caught me off guard. I scrambled to give him something for a moment, but then the obvious answer hit me.

“I have to go to China to meet with the investor I spoke to Friday morning. He was already shaky on us, so now I have to go and persuade him to give us the money. Without him, we can't finalize the acquisition of INT, and then we'll be up a creek.”

“When did this happen?” My father's eyes narrowed. I criticized him for his work ethic, but when it came down to it, but he still cared for the company more than anything else—even himself. It was his legacy and his life's work, and he was CEO. Even if sometimes the role was a nominal one.

“On Friday, when I met with him. Like I said.”

The information caught my father's attention. “What did he say, exactly?”

“Nothing specific. I told you the basics,” I lied.

My father seemed to know me better than that because his eyes narrowed further. “I made sure that guy was a slam dunk.”

For a moment, I hesitated. I hadn't been kind to my father these past few days, but that was me—I was his son. There was a difference between letting my pent-up feelings out and telling him what someone as important as a significant investor thought about him.

“Did you forget what he said?” My father gave me a look I knew well from childhood. He expected me to provide him with the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

No, I hadn't forgotten. The words had been ringing in my head since Friday morning, around and around as I tried to figure out the best way to ensure the investors were on board. I had, in fact, been in a low level of panic about the entire thing.

But my father had been the one to bring him in, like all the others. In this, I wasn't my father. I didn't have the same charisma, and I didn't have the ability to work whatever magic my father had with investors.

I was worried, though I hadn't told anyone. I didn't want anything out there that could jeopardize this acquisition deal from any side.

“Paul?” my father asked. He could tell from my silence that what I had told him wasn't true, and I finally gave in. But I had to take a breath before I did.

“I think his words were, ‘He's still the CEO, Paul, and at the end of the day, you're still just the COO. Whatever you did, he's the head of the company, and he can still bring it down no matter how hard you work. Markets can always change.’”

But I didn't think. I knew.

My father stilled, and I watched his face, trying to read his reaction to the news. He was an expert poker player, and his poker face didn't slip.

“Well,” he finally said. “I guess you're just going to have to win him over, kid.”

He shocked me with a fatherly punch on the arm, a slight grin pulling at one corner of his mouth. It was the first I'd seen

from him, minus his hello to Tara, which was strange for a man who was always smiling in some way.

Maybe everything I'd said to my father had gotten to him.

"How long are you going to be gone?"

I cleared my throat. "It should be about three weeks."

My father nodded, used to such things. This was my first meeting in China, though, and the news had come as a surprise to me. Usually, these things consisted of flying in and flying out, but things were done differently there. And we needed this investor.

I didn't want to think about what would happen if we didn't land him and our deal with INT fell through. It would be a disaster of epic proportions, and nothing I did would save us—or me.

"You still haven't told me what you need me to do."

My father was watching me, and I was suddenly aware that I'd paused for too long again, too lost in my own thoughts and anxieties, falling under the pressure.

"I need you to run the day-to-day while I'm gone."

My father looked at me for a moment, and a small, crooked smile accompanied his confusion. "You mean like I did before you got here?"

"Things have changed a lot since then, Dad," I cautioned. "I made serious changes to the way things run. Will you be able to handle it?"

"Paul, I've been doing this since you were in diapers. If I have to get the hang of a new system, I'll get the hang of a new system. Why would it be a problem?"

I sighed. "The business is different now. Considering I've been running the company in all but name the past few years, I'm concerned."

I also didn't know who else could do it. That was the point of having a CEO and a COO, and the other executive team members—the company could survive while one or more were

gone. But given all that had happened not just over the past few years, I wasn't sure it was going to work this time. I had a feeling Tara could run the company better than my father at this point—absentee father and absentee CEO. At least she knew how the day-to-day worked.

At my words, my father's shoulders stiffened again, and I saw a flash of something cross his face and thin his lips. I was still pushing the line, testing the boundaries like a kid to see what my father would do and how far I could go. Instead of an angry retort, my father took another deep breath, the downward quirk to his mouth easing. The sight made me feel marginally better about what I was asking him to do and also about earlier.

Although my father's admonition about being too hard on employees still rankled, mainly because it seemed like his selective memory was working on overdrive again. I might have been hard on certain people when they deserved it, but at least I was predictable and fair. For all he was known for being too "kind" and easy on people, Dad certainly had his moments where he would fly off the handle. We hadn't had an incident since I took over as COO, and not many people remembered, but I did.

"I'm going to be fine, Paul. Give me a little credit."

I met my father's gaze, and he raised both eyebrows, daring me to say anything to the contrary. Well, it was only three weeks. He couldn't ruin the company in three weeks—no one was quite that inept.

"And I know that guy isn't going to back out. Don't worry." My father gave me another soft cuff on the shoulder. How had he known I was worrying? "If he gives you trouble, I'll call him."

Licking my lips, I nodded, my hand fiddling with the watch around my wrist.

If anyone would know, it would be my father. After all, most of our investors were there for him—in fact, the majority of our investors were there because Dad had brought them in, and they stayed because of him. My father wasn't just

charming with young women. He also used the same charismatic charm with investors, and they ate it up. I had never in my life been able to duplicate the rapport my father had with people, and I'd come to the conclusion it was something you had to be born with.

This was the first investor I was dealing with alone, even though my father had been the one to snag him to begin with, and I felt the pressure. Dealing with the day-to-day running of the company was something I could do in my sleep, but the thought of facing an enormous investor at such a critical time made me break out in a cold sweat.

“Paul.”

I realized my gaze had strayed to the leather of the couch, and my dad watched me.

“You’re going to be fine. Just don’t let him smell your fear, or you’re done for.”

My mouth attempted to pull up into a smile, but it didn’t get very far.

“Seriously, you’re going to be fine. Give them a smile, give them compliments, give them what they think they want while keeping your eye on your goal, and you’ll be just fine. Show them they can’t push you around, just like you did me.”

I felt my eyebrows rise. Despite the contradictory advice, had my father just complimented me? About lighting into him? For a moment, I wasn’t sure how to respond. He was still looking at me, a half-smile on his face, and I saw no trace of anger or facetiousness—did he believe in me that strongly?

My father seemed to intuit my uncertainty because he chuckled. “I know you can do it, just like you know I can run this company while you’re gone.”

“Are you really sure you can do this?” I asked. “I’m asking you now because this is serious. Are you not going to brush it off like the gala?”

The smile disappeared. “This is the company, Paul, not some gala—”

“But that gala was for the company, Dad. For you, for me, for us, too.”

“It might have been for the company, but it wasn’t ever going to affect the actual running of the company.” His stare had become hard, and I could see he was going to chase this one as far as he needed to.

I was quiet for a long minute, aware of office life going on over my father’s shoulders and beyond the glass wall of windows. People passed through the corner of my vision, and I could hear muted conversations and phones ringing.

“This is it, Dad. You want to apologize, you want me to accept your apology, show me how serious you are.”

“And you need to show me how well you can do with this investor.”

My father’s statement was a parry to my own, a challenge for a challenge. I met his gaze, and he smirked before leaning back into the couch and stretching like he owned the place, which he did.

“Whatever you say, Paul, whatever you think, we need each other. The company has grown because of the two of us and the way we work together. You might hate our differences, but we complement each other in a way that’s gotten us to where we are today.”

“Is that your big revelation of the day?” I asked. I could hear the hint of sarcasm in my tone.

I had to admit, though, that maybe my father was right. When I thought about it, I was good with the day-to-day and running of a company while my father was the people person. I’d been thinking along similar lines all weekend, but lamenting that fact in light of the circumstances, I hadn’t been able to put it all together.

As much as it annoyed the hell out of me, and so did my father, I wouldn’t have a company to run if my father didn’t bring in the investors. But my father wouldn’t have a company to get investors for if I didn’t run things the way I did. If either of us left, the company would likely tank quickly.

Did we truly complement each other so well?

“So, we up for this challenge, you and me?”

I resisted rolling my eyes like a teenager as my father gave me yet another bump on the shoulder. We weren't in some peewee baseball club, and he wasn't my coach giving me a pep talk before the game. I wasn't sure where this fatherly gesture and comradery had come from all of a sudden.

“Yes, we're up for the challenge.” I sighed and realized I really did sound like an annoyed teenager, and my father chuckled.

At least the chasm between us didn't seem so enormous anymore.



Chapter 16

Will

I GLANCED AT MY WATCH and then squinted at the bright morning sky. Paul should have been lifting off for China just about now.

The past days had been a whirlwind, and I felt I was still caught up in its spin. From the time of our argument at the gala to today, it seemed like it had been one big hurricane of anger and regret. I hadn't had such a roller coaster of emotions during my divorce.

Today, the sun was brighter, the sky bluer, and it seemed things between Paul and me might be on the mend. Which meant I felt far better.

Not that absolutely everything had been resolved. Paul's accusation that I couldn't face the hard things still rankled deeply—building and making a success of a business required doing the hard thing over and over.

Building a business was the hardest thing I had ever done. Paul was only in diapers, and there was no way he could know how much blood, sweat, and tears had gone into the years it took to build something stable and create a successful foundation. He didn't know how long the hours had been, how many sleepless nights I'd had. My son didn't remember what it was like to barely be scraping by before the business was profitable, to worry about how we would pay our bills. He didn't remember the way I dragged myself from meeting to meeting, fighting my way through more losses than successes at first, turned away at nearly every door.

Somehow, I had fought through it all—the doubt, the frustration, the exhaustion, the endless nights when I wondered whether it was all worth it or if I had made an enormous mistake. I had sunk everything into the business, including our retirement savings and my life savings, though neither had been too big to begin with. Then had come the

debt simply to pay for groceries or diapers or a visit to the doctor.

There wasn't a day that didn't go by that I wasn't grateful those moments were behind me. But Paul didn't remember any of that, and I was also thankful for that. It also meant he didn't have a frame of reference for much of my life experience.

Maybe in the intervening years, I had grown a bit soft because the difficult feelings between Paul and myself had thrown me into a freefall I wasn't sure I had experienced before. Paul and I had never been extremely close, but I had obviously underestimated our relationship's role in my life for his anger toward me to affect me.

The investor's comment had also danced through my head all night—what had he meant, exactly? Did the man genuinely think I would do something to seriously jeopardize my company? The guy hadn't mentioned a thing during our meetings and had been amiable and open to our partnership. Part of me thought it had been a negotiating tactic or even a test, but what did he have to negotiate, and what was he trying to test?

But between Paul and that guy, I figured I had to be at least slightly more careful.

The entire incident felt bad enough that I was determined to make these next two weeks go well—I was going to relearn my company and see what Paul had changed. I was curious, to be honest, but I had never taken the time to have a proper look at what my son had done since taking over as COO.

What had he learned earning his MBA at that fancy Ivy League of his? It had to be decent, knowing how smoothly the company seemed to run.

I felt a newfound excitement as I stepped off the elevator onto the executive floor. I also didn't miss the heads turning my way or the looks of surprise trailing after me to see me so bright and early.

“Tara.”

The woman had her head bent over a tablet on her desk, tapping with one hand while typing on her computer with the other. It was an impressive sight and must have taken up all her concentration because she jolted when I said her name. Either that or she, too, was startled to see me here so early.

“Mr. Finlay?”

Maybe more of the latter, then.

I jerked my head in the direction of my office. “Come with me for a sec?”

The young woman almost stumbled in her haste to get up from her desk and follow me as I strode down the row of offices to the largest one in the corner. She looked around uncertainly as I leaned back against my desk and crossed my arms.

“So, I’m sure Paul let you know what was happening.”

She nodded.

“To do that, I’m going to have to figure out how this all works now, and I’m going to need your help to figure it all out. Can you do that?”

Tara looked less uncertain now and nodded. “Of course, Mr. Finlay. I’d be happy to do that for you.”

What followed was a procession of the executive team to give me rundowns of the state of things, from financials to marketing to processes, while Tara translated what I didn’t understand. I quickly saw that it was awe-inspiring what my son had done to the back end of our company. He’d done it in an incredibly short amount of time. Everything Paul had said about his role here and what he had done to boost the company made more sense—it was all true. I would never have been able to design anything half as good.

Several hours later, my head spun with everything I had tried to pack into my head all morning. I had to get out of the office and let it settle before doing anything else.

The day was warm, and I was glad I had left my coat in my office as I headed out for lunch and a walk to clear my head. I

rolled up my sleeves, glad to feel the sun and warmth.

As I headed down the sidewalk, for the first time in a long time, I had a bounce in my step.

Even though I knew the company was doing well, I'd never taken the chance to truly understand how it ran under Paul's leadership. I had to admit, the practices Paul had put into place were masterful. Everyone had their position, everyone had their role, and there was a process for everything.

I had run the company well, I had always believed, but never would I have thought to come up with something like this. The company was the European sportscar of businesses, every element running the way it should, every part with the resources it needed.

I knew my kid was smart and good at what he did, but I hadn't taken the time to realize how talented he was. It was gratifying, and there was indeed an amount of pride included.

Dodging a kid riding down the sidewalk on his skateboard, I rounded a corner to find my favorite coffee shop. At least, in concept, it was my favorite. I was rarely here myself, but I often sent my assistant here for coffee for three reasons: single origin, house-roasted, and some of the best baristas outside of Italy I had found. Their creative take-out wasn't anything to snub, either.

Conversation, the whir of a coffee grinder, and the high-pitched hissing of the espresso machine greeted me as I pulled open the door, along with the sweetly acidic scent of freshly-ground coffee.

"Hi, how can I help you?" The young woman behind the counter smiled warmly.

"I'll have an espresso, triple shot, and"—I leaned over to check out the display case full of sandwiches, wraps, pastries, and salads—"one of those. And that."

I pointed to a boxed salad and a pastry I couldn't pass up. I knew where they sourced their baked goods, and they were good.

“Sure thing.” The young woman ducked to collect and box the items. When she straightened, she smiled at me again, her gaze lingering slightly longer than it should have. I couldn’t help but return the smile, my trademark grin pulling at one side of my mouth.

“Thanks for your help. Keep the change.”

The young woman’s eyes widened as I handed her a hefty bill. I turned away before she could say anything more, in the same move swiping the cup of espresso from the counter another employee had just placed there. Paul and I finally seemed to be in a good place, or at least on the start of that path, and I wasn’t going to screw it up. I could hold off for now and show my son how seriously I took his requests and our company.

Takeaway bag in one hand and coffee in another, I pushed open the door. Someone else was coming in, and I stepped back to hold the door open so she could pass through.

Then our eyes met, and I couldn’t look away. Intensely green eyes caught mine for just a moment, then a glimpse of creamy skin, almond-shaped eyes, and long, dark hair.

“Thanks.”

The woman flashed me a smile and was gone into the shop. For a moment, I nearly went back in just to talk to her. From what I’d seen, she was young, maybe as young as the bartender from the club. And I had just been thinking about being good until Paul got home.

So, I left, patting myself on the back for my restraint.

But I also screamed at myself for leaving.



Chapter 17

Paul



I COLLAPSED INTO THE modern chair, the leather creaking as I leaned back and let my head fall over the padded rest. To say I was tired didn't entirely cover the bone-deep exhaustion I felt at that moment. My eyes drifted closed, and I tried to will away the headache that had tugged at my temples since morning and had steadily grown worse all day.

I'd been working in the corporate world for a long time. I knew what it was to play mind games, each company or person trying to gain the upper hand. But I never had experienced business quite like this.

To be fair, this was a different country. The rules were different. I had hired someone beforehand to help me learn the ins and outs, the expectations, and the cultural subtleties that might make the difference between success and failure. China was a total culture shock, both in the business world and out of it, which was something I hadn't experienced in a long time.

I was widely traveled. I considered myself able to adjust and adapt quickly thanks to trips to Europe as a kid, backpacking trips to far-flung places over the summer in high school, and the weeks I'd spent wandering from place to unknown place with only my backpack during college. I had already been to China, from Hong Kong to Shanghai, to Guangzhou, to Harbin, I had traveled up and down and around several times.

But that had been as a tourist during gentler times. Being a part of the business world was something else entirely, and I was grateful I had hired an interpreter and fixer to help me along. Still, I felt lost. I had to call on every ounce of training I'd received from my dad, directly and indirectly, to help me through the endless business meetings as I tried to secure this crucial funding. Several times I almost picked up the phone to call him to ask for help, but I put it back down again.

I was fully grown, and I was going to do this on my own.

Too often, though, I wished Tara was with me to help me organize my mind and work. The massive number of things I had to remember, to file away, the red tape and the documentation, and the sheer amount of paperwork was mind-blowing. She helped me as much as she could from afar. When I wasn't at meetings, a business dinner, or being shown around Shanghai, I was on my computer and phone with her and the fixer who had become my temporary assistant as we sorted through and filed away all the information.

At the completion of this marathon was the funding for our takeover of ITN, a goal shining at the end of this challenging road like a beacon. I hadn't come this far, worked this hard, and reached this final level to let it all go now over a technicality that was understanding how business was done in another country.

My eyes finally opened to the ceiling of the apartment. The bright lights of Shanghai reflected on the white paint, the colors of the enormous LED lights and signs a shifting rainbow.

The company had put me up in a penthouse far up on one of the towering buildings that gave Shanghai its unique skyline. The apartment was clean, modern, entirely uncluttered, and almost too perfect to feel completely comfortable. But it came with one hell of a view. From the enormous picture windows, I could see the city like an ocean of skyscrapers and lights as far as the eye could see, including the pink tower with its domes like enormous replicas of the Times Square New Years' ball.

I had to take a deep breath before I levered myself up. It took far too much effort—how did my body feel like it weighed a thousand pounds or like I was eighty instead of thirty-two? Too much stress and not enough sleep or exercise.

Night had settled long before, and my stomach was full of yet another business dinner with many courses and more alcohol. As I stared out at the bustling city before me, so much like New York and at the same time so different, I felt restless.

I thought about it too long, I would end up eating junk on the couch. I undressed, throwing my suit haphazardly on the bed, and pulled on the workout gear that had been languishing, unused, in the closet. My running shoes had a thin layer of dust on them, something I didn't think would be possible in this immaculate apartment.

The elevator ride down to the sub-floor gym took an uncomfortably long time—I wasn't sure I would get used to that if I moved here permanently. Only a handful of other people were working out when I got down there, and I found an unused treadmill away from everyone. If I didn't beat my time and felt sluggish, my split wasn't nearly as bad as I would have imagined after my hiatus from the single form of exercise and movement I had hung on to after starting as COO.

I felt better after my run but still slightly off-kilter. Instead of turning toward the elevator, I headed out the door.

The night was cold, colder than I would have imagined. The chill air felt good against my skin, cooling the sweat on my skin from the exercise.

Even this late in the evening, the number of people on the street was incredible. I was glad I hadn't tried to run outside because there was no way I could have gotten above a slight jog, and I would have had to be dodging like an obstacle course.

I kept walking, letting the sights and sounds of the city wash over me, the languages and dialects, the traffic and lights, the smells of food and city and water. I hadn't been outside my apartment without my fixer or translator, and the feeling of being on my own was as liberating as it was alarming. It reminded me of my wandering days, of that sense of being entirely lost in a new place and a different language where you knew very little. That knowledge had always given me a sense of being small, of understanding I was only one among many. I had felt more myself there than I ever had in my life, away from the world of private schools and summer homes on the coast and orchestrated lives.

At least until I had become COO. Then I had felt myself, and there I had found my place.

In the comfort of the known, I had grown unused to situations and unknown places and the discomfort that came with them. It was an oddly empowering feeling to be on shaky ground where you knew nothing and no one. I didn't know my way around without a driver and my fixer and translator, and though I had a phone in my pocket, I wasn't sure I could find my way back to the tower with my apartment.

The idea was anxiety-inducing, but in a far better way than the everyday anxiety I dealt with. This kind was thrilling and pushed my feet onward.

At one point, I bought food from a food stand. Despite the large dinner, the smells wafting from the open-sided tent were too enticing to resist. I managed to get what I wanted by pointing and gesturing, not even sure I had given the guy behind the grill, face shiny with sweat from the steam and flames, the correct amount of money. Whatever it was, the food was good, and I kept walking afterward.

My feet finally took me to the waterfront with the Western-style buildings lit up at night with floodlights. I remembered my fixer pointing it out as an important historical and tourist area. I wandered my way through the dense crowd standing around and taking pictures until I reached the railing that looked out over the water where the river met the bay met the sea.

New York was in your face, but everything shimmered in Shanghai. Lights glittered as reflections in the dark water. The city was so high-tech, so incredibly new, so incredibly clean, and busy. The energy was almost an electric buzz all around me as people buffeted me from all sides.

The air and the people at the sights helped clear my head.

The culture shock wasn't so bad out here, nor was the loneliness. Out here, I could also separate the loneliness from the frustration of the trip. There were days when I didn't know if the investors would be able to see me or if the company we were acquiring would allow me in. From what everyone said,

it was part of the game, and I had to accept that things worked differently.

It meant I spent a lot of time in the apartment, alone and thinking, which was never a good thing. My mind and my imagination were overactive, which was great for business but not so great for time spent alone. What I didn't know was whether I was lonely here because it was an unknown territory or whether I was this lonely at home, but I had enough to distract me that I didn't notice it.

How could I be lonely when I had Angela at home?

She and I had called a handful of times, but between our work schedules and the time difference, finding any meaningful time to talk had been nearly impossible. I'd spoken to Tara for more than my girlfriend.

I had even spoken to my father and the other executives more than Angela, although thankfully, they all had glowing reports. This was my first extended time away as COO, but from what they told me, I had left things in great shape and the business running like a machine. It was a good feeling to know, just as I had hoped, I had created a model that ran efficiently by itself.

From what the executive team said, my father had been in every day, working hard, learning my ropes, and doing well.

To say I'd been anxious about what I would find when I returned was an understatement. I knew my father couldn't destroy in two weeks what I had built. At least, I hoped not. But it seemed like not only was he not actively destroying anything, but he was engaging with it.

It was a satisfying feeling that my father was truly seeing what I had done for the first time. Maybe now he would see how important my job was, how hard I had worked, and how invaluable I was to the company. He would finally understand precisely what I did and how much I did for our company.

Now it was up to me to bring everything home—my father seemed to be excelling at my job. Now I had to knock it out of the park doing his job.

As I wandered my way back to my apartment, I reflected on the fact that maybe my father wasn't quite the man I had come to think of him as over the past few years. If he was walking in my shoes back in New York, I was walking in his here in Shanghai, and it wasn't easy.

In fact, it was one of the hardest things I'd done for the business.

Maybe I was starting to see what he did for the company from a different point of view. He might have fallen into the role of wining and dining like he had been born into it, but I couldn't deny he was probably good at what he did, too. This entire trip showed me that winning over investors wasn't just about partying or fancy dinners. Not in the least.

And maybe, just maybe, I could see that my father wasn't the screw-up I had thought.



Chapter 18

Will

THE DAY HAD DONNED gray, cold, and windy, the first hint of late autumn chill on the air. I was more of a warm-weather guy—give me high temperatures and humidity, and I was happy. Throw in a sunny beach, and I had all I wanted out of life. But as I shrugged into my coat, brushing off a piece of lint from the black wool, I was looking forward to going out.

I began to hum during the elevator ride down, earning me a strange look from the old woman who lived down the hallway from me. I simply flashed her a smile and patted her small, black dog on the head as the doors slid open with a tuneful *ding*. The woman gave me another strange look as I gestured grandly for her to precede me out the doors before she limped out, her little dog tottering after her.

“Good morning, Mr. Finlay.”

The doorman greeted me with a nod, halfway between holding the door open for the woman and me.

“Good morning, Franklin.”

The older man’s graying eyes followed me curiously, and I flashed him the same smile I had given to my neighbor.

“You seem chipper this morning, Mr. Finlay.”

“You know, I feel chipper. Have a good morning, Franklin.”

“You, too, Mr. Finlay.” He nodded to me again as I passed, and then his face creased into confusion. “Aren’t you going to call your car to come to get you?”

Turning to walk backward for a few steps, I waved away his question. “No. I feel like walking this morning.”

I could still feel the doorman’s gaze on me as I joined the busy morning foot traffic on the sidewalk that swallowed me up like a swiftly flowing river.

The amount of traffic during rush hour, whether it was by car or foot, was something I hadn't dealt with in a long time—this week marked the first time in years I was getting to the office by eight. But I didn't mind the push and pull and buffeting this morning. I hadn't, in fact, minded it in days.

It had been a full seven days since Paul had left, and I was surprised at how well things were going. Not only did I have my son's systems down, but I'd been able to do my job simultaneously, taking my meetings knowing that everything would still be settled when I returned to the office.

The truth was, I hadn't worked like this in a long time. I let others take over, knowing Paul and the other executives took over a lot of the work and picked up the slack. I saw that the only reason I could let things slide as I did was that Paul had taken the reins so firmly and competently.

This switching of roles had shown me that, far from making it clear I could do both jobs, thus making my son redundant, what he had said was true—I wouldn't have a company to run without him.

It was a good feeling, which was part of why I was in such a good mood.

I was the founder the CEO of what had been a small business, then a larger business, then a company, and now a corporation, and I knew from talking to people in similar situations that the number one thing they worried about was succession. Choosing who would take over for you wasn't easy—far from it. Too many people had children who either weren't interested, were ineffective, or had too many family members who wanted the role. Any way you put it, from infighting to poor leadership to the business leaving the family's hands, the result was always a disaster for the company itself.

In Paul, I had my successor. That if I quit today and handed the entire ship over to him to steer, it would have a long, bright future with him.

Almost, anyway. This trip would prove Paul could pull it all off once and for all.

To say I felt an inordinate amount of pride in my son after this week was an understatement. The week may have started poorly, but this kind of role switch seemed to have been what Paul and I needed to finally come to an understanding.

I hadn't realized we needed an understanding, but there it was, and it felt like a new start.

The wind picked up as we—the rush hour crowd and I—waited for the crosswalk sign, leaves blowing over our path as we made our way across the street.

My feet picked up the pace as I turned a corner, catching sight of the sign for the coffee shop. But it wasn't coffee that was driving me forward. Not today, anyway. It was the other reason I had been in such a good mood all week.

The coffee shop was packed as I pushed open the door, voices, and noises like the whirring of the coffee machine rising to the high, unfinished industrial ceiling. My gaze scanned the crowd, looking for one single person—would she be here today?

Every day this week since meeting eyes with the young woman coming in the door, I had come here looking for her. Well, the first day, I had come for coffee and was surprised to find her here not just for lunch but for an early-morning coffee, and the same happened on the second day. When I saw her that second day, I went back on the third looking for her. Then the fourth day, and the fifth.

Every day, just like me, she had been there, coffee cup in hand, earbuds in her ears as she moved her foot, or the long fingers wound around her coffee cup to a beat I couldn't hear.

Something about the young woman drew me inextricably toward her, my attention, my gaze, everything. Even my feet wanted to turn toward her. She had stayed in my thoughts to the exclusion of all others. Aside from being busy with work, I hadn't been to any clubs or bars, either, to look for someone to keep me company at night.

Every day, I kept away. It was like the universe was testing me on a week I had to be on my best behavior.

For a moment, as my gaze scanned the crowd, I thought maybe today was the day she wouldn't show up. I felt disappointment and relief at the same time—I wanted to see her, but it was better that I didn't have the temptation right in front of me.

I got into the line that stretched nearly to the door, content to wait for my coffee, and pulled my phone from my pocket. I scrolled through several messages and another few news stories that had popped up on my screen since this morning, but nothing noteworthy came up. I was replying to a short email from Paul while I waited, giving him a quick update, too absorbed to notice anything more than the fact someone had come up to stand behind me in line.

It wasn't until I slipped the phone into my pocket and looked up to see how far I was from the front of the line that I caught the sight of dark hair from the corner of my eye. For a moment, I felt an extra beat in my chest before I casually looked behind me.

The young woman stood directly behind me in line. She had on a long, creamy wool coat and a woven hat of a similar color pulled down over her wealth of dark hair. Today, she didn't have earbuds in her ears.

In fact, when she noticed my attention, she smiled. It was a full, bright smile of white, straight teeth, and warmth.

“Hi.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but for the first time since I was a teenager, nothing would come out. The young woman quirked her head, amusement dancing in her green eyes. Somehow, I managed to swallow and pull myself together—mostly.

“Good morning.”

My voice was a baritone already, but I found myself overcompensating and trying to lower it. This was ridiculous. I was fifty-two, not fifteen. And the CEO of a successful corporation to boot. How in the world was I scrambling to answer a young woman like this?

“How are you?” I forced the words to sound more normal.

“I’m doing well, thanks. Although I’ll be doing even better once I have my coffee.” Her voice was light, almost musical, and I heard the same glimmer of amusement in her tone that seemed to be always in her eyes.

“Same here.” I chuckled, hesitated, then stuck out my hand. “I’m William, by the way. Will.”

She took my hand and shook it, her hand slim in mine. “Rita.”

“Nice to meet you, Rita.”

“Same, Will. Nice to meet someone who likes this coffee shop as much as I do.” She flashed me another smile, and I held back my urge to cringe.

So, she had noticed me noticing her. She didn’t seem to mind, however. It was only amusement I saw in her eyes instead of caution or dislike. I searched for a question that wouldn’t seem too forward, but I wanted to know more about her.

“So, do you have classes around here? You’re in here often.”

“Nope.” Rita shook her head. “I graduated a couple of years ago. I do work close by, though. It’s easier to pick up a cup of coffee on the way to work. Better coffee, too. I kind of stink at making it myself.”

She made a face, and I laughed.

Young but not college-age, probably the youngest I could date without Paul throwing another fit. I didn’t know if I should be thinking along these lines at this point. But I couldn’t help myself.

Rita and I chatted as the line continued to inch forward. It wasn’t anything deep or thought-provoking, but Rita was fascinating on another level from the women I had dated before. When we parted, coffees in hand, I realized I didn’t want to. But I did so knowing I would come again the next day, and we would see each other again.

I returned to the office, smiling. I liked Rita. She was sassy, intelligent, and strong—she hadn't backed down from a single thing I'd said. Unlike most of the vapid model girls I usually dated, her answers had been whip-smart and agile.

Rita was intriguing, and I couldn't wait to see her again.



Chapter 19

Paul



THE DAY WAS COLD BUT clear as my translator, my fixer, and I exited the crowded lobby. As people rushed past, entering and exiting, moving around us on the sidewalk, I craned my head back to look at the towering office building. It seemed to go up forever until it touched the cloudless sky. In terms of sheer height and volume, New York had nothing on Shanghai.

“That went well, Mr. Finlay.”

I looked at my fixer smiling up at me, her cheeks pink with happiness. Somehow, the slight woman had taken up my cause and made it her own in the most endearing way. She had worked with me those late nights, working half a world away with Tara, so I had everything I needed. She went above and beyond to ensure everything was in place and that I had spoken to and shaken hands with the correct people.

When I had the chance, I would have to ask the translator how I could show my thanks to her. And to him, of course.

“I’m glad to hear it.” I offered a smile back, feeling as exultant as she looked at me.

I had gotten the call yesterday evening that my request had finally been granted approval from the investor and the government to receive the money that would make the purchase of ITN final. To say I had been pleased would have been an understatement. But it had also given me last-second jitters. I didn’t want anything to go wrong, and I didn’t want that thing to be me and a misunderstanding because I didn’t understand what was happening.

My fixer had stayed late to go through the process with me until I had felt like I understood it enough for today to go well.

According to her, it had. More importantly, the deal had gone through. We had been up in the office for several hours,

signing relevant papers. I wasn't sure I had seen so much paperwork in my life.

But the deal had gone through. We had the money. As soon as I got home, we would purchase our largest competitor.

It was a big win for me.

Check that—it was an enormous win for me. I had proven to myself and to everyone else I could pull off something this big, this colossal, this important, despite everyone's doubts, including my own.

I wasn't going to do it here on the street, but the first thing I would do was call the office and tell them how it had worked out.

“Thank you for all of your help.” I bowed to the fixer and the translator, not even attempting to use the phrase in Chinese they had both tried to teach me because I knew how badly I would bungle it.

We said our goodbyes, setting up the time they would come to my apartment the following day for the next steps. Then I slipped into the back seat of the car waiting for me, the driver beside the open door.

As we inched our way through traffic, I watched the scenery going by, still marveling at the city that was so new. It looked impressive all the way up in my penthouse, but the perspective from the ground was more mind-blowing. I couldn't see the tops of some of the buildings from my place inside the car.

“Do you like Shanghai, sir?”

The driver's voice drifted from the front, heavily accented.

“I do,” I answered, sitting up from where I'd been caught pressing myself against the window like an excited kid. But I wasn't a kid—I was the COO of a multi-billion-dollar company.

The driver didn't seem to mind or even notice, however.

“I remember a time before all of this was here,” he continued.

I hadn't taken too close of a look at the man, who had been silent until now except to wish me a good morning or night. I could see deep-set lines at the corners of his eyes and gray streaked his neatly styled hair.

"Do you?" It seemed the obvious answer to the man's statement.

"I do. It wasn't long ago when you could stand at the edge of Pudong and still see many miles into the distance."

I tried to imagine what Shanghai's financial district would have been like without the forest of metal and glass that blocked out the sun on the sidewalks below and couldn't.

"That must have been something to see it all going up," I answered.

"It was. And so quickly, too. Now we are the financial center of China." There was a genuine note of pride in the man's voice.

I could respect the sentiment and understand the pride of watching your city become something so great. I supposed I felt the same way about New York, which I suddenly began to miss with an ache the size of the Empire State building.

This trip had been the most successful I'd ever had, but I was ready to go home. I missed my coffee shop, my favorite bar down the street, and the cozy little Greek place around the corner and down some steps where they knew my name.

I was looking forward to talking with my father, which was an unusual thought. I hadn't once had that reaction, at least since I'd been a kid. With the positive reports I'd been receiving from the office of his success and my victory here, I was eager to talk with him.

It was a good feeling, one that made me think maybe our relationship was heading somewhere positive for the first time.

The driver let me out outside of the tower complex, and I thanked him, making a mental note to ask the translator the best ways to show my appreciation to everyone.

Waiting for the elevator, I took out my phone and scrolled through the emails that had come in that morning that I hadn't had a chance to answer in the car. Nothing was pressing enough that I had to get immediately back to work. I could take a few hours off, maybe do some more walking on my own and celebrate today's achievement before I got back to work. The driver had given me a few local restaurants to try close by, telling me to call him if I needed a ride and a guide. I entertained taking him up on his offer, knowing that tour would certainly be a look at the local restaurants where I wouldn't find any tourist—something I had enjoyed when it had been just my backpack and me traveling the world.

I punched the number into the keypad that served as a lock to my apartment but was surprised when I got a flashing red light. When I tried the handle, the door swung in easily.

Tensing, I shifted, trying to look through the open doorway into the room. Was someone in there, or had I forgotten to lock the door when I'd left that morning? Didn't it lock automatically?

At a sound, I froze, trying to decide what to do next—someone was definitely in the apartment. Were they trying to rob me? Steal business secrets from my computer? I'd left it out on the table instead of stowing it like I usually did. Should I go back down and alert security?

Then someone moved into my range of vision and stopped, looking at me, her hip and one eyebrow cocked.

“Are you coming in, or are you just going to stand there?”

I felt my worry leave me in a great rush, taking all my air with it so I had to draw in a deep, shaky breath.

“Angela?”

She smiled and beckoned me in, but I still didn't move.

“How did you get in here?”

“I asked Tara for the door code,” she replied like it was nothing.

We both stood staring at one another for a moment. Angela was waiting for me to move, me trying to understand what was going on and how my girlfriend was standing in my apartment when she was supposed to be back in New York.

Angela finally got tired of waiting and came toward me, wrapping her arms around my neck and pressing her lips to mine. She didn't seem to mind when I was too taken aback to respond in kind.

"What are you doing here?" I asked when she finally pulled away.

"I decided to join you because you've been gone so long, and I missed you." Her full lips pulled down into a pretty pout. Instead of making me smile like the gesture usually did, it only annoyed me. I was in the middle of a big deal, and as far as Angela knew, I was still trying to pin it down. I hadn't told anyone yet that it had gone through successfully. For all she knew, she was here to distract me from one of the most important deals of my life to date.

Angela must have sensed something in me, maybe a tensing or shifting of my face, because her expression changed, too.

"Oh, come on, Paul." She pulled away, her pout becoming an actual pout. "It's romantic. I flew all the way out here to be with you."

Her words sparked guilt—wasn't this romantic? Wasn't this a grand gesture of how my girlfriend felt about me?

"You're right." I sighed, taking off my coat and closing the door behind me. I heard the lock slide into place. "I appreciate the thought."

Mollified, Angela sidled up to me again, sliding her arms back around my neck, her expression sultry. "You've been working so hard, I thought you deserved some fun." Her pout was back on her lips, her gaze trying to pull me in. But I didn't feel very drawn to her at that moment.

"How did you get here, anyway?" I asked, extracting myself from her arms to put down my bag and drape my coat

over the back of a chair.

Angela shrugged. “A friend greased the wheels for me.

“Who? Someone at the State Department?”

Another shrug. “Just an old friend.”

Clearly, Angela wasn't going to elaborate, which instantly aroused my suspicions. I knew she had an ex who worked for the government—had she called on him to help?

“Seriously, Angela, I appreciate you being here, but I'm in the middle of working—”

Angela's eyes flashed for a moment, though it was too fast to determine whether it was anger or hurt. Then she came toward me, pressing herself along the length of me, her gaze on my tie as she ran her fingers down it suggestively.

“Can't I do something nice for my boyfriend?” she asked. “We're getting serious, aren't we? Isn't this something you do with a serious boyfriend?”

I swallowed, unsure how to answer her question. Then her gaze moved up to mine, a slight smile tugging at one corner of her lips. Sure, we were decently serious, but we had only been dating for a few months. How serious could we be?

“I mean, how romantic would it be just to elope here in China? There are some beautiful places—”

Before I could even think about it, I took a giant step away from Angela. My pulse sped up, and I felt my eyes grow wide as I stared at her. Her response was quick, and she stepped toward me again, her hands held up in a placating gesture.

“Hey, hey, it was just a joke.”

When I didn't respond, Angela's mouth twisted into another frown, and she moved toward her suitcase by the wall. “Nice to know where you are,” was her parting shot as she disappeared into the bedroom.

For a moment, I didn't move. Her suggestion might have been just a joke, but my body and mind hadn't gotten the

message. Just the mention of marriage sent me into a tailspin of panic.

Whatever I had said to my father about being serious with Angela had been just to rankle him. I hadn't actually been serious. I'd already told Angela I wasn't a big believer in marriage. Not after watching my parents' marriage devolve into divorce.

I moved without thought onto the balcony, taking in great gulps of air like I'd been running a marathon instead of walking across the apartment.

It was apparent Angela saw a long future for us, but I didn't know how I felt about it. Part of me saw a future. I hadn't entirely pulled that out of nowhere when I'd been baiting my father, but I didn't know what that looked like. I didn't know what I wanted it to look like, and I didn't think it was time to dive deeply into the question. I had to put all my focus on the buyout.

A noise behind me made me turn, my nerves already crackling under the pressure, to find Angela in the open doorway. She had changed out of her travel clothing into a negligee. The black lace looked like it had been etched onto her creamy skin, and the long length of her leg was visible.

So were other things, including her erect nipples.

Despite myself, my body responded, the blood rushing down so fast I felt almost lightheaded.

"Come on. You've been working so hard. Let me help you relax."

Angela strode to me slowly, her gaze never leaving mine. Her hands found my shoulders and worked their way down until she had curled her hands around mine.

When her mouth met mine again, I responded this time. I drew her close, feeling every curve as she pressed against me. Her lips were warm and soft, her body molding to mine, pressing against me.

I took her in, physically and with my senses, everything dropping away as we found our way inside, still tangled up, to

the bedroom.



Chapter 20

Will



“WALKING AGAIN, I SEE, Mr. Finlay?”

Two weeks in, and my doorman was starting to get used to seeing me walk around town, whether to the office or elsewhere. He’d even taken to ribbing me about it, making sure to mention the fact whenever I stepped outside the door and no car was waiting.

I flashed him a grin. “I’m a busy CEO. How else am I going to get my exercise in?”

The truth was, I was feeling more energetic than I had in a long time. I’d been waking up early with a bounce in my step, worked all day, and still came home with energy to spare. Seeing what Paul had built and working with the company again in an entirely new way had given me an incredible boost. More than that, the company had my attention again. I felt reinvigorated.

I hadn’t realized how much I had let myself check out after Paul had taken over as COO. With my interest revitalized, I realized I couldn’t wait to get into the office, just like in the early days.

There was something else, too.

Since our meeting at the coffee shop, I had seen Rita regularly. Nothing serious or date-like had been going on—all we did was meet at the coffee shop over lunch to talk. But our meeting had happened nearly every day for two weeks, including the weekend, for two weeks.

Tonight was our first proper date, and I was excited. It was a different kind of excitement from what I usually felt with other women. Even that had lost its luster a long time ago. It was something I did to take the boredom out of life, to disrupt the monotony. Except that the endless parade of vapid young women who were interested in very little except my money,

with which I showered them freely, had become monotony itself.

Rita was different, and I was enjoying our slow walk toward possibility for the first time in a long while.

Even though we hadn't spent much time together, I could tell Rita was unique. There was nothing vapid or translucent about her, and our conversations covered a wide range of topics, both business-related and academic. Neither did her interest seem feigned. I hadn't told her who I was yet, beyond my name. Not that she couldn't look me up. She had told me she was a writer for the *Star Tribune*, and as a journalist, I doubted Rita would let any stone go unturned when it came to her research of me.

Even so, she kept coming back, so there had to be some kind of interest.

I had a fleeting worry that maybe Rita was hanging out with me to get information for a story on me, the business, or Paul. But the woman had yet to ask me a personal question, so I dismissed the idea. Even if it were true, it would be worth it to spend time with Rita. She was the most fascinating person with the most fascinating conversations I'd had in a long time.

She was also down-to-earth. After spending so many decades up there among the high offices in the skyscrapers, meeting with the same people and their too-rich partners, things got stale. At least for me, anyway.

Variety was the spice of life, after all.

The night was chilly, but it felt good after the warmth of my apartment. It felt good simply to walk lately, to feel the air on my skin, to hear and see the city all around me.

I felt more alive than I had been in years, and it was good.

A line waited outside the restaurant when I arrived, but I saw recognition light up the host's face when I walked in.

"Mr. Finlay." She smiled at me. "Welcome in tonight. I believe your regular table is ready if you'll give me just a moment."

I ignored the glares from the people in the entryway that had probably been waiting for an hour or more.

The young woman disappeared into the dim interior of the restaurant. If you wanted ambiance, this place was it. They kept the light levels low, the tables were far enough to award some privacy, and by some miracle of acoustics, it was never loud. All I could hear now were soft murmurs and the clinking of flatware and glass.

I turned away from the host stand, hands in my coat pockets, and found Rita waiting just inside the door.

She smiled, her green eyes glittering with the glimmer I had come to understand was omnipresent.

“Hey, Will.”

“Rita, hi.”

She moved closer, but there wasn't time for anything more, however, as the host returned to take us to my usual table.

I had chosen this table for a reason—it was in a corner, away from everyone. The only light came from a glass lamp above, leaving the area around us in shadow. Which meant it was difficult to see whoever was sitting at the table.

In short, it was private. Just the way I liked it.

I took off my coat and turned around to help Rita do the same, but she was already slipping hers onto the back of her chair.

“No chivalry needed here,” I quipped, grinning to take the sting out of my words.

Rita shrugged. “You can push my chair in if you would like.”

I chuckled as she sat, and I pushed her chair in. “Thank you for deigning to allow me to be a gentleman.”

That won me a laugh.

Almost as soon as we had settled, a server was at our table, taking our drink orders. With a nod from Rita, I ordered a bottle of red for the table and my favorite appetizer while she

started with the special for the night. But once the server was gone, an oddly awkward silence descended over the table.

I wasn't sure why. I usually never ran out of things to say, especially when trying to charm the woman across the table from me. Something about tonight felt different. Maybe it was the fact it had taken me far longer to get Rita to agree to, well, if this wasn't a date, then a friendly dinner, than with any of the women I had seen recently.

"You look beautiful tonight," I finally said to break the awkwardness. The woman sitting across from me did look incredible—she was wearing a dress with a skirt that ended a hand's length above her knees in a deep evergreen that set off her eyes, hair, and olive complexion. It also granted me a good look at long lengths of leg. It was the first time I had seen her without layers to ward against the autumn chill.

Rita smiled. "Thanks. You don't look so bad yourself."

"I wasn't fishing for a compliment." I chuckled.

Her smile grew into a grin. "Neither was I."

The start of our banter broke the ice, and we chatted through our appetizers and our first pours from the bottle of wine.

Rita was pouring herself another glass when she peered at the label.

"A four-year-old Côtes du Rhône? That's a good vintage."

"You know wine?" I asked, faintly surprised, although I wasn't sure why. Rita had been full of surprises, and I had the feeling that if she stuck around, I would be in for plenty more.

She shrugged, replacing the bottle on the table, then swirling her glass before she took a delicate inhale. "Enough. My mom is an enthusiast. Although I don't know whether it's the wine or the alcohol she prefers."

I paused with my fork halfway to my mouth. Rita's comment was odd, and I wasn't sure what to make of it. It certainly wasn't full of warmth and affection—if anything, it had been condescending and edged by disdain.

“I take it you and your mom aren’t close?”

Rita’s gaze had been on the ruby-red liquid in her glass, her mind obviously elsewhere. At my question, her green gaze flicked up to mine, widening slightly as though surprised she had said the words out loud.

“Oh, yeah, I guess. We’re just really different people.”

“Different, how?” I pressed, curious.

I thought for a moment that a shrug would be my only answer as the woman sitting across from me grew oddly reticent and guarded, but then she sighed. “My mom puts on a good show but can be cold and calculating. Not everyone can see it, and my mom takes pains to hide it so she can get her way and so people like her, but it wasn’t comfortable growing up like that.”

“You seem different,” I observed. Then again, if she were cold and calculating like her mother, she probably wouldn’t tell me outright. My sense of her told me the woman I saw was the true Rita, not a mask. People like that could only cover up their true selves so much, and at some point, their smiles seemed too brittle to be authentic.

“I guess that’s something she taught me—how not to be her.” Rita flipped a strand of hair behind her shoulder with a little too much force, and I realized I had touched a nerve. “I’m determined not to be like my mother.”

“Well, you seem to be doing a good job,” I offered.

Some of the strain left Rita’s shoulders, but her smile seemed a bit forced. “Thanks.”

I steered the topic to a lighter note from there and made sure to stay away from it for the rest of the evening. If Rita wanted to tell me at some point, she would.

If there was a future between the two of us. As the evening wore on, I found myself hoping there was. What I had earlier determined had been simply interest without a romantic edge had turned to something else the more I spoke and learned about the young woman across from me.

Rita was, as ever, sassy, funny, and strong-willed, all of which I appreciated. But the woman was also brilliant. She didn't shy away from subjects most people avoided from a lack of comprehension, and the breadth of her knowledge was impressive. She was almost a sparring partner when it came to conversation, something I had rarely found, even in people twice her age.

I had enjoyed our conversations at the coffee shop, but tonight was something else altogether. Yes, I was attracted to her, but I was more attracted to her mind—she was fascinating. By the end of the evening, I realized I had found something rare and wonderful.

A line still waited when we stepped outside the restaurant, pulling on our coats against the damp chill in the air. It had rained while we were eating, but the sliver of a moon was visible through the shredded clouds.

Rita shivered and pulled her coat closer around her neck before she smiled at me. “Thank you for dinner.”

“Thank you for the conversation,” I replied, entirely serious. I could tell Rita wasn't sure because he tilted her head, trying to decide whether I was being facetious. “I'm serious. All I get to talk to all day is old men, and all they talk about are stocks and what's wrong with the business.”

I flashed Rita my most charming grin, and I was rewarded with a slight flush and a girlish giggle.

We stood there beside each other for a moment, and I nearly invited her back to my apartment. Before I could say the words, however, she smiled again. “Thanks again, Will. I had a good time tonight. Goodnight.”

Rita turned and started the opposite way down the sidewalk. Surprised, it took me a moment to get any words out.

“Hey, wait up.” I had to jog a few steps to catch up to her long strides, and she turned and stopped when I took hold of her arm. “Am I going to get to see you again?”

“I'll see you for coffee on Monday morning, right?”

“Well, I—”

There was nothing girlish about her laugh this time. It was rich and throaty and entirely amused.

“And I might be interested in seeing you again for dinner some other time. Maybe drinks beforehand sometime. I’m sure you know a good place.”

“Of course I do,” I scoffed, then noticed the gleam of mischief in her eye. “I’ll find a good place,” I promised.

“Good. So, I’ll see you then.”

Then Rita was walking down the sidewalk away from me again, and all I could do was watch her go. I didn’t know what to think of tonight or even what was happening between us. It felt almost like the beginning of a relationship, but I was thirty years out of practice.



Chapter 21

Paul



TWO WEEKS, AND TOMORROW I was going home.

I looked at the calendar on my phone and the schedule I was returning to that Tara had sent me. It was packed, but it would be good to get back to my regular routine. I also couldn't help but look back at the past two weeks—the running from meeting to seemingly fruitless meeting, the dinners, the endless hours of work on something I had thought all but tied up neatly in a bow.

The important thing was that it was done, and I had done it. More than securing the funding, I had supervised INT's buyout from here. It had been a long few days and an even longer couple of nights, but we had gotten it done.

The buyout was moving ahead, and nothing could stop it now.

I finished the last email, shut my laptop, and stretched, rolling my neck to get the crooks out. When I checked my watch, I calculated the time difference. It would be 7:00 AM in New York, and I doubted my father would be up. But this was the last item on my to-do list, and I was getting hungry.

I was surprised when he picked up after only a couple of rings, even though he was halfway around the world.

“Dad?”

“Hey, Paulie.” My father didn't even sound like he had been asleep—he sounded wide awake.

“Are you really up this early?” I couldn't help the shock in my voice.

“You sound surprised.” I could hear him doing something in the background—was he shaving?

“I'm not sure I remember the last time you were up before ten in the morning.”

A derisive snort answered me as though my statement had been entirely asinine. As though he hadn't made a practice of wandering into the office at noon every day for the past few years.

“So, China still treating you well?”

I heard running water turn on, then switch off after a few moments.

“Yeah, it's been good. I'll be glad to be on the way home tomorrow, though.”

“We'll be glad to have you.” My father sounded slightly distracted, and now I was sure he was moving around the bathroom.

“So, I have to get to work, and walking takes extra time. What can I help you with?”

William Finlay, up before seven, ready, and actually hurrying to get to work by eight? And walking instead of taking a car. I had to shake away the disbelief before I could remember why I had called.

“So, Tara sent me my schedule when I get back, and it's packed. But we have a dinner on Monday evening with the chair and vice chair of the Wealdstone Management Group. You have to be there, Dad.”

“What time?”

“Eight on Monday. I'll have Tara send you the information.”

“Great, I'll be there.”

“And Dad, you have to be there, and you have to be on time. It's critically important. I'm not joking.”

The noises behind my father stopped. “Paul, I told you I would be there. Do you not believe me?”

These words stopped me nearly as much as the fact that he was up so early—what did he mean, exactly? Two weeks of filling in for me didn't make up for years of irresponsibility. I still expected him to return to his old ways at any moment, for

the call that would tell me he'd done something stupid or careless, something that would show me he was back to being entirely irresponsible.

But I bit back my words—I didn't want to start another argument, especially over the phone when I was half a world away. Maybe a different tact with my father would work better—something about catching more flies with honey.

Or a father by letting him stay on his roll, hoping it would last for as long as possible if I didn't mention anything or give him a reason to stop.

“Okay. Just make sure you're there.” I sighed.

Another snort. “I told you I would be.”

I shoved a hand through my hair. “Okay, so, have you seen the stocks after the merger?”

A door closed, what I imagined was my father's front door because I heard the ding of an elevator door soon after. “Going up like crazy. Faster than the elevator in that fancy building of yours. Good job, Paulie. You did it.”

“Bill told me the SEC is sniffing around, though.”

The call from one of our lawyers had been the one dark cloud in all of this.

“They're just bored. Everything was above the board, and we're not breaking any laws. They'll sniff around, and then they'll leave us alone.”

My father sounded confident, and it was oddly comforting.

“So, I've been told you've been doing a good job at the office. Everyone says you've been busy.” I stood up from my chair and slipped my laptop into my bag.

“You checking up on me?”

My father was on the street—I could hear the sound of the wind and the busy city street.

“I'm checking up on the business, Dad. And I've really liked what I've seen.”

The line was quiet for a long moment.

“Dad?”

“You do realize that I was in charge long before you got to the company, right?”

The words had none of my father’s usual levity. Did he sound almost... upset?

“I was giving you a compliment, Dad.” I dropped my computer bag by the office door, ready for departure the next day, and pulled it open.

Angela was in the kitchen, wrapped in a sapphire-blue silk robe. She looked up as I came out of the office and offered me a smile, momentarily distracting me from my conversation.

“Well, I don’t need one. Technically, I can do whatever I want. This is still my company. I could even fire you if I wanted.”

I laughed at the cheeky joke. Angela tilted her head in askance, and I waved that I would tell her later.

“All right. I’ll keep that in mind.” I was still chuckling. “Dinner on Monday, Dad. You need to be there and be on your best behavior.”

“I already said I would be.” My father’s tone of voice was definitely peevish.

“Okay, okay. I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

I disconnected and slipped my phone into my pocket as Angela approached me. Her robe was loose at the chest, giving me a view of cleavage.

“Your dad?” she asked, tracing the line of the buttons down my shirt with a finger.

“Yeah. Telling him about the business dinner on Monday.”

“What do you want me to wear?” There was a twinkle in Angela’s eye, but I ignored it. I still had to pack, and I was still hungry.

I pulled away from her, shifting her to the side as I headed into the kitchen. I could see the containers of food on the counter, and my stomach growled.

“What did you get?”

Angela shrugged. “Stuff from that place down the street you like.”

She had been here for the past week, enough time for the two of us to settle into a routine. But I didn't think this had been the vacation Angela had been looking for. I'd spent most of it working, and she'd wandered around, mainly staying in the apartment, even when I told her she could use my driver to explore.

As we unpacked the food in relative quiet, I wasn't sure why Angela had come to begin with. It wasn't like I was going to be gone for weeks on end. More than that, she had known I was on an important business trip before she had hopped on a plane here. Had she somehow gotten the idea we could spend a romantic week together in between everything? Angela, of all people, should have known that would be an impossibility. She knew what my work entailed, or at least how many hours. And a buyout?

She'd said something about being romantic. Angela was possibly the least romantic person I'd ever known, myself included. It was part of the reason we worked so well—neither of us had time for the frilly aspects of a relationship. I never had to worry about spending time on empty romantic gestures with Angela, a trait I already appreciated.

Angela was too pragmatic for romance, which was why her grand gesture, flying all the way to China to see me, made little sense.

We ate in mostly silence. I could tell Angela was reading something on her phone, though I couldn't tell what. Was she angry with me that things hadn't turned out how she had wanted? Again, what had she expected? This wasn't a vacation to Tahiti.

“What time does your plane leave?”

“Ten,” Angela answered, her gaze still on her phone screen.

“I know you’ll have to wait several hours, but why don’t we both take the car service?”

Her gaze finally flicked up toward me. “Sure.” Then she returned to her phone screen.

I almost asked Angela if she was upset with me, but something held me back. I wasn’t sure what kept me quiet—was it a lack of interest in the subject? A need to avoid conflict? Some unknown hesitancy on my part?

Whatever it was, it kept me quiet through the rest of dinner and beyond.

As we worked in silence to pack, our suitcases side by side on the bed, I wondered yet again what Angela had hoped to accomplish by flying all the way out here.

Not for the first time, I wondered if our relationship was what either of us wanted. Was Angela the one I wanted to have a future with? I enjoyed what we had, but I still didn’t know whether I could picture the future.

Not only that, but something didn’t feel right. I couldn’t put a finger on it, but none of Angela’s recent actions made any sense. Something just didn’t feel right.



Chapter 22

Will

I HIT THE BUTTON TO end the call with Paul, my annoyance flaring hotly. Resentment welled behind it. My son had basically given me what amounted to a verbal pat on the head for not messing everything up.

It had been two weeks, and he was still ribbing me about responsibility and being there. Hadn't I shown him that he could rely on me when it counted? And another thought—why did I have to prove myself? In the end, this was my company. I was the CEO. He might have come in and made it run more smoothly, but in the end, his work was built off what I had created.

I felt bad and wanted to find a way to make it up to myself. Along the way, I found myself caught up in the fun of my business again, for which I was grateful. But enough was enough—he wasn't the CEO yet and would never be the founder. I was still firmly in control, and the time to apologize for what had happened at the gala was over.

What had started as a good morning suddenly felt as stormy as the gray clouds hovering over the city, promising rain at some point during the day. I could even feel it on the eddies of the stiff breeze as it blew through piles of dried leaves collecting on the sidewalk.

Rita looked up as I yanked open the door to the coffee shop, and her expression creased. I must have had a stormy expression on my face, probably the first she had seen. It wasn't my normal state of being.

“Something wrong?” she asked.

“My son can be”—I searched for the right word—“condescending when he wants to be.”

“That the one who's in China for the big business deal?”

“Yep. You got it. One big business deal, and he thinks he’s Mr. Bigshot now. Thanks.”

We had taken to buying each other coffee in turns, and Rita was already sliding the takeaway cup with the triple shot of espresso across the table toward me. I took a long drink, willing my frustration away. But the words found their way out soon enough.

“It all started because he told me we have an important business dinner on Monday evening, and he kept repeating how important it was that I was there and on time. I already told him I would be.”

Rita shrugged, taking a sip of her latte. “Trust is a hard thing to win back, Will. It’s probably going to take a lot longer than two weeks to show him you’re really serious this time.”

I stuffed a bite of pastry into my mouth to cover my growl of annoyance at her words. Maybe they were true, but I would be damned if I was going to let Paul act so condescendingly while he was deciding whether and when he could trust me again.

“Just think about it—from all you’ve told me, you lost interest in the company in many ways and let Paul take over. You said that you let things slide when you shouldn’t have, including your obligations to the business.”

I suddenly regretted spilling everything I had to the young woman, including who I was and my history there. But Rita was easy to talk to and a good listener, as any half-decent journalist should be. I’d realized, sitting there talking to her over the past two weeks, I didn’t have many good listeners in my life. Too many of the people surrounding me either liked to hear themselves talk too much to listen or were simple yes men who had no idea how to add value to a conversation. Never mind the vacuous young women I had made a part of my life. Sure, they pretended to listen—or maybe they did, who knew—but they certainly hadn’t known how to carry on an intelligent conversation.

But I hadn’t, after all, chosen them for their conversating abilities. Other things had been on my mind.

Rita was refreshing and bright and knew how to carry on a conversation. I found her fascinating, full of life, and even at her young age, worldly. Her insight provided new perspectives that hadn't occurred to me.

Nor was Rita shy about sharing her opinions, like now. Whether I wanted to hear them or not. And I really didn't today. Not after my conversation with Paul.

"What is it with the younger generations?" I huffed, taking another long drink of my coffee. "You think you know absolutely everything, even though I have dozens of years on you both."

Rita's mouth quirked with amusement, and she flicked a piece of long, straight hair back behind her shoulder. "I'm pretty sure it's because we aren't stuck in our ways. We see things with a fresh perspective."

"You see things without the benefit of years of experience," I corrected her.

An eloquent shrug was my reply. "There are benefits to both."

"Are you really taking my son's side?" I could feel my annoyance rising again.

"I'm not taking anyone's side," was the sharp reply. I had found that Rita wasn't one to back down. She was far more self-possessed than many people twice her age, her self-confidence radiating from her in waves from the first look at her. "I'm just saying he has a point, too."

She met my annoyed scowl head-on without looking away. It was admirable, and I relented with a noncommittal shrug.

"Look at it this way. What would you do if you had an employee who always came in late, didn't show up when you needed him to, and foisted off many of his duties on other people?"

"You don't have to make me sound so negligent," I groused.

“I’m not, I’m stating the facts you’ve given me. And you’re the founder and CEO—you’ve probably earned the right to walk in at noon sometimes.”

Why did she have to add the *sometimes*?

“Seriously, Will, what would you do? Would you trust him?”

Again, she didn’t look away, even when I wanted to.

“No,” I finally admitted. “I’d probably fire the guy, and I wouldn’t trust him with the business.”

Rita made a gesture of *well, there you go*, which should have annoyed me, but she had a valid point. I couldn’t deny it.

“Maybe he doesn’t have to be so rude about it...” Rita’s words trailed off, leaving me to finish her sentence.

Rita and I ate and drank silently for a few minutes as I grudgingly had to admit everything she said was true.

The last two weeks had gone well for Paul and me, but we both had a long way to go with one another. We didn’t know how to be father and son, not really, and it was going to take more than a few gestures of goodwill on both sides to create something new.

“Where did you find insight like that?” I finally asked.

Her secretive smile twisted at her lips again. “I told you I don’t have a stellar relationship with my mom, either. Comes from experience.”

I had to chuckle, and Rita’s smirk pulled into a bright smile as she met my gaze again.

There was something about Rita I liked. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but I felt drawn to her. Then again, maybe I didn’t have to. Perhaps I liked many things about the young woman, and I didn’t have to choose just one.

“Well, this is completely off-topic, but I told you about that dinner on Monday? Would you like to join me? Normally spouses or partners come to these things, so the night isn’t entirely boring and about business.”

I hadn't asked Paul if I needed a date for this dinner, but why not? I knew how these things went, and no doubt whoever was involved would be bringing their trophy wives.

Rita hesitated for a moment.

"It's nothing big, nothing super fancy," I added quickly, trying to reassure her. "No pressure, of course."

"Well—" Her expressive mouth pulled up again into an uncertain line, but then she shrugged again. "Why not? Not every day I get taken to two fancy restaurants in two weeks."

I chuckled.

"But this doesn't mean we're a couple, okay?" Rita caught my gaze and held it to make sure I understood. "And I want that made clear to everyone around the table."

"Embarrassed?" I asked, half teasing and half serious.

"No," she sniffed. "I'm happy to be your date, but don't make any moves on me. We're still getting to know each other."

"No moves, I promise. I was going to say the same thing anyway." I held up a hand in a salute, and one of Rita's eyebrows rose.

"Were you ever a Boy Scout?"

"No." I smirked. "My parents bought the popcorn every year, though."

This made Rita laugh.

The truth was, I wasn't planning on making any moves with Rita. I'd realized early my interest wasn't romantic, at least at this stage. I found Rita interesting, and her company was far more stimulating than anyone I had been around in a long time. If I wanted to be around her, it was because my life was suddenly far more interesting with her in it.

"Dinner is at eight. I'll pick you up at 7:15 to make sure we're there in time. Will that give you enough time to get ready after work?"

"Sure." Rita nodded. "I'll text you my address."

I left the coffee shop feeling better than when I had entered it. Rita had that effect on me. Even with everything she'd said and with the realities she had forced me to face, I was still in a better mood now than I had been after my conversation with Paul.

Talking about Paul, I didn't want to call him and confirm whether Rita was actually invited to dinner. Rita's words about trust-earning taking time were still fresh in my mind. I didn't want the gala fiasco to happen all over again.

Paul picked up after the fourth ring. "Dad?"

"Hey, Paulie. Quick question—do we need a date for Monday or not?"

Silence on the line, then, "Well, it's not mandatory. I mean, you know how these things are. No one's going to expect you to bring anyone, though. I'm kind of surprised you'd even ask."

"Why would you be surprised? I'm asking to ensure I show up the way you want me to."

I wanted it made clear I was extending an olive branch.

Another small silence met my words before Paul spoke again. "In that case, it's up to you."

"Great. I have someone in mind. I think you'll like her."

"As long as it's not that bimbo from the gala, then fine." My son sighed. I could almost hear him rolling his eyes. It was clear he didn't need me bringing some fling to dinner.

"No, really. She's really interesting. Bright, funny. I think you'll like her."

"Sure, Dad."

From my son's tone, I knew he didn't believe me. This time, I was right. Rita was different, and Paul would see it right away. In fact, I had a feeling Rita and Paul would get along well—she might even give him a run for his money. I grinned, thinking about wiping the superior smile from my son's face when Rita made him trip over his words or when she called him on something smugly ridiculous.

This would show Paul how serious I was, even if Rita was young. There would be no way my son could fault me for bringing her along. She would probably outshine everyone at the table, and it would show him just how serious I was. This time, it wasn't going to be me making a fool out of myself.

I couldn't wait to see what Paul had to say about that.



Chapter 23

Paul

AS I REPLACED MY PHONE on my bedside table, I stared up at the ceiling, thinking about my conversation with my dad. I was surprised my father would ask to bring a date, but I was more surprised he would ask me if it was okay. Never once had my father asked my permission to do anything, including when it was about me. He had famously sent me to a summer camp without telling me about it or even asking if it was something I wanted to do. The car had shown up, I'd had ten minutes to pack, and suddenly, I was in the middle of nowhere, not sure why I was there. I had, of course, had a terrible time, and I was sure there was still a part of me that resented him for the entire episode.

However, the fact that my father had asked meant this probably wasn't some fling. My father hadn't called it a date, which was also interesting. He had explicitly used the words *a friend of mine*, which I hadn't heard him use before. The man had also used the words *interesting*, *bright*, and *funny*, which were three words I had never heard strung together about any of the women he had dated. The adjectives usually centered around the size of the woman's chest or the sport she played in college.

I wasn't sure, but I might have been skeptically optimistic.

Beside me, Angela pushed herself up onto her elbow. "What was that all about?"

I shrugged. "I have no idea, but my father asked if he could bring a date to my business dinner on Monday."

Even in the dark, I could see her eye roll. "Seriously? That man has no shame."

"At least he asked this time. I think this one might be different—I haven't heard him talk about someone like this before. He called her intelligent and funny and told me I

would like her. I'm not sure I've ever heard him talk about anyone like that."

"Really?" Angela was already lying down again, her tone just this side of disinterested.

"Really. He usually only mentions other"—I paused, searching for a delicate word—"attributes. Nothing about their personality and certainly nothing about intelligence."

"I'm not sure there was any intelligence to speak about anyway." Angela's snort was derisive.

I pushed myself onto my elbow to look down at her this time. "I think he may have found someone to be in a relationship with. Although he used the words 'a friend,' which is unusual, too."

Angela stared up at me, her hair spread around her on the pillow, her skin lit by the city lights seeping through the crack in the curtains. "He's had dozens of relationships. Why would this one be any different?"

"Just the way he sounded. He sounded almost enthusiastic. Plus the words he used to describe her. And the fact that he asked in the first place instead of picking up the first bimbo he saw on the way to dinner."

Or, I had to be honest, at dinner.

"It's incredibly rare," I finished.

Angela didn't say anything, watching me silently instead. I didn't know whether she was waiting for more information or wasn't interested in the subject matter. She could be damnably difficult to read sometimes.

"I mean, the last time he sounded this serious about someone was probably a decade ago. He met a woman closer to his age, who I actually liked. She was smart, funny, driven."

"What happened to her?"

"I think she wanted more than Dad could give." I flopped back down onto my back, staring at the ceiling. "I think she wanted an actual relationship, and she was too much for him, wouldn't take any of his crap. Maybe too independent for him."

I don't know if what happened with my mom, their marriage falling apart, and the divorce scared him off anything real or what."

"It happens sometimes," was Angela's only reply.

"Not that I care either way." I sighed, pushing hair back from my forehead that had flopped forward. "As long as it doesn't start affecting the business or me."

"As it did," Angela pointed out.

"Yeah, true."

Why did I care so much that my father sounded genuinely interested in someone? It was something I never thought would happen, and I was surprised. It was something beyond that. Was I happy for the guy? Was I hoping a serious relationship would somehow tie him down or calm him down? Was I hoping for some significant change in how my father lived his life?

I couldn't be too optimistic—it was one call, one dinner, and he had very clearly called this woman a friend. My only hope was that she was closer to his age and could carry on an actual adult conversation, unlike the parade of children who had strolled through his life for the past decade.

I didn't know why he had started dating such young women in the first place. After he had broken up with the woman nearly his age, the women in his life had started getting younger and younger. I wondered if that guaranteed he wouldn't have them in his life for very long. But he would be far from the first CEO to marry someone younger than themselves.

Maybe he didn't like the idea of getting older, and these women gave him the illusion he was still young?

"My parents' divorce wasn't terrible—it was pretty friendly, all told. They're still friends, so I don't understand why my father would be scared away from any type of real relationship just because of that."

"He doesn't seem so great with regular relationships, either." Angela sighed. She was clearly over this conversation.

Then she shifted and was on one elbow again, leaning over me. “Besides, who knows how your father feels about his failed marriage. Maybe it scared him away, or showed him he was bad at it, or a million other things. And you don’t have to have a bad divorce for it to screw your view of things. I mean, look at you.”

I very suddenly regretted ever bringing up the subject of relationships with Angela. I should have seen this coming, but I hadn’t, and now I was trapped.

“What do you mean about me?” I asked casually.

“I mean that you seem to be weary of relationships yourself. You told me I’m your first relationship to go beyond a few dates in a long time. We’ve been seeing each other for months, but you won’t talk about the future. Every time I mention anything, you run the other way. It seems to me that maybe your parents’ divorce affected more than just your father.”

Pushing myself into a seated position, I moved back away from Angela, unconsciously so, but still aware it was happening.

“We haven’t been dating for that long, Angela. If I want to take things slowly, so what? We’re in a relationship. Why do we have to talk about being serious right now?”

Angela followed me up, sitting across from me, her gaze intense. “Because I want to talk about it. Your father wants to pretend he’s not getting any younger, but I know I’m not. I don’t have time to waste.”

“Time to waste on what?”

“On boys who don’t know what they want.”

The words stung. “I know what I want, Angela, and right now, this is what I want. I’ve been clear about that from the beginning. I thought you were, too.”

“Well, you thought wrong. I’ve been clear about my intentions lately. You’re the one who won’t talk about them.”

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. It was way too late for this argument, and I had to get up way too early for my flight. “Look, Angela. You’re the one who flew out here and expected something I can’t give right now. This was a business trip—you know how important it was and how much work it would be. You’re one of the people who gave me pointers about business in China to begin with. I’m not sure what you expected, but I’m not up for this conversation now.”

“So, when are you going to be up for it?” Angela crossed her arms, her scowl visible even in the dark. At least, I could feel it.

“When we get home, and the dust has settled from everything. I have a lot on my plate right now. You know I do. The least you could do is give me some time to think. If you can’t deal with that, I guess you’ll have to figure something out on your own.”

We continued to glare at one another for a long moment, neither of us talking. Then I shook my head and got out of bed.

“Where are you going?” Angela’s tone was tight, the irritation under the surface poorly concealed.

“I have to get up for my flight in a few hours. If you’re not leaving with me, I’m going to sleep on the couch so I don’t wake you up.”

“You’re not doing this for me. You’re doing this so you don’t have to talk to me,” Angela spat.

I stopped in the middle of collecting a pillow and thin coverlet from the end of the bed and turned to Angela. “I’m going out there because I’m tired, I have to get up in a few hours, and I need to get at least a few hours of sleep. I told you when we could talk about this subject, okay?”

Angela watched me for a long moment, entirely still. Then her whole demeanor changed—her shoulders dropped and shifted, her chin came down, and she cocked her head to the side as she reached for my arm. “Look, Paul, I’m sorry. You know I get scared sometimes about ending up alone. It’s the reason I push so hard sometimes. Let’s not fight, okay?”

Her tone had shifted from cold and angry to soft and almost wheedling. Her hand around my wrist tried to pull me back into the bed. But I pulled away, thrown off by her sudden change.

“No, I’m going to sleep on the couch. I don’t want to disturb you when I wake up. My stuff is already by the door, and my clothes are in the bathroom so that you won’t hear anything.”

“Paul, I—” She reached out for me again.

“It’s fine, Angela. We’ll talk about it soon, okay? Don’t worry about it. Get some sleep, and I’ll see you when your plane lands.”

I turned and walked from the room, blanket trailing behind me, and shut the door. I heard muffled, angry words but ignored them as I made my way to the couch.

Even though I knew I had to get up in only a few hours, sleep wouldn’t come. My thoughts kept swirling around Angela and her swiftly changing moods.

When we had first begun dating, she had seemed steady and mature. Lately, I had been seeing a more petulant side to her. The fact that she could go from angry to sweetly cajoling in one heartbeat to the next was disturbing. She hadn’t suddenly become sorry or understood why this wasn’t the moment to talk about our relationship.

Was she trying to manipulate me or was she salvaging the last hour of the trip? I didn’t know, and I didn’t care—both made me equally uncomfortable.

In relationships, the longer you went, the more you learned about a person. You got to see their flaws. Angela had seen some of mine already, but I wasn’t so sure how I felt about these particular flaws, nor what they would mean for me in the future.



Chapter 24

Will



JUST AS I HAD WHEN Paul had taken off, I checked my watch. According to his schedule, his plane would be landing soon.

I had been grinning from ear to ear all morning, thinking I might have actually found a woman of which my son would approve. While Rita was young, she was also bright and different from anyone else I had dated—just as I had told Paul on the phone.

There was only one way to find out, and we would see at dinner on Monday.

Then I glanced at my watch again—I'd been so caught up in work I hadn't realized what time it was. I had a meeting I couldn't miss.

When I called Rita and offered to buy her a dress for dinner, I wasn't sure my usual move would work. Rita didn't seem the kind to fall for grand gestures and flashy illustrations of my wealth. When she had asked how fancy the meal would be, I told her it was just a regular dinner. Nothing too fancy, but if she had something of her own to wear, that would work, too.

Rita's reply had been swift—my idea of a regular dinner and her idea of a typical dinner was probably an ocean apart. She doubted she had anything to wear on her salary. Surprisingly, she had taken me up on my offer, and now we had an appointment with Barker at noon at his dress shop over her lunch.

I hurried through the rest of that morning's work and packed up, pulling my coat from the hanger as I was heading out the door.

"Heading out, Mr. Finlay?" Tara asked, looking up from her computer screen as I passed.

“I have a personal appointment at noon, but I should be back around one. Tell him I’ll be back if Paul gets here before then.”

“Will do, Mr. Finlay.” The young woman smiled in return.

I took a car the familiar route to the dress shop this time—it was too far to walk and still be on time. Besides, the weather was still nasty, rain pattering on the car’s tinted windows as we inched through traffic.

Barker looked up from his measuring tape as the bell over the door jingled. “Mr. Finlay, right on time.”

At his words, Rita looked over her shoulder from where she had been facing the mirror, allowing the dressmaker to take her measurements.

“Hey, Will.” Her smile was warm as if she was happy to see me.

I couldn’t deny that I was happy at the thought. I was also happy at the sight of Rita in the middle of the day. I didn’t have to wait until the next morning.

“The usual, Mr. Finlay?” Barker asked, finishing up his measurements and making notations in his little notebook.

At the question, I cringed at the same time I saw one of Rita’s eyebrows rise higher than I had seen it before.

“Whatever she wants, Barker.” I sighed, shoving my hands into my pocket out of want of something to do with them. Part of me wanted to wring the dressmaker’s neck for his ill-timed question. Had he said that on purpose?

I glanced at Rita. She was observing me, but she didn’t look like she was going to storm out immediately, either.

“Ms. Simmons, if you’ll follow me, I believe I have a nice selection in your size.”

With a last look at me, Rita followed Barker into the back of the store, and I let out a sigh of relief. My recent dating history had come up in our conversations, but in more general terms. The idea that I came to the dress shop often enough to have a “usual order” was something else entirely.

She hadn't run away screaming or cursing at me, so maybe that was a good sign.

Barker returned about ten minutes later, a pleased expression on his face. "I believe Ms. Simmons will find a dress she likes," he said, his tone smug.

"I don't believe anyone has come in here and left empty-handed," I answered, my usual far-too-clear compliment to get Barker preening. He always knew what I was doing but never seemed to tire of our game.

"My reputation stands for a reason," was the man's reply. The measuring tape hung around his neck, and he settled his hands over the paunch hidden by a sweater over which he wore a vest.

"It certainly does."

Silence settled between us for a minute.

"I like this one," Barker said finally, the comment I had been waiting for.

"Yeah?" I asked, nonchalant to hide my curiosity.

"She's not like the others if you will forgive my saying so."

I shrugged. "I know."

"She's smart and classy—I can see it in her dress choices, and I'm never wrong."

Unlike the last girl you brought in here, his unspoken seemed to say. My memory from that night had already begun to fade, and so had the girl, but I remembered a confection of pink and sparkles.

"She chose a prom dress for a gala," Barker said as though I hadn't noticed.

I made a noncommittal noise in my throat.

"I haven't seen the young lady in here again," Barker mentioned obliquely.

“We decided to go our own ways,” I answered just as circuitously. I certainly wasn’t going to tell Barker, the notorious gossip, the details of what had happened. It would be splashed all over the gossip rags in a few days.

“Ah, well, it certainly happens.” Barker knew I wasn’t telling the entire story, but he accepted that I wouldn’t tell him, either. “I like this new one, though. Good head on her shoulders.”

“And you can tell this all in one fitting?” I raised my eyebrows as I looked at him.

“Of course.” Barker sniffed. “I’ve been doing this many years, Mr. Finlay. I can instantly tell who someone is by the dress they choose and how they do their fittings. Ms. Simmons was polite and friendly, and her dress choice classy. Ms. Levesque, by the way, was none of those things, and she very specifically chose your company colors—had me redye the satin twice until it was perfect. Quite demanding.”

I filed away the comment, wondering why Barker had brought up Paul’s girlfriend when he probably had a million other examples of demanding, unhappy clients. The statement had even come with a significant look, much like the one he had given me the night of the gala when he had given me similar information.

Noise became a hand that parted the curtain to the back of the store and the dressing rooms. Then the curtains parted, and Rita stepped out. For a moment, I forgot to breathe.

“This one, I think, Mr. Barker. What do you think?” She smiled at the tailor.

The man hurried to her side, making a fuss about the dress and how it fit on her in a way that I wished I could. But it was far too early for that, and I held my words back.

Rita looked stunning. She was tall, with an athletic build that was still soft where it counted, and the slinky black dress hugged every single curve. With her long, dark hair and green eyes, she was the definition of alluring.

It took every ounce of self-control to tear my eyes away, so I wasn't staring at Rita as she worked with Barker to work out the small details of the dress's fit.

I wondered whether the dress and the way Rita looked in it would push things over the top with Paul—sexy wasn't precisely what someone went for at the business dinners. Then again, most of the men I did business with enjoyed something to look at and admire, even if they couldn't touch it. It might even win me some points with them, if not my son.

Well, if it did, so what? Rita was stupidly hot. Once Paul actually gave her a chance and got to know her, he would be fine. She wasn't just a ditz in a dress—she was the whole package.

Maybe meeting Paul and feeling like she knew me better would take our relationship beyond the light, friendly dating that had been the rule of the day so far.

Because, even though I had decided that maybe my interest in Rita was just that, interest, suddenly, I wasn't so sure.

When they were done, Rita changed back into her clothes, I paid for the dress, and Barker made plans to have it picked up once he had finished with the tailoring.

The sidewalk was busy as we stepped out of the dress shop into the cool, wet air.

"Thanks for doing this. I didn't want to show up looking like I had no idea what I was doing," Rita said, taking the pickup slip I handed to her.

"Happy to help." I was still feeling slightly stunned after the vision of Rita in her dress, and talking wasn't my strength at that moment.

"Barker seemed to know you well. Do you do this often?"

Swallowing, I shrugged—there it was. "I've bought dresses here before for other women. You know my history, more or less. It's something I enjoy doing."

Rita's mouth twisted up into something between a smirk and a frown, and she studied me. "I'm not looking for someone to take care of me, in case that's what you think this is," she said finally.

"No, I didn't think that at all. This is just a nice gesture for someone I admire," I answered as nonchalantly as possible, even though my heart was in my throat at her suggestion. "I wouldn't think that of you."

Rita nodded, apparently mollified by my answer. "Okay then, thank you, Will. I appreciate it. I'll see you tomorrow morning?"

I was relieved that she still wanted to see me. "Yes, tomorrow morning."

Rita smiled. "Good. I have to get back to work. See ya." She waved and turned to head down the sidewalk.

She didn't seem to feel my gaze following her as she made her way through the foot traffic.



Chapter 25

Paul

I WAS STRAIGHTENING my tie in the mirror when there was a knock on my door. I glanced at my watch. I had an hour and a half before dinner, and I wasn't expecting anyone tonight. Did I forget to sign something, and they sent it by courier? But Tara would have texted me, and my screen was free of text bubbles. The doorman hadn't called ahead to ask about a visitor.

The knock came again. "Just a second," I called as I finished with the tie, but I must not have said it loud enough because there was a third knock as I crossed my apartment.

"I'm coming," I called, annoyed at whoever had so little patience.

I put my eye to the peephole and stopped, my hand frozen on the doorknob. It was Angela.

"Paul?" I heard and saw her say, her expression one of confusion.

Shaking off my surprise, I unlocked the door and pulled it open.

"Angela? What are you doing here?"

My girlfriend was dressed for a nice night out—a little black dress, heels, and the pearl earrings I had bought her for her birthday.

"I'm here for you, silly." She smiled and pushed past me into my apartment without another word or more explanation.

"For me?" Had I forgotten something important?

She glanced over her shoulder at me and shot me a flirtatious smile. "The business dinner tonight, of course. Why else?"

The business dinner? I hadn't invited Angela to the business dinner. I'd talked to her about it, yes, especially as it

pertained to my father and his date. But I hadn't *invited* her to the dinner. How had she even known the time? Had she called Tara or checked my phone?

Had Angela just invited herself to an important business dinner?

For a moment, I watched my girlfriend wander around my apartment. She had already kicked off her heels and was reaching into a cabinet for a wine glass. She grabbed a bottle of wine from the wine fridge, pulled the cork, and poured herself a small glass.

I should have enjoyed the scene—Angela was clearly at home in my apartment. At that moment, after inviting herself to my business dinner, it just seemed presumptuous. Yes, we were serious, but were we serious enough that she could assume she was coming with me to an important business dinner? Even if my father were bringing a friend, the others in the party would be bringing their wives, as I had pointed out our last night in China, that wasn't Angela. Not yet.

Maybe not ever. Especially not when they assumed a sort of control in my life that I hadn't given to them.

I had been too busy with the takeover now that I was back in the pilot seat to think any more about it. Truthfully, it was a welcomed distraction. I wasn't ready to think about it yet, either.

"Hey, we have to leave soon. Are you ready?" Angela took another sip of her wine as she padded over to me.

"Yeah, almost," I managed to stutter.

"Good. You told your father not to be late, and we don't want to be, either." She put her hand up to my tie, made a face, and turned to put the glass of wine on the entryway table next to the door. She was back a moment later, fixing the tie I had just spent five minutes fixing on my own.

Angela had invited herself to my business dinner, and she was fixing my tie like she was my mother. There wasn't anything wrong with it, but I pulled away, annoyed. For a

moment, she looked nonplussed but shrugged it off and turned to pick up her wine glass.

“I’m almost ready. The car is going to be here in ten minutes.”

I stalked back into my room without waiting for an answer. When I reached the safety of the bathroom, I had to lean back for a moment and close my eyes while I took deep breaths. I needed my focus and calm tonight, not for my head to be stuck in my annoyance at my girlfriend’s presumptuousness.

It was fine. It was all fine. I didn’t mind her coming, especially since Dad was bringing someone. Maybe she could temper things if it all went downhill and Dad started acting like himself again. It was all some kind of misunderstanding. I had invited her to the gala, after all. Why wouldn’t she expect to come tonight? And plenty of wives and girlfriends fixed their partner’s ties.

It was fine.

As I finished getting ready in the bathroom, I could hear Angela moving around, flipping on the TV to the news, and pouring more wine.

It was a domestic scene, calm and normal and peaceful. But it didn’t feel normal. It didn’t give me the sense of peace I had always envisioned.

Was it me? Was there something wrong with me? Why didn’t I want what Angela was offering—a partner, a home, a life together with someone? It was true I didn’t believe in marriage. I’d seen too many, including my parents’, crumble. I had something now, yet, I seemed to be actively trying to disentangle myself from it.

Or was the problem with Angela? On paper, she was perfect for me. But did she possess something, or lack something, that kept me from connecting with her on a deeper level? And the bigger question: was it something I could be okay with, push through, get past, to find what I had been searching for?

I straightened my tie again. Angela had knocked it slightly askew when she was fussing with it. She couldn't stop seeming to meddle at the worst times, like flying to China in the middle of the biggest business deal of my career. I hadn't quite gotten over my frustration with the entire incident, wondering what exactly she had thought she was doing or what she thought would happen.

The thought sent another flush of annoyance through me, and I took another deep breath.

It was probably all the stress lately—that had to be it. Between all the preparation for the gala and the buyout and accompanying high-stress trip to China to secure funding, I hadn't had a break in months. The late nights, the pressure, the sleeplessness, the anxiety, and the high stakes combined to make everything look worse than it was at this particular moment.

That had to be it. I was overtired.

How could I be upset with Angela for being loving? Wasn't that what you did in a relationship? She was showing me in her own way, which, to be fair, might look awkward to the casual observer. Neither of us had a lot of practice in the romance and relationship arena. I certainly wouldn't win any awards in the best boyfriend category.

Angela and I might have been at the top of our respective fields, but in this respect, sometimes it felt like we were both still stumbling around like kids.

Footsteps in my bedroom heralded Angela's turn into my room, her reflection appearing in the mirror, wine glass still in her hand.

"So, do you know who your dad is bringing tonight yet?" she asked.

I shook my head. "No, not yet. I barely had a chance to talk with him on Friday beyond getting caught up."

By then jetlag had hit me like a punch in the head. I'd slept most of the weekend so I could be ready and alert for work and this dinner today. It had also been an excellent excuse to

avoid Angela in case she wanted to continue our conversation we'd started in Shanghai.

"You're still okay with this?" Angela ran a finger down my suit coat, brushing off an invisible speck of dust.

I shrugged and turned, resting back against the sink. "I'm trying to give him a chance to prove himself. He ran things well while I was gone, and I don't want to break the streak."

"You do realize he's your father, and you're the kid, right?" Angela asked as she moved to stand in front of me, one side of her mouth tipped up in a subtle smirk.

"Maybe if he wants our relationship to reflect our roles, he should act his own," I replied, trying not to let my aggravation creep into my tone. Not too much, anyway.

Angela shrugged. "I'm sorry to tell you that it might be too late for that. He's been this way forever. Not sure he's up for a significant change at this late stage.

"I guess I'm an optimist, then. I think there's good in everyone."

We watched each other for a moment, something odd passing between us as a flash of emotion across Angela's face that I couldn't read. Then she turned away, fidgeting with the ornamental vase of copper and metal flowers my interior decorator had placed there but now I couldn't be bothered to dust unless my housecleaner did it.

"What's her name, anyway?"

"I don't remember if he ever told me. Just said it was a friend." I slipped my suit jacket off the hanger, sweeping at the smear of something Angela had left when she had brushed the invisible dirt from the sleeve.

"Probably some bimbo he found at a strip club or something like it," she huffed and tilted her glass back to finish the wine.

I winced. She had a point, but it was still in poor taste. She didn't know my father well enough to speak of him like that. She hadn't even met him yet.

“If nothing else, my father doesn’t do strip clubs,” I said by way of a gentle reproach as I put on my suit jacket and adjusted it in the mirror until it sat perfectly.

However, Angela didn’t seem to hear the rebuke because she shrugged. “Not much of a stretch, in my opinion,” was her reply as she padded out of the bathroom, her empty wineglass lying forgotten on the bathroom countertop.

I stared at it until I heard the ding from my phone saying my car had arrived.

Slipping my shoes on, I grabbed my coat to find Angela already at the door, smiling sweetly as she waited for me. “I have a great idea,” she said as I closed and locked the door behind us.

“Yeah?” I slipped the key into my pocket as we headed toward the elevator.

“When we get home, we should cuddle up and watch a movie. It’s cold tonight, so the weather is perfect.”

“Yeah, sure,” I agreed faintly.

When we get home.

Home? As in my apartment?

Had that been a slip, the general *home* as in where we were, or was Angela getting ahead of herself?



Chapter 26

Will

“THANK YOU, WILSON.” As I exited the car, I thanked my driver, who stood by the door he had opened. “This the place?”

“It’s the address you gave me,” the man replied with a slight shrug.

I stopped and looked up at the brownstone that had been converted into apartments, counting up to the third floor, wondering which apartment was Rita’s.

“I’ll wait here,” my driver said, shutting the door I had just exited and walking back around to the driver’s side.

Searching for the apartment number on the buzzer pad, I found 301 and pressed the black button.

“Hello?” the answer crackled a moment later over the intercom.

“Rita, it’s Will.”

“Oh, you’re early. I’m not quite ready yet. Why don’t you come up?”

The door clicked unlocked to the tune of the ear-spitting buzzer. I thought about waiting downstairs for her instead, wondering if it was too early. But she had invited me up, after all, so I pulled it open to make my way up the stairs to Rita’s apartment.

When she answered the door, Rita was still in her work clothes, her makeup half-finished.

“Sorry, I’m not ready yet.” She blushed slightly, the first time I’d seen her do anything of the sort. “I had a meeting at work that ran over, and then the train was late. I’ll be ready in fifteen minutes. Is that okay?”

“Of course,” I followed her inside and shut the door behind me.

“Great. Just get comfortable wherever.” Rita gestured to the room at large over her shoulder before she disappeared into the only other door in the place beside the coat closet.

I glanced around, feeling a sense of déjà vu. I hadn’t been in an apartment this small or old since I had first been married and Paul had been a baby. It reminded me a lot of the one my ex and I had lived in when I had been trying to get the business off the ground, and we’d been struggling to pay the bills.

Looking around, I could almost intuit where everything was—it was the same in small apartments the world over—tiny kitchen, the counter crowded with food boxes and unread mail. The living room was a single couch that had seen better days, a disk chair, and a dining room table that could fit only two people with a few boxes piled on top. A shopping bag had fallen over, its items spilling onto the scratched top. More boxes, a paper bag, and a pile of discarded shoes were near the door.

“So, is your son bringing a date?”

Rita’s voice drifted in from her room, and I moved closer.

“I have no idea. Probably the woman he’s dating.”

“He’s dating someone?” Rita leaned out of her bathroom, and after a moment’s hesitation, I walked in. It felt strange being in her room, again, another step, but the young woman didn’t seem to mind.

“Yeah, for a while now. Maybe four or five months?”

“Huh. What’s she like?” Rita disappeared back into her bathroom, and I heard things shifting around in a makeup bag.

“I haven’t met her, to be honest. I’ve only seen her a couple of times in his office and only at a distance. Paul seems to like her, anyway.”

“But you don’t?”

“I don’t know a lot about her,” I admitted, shifting clothes so I could sit in the single chair in the room instead of wandering around like a creep. “Just what I’ve heard.”

“And what have you heard?”

Rita didn't seem to spend much time at home—outside of the disorder, there weren't many decorations up. The rest consisted of a handful of pictures, a single framed painting reproduction in the living room, and a funky lamp on the bedside table that looked like it had seen better days.

“Not a ton, either, although what I have isn't shining. The tailor you met on Friday isn't a huge fan. He says she was rude to him, but with Barker, you have to take what he says with a grain of salt. His love of a good fabric is only second to his love of spreading gossip.”

I heard Rita laugh. “Good thing I didn't give away any state secrets, then.”

“Yeah.” I chuckled.

“Does he like her?”

The question was curious. “Like her? Well, they are dating —”

“No, I mean, are they serious?”

“Oh.” I thought about it for a moment. “I guess he did mention something about the future—”

And we argued because of it. Because I hadn't heard good things about his girlfriend, and I had warned him against it.

“But we don't talk a lot about that. I doubt he would share his plans with me.”

I pulled my gaze from Rita's unmade bed and the thoughts swirling around my head to my watch and realized with alarm that if we didn't leave soon, we would be late.

“Are you almost ready? We have to go.”

“One more minute, and I'll be done. Promise,” was the reply.

Not wanting to distract Rita anymore, I wandered back into the living room. Rita had asked a lot of questions about Paul, but I didn't mind answering them. She seemed interested

in my life, of which Paul was a part, which by extension, made me think she was genuinely interested in me.

Anyway, Paul was much closer to her age, not even a full ten years older. That might put me on alert, but I didn't see either of them being interested in the other. Rita was lively and talkative, while Paul was serious and meticulous—he would find her apartment intolerable. He would probably find her chatter annoying, too. I wasn't sure Rita would be too keen on my son's specific brand of seriousness. Paul tended to go for quiet types like himself.

I wandered to the side table against the wall, and the photos lined up on the top: one of Rita with an older man, one of her with two older women, and a few with other young women her age in their graduation robes. My gaze snagged on the one of Rita with the two other women. One had gray hair and was clearly far older. But the other had dark hair, and though she was older than Rita in the photo, it was difficult to tell her exact age.

Something about the other woman sparked something in my mind, but I didn't know what. I stared at the picture, trying to pull out whatever it was, like a toy on a string. It was nearly on the tip of my tongue when I heard the tap of heels behind me and turned to find Rita striding out of her room.

Whatever I had been trying to remember fell away instantly—Rita looked spectacular. What had been a well-fitting dress at the shop had become something else entirely with Barker's tailoring.

"You look spectacular," I said, guiding Rita to the door.

She grabbed her coat and almost didn't let me take it from her as I reached for it.

"Let me be the gentleman tonight? I promise not to tell anyone."

Rita huffed a laugh but let me take her coat and help her into it.

"Is there something wrong with being a little traditional sometimes? I promise I know you can do it yourself," I teased.

“I guess I’m not used to guys my age showing me the courtesy,” Rita replied, the old door creaking as she had to put some force into yanking it open.

“I’m not old.” I chuckled as we headed out.

I felt her gaze on me for a moment, but for once, she didn’t reply. Her lack of response said more about what she thought on the subject than any words would have.

“I’m middle-aged,” I insisted, following her down the stairway.

“I’ll go with that,” was the bright reply as Rita greeted a neighbor passing us on their way up.

“Gee, thanks.”

Rita shot me a mischievous grin over her shoulder as she opened the front apartment door. Then she stopped when she realized the sleek black sedan at the curb was waiting for us, my driver once again waiting by the open door.

“Is that for us?”

“Of course.” I flashed her a grin, gesturing for her to precede me into the back of the black car.

“Fancy.” Rita’s word was irreverent, but I could see a sparkle in her eye as she eyed the plush interior and tinted windows. She wasn’t hesitant to get in, either.

“Only the best.” I chuckled and followed her inside, and my driver shut the door.



Chapter 27

Paul



I JIGGLED MY PHONE in my hand as I glanced out the car window. We were inching forward in the worst traffic in a long time, a red trail of headlights stretching in front of us as far as I could see.

“Can’t you take another route?” I asked my driver, leaning forward as though he would somehow hear me better even though he was in the same car.

“Sorry, sir. There’s some sort of function going on tonight, so half the roads are blocked off. We should still be there on time.”

Sitting back, I resisted the urge to fidget like a kid. “We’re going to be late,” I growled under my breath.

“We’ll be fine.”

Angela didn’t even look up as she replied to me. She had been on her phone since we had gotten into the car, scrolling endlessly through something. I realized I didn’t even know what. Her flirtatiousness from the apartment seemed entirely forgotten, and we’d barely said a word to one another the entire ride.

I didn’t know what presaged Angela’s changes in moods. Had it always been this way, but I had been too enamored of a new relationship to notice? One second, she couldn’t seem to get enough, and the next, she was entirely disinterested. Hot to cold, to hot and back before I’d even had a chance to get my feet back under me.

“We should have left earlier.”

“We’ll be fine.”

Angela’s reply cut off any more conversation, overtones of exasperation hovering around the edges of the clipped words.

I looked down at my phone I had been flipping over and over in my hand, irritation nudging against the back of my

mind as the time flashed onto the screen. Adding to my restlessness was the fact that my father hadn't returned my text yet about tonight.

He had been in his office when I'd left for the day, and we'd exchanged a wave but no words when he had indicated he was on a call. Instead, I had sent a single text confirming dinner—just one. I was still trying to give him space to prove I could rely on him. But he had yet to reply, and it was making me nervous.

“Do you think he'll be there?”

It took a moment for Angela to disengage from whatever was on her phone screen. “Your dad?”

“Yes.”

Who else would I be talking about?

Angela shrugged. “I guess we'll see.”

“That's helpful.” I didn't mean to sound so petulant.

My girlfriend's eyes narrowed. “What exactly do you want me to say, Paul? Neither of us can control your father. He's a grown man. If you're so concerned, maybe you should start looking into ways to get him out of a place of power in the company.”

The retort cut me off sharply. “No, no way.”

I turned back toward the window, but I could feel Angela's gaze on me for a moment longer before I heard her phone screen unlock, and we fell into silence again.

Take my father from a position of power at the company? There was no way. One, I wasn't about to stage a coup. My father and I clashed on many points, but I wasn't going to betray him like that. Two, as much as I worried about how his actions affected our business prospects, the last couple of weeks had shown me we also needed each other. We each filled a role at the company. For my part, at least, I wasn't ready to take it all on myself.

No, I would never do that to my father.

A chilly silence fell on the car as we continued to inch our way forward until, finally, a side street opened, and my driver took the route.

“At least everyone will have been stuck in the same traffic, sir,” the driver offered as he pulled up at the curb in front of the restaurant.

It was an offering of apology, even though I knew there was nothing he could have done differently.

“Let’s hope so.” I smiled and gave him a pat on the shoulder before one of the restaurant’s valets opened the door for us.

After sliding across the seat and out, I straightened my coat and cuffs as I waited for Angela to get out of the car behind me, my gaze sweeping the area with a creeping sense of calamity.

My father was nowhere to be found.

“Welcome back to the Fitzroy, Mr. Finlay,” the valet said.

“Has my father arrived yet?” I asked, hoping he was inside.

The valet’s face creased as he thought. “I don’t believe so, sir. I’ve been here all evening. Although I did have a short break an hour ago. Maybe he arrived then?”

“No, that would be too early.”

Unsure what else to say, the valet nodded and moved to shut the door behind Angela.

No father. No car. No text. No message.

Frustration warred with defeat. Despite knowing better, some of me had genuinely thought my father would be here, if not early, then on time. The last two weeks had given me a modicum of hope that he might turn a new leaf. Or even a quarter of a leaf. But two weeks was apparently his limit on responsibility. This was not a good start.

What else had I expected?

“Your father’s not here yet?” Angela came to stand next to me, looking up and down the sidewalk.

“No.”

I was sure that one word said everything.

“One of your guests is already inside, though, sir,” the valet added.

“All right.” I made a final adjustment to my coat with a roll of my shoulders and took a deep breath to steel myself for the evening and the inevitable questions about my father.

We were following the valet to the door when another car pulled up at the curb. I glanced over my shoulder, my attention caught by the noise, then took a second look.

“Angela, wait.”

I didn’t wait to see if my girlfriend had heard me as I turned, a rush of relief accompanied by something more potent.

“What?” came her voice from behind me.

“I want you to meet my father. I don’t think you’ve ever actually met him before.”

A second valet was already at the car door, pulling it open, and my father greeted him warmly as he got out. Then he smiled as he caught sight of me, adjusting his cuffs just as I had done.

“Hey, kid. Sorry we’re late. Got caught in that awful traffic.”

“You’re right on time. Actually”—I glanced at my watch—“you had five whole minutes before you were late. I’m impressed.”

I could hear the relief in my voice.

“Even better.” He flashed me one of his trademark grins, then turned just as a woman got out of the back of the car.

A vision unfolded as she straightened, her tall, willowy, body outlined by a slinky black dress that left just enough to

the imagination. A cloud of dark hair fell in loose curls down her back and framed a face that my wildest imagination couldn't have dreamed up, with full red lips and intensely green eyes that pulled me in as they flickered toward me.

For a moment, the world dropped away, and I forgot to breathe.

The woman's gaze stayed locked with mine as though neither of us could look away. Then the world rushed back in, overwhelming the noise and sound and my father saying something.

“—is my son, Paul.”

The woman blinked as though coming back to herself, and her gaze slid to something over my shoulder. Then her eyes widened. “What the hell?” she asked, her complexion visibly paling before her cheeks colored with anger. “Is this some kind of joke?”

“Is what a joke?” My father looked as bewildered at the reaction as I felt.

“Rita, what are you doing here?” Angela pushed past me, her tone sharp.

“What do you mean what am I doing here? What are you doing here?” the woman retorted.

“Rita?” I looked between the two women. “Do you know each other?”

“Of course, we do,” Angela huffed testily, crossing her arms as she shook her head. “Rita is my daughter.”

THE END





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I Hate You

I Hate You A Little Bit

I Hate You A Little Bit More

A Bump in the Road Series

Expecting Love

Selfless Act

Doctor's Orders

A Burning Love Series

Spark of Passion

Flame of Desire

Blaze of Ecstasy

A Chance at Forever Series

Forever Perfect

Forever Desired

Forever Together

A Dark Casino Romance Series

High Roller

Place Your Bet

All Or Nothing

A Dark Mafia Romance Series

Taken By The Mob Boss

Truce With The Mob Boss

Taking Over the Mob Boss

Trouble For The Mob Boss

Tailored By The Mob Boss

Tricking the Mob Boss

A Dating App Series

I've Been Matched

You've Been Matched

We've Been Matched

A "Kind of" Billionaire

Taking a Risk

Safety in Numbers

Pretend You're Mine

A Maybe Series

Maybe I Should

Maybe I Shouldn't

Maybe I Did

A Royal Affair Series

Royally F*cked

Royally Screwed

Royally Obsessed

Assisting the Boss Series

Billion Reasons

Duke of Delegation

Late Night Meetings

Delegating Love

Suitors and Admirers

BBW Romance Series

Capturing Her Beauty

Pursuing Her Dreams

Tracing Her Curves

Beating the Biker Series

Making Her His

Making the Break

Making of Them

Betrayal at the Bay Series

Devil's Bay

Devil's Deceit

Devil's Duplicity

Billionaire Banker Series

Banking on Him

Price of Passion

Investing in Love

Knowing Your Worth

Treasured Forever

Banking on Christmas

Billionaire Banker Box Set Books #1-3

Billionaire CEO Brothers

Tempting the Player

Late Night Boardroom

Reviewing the Performance

Result of Passion

Directing the Next Move

Touching the Assets

Billionaire Hitman Series

The Hit

The Job

The Run

Billionaire Holiday Romance Series

Driving Home for Christmas

The Valentine Getaway

Cruising Love

Billionaire Holiday Romance Box Set

Billionaire in Disguise Series

Facade

Illusion

Charade

Billionaire Secrets Series

The Secret

Freedom

Courage

Trust

Impulse

Billionaire Secrets Box Set Books #1-3

Blind Sight Series

See Me

Fix Me

Eyes On Me

Branded Series

Money or Nothing

What People Say

Give and Take

Building Billions

Building Billions - Part 1

Building Billions - Part 2

Building Billions - Part 3

Butler & Heiress Series

To Serve

For Duty

No Chore

All Wrapped Up

Change of Heart Series

The Heart Needs

The Heart Wants

The Heart Knows

Club Confession Series

Envy

Crave

Decoy

Urge

Oath

Club Confession Box Set Books #1-3

Cottage by the Sea Series

Surging Tide

Distant Shores

Twisting Ocean

Counting the Billions

Counting the Days

Counting On You

Counting the Kisses

Cry Wolf Reverse Harem Series

Beautiful & Wild

Misunderstood

Never Tamed

Darkest Night Series

Savage

Vicious

Brutal

Sinful

Fierce

Darkest Night Box Set Books 1-3

Dead of Night Series

Abduction

Department of Defense Series

Dead Ahead

Blue Falcon

Joint Service

Indirect Attack

Devils MC Series

Pain

Ruin

Diamond in the Rough Anthology

Billionaire Rock

Billionaire Rock - part 2

Dirty Little Taboo Series

Flirting Touch

Denying Pleasure

Forbidding Desire

Craving Passion

Dominating PA Series

Her Personal Assistant - Part 1

Her Personal Assistant - Part 2

Her Personal Assistant Box Set

Fake Billionaire Series

Faking It

Temporary CEO

Caught in the Act

Never Tell A Lie

Fake Christmas

Fake Billionaire Box Set #1-3

Falling in Love Series

Small Town Charisma

Pleasing My Sweetheart

Switch My Future

Firehouse Romance Series

Caught in Flames

Burning With Desire

Craving the Heat

Firehouse Romance Complete Collection

Forging Billions Series

Dirty Money

Petty Cash

Payment Required

For His Pleasure

Elizabeth

Georgia

Madison

Fortune Riders MC Series

Billionaire Biker

Billionaire Ransom

Billionaire Misery

Fortune Riders Box Set - Books #1-3

Fragile Series

Fragile Touch

Fragile Kiss

Fragile Love

Great Temptation Series

The Devil's Footsteps

Heaven's Command

Mortals Surrender

Hades' Spawn Motorcycle Club

One You Can't Forget

One That Got Away

One That Came Back

One You Never Leave

One Christmas Night

Hades' Spawn MC Complete Series

Hard Rocked Series

Rhyme

Harmony

Lyrics

Heart of Stone Series

The Protector

The Guardian

The Warrior

Heart of the Battle Series

Celtic Viking

Celtic Rune

Celtic Mann

Heart of the Battle Series Box Set

Heistdom Series

Master Thief

Goldmine

Diamond Heist

Smile For Me

Your Move

Green With Envy

Saving Money

Highlander Wolf Series

Pack Run

Pack Land

Pack Rules

Hollyweird Fae Series

Inception of Gold

Disruption of Magic
Guardians of Twilight

How To Love A Spy

The Secret
The Secret Life
The Secret Wife

Just About Series

About Love
About Truth
About Forever

Just About Box Set Books #1-3

Justice Series

Seeking Justice
Finding Justice
Chasing Justice
Pursuing Justice

Justice - Complete Series

Karma Series

Walk Away
Make Him Pay
Perfect Revenge

King of Hades MC Series

Sinner
Tempting Sinner
Enticing Sinner

Kissed by Billions

Kissed by Passion
Kissed by Desire

Kissed by Love

Leaning Towards Trouble

Trouble

Discord

Tenacity

Love on the Sea Series

Ships Ahoy

Rough Sea

High Tide

Lovers in London Series

Risking Millions

Venture Capital

Worth the Expense

The Price of Luxury

Exclusive Passion

Sparkling Christmas

Lovers in London - 3 Book Box Set

Love You Series

Love Life

Need Love

My Love

Managing the Billionaire

Never Enough

Worth the Cost

Secret Admirers

Chasing Affection

Pressing Romance

Timeless Memories

Managing the Billionaire Box Set Books #1-3

Managing the Bosses Series

The Boss

The Boss Too

Who's the Boss Now

Love the Boss

I Do the Boss

Wife to the Boss

Employed by the Boss

Brother to the Boss

Senior Advisor to the Boss

Forever the Boss

Christmas With the Boss

Billionaire in Control

Billionaire Makes Millions

Billionaire at Work

Precious Little Thing

Priceless Love

Valentine Love

The Cost of Freedom

Trick or Treat

The Night Before Christmas

Gift for the Boss - Novella 3.5

Managing the Bosses Box Set #1-3

Managing the Bosses Novellas

Mislead by the Bad Boy Series

Deceived

Provoked

Betrayed

Model Mayhem Series

Shameless

Modesty

Imperfection

Moment in Time

Highlander's Bride

Victorian Bride

Modern Day Bride

A Royal Bride

Forever the Bride

Mountain Millionaire Series

Close to the Ridge

Crossing the Bluff

Climbing the Mount

My Best Friend's Sister

Hometown Calling

A Perfect Moment

Thrown in Together

My Darker Side Series

Darkest Hour

Time to Stop

Against the Light

Neverending Dream Series

Neverending Dream - Part 1

Neverending Dream - Part 2

Neverending Dream - Part 3

Neverending Dream - Part 4

Neverending Dream - Part 5

Neverending Dream Box Set Books #1-3

Outside the Octagon

Submit

Fight

Knockout

Protecting Diana Series

Her Bodyguard

Her Defender

Her Champion

Her Protector

Her Forever

Protecting Diana Box Set Books #1-3

Protecting Layla Series

His Mission

His Objective

His Devotion

Racing Hearts Series

Rush

Pace

Fast

Regency Romance Series

The Duchess Scandal - Part 1

The Duchess Scandal - Part 2

Reverse Harem Series

Primals

Archaic

Unitary

Roommate Wanted Series

The Roommate

The Bunkmate

The Flatmate

R&S Rich and Single Series

Alex Reid

Parker

Sebastian

Zane

Saving Forever

Saving Forever - Part 1

Saving Forever - Part 2

Saving Forever - Part 3

Saving Forever - Part 4

Saving Forever - Part 5

Saving Forever - Part 6

Saving Forever Part 7

Saving Forever - Part 8

Saving Forever Boxset Books #1-3

Secrets & Lies Series

Strange Secrets

Evading Secrets

Inspiring Secrets

Lies and Secrets

Mastering Secrets

Alluring Secrets

Secrets & Lies Box Set Books #1-3

Shifting Desires Series

Jungle Heat

Jungle Fever

Jungle Blaze

Sin Series

Payment for Sin

Atonement Within

Declaration of Love

Sins of the Father Series

The Betrayer

Southern Romance Series

Little Love Affair

Siege of the Heart

Freedom Forever

Soldier's Fortune

Spanked Series

Passion

Playmate

Pleasure

Spelling Love Series

The Author

The Book Boyfriend

The Words of Love

Strength & Style

Suits You, Sir

Tailor Made

Perfect Gentleman

Taboo Wedding Series

He Loves Me Not

With This Ring
Happily Ever After

Tattooist Series

Confession of a Tattooist
Surrender of a Tattooist
Heart of a Tattooist
Hopes & Dreams of a Tattooist

Tennessee Romance

Whisky Lullaby
Whisky Melody
Whisky Harmony

The Bad Boy Alpha Club

Battle Lines - Part 1
Battle Lines

The Brush Of Love Series

Every Night
Every Day
Every Time
Every Way
Every Touch

The Brush of Love Series Box Set Books #1-3

The City of Mayhem Series

True Mayhem
Relentless Chaos
Broken Disorder

The Coffee Shop Romance Series

A Rich Aftertaste
A Bitter Flavor

Baked to Perfection

The Debt

The Debt: Part 1 - Damn Horse

The Debt: Complete Collection

The Fire Inside Series

Dare Me

Defy Me

Burn Me

The Gentleman's Club Series

Gambler

Player

Wager

The Golden Game

On The Pitch

Respect the Game

All Game

Sweat and Tears

The Final Score

The Golden Game Box Set Books #1-3

The Golden Mail

Hot Off the Press

Extra! Extra!

Read All About It

Stop the Press

Breaking News

This Just In

The Golden Mail Box Set Books #1-3

The Long Con Series

The Misfit

The Hustle

The Cheat

The Lucky Billionaire Series

Lucky Break

Streak of Luck

Lucky in Love

The Millionaire's Pretty Woman Series

Perfect Stranger

Captive Devotion

Sweet Temptations

The Sound of Breaking Hearts Series

Disruption

Destroy

Devoted

The Takeover Series

Love Notes

Fine Print

The University of Gatica Series

The Recruiting Trip

Faster

Higher

Stronger

Dominate

No Rush

University of Gatica - The Complete Series

The Wrong Side of the Tracks

The Knockback

The Overshare

The Fightback

Timing is Everything Series

Right Time

Right Place

Right Reasons

T.N.T. Series

Troubled Nate Thomas - Part 1

Troubled Nate Thomas - Part 2

Troubled Nate Thomas - Part 3

Toxic Touch Series

Noxious

Lethal

Willful

Tainted

Craved

Toxic Touch Box Set Books #1-3

Undercover Boss Series

Marketing

Finance

Legal

Undercover Series

Perfect For Me

Perfect For You

Perfect For Us

Unknown Identity Series

Unknown

Unpublished

Unexposed

Unsure

Unwritten

Unknown Identity Box Set: Books #1-3

Unlucky Series

Unlucky in Love

UnWanted

UnLoved Forever

War Torn Letters Series

My Sweetheart

My Darling

My Beloved

Wet & Wild Series

Stormy Love

Savage Love

Secure Love

Worth It Series

Worth Billions

Worth Every Cent

Worth More Than Money

You & Me - A Bad Boy Romance

Just Me

Touch Me

Kiss Me

Standalone

Wash

Loving Charity

Summer Lovin'

Love & College

Billionaire Heart

First Love

Frisky and Fun Romance Box Collection

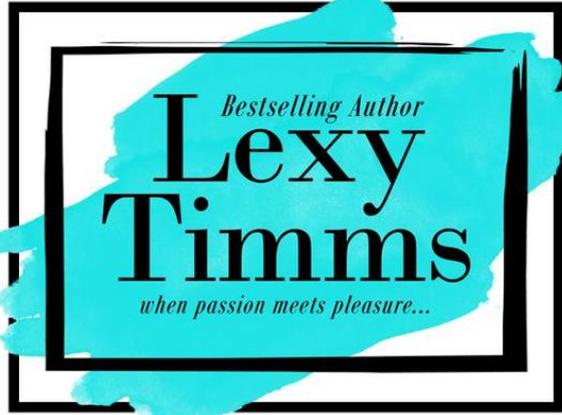
Beating Hades' Bikers

Everyone Loves a Bad Boy

Dead of Night

Christmas Countdown - The Advent Calendar

Watch for more at [Lexy Timms's site](#).



Bestselling Author
Lexy
Timms
when passion meets pleasure...

About the Author

“Love should be something that lasts forever, not is lost forever.” Visit USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR, LEXY TIMMS <https://www.facebook.com/SavingForever>
Please feel free to connect with me and share your comments. I love connecting with my readers. Sign up for news and updates and freebies - I like spoiling my readers! <http://eepurl.com/9i0vD> website: www.lexytimms.com
Dealing in Antique Jewelry and hanging out with her awesome hubby and three kids, Lexy Timms loves writing in her free time. MANAGING THE BOSSES is a bestselling 10-part series dipping into the lives of Alex Reid and Jamie Connors. Can a secretary really fall for her billionaire boss?

Read more at [Lexy Timms's site](#).