

DUET
PART ONE

THE
Hanschen
THE
Trench

Sybil Knight



SYBIL • KNIGHT

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Editing: Kat Pagan, Lunar Rose Editing Services

<https://www.lunar-rose-services.com>

Paperback Formatting: Frankie Page

SOCIALS:

Email: authorsybilknight@gmail.com

Newsletter: www.sendfox.com/dahliaandsybil

Facebook Group:

www.facebook.com/groups/dahliaandsybilslittedevils

Instagram: www.instagram.com/author.sybil.knight

Facebook Page: www.facebook.com/authorsybilknight

TikTok: www.tiktok.com/@queenofchaosbooks

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DEDICATION:

Dahlia, thanks for letting me use your man. Chicks before
dicks. For life.

AUTHOR NOTES:

Before proceeding and/or placing judgment on the author or the actions of the characters in this narrative, please keep in mind that each individual responds differently to trauma. How someone copes doesn't make them any more or any less deserving of empathy. The author asks that you refrain from judging the characters or their actions based on how you would, how you think you would, or how you think they should respond in any given scenario. People are not cookie-cutter and nothing was done thoughtlessly or without proper research and consideration.

TRIGGER WARNINGS:

△△△ This book is recommended for a mature audience.

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The enclosed content includes triggering situations such as (but not limited to) the following:

on-page sexual assault/rape of a main character (not involving the romantic interest), profanity, detailed violence/gore, infertility, mental diseases and disorders, loss of a parent, amputation, motor vehicle accident, alcohol misuse/abuse, off-page accidental death of a pet, threats of violence and murder, kidnapping, physical disabilities, stalking, sexualization of female characters, gender inequality, obsession/possessiveness between romantic leads, criminal actions such as bribery and extortion, and crossing professional boundaries.

BLURB:

*Shut up and look pretty,
sweetheart.*

The instructions were simple.

1. Do as you're told.
2. Don't ask questions.
3. And always smile. *Men find it more attractive when you smile.*

Unfortunately, the job description forgot the part about not punching your partner square in the jaw. *Guess they should have been more specific?*

Not that life lessons really mattered to a dead guy. Or the other halfwits looking to clean up his mess. If only the truth had been as easy to bury...

But the past, yeah, it had a way of creeping up on you. Especially when you forgot the most important rule:

4. Don't mix business and pleasure. *Again.*

PROLOGUE

The crisp, off-white envelope with embossed lettering was tucked inside his jacket pocket, the weight of the contents far heavier than the cardstock itself.

It wasn't wedding crashing. Not when you received an invitation from your ex, regardless of her motives. His eyes scanned his surroundings, faces both familiar and unfamiliar in equal waves while he sat the stranger amongst them.

This was it, right? The thought popped in his head as he catalogued the banality of it all. This was what every woman wanted, what every decent man should give her.

The flowers, the white dress, the three-tiered cake, the partygoers whispering their compliments and criticisms in the foreground like judgmental gods in the presence of mortals.

Yes, this was where the story ended, where the chapter concluded, and the characters lived happily ever after. Or whatever it was they said at the culmination of every fairy tale, as the pages whittled down and the book closed.

There was no last-minute plot twist. No "ah-hah" moment. No sudden turn of events that could unexpectedly alter the finality of these words. Because, as if circumstance begot reason, he understood there was no undoing what had been done. What had veered the story. His story. And her story too. So off course.

He wasn't blind to the truth. He knew what their vows signified. Those promises uttered in a breathy whisper as he watched her make them without a hint of duress. Without regret. But mostly, he knew now what he should have known back then. At the beginning. It was inevitable. Because this supposed storybook ending was just that. An ending. With none of the revelry.

After all, he'd come to accept the cold embrace of his latest mistress—fate—and the ill-tempered hand she'd dealt him.

Cross the T.

Loop the E.

The End...

But then again, that was the irony of his presence. Here. Today. That the conclusion of one narrative was merely the start of another.

Staring up at the feminine silhouette, who was now nothing more than an apparition from his past... A reminder of a life that no longer seemed like it was ever his own. A souvenir representing his younger self, a different self altogether. And the catalyst for the series of events which led him to this present moment.

Yes, as he watched the figure who was so much more than a bride, it was evident how a man could be utterly oblivious to the delicate changes time inflicts on a woman on a daily basis. How a romanticized memory could replace what someone else saw as their reality. Especially when it stared back at them in the mirror.

It wasn't for lack of consideration—though most women would argue otherwise—but rather, he suddenly realized he would never envision her any other way than how she appeared at this moment, on this day. The image of her, with him, replacing the recollection so ingrained in his mind of their time together.

In this instance, though cognizant of the fact that he was just another face in the crowd, words were meaningless and his were utterly lacking. Because, despite everything—and this seemed to irrationally plague him the most—she was not his. Not how he had once considered her... even if only in a memory. She would never be... Not ever again. And not in the way he'd once wanted.

He forced a smile, or the closest thing he could muster, something more like a grimace.

No, that wouldn't do, he chastised himself.

A smile would be foreign on his face as of late... a clear sign that things were not as "well" as he affronted. So, instead, he figured it would be better to neither smile nor frown.

He would remain a steadfast figure of stoicism; indifference would act as a mask for the mix of emotions he shoved down to his innermost viscera and was resolute to ignore until they finally consumed and destroyed him from the inside out.

But enough of that self-pity. Enough of the guilt he carried with him until now. Until he saw for himself.

This was not a day to agonize over what “was.” This was a day for closure. This was the day that clearly defined “what had never been.”

He should be thankful that they could both finally move forward, and he was thankful. For her, anyway. She deserved this life, the normalcy of it, the kind of life he would have never been able to give her. Or anyone else.

Because he wasn't normal. And nothing about his life was either.

CHAPTER ONE: THE CONTENDER

Tessa

This was no happily ever after, Tessa scoffed to herself before glancing up at the thirteen-foot vaulted ceilings. *Nope, there was absolutely no chance in hell this marriage would last.*

She dropped her glare and eyed the remaining fanfare with disdain. The crystalline chandeliers and polished silverware evoking the same repugnance most would reserve for rodents and cockroaches looking to scurry under the closest kitchen appliance. She could feel her lips curl, her nose twitch, in a manifestation of outward disgust.

And immediately relaxed her posture.

She knew better. She should remain apathetic and attempt to assimilate with the societal *beau monde*. The entitled blue bloods who'd narrowed down their ancestry to the Founding Fathers themselves—or at least claimed to. It wasn't that she hated the elite as much as she despised their existence in its entirety. The idea that people held a monetary value that could be bought and paid for as easily as a transaction at a grocery store checkout. The belief that self-worth was determined by factors outside one's control such as: age, race, gender, birth order...

The conformity—the sheer injustice of it all—churned the acid in her stomach until it ate away at her own morality. But now wasn't the time for inner reflection. She had a job to do and failing to school her features would only serve as a hinderance.

Then again, perhaps her obvious aversion would provide all the more camouflage, she mused. After all, how better to conform with the *crème de la crème* than to appear unfazed,

underwhelmed even, by such a blatant display of overindulgence?

She hadn't *exactly* been invited to this affair; however, *trespassing* still felt like too harsh a term. There were no posted signs specifically "prohibiting" her entrance to the reception of the soon-to-be Mister and Missus. At least, none that she had seen thus far. Her intrusion was further morally justified by the sheer superficiality of the hired security team—who upon first glance of her aristocratic features (credited by her mother's French lineage) enthusiastically escorted her to the reception hall, all the while playing little mind to her partner in tow.

Corey

Corey could only shake his head at the theatrics that had just transpired in front of him. Tessa was a shark in open waters, a predator having spotted, smelled, sensed her first drop of blood before it dissolved and became one with the sea water. She walked like she belonged, she talked like she belonged... The only changing variable was the setting. The journalistic where and when. Even her partner wasn't entirely sure she *did not* belong.

There may actually be a story there.

He chuckled at the thought. But that theory would have to be explored at a later date. Today, they would focus on the frivolity of the privileged and pedigreed: who was secretly married, who was a bastard love child, who did Miss Scarlet kill in the conservatory with the candlestick?

Their normal repertoire.

His eyes nearly doubled in size as he watched Tessa wordlessly flip the posted notice clearly forbidding the entrance of press "of any kind" beyond the threshold, as she fluttered her lashes at the overly distracted security officer. As if implying an "out of sight, out of mind" rationale to their uninvited attendance to the evening's festivities.

That's not how things work, he groaned at her internally.

Or is it? Her red Cheshire smirk seemed to rebuke in response as she casually grinned at him, a single eyebrow raised in challenge, with that knowing glance over her shoulder. Again, he couldn't help but shake his head. Only Tessa...

She was the star of the show and he was her what exactly? Some sort of hired help. That's how it must have seemed anyway, as he struggled to keep pace with her long cat-like strides.

So much for "escorting" her anywhere, he continued to ruminate.

Though he was certain no one would have believed that fact to begin with. He would have been better off posing as her driver, rather than her husband for the evening. Not that Corey wasn't a sight in his own element. He was tall, broad, muscular. His short blonde hair and striking green eyes would easily catch the attention of a cougar or two; but where he was an accessory for the affluent, Tessa reeked of wealth and status... old money even.

If only they knew the girl behind that painted-up mask, the rich fucks would likely choke on their champagne and caviar.

The "Tessa" he had the pleasure of experiencing was the girl next door. The girl who could and *would* drink a six-pack with the rest of them, after a long day of editorials and deadlines. Her hair was often thrown up in a bun as she would glide across the conference room in jeans and a t-shirt. That presence, the way the woman carried herself, was the one element that was unchanging. It perpetuated confidence, guile, a certain magnetism even—that could first infatuate and then consume a man—whether she was clothed in rags or couture.

Not him, Corey was sure to clarify to no one in particular. But to an unsuspecting pawn, Tessa's allure could be intoxicating. Noxious. And here they were, in a room inundated with unclaimed chess pieces all looking to maneuver towards their opponent's queen, and all steps away from falling into that queen's gambit.

Tessa

And now we wait.

Tessa tapped her freshly manicured index finger against her perfect pale jawline. Most journalistic investigators would take notes, covertly placing microphones in brooches and hairpins. But that would be a novice move among the *bien nantis*. Instead, she would watch. Patience, not only a virtue, but Tessa's ever-present confidant.

She should hold more stock in words, given her chosen profession. Yet experience had shown her *on more than one occasion* that it was the unspoken articulation that carried the most weight. Especially among the current crowd. Sleek silver lies would often spew from the tongue while rotten truths were held close to the heart, choked down and stifled.

So it was her job, as well as the journalist's secret indulgence, to read between the lines—between those lies—and to find the bigger picture. Quite literally sometimes. After all, a picture was worth a thousand words. Or, as in Tessa and Corey's case, thousands of dollars.

The honesties were unmasked by the small nuances. A glance here. A glare there. She just needed the slightest opportunity. Something little. Subtle. A scowl. A seemingly inconspicuous smirk. A light surreptitious brush of an arm. Something she could sink her teeth into. It was the small, uncontrollable moments she sought. She waited for. The moments when no one was watching and the truth would peer out, just long enough for her to grasp and grab hold. It didn't take much, only the thinnest thread of latent candor. She felt like a predator—a lioness stalking her prey—and the thrill stimulated every nerve in her body, awakening her most visceral impulses. When presented with a choice between fight or flight, she effortlessly selected fight every time. But this fight was not accomplished with the use of physical force. Not today. This was just as refined an interaction as the ones she pursued.

Bingo!

Tessa's internal radar sparked on high alert, almost in unison with her inconspicuous camera flash. She had him. Good looking? Yes. But good looks were a dime a dozen—and much like a mistress—they lost their appeal over time. No, it was his presence that drew her in. He had a story. She could feel it in her bones. Her core reverberated with intrigue and her mouth was peppered by the metallic apparition of blood. Or perhaps the thrill really had caused her to bite her lip a little too hard. At this point, she was too hyper-focused on her mark to care for the difference.

That familiar, calculated grin again painted her lips as she beamed down at her screen. Yes, it was archaic to use her phone—she knew as much—especially with the professional equipment she had at her disposal. However, the sophistication of the image was not the priority; it was its overall authenticity that was essential. And this job taught her that authenticity was always in question with a camera crew, overhead lights, and a microphone in view.

She laughed at the image.

But who would question a partygoer tightly clutching her cellular device in a venue that catered to and promoted self-centeredness and superficiality? Especially a woman as elegantly tailored as she was?

Not a damn one of them; that's who.

The image was exactly what she wanted, Tessa discerned as she studied the captured likeness. His expression was candid, soft. Pained? Maybe. As he stared—*or perhaps gazed was a better word, definitely not gawked*—at the newly appointed Missus. It lasted only a moment. But she was an expert in moments, and thus, had eagerly captured his. This was all she needed. Just this image. This lead. And the rest of the story would write itself. At home. With the help of Inspector Google and a pint of cookies and cream ice cream, her greatest friend and biggest foe.

She would dissect this man. Piece by piece. A surgeon skilled at incising duplicity. Yes, there was definitely

something there. She could taste the intrigue and it was sweet. Bittersweet.

She sucked in her cheeks, chewing on the flesh there, and nearly giggled aloud. Her hand shot up to quickly stifle the sudden outburst of emotion, before she accidentally compromised her position.

“I beg your pardon, Miss.” The authoritative tone both startled and roused the journalist from her speculative trance. “But I believe you have something of mine.” With that ambiguous introduction, the man behind the tone—the same man who’d obsessed her ruminations mere moments ago—effortlessly plucked Tessa’s cell phone from her grip and attempted to unlock the screen.

“It has a passcode, you know?” she chided, gesturing towards her stolen device before folding her arms over her chest. “However, if you wanted my number, all you needed to do was ask.”

Yes, she would diffuse this situation with a little harmless flirting.

Her posturing further emphasized her elongated neckline and the dangling jewelry cascading into the deep-V of her fiery-red gown.

“I’m aware there is a passcode. Or, rather, that there likely is one,” the man-in-question smiled at her. *Well, almost smiled?* “Though, that’s hardly relevant when the screen is unlocked.” *Now* he smiled, as he continued to hold the phone just out of her reach.

Tessa’s demeanor flared from sirenic to incensed; however, to most men, hot with eroticism and hot with belligerence held very little distinction. And yet, he hadn’t even flinched at her blatant display of provocation.

Time to up the ante, her inner voice instructed.

Tessa refused to let the smirk fall from her lips, even while she clenched her teeth behind them. Again, with dexterity very similar to a feline prowl, the journalist stalked closer to her newly labeled adversary. Her movements were

abrupt, unexpected, and daunting enough to ruin even his carefully poised composure.

“You didn’t answer the question about my phone number, *mon chéri*,” she purred, her body suddenly slinked across his lap and her breath now warming his freshly shaved jawline. The tailored guest didn’t move, almost as if he didn’t dare.

“You didn’t ask a question,” he rebuked, the inflection in his voice ever steadied. Not an ounce of hesitation. “You made a statement. However, *I* do have a question...”

Tessa had no intention of removing herself from his lap. She glanced up at him, her fingers now curling the ends of his tie. The seconds ticked by—for dramatic effect of course—the scene almost intimate if it weren’t so *public*. “You, *mon nounours*,” she emphasized, flawlessly switching from her mother’s native accent to her father’s colloquial one, “may ask me anything.” Still not a hint of levity from this man.

A story indeed, she considered.

Corey

Corey was sure to catch Tessa’s unsolicited maneuver with his camera phone. “The insurance shot” she had enthusiastically christened this tactic—though she appeared to be the only one amused by her wit at the time.

He quickly glanced down at the photo. Tessa was sprawled across the stranger’s lap, crinkling the man’s once-pressed suit and loosening his neatly tucked dress shirt. While the sight was both compromising and salacious, a more naive viewer would find it almost tender.

And that’s exactly what she planned, wasn’t it?

The realization finally dawned on him. Blackmail. How had he not seen that one coming? Was that what it had always been about? And he was only just now realizing it?

Corey stood in the background, watching the playful banter between the two. The man seemed to hold his own—he would give him that. Most men and women alike fell under Tessa’s spell long before she even unleashed her charm to its

full extent. But there she was, having already relinquished her cache of French endearments and her mark appeared unfazed.

Maybe he has something against the French? her partner quipped to himself. *Well, Tessa did always enjoy a challenge.*

Corey continued to observe the pair for several minutes before determining that perhaps it was finally time for him to intercede. He protectively shoved his phone back into the pocket of his dress pants and quietly, reluctantly, trudged over to his ever-beguiling cohort.

Time to get this show on the road, he huffed, as he had no intention of earning himself a pair of silver bracelets to match all the silver spoons in attendance. Corey was far too pretty for prison. At least *he* thought so.

Sterling

Before he could respond to the woman's overtly flirtatious double entendre, Sterling's attention was drawn to the sizable figure trekking in their direction. The man seemed intent on disrupting this ongoing charade—the sexualized female currently clinging to his lapel in an effort to distract him from his sensibilities.

Boyfriend? Husband? Maybe. No, he concluded.

Her knight in shining armor was far too composed at this predicament for there to be anything romantic between them, and Sterling had noted the lack of a ring. For no reason other than his livelihood was dependent on his ability to discern the finer details. His prowess was built on his keen sense of observation, and his instincts told him this man was more likely a brother to her. Except there was little semblance there, even if only one parent had been shared.

So a fraternal bond, he continued to deduce. *Years old though. Almost as if he were used to her antics, both bothered and bemused by her. Closer than a mere colleague or acquaintance. A symbiotic relationship. Interesting, considering they were of opposing genders and both clearly aesthetically pleasing.*

“Does a cat have your tongue, *mon beau*?” The woman continued with her pretty French words.

If someone had stolen his tongue, he was certain she would be behind it, he thought to himself. He rolled his eyes in response.

“Then what is it that you wanted to ask me? In exchange for my property that is, of course,” she prompted.

There it is.

He smirked. Her pronunciation was definitely sprinkled with irritability now. Barely noticeable. But it was there, manifesting in a small undertone and slight emphasis when she spoke the word “property.” This was her game, and yet she was clearly tired of it. Much like a cat done playing with an injured bird.

How befitting.

“I merely wanted to enquire if you do this often?” he spat.

“And what is it that you think I’m doing?” She sought to provoke him, a challenge resonating in unison with her tonality and purposefully defiant facial features.

“Attacking and mocking a helpless crippled man,” he growled, his upper lip curling in disgust—whether it was at himself or the woman in front of him had yet to be determined.

CHAPTER TWO: THE FIRST ROUND

Sterling

She'd laughed at him. Actually laughed in his face. It was a boisterous, lighthearted sound. And probably the first sincere reaction he'd seen from the woman.

Great, she was mocking him.

He shouldn't be surprised. And yet, for a moment, he closed his eyes in silent resignation. But that small break in character was all the emotion he would surrender. She would get no more from him, he vowed.

"First of all, I would *never* attack or mock a *helpless crippled man...*" she retorted, simultaneously composing herself while breaking his train of thought.

"Then what do you call this...?" He gestured towards their current struggle.

"Well, this... *this* is rude. Had you let me finish my explanation, instead of cutting me off mid-sentence," she chided.

He raised a curious brow, conceding to her antics with an open palm. "By all means..."

"As I was saying, *mon ami*, first of all, I would never do as you have so thoughtlessly accused. The very idea further implies that you should get to know me better." She paused and teased at his collar before continuing. "And secondly you, sir, are by no means helpless or crippled. Far from it in my expert opinion," she whispered close to his ear, her voice audible only for him, her breath warm while the slight movement remained intoxicatingly personal.

This conversation was ridiculous. "Is this a joke? If not crippled, what would you call it?" He stared out into the

crowd, partially addressing the young woman and partially taunting himself.

She hummed for a second, as if carefully choosing her words. “Crippled is a man without tact. A man without wit. A man who fails to observe the world around him and learn it’s not always as it appears. A man who is incapacitated by his chosen ignorance. You are not that man. You are as hindered a man as I am a woman.” She allowed a bout of silence to fall between them, her thoughts seemingly distant and far from this moment, then added, “Yes, outwardly we are both regarded by our physicalities. Dismissed even. Because of our most prominent distinctions, by those with little depth of character. However, the same puppets who pass judgement, in turn, play into our strings. We use that ignorance as ammunition. Myself—in how I superficially live up to the expectations of a vapid, wanton plaything—to be used and thoughtlessly dismissed on a whim...”

She silently averted her gaze as she brushed her hair behind her ear and continued to trail her fingers down her cheek, passed her chin and neck, before lightly grazing her cleavage.

“And you—in how you equate the functionality of your legs with the functionality of not only your mind but also your manhood. We both know that’s not true, *cherie*,” She skimmed her fingers against his waist this time. “However, we use the insecurities of lesser men and sometimes even our own innermost selves, to produce the desired outcome. Hence, you threw out the word *crippled* as one would use profanity. For shock value. With the expectation that I would yield out of guilt or discomfort. Or both. *No?*”

The distraction was just long enough for Sterling to catch the camera flash in his peripheral.

“*Son of a*—I shouldn’t be surprised. Is anything about you real? Not part of some greater scheme?” He cursed and nearly dropped the woman to the ballroom floor, shoving her captured cellular device back into her grasp. “Just take it and go! Use whatever photos of me you’d like but you *will not* make a spectacle of my cousin nor *her* wedding day.”

Tessa

This was a command, not a threat. And not intimidation. His cadence remained unshakable and didn't discern even a hint of the anguish that his eyes betrayed.

Interesting...

You would think that she would be taken aback at this point—quick to flee under the accusations and scrutiny of a wretched man in a wheelchair. But, instead, the journalist was nearly giddy.

He was annoyed with her. Not entranced. Not unnerved. And perhaps not even attracted. *Why?*

Tessa leaned in, a new thrill driving her tactics, something slightly more valuable than monetary gain. “Real? Now, that depends on your definition of the word, *mon nounours*. It’s true that most of what I do serves an underlying purpose,” she hummed. “But *this* time, it’s my words that do not.”

“Whatever it is you seek to accomplish with this game you’re playing, I suggest you cut your losses, sell your tabloid photos, and move on.” At this point, he seemed beyond any hope of reconciliation, dismissing her presence with a cavalier wave of his hand.

“Tabloids?” She snarled, repulsed by the insinuation. “Is that what you think I do?” She smoothed out the creases in her designer gown, more offended than if her mark had tried to shove a twenty down her top.

Tessa wasn't sure why she was suddenly so distressed by his implications. This is what she was accustomed to. These chauvinistic assumptions built her career, after all. And these displays of public sexism had always made her that much more dangerous; yet she felt insecure and exposed. This time. In this moment. And what was most harrowing was the unestablished causality of these emotions over a man whose name she didn't even know.

What was it about his appraisal of her that somehow mattered? She had long since outgrown her need for outside validation. Or so the journalist thought...

“Blackmail then?” the man prompted, breaking her daze.
“From old money or new?”

She wasn’t entirely sure why he kept the exchange going.
Then again, she wasn’t entirely sure why she did either.
“Neither, you?”

“Both,” he responded flatly.

“Ah, so family money and *nouveau riche*.” She mulled over the concept. “Self-sustained. How *bizarre*...”

“The accent, real or fake?”

Tessa smiled wide this time. Wide and earnest. “Both, *mon petit nounours*.” She sat down beside him, transitioning from vixen to perfect gentlewoman in an instant, while purposefully accentuating her enunciation. She rested her elbow on the table, her hand against her temple, and tapped lightly. “My mother is from *La Rochelle* and my father is a Midwesterner. I grew up with the language but I can exaggerate it at will,” she confessed.

Corey

He feared his partner had gone too far this time, having forcibly accosted the affluent man in the wheelchair, especially at such a high-end affair.

Corey held his breath as he waited for the onslaught of security that was sure to ensue. And yet, surprisingly, Tessa’s transgression was well-orchestrated enough to somehow remain unseen.

When finally within earshot, he paused. Unsure how things had evolved from a verbal altercation to a game of twenty questions, Corey was paralyzed by confusion.

That was *his* Tessa now...

Well, not his.

He dismissed the awkwardness of that thought. Because she wasn’t his in that way. But the real Tessa. That smile was absolutely real; its authenticity proven by how the levity reached her eyes, her grin slightly crooked and her nostrils flared in amusement. He wasn’t entirely certain how to

proceed, or if he should interject at this point. She seemed to be enjoying herself. He took another deep breath before advancing.

“Tessa, my darling.” He approached hesitantly, the strain in his voice apparent as he attempted to subdue his natural speech pattern. “You seem to have wandered off.”

Sterling

Darling?

Sterling’s eyebrow raised in response to *Tessa’s* bewilderment, as though the girl had forgotten her fallen veneer and was stumbling to regain it. She didn’t seem like the type of woman to stumble often. Therefore, this slight misstep, this break in character... it intrigued him.

Much more than it should, he openly admitted to himself.

She appeared startled but amused by the onlooker’s feigned sentiment, the forced haughty accent doing little to camouflage the man’s humble upbringing. Sterling could not help but note how foreign the term seemed to taste on the newcomer’s lips. Almost... *sour*. He’d deciphered their relationship correctly, he decided.

However, why did that realization invoke such a rapid heartbeat? It seemed to palpate in his ears and, alarmingly, it sounded from within his own chest.

“You’re absolutely right, *mon chou*.” The woman’s intonation was different this time, far less flowery and yet seemingly more... endearing. Authentic. “How inconsiderate of me! I’d become preoccupied—you know how shiny objects tend to catch my eye. Speaking of, this is Mister...?” She turned, her gaze shifting from her companion to the stranger amongst them.

“Sterling.” He nodded in acknowledgment.

“First name or last?” the man prodded with poorly guised amusement.

“Both.” Sterling huffed, no longer emitting interest in continuing to converse.

“Ah, like Madonna? Or Cher?” the overgrown outsider jibed. “All right then, Mr. *Sterling*. I suppose my wife and I should go offer our congratulations to the newlyweds.”

“Right. Though, forgive me for my frankness, but why in the hell would you do that? It’s not as if either of you were invited.” And those were his parting words, as Sterling nearly backed over the guy’s feet and proceeded to distance himself from the troublesome interaction. And that troublesome woman.

Corey

“Well, what was that all about?” Corey turned from the fleeting partygoer to face Tessa.

The smile continued to adorn her mouth. “I think he likes me.”

“I think he *hates* you,” Corey countered.

She chuckled, grabbed the crux of his arm, and guided him towards the doorway. “*C’est la vie*. That’s life,” she murmured wistfully. “What can we do?”

“*Que sera, sera*,” her partner hummed in response, butchering the pronunciation with his Irish-American twang peppered by an odd mix of something southern, while haphazardly attempting refinement.

Tessa shook her head as they continued down the sidewalk, the pretentious ballroom filled with its pretentious patrons shrinking in the distance. “That’s not French, you know.”

“But it sounded good, aye?”

“Not even a little bit.” She snorted, and her counterpart grinned.

Corey loved this girl. Wholeheartedly.

Girl, not woman, he distinguished.

Because in these rare intervals of time, she was that girl again. Carefree, unburdened by the drudgeries of the adult world, and vulnerable. He regarded her with both fondness and

intimacy in their purest forms. Not something tarnished by romantic interest, but rather adoration and respect for this person unconditionally and regardless of her gender.

Her femininity—while eliciting his more protective nature, he would admit—was of no other circumstance. And were it to ever come into consideration, he knew these sporadic moments of reprieve would be lost to him forever. Losing that part of her, this glimpse of her, was not something he was willing to risk for a more physical one.

Not ever. And he knew she felt the same.

Tessa

There were no questions about her intentions when it came to Corey. Tessa never once played games with him. In fact, she despised it whenever he saw her act this way; however, the journalist had no choice when it came to her career. It didn't matter how much she downplayed her exterior, she'd always been met with misogyny. And a slew of men who assumed having a cock somehow increased their number of brain cells. It didn't.

Over time, Tessa had learned to use the ridicule she faced advantageously, instead of seeing it as a hindrance.

They wanted a Barbie doll? They got one. But just long enough for her to get what she wanted as well. A story. *The story*. The one that paid and paid generously. While it wasn't the kind of investigative journalism she'd envisioned—mostly deep dives into the repugnant and unscrupulous innerworkings of the affluent—she had made a name for herself. *Finally*.

Well, kind of...

In order to gain professional recognition, as well as protect her anonymity while undercover, she only ever published her initials. Although she never specifically gender-identified under the pseudonym, readers often assumed she was male. The blatant societal sexism, ironically enough, had accelerated her journalistic esteem whereas once it had been inhibited.

The truth was, she hadn't been lying to Sterling.

Though she couldn't blame him for doubting her motives. There were days when she herself couldn't differentiate the lies she told from those she didn't. Almost as though a piece of her tangible self died each time she played a part.

The journalist hoped that wasn't true. That she hadn't begun to assimilate with her numerous alter egos. She hoped she was merely succumbing to a brief instance of stagnation... Boredom.

But after the unexpected exhilaration that seemed to consume her after her only authentic exchange with the brooding wedding guest, his terse dismissal left her feeling... dejected.

Having returned to her small apartment—small because she had no need for anything more gratuitous and not due to limited financial stability—Tessa continued to fixate on the strange interaction with that strange man.

Strange and magnetic, she continued to muse.

To say there was “something about him” was too simplistic; there was much more than just something. But what? She chewed on the end of her spoon before robotically shoving it back into the empty ice cream carton. She had been so lost in thought, she hadn't even realized she had eaten the entire thing.

Ugh, she huffed.

She needed to focus. She needed to write or she might find herself obsessing over this man all night. Her fascination needed a more productive outlet. She grabbed her cell phone from the entryway table where she had tossed it and plugged the device into her laptop.

Okay, let's take a closer look.

Tessa paused, glaring at the error message on her computer screen. Then proceeded to dislodge her phone from the USB cord before reattaching it. She narrowed her eyes at the returning accessory failure, hissing inwardly while holding her breath, and flicked open the cell phone backing.

That son of a bitch!

She growled outwardly this time, discharging a slew of French profanities aimed at both Sterling and herself. He'd stolen her SD card. And not just stolen it. He'd choreographed the entire exchange—she was sure of it.

She paced. It was what she did to help her think. Dissect.

The conclusion was simple. Her mark had played her. He was the *toreador* baiting his opponent with flowery affectation. Waiting until the very last moment—both impassive and shrewd—before unveiling his deceit with a methodical flick of his wrist. Too callous to even revel in the resulting onslaught. And she...

Tessa seethed with sudden realization. She found herself to be no better than the frenzied beast, antagonized, predatory, and *sure as hell* she was seeing red.

You've messed with the bull, mon ami...

CHAPTER THREE: THE HORNS

Tessa

In truth, she didn't need the pictures. It was only on the rare occasion that she would even publish them. Instead, her methodology centered on studying the small nuances she'd frozen on film. She would focus on those images with the same scrutiny as a forensic scientist trying to connect the dots amongst the unsavory aftermath of a crime scene. She searched for context clues, needles in the haystack.

It was an unorthodox form of investigative journalism, she knew. However, it was how her cognitive inner workings thrived. She needed that puzzle. She needed to solve for the hypothetical *X* in order to appease her inquisitive nature. It was how the journalist had functioned for as long as she could remember. Find the problem first, then determine how you got there. Unearth all the defining factors. This was how Tessa effectively married analytics with creativity. Her composition was poetic, precise, and unconventional; it was her journalistic signature.

However, the fact that she didn't necessarily need the photos did little to alleviate the rage bubbling beneath the surface.

Okay, it was more than bubbling.

The proverbial pot had already bubbled, boiled, and erupted in an ebullition of shock, contempt, and humility. Before finally settling on defiance. She could not act on impulse, she decided. He would expect a hotheaded counterattack.

Tessa returned to her compulsory pacing from her workstation to her apartment window and back again.

Especially if he assumed she worked for the tabloids. She rolled her eyes. No, anger would be predictable. As would

further melodramatics. The next interaction must be completely outside his expectations. Outside his need for control and his appreciation for polite society. It had to encroach on his every level of comfort.

She smiled—that long, curled, Machiavellian smile. There was only one strategy that would shake a man who seemed to turn his back on the world, who anticipated her next move long before she'd skimmed her piece across the chessboard.

But first she had to find him.

Having effectively transitioned through the seven stages of loss—because that's what it had been to the woman who was accustomed to setting the trap rather than being ensnared herself—and after several more days, Tessa was finally settling into her phase of acceptance. However, that did not mean she *accepted* defeat.

No, instead, it was far more accurate to say she had voluntarily recognized the challenge. And perhaps was a little enticed by it. She told herself she wanted to face Sterling to prove her intellectual superiority. To best that man at his own game. *Her own game as well*. But if she was completely honest with herself, completely transparent, she would admit it was partially an excuse to see him again.

She had plenty of men who would willingly fawn over her, who had promised her the world. And more. But Tessa never wanted the world. She never sought the monetary, tangential affirmations that were easily laid out as offerings in exchange for her romantic favor. She hated to be called “pretty” or “beautiful” or any of the other ornamental blandishments—it made her feel hollow and eerily alone.

She didn't want to be revered or held up on a pedestal as one would exhibit the fanciful curiosities they'd acquired over time. She wanted a more abstract proposition. A more physiological—rather than physical—antagonist. A man who would not concede to her every beck and call just to win her affections. Who would be willing to draw out her vulnerabilities rather than demand them. Though the concept

seemed foolish, Tessa was unable to dismiss her optimism entirely.

But she'd wasted enough time in this state of introspection. She was much more prone to action. After all, she was still in possession of the insurance shot—the photo Corey had taken of her and the elusive Mr. Sterling—as well as a certain element of surprise when it came to planning the next interlude. It was a decent starting point. For both her yet-to-be-addressed article and yet-to-be-established reintroduction.

She was certain Sterling and Corey alike had concluded that the second photo was planned in an effort to secure leverage and coerce a reluctant mark—hence the clever terminology. However, that wasn't entirely true. The journalist wasn't looking to ensure the man's compliance, as much as she was looking to safeguard her physical well-being. The photo served as a discreet accounting of her last known associates. A documented: who, what, when, and where. Should the journalist need a backup plan.

The thought sent a considerable chill down her spine; she knew that the fear was justified and yet it was no easier to embrace. It was a frailty she didn't dare mention aloud and she was especially not willing to impart it today.

Maybe you're not the only one who's broken.

She confessed as much to the open air in her bedroom, and to a man who didn't know her and couldn't hear her, as she packed a crumpled notebook into her leather messenger bag before tossing the familiar weight over her shoulder and exiting. Her hair was twisted haphazardly into a bun at the top of her head while a favorite click pen hugged the edge of her right ear. This lackluster rendition was a far contrast to the vixen from the days prior. But certainly not any less formidable.

The phrase the “man is an enigma” had never felt more appropriate before now. Because this particular man didn't seem to exist. Tessa huffed. After hours of researching, she

was no closer to narrowing down the identity of the figure self-purported as “Sterling.” He may as well have introduced himself as “John Doe.”

She’d probably have better luck if he had. At least in that instance, she would have a first and last name to go by. Tessa rolled her eyes.

She had sorted through articles about silverware, birds, coins, business names. Anything and everything filtered through her search engine—with such little information to narrow down her scope—and *that* was assuming he favored the traditional spelling.

Her mark had mentioned that the bride was his cousin. Well, to be completely factual, he’d said “his cousin” and “her wedding day” in the same sentence, which led to the assumption.

Tessa began mindlessly chewing her pen cap, as she was known to do while deep in thought. Admittedly, many pens had been decommissioned this way.

However, Googling the family tree had landed her with another dead end. She continued to ruminate. The journalist had already discovered that the bride didn’t have any cousins—first or second, to be more specific. Which could only mean one of two things: the bastard had full-blown lied about their relationship, *or* he had given Tessa just enough for the information to be both truthful and inconsequential. And the man did not appear to be a liar...

The change of scenery—having left her apartment and now seated in her office—had helped refresh Tessa’s perspective. She needed to solve this Rubik’s cube; there was no question about it.

Corey

“The website’s up...” Corey chimed in, leaning his shoulder against the doorframe.

He’d been watching her for several minutes before breaking her concentration. To say he had never seen her so obsessed would be a veritable lie. This was Tessa’s MO. Her

obsession was both her brilliance *and* debility. She would hyperfocus on the details most would overlook. She would find a story where he was certain none had existed before, as if the woman could almost will it into materialization. He knew this would likely be the case again; however, logic resounded in his ear.

Because there *was* something different in this instance. He couldn't determine exactly what it was. But there was *something*. Perhaps Tessa's intuition was rubbing off on him, or maybe it was just his lack of sleep finally catching up. Either way, she appeared slightly off... almost personally invested in this man and his identity.

Corey hoped this wasn't the case. As much as he cared for his partner, as much as he wanted her happiness, he didn't trust the rest of the fuckers out there. *Their marks*. Any of them. Men like that—the elite, the wealthy, the privileged bastards born at the top of the food chain—they were all used to having the world handed to them. They focused on materialism, favored the tangible over the unquantifiable. And Corey feared what value someone like that would put on Tessa's heart if freely given. His dread grew exponentially when he noted the spark in her eyes that his tidbit of information had clearly evoked.

“Is it now?” She responded in an almost singsong voice.

“It is,” he confirmed. “But why are you so interested in this guy in particular?” Corey propelled his weight from where he was angled at the entrance of her office and positioned himself beside her. Tessa was already perusing the official wedding announcement and press release posted by the bride's family.

“I'm not sure what you're implying, *mon chou*.” Her retort was guarded, her tone resonating both warmth and warning. “He's the mark. There *is* a story there. Why else would he be so elusive? Besides, he thinks he's bested me. And you know I can't have that.”

She glanced up at Corey briefly, then dropped her gaze to the computer screen and continued to scroll.

“There it is!” Her loud proclamation nearly knocked her counterpart from his seat. She ignored his plight and tapped on her monitor. “You see it, don’t you? That’s not a look of a man happy for a *cousin* on her wedding day. That’s a look of a man lost. A man who *has* lost. And that’s my story.” She paused before returning to her rant in near-whispered contemplation. “What’s the history there?”

Again, while Corey was not entirely sure what *Tessa* saw, or what theory she’d likely already concocted when she focused on the blurry man in the background, he would agree there was probably more depth to the image than he could currently perceive. It took a keen eye to narrow in on Sterling amongst the crowd. But once Corey did, beyond an expression of torment, he detected a quiet acceptance.

This was someone who not only acknowledged his fate but seemed to have a willing hand in it. And it was as if the sudden realization had slapped him back to reality.

“The bride wasn’t his cousin,” he blurted aloud. “She was *his*. An ex. An ex-girlfriend. Fiancée. Wife. Whatever. But she was *something* and I bet he pushed her away. Or let her go. The groom—that’s the cousin. And the bastard’s use of a pronoun for the girl... it was meant to dissuade more than just *our* interest. My guess is that it is a reminder to dissuade his own as well. A psychological prompt.”

Corey began to mimic *Tessa*’s enthusiasm, as he robotically paced back and forth across the office and mindlessly rubbed his index finger and thumb against his five-o’clock shadow.

“We should search through old engagement and wedding announcements. If we assume the information he provided is correct.” He spun on his heel to face her now. “And he really is from old money, then there would be something about the pairing published. Even if it was kept under wraps. There’s no such thing as full discretion in *that* world.”

“Precisely my thoughts,” *Tessa* purred with a smile that could not have been wider if it were painted in place. She gestured towards the empty coffee mugs conveniently stacked

just out of reach, as her elbow made light playful contact with Corey's lower abdomen. "So... what are you waiting for?"

"*Really...?*" He rolled his eyes with a blustered breath before reluctantly obliging. Mugs in hand, Corey trudged towards the break room, grumbling to himself in feigned annoyance. "Always the bridesmaid and never the bride..."

CHAPTER FOUR: THE INTENDED

Sterling

She had been right about one thing; he did observe the world rather than try to live in it. Sterling would never admit this concession to her but he could, at the very least, admit it to himself—however begrudgingly.

He tapped the SD card against the top of his desk while staring blankly at his computer screen. He wasn't entirely sure why he continued to hold on to the tiny piece of plastic, but for whatever reason, he couldn't throw it away either. Ideally, he would have preferred to delete the stolen images rather than confiscate all of her device storage; nonetheless, she hadn't given him much of an option at the time. He couldn't allow her to play her games during Madelyn's wedding; he *wouldn't* allow her. Had the setting been anywhere else, he may have prolonged the interaction, entertained her antics for a bit longer. Surely he would have figured her out by now, if only he'd been given the opportunity.

Continuing his “should have, would have, could have” train of thought, Sterling *could* not bring himself to destroy the damned card and yet his urge to view its contents felt too much like an invasion of privacy.

Not that she cared much for his, his subconscious countered.

His intentions weren't depraved. He didn't seek to gawk at any private moments hidden in her phone's history, nor did he wish to blackmail her—though he wouldn't deny that both thoughts had crossed his mind at one point or another. Instead, guilt surged and ebbed at his core. The images could be important. Irreplaceable...

And yet—to be completely transparent—morality was not Sterling's only drive. He'd also become somewhat obsessed

with knowing more about the woman. Perhaps it was the mystery by its very nature that haunted him. And once solved, once her true self came to light, his mind would be free from any further thoughts of this woman. His piqued curiosity had to be far more alluring than her actual embodiment. Or so he told himself.

Indecision was not Sterling's usual state of being and the feeling unnerved him. He could ask his secretary to take a look...

He pondered the idea, before ultimately dismissing it in frustration. He wasn't a coward nor was he one to delegate *sensitive* undertakings.

How had this one woman completely disarmed him?

It had to be the normalcy of the interaction that rattled the usually controlled blue blood. She was clever and she knew it. And yet, she had spoken to him as she would have spoken to any other man in the room. Not because she saw him as weak. And not in the predacious sense.

The tapping of the plastic continued with his thoughts. *Tap, tap, tap.*

Sterling had become accustomed to the standard reactions: aversion and avoidance. But she wasn't cruel. And she wasn't intimidated. She hadn't glared at his chair, regarding its proximity as an affliction in itself. Nor had she maintained the expected social distance, afraid his disability was some sort of contagion that could be passed from person to person. Despite her capacity for deceit, this reaction—or rather lack thereof—hadn't been part of her con.

Eyes were telling, even the most composed, and hers had not flickered with disgust or pity. Or even the air of superiority. Not in the usual sense anyway. She *did* feel superior, but it had nothing to do with his physical shortcomings. He had assumed, that in her own opinion, her arrogance was well-earned among most. Even if her intellect was no match for his.

He chuckled. And momentarily glanced at the SD card, continuing the *tap, tap, tap*.

This was maddening. He slammed his fist against the solid-wood desk.

No, she was maddening...

It was his last thought before shoving the card into his laptop port. And before his conscience could convince him otherwise. He peered down at the computer screen and braced himself. His instinct was to cringe—much like a man sticking his hand in a cage—uncertain if he was about to be embraced or bit. It was foolish and yet, even with that acknowledgment and understanding, his posture remained stiffened and his brain screamed: *beware of dog*.

And beware, he should...

Having permanently deleted all the photos from Madelyn's reception, Sterling scrolled through image after image as if he were transfixed. He wasn't entirely sure what he expected to see, but *this...* this was not it.

This girl was normal and completely extraordinary in the same instance. There was no other way to appropriately describe her, he'd concluded. He had learned nothing and everything about her in these few moments. She was absolutely that woman he had met that night. Intoxicating. Infuriating. But in an abundantly different way. Or maybe exactly that way...

His thoughts were jumbled and incoherent, and he couldn't adequately decipher them, let alone express them. With each click of his mouse, he saw more and more of the real person behind the painted veneer she liked to present. He saw her real smile and how, when it was authentically drawn out, it rose slightly higher on the left side—no longer controlled and perfectly placed. He remembered that smile. She had given it to him that night, or perhaps he had stolen it without her realizing. Either way, it had been his for a brief period of time.

He wondered how many others could say the same.

He saw how her eyes could light up in both feigned annoyance and genuine enjoyment when her photo was taken candidly. She seemed to know she was classically beautiful and yet she didn't appear to know how truly captivating she was at the same time. She didn't like to be that woman she pretended to be. The disdain was evident, her orchestrated expression darkened and discouraged in comparison to these unfiltered ones.

That being said, she still loved the thrill of winning... of besting her opponent. Whether the casualty knew it or not was completely irrelevant to her satisfaction. Because *she* knew it.

The woman was complex, a creature both faultlessly optimistic and deeply jaded about mankind. Like a strategic game of cards, her face was an anatomical contradiction, emotion laced in duplicity.

And if nothing else, she was compelling; like a siren in the darkness, she beckoned him. While he was the ship all too willing to sink along the shores.

She had a tendency of wearing yellow most days in some fashion or another: yellow pens tucked behind her ear, yellow mugs grasped tightly in her hands, yellow sunglasses hiding her intense green eyes, a yellow belt cinching her hourglass figure.

He wondered if she realized this or if the choice was subconscious. Was she drawn to the color? Much like Sterling was drawn to dissecting her?

He studied the last image on the roll, having scarcely realized that his examination had already come to an end. Except it wasn't an *image*; it was a video.

She had been honest with him about her parents or who he could only assume were her parents by the undeniable resemblance between her and them. Tessa was a near facsimile of her mother, though with somewhat softer features. The man—who's thinning hair was peppered with age—mishandled the camera view in the stereotypical "parents and technology don't

mix” way, while the woman issued muffled instructions in a thick French accent.

Once the screen was properly adjusted and the couple was collectively framed, the woman began to speak:

Tessa, notre petit chou, we are so proud of the woman you have become. And remember, no matter what happens: success is not measured by the worth others put on it but by the value you find in it. Nous t’aimons. We love you!

The message cut off with a flurry of hand movements, a close-up of the man’s palm, and a view of what appeared to be a living room ceiling. The video was several years old, evident by the date and time stamp on the file, and Sterling surmised that it was likely rewatched countless times over.

He nearly laughed at the sad irony in it; the woman had spoken about intrinsic value. And he suspected that this tiny piece of plastic held immeasurable significance to its owner, a loss that was beyond compensation. He didn’t understand one’s attachment to their parental figures, not firsthand anyway; however, he did recognize the normalcy of it. And part of him wished his mother and father had been so openly supportive. He wondered if the couple on the card were still living and more so, he wondered how he was going to find this paradox of a woman and return it.

Still lost in contemplation, accompanied only by the continued rhythmic tapping of his fingertips—the plastic square discarded to the side of his desk—Sterling ignored the knocks on his office door. He was too far entranced to hear anything outside his internal monologue.

He didn’t know where to even begin to search for Tessa. He didn’t have more than a first name and a handful of photos. The guest list would be useless; after all, she was never a guest to begin with. And he doubted anyone picked up on her antics. She neither belonged nor stood out amongst the crowd that day.

Well, to say she didn’t stand out would be a lie. *She definitely stood out.* Just not in any way that would be helpful to him now...

The knocking persisted.

“Yes, what is it? Come in already,” he finally growled at the unrelenting sound. “For fuck’s sake, what could possibly be so urgent?”

“Well, sir, I knocked several times and you didn’t bloody answer. You could have been dead for all I knew!” the voice rebuked in a satirically formal diction, colored by a hint of a British accent. The man loved to slip the occasional colloquialism in, as if to remind everyone of his time at Oxford. And with an overdramatized entrance, the figure—now recognized to be his business partner Charles—threw his hand to his heart and gasped.

“And if I were dead, how would knocking help in the slightest? Last time I checked, dead men don’t answer doors...”

“Very true. *However*, I didn’t want to interrupt the process either. If my memory serves me correctly, and it always does, I’m still listed in your will...” Charles paused for a moment as if daydreaming about his cohort’s demise, then added, “And I really could use a new car—I’m thinking a baby-blue P72 would look pretty in my driveway...”

“Funny... because adding a sixth to your collection is a fiscally responsible decision, coming from the man I trust with my accounting.” Sterling rolled his eyes. “Now, tell me why you’re really here?”

“Ah, yes. Right. Back to business.” Charles straightened his imaginary tie, flattened the imaginary wrinkles in his pants, and adjusted his imaginary glasses. “Miss Owens is here to see you, sir.” His voice was, mockingly, an octave lower than it was when he’d first entered.

“Miss Owens?... I don’t have anything on my calendar for this afternoon...” The desk was inundated with folders, all of which had been ignored for the entirety of the morning. And Sterling’s calendar was buried somewhere underneath.

“She said the matter was pressing. Something about her property in the city?” Though they were the same age, Charles

appeared much younger, especially as he stood there and rocked back and forth on his heels like an impatient child. He claimed that it was his humor that kept him youthful, while Sterling's scowls had aged the man beyond his years. But in truth, he believed it had more to do with a clean shave versus his counterpart's usual five-o'clock shadow. Though it wouldn't kill the guy to smile either.

"Fine, yes. Send her in." Without raising his glance and still searching his desk, Sterling waved his hand in reluctant concession.

"Oh, good. Because the girl followed me up here anyway!" the would-be inheritor confessed as he turned and reopened the office door.

"Girl?" Before Sterling could look up and finish his thought process, the hinges had already pivoted in the casing and *she* was standing at the threshold. Ripping the SD card from the port while simultaneously slamming his laptop closed, he paled.

"Lucien Conrad Sterling," she hummed. "It's a pleasure to see you again, *mon nounours*."

CHAPTER FIVE: THE KNOCK-OUT

Sterling

The quiet was deafening as seconds ticked by like hours. While he had been preoccupied with finding her, she'd hunted him down instead. And somehow, he hadn't even fathomed the possibility of such a plot twist. He was anchored in place, as if any sudden movement might shatter the reality and the girl would disappear.

Like an apparition only he could see.

"Silly me." Charles broke the tension with an exaggerated palm to his forehead. "I forgot to mention Miss Owens never actually *scheduled* an appointment. She just showed up at the office today." He turned to face the girl. "Tessa Owens, it appears you're already acquainted with Lucien so I will forgo a more formal introduction."

The distraction was exactly what Sterling had needed to recover his composure. Even so, he couldn't help but regard her fondly. He leaned back in his chair, his hands steepled and an arrogant half-smirk across his lips.

The socialite he'd met was gone, and in her place was a girl every bit as impressive. Her hair was freed and fell naturally over her shoulders and down her back. Where once it was framed by a designer gown, her hourglass figure was now adorned in black jeans, brown leather boots, and a matching jacket.

There were those who mistakenly assumed that elegance and grace and sophistication were a birthright for the upper class, characteristics signed over with their title once their bank account listed enough zeros.

They were wrong.

Wealth had nothing to do with it. Rather, it was how someone's entire being could fill a room upon entry while

emitting these attributes. No matter the attire. No matter the influence behind it. It was how the person carried themselves. Regardless of circumstance. And this girl just... had it. His gaze traveled along her neckline to her white blouse before landing on the thin yellow belt that circled her waist.

His smile grew, as if on its own accord.

“... Your belt. It’s yellow.” It was an odd statement, he knew. But he was compelled to say it all the same.

“How observant,” she challenged, her arms crossed, and yet her inflection was playful.

“It suits you.” Sterling shifted his weight forward, his elbows planted firmly on the desk and his eyes narrowed. “How did you find me?”

This time, it was her grin that widened as she pointed to the SD card he was trying to conceal in the palm of his left hand. “You have your tricks..” she responded, her outstretched finger then turning to tap lightly on her breastbone, “and I have mine.”

A nod was his only reply, partially in agreement and partially at a loss for words. Charles was chuckling to himself as he leaned in the doorway, clearly amused by the spectacle.

“I’m sorry. Please forgive my lack of manners. Tessa, this is Charles.” Sterling gestured to his cohort. “Charles Fox... partner to the firm, the executive of my familial estate, and legal representative. His duties include: being a constant pain in my ass, while reminding me of both the financial and judicial ramifications shooting him would cause.”

“Ah, yes!” Mr. Fox issued his most authoritative delivery. “Jail... and lots of fines. Many, many fines.” Removing himself from the entryway, Charles pivoted to exit. “And on that note, I will leave you two to discuss the... a... property...” Without waiting for a rebuttal, he secured the door behind him, his footsteps quickly echoing down the hall.

At the mention of the reason behind her sudden appearance, Tessa closed the distance between herself and the desk separating them. She sunk into the leather visitor’s chair

and mimicked Sterling's posture, elbows in place and paralleled to his. She reached for the tiny black square, then paused.

"So." Her green eyes locked on to his darker ones. "Did you enjoy the nudes?"

The memory card escaped from his grasp and bounced on the wood surface before settling between them. His mouth remained slightly ajar. "The what?" he scrambled. "There... There weren't any... a... nudes..."

A grin curled Tessa's lips as she propelled herself off the desk and into the back of the chair, her demeanor relaxed. She looked like the cat who ate the canary. "Don't sound so disappointed, *mon beau*."

Tessa

She'd promised herself that she would behave accordingly. That, despite her instinct to outsmart and outmaneuver, she would approach this man without her usual smokescreen. And she had every intention of keeping that promise.

Until the moment she'd walked through that office door.

She sighed. Some impulses just couldn't be suppressed. She was enamored by the psychological warfare at play and the effort needed to get a rise out of the man in front of her. He was a... challenge. Unlike anything she'd seen in recent years, and the journalist had never been one to back down from a challenge.

All things considered, this very well could have been the real girl. She wasn't trying to seduce. She wasn't succumbing to his idea of her. Or, rather, who they both thought she should be. And there was no means to the end. The only actual gain was her own personal enjoyment as she watched him squirm.

And squirm he did.

Though she was proficient in the art of stoicism, contentment now sparkled in her eyes. Even amongst the dead air that most would find disconcerting. She sat across from Lucien, a first name she had just recently learned, the only

words between them hanging and unspoken. A smirk further heightening her cheekbones while discomfort reddened his.

She'd spent the last several days solely focused on deconstructing this man; a detail her colleague would be none too happy to hear. Especially considering the information she'd ascertained was irrelevant to their article.

However, their shared theory *had* been correct.

Five years prior to her most recent nuptials, the illustrious Madelyn Beaumont—now Madelyn Beaumont-DeLacy—had been engaged. And as Tessa had announced upon entry, the would-be-groom's full name was Lucien Conrad Sterling, a title that sounded like money.

And it was.

His family was nearly as blue blood as they came, owning every bank in the city, with their ancestral crest practically printed on each denominative bill; subsequently, little else was mentioned about them. A small factoid the journalist found strange in itself.

Although there had been no publicized acknowledgement regarding the dissolution of the betrothal between the socialites, Tessa surmised that it likely had something to do with whatever led Lucien to his current state. While the engagement photos had shown a smiling man standing beside the Beaumont bride, presently, smiling seemed like a distant memory and that same statuesque figure was confined to a chair.

Using every resource at her disposal, Tessa was still unable to determine the root cause of this turn of events. The media outlets had been close-mouthed on the matter in the years following—a happenstance that didn't occur organically. She was certain deep pockets were necessary and that copious amounts of cash must have exchanged hands.

His next appearance in print transpired two years later with the uprising of his architectural restoration firm, a multibillion-dollar venture. By that time, however, Lucien had distanced himself from his familial name and entitlement. Very

few individuals, outside those closest to him, realized his connection to the prominent financiers. He'd even went as far as to drop his first name in its entirety; the man was singularly referred to as "Sterling" in every publication moving forward.

There couldn't have been more intrigue if the journalist had written his backstory herself.

The lingering silence allowed Tessa a more thorough appraisal of her male counterpart. Though she had initially deemed the man as handsome, it felt far too superficial a word upon closer inspection. His eyes were a deep, dark brown; they would lighten a shade when he was amused while turning a near black when agitated—an effect she'd experienced firsthand. And more than once. His jaw was tight and squared in reservation, softening just slightly when he observed something he found gratifying, as it had when he took note of her belt.

Unlike their first confrontation, he hadn't shaved this morning. But the stubble only further accentuated the angles of his mandible. Her visual examination concluded with a sweep of his broad shoulders and well-defined chest muscles before landing on the natural stretch and flex of his biceps, now fidgeting beneath her scrutiny.

It was evident that he'd not allowed himself to waste away in that chair, she thought. Nope, not at all.

What he feared he'd lost with the use of his legs, he seemed to try to make up for with his upper body. This was a man with an indomitable presence, no matter his self-reported inhibitions.

The silence was an interrogation measure used to break willpower. Most didn't like the unease a hushed room instilled and would unwittingly fill it like a sinner in a confessional. And so she sat: legs crossed, eyelashes fluttering, and lips planted. However, what she hadn't foreseen was that, being well aware of this stratagem, he did the same. It was a true-to-life chess match, each having successfully captured the

opponent's pawn. But there were still many more pieces up for grabs on that board.

And Tessa would patiently await his blunder before... check and mate.

Neither certain how much time had lapsed, the two jolted in unison at the sound of the heavy wooden door slamming against the wall. Somehow, the tension seemed to be vacuumed out upon its impact. And in perfect synchronization, Tessa giggled, her hands rushing to her mouth to stifle the sound while Sterling attempted to turn his chuckle into a cough.

Stalemate.

"You two..." Charles barged in on the dead-locked impasse, pointing a disciplinary finger at each of his transgressors before resuming his reprimand. "How do you expect a guy to be able to eavesdrop on a conversation without... you know... conversating!" He sighed and motioned towards the hallway. "Do you know how long I've been standing out there with my fucking ear to the door? I'm pretty sure I'm going to need a chiropractor after all this..." He began rubbing the back of his neck in a blatant attempt to evoke sympathy.

Apparently, Charles Fox had been the only one broken in their twisted battle of wills.

"Good thing you're up-to-date on your insurance premiums," Sterling teased, but his eyes never left Tessa's silhouette... even as she turned to face their inquisitor.

"Sorry to disappoint, *Charlie dear.*" Though she didn't seem very sorry. He threw his arms up in exasperation and stormed out, mumbling to himself, while Sterling raised a curious eyebrow at the journalist's familiarized pet name. "I'll take that as an *apology accepted!*" she called to his back, as Charles disappeared around the corner for the second time that day.

Tessa shook her head and laughed, before rising to her feet and approaching the large set of windows behind the desk. The office building was old brick-and-mortar and the hazed panels were likely historically preserved, or very accurate replications. She pressed her hand to the glass, unable to discern if they were, in fact, the heavy leaded encasements she'd been expecting from the era.

“The panes are original, the weights were restored, and the frames are refabs.”

Startled by the intimate presence of the voice at her back, Tessa spun on her heel. And consequently lost her footing. She reached out in an attempt to catch herself, but instead propelled full-force into the man now seated beneath her.

“How is it that you keep finding yourself in my lap?” His question came out in a gruff whisper.

She wasn't entirely sure herself. But, at the time, she didn't entirely care either. The hands that held her in place were just as solid as they had appeared at a distance, while the smell of his cologne was subtle yet stimulative.

Her arms had instinctively encircled his neck as she landed, her hands interlocking in a sort of damsel-in-distress death grip. The journalist's heartbeat was so loud and so rapid that she was both certain and mortified at the belief he could hear it too. Removing her head from the crux of his jawline, Tessa glanced upward, noting his labored breathing. It was comforting to see that she hadn't been the only one affected.

“I don't know...” Her mouth was hypnotically close to his as she confided, “But I must say, I rather like it...” Despite the gravitational pull, neither party edged closer.

“Is this all part of some game? Some con of yours?” She could feel the pounding in his chest quicken against hers, as he asked the question.

“No.” Her voice was breathy, her pupils dilated.

“And how can I tell the difference?” She wasn't sure who had moved forward—but somehow—he was nearly talking

into her lips. She could taste the significance behind his inquest. But she wanted to taste something more.

The kiss was soft. Tender. Yet impassioned all the same. His fingertips grazed along her cheek before resting at her chin as he tilted it upwards. He was controlled and gentle, a stark contrast to her frenzied thoughts. Much like how it started, Tessa didn't know who had pulled away first.

"If this were a game, I wouldn't have stopped you." She continued as if the conversation had never paused.

"Was it *you* who stopped *me*?" He brushed his thumb against her slightly puffed-out lower lip, his eyes locked on hers.

"I would have..." Her assertion came out weaker than she'd intended.

He smiled down at her and shook his head. "I'm not so sure."

The man's confidence was overwhelming, thereby thrusting her wayward senses firmly into place. She removed her arms from his shoulders and pulled herself back upright. To her feet. Having combed her nails through her hair before tucking the loose strands behind her ears, the journalist had regained her sobriety. The mesmerism had been broken and neatly filed away, to review and reassess at a later date.

"I guess you'll never know then, *mon ami*." She adjusted her top and straightened her jacket as she headed towards the exit.

"Fine. If not a game, then what was it?" he probed. It wasn't a plea but an implication that hung in the air between them.

Tessa stopped mid-stride and rested her hand on the brass doorknob. Without turning to look at him, she responded, "Honestly, I have no idea..." Her face was out of his direct line of sight, but she smiled at her own abrupt self-awareness.

"When will I see you again?" His movements were quicker and far more soundless than she could have predicted.

He had closed ranks, currently positioned but a few inches from where she'd fled.

Glancing over her shoulder, the journalist finally met his gaze with a proposition on the tip of her tongue. "I found you. Now it's your turn." Then she marched out of the office, stopping halfway down the hall for one final taunt. "At least you get to start with a first *and* last name."

And just like that, with a parting provocation and as cryptically as she'd appeared, Tessa was gone.

CHAPTER SIX: THE TOUCH-MOVE

Sterling

Sterling had no idea exactly what had—or perhaps hadn't—just happened. This morning he'd been perplexed. But now, he was completely disoriented.

For a moment, he'd felt like his old self. Deliberate. Decisive. Dominating even. But that moment was fleeting. And then, all of a sudden, he felt empty. Emptier than he could remember feeling since...

He shook his head. There wasn't time for any of that self-pity bullshit. He wouldn't become *that* guy. Over the years, he had seen his fair-share of sympathy, especially on the faces of those closest to him. And for fuck's sake, he wasn't about to see it in the mirror too.

The scent of her perfume still clung to his shirt and remained the only concrete testament of her actual presence. Curiously, her SD card still lay where it had fallen; she hadn't even taken it with her as she'd bolted out the door. His teeth clenched at the memory of kissing her, the feel of her weight curled up and against his torso, and the faint pressure she had placed on his thighs. He couldn't explain it. But it hadn't been like that night when he first saw her.

This time, when he'd looked down, there had been a vulnerability in her eyes—a slight ripple in her polished exterior. And for a split-second, before her cognitive faculties could tell her otherwise, it was an insecurity she had wanted him to see too. But then again, almost as if it had been regenerated, her veil dropped right back into position.

Flawless... like it hadn't moved at all.

“So what'd you do to scare this one off?” True to his meddlesome nature, Charles—who'd likely been within

earshot of the door anyway—interjected, hitchhiker thumb gesturing behind him.

Sterling shrugged, glaring down at his computer screen and pretending to read what he now just realized was actually a spam email.

“A shame. I liked her too. Seemed fiery. You know, like the kind of girl who could clean up nice and all... but at the same time, you’re a little afraid she just might kick your ass, then ravage you in a back room?” Charles stopped when he reached the desk. He leaned forward onto the polished veneer, arms spread and palms flat.. “So...? You going to call her? Tell me you at least got her phone number?”

Sterling had no intention of answering the barrage of questions being obnoxiously tossed his way. Instead, he glanced up once—his blank expression saying as much—before continuing to stare at his keyboard.

Charles sighed, and a hand gripped the edge of each one of the armrests, as he sunk back into the chair. The same chair where Tessa had just been. He crossed a leg, ankle-to-knee, as he carefully considered his next words. “In all seriousness, *did you see that girl?* When’s the last time someone like *that*...” He paused, first pointing to the doorway then tapping his index finger on the upholstered leather for emphasis. “...just walked in here? Or better yet, *just willingly walked into your office?*”

“Pretty girls walk in here all the time,” Sterling rebuffed the implication.

“I didn’t say *pretty girls*,” Charles clarified, dragging a hand across his face. “I *said* a girl like *that*. A girl who can actually stand to be in your presence... No. I’m sorry. A girl who actually *likes* your presence—wait! Is that her memory card?” He reached out to grab it but Sterling quickly intercepted.

“How’d you know about this?” Eyes narrowed, Tessa’s mark held the plastic square up and into view.

Charles grinned and reclined into his seat before replying, “Who’s idea do you think it was to call her *Miss Owens*?...”

Clearly thinking he was clever, he paused to sarcastically dust off his shoulders.

Sterling had never been one to pay attention to the specifics when it came to his clientele. Names. Addresses. Phone numbers. Niceties. That had always been Charles's department. They were all just faceless voices to the disgruntled architect. *Irrelevancies*. All he was interested in was how old the structure was and how much of it could be salvaged.

"Huh. She did all that research to find you. To get *that* back. And then she just *left it behind*. Interesting. Don't ya think?"

What was truly interesting was how in less than ten minutes, the woman was able to not only con her way into his office but also get his closest friend to act as a willing co-conspirator. However, it did explain the familiar pet name she had imparted earlier.

"It doesn't matter." Sterling returned to his brooding. "You saw her run out of here. She blew me off."

"Are you trying to convince me... or yourself? I heard what she said to you in the hallway. She found you. *Now it's your turn*. She dared you to do it. So go find her." He cracked his knuckles before leaning in. "Be honest. You've always preferred the chase anyway. When have you ever wanted anything that simply fell into your lap?"

Ironic choice of words, considering *this time*, it just so happened to be *exactly* what Sterling wanted.

Tessa

Fils de pute! Son of a bitch!

What the hell had she been thinking! Oh, right. She hadn't been thinking and therein lay the dilemma.

In trying to get into his head, he had gotten into hers. Her heart was fluttering as if it were seeking to untether itself and erupt from her chest cavity. This was absurd. She didn't know why she was so flustered.

He was just one man. And it had been just one kiss. He was a mark... like any other. And it was a story angle; howbeit one she'd gotten a little sidetracked on.

It happens to the best of us...

Except it hadn't been about the angle, not in the slightest. She sighed. Whatever that interaction *had been*, it had nothing to do with an article. And everything to do with her actually enjoying his company, as unfathomable as that may have seemed.

He'd been confident with her, in a completely different way than she had been accustomed to. Completely different from how he had been during their first exchange. Though his ego wasn't the issue—she had met plenty of confident men in her life. In fact, those were her favorite to take down. In the “the bigger they are, the harder they fall” kind of way. But this hadn't been that sort of confidence. This... this had been earned. Because she had freely given it to him. Because she had wanted to. And he'd wanted to take it.

Oh mon Dieu, c'était mauvais.

This was bad. She felt trapped, caged within the confines of her own emotional stockade. And for the first time, in a very long time, she had the instincts of flight. Though it was then that she quickly discovered she had a bigger problem—far greater than crossing the line of business and pleasure.

Her eyes widened with sudden comprehension, a hand muffling her gasp. “I forgot the card!” she exclaimed aloud, frozen midstep on the busied sidewalk. And worse still, part of her wasn't entirely sure if it had been accidental.

Swinging the door open with a little more force than she had intended, Tessa rushed into her apartment. She threw her suitcase onto her bed and piled it high with handfuls of clothing, taking little notice as to what exactly she was packing. She shoved her laptop into her leather messenger bag, sprinkled it with whatever pens were within reach, and tossed in her notebook. She took a quick survey of her bedroom;

however, in her current state, she wasn't sure if she would have even noticed if she had missed anything. She turned off all the lights and lowered her thermostat setting, before grabbing her luggage and sprinting back out the door.

She took a deep breath and pulled her cell phone from her back pocket as she entered the elevator and began the descent to the lobby. Having replaced her device storage capabilities several days ago, she sent a flurry of text messages to Corey, explaining her intentions and reminding him where she hid her spare apartment key back at the office.

One of the perks of journalism was she could work anywhere and on an autonomous schedule. That was exactly what she needed at the moment—some fresh air and a chance to escape for a little while. And there was only one place she could go to do that and only one person she could do it with.

The only man Tessa had ever loved and the only man she could ever run to in such a disheveled state.

Corey

Looking down at his phone, Corey scrolled through his last few messages. He'd been waiting back at the office for Tessa to arrive and it was unlike her to be running late. Her typing seemed frenzied, incomplete, and somewhat incoherent. But he was able to understand the overall gist of what she was relaying, even if she had thrown a few French words in the mix absentmindedly.

Something was up, he thought to himself.

She wouldn't run off to see Jack, especially with an article due, unless something was really wrong. He wouldn't press her just yet. It wouldn't get him anywhere, except maybe on the floor with a few knuckles to the gut. But once she was settled in, he needed to check on her. He opened her desk drawer and removed her spare key from its usual hiding spot before adding it to his key ring.

In the meantime, he would keep an eye on her place. And possibly her refrigerator.

Sterling

He'd never realized how common of a surname "Owens" was until he began searching for one in particular. After reviewing the first few pages of possible addresses, a thought finally occurred to him. He was never going to find her this way; it was too wide a berth for him to narrow it down to a single girl. But he still had her photos...

He was more likely to find some sort of lead that way than anything he was currently doing.

Scanning the images for the second time—instead of focusing on the one girl he couldn't stop focusing on—he scrutinized every detail beyond her. By the midway point, he stumbled upon what he was looking for. Or at least he hoped so. He'd seen it in a cluster of photos taken inside what he deduced must have been her apartment.

Outside the windows that overlooked the city skyline, there was a distinguishable archway in the distance. It belonged to one of the oldest buildings in the area and had been historically returned to its original grandeur last summer. All the intricacies had been handled personally by Sterling's company and, as it so happens, by Sterling himself. He smirked. And he knew exactly which complex held such a view. Now, pinpointing which apartment number would be a hell of a lot easier than aimlessly perusing the white pages.

It had been far longer than he would like to admit since the last time he put so much effort into something that wasn't structural, arciform, or dormered. But Charles had been right. As difficult as it was for Sterling to accept, Tessa was certainly much more than another *pretty girl*. In fact, neither of the terms did her any justice. She was strikingly beautiful and infinitely more woman than girl.

At first, he'd assumed it was how she had been painted up at the wedding—embellished by pearls and satin and shrouded by the ambient lighting. Similar to how a dream was always more intoxicating than reality. Though he was man enough to admit that was also what he'd wanted to believe at the time. However, the way she presented herself in his office cemented any notion that her appeal had been simply ornamental. Like the most perfect disaster, her exterior wasn't her only artillery

in play; she was sharp, obviously educated, and relentlessly tenacious. She had and was willing to meet him blow for blow. So, if she really had been just throwing down the gauntlet, he would meet the challenge.

And raise her one.

“Did you find her?” Charles prodded from his usual perch in the doorway before closing the distance between them.

“I believe so.” Sterling nodded, shutting down his laptop and typing an address into his GPS. “Why?”

“Because I’m coming along for the show,” Charles affirmed. “Have to make sure you don’t do anything stupid this time.”

Sterling rolled his eyes. “Fine. But I have to make a stop first.”

Tessa

She pulled up to the familiar wrap-around porch and took a deep breath before turning the ignition off. When the idea had first come to mind, it felt like the right thing to do. But as she sat in the glow of the streetlights after the two-hour long drive, all she could think about was putting the car in reverse and peeling out of the driveway. She swung the car door open, letting it slam as it closed in order to alert the residents of her arrival. Her suitcase in one hand and her bag thrown over her shoulder, she approached the large wooden door.

Bracing herself, the journalist tapped lightly and waited. It only took a few seconds for it to fling open, for the warm gruff voice to address her. “Tess...” The man stared down at her inquisitively. “What are you doing all the way out here? Is everything all right?”

Tessa shook her head, trying to restrain the same tears she’d been holding back since she first set out to her destination. She dropped her luggage on the porch with a *thump* before enveloping him in the tightest hug she could muster while burying her face in his shirt.

“Can I stay the night?” she pleaded, her voice soft and vulnerable.

Without having to respond, he picked her bags up off the ground and escorted her inside, the door closing quietly before it was locked in place.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE SILVER FOX

Corey

Mid-bite of Tessa's secret stash of Fudge Ripple, Corey craned his neck towards the repetitive knock sounding from the hall. It must have been too much to ask for a grown man to enjoy a little ice cream post-shower like any other normal, functioning adult. Especially one squatting in a colleague's apartment while indulging in the quietude the privacy allotted him.

Refusing to let the unwelcomed guest ruin his guilty pleasure, and with carton in hand, he begrudgingly trudged over and flung the door open. Corey leaned against the frame, licking the spoon as the miniscule towel around his waist clung there. Just barely.

"Yep...?" the Irish boy with an oddly southern drawl questioned, glancing casually at the two confused men in front of him. "What my girl do this time?" After another mouthful and still chewing, he continued as he pointed the silverware in their direction. "Full disclosure, I cannot be held accountable for her shenanigans. Even have an agreement saying as much. Insisted on it after the first time. There's no controlling that one."

He recognized the one as Tessa's mark; if he hadn't, the chair would have been a dead giveaway—*unless pissing off guys who couldn't chase her down was her new thing*. The other guy's identity? He had no clue. Both men were silently gawking at his unabashed state of undress.

Sterling was the first to speak up, clearing his throat in discomfort. "A... right... well... I just stopped over to return her possessions. She had, um, left them behind when she came by the office yesterday." Sterling reached into his coat pocket, pulling out Tessa's missing memory card and a small white box that Corey didn't recognize as hers.

“She’s actually not here right now—wait... did you say yesterday?” Corey again directed his accusative chocolate-coated spoon at the seated man. “Are you the reason she ran out of town so abruptly and headed over to Jack’s?”

Sterling

For what felt like the millionth time since having met this girl, he found himself speechless. First, she’d fallen into his lap and kissed him; then she’d run away, taunting him to come find her; and now, his would-be chivalric gesture is met by this half-naked man at her door who proceeds to tell him about some other guy she’d taken off with. And somehow Sterling was at fault?

He wasn’t sure how to answer any of it. Nor did he really want to.

The architect chided himself for being the least bit surprised, but even more, for feeling so utterly disheartened.

Ironically enough. He inspected Corey from top to bottom. *Had he been able to stand at the time, he’d tower over the Irish cowboy. Rather than have to glare up at him like he was.*

But did it really matter anyway? In the end, she had gotten one over on him and he’d allowed it. Subtly regaining his composure, Sterling shoved the items into Corey’s outstretched hand.

“I’m sorry. But I cannot speak for her choice of actions,” Sterling responded as tactfully as he could conjure up at the time, as he readjusted his lapels and buttoned his jacket. “If you could just return those to her, it would be greatly appreciated.” He veered towards the elevators before Corey’s audible observation stopped him in his tracks.

“I would, except *this* isn’t hers.” Corey exited Tessa’s apartment and stalked down the hall, obviously carefree when it came to his God-given attributes. “Aren’t you even gonna ask Jack’s last name?”

“And why would I want to do that?” Sterling scoffed, pivoting to face the man. “What would be the point?” He

reached over to reclaim the box.

“Because, it’s *Owens*. Jack Owens.” Corey nonchalantly returned the rectangular parcel along with the memory card. “Whatever you did, you sent her straight home and into the arms of Papa Bear. So I recommend you giving *that* to her, yourself, in person.” He crossed his large biceps over his wide chest, then continued. “I’ll even make you a deal. If you have a business card on you, once I’m dressed, I’ll text you the address. In return, you agree not to mention this whole *eating her ice cream and wearing her nice towel* incident. That woman will stab a man over some Häagen-Dazs.”

Mouth still slightly agape, Sterling’s suspiciously tight-lipped counterpart pulled out his wallet and revealed a crisp metallic card. *Silver Fox Restorations*. Corey plucked it from Charles’s grasp and, with a bemused salute of farewell, strutted back in the opposite direction. After several moments had passed, Sterling elbowed Charles in the side with a reproachful glare.

“What the hell? Are you suddenly mute?”

Smiling almost robotically, Charles signaled a ‘mind-blown’ gesticulation, followed by a theatrical clap. “That. Was. Amazing! Like watching a live-action soap opera,” he uttered in astonishment. “There was love... loss... a rival suitor... then finally the twist ending!” He stared blankly. “I can’t wait until the next episode. You think she has an evil twin?”

With an audible *thump*, Sterling aimed a closed fist at his partner’s rib cage before again maneuvering towards the elevators.

Tessa

As defeating as it felt to tuck her tail between her legs and hide out back home, there had always been something so reassuring about actually being here. She sat in the kitchen with her father—a tall, imposing figure and absolutely the only man to earn a piece of her heart.

No one else could ever stand in comparison. She had been close once, and that once embedded the ideal she had known all along: *Jack Owens was the exception*. To him, she was never a disappointment or a failure. He never asked her to be any more or any less than herself; *that* had always been just exactly enough for him.

From the time she had been a little girl, he stressed the importance of her intelligence over her physical aesthetics. It had been the world around her that constantly insisted otherwise, that one man. And that one instance. While the repetitive reminders of her supposed inadequacies as a female only sought to further root her staggering insecurities—the realization that she had almost willingly handed over a small part of herself, to have it discarded before it had even left her grasp.

Looking back, it had been the embarrassment over her sheer gullibility that had broken her down; more so than any tangible wound she had suffered, it was the knowledge that she had played a complicit part in her own invalidation that shattered her self-worth. All those years her father had put into building her up and yet she was so effortlessly weakened. With that in mind, whenever she felt her sensibility buckling, she returned to this house and to this kitchen to find her solid ground.

Mulling over her theology, she knew how it sounded. Like one single broken heart was all it took to close her off from humankind. But it hadn't been that simplistic. It hadn't been just that incident. It had been every person... every mark from that day forward who reiterated her worst fears. Who saw her as nothing more than what she offered on the outside. Who never once tried to look deeper. She had given them the chance—each and every one of them—to morph from a hedonistic philanderer to someone worth a damn. And each had failed miserably. That is, until she'd met Sterling, and he'd shattered her fortitude in a completely different way altogether.

“All right, Bumblebee.” Jack pulled up a stool and handed her the traditional cup of hot cocoa. “Tell me what's going on.

It's been a while since we've had an impromptu visit. *Not that I'm complaining about having you home.*" His smile was more creased than she'd remembered it being, his hair more white than gray. Though even harrowed by age, the retired military man held firm his authoritative bearing.

"I don't know, *Papa.*" Tessa shook her head and stared down into her mug. "I just feel completely—*je ne sais quoi*—out of sorts, I guess. Like I'm at a crossroads and not completely certain that I am who I thought I was... Maybe it's all the undercover assignments. Maybe I'm losing myself in the midst."

Thumb gently lifting her chin, Jack forced her eyes to meet his. "Hold your head high and proud, kiddo. Because what do we do when we fall?" he prompted.

"We stand back up..." She grinned at the familiar phrasing, the last few tears trailing down her cheeks.

"And when we fall seven times?" he continued, wiping each tear away before tugging at her ear.

"We stand up eight." She laughed, her anxiety momentarily eased. "Though, I'm not so sure that philosophy is appropriate in this instance, *Papa.*"

"Problems are often much worse in our minds than in reality, Bee. The fact that you're here questioning everything is proof in *itself* that you are exactly the person we raised. You don't blindly accept what is in front of you or what the easiest solution is. You don't follow the course; you've always set it. *Changed it.* You may not feel like yourself and it's because you are not the same self. Not as yesterday and not as tomorrow. Life experiences shape you. Change you. Or else you would remain stagnant and small-minded. And, Miss Owens, though you may accuse me of being biased—you have always excelled far beyond mediocrity."

This time her laughter was earnest and full-bellied, amused rather than tense. "Now how can I argue with that, *Papa?*" Still grinning, she paused. "If only I had your voice playing in my head all day. Instead of my own."

“Ah. But then what excuse would you have to come see your old man?” he jibed, sipping from his own mug.

She lifted hers in salute. “The hot chocolate! Of course!” He chuckled at her reply while gesturing *touché*. Tessa sighed, her expression suddenly solemn. “How is *Maman*?”

Corey

Whelp, there was no turning back now, Corey thought to himself after pressing send on his most recent text message.

If Tessa wasn't going to kill him for cleaning out her freezer, she sure as hell would be planning his demise when two men appeared on Jack's doorstep. Then again, depending on how things turned out, Jack might take on the job himself.

It was times like these that he wondered if he was some sort of masochist, begging for a swift kick to the groin. Truth be told, Corey had no fucking clue why he chased the guy down the hall and gave him the advice he did. He probably should have just let them both think he was Tessa's live-in boy toy; but there'd just been something about how crushed he'd looked. Not angry. Not dismissive.

Crushed.

There was more going on between the pair than either party would willingly admit. Corey could sense the mutual infatuation just under the surface, an interest blocked by two-pronged egotism. And had it been merely superficial, he would have been the first one to send Mr. Money-Bags packing. In fact, had the stranger uttered a single insult directed at the girl he loved like a sister, he would have been met with closed knuckles to his chin.

Yet, despite being faced with Corey's lackadaisical bare-bodied form at Tessa's door, Sterling had not only remained reserved; but the rich crit had also politely returned both her storage device and whatever trinket he had been hoping to sway her with. That had to mean something. No matter how much either one of them would argue otherwise, Corey had the gut feeling that this was the right thing to do.

At least, he hoped so...

Sterling

Sterling had been tapping his hand against his knee involuntarily for the last forty-five minutes, a habit triggered by nerves. And his clear tell, had he been playing cards rather than making questionable life choices. Right now, he wished it was money he had on the line...

He was being reckless and, more than likely, this was an even bigger mistake than having engaged the girl in the first place. And yet, somehow, this is where the architect had found himself. She was an expert in putting him in awkward situations. Or maybe he was just an expert in walking into them—like a moth to the light. A two-hour drive for what? To have a door slammed in his face? To have her laugh at him and ask what he was thinking?

What was he thinking? And when had he become so self-loathing? Except, he knew exactly when...

Prior to the *accident*—as everyone liked to refer to it—Lucien was impossibly cocksure. He could captivate an audience, force every eye in the room to follow him by sheer will alone. Women had always been nameless and faceless, only in a different way altogether; he'd never been moved by the vapid, wanton china dolls, who bit at his heels while hoping to marry into his family name. Or more so, his family money. They all came and went, rebuffed, when he refused to promise them anything more than a night or two. Now that he was older, he didn't know why he had entertained them at all in the first place; his only excuse being that he had been young and dumb at the time.

But not that dumb...

When the self-inflated twenty-something-year-old had first laid eyes on Madelyn, he'd been enchanted by her. Yes, enchanted was the only way to describe her hold on him. It was the first instance in which he was at the tail-end of a rejection.

Perhaps Charles had been right about him always choosing the road less traveled. He laughed to himself.

But it was true. She had no interest in Lucien. His intentions. Or his lineage. She had one of each on her own, after all.

And Madelyn Beaumont had neither the time nor the energy to “entertain his foolish preconceptions” as she had so eloquently dubbed them. This spurn—the evident cold-shouldering—thrilled the young man, emboldened him even. He had to *and would* win her over. He’d never lost before and he wasn’t about to start then.

Over the next few months, and as he prepared to bear the weight of his family’s legacy, Lucien had slowly torn down her walls. Until she became just as enamored with him, as he was with her. While it may have seemed counterproductive to lament over something that could not be changed, he did so as a reminder. He’d been a different man back then. A man, though confident, who was willing to settle for what was expected of him. And from him. Instead of breaking free to make his own way, as he had done in his later years. Somehow, as insane as it might have sounded, he had been less of a man then than he was now. Chair be damned.

Not that he should compare the two, but Madelyn—other than initiating the chase—was a stark contrast to Tessa. Even with as little as he knew about the girl. Where his ex-fiancée had been soft, docile, and content in her sheltered world; Tessa was harsh, fierce, and driven to rebel—she was the phoenix that could not be caged. The flame that could be observed but never grasped.

He knew he probably looked like a madman, grinning to himself. But at this point, what did it matter? A crippled madman it was.

“Isn’t it your *job* to talk me out of poor decision-making?” Sterling barked, noting Charles’s whimsical stare. “I’m fairly certain this borders the line of stalker-like behavior. Don’t you think?” He was speaking his inner fears aloud. Ultimately, it was true. He had only met the girl twice and here he was, tracking her down at her parents’ house.

“That’s the funny thing when it comes to the legal intricacies of courtship,” Charles hummed, arms crossed as he glanced down at his seemingly manicured fingernails. “The difference between an overtly romantic gesture and flat-out criminal stalking is all in how it is viewed by the recipient.”

“Well, that’s comforting... Shouldn’t you want to keep me *out* of jail,” Sterling refuted. “Instead of escorting me there?”

“Now that you mention it, I *have* been waiting for the chance to use the ‘helpless-man in a wheelchair’ defense for some time.” Before Charles could look up with his own patronizing grin, Sterling’s cell phone launched forward from the back of the vehicle and landed square against the man’s jaw. “Never mind! With such violent tendencies, maybe a little jail time would do you some good!”

Tessa

It was nearly dusk on the second day since Tessa attempted to find solitude at her family home, hidden far from the distractions of the city. She’d tucked herself into her favorite loveseat, hair piled high on the top of her head while loose strands randomly escaped and framed the natural coloring of her unpaletted face. The air was thick with the scent of chocolate-chip oatmeal cookies as her father sought to impede her already meandering work ethic.

She couldn’t resist her impulses as the aroma enticed her from the nest of pillows she’d created and drew her into the kitchen. Just as Tessa was about to grab one of the still-cooling desserts, her bare feet inching over the cold tile floor, a pounding echoed from the front door. Jack turned, the noise having alerted him to his daughter’s presence, and playfully whacked her outstretched hand with his spatula before directing her to see to the unexpected guest. She snapped her fingers and narrowed her eyes as she approached the sound.

The breeze caused her to blink a few more times than necessary as she hurled the screen-door open, nearly making contact with one of the men positioned there. Locking the swing-bar in place, Tessa allowed her gaze to travel from the

wooden boards along the porch, upwards, before her eyes met a recognizable glare.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t see you there...” Mid-apology for the mistaken collision, she froze, her pupils widened in disbelief. *Son of a bitch...* “So it seems you found me.”

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE GUT-SHOT

Tessa

It would have been a lie to say she wasn't taken aback by the sight of him; an even bigger falsehood to say she wasn't pleased as well. But Tessa had never been the type to fold her cards after only the first draw; she was much more interested in the slow play. Arms crossed, she leaned into the doorframe—as headstrong and impertinent in a pair of joggers and a tank top, as she would have been in a ballgown. Her posture emphasized that she knew she was breathtaking, even in her disheveled state. And that she didn't care. She was no longer the shell-shocked creature she had been in the days prior. Unsure. Broken.

No, on the contrary, this was exactly the woman her father had raised her to be.

“You seem surprised.” His gaze bore into hers, almost as unwavering. But where Tessa was impassive, he was impassioned. It was the effect the two seemed to be able to place on each other, the sensation that the earth had stopped spinning on its axis and everything else had stilled. Like a clock that had been halted mid-tick.

“Oh, I am,” she admitted. “Not by your ability, though. More so by the follow-through.” Unshod, her bare toes inched onto the weathered threshold. Sidestepping her admirer, she approached his cohort instead. “That is an awfully long drive, *mon lapin*.” She reached up to reposition Charles's collar. “What brings you here?”

He gulped beneath her touch; the flesh along his neck reddening at her carefully exacted maneuver. Tessa could feel Sterling's glare, narrowed and direct, his cogs turning as he tried to interpret the interaction. And that was precisely her logic; she had sought to assail the more fragile target first. She

beamed up at her flustered guest, lashes fluttering and expression coy.

“I... we... We’re returning your stuff... The stuff you forgot.” The normally extroverted wisecracker combed his fingers through his hair, neither moving forward nor back. “We...we... We have some properties in the area we are looking into.”

With a final tug to his neckband, the journalist released him, her hands resuming their crossed platform. “Ah, really? Where?” She aimed the question at both men this time. “I’m sure my father could assist you. Except during his service, he’s lived in town his entire life.”

As if prompted, Jack Owens shadowed the entryway, dish towel in hand. “These your friends, Bumblebee?” He nodded towards the visitors.

Charles echoed the endearment in whispered breath while attempting to stifle a laugh. “*Bumblebee?*”

A single eyebrow raised, and sporting an expression as deadened as his tone, Jack warned. “Her mother urged me to soften the nickname years back. Claimed it scared the other kids when I called my girl *killer* at the playground. But don’t you be fooled, boy: the thing may be small, but yell *bee* in a crowded room and everyone goes running. It’s not the size of the creature they fear, but the intensity of its sting.” He turned his back in more of a command than an invitation and ordered, “Come on in. It’s time for dinner.”

Grabbing Charles by the hand, Tessa yanked the unwilling guest through the doorway while he twisted to face Sterling over her shoulder. He pointed and mouthed the words “*evil twin*” before disappearing into the house.

Sterling

He should be jealous—the *average* man would have been. But as previously determined, Sterling preferred the unconventional. In fact, he was still trying to decide if he should consider her artificial display with Charlie *blatant antagonism* or an outright compliment. Observing her

bravado, rather than being subjected to it, was an artform all its own. He watched as she instantly adapted to each new circumstance, a chameleon by its very definition. She didn't miss a beat; it was as though the entire scenario and all possible outcomes had already been scripted. And all she needed to do was recite her lines. Each movement had been natural yet precise, graceful but calculated. Like a dance edged in subtleties.

She had concentrated her efforts on Charles because of how easily the man would crack. Hell, her hapless victim had surrendered before she even had to lay a hand on him. This much, Sterling had already surmised. What he couldn't understand was why, in this instance, she had favored a swift submission over her usual strategy? Was it possible Tessa was acknowledging that she had been bested? Realizing that he had seen through each layer of carefully applied deception and been introduced to the girl beneath it all? Or perhaps, even more unlikely, had she willingly chosen to disengage her opposition? Was the gravitational pull between them deeper than even her serpentine devices dared to reach?

Tessa

Dinner had been quiet but oddly comfortable, considering the questionable happenstance; only in the Owens household was it customary for company to be threatened before being fed. Granted, her father had been one hundred percent accurate. Tessa did have one hell of a left hook.

She shrugged her shoulders in silent agreement.

Placing a silver dessert tray in the center of the table, Jack gripped the back of Charles's neck, causing the poor guy to nearly jolt from his seat. "Come now. I'll show ya' where you fellas will be spending the night." Again, the offer was formulated as an instruction.

Charles dropped the cookie he had raised, though his mouth remained ajar. "Oh, no. We couldn't impose. We, ah, we planned on staying at the hotel downtown," he stuttered.

Mr. Owens didn't respond; instead, the imposing figure continued towards the guest room. As if unsure what else to

do, Charles stood—equally wordless—and followed the man while Sterling and Tessa erupted into a bout of combined laughter.

“He does make it almost too easy. *No?*” she posited.

Sterling nodded, the air again falling silent as he glared into his black coffee before taking a swig. “I’ve been meaning to ask... I couldn’t help but notice the ramps. Since you obviously hadn’t been expecting us all the way out here, I take it you didn’t break them out just for me?”

She was startled when the warmth of his hand closed around hers, providing the reassurance she didn’t know she needed until it was already there.

This. This was exactly what she had been hoping to avoid—what she was running from—the emptiness she felt at the thought of him letting go and her sudden impulse to hold on that much tighter.

“Already dismissing my ability to predict the future?” she jested, looking to ease her own apprehension rather than his, before adding with a sigh, “My mother. She just doesn’t have the same strength anymore. When she refuses to eat, she can barely make it out of the car after a doctor’s appointment. But when *Papa* bakes her favorites, he’ll find her up that flight of stairs, reorganizing the linen closet as if she were ten years younger. He built her those ramps after the first bad day. He never wanted her to feel that helpless again.” Then Tessa bounced from her chair, as if the thought had unexpectedly struck her. “You two should meet!”

Sterling

Tessa had shot up from her chair as though she were animated by a self-imposed electrical current before, and assuming he’d follow her, she bounded through the kitchen and down the hall. She, of course, had assumed correctly.

Like father, like daughter, he mused to himself.

The corridor was wider than Sterling would have expected from the structural era. Although an expansion could have been made in later renovations, the architect took note of how

the double-pocket doors and Victorian-bronze knobs spoke to the original construction. The high ceilings, intricate archways, and hand-carved woodwork had been well-preserved over the years, but it was the aerial view that had piqued his interest. If only he were able to take a closer look at the plastered ceilings...

From his current angle, he couldn't tell if they had been restored or just impeccably maintained. Time, settlement, and moisture were not sympathetic to the opulent design; however, the obvious yellowing leaned towards its authenticity.

Sterling's preoccupation with architectural features derived from an early age and had initially centered around the historic financial repositories his family had inherited. While his parents conversed over which walls to blow out and which foundations to demolish, Sterling stockpiled antiquated vault doors, ornamental ironwork, and whatever carpentry he could salvage. He never understood how the same individuals hyper-focused on progeny could completely dismantle their ancestral monuments, preferring to replace them with whatever was newer, sleeker, and more modernized. His office building was the last concession he'd welcomed from them, and only because he knew if he had not, its future lay at the other end of a bulldozer.

The now obsolete credit union had originally served as the city's fledgling fire department before it was converted into a warehouse and then finally landed amongst his familial line of holdings. It had been his first conservation venture post-injury and consumed him for months on end—as he drafted and redrafted his blueprints, converting the archaic freight-elevator into something usable so he could ultimately navigate the top floor. While his predecessors insisted their legacy was found at the other end of a bankroll, Sterling saw *his* etched in brick walls and masonry.

He had given up on the idea of ever having children, instead believing that his patronage could get passed down in every bit of stone and mortar he sought to maintain for future generations. Unlike an epitaph—cemented in sorrow and mourning, as forgotten as the dirt beneath it—these aging

infrastructures could inspire enjoyment and admiration over lifetimes, as they did for him in the present moment. It was a far more beneficial use of his namesake.

At least he thought so. His forebears on the other hand? Not so much.

The hallway ended in what would have been traditionally used as a cigar parlor. Sterling waited at the entrance as the two women spoke quickly and fluently in French. Mrs. Owens was not what he had been expecting, despite having seen her briefly in the video message.

She was much thinner and slighter in frame, likely due to the malnutrition Tessa had recently mentioned. But all the same, she was a beautiful woman. With long auburn hair braided into a bun and not yet showing signs of gray. Her eyes were strikingly green and mirrored her daughter's. Though the edges were creased, she still appeared much younger than her age would suggest. At the moment, she was standing but her chair was only a few feet behind her.

Catching his stare with the corner of her eye, Tessa greeted him with a small, sad smile as she directed Mrs. Owens's gaze. "Lucien, this is my mother—*Emeline Leroux Owens*. And, *Maman*, this is the friend I was telling you about. He's in town... looking at some properties." She purposely inflected her voice as she repeated Charles's less-than-clever cover story.

The woman's brows furrowed in confusion before she quickly placed a kiss on each one of Sterling's cheeks and continued to respond in her native tongue.

"No, *Maman*, only English," Tessa corrected; however, Emeline's speech remained the same—though perhaps slightly more frantic. "*Maman, nous devons parler en Anglais.*" Tessa prompted again, shaking her head.

"I'm sorry, Bee." Jack entered the room, pushing passed the doorway to cradle his wife close to his side. "She doesn't know how. Not anymore. I didn't want to ruin your visit with us or burden you... The doctors say the disease has attacked her language center. She's reverted completely to French over

the last few months. I was hoping you wouldn't notice for a while yet, since that's your preference anyway. The specialist said she wouldn't even remember learning English..."

Sterling suddenly felt intrusive, though he couldn't bring himself to abandon Tessa in this moment either. He watched as her demeanor shifted between several emotions before settling on anger. She let out a flurry of French profanities, which Mrs. Owens had no problem understanding and seemed to reprimand her for. Then turned to Jack.

"How could you not tell me!" She huffed, pacing a few steps forward and then pacing back. "You don't speak a word of French! I could have been here. I could have helped. Translated! What were you thinking, *Papa*? Be honest. No bullshit!"

"Words have never been a barrier for us, kiddo. After nearly thirty years together, I already know what your mother wants, what she needs. She doesn't have to tell me." As if she knew exactly what her husband was saying, Emeline smiled up at him, and Jack placed a kiss to her forehead. "Speaking of which, I have to get her ready for bed. Show your friend here to the study. I converted it to a spare room for those nights when your mother doesn't want to climb the stairs. You can visit more in the morning." He escorted his wife to the threshold, pausing to address Sterling. "By the way, my daughter's room is upstairs, across from mine. And I'm a *very* light sleeper—an old habit from the war."

"With all due respect, sir," Sterling replied, unsure if the man was actually serious or just busting his balls. "Unless there's an elevator, you won't be finding me up any staircase. You understand that's physically impossible, right?" He gestured towards his chair, but calmly tempered his annoyance.

Mr. Owens grinned; it was the first time his face had softened in direct view of his houseguest. "*Impossible*? Yeah, that's what they said when I only had three months to talk a pretty French heiress, who didn't know a word of English, into moving to the States with me." Exiting the parlor, Jack

declared, “I did it in two. Boy, where there’s a will, there’s always a way.”

He sat with her in silence for longer than either of them had realized. Ironically, like Jack had suggested, verbal communication wasn’t necessary. There wasn’t much Sterling could have said to take away her anguish, and he guessed there wasn’t much she would have wanted to hear at the time anyway. But Tessa hadn’t wanted him to leave and somehow he had understood her plea without her having to vocalize it. He allowed her to stare off into nothing, devoid of questioning or prodding, as he circled his thumb around the palm of her hand.

Unprompted, she was the first to break the lull. “I’m sorry...” Tears clung to her bottom lashes, teetering on the edge of despair as she battled to keep them from falling. “I’m sure this wasn’t what you were expecting. *Telle est la vie, mon chère*, huh?”

She stilled, as he wiped the grief from her eyes before forcing her to turn and look into his. “I’ve already learned that it’s foolish to have expectations when it comes to you.” He cupped her cheek with the rough, cracked skin of his open palm. “It would be like a blind man trying to describe the sky.” His remark came out a little huskier than he’d intended; but then again, it usually did when he was in the same room as this girl.

“Hm. Maybe you *are* smarter than you look.” She laughed as though finding comfort in the comparison.

“Did you seriously just insinuate that I’m dumb?” he gasped, seizing her wrist before she could react and causing her to topple into his arms. She shrieked in surprise and landed with a giggle.

“*C’est souvent vrai quand tu es jolie*. The pretty ones usually are.” Tessa smirked at the same stereotype that had been the bane of her existence. She shifted from a position of submission to one of dominance. Straddling his lap, her knees pinning the outside of each one of his thighs, she forced *him* to

look up at *her*. His hands reflexively shot to her waist to steady her movements as well as to keep her from fleeing.

“Ah. So you admit that I’m pretty?” he countered. “Though, as I’m sure you’re aware, men prefer to be called handsome, rugged, dapper even...” His list of preferred adjectives was cut off by her mouth impatiently assaulting his.

Her lips were softer than he’d remembered, the taste somehow sweeter. Or maybe his memory just couldn’t do them justice. All the same, she ignited every neuron in his body—even those long thought dead. He knew they were practically strangers and yet everything about this woman felt *right*. Felt seamless and extraordinary. Like the piece he had been missing for years.

Hell, the way she looked at him...

She loosened his collar then turned her focus to the buttons of his suit jacket, yanking the material from his shoulders in an attempt to further liberate him from his constrictive clothing. In doing so, her memory card fell from the inner pocket as did the rectangular box he’d been concealing. Both landing with a muffled *thud* on the hardwood. The sound—although just barely audible—was distracting enough to catch her attention. She reached down and plucked the items from the floor, intent on discarding them on the end table at their side.

“Open it,” he encouraged. Though, in truth, what had initially seemed like a good idea suddenly induced self-consciousness and apprehension.

Wordlessly, she did as she was instructed. *For once*. He could detect her quickened pulse when she exhaled the air she must’ve been holding back. And her head was tilted and her eyes were narrowed, as if she were asking a question without an utterance.

“It... it reminded me of you. Charles said it was weird. You can be honest if you don’t like it. Flowers just felt too... cliché.”

CHAPTER NINE: THE HORNET'S NEST

Tessa

Clutching the white box to her chest, the journalist was awestruck. That and somewhat perplexed.

It hadn't been the monetary value that rendered her speechless, though she was certain the price tag was more than she cared to know. No, she was accustomed to the practice of having thoughtless tokens tossed her way; too many admirers—both men and women alike—confused the size of their wallets with their desirability. Instead, it had been his considerable forethought that left Tessa feeling suddenly... *off-balance*.

Grazing her fingertips over each detail, she was thoroughly convinced that Sterling's choice had been exacting and deliberate. The adornment had been carefully nestled inside the crushed velvet navy-blue cushioning, old but delicately placed. The chain appeared to be platinum and pearl, each sequence slightly misshapen and patinaed over time, but the pendant shone as the true masterpiece.

Fossilized amber seemed to be artfully sculpted into an almost teardrop heart shape and then it had been mounted into the silver and rose-cut diamond setting. The pattern crisscrossed from the widest point before interlocking at the tip. Moreover, encased inside the yellow resin was an exquisitely preserved and petrified scorpion. Both fierce and beautiful.

"It reminded me of you."

She knew he was waiting for a response, likely one more animated than her state of reticence. *But how do you respond to that?* He was examining her, scanning for any indication of her displeasure. But he didn't goad her; he didn't force a reaction. He deferred his emotions to hers. However, she did

notice that his grip on her had tightened—whether intentional or not—as though he feared she might run away again.

Cautiously lifting the necklace from its resting place, Tessa cradled it in her palm as she continued to trace out the intricacies. After only a few interactions and even fewer words exchanged, this man had found a way to personify her better than she could describe herself. She uttered the only dialogue she could muster at the time.

“C’est parfait. It’s perfect.”

Over the next hour, and despite the other available seating options, they remained as they were. Tessa had sprawled one leg across the curved armrest with the other dangling off the side, her back held tight to his chest. With each word he spoke, she was soothed by the vibration of his throat pressed to her shoulder while his chin rested comfortably at her collarbone.

She couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt so at ease in her own skin. It was then that she’d been able to openly explain her mother’s illness and how the dementia had crept in slowly at first—under the guise of forgetfulness and the natural aging process—before eating away at the invincible woman Tessa had known throughout her youth.

Emeline Leroux had traveled to the United States, as Jack had mentioned, barely knowing more than a word or two of English. In the year that followed—and in every respect all but self-taught—she became fluently bilingual. Though she had originated from a well-established family, Emeline had never again returned to her hometown, relinquishing both her name and wealth in agreeing to follow the handsome young soldier.

The Leroux bloodline was solely anecdotal for Tessa, her grandparents’ existence stored in the mind of a woman whose memory diminished a little more each day. Believing they deserved the same regard they’d shown her father, Tessa knowingly accepted the fact that part of her family history would die alongside her mother’s recollections.

She accepted it as much as she didn’t care.

Recognizing that her initial sentiment may have appeared grim, Tessa sought to clarify the logic behind her familial indifference; while Sterling continued to listen without interruption or disparagement, absorbing any insight into her inner workings she would willingly impart. There had been moments she was convinced that his attentiveness was, in fact, a demonstration of boredom. She would turn, expecting to find his mind adrift but instead his eyes would meet hers with an encouraging nod. He would pull her back down against him, warming the nape of her neck with his measured breathing, and prompt her to proceed.

She rationalized that extended family—especially one that didn't want her to begin with— was inconsequential, growing up as she had and with parents such as hers. Emeline had been the catalyst for Tessa's education, advising her daughter on the importance of being well-rounded in conjunction with being well-versed. She stood by her belief that there were many different facets of intelligence and academics were just part of a larger equation, and thus, motivated Tessa to expand her scope of knowledge outside of social formalities and comfort.

So, at her mother's prompting, the girl had studied literature, the arts, history, and photography in tandem with mechanics, engineering, business, and politics—acquiring such a vast variety of skill sets that Corey surmised his counterpart must be an international spy. He jokingly dubbed Tessa the *Female 007*, himself the cleverly appointed *Bond Boy*.

But most of all, Emeline had taught her daughter that wealth was always secondary to personal fulfillment; the woman could speak from experience.

Meanwhile, ever the proponent of his daughter's intestinal fortitude, Jack Owens had raised Tessa with the understanding that the only tangible hindrance to an accomplishment was self-depreciation. He repetitively vocalized his pride, insisting that true failure was achieved by never trying in the first place, while deeming each misstep she took no more than an exercise in perseverance. She had never been his *princess*.

No, Jack's daughter would never be labeled a damsel in distress, as he called it. She was his *killer*. The kind of girl born to cause a commotion. He trained her to box, build her own campfire, and change her own oil. Where many parents misguidedly focused on a burden-free life with their children, he focused on preparing Tessa for the obstacles she would face *without* him.

At no time, and under no circumstance, did the girl fear living up to his expectations. Just his legacy.

Sterling

He'd thwarted her attempts to move, no matter the number of times she'd tried to pull away. However, he didn't hold her there against her will. In fact, he had the inclination that she wanted to stay as much as he had needed her to. Her inability to relax against him for long periods of time seemed more of a compulsion—manifested by anxiety—rather than an autonomous decision. How seamlessly she melted back into his arms further solidified his theory. Every time and as if subconsciously, her restlessness stilled with the light pressure of his hands around the narrowing of her waist.

Sterling studied the girl as she spoke, while appeasing his usual affinity for observation. However, he wasn't looking to remain the outsider, nor was she a peculiarity he was hoping to dissect. Instead, he appreciated each word. Each recounting. Each autobiographical detail she voluntarily divulged. She'd guided the conversation, centered her small relinquishments around her immediate family and her upbringing. It was as though she sought to steer the architect away from anything too personal. And yet, ironically, that had been her fatal flaw.

Her parental relationships told him more about her than any self-portrayal ever could have, much like *his* would have told *her*. Even to the most absentminded spectator, it was evident that she maintained a staunch closeness to them. There had been a tenderness in her depiction of the couple. Her tempo would serendipitously quicken with enjoyment and her French would interject more fluidly. And yet before he could pause and remind her of the language barrier, she would

habitually translate—a practice that, he assumed, had become second nature with her father.

Jack's pride had shown in his eyes at the mere mention of the girl. And not because of what she had done in life but because of who she had become. Courageous. Unrelenting. And resourceful. It didn't need to be said; it was intrinsically felt. Furthermore, the care her father had taken to preserve the grandeur of their old, well-loved home exemplified how the man defined value. There were some things that no amount of money could replace, a conviction that the Owen's family seemed to collectively share.

While Sterling hadn't gained direct understanding from Emeline's words, the body language between mother and daughter spoke volumes. Tessa had grown into a girl as much a fighter as her mother seemed to epitomize. Even riddled with disease, the petite maternal figure projected dignity and strength. His heart—the cold, dead thing that it was—ached at the sight of the two and with the knowledge of what was to come for the woman he knew in narrative alone.

Yes. Her childhood had been a stark contrast to his, he thought to himself. Where her home emitted warmth and laughter even when faced with hardship, his had been formalized, cold, and distant. Just like the currency that bore his surname.

Tessa

“It's getting late, *mon nounours*.” She sighed.

The fact that neither one of them had wanted to say it aloud didn't make it any less true. She begrudgingly removed herself from the warmth of his lap, stretching each leg to ease the cramps that had formed there. She felt the phantasmal loss the moment his hands left her hips, a chill where the heat had been. Crossing her arms, she stifled the urge to subdue her rising goose bumps.

“Come on. I'll show you to the study, and make sure you're tucked in properly.” She winked, pointing and curling her index finger before turning on her heel.

Tessa led him to an enormous pair of antique pocket doors, delicately edging the weighted panels open to reveal the interior. This had always been one of her favorite rooms in the house. Breathing deep, she noted how it still smelled like the timeworn books it once held. She watched as the architect seemed as enamored with his makeshift sleeping quarters as she was.

While Tessa had learned that his architectural firm was restoration-based, what hadn't occurred to her was that he actually found enjoyment in it. It was a rare quality to observe in the affluent—usually the only thing they sought to retain was the blue tint to their blood. She couldn't help but smile at the immersive look on his face as he continued to examine the coffered ceiling.

"I'm shocked that we haven't heard hide nor hair from Charles," Tessa remarked as she slid the double doors in place before latching them closed. Turning, she stalked towards her captive prey—the newly gifted amber pendant bouncing in step against her low neckline, as if daring the man to stare.

"He texted that he's sleeping outside in our SUV." Sterling laughed. "He claimed your dad is crazy and threatened to: *make sure he needs a chair of his own...* if he found him anywhere near your bedroom."

Tessa threw her head back in amusement. Little did either man know, Jack was not one to fight his daughter's battles for her. He had the foresight to understand she wouldn't be able to rely on his protection. Were she to find herself in a vulnerable scenario, the only strength his daughter should ever count on was her own.

Sterling

"*Papa* is all bark and no bite," Tessa professed, still smirking. "I'm pretty sure he gets his kicks from making you guys sweat. In truth, I think it's more of an invitation—if anything. Since we haven't been able to hit the bag in a while, he's probably hoping someone takes the bait, so he can make sure I can still land a solid punch."

Somehow Sterling didn't find her admission all that shocking—the apple certainly didn't fall far from the tree with this one.

She positioned herself as she had earlier: saddled on top and facing him, arms circling his neck. “But, now that Charlie's left us all to ourselves in here, there's something I've been meaning to ask... I know we've brushed over the topic,” she said pointedly, running her fingertips along the sleek armrest of his chair. “But I think it's time we addressed the elephant in the room.”

This was it.

The moment he'd been dreading. He closed his eyes and inhaled with the pang he already felt in his chest. He knew what she was going to ask. In actuality, he was surprised at how long she'd taken to bring up the subject. And yet, he couldn't squelch his underlying panic. *This* was why he avoided socializing in crowds, why Charles handled the firm's face-to-face daily operations.

The poking. The prodding. The constantly approaching him like he were a museum exhibit to be gawked at. Like his spectators had the right to know which parts of him worked and which didn't.

He'd been so immediately drawn to her because of how differently she'd treated him. Or rather, how equally. Then again, he knew the bubble she had initially created for him wouldn't last. Curiosity would always overtake even the best of them.

“Go ahead and ask.” He groaned, his gaze penetrating hers as he ignored his growing impulse to look away.

CHAPTER TEN: THE SLOW STUDY

Sterling

Every muscle in his body tensed as he waited for her to formulate the question. The same question he'd answered, or refused to, or cursed at since the moment he'd discovered his entire world in shambles.

Even now, he could still see the look of horror, guilt, and pity on Madelyn's face upon hearing his prognosis. Though, in all fairness, it wasn't that hard to remember—considering that to this day, that look had remained imprinted there. He had yet to decide what had been worse, his fiancée's reaction or the devastation met by his parents. Not over concern for their son's future of course, but rather for their sudden lack of a sole heir. In an instant, he'd shattered everyone's dreams, except his own, because he had never been permitted to have any in the first place.

Funny enough, this was the first time he realized that he'd never really had anything to lose to begin with. Not a single aspiration had belonged to Sterling alone...

From the time he'd been born, his life had been decided for him. His education. His profession. His impending marriage. It'd all been laid out in front of him like tomorrow's suit—one that he'd unquestioningly stepped into. That is, until he'd lost the use of his legs and in turn, gained his backbone. It was true that his feelings for Madelyn had been earnest; however, he'd also never been given the opportunity to meet anyone outside his family's set income. Nor had he taken it. It was odd to think where he might be, right now, if everything hadn't veered so far off course.

He certainly wouldn't be in this room. Or with this girl.
And that thought sent an unexpected twinge to his chest.

“Don’t get me wrong, *ours en colère*.” He was disoriented by the sound of her voice and incidentally freed from the trappings of his inner thoughts. Tapping on the left cylindrical spoke, she grinned as if bemused by his discomfort. “I know you come from money, but I have to ask... what is this? The Rolls-Royce of wheelchairs?”

Stunned, the architect blinked and tried to maintain his bearings. *Okay, that hadn’t been the question he’d been expecting. And perhaps he wasn’t smarter than he looked*, he thought and immediately regretted not heeding his credence from earlier.

“Only if a Rolls-Royce is made of graphene and manufactured in Sweden.” His retort was natural and puckish as he choked back his laughter. “*That* was what you waited to ask me behind closed doors? Not about what happened...” He was a grown-ass man, and yet he could feel the heat creeping up his neck as he mindlessly tugged at his collar. “Or about what works? Instead, you want to know about the fancy chair?”

“Yep! Right now, in this moment, does it really matter what happened?” Her eyes glanced down suggestively before continuing to trail upwards to meet his gaze again. “And I’m already *well* aware of what works, Lucien. Lest you forget, I’ve spent more time in your lap than not.”

He shifted in his seat under her visual anatomizing.

“As for bringing up the *fancy chair*, as you call it, I had to wait until we were out of earshot. I was raised to never comment on someone’s financial status. *Maman* says it’s rude.” The look she gave him now was mischievous. And maybe something more...

She didn’t flinch when he’d refused her offer to help climb onto the guest bed. He’d anticipated her leaving by that point—as embarrassed as he was—when he clumsily transitioned his weight onto the mattress. The same as he had done every night. Instead, she grinned and lifted her palms up in submission before plopping herself on the other end to

watch. Though as to what she was so intent on observing, he hadn't the slightest. He wanted to be taken aback or annoyed by the way she treated him like a spectacle. But there was something about how her eyes regarded him that made Sterling think twice.

“And what exactly are you doing?” The accusation left him unwittingly and before he even realized he'd formulated the sentence. And yet, surprisingly, her stare didn't waver in the least bit.

“Trying to give you incentive to hurry up, since you didn't let me hasten the ordeal.”

It was then that he recognized the gleam—the exact one that had prompted his hesitation. The look she'd given him, it'd been... *flirtatious*.

No wonder he hadn't been able to pinpoint it at first.

Braced by the heavy wooden headboard, he chastised himself before returning his attention to her prone form. It was a strangely tender feeling, having her lie beside him and beneath the covers. Though to her it was completely natural. Or, at least, outwardly that's how she appeared.

She was curled up on her side and still facing him, one arm tucked under the pillow and the other under her head. Her hair had escaped the high-tied knot and framed her profile with unfettered waves, while her respirations idled in a slow and even pace, further drawing his gaze to the pearly chain constricted by the dip of her breasts.

“Shouldn't you head upstairs? Before someone notices you're missing?” His reluctance was palpable; howbeit, no one could say he didn't at least *try* to do the right thing.

Chivalry wasn't dead, but it was sure as hell a challenge to maintain.

“I haven't slept up there in ages,” she confessed, and her lips couldn't have curled up anymore if she tried. “Whenever I do visit, I'm usually up late into the night working and eventually doze off on the couch. Or in here, seeing as it used to be my father's study.”

What the fuck was he supposed to do with that information? What would Lucien have done? Never mind, he knew *exactly* what Lucien would have done.

But he wasn't so sure that he wanted to be that guy again, even if presented the opportunity. Just the sound of his given name—as she spoke it those few times—left him feeling distant. Like the person she was referring to was someone else entirely.

Would she have been able to so effectively disarm the man he once was, he wondered. Though, if he were to be completely honest, the question itself was rhetorical. Considering he knew with an unequivocal certainty that, that same man would have enthusiastically walked into her trap and closed the door behind him.

He had no doubt that this girl would be the end of him; however, as he was now, he knew he held a much higher chance of survival.

Tessa

Corey would have accused her of being completely out of her mind, she told herself.

If she'd asked, her target would have relinquished his entire story. Right then and there. Though professionalism had not been her sole reason for avoiding the subject, she would still have argued with her partner. She would have reminded him that the most precise truths were those offered unprompted and adventitiously. And just as often as not, they were insinuated rather than audibly spoken. What was true for her day job translated seamlessly into her personal life as well. Therefore, she would admit that her intentions with Sterling were not entirely executive-based.

If at all...

She wasn't lying. She'd meant it when she said that in this moment what had happened previously didn't really matter. Because it hadn't mattered. It didn't matter. The only thing that did, was the realization that she was cradled next to him because she wanted to be; there was no other ulterior motive.

And she feared that posing dually loaded questions would have changed that.

It was generally assumed—if not implied—that the journalist should be well-versed in basic intimacies, considering Tessa relied on not only her guile but also the subtle nuances of seduction. Though she couldn't really fault the misplaced conjecture, in actuality, she barely let her targets touch her. And under no circumstances did she go home with them.

Not anymore anyway...

No, the crucial part had always been to leave them wondering. Wanting. Obsessing over what they couldn't have. Or what they thought they could. It had been a long time since she had interacted with any male outside of these intended marks—as baffling as that may have seemed. But these career pursuits had always been her main focus; *that* and the fact that she found very few individuals worth more than the passing pleasantries.

Thus, lying beside this man was both intimidating and freeing, as was the fact that she had both nothing and everything to lose at once.

Sterling

Her posturing had been spontaneous and independent of her normally composed and premeditated behaviors—quick but not any less catlike—as both her presence and stature bestrode the man beneath her. Upon impact, her knees pinning the slight V-shaped dip of his transverse muscles, Sterling's eyes closed with a vocalized groan. They opened as she released each button of his dress shirt before sliding the material down off his shoulders and onto the floor.

The tips of her fingers played along the sculpted outline of his exposed upper body. His clavicle, to his sternocostal, to his deltoid. As if they were memorizing the well-defined details. Necessity, rather than narcissism, had cut and broadened the architect's physique whereas endurance had molded it.

The gentle exploration had ended with her hands flat and paralleled on his bare chest while his palms tucked into the bend of her knees. Counteracting her initial leverage, he utilized this sudden gravitational vantage point to tug her forward, her mouth meeting his. He lightly cupped the side of her face, the kiss fluctuating from soft to animalistic.

Her initial appraisal had been accurate; there was no question about which parts of him were fully functioning. If only his legs had been as cooperative, he would have already flipped her onto her back and shown her just how right she had been. But the reality of the situation left him completely at her mercy. He could only give her what she took, offer what she embraced and accommodated.

The suppressed whimpers and moans she was emitting were enough to drive any man crazy; however, it was the back and forth grind of their clothing that edged him towards madness. Cursing under breath, he tilted his head back against the headboard willing the resounding *thud* to knock the sense back into him while he attempted to steady his respirations. And yet, his efforts would remain fruitless as she continued her pointed assault on his ability to rationalize.

She nipped at the base of his jawline, grazing her teeth along the stubbled contour before meeting his ear with her shallowed pants. “*Dis moi ce que tu veux...*” The sound was as carnal as it was incoherent. “Tell me what you want,” she repeated, dragging her nails across the skin bordering his waistband.

His capacity to formulate thought or articulate any further was all but fragmented as he hissed the singular word. “You.” Had she been testing him—despite the stuttered, faltering response—it appeared as though he passed; that is, if her reprisal were any indication.

She unfastened his weighted belt buckle, next focusing on the top button and zipper of his pants. “You were never going to be able to sleep like that,” she whispered, wrenching the leather strap through each loop in a single directed flick of her wrist and chucking it onto his crumpled shirt. “You should have let me take it off *before* you came to bed, *chose têtue.*”

Upon achieving her unrestrained and self-imposed access, Tessa's hand dipped into the open pocket of the tailored fabric while her gaze fluttered upwards, piercing his own. She gripped the uprisen bulge between his thighs. Palm pressed excruciatingly tight, she taunted him into increased submission. Her gestures were slow, methodical, just enough to stir the flame but not nearly enough to satiate it.

He searched for some hint of similar instability, aching for the slightest testament that would denote her reciprocation. A man haunted by self-doubt, he sought any sign willing to confirm that this femme fatale burned as hot and as hungered as her harshened command would suggest. Nevertheless, when he encountered Tessa's shared intensity—her eyes flickering between appetite and combustion—he balked.

“*Fuck...*” Swearing with baited exhale, he momentarily halted her touch. “You know you are damn near *killing* me, right?”

“*Mon ours*, I can assure you that is not my intention. Then again, what is life without *la petite mort...*?” Unburdened by discretion, she recaptured his lips, hers feverishly sealing the promise that hung in the air.

Tessa

The control she held over Sterling was almost as gratifying as the rhythmic rise and fall of his hips beneath her. Without regard for propriety or consequence or even the fact that they knew less about each other than she cared to dwell on, Tessa unsheathed the man.

She took shameless pleasure in just the sight of him: exposed, throbbing, and raw from her embrace. Though unclear whether it had been by instinct or intimidation, he pulled away, stilled, and waited for her next move; while the usually patient journalist had no interest in building the suspense a minute longer.

Despite how tempting her view, she mused, cocking an eyebrow at the thought.

Had he still been wearing his necktie, this would have been the part where she yanked it forward and closed the distance between them—a small reprimand for having created their separation in the first place. However, lack of a proper leash be damned, her pet couldn't evade her predatory crawl nor *she presumed* would he care to. Regaining sufficient proximity, Tessa enclosed her arms over his shoulders. His chest taut, hers heaving. Before mounting the man in an impassioned display of dominance.

The sudden rush of heat and friction where it'd been needed most left them both gasping. Desperate and breathless, she rode out the pulsing ache at her core. There were no thoughts, no second-guesses. All forms of logic and reason were dismissed as the pressure sharpened with every staggering grind of her pelvic bone. Even as her toes grew numb, her flanking thighs both tense and trembling, Tessa remained too far gone to consider the post-climatic aftershock her body would endure. As her energy waned, his hands—which nearly encompassed the entirety of her waist—hastened the tempo with each additional thrust.

When she finally reached her peak, he kept one palm firmly in place at her hip, the other shooting upwards to muffle her cries. Slinking over the stimulative edge, Tessa bit down on the meat of his knuckle in a half-hearted attempt to quiet herself. The sinking sensation of her teeth into his flesh heightened his own release, which culminated in an unrestrained growl. And almost as if her allegorical strings had been cut, the journalist collapsed onto the security of the architect's chest, his arms innately clutching her there.

Sterling

Short-winded and fighting for air, Sterling couldn't help but think how the expression *a little death* had never been more fitting.

He'd looked death in the eye. He knew death. Surrender. And this... This was jarringly close to it. Where most would say *fuck you* to that final submission, the man had spit in the Grim Reaper's face and said, "Fuck me," instead. And she'd complied.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE LOOKING GLASS

Sterling

It'd been a year since he'd met the girl he would easily consider the love of his life. And nearly a year to the day before he would marry her. Looking back had anyone told him this was where he would be, he would never have believed them.

But this girl... she was unlike anyone he'd ever met and he couldn't seem to get her out of his head. Like a bad habit he just couldn't shake, an addiction he'd no intention of breaking. Their engagement had been spontaneous—one he hadn't planned. Instead, the thought had hit him suddenly and without warning.

He couldn't live without her. He didn't want to...

And so, he'd spit the question out before logic or reason could argue with him otherwise. *Be my wife?* It hadn't necessarily been phrased as a request but it hadn't been a statement either. It was more open-ended than that...

She was the exact opposite of everything Lucien had been raised to look for in a future spouse. She defied him at every given chance, countered his every decision, and inspired him to blindly dive towards so much more than he thought himself capable. She was the spark that seemed to set his world ablaze and he voluntarily watched it burn.

Even now, as he repositioned his tie, he could hear her humming in the background as she readied herself for their dinner with her parents. And he couldn't stop himself from grinning over the joy that simple, soft vibration elicited from him.

“Careful, keep smiling at your reflection like that and you'll have a fate no better than that Greek nymph,” she warned from her perch at the threshold of the bathroom.

She was beautiful...

But to say it or think it wasn't enough for him. The three words weren't enough to even begin to describe her. They were minimalistic in comparison to her presence. After all, beauty was such a trivial concept. A label given to a painting, a piece of jewelry, a distant landscape, and all the other things the world chose to disparage and gawk at. She wasn't one of those things and while he couldn't deny the fact that he was driven to stare at her; it wasn't out of the need for a visual inspection—it was in wonderment and awe over every aspect of her entirety. And yet, in the current state of his primitive brain, all he could come up with was:

She was beautiful...

“It's *you* I'm smiling at,” he retorted, staring at her mirrored image reflected back at him as he continued to button his suit jacket and adjust his cufflinks.

“Hm... I find that rather unlikely, considering you have yet to even turn to look at me.” Her expression was bemused, her tone mocking.

“I don't need to look at you to be so utterly captivated.” He paused and tapped his index finger against the hollow of his temple, maintaining the reflective eye contact. “Your image is perfectly ingrained up here, darling.” She crept up behind him, flinging her arms around his neck and draping them across his chest; her lips pressed close to his ear as she kissed the sensitive skin along his nape.

Breathing in the scent of his cologne, she sighed. “Save the charm for someone who's likely to fall for it, Lucien.”

“I did...” was all he said before he pulled her from behind him to capture her mouth with his. She tasted as sweet as she had that very first night they'd been together and every night since.

“All right, enough, you two lovebirds,” Charles interrupted, obnoxiously motioning at his invisible wristwatch. “I refuse to be held accountable if we're any later.”

Almost as though their reaction had been choreographed, Charles was met with a synchronized pair of eye rolls before each exited the master bedroom.

“On that note,” he continued. “I’ll take my own car.” With a captain’s salute, he turned on his heel, refusing to glance behind him at the imaginary holes being burrowed into the back of his head in the form of friendly fire.

Pleasantries and well-wishes were exchanged across the table, while all parties sought to soothe the circulating tension by glaring at the bottom of their empty liquor glasses. Charles was his usual carefree self, eager to entertain and content with all focus narrowed in on his every word. And for once, this was more of a relief than a bother for the couple, especially considering it filled the frequent, uncomfortable intermissions. The evening had been rather uneventful, a formality really, however still somewhat awkward.

Her father, widowed just six-months prior, was already remarried. Though their nuptials may have seemed sudden, the ordeal wasn’t entirely unexpected. Her mother had been ill for quite some time, and in truth, the woman had been *long gone* prior to her physical passing. This was the first time everyone had gathered together since the funeral and fast-paced vow exchange. Thus, the discomfort was palpable and it eased into a sensation somewhere between mourning and celebration—a sort of emotional purgatory.

Regardless, Sterling would take a million more evenings such as this, if it meant spending them beside the woman currently in the driver’s seat. He closed his eyes; the air was cool against his face as they traveled down the highway and towards their vacation home in the countryside. Charles remained behind at the restaurant, hoping to liven-up the stiff interactions that had prevailed over the course of the meal, while they made a quiet escape out the side door. Neither had any interest in prolonging the experience. And adding more alcohol to the mix only seemed to stir unresolved contentions.

No, it had been a far better decision to end the night prematurely and in the best spirits possible, all things considered, Lucien concluded.

He struggled to stay awake; but he feared that he had one too many glasses of brandy with dinner and part of him was still fighting to maintain his state of consciousness. While he'd been hesitant to allow his bride-to-be control of the steering wheel, he was now thankful for the luxury of the passenger seat and the reprieve the elongated blinks granted him.

The roads were remarkably empty and the radio lulled him into a further state of restfulness. Before he even knew he was sleeping, Lucien began to dream of this girl and the life he hoped they would have. He dreamt of their future home and the possibility of children. And he dreamt of all the intangible niceties he never before thought possible. Until meeting her.

It was while his mind sunk deeper and deeper into this meditative trance that the vehicle began to swerve.

Lucien couldn't remember what he heard first: the slamming of the brakes and the shrill echo of tires screeching, the shattering impact of the car slamming into the hillside, or the devastated sobs beside him...

The isolated sounds seemed to jumble together, neither forming a cohesive sequence nor escaping to distinguish themselves individually. It was as if his neurological system had altered its wavelengths and could no longer decipher the subtle differences in time. He couldn't perceive variations between what he heard, felt, saw, or even smelled.

But blood—*he tasted* the blood. It was metallic and raw and seemed to pulse in his mouth. It was thicker than he recalled the liquid being and coated the back of his throat.

He didn't know if minutes, hours, or even days had passed—as he internally stumbled in and out of the near-drunken haze. At first, he'd felt an unimaginable sense of warmth, not unpleasant but not exactly reassuring either. It was a tingling

sensation, both thermal and wet until that ache transformed into a near existential agony.

His outstretched hands attempted to gain bearing amidst the composite of rock and foliage, but every muscle fiber fought in opposition of furthering his movements. The shooting pain seemed to emanate from the entirety of his being with no discernable root cause, as though he himself and his mere existence were the very source. All while his fundamental drive for self-preservation was collapsing steadily and giving way to acceptance.

He accepted death. He welcomed it.

Desperate for oxygen, his nerve endings screamed with each sputtered intake of air as crimson tinted his breath upon discharge. He paused between respirations and swallowed the expelled blood clots, simultaneously ignoring his stomach's desire to evacuate its contents. The world around him felt both intrusively close and apathetically distant. And he was no longer certain what was real and what were hallucinations as he struggled to orient his physical body with his surroundings: who he was, where he was, and what day it was...

“No, no, no, no. Please, no...”

They may have been his words—possibly mumbled inwardly or gasped outwardly—or they may have been hers. At the time, they held no recognizable ownership; however, they were unequivocally present in some form or another. He had no memory of any verbal exchange in those suppressed moments. He could only hope that he'd said something worth saying. That at the very least she understood what she meant to him and what he had been thinking in the seconds immediately before...

All the noise.

The throbbing was starting to subside; though in truth, he would have chosen the pain over the inevitable numbness that would come to replace it.

Feeling something was far better than feeling nothing.

For Lucien, there was no greater realization than that. He'd always thought that death was meant to ease the suffering of a dying man, and yet somehow the fear of his approaching mortality only increased his burden. When his vitals began to plummet and his breathing grew more laborious, he knew *then* that—just as intrinsically as he had known he wanted to marry her—he would have done anything to stay alive. For her. And done that same thing ten times over, to feel her touch rather than the coldness he was succumbing to.

Willing his eyes to open, it wasn't blackness he saw. Instead, it was *nothingness*. There was no more accurate of a definition, no better way to express it. However, after a few additional strained breaths, his vision focused. And the looming shadows morphed into tangible images.

The irony was not lost on Lucien as he stared at the iridescent glass in the shattered side-view mirror. The evening had ended unnervingly similar to how it had started. Huddled against his larger frame, Tessa's reflection stared back at him.

Tessa, the girl he couldn't stop thinking about. The girl he couldn't stop dreaming about, even as she was forced to watch him take his last breath...

CHAPTER TWELVE: THE MAVERICK

Six Years Prior

Tessa

Her first two thoughts had been: *What the hell had she gotten herself into? And how the hell was she going to get herself out of it?*

Cursing under breath, Tessa shifted her weight back and forth just long enough to realize her wrists were crossed and bound behind her. The throbbing in her head pulsated in rhythm with each inward gasp for air. The atmosphere itself was stale, *dusty*, and flavored by death and rot. Or rather, what she could only assume those things would taste like. Licking her bottom lip, she could feel the swelling as well as the gash present there; however, continuing to run the tip of her tongue along the inside of her mouth she noted that all her teeth remained intact.

“Dieu merci pour les petites choses...” she huffed. *Thank God for the little things.* Even as young as she was, she wasn't a crier. Not usually. And not in instances such as these. Though—and of this she was certain—had she in fact been one, *now* would be the time for it. In the absence of tears, she had been taught to act out of instinct and logic rather than emotion. Ironically enough the answer to her internal dialogue was her failure to adhere to those same teachings.

What she had gotten herself into was an underground power struggle between two different criminal organizations: the Russian *Bratva* and the Italian Mafia. On the other hand, how she was going to get herself out of it had yet to be determined.

The mission had been simple: infiltrate one of the high-profile crime families, unearth any hidden or obscured details

behind Salvatore Ragetti Junior's death, and get the hell out of there. Perhaps *simple* hadn't been the correct adjective; it may have been more accurate to say that her instructions had been *straightforward*.

She and her partner were given the lead on the upcoming feature in *The New York Times Magazine*, centering on the unsolved murder of the fallen west coast mob boss. The anniversary of the supposed robbery-gone-wrong was around the corner, and her editor was hoping to spark new interest in the notorious case. *That* and, of course, increase profit margins. Anything and everything lurid always sold more papers, even if the information was vague and repetitive. It was what the public wanted—a glimpse into the immoral world that remained just out of their reach.

And Tessa was determined to give it to them.

Before she had even graduated college, Tessa had been working as an embedded undercover journalist. She was handpicked early on in her career because of her charisma, decisiveness, and most of all, her ability to charm her way out of trouble. Whatever situation her use of words and wit couldn't overcome, her exceptional boxing skills would.

Until she'd met one man; a man who would not only shatter her confidence but ruin her career before it'd even started. A man who neither her intellect nor her left hook were ready for.

At the time, the most prominent syndicates on the east coast were the Agostinos and the Morettis. Sebastian "Bash" Santoro had been filtering information from the lower-level soldiers in the Moretti Family. Cold-hard cash was an easy way to loosen lips with these 'yet to be made' men, especially considering how ill-regarded the familial patriarch seemed to be amongst his own crowd. However, the Agostinos were an entirely different story. Their men were intrinsically loyal, well-vetted, and couldn't be bought—the crew's esteem had been earned rather than enforced and no amount of dollar-signs seemed to be able to diminish that type of allegiance. No matter how hard the journalists tried.

The little bit of knowledge Bash had been able to siphon out helped devise Tessa's next plan of action. The weak link in the organization was the youngest Agostino brother, Marco. The kid had a proclivity for skirt chasing and it seemed to take only a few bats of an eyelash and a nice pair of legs to grab his attention. And Tessa just so happened to possess both. Because the boy seemed to run through women so quickly, there was rarely enough time for a proper background check before he was onto the next girl. She just needed to hold his attention a little longer than his usual conquests, just enough time to flesh out a lead, and then she would disappear as quickly as the last piece of arm candy.

That had been her intention anyway.

What she hadn't prepared for was how working so closely with Bash would eventually affect her. This would be a mistake she promised herself she would never again repeat.

She couldn't remember the exact moment she had fallen for her partner; all she *could* remember was that the feeling was there before she could stop it from formulating. The late nights, the forced proximity, and their shared professional drive ignited the heated infatuation between them. It wasn't until years later that she would come to realize she had been the intended mark all along, and the affair had never been mutual.

After weeks of planning, it only took a few minutes of sitting at the bar—her legs bare and crossed and hair pulled high and tight while revealing a neckline too perfect to not be sculpted—for Marco to notice her. In part, because he had an eye for beautiful women. But the other part was because Tessa just seemed to have that *something*, that *allure*, that attracted men like flies to honey. And the younger Agostino heir was all too willing to be captured.

Part two of their modus operandi meant *keeping* him there. This task took a little more finesse than just looking pretty. With such a ruthless and domineering lineage, what Marco hadn't been accustomed to was hearing the word *no*.

And Tessa long ago theorized that much more than the prize itself, men hungered for the chase. The sort of bait dangled just out of reach.

If bait was what the boy needed, then bait she would be...

As effortlessly as she'd whispered all those pretty French words in his ear, she would turn on her heel, peer over her shoulder, and reject him. She became the jigsaw puzzle he just couldn't piece together. And that kept him fixated.

However, the problem arose when that *fixation* spilled over and onto the other organizations with much more nefarious intentions; those individuals who began to see the coupling as leverage and a rather large bargaining chip against the Agostinos. And that... *that* had been the first mistake that had led to her downfall.

The second had been trusting Bash...

An undercover partnership was one that required an unquestionable amount of interdependence—one that not only involved the utmost discretion but also impacted matters as significant as life and death. And Tessa had relied on her partner as much as she relied on herself at the time. Bash assimilated comfortably with the patrons at the *Danza* nightclub, both owned and operated by the Agostino Crime Family. He was assigned as her eyes and ears should her cover be blown and her safety be jeopardized. Wearing a wire or any sort of recording device was too risky; therefore, he was the only thing that stood between the journalist and the back of a trunk.

Or so she'd thought...

Instead, when push had come to shove, the son of a bitch had walked away without even a glance backwards as the large Soviet hitman had snatched Tessa from the back room and thrown her into the vehicle before driving away. Leaving her where she presently sat, beaten and tied to a metal chair in some dilapidated warehouse outside New Jersey.

Fuck New Jersey. She spit at the thought, the resulting puddle tinted pink.

The Russian men had falsely come to believe that she meant more to the Agostinos than she really did, and the fuckers now hoped to use that to their advantage.

Though the sting of betrayal crawled beneath her skin, Tessa forced the bitterness into the depths of her stomach. She left it to burn and bubble there, to ferment amongst its own acidic nature until there was room enough for it to boil over and finally be of use. But while she waited for that rage to manifest itself, she didn't have time for self-pity or loathing; she had to focus on survival first.

And she did survive. Better yet, the journalist conquered and overcame.

The intricate details of her escape never came to light. She didn't share them with a soul; she didn't tell a single person what exactly she'd endured during her sixteen hours in captivity. However, she'd emerged far more stalwart, stronger somehow. She hadn't allowed them, nor the deception she'd faced, to break her. *Because there was a difference between being battered and being broken*—a proverbial mantra she believed she'd read somewhere and she began repeating over and over again internally. Or perhaps it had been the devil himself that had whispered those words in her ear. But that was an entirely different story and one for another day...

Regardless, the saying had resonated with and empowered her.

Injuries be damned, she finished her article—a piece entitled Wise-Guys Finish Last: Who Whacked the West Coast King? And it was published front and center in the following month's edition.

Picking up the freshly printed paper from her local newsstand the morning of its release, Tessa was met with the final stab she would ever allow to penetrate her heart. All mention and credit to her name had been erased. In the biggest, boldest, Times New Roman font stood the accreditation: *by S. Santoro.*

But it hadn't been there, in the middle of that sidewalk, where she'd surrendered to her fate and to leaving that city forever. Fumes dancing from every pore, Tessa stormed full speed to her office building. And crumbled-up magazine in hand, she flung the article down on the desk of her chief editor in full view of her colleague, ex-lover, and partner—a single man *all* one in the same. As Sebastian sauntered into the room, it took every fiber in her being to keep Tessa from smacking that smirk from his mouth. Both men stared at her as though they couldn't begin to comprehend what the problem was, as though *she* were the crazy one. Neither could decipher the string of French obscenities that preceded her next words.

“This... this was *my* story. I wrote it. I *bled* for it and not even an acknowledgement!”

Their off-kilter replies would haunt her, even six years later. “Darling, your name will never be published. It's cute though, to think you are that naïve,” Sebastian mocked, before pinching her cheek like she was a child and only there to entertain him. “We chose you because of that pretty face of yours. And that ass doesn't hurt either. But, sweetheart, leave the writing to us men.”

Despite being made a fool of, at that point in their exchange, Tessa may have been able to save her career had her retort not been a fist firmly planted in Bash's jaw. But the feeling of her knuckles making precise contact with that man's glass chin was worth more than any amount of recognition the field could offer her.

Ironically, they'd been right about one thing. Her full name would never be published. Because moving forward, she would be known under her abbreviated pseudonym; however, she would never be able to “leave the writing to the men” as they had so condescendingly suggested. The challenge just spurred her on, drove her every action, and made her resolute to prove them wrong.

That would be the last time she ever saw Sebastian Santoro, Marco Agostino, or the New York City skyline. None of which would she ever come to miss or regret leaving behind.

Nevertheless, her new code of conduct had been indoctrinated that day. Bash became both the first and last romantic interest to ever get that close to her heart—though, without reciprocation, she knew it wasn't love she felt. Having seen what her parents had between them, Tessa would never dare to call it that. She meant it when she claimed that Jack was the one man to ever create permanence in that hollowed-out cavity in her chest. Furthermore, in the six years to follow, her ex-partner remained the only person to ever share the intimacy of her bed. No one had earned that privilege. Not after the atrocities she'd endured in that warehouse...

Until Lucien...

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: THE ACE-KING

The Present

Sterling

Contrary to what his subconscious had just revealed, to what his brain was screaming at him to believe, to what some part of him was wanting to be true... in that side-view mirror, those eyes weren't *Tessa's*. That haunting stare had never been *Tessa's*. Because the girl wasn't there; she'd never been *there*. Not before. Not during. It wasn't until long *after* that night that she'd begun to obsess his thoughts.

The nightmare itself hadn't startled him awake. He'd grown accustomed to its repetitive nature, to gasping for air in the middle of the night, as if he were back in time and his lungs were once again pitted and desperate. He'd even learned to suppress the phantom muscular contractions that incessantly tore through his nerve endings—the same nerve endings that, once his eyes fluttered open, lay still and lifeless. Dead and defective.

As if God himself were taunting him.

Instead, it was the fact that his mind had materialized *her* in what had always been Madelyn's placeholder, the one safe haven where his first love was still *his*. Even if he knew how the dream would end, how the actual events had long ago come to fruition, it was the peaceful moments just *before* that he'd always cherished.

This sudden change... he didn't know what to make of it.

Had he been able, he'd have run, fled in the middle of the night like the bastard he was beginning to believe himself to be. However, that wasn't an option so he allowed his pangs of consciousness to eat away at him in the shadows of the darkened room.

She wasn't his. She belonged to someone else. He kept chanting it internally. Madelyn was married... to William. A man with the ability to walk her down the aisle, to sweep her off her feet and dance beside her, for as long as she would have him.

Then why did he feel so... *guilty*? Was he going to mourn her loss for the rest of his life? Was he supposed to? Or was this knee-jerk reaction, this irrational dread, really just his own gratuitously self-inflicted need for some sort of... atonement? Better yet, why was he so grief-stricken in the first place?

The woman, though out of his reach, was alive and well.

Were these feelings just an outlet for his self-pity? A preoccupation with and regret over all the what-could-have-beens? She had moved on and was happy. Perhaps even more so than she ever would have been with him. That being said, why did everything now still feel so utterly... *wrong*?

Or was it that it felt right?

And rightness was an emotion long since forgotten by Sterling; it was such a distant memory in fact that the architect couldn't even tell the difference between the two anymore.

The girl began to stir next to him, seeming to seek out the warmth his body emitted before sighing and once again succumbing to the restful quietude.

When she dreamed, her expression softened, her brows unfurrowed, and that ever-present smirk of hers fell into a natural pout. As though all the worry she carried throughout the waking hours slipped from her shoulders, and for the time being, she didn't have to pretend so hard. Because pretending seemed to be how she got through the day-to-day: pretending she was okay, pretending she knew everything, pretending she didn't care one way or the other. But she did care.

Perhaps she wasn't so different from him after all.

Her touch grounded Sterling, calling his spiraling thoughts back to the present—to *the here and now*—while his unrelenting panic began to subside. Gently, so as not to disturb her, he combed his fingers through the ends of her hair. He

wondered what her story was; he knew there was so much more to it, to what made this girl tick.

Would she tell it to him? And would he ever share his own?

Tessa

Whereas most people looked peaceful whilst they slept, this man appeared plagued. Tormented. His teeth were clenched and his jaw ticked with the slightest movement. It was as if whatever new hell he was facing escalated tenfold during the time his mind should be resting. Her heart—the same organ presumed to be nothing more than dead space and dust—ached at the sight of this inwardly angled and self-guided torture.

Placing her hand to the center of his chest, Tessa watched as he stilled with the weight of her palm, as if his thoughts could be unburdened by the slight gesture.

It wasn't until several moments later, at the sound of the heavy pocket doors shifting, that they were simultaneously stirred from the comfort of the sheets. The would-be intruder seemed to be perplexed by the antiquated locking mechanism, choosing instead to shake the firmly rooted panels.irate footsteps stomped back down the hall, followed by an onslaught of unintelligible and mumbled expletives that could only belong to none other than Charles Fox.

Sleeping in the SUV all night likely had the poor man waking up on the wrong side of the steering wheel. Tessa laughed to herself. “And here I thought Charlie would understand how a skeleton key works by now,” she jested.

“Do you honestly think that man steps foot in those old, rundown homes? Can you imagine the screams, should the pretty boy come face to face with a cobweb?” Sterling retorted, while the pair chuckled in unison.

“Then who does all the detail work and measurements?” Her tone suddenly more direct, Tessa stretched and faced the man beside her, the bedsheets still strewn haphazardly across her chest in some semblance of intended modesty.

“I do.”

Sterling

He couldn't hide the edge to his voice. Despite avoiding her gaze, his delivery had been just as sharp, just as pointed. It wasn't out of embarrassment that he'd evaded whatever reaction he knew she would instinctively formulate upon hearing his claim. But rather, he didn't want to see the questions or doubts that he feared were lingering in her eyes. He hadn't yet shielded himself against the skepticism. Not from her. Not yet.

Steeling his nerves, he clarified, “I get what I can from the ground-level; for the remaining, I rely on my research and photographs.”

Her smile grew and her face lit up. “*Ça alors! C'est incroyable!*” Her spine straightened as she gasped. “That's incredible...”

She cocked her head to the side and began scrutinizing the intricacies of the room. Perhaps trying to speculate how the architect himself saw the world from where he sat. Wrought by his own sense of internal conflict, Sterling couldn't tell if her movements had been deliberate or subconscious.

As if she could somehow feel the weight of his introspection, she stopped and smiled before returning his tentative stare. “I just can't imagine... It must require so much determination and discipline, preserving homes such as these. Not just anyone has that level of passion and respect for the history in these walls. Each decision impacts what'll be left behind, what story is told to those who will live here next.” Taking a moment to reflect, she sighed. “I'm sorry. I probably sentimentalized that a little more than I intended. It's a bad habit of ours—*writers*—we like to overindulge in the idealistic. Overcomplicate language and how we express ourselves.”

All he could do was nod in response, realizing that every word that fell from this woman's mouth left him speechless. There were only two possibilities: either she was one of the

few people to understand him, inside and out, or she really was a far better actress than he'd given her credit for.

And he wasn't entirely sure which option would be more dangerous.

“So, who was that guy in the towel anyway?” Charles asked, his demeanor nonchalant, as though there was nothing abnormal about discussing half-naked men at the breakfast table. Sterling nearly choked mid-chew, while Jack clamored the silverware in the sink with a little more gusto than necessary before turning to face the inquisitor.

“What guy? In what towel?”

Shrugging his acknowledgement, Charles continued to poke the proverbial Papa Bear. “Tall. Blonde. Abs painted on like some sort of Greek Adonis and wearing a towel about this size *here*.” He lifted the napkin in his hand to help exemplify his elaborate depiction. “He answered the door when we stopped by *your* apartment.” First gesturing his fork towards Tessa, Charles then proceeded to inhale his plate of scrambled eggs.

If Sterling could only kick his so-called confidant from where he sat, the man's shins would have turned a dark shade of purple by this point in the interrogation. He'd already explained to Charles that Corey had been the same individual who'd crashed Madelyn's wedding. Therefore, this loaded line of questioning had no real gain other than to incite tensions between those now present. To that end, he had no clue what his friend was hoping to accomplish here...

As if she just realized the context of the conversation, Tessa's head shot up; she slammed her hands down onto the counter with a force greater than her small frame would imply she was capable and rose to her feet. “That son of a bitch!” she huffed, though neither man quite understood the intensity or direction of her sudden mood-swing. Grabbing her cell phone, she appeared to be sending-off multiple frenzied text messages while muttering to herself between gritted teeth. “If I find a

single one of my new towels out of place, I swear to God I will castrate him.”

Though her grumblings did little to diminish her two houseguests’ confusion, realization instantly coated Jack’s face as his shoulders relaxed and bounced up and down in a silent chuckle. “Oh, you mean Corey.” Mr. Owens attempted to clarify his relief. “You should have mentioned it was *him* from the start. Sure hope he kept his hands out of her Häagen-Dazs this time.” He turned, shaking his head. “Or that boy is in for a world of hurt...”

One week. He’d spent nearly the entire seven days joined at the hip with this girl and yet it felt like a lifetime. They’d fallen into a comfortable routine, each holed up in the study: Tessa working on her laptop for most of the day as Sterling switched between his computer and his various long-distance calls. Even in the silence, her presence had a way of soothing him.

Unlike anyone else could.

After that first night, Tessa moved all of Charles’s belongings into her old bedroom. Across the hall from Jack’s. Her father outwardly ignored the implications altogether while Sterling’s counterpart huffed and puffed his way up the old creaking staircase, none too pleased with his new sleeping arrangements.

Each night that followed, she’d curl up against Sterling’s side, her head on his chest. As though she’d molded herself into place over years’ time.

Like she belonged there.

The architect chastised himself at the notion that anyone could feel something so strongly for someone so nearly a stranger. He knew better. He *should* know better.

But then she’d walk into the room again and he could feel his heartbeat pounding in his throat, his mouth would become uncharacteristically dry, and he would have the incessant urge

to tug at his collar—like, out of nowhere, the same loose-fitting fabric was somehow strangling him.

The aftermath of her presence left him disoriented, and he'd *forget* to *remember* what he *thought* he *knew*. She would smile at him, as if the interaction had been preemptively scripted, and Sterling would accept that what he knew was absolutely nothing at all.

Ironically, that concession was freeing. Like a game he'd already accepted and planned on losing. It didn't matter what the next card was; regardless, the man was always going to fold.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: THE QUEEN'S BISHOP

Tessa

One week. Somehow, in only seven days' time, the man had begun to break down the concrete walls she'd constructed over the course of the last six years. Brick by metaphorical brick. However, Tessa refused to let that insight fully sink in and settle. She overlooked the crumbling foundation, her free will in shambles, and hid behind the security of her hometown, as if her emotional fortitude could regenerate on its own accord and her heart would be none the wiser.

But it knew.

Without the buffer, she took on the role of a girl infatuated, besotted, and more importantly, not the least bit broken. She took on the persona of... *herself*. And, for once, the disguise fit perfectly. Her expressions had been real; her laughter and enjoyment had been real; even her moments of outward vulnerability had been real. Though, should anyone have asked her, she would have denied it. She would have argued and said it was all part of the character she was playing and the story she needed to portray.

And that sentiment would have been a bold-faced lie.

But it was over. Her bubble had been burst, and reality sank in as she stepped over the threshold of her apartment, where she thought she would feel relief and instead felt hollow. Like it wasn't the barriers themselves she was missing but something much deeper. That piece of herself that she thought she had left behind in New York.

Dropping her phone and keys onto the entryway table, Tessa sighed, flung her leather bag on the floor, and kicked her shoes off before jumping back with a start.

"Forget about me already?" Corey leaned against the counter, his bulky arms crossed in feigned annoyance. Had it

been anyone else, his glare would have been imposing, but to Tessa it was more comical than anything.

“Of course not. You just startled me. That’s all.”

Her blatant dishonesty evoked an amused eyebrow raise as he pulled her in. Squeezing once, he released her from the welcoming gesture. She padded barefoot into the living room, tossed herself onto the familiar cushioning of the sofa, and sprawled across almost its entire length. Plopping down next to her, Corey lifted her legs and folded them back over his lap as he reached for the remote and muted the television.

Corey

“How’s Jack?” He paused. “And Em?”

“They are... as well as can be expected.” Her expression suddenly somber, the journalist directed her sharply bladed stare at Corey’s profile. “Did you know about her English?”

He winced at the accusation underlying her question before attempting to shift the dialogue. “And how’s the boyfriend?” Though he was relieved that she willingly took his bait, he would have preferred if she hadn’t done so while aiming a pillow solidly against the side of his face.

“I know what you’re doing, *mon chou*, so don’t think for a second you’ve won.” She raised a threatening finger in his vicinity. “You’re just lucky I don’t want to talk about it either. Regardless, we need to get back to work if we’re going to make the deadline. I’ve done all I can with what little we have so far.”

“Right, and when are you gonna tell him?” he prompted, unsure if this new topic of conversation was any safer. Although, if he were being honest with himself, he knew it wasn’t.

“About what?” She diverted her gaze and inspected her cuticles as if she had the ability to simulate ignorance at this point. Her performance may have been credible with someone, but that someone wasn’t Corey.

“*Tess*, about how he’s the subject matter of the article you’re writing.” Sucking in a deep breath, his nostrils now

visibly flared, Corey tapped his forehead with the palm of his hand. “You’re telling me that you sat next to him all week. Typing away on your keyboard, taking notes, and composing your draft versions, *slept next to him* each night—all with no intention of confessing what you’re up to? This won’t play out how you think it will. You’re smarter than that. You need to tell him about the story and face the consequences, *or* pass it on to someone else. We still have time to find another angle and make print.”

“I’m not—I won’t—give up *my* story. For *anyone*,” she hissed; the daggers in her eyes had now fully ignited into two unwavering emerald flames. “I will *never* let someone come between me and my career.” She didn’t finish the thought, nor did she say the word audibly. But like an omen, it hung in the air and Corey could infer the unspoken meaning.

Again. She would never let someone come between her and her career... *again.*

Pushing the matter wouldn’t get him anywhere. He needed to steer the disagreement in a more amiable direction, appeal to her reasoning. Tessa was always one to gravitate towards logic, and Corey could only hope she would see it here as well.

Lifting his palms in mock surrender, he admitted temporary defeat. “I get it, TK. I really do.” He hoped the use of her nickname would somehow soften the blow of his next thought. “But hear me out. Anything you use moving forward—if told in confidence—will taint *whatever it is* you have going on between you two. I know you like the guy. You can’t even tolerate *me* in your personal space for an entire week...”

Rolling her eyes, Tessa tapped him with an open fist. “That’s because *you* root through my freezer, *mon chou*. But that’s all irrelevant. Because I didn’t—nor do I plan to—get anything from him in confidence,” she affirmed. Noting his obvious confusion, the journalist attempted to clarify. “You were right about one thing: I *am* smarter than that. So, we’re changing the focus of our operation. We thought Lucien was the story. But he’s not. The real story is the Beaumonts. It’s Madelyn and why the engagement was called off without a

press release. Which means...” She pulled her legs back, tucking them under her while grasping the top of the sofa frame, subsequently doubling her height like a predator about to trap her prey “...you need to dry-clean your tux. We’re going back into the field.”

“Tess...”

She raised a hand, effectively cutting him off mid-sentence. “We’re going to embed *you* this time. And I’ll be *your* eyes and ears, darling.” Appearing quite pleased with herself, Tessa pinched his cheek. “There’s a charity event at the same venue as the wedding. *In two weeks*. Both the Beaumonts and the DeLacys will be in attendance. It’ll be the perfect opportunity for you to get nice and comfortable with Madelyn’s closest, most pompous confidants. A few rounds in, and jealousy will flow as freely as the champagne. All you need to do is stay sharp, look pretty, and catch it, *mon chéri*.”

“And what makes you so sure your boyfriend won’t be there?” This time his taunting was met with a jab of her elbow.

“*Careful...*” She directed an outstretched finger at him. “But to answer your question, Lucien doesn’t go to those kinds of things—he hates them almost as much as I do.”

“You have it all figured out, don’t you?” Sighing for what felt like the dozenth time since she walked through that door, Corey shook his head when his rhetorical statement was met by the curl of his partner’s elongated, self-contented grin. The woman was impossible.

Fingers-crossed, he could only hope everything would work out as seamlessly as she seemed to think it would.

Tessa

But she didn’t have it all figured out. Nope, not in the least bit.

Tessa had no idea what she was doing. This—whatever it was—was completely out of her realm. And everything was always so much simpler within those confines of normality. However, she wouldn’t let Corey see this sudden,

uncharacteristic lack of confidence; in fact, she wouldn't let anyone see it. See her insecurities.

It would just be another mask she'd have to wear...

Until it wasn't.

She didn't like this feeling.

The thought was childish, so she could only imagine how it would sound should she give it a voice. But she didn't like it nonetheless. She didn't like how the sanctity of her own apartment now felt cold. Or how the contentment her enormous mattress once offered was suddenly so *isolating*. And above all else, she didn't like how she actually... *missed* him.

She willed her overactive brain to sleep, to push aside the bullshit, but all she did was toss and turn. Staring at the blank-white ceiling, Tessa reprimanded herself. For being so foolish, for being weak, and maybe even for the enjoyment she found in *being* both of those things.

It was then that the vibration of her cellphone and the illuminated screen caught her eye. She glanced at her alarm clock as an innate sense of dread enveloped her. Realizing that it was already several minutes past twelve, the only thought that came to mind was the saying: *nothing good ever happens after midnight*. It wasn't superstition that had her on edge; it was the understanding that one of these days the late night call would be about her mother. And having returned home, every unexpected "ding" reinforced that reminder. She could handle anything thrown her way.

Anything but that...

Fumbling for the buzzing device, Tessa swallowed her apprehension; and, as she did with most of her unpleasant and unwanted emotions, she ignored them. She punched in her four-digit code before staring at the message now glowing in the darkness of her bedroom. She couldn't help but grin as the three simple words seemed to mean much more than the obvious.

Unknown: Good night, Tess.

She didn't need to look up the number to know who it was from.

For a man who seemed so sure of himself in most things, the brief text proved Lucien was as hesitant as she was. A fact that was somehow both endearing and disconcerting. The usual decisiveness that drove Tessa's ambition was divided between what she knew she should do and what she was certain she shouldn't—but really, really wanted to.

After a few more moments of inner conflict, it was the devil on her shoulder that seemed to win out. And so she responded before she could change her mind.

Tessa: Good night, Lucien.

Within seconds, a reply hummed in her open palm. She smirked at the reminder she'd entered into her contact list—in place of his name—before opening the message.

He'll Ruin You: Shouldn't you be sleeping?

She grinned, her retort burning the tip of her tongue and biting into her lip before manifesting on her device screen.

Tessa: I would be. If my phone wasn't buzzing in the middle of the night.

Although she'd fallen asleep before receiving his response, the next morning, Tessa awoke to a nearly dead cell phone battery, a pending notification, and an ambiguous promise.

He'll Ruin You: I'll make it up to you.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: THE FALL HAZARD

Sterling

He was an idiot.

The thought spiraled in Sterling's subconscious as he read and reread the message he'd so carelessly typed out the previous night. And not just typed out, because the masochistic bastard that he was had doubled-down by pressing send. He must have been a sucker for punishment. It was the only plausible conclusion.

Otherwise, he couldn't explain why he was making promises he wasn't entirely sure he could keep. He could argue that his response had been impulsive; it wasn't all that beyond the realm of belief. But the truth of the matter was that nothing drove his actions. Other than his urge, his want, to do something more for her. To see her smile. And more than that, to see it directed at *him*.

He should have been sorting through acquisitions and ensuring his client's deadlines were being appropriately met; but instead, the architect was once again tapping his fingers on his desk, lost in thought over this woman. There had been plenty of red flags tacked up when it came to Tessa Owens. Plenty of indicators that he was in too deep and too soon.

The tabloid writer was a hazard to his habitual and long-standing efficiency. And yet, work ethic and sound judgement be damned, it would be an exhilarating way to go... That was one thing he was sure of.

Sterling found himself grinning like some basket case for no reason, the curl of his lips manifesting at just the thought of her. Her wit was sharpened and more invasive than any blade, and it struck its target with the precision of a master swordsman. So sudden and so piercing that the penetration

was gone before he knew it was even there. Until he felt the prevailing sting.

And then... then there was the way she always seemed to come out on top—both literally and figuratively. That woman always found a fucking way to win. He would never admit that to her, and yet, it was clear she already knew.

Despite his curiosity as to what exactly she was saying, it wasn't with those purred little pet names that she'd succeeded; nor had she bested him with her usual well-orchestrated measures. No, the games, *those*, he saw right through. And tore down as quickly as she built them up.

It was with her authenticity that she had finally conquered the man. Something that was buried so deep inside her that getting a glimpse—one in which she herself didn't realize had seeped out—was utterly addictive. If she only knew how incredible that side of her was, he wasn't sure she would be able to hide it as thoughtlessly as she did.

She seemed to plan out her every exchange to the most miniscule detail; as though the interaction had already taken place in the confines of her mind before its execution. She had an endgame, a countermeasure, and a backup plan. Every word. Every phrase. Every small gesture perfectly choreographed how she wanted and for what she wanted. She had a taut grip on those puppet strings. *She* was in control.

But when she wasn't, when that mask fell, when her smile actually made it all the way up to her eyes... *that* was true beauty.

Admittedly, at first, he thought it was the chase that aroused his interest. That once that playful round of “cat-and-mouse” had ended, the thrill would die down. And he would be back where he'd started. Engrossed in his work and brooding—as Charles would call it. But it hadn't tapered off. Not in the least. The more he learned about her, the greater the mystery seemed to deepen and the more questions he had. Until he was certain he needed to know everything about this woman. Every last detail and it still wouldn't be enough.

He found himself wanting to send her random messages throughout the day and then he would obsess over waiting for hers in return. Even though he could sense her hesitancy and how her mind continued to overthink each word she typed out, he could always tell she was as eager to hear from him as he was to hear from her.

He was distracted during his quarterly review meetings, his projections, and his investment plannings. He could feel himself intermittently glancing at his phone between pauses, absentmindedly scanning his screen for notifications.

He should have been focusing on his latest undertaking: the restoration of a 19th century, five-thousand square-foot Victorian—one he had been fighting alongside the historical society to preserve rather than tear down for a series of duplexes the city wanted to expand. The project may have been a pro bono charity case, but it was one he couldn't turn his back on. The house itself needed extensive work but after all it had survived, it would have been a crime to allow it to fall to ruin. However, instead of sketching out the required architectural restructuring, Sterling was daydreaming about a pretty girl and all the pretty things she liked to whisper to him.

A sudden *thud* jarred the architect from his trance.

“Here are the blueprints you wanted checked out of archival.” Charles slammed the heavy, yellowed, leather-bound documents onto the desk before noting, “Staring at your phone again, huh? Man, do you have it bad.”

Glancing upwards, Sterling had only been half listening. “Have what?” he mumbled before unknowingly side-eyeing his phone for the umpteenth time. “I haven't done the sketches yet. How can they be bad?”

Charles shook his head, chuckling to himself, and plopped down in his usual chair. “No one mentioned anything about sketches, *Luci*.”

“*Do. Not. Call. Me. That.*” Sterling growled, his hatred for the childhood nickname finally rousing him from his compulsive preoccupation with his cellular device.

“There he is! The man of the hour. Finally back down to earth with the rest of us.” No matter how absent the audience, Charles was somehow always able to put on a one-man show. He stretched his arms out, far-flung and open, before dipping his head to his nonexistent crowd of onlookers.

“What are you going on about now, *Foxy?*” Sterling retorted with his cohort’s equally cringe-worthy grade-school moniker.

“Though it was never my first choice, can’t deny the accuracy there.” It was likely that no matter the intent, the well-fluffed ego of Charles Fox could find a flattery in any gibe. He leaned back, his wide grin and wider wingspan spread across the top of the seat emphasizing just how much he believed that statement to be true. “But enough about me. Your—let’s call it *fondness*—for a particular tabloid writer. I’d much rather discuss that.”

“And *I’d* rather not.” The response was curt, to the point. End of discussion. But, of course, the discussion did not end. Not there and not with the current company in attendance.

“Luci, my dear, dear friend, we’re sensing that your concentration has been a little... *adrift* lately.” There was in fact no collective *we*. Charles knew it. Sterling knew it. And Charles knew *that* Sterling knew it. However, the charade continued anyway. “We’re concerned that you may not be able to put one-hundred percent of your efforts into this new project. Maybe we should just subcontract.”

“*Sub-what?*” The question was hissed between a tightly clenched jaw and gritted teeth. “I’ve spent months drafting this proposal, buried in these damned legalities and all the red-tape and bureaucratic bullshit, and you want me to do what?”

“Exactly my point, Luc.” It was one of the very few moments where Charles’s voice would become solemn, the flair and revelry thrown aside and only the man remaining. “You’ve been drowning yourself in venture after venture, building after building. For years. And now, finally, you have something—*someone* to distract you and you don’t even know what balance is. Let alone how to obtain it. So, maybe it’s a

good time to figure that out. Take a break, let go of the reins. God knows you have the bank account to do it.”

“While I appreciate your concern, *Chuck*, I just took a break. An entire week actually. If you recall. A break we both just returned from.”

“With all due respect, that was not a break. Sitting in the same room with the girl as you work on a remote brokerage deal is not a vacation. Nor very romantic, I might add. And while I have your attention, I suggest you watch a romcom or two—take some notes.”

“What’s more romantic than being buried up to your arms in purchase agreements and insurance titles?” Sterling shook his head before placing his index fingers against his temples. “You just wouldn’t get it. Having her there was enough. And she had her own work to distract her. It was... relaxing. It was a break from my thoughts. From all the noise. But you *have* given me an idea...”

“Somehow I doubt it’s a good one.” Charles sighed. “Please tell me you aren’t going to drag that poor girl down here and have her sit in your office on the regular. She’s pretty to look at and all, but torturing you is one of the few highlights of my day. Not sure I want to share the task.”

Sterling’s grin grew tenfold before he replied, “I promise that won’t be the case.”

However, for some reason, Charles seemed wary that whatever his friend had planned wasn’t much better.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: THE FINE PRINT

Tessa

Compartmentalization. It was a tactic. A skill set. A second nature. That the journalist had cultivated into a true art form over time.

With practice, Tessa had developed this uncanny ability to manipulate her emotional state. She could submerge those feelings she wanted to ignore the most, tamp them down, and leave them to decay. A feat that would be impressive if the psychological aftermath didn't include the exceedingly unhealthy coping mechanisms that followed. However, it was for this same reason that she could effortlessly fall into character; she could be whatever facade someone wanted her to be at the time, whatever twisted version of herself that'd been imagined.

Somewhere, beneath it all, was the broken girl. The one who would never climb out to the surface again because she was buried under so many layers of dirt, earth, and sand that surely she had already succumbed to its weight. The girl with the story too salacious to be printed. Too damaged to be spoken aloud—who, with any luck, had decayed and rotted away so that nothing was left but her faint imprint and an ethereal stone epitaph that read:

Here lies the foolishness that once was. And would never be again.

But who Tessa was today, this was an entirely new identity. One waiting to be named and labeled, so the mask could be catalogued amongst the others already tucked away in her privately owned arsenal. Then again, this version may not have been as foreign as she'd initially thought. It seemed to fit in a way that was uncharacteristic yet oddly familiar. It was like a stranger's face she was certain she'd seen before. But only in passing.

She berated herself, her first logical question being: *what had changed?*

Of course, the only viable answer was: Sterling. He affected her in a way that was so seemingly unnatural she felt severed from her innermost person. As if she were wearing someone else's skin and forced to embody it like it were her own.

However, a far more disturbing question hung in the air. It floundered about like a complex equation not as readily solved, no matter the numerous attempts she made to recalculate it: Why did this role feel so inexplicably customized, with each and every perceived vulnerability pinned and sewn in place? And how could she possibly feel like something so unequivocally synthetic otherwise *belonged?*

“...What's the progress?” The voice was piqued, slightly barred, and clearly growing more impatient.

“Progress...” The repeated word rolled off Tessa's tongue like it was alien to her, its definition unknown and unclear.

“Yeah, P-R-O-G-R-E-S-S. Now, for the second time, TK, what's your progress on the undercover feature? Are ya even listening?”

Nope. She. Was. Not.

A sudden, aptly timed kick—exerted from beneath the conference room table—jolted Tessa from the clutches of her mental fog. However, the unexpectedness of the strike propelled the flattened pen cap from the confines of her jaw and onto a yellow-lined notepad, where it presently sat. Unfazed by the resulting puddle of saliva that was now wrinkling the previously crisp pages, the journalist glanced down once before shrugging her shoulders.

“For fuck's sake. Do ya have a story? Or not?” Composure was not the man's strong suit, neither was subtext.

No, Frank Fitzgerald—beloved Editor in Chief of the largest magazine currently in distribution in the local

metropolitan area—was affectionately called “Fitzy” for a reason; the moniker derived from not only his last name but also his propensity for adult-sized tantrums. A fact that became more evident when the man slammed his fists on the pile of paperwork in front of him.

“The teasers need to be embedded in the next issue or we won’t have enough time to generate buzz before publication. I don’t pay ya to sit there and look pretty. I pay ya to write goddamn articles. No bullshit, what’s the status?”

“You know damn well anyone can write, Fitzy. You don’t pay me to write. You pay me because I’m fucking good,” Tessa corrected, rising to her feet as if she had been instantly tugged then tethered up and out of her chair. Her palms flat against the veneered surface, the journalist leaned closer—her eyes now level with his—before continuing. “And if we’re arguing semantics, you pay me because I deliver, I don’t disappoint, and most of all, because I fucking sell. But if all you want is a writer, by all means, you have your pick.” She gestured to her tight-lipped colleagues. “Feel free to reassign my column.”

Satisfied with the impromptu tirade, Tessa stepped off the proverbial soapbox and reclaimed her seat while the older man muttered to himself incoherently. She waited, deliberately inflicting a few more fleeting moments of silence, just long enough to make the entire room uncomfortable.

“We’ll make the deadline. Just the same as always. This time isn’t any different,” she affirmed, her inflection pronounced and her arms crossed.

“Fine. Good.” Though he clung to his ballooned posture, the editor’s expression had weakened along with his deflated tone.

It wasn’t like Tessa to conduct herself in such a disruptive manner, not in the office and certainly not amongst her other team members. Similar discussions had always occurred behind closed doors and with an even temperament—well, from her anyway. The red face and puffed-out bravado was the

Irishman's preferred uniform, as was a standard accompaniment of foul language.

But not her. No. It was not normal for the girl to emote so recklessly and without careful forethought.

While it was true that his comments had pissed her off, she couldn't deny that the outburst was far more theatrical than she'd intended it to be, and not entirely directed at just Frank. Self-doubt and guilt seemed to be festering in the pit of her stomach, prompting a reactionary combustion as soon as her latent fears had been drawn to the surface.

She wasn't a failure. She never had been. And underachieving sure as hell wasn't a trademark she was willing to assume in any foreseeable future.

She had to provide the marketing director with a title or tagline by the end of the month. If she missed the deadline, then by the time her feature made print, her target audience would be unreachable and disinterested. Poor publicity meant poor sales, and she'd worked too hard and for too long to fall into that category.

Steeling her resolve, Tessa realized the bottom line was becoming that much more apparent. She needed to ensure that Corey was successful at the upcoming charity event. There was no wiggle room or capacity for delay. Without a longer thread to unravel, the journalist would have no choice but to stick to her original plan, delve further into Sterling's family, and drop the Beaumont angle altogether.

As a point of contention, Tessa despised the overuse of exaggerated statements. But this time it felt appropriate because she'd never before found herself this lost, without a narrative to tell. Throughout her career, it had always been by some unknown and intrinsic force that every one of her articles had ultimately written themselves.

Her love affair with word play and subtle symbolism had been long-standing, a feverish passion that was ignited with each and every keystroke. It was unbridled and unrelenting. It demanded release and couldn't be contained, no matter how hard she tried. With or without her consent, the text would

materialize from beneath her fingertips and onto the computer screen.

But not now.

Now, in place of her usual literary arousal, the only picture that seemed to paint itself inside her head was yet another memory she wanted to forget. Over and over and over again, the scene played out. A recurring and unrelenting loop. As if it were on an internal film reel rather than a single stilled image that she'd captured and he'd deleted.

She was haunted by the look on Sterling's face and the regard in which he'd held that woman, who in turn was held by someone else. It was as though realization, acceptance, and regret had all hit him at once. Before twisting and turning. The resulting onslaught both unrecognizable and unwanted by the same man who'd created it.

So, where had she gone wrong?

Like every assignment before, her established protocol had been followed to the letter: she had gained entry, allowed her gut to take the reins, secured her mark, and was inevitably driven to raw inspiration. And like every assignment before, her instincts had been dead-on. Accurate. But this time, in this instance, the story it told was far too close to home to ever be written. She could no longer guarantee that anything she put down on paper would fall within the realms of journalistic integrity. Because the entire process was now skewed, biased, and indiscernible.

She'd been ambushed and ensnared in a self-imposed web. A trap she had artistically weaved in suggestion and subterfuge. But instead of cutting ties and walking away, Tessa had allowed one prolonged interaction with one seemingly irresistible man to somehow become her defeating mechanism. And worse yet, she knew it was of her own doing; it had been her very own design.

If she hadn't stopped. Or rather, if she could have stopped...

If she didn't engage. Or if he hadn't engaged...

If she didn't need to prove herself. If she hadn't hunted him down. If he hadn't needed to do the same. Or if she didn't dare him to, want him to, need him to...

She was beginning to realize wherein lay the problem. Compartmentalization only worked when each of the *compartments*—each alter ego—remained separate and isolated. However, Sterling had crossed over into several different facets of who she was. Or at least who she needed to be in the moment: professionally, socially, and intimately.

This sudden unease, this discomfort, it was an identity crisis. It was psychological and emotional seepage at its fundamental level. All she needed to do was regroup, reconfigure, and rebuild. She had to place this man in his very own cognitive box. She had to define and label him; but most importantly, she had to keep him there.

Or else her world—and everything she'd come to know and understand and find security in—would implode...

Tessa hadn't even noticed that the meeting had ended or that the office was silent and vacant. It wasn't until her phone began vibrating along the polished conference room table that she was stirred from her thoughts for the second time that day.

She shoved her decapitated pens and scribbled-on notebooks into her bag before reaching for the pulsating device. As if her mental fixation had conjured the man himself, she paused when Sterling's nickname lit up and flashed across the screen.

Internally, she remained at war.

Part of her smiled—a warm, fluttering sensation invading her core at just the prospect of hearing his voice on the other end of the receiver. While the remaining part struggled, her decisiveness fluctuating between panic and provocation. She was unsure if she should curl up in a ball, cover her ears, and ignore the possibility of having to face further emotional turmoil. Or if she should systematically press end call. Erase the man, erase his number, erase the distraction altogether.

It was simple. Her options once again whittled down to: fight, flight, or freeze. So she made the only conceivable choice, the same choice she always made. Except once. But this instance was nothing like the last time, or so she told herself.

“Lucien.” Her voice was soft, nearly sweet, but not fake. “I’m glad you called. We should probably talk...”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: THE RULE OF THREE

Sterling

“Wow, she’s breaking up with you already?” Charles shook his head before stepping over the threshold to enter the office. Circling the desk, he placed his hand on Sterling’s shoulder and continued. “That’s rough, buddy. I’m sorry.”

“What are you going on about now?”

“Oh no! It’s worse than I thought! You’re in denial!” Charles plopped down in his favorite chair, his arms crossed and expression somber.

“Apparently, I’m missing something. So why don’t you explain it to me, O’ Wise One.” Sterling’s tone was as blatantly mocking as the gesture that followed. “I doubt I can stop you anyway. So please, Chuck, go on.” He waved his hand with the same flair one would use to introduce the next act in a theatrical production—which, to be fair, wasn’t that far off from the truth.

“You must be smarter than you look, old chap!”

Sterling was starting to wonder if he should be concerned, seeing as his intelligence was constantly in question. He wasn’t sure what was more worrisome: the possibility that he was emitting an air of stupidity or the idea that Charles and Tessa were rubbing off on each other. He didn’t like either option. His mind aimlessly wandering, it took several minutes for the architect to realize his friend had begun speaking again.

“...so you see, it all started with the birds and the bees...”

Sterling interrupted his cohort mid-sentence. “Yes, yes, I’m aware. Can you skip the basics and get to the point, please?”

“Right...” Charlie nodded before leaning in closer. “So anytime a woman says: *we need to talk*. What she really means is: *we need to talk about whatever it is you did or didn’t do and why I’m dumping you for it.*”

“That’s ridiculous. She just agreed to go away with me this weekend—wait a minute. How did you know she said that we needed to talk?!”

“I was listening on the other end, of course...” Charles affirmed, sinking back into the seat and rolling his eyes. “Who uses a landline in this day and age? I don’t know why you would make a personal call on the conference phone anyway.”

“Chuck, you do know that creates more questions than answers. How’d you even know it would be a personal call?” Sterling narrowed his gaze. “How often do you listen in on my business line?”

His partner’s only response was silence and a wider grin.

Tessa

For someone seemingly conflicted moments earlier, Tessa had agreed to spend the weekend with the supposed source of her contention without requiring much coaxing on his part. It was against everything her internal defense mechanisms had taught her.

The only person she should rely on was herself.

It had taken years for her to develop the sort of comfort level she now had with Corey; and it was only after he had secured his place as someone who was more like family—than anything else—that she had finally allowed herself to trust him. And yet here she was, face flush and heart aflutter like a girl with a teenage crush.

But she wasn’t a girl. She was a fucking full-grown adult. A woman with responsibilities and a career and priorities and all the things that *girls* were expected to sacrifice (along with their dignity) for the men in their lives. Which was precisely why she didn’t entertain them—relationships, that is. Sexual or otherwise. That, and because she’d never been quite the same after everything that had occurred in New York.

She didn't understand why things had escalated so quickly with Sterling. Or why after so many years of avoiding intimacy, being with him and being with him in *that* way had been primordial. She freely admitted she hadn't been thinking. Same as the first time he had kissed her in his office. Or maybe she had kissed him...

Even now, the exact details of their interaction that day and the event itself remained a bit hazy. It was the same as every time she seemed to engage with that man. She didn't think. She reciprocated. She felt...

Actually, what she felt was still a paradox.

She was no fool. Not Tessa. Not ever. At least, not in any way she would care to admit. She didn't believe in fanciful notions like instant attraction or love at first sight. Those were stories told to little girls who dreamed of white knights and princesses in towers. And nothing like the real world. Fairy tales were dangerous and could taint the sensibilities of a more easily swayed mind. And leave a young girl waiting to be rescued. Tessa didn't need to be rescued. Not by Sterling. Not by anyone.

And yet, there was something... something that kept her from fleeing. Something that kept her coming back for more. Something that both eased and quickened her trembling. He didn't look at her, or through her, and yet he *saw* her.

That sounded cliché. But she could think of no other way to describe it.

The reasoning behind the sudden change in her behavior would have been more apparent had she been ready to face it. But now was not the time. The journalist was not prepared to delve that deep into her psyche. Not yet anyway. Not today.

Yes, avoidance felt much better than the intricacies of her erratic decision-making. Avoidance kept her from having to remember and relive; it safeguarded her. And with Sterling, she set the pace. She was in control. And should she change her mind, with Sterling, she could run.

This was different than the last time. *It had to be, right?*

She'd been young then, foolish even, and weak. That word echoed in the back of her mind. Weak. In so many ways, she'd been weak. But that wasn't who she was now. She'd conquered those demons. She'd risen above the labels that those men had placed on her. She had her moments, she would admit. She had her doubts. But, God, was she a force to be reckoned with.

Her inner monologue—the very story she told herself about herself—was all that mattered. Not what anyone else thought of her. Because the only validation she needed was her own. No one else could tell her what she was worth or how much. Hers was the only opinion that held significance. Everyone else's changed as quickly and as wantonly as the weather. And was often based on what she gave them or could give them down the line.

As to what any of this had to do with her current predicament, she really hadn't the slightest idea; however, what it did remind her was that she shouldn't let her past insecurities dictate her current choices. Despite her fears, Sterling was not Bash. He was not any of the other men she had previously encountered either; the kind of men who had undermined, demeaned, or underestimated her. She was in control and he didn't fight her for it; nor did he act as though that fact impinged on his masculinity. In fact, he seemed to enjoy that spark in her. He seemed to ignite it. Incite it. Just so he could see it burn that much brighter. He challenged her. Not to win. But because he enjoyed the game as much as she did. The end result was of no consequence.

She felt safe with him. Safer than she felt with nearly anyone else. And not safe in the way that most would think. She didn't need a male counterpart to secure her physical well-being; her father had ensured that much. Rather, it was the type of security that meant, for a brief moment, she could put her guard down and just breathe. She didn't have to plan or think or be on the defensive. He didn't need anything from her. And outside of her ensuing article, she didn't need anything from him either. Not his money, not his name, not his approval—she had earned those on her own.

And so, as mentioned before, the decision had been simple. She *wanted* to spend more time with Lucien. And answering him had been natural. Because at the end of the day, after everything was said and done, she was a fighter and she would fight.

Even if it meant her opponent was herself. Her doubts. And the prize was her own happiness.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: THE ACQUISITION

Tessa

The house was like something out of a dream. Maybe not everyone's but certainly Tessa's. You could see that at a time the home was loved. And that at another time it wasn't. Treated much like mankind treated each other. Some taking care; some barely taking notice. The structure was old, tired. But not dead. There was still some semblance of a spirit there, something alive, waiting to be either tended to or extinguished.

It creaked and groaned with each step she took, while the paint chipped and peeled and fell. Much like tears. Light reflected and blinked back off the stained-glass windows, somehow still preserved at the house's highest peak. They flickered in the sun as if speaking to her. Telling the journalist that life was still there; though buried, it could be kindled and salvaged. The splintering wood of the porch begged for reprieve underfoot as Tessa inched closer to peer inside.

She gasped in a mixture of awe and anguish. Not many would see the beauty beneath the graffitied walls and crumbling plaster. But then again, most were blind to begin with. Nowadays, the world wanted things quick, manufactured, convenient. And this home was anything but. It was a labor of love. The carved wood took time, care, precision. The glass tiles were hand-blown and colored organically before the design was patterned piece by piece. In their prime, these kinds of homes embodied their residents, with personalities as unique as those who lived there. She caressed the sill as though she was uttering a silent promise.

It will be okay. You will be okay.

The family who built it may have been long gone, but the spirit of the home would live on and remember them. And so would she.

As if forgetting the present company, Tessa forced back the nailed-in plywood barricading the broken window panes before granting herself entry, one leg at a time carefully flung over the ledge and into the vacant sunroom.

Once upon a time, the residence had been grand, she concluded, taking note of the opulence of the remaining brass chandelier. The emptiness seemed to call to her; it beckoned the journalist up the decimated staircase—one she should have assessed before mounting upwards but of course did not—and over towards the banister which presented a panoramic view of the entryway below.

This was something the city could never offer her. Not to this scale.

From her perch on the second floor, Tessa noted the woven design of the original parquet flooring. The shifts from dark to light hardwood offered a checkered aesthetic, both rich and riveting from her aerial vantage point. But the image that caught her off guard, as she tried to stifle the quivering in her throat, was the man she saw entering the double-paneled Eastlake front doors.

The utterance wasn't that of surprise. They had driven there together after all. Rather, her sharp intake of breath had been caused by the innate increased pounding in her chest, one that seemed to involuntarily quicken each time she saw *him*. The grin he offered as he stared up at her earned him one in the same.

“Tell me we can keep it, *mon ours*,” she jested.

“We?” Though Lucien raised a single eyebrow in question, the curl of his mouth didn't falter. Tessa's lean on the banister laxed as she propped her head up by the bend at her knuckles. She tucked a free strand of hair behind her ear before tracing the curve of her neck, resting her remaining hand loosely by her bolstering elbow.

“What? Too soon for such a grand gesture?” She laughed. “Seriously, though, Lucien...” The musing nature in her tone dissipated as her heels tapped their way down the staircase.

Sterling

There it was again, parting her lips and landing on him like a single word could somehow singe his skin. Creating a bridge of permanent scar tissue that seemed to imprint each letter in its wake.

Sterling hadn't even heard the rest of her commentary; he was so shaken by her repetitive usage of his given name the architect had no choice but to ask her to reiterate.

"I said... tell me you're going to restore her." Tessa looked up once more before continuing. "It's marked for demolition but tell me there's something you can do. You wouldn't take me here otherwise, right?" She didn't wait for a response; instead, she crossed the threshold into the parlor and wistfully marveled at the architecture. "This place has a story. I can feel it. What I wouldn't give to dissect it. To write about the history that filled this home, breathe life into these walls. Those are the stories that deserve to be told the most. The ones that no one tells."

"I'm glad you agree." He followed close behind her, his head tilted when he prompted, "Then why don't you write them?"

Once again, she distanced herself. A step. A pause. And two more. "Mhmm..." The sound of her voice was more like a hum, equal parts longing and loss. "Stories like that don't sell papers... or magazines. The general public doesn't want to read about the character of a home; they don't give a damn about the people who built it either. They like the seedy, the salacious, the rich, the infamous." Tessa turned to face him. "They like to read about men like you—or families like yours, at least," she was quick to clarify.

"And what do you know about me? Or my family for that matter?" Sterling snapped, though his tone didn't seem to faze her.

"I know the type."

"Have you ever tried to write something else?" He stifled his resentment, choosing to focus on the task at hand. Though

she seemed withdrawn from the conversation, *he* wasn't done with it. Not yet. "Maybe people will surprise you."

Maybe he would surprise her.

"I have. Tried, that is. I was going to do great things. Write great things. Life-changing things. The sorts of things men like you would notice."

Men like him. There it was again. And what kind of man was that? The rich kind? The broken kind? The foolish kind? He could only imagine her choice in adjective...

"And...? What happened?"

She stopped her pacing, dusting her fingers along the brittle mantelpiece before rubbing them together as though deep in thought. "Hmm..."

She was humming again. He took note of the sound, of her sudden posturing.

"The usual. I was young, naive, ill-prepared for the male-dominated career field—the politics behind it all. I guess you could say my hands were tied. In a manner of speaking..." she professed, as though her phrasing were chosen purposefully, her meaning laced in subtext.

"You... give up? Accept defeat? Somehow I doubt that."

"What can I say? Knocked down seven, get up eight." The statement was just above a whisper, meant more for her own ears than his, he concluded.

"What was that?"

"Oh, nothing. Just something my father says. It means you have to get knocked on your ass every now and then, in order to learn how to get back up. So, yes, I was down for a bit. But not out."

"That sounds a little more like it." Sterling nodded. "However, I still think you should give it another try. Writing something you're passionate about..."

"Ha! Passion doesn't sell print, Lucien." Her sarcasm landed with every word, her jaw tight and her teeth clenched.

“It’s easy for you to say. The spoon you were raised with is as silver as your last name. I, on the other hand, had to bleed my way to where I am. I get it. My assignments aren’t to your liking. Your elitest standards.” She threw an arm in the air as if to further emphasize her point. “And, yes, I know they’re vapid and meaningless a majority of the time. But when they aren’t. When I can dig in, sink my teeth into something real and unexpected. When I find that detail that no one knew was there and I bring it to light. When I’m in the field and see what everyone else in the room is too blind to see for themselves. *That* is true satisfaction. That is fulfillment. That is the validation that not only am I good. But I’m damn fucking good.”

“You trying to convince me or yourself?” he quickly countered.

Silence. The air was deafeningly silent, and for some reason, that seemed to bother him more than any cleverly designed quip she could have lashed out at his expense. Where before the quietude between them had been comforting, now the intensity of it prickled his skin.

“Are you trying to start an argument with me today? Your responses seem much more on edge. Like you’re intentionally digging at me, Tess...” He reached out and grabbed her hand; though covered in dirt and dust, he held it between his own and sighed. “Is it true what Chuck said? Are you here just to break things off with me?”

“That’s awfully presumptuous, *mon nounours*.” The lilt to her voice had returned, her smile lighter. Genuine. “That would mean you both think we are together in the first place.” She finally allowed her gaze to meet his, searching his face as though he held the answer to some unresolved question.

He didn’t. Or at least he didn’t think he did.

But whatever it was that she saw there caused her to soften before turning her frame and straddling the architect in his chair. The kiss was just a brush of skin to skin. Not burning. Not passionate. Not frenzied or animalistic. He cinched his hands around her waist, the only choice he thought

he had to keep her from fleeing. Because that was what this felt like. Like a goodbye before she ran.

“I can’t help but think that you’re pushing me away,” he admitted out loud.

“I just... I may be... I... I honestly didn’t plan on it though.” Her confession seemed to hang between them. Nonsensical. Unexpected. Meaningful and meaningless.

“Tell me to leave you alone and I will. You should, you know?” He sighed before repeating, “You should tell me you don’t want this, or me, or what little in life I can offer you. You should tell me not to kiss you again. Not now, not ever. Not here—” His lecture was interrupted by her mouth crashing into his and offering everything the prior kiss had been lacking.

“You should stop talking, Lucien,” she chided. “Or maybe I really will break things off.”

He smiled into her lips before bouncing her words off his own tongue. “That’s awfully presumptuous, Tess...”

Tessa

She hadn’t planned on the man being so straightforward. Nor had she planned on him calling her out on her bullshit. Instead, if she would have guessed, she would have prepared herself for another game.

Games, she was ready for.

The truth? Not so much.

She would fully admit that she had been “digging” at him as he had called it. She had been steering the conversation into an uncomfortable direction—one that was likely to lead to an argument. However, he hadn’t taken the bait. And worse yet, she hadn’t even meant or wanted to argue with him in the first place.

It was instinctual, she concluded, to treat every scenario as though she were armed for battle. Though Sterling seemed to be the one man that could delicately remove each piece of

armor, leaving her open, exposed, and vulnerable. Adjectives as foreign as the pet names she whispered into his ear.

You should tell me you don't want this, he'd said.

And he was right. She should. It would have been the safest, smartest route to take. But it would have been a lie. Because she did want *this*, and more so, she wanted *him*. One look into the eyes of the man who freely surrendered to her—even though he could match her wit, even at his own expense—and she knew. She knew that what she should do had little effect on what she was going to do.

The house he had taken her to was his most recent investment purchase. And he'd somehow known that she would appreciate it as much as he did. While he was confined to the first floor, she was able to fearlessly ascend each staircase and assist in obtaining the necessary measurements he would use to begin his preliminary drafts.

Ballgowns, stilettos, and jewelry: none of it compared to the feeling of the dirt, dust, and grime beneath her fingernails or the gratifying ache of manual labor. Despite his warnings, Tessa crawled across the rafters in the attic, sweat and sediment clinging to her every pore.

It was a challenge after all, she thought to herself.

She even attempted to make her way along the roof and into the partially crumbling chimney, but her hips had been too wide to venture farther. Though, this was likely for the best, considering it appeared to be a death trap all its own.

“That’s a good look on you!” Sterling called out, as Tessa lowered herself onto the ground from the dormer’s edge and jumped to the grass in order to cushion her fall.

She knew her hair was probably wild, her makeup smeared, her face peppered by residual ash; however, she couldn’t help but agree with the sentiment. The filth spoke to a hard day’s work; one she was proud of. Brushing a layer of soot off her hands and onto her jeans, she trekked through the unkempt flower beds towards her onlooker.

“It is, isn’t it?” She laughed, lightly grasping his tie and tugging it forward, sullyng both it and his dress shirt in the process. “It’s a shame you’re so overdressed.”

“This was a new suit, you know?” He chuckled in response. And, as if his words evoked a dare, Tessa’s grin widened as she painted her fingertips down his throat, loosening his collar before marking his lips with a kiss.

“You can afford another one. These are priceless,” she urged, holding up her carefully annotated dimensions while keeping them just out of the architect’s reach. “Don’t you agree?”

“More than you know, Tess. More than you know.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN: THE MASQUERADE

Tessa

“And why exactly can’t I just wear a wire?” Corey huffed.

Sounding much like a giant man-child, Tessa noted to herself.

“Feel free to ask my last partner. If you can find him...” she retorted, her ominous tone stifling any further complaints he thought to muster outwardly. Though he appeared to be grumbling to himself in the mirror nonetheless. “I’m not sure what you’re so nervous about, *mon chou*,” she continued. “This isn’t any different from picking up women at a bar.”

“Yeah, well, the bars I go to don’t exactly cater to these types of women.” He adjusted his bowtie, tugging on the fabric as if it were a noose before throwing his hands in the air and rolling his eyes. “And neither do I,” he added.

“What you cater to has little to no bearing; it’s not about you, remember?” Tessa glided across her apartment floor, her mask now firmly in place and her fictitious arsenal fully stocked. “It’s about them: what they want you to be, who they want you to be, and how they want you to be. They’ll already have the image subliminally painted in their minds. You just have to embody it, darling.”

Her gown was red. The kind of red that, upon first glance, one would associate with refinement and perhaps debauchery. The kind of red that was meant to catch the eye. Her purpose was not to blend in but to deliberately stand out. To be forgettably unforgettable. While the color itself would solicit stares, little else about the journalist would be memorable. She would be the woman in the red dress and nothing more. Likewise, there’d be no question as to whether or not she concealed a recording device; the fit of the material made it clear that there was none.

No, there was nothing between the clinging satin and her sculpted form. Not even undergarments.

A fact that anyone in proximity would be able to easily determine as well, Tessa assured herself as she smoothed her hands against the bunching lines at her navel. Though they would be tempted to wonder.

She'd fitted her counterpart in an all-black tux—contrast found only in the gleam of his gold cufflinks, light hair and eyes. In actuality, the extravagance of his attire was of little consequence. It didn't matter if the women there thought he had money; they had their own after all. And yet, they weren't looking for husbands either. No, a lover is what they really sought. Someone to warm their expensive silk sheets for a few hours, or nights, or days. Depending on their current proclivity.

And that was the kind of man Corey needed to present, a man who was easily projected into that fantasy. Nameless. Faceless. The bulk of his trousers was, more than likely, the only discerning factor. And as much as she didn't like to look at him that way, *bulk*—she would admit—Corey had. That being said, she'd tailored his suit to further advertise that feature, and Tessa wasn't the least bit embarrassed about doing so.

“All's fair,” she hummed aloud as she crouched down and straightened his seamline. When her hand unintentionally crept upwards towards the apex of his pant leg, Corey quickly grabbed her wrist and turned his hip.

“Okay, I think they'll get the point. You can stop tenderizing the man-meat already,” he grumbled.

“Now you know how it feels,” she rebuked, steadying herself on her heels before adjusting her cleavage. “Not so fun, is it, *mon amie?*”

The journalist couldn't shake her sudden feeling of déjà vu as they entered the same reception hall with the same chandeliers and the same silverware, an undertaking that

would undoubtedly be outfitted with the same pompous patrons. Though, one patron in particular would be missing; and that would be the same patron Tessa actually cared to see again. But tonight was not about that man.

Well, mostly not about him, she told herself.

Her freshly manicured hands delicately planted within the crux of Corey's arm upon entry, Tessa observed how even the serving staff, security team, and hired photographers were all distinctly familiar from the event prior. Though, the vigilance over the comings and goings of those in attendance was far more lax this time around—bearing in mind, this was no socialite wedding. She paused at the staircase landing that descended into the largest ballroom in the hall. And repositioned Corey's lapel.

“This is where we go our separate ways, *mon chou*,” she instructed. “Remember: you're here to look pretty. A nice, muscular bite of arm candy for these women. Nothing more. They don't care about your opinion, so don't offer it unless it's to agree with theirs. However, if you find yourself in a sticky situation, act as though your *life* depends on it.”

Because it just might. She didn't say that part allowed, though. She didn't want to traumatize the kid.

Tessa reached up and dipped Corey's chin to ensure he met her gaze at eye level. “Repeat the code. LIFE: Listen. Insult. Flatter. Evade.” She'd slightly altered her usual bit to cater to a female target, but the intention was much the same. “*Listen* to whatever bullshit your snobby lady friend sputters. *Insult* everyone and anyone who isn't her. *Flatter* excessively but not wantonly—make sure the compliments count. And *evade, evade, evade*. If you don't know the answer to a question, change the subject. Ideally, you can refer to one of the other letters. Got it?”

He nodded, though his widened pupils emitted the fear she'd hoped to squelch.

“You've got this. I have faith. Look at you,” she ribbed. “You're almost as irresistible as I am. Sic 'um, tiger.”

Corey

She had a way of always making everything sound so easy, he groaned inwardly. Then again, for Tessa, it was always just that easy.

He never felt this unnerved when she was the decoy. He had stepped into this same room several weeks ago without a second thought about how much was riding on the slightest interactions. He was her eyes, making sure she didn't get into too much trouble; and if he was being completely honest, he was just extra muscle really. But now, with the weight of added responsibility on his shoulders, he felt as though he were suffocating.

The pair had spent the last week reviewing their potential marks—the list of women most likely to spill everything dark and dirty about Madelyn DeLacy. And there were several options for the choosing. However, they'd settled on two primary targets.

The most logical starting point was Abigail Harrington. She and Madelyn were almost never photographed out in public separately, and research suggested she was the closest thing to a confidant for the blushing bride.

Then, of course, the next obvious choice was Susanna Beaumont, the infamous step-mother. She was rumored to have eased her predecessor into an early grave, and the supposed gold digger was only a few years older than Madelyn herself. If there were skeletons locked away in a closet somewhere, surely one of these women had the key.

Corey had already lost sight of Tessa in the sea of blurred faces; though, he guessed that was probably her intention to begin with. She would likely keep watch at a distance, ensuring there were no external distractions, including herself.

It didn't take long for Corey to spot Ms. Harrington. The only thing louder than the woman's taste in gemstones was the piercing sound of her voice, and worse yet, the obnoxious cackling that followed.

The instructions he'd been given were clear: first and foremost, he was not to approach the blithe brunette. No, Tessa had been sure to counsel him on how making initial contact was the most important step. How the exchange must appear natural and unsolicited, as if it had been the mark's idea all along. Instead, he was to pay attention to every other female patron in Abigail's proximity, social crowd, and general age group.

Be noticed, but don't look like you're trying to be noticed, he repeated Tessa's words in his head. The woman sounded like a damn fortune cookie. Granted, he had to admit it didn't take more than a few minutes for Madelyn's lady-in-waiting to unabashedly saunter to his side.

Her skin was coated in expensive perfume, her breath peppered by expensive liquor. She wasn't even trying to conceal her intentions as she twirled the string of pearls that draped deep into her neckline around her fingers and leaned across the cocktail table separating them. Corey had seen Tessa mimic similar actions. But, with this woman, it just seemed... *crude*. Her gestures abhorrently unrefined.

It was a lesson he'd learned early on, during similar assignments: money was not synonymous with class. He'd discerned that the difference was in how the two women carried themselves. Whereas his partner emitted an air of sophistication and confidence, he noted that his current cohort seemed to be looking for hers at the bottom of a champagne bottle. And clearly, she hadn't found it; however, the predicament did make for loose lips.

Next, he was to steer the conversation towards Madelyn but was told that his remarks must remain neutral.

Follow Abigail's lead, Tessa had cautioned him. If there are latent resentments, they will speak for themselves. But if further prompting is needed, issue Madelyn or her family a trivial compliment. Abigail will likely argue otherwise, which will open the door for the more depraved details.

And just like his mentor had predicted, an opening seemed to present itself, after a congratulatory "cheers" was

given to the DeLacey couple in celebration of their current wedded bliss.

“They appear to be enjoying married life,” he whispered softly against the overly indulgent brunette’s ear, while alluding to the raised glasses.

“Yes, because for darling Maddy, appearance is everything,” Abigail hissed, finishing what was left of her overpriced bubbly beverage and reaching for another.

Corey masked his surprised utterance with a cough before hesitantly coaxing, “Trouble in paradise?” His tone was light-hearted. Inattentive. Disinterested. Though it didn’t seem to matter. The woman’s bitterness had already risen to the surface and manifested itself in the form of a scowl.

“You wouldn’t know the half of it,” she scoffed, her index finger gesturing towards William DeLacy. “She was engaged to *his* cousin, you know... Head-over-heels in love with the guy; that is, until he didn’t represent that perfect image anymore.” Hiccups punctuated each sordid statement as Abigail edged closer and lowered her voice. “A shame, too, that man was worth more than the occasional jump in the sack—speaking of...”

Corey stilled as the socialite’s hand snaked beneath the tablecloth and began to trail up his thigh. She was losing focus; he needed to redirect her before the situation got out of hand.

Quite literally. He gulped as he attempted to disengage the fumbling fingernails without stanching her word flow. He lifted her wrist to his mouth and brushed his lips along her quickening pulse.

“Tell me more,” he urged playfully. “I mean, who doesn’t love a good dirty story before bedtime?”

Her face flushed at his veiled implications and her eyes darted across the room. “Of course, you didn’t hear this from me, sugar.”

Another pause. Another hiccup. And another drink.

“You want to talk about appearances? Ha! Miss Prim-and-Proper spent her entire wedding night in a drunken stupor, crying over that banker’s boy. *The one who got away*. Can you believe it? After marrying the man’s fucking cousin? When everyone thought she’d been whisked off on her picture-perfect honeymoon and bedding Tall-Dark-and-Handsome over there, she was actually hugging a toilet bowl and spilling every last detail about her supposed ‘first love’ to anyone in earshot.”

Abigail huffed, her torso pressed against the tabletop and her breasts nearly spilling out like an unspoken offering.

“You see, this whole time we all assumed *she* had dumped *him* after the car accident. Poor guy would never walk again. And with a name like hers, there are certain *expectations*. It was understandable. Suffice to say, the Beaumonts could not be without an heir. But, no! Turns out, she had been the one driving the car and two sheets to the wind at that! Blood alcohol level through the fucking roof. Not so perfect after all.”

The woman sneered and continued, her speech increasingly slurred.

“Her *daddy* covered up the whole thing. Luci took the blame so poor little Maddy could avoid rehab and jail time. They have no tolerance for that kind of thing in Europe, no matter how deeply lined your pockets are. Lover boy eventually cut things off with her. Something about wanting a better life for her than he could offer, or so she claimed anyway. Both families kept everything a secret all this time. Shows you how corrupt the Swiss are. If that happened here, it would have been in every headline. She would never be able to show her face again. Instead of standing up there on her porcelain pedestal with a ring the size of a tennis ball. She must have a golden crotch, that one, to have two men in that family so thoroughly whipped. I don’t even understand how she could hide this from me...”

An abrupt hitch in Abigail’s throat marked her sentiment. Corey tensed, struggling to maintain his composure while simultaneously hoping to postpone her influx of tears for at

least a few minutes longer. Then, as luck would have it, the woman's choked chorus of intermittent sniffing began to gradually subside with each new tip of her glass. Nevertheless, the aftermath—an unreasonably exaggerated intake of air—served to only further obscure the already long-winded, alcohol-laced narrative.

“...six years old, you know, we've been friends since we were six years old!” Abigail bemoaned. “And she didn't say a fucking word to me! About the accident. About the broken engagement. About any of it! So much for friendship... Daddy Beaumont must have paid a pretty penny, to keep that story under wraps especially after they returned stateside. Poof! It was like the whole unpleasant experience never happened. Hm...”

She paused, as if only now just realizing something.

“Considering there hasn't been a single mention of Luci either over the years, my guess is they worked out some sort of deal. A tit for tat. Luci got to have his privacy; his family got to make sure not a word about his *situation* leaked to their high-rise investors. And in turn, she... she got to keep her *squeaky-clean* reputation. Now that I think about all that fiscal back-scratching, I can't help but wonder if the new hubby was part of the deal. One bankrolled heir in place of the other. Appearances, though, right?”

Shit. Corey grimaced. *Shit. Shit. Shit.*

CHAPTER TWENTY: THE MAN BEHIND THE MASK

Tessa

Whether or not he realized it, the man was a natural.

Tessa grinned into the rim of her whiskey glass as she regarded Corey's carefully orchestrated proceedings from afar. That girl had flocked to him like a fly to honey.

Or should she say a honeypot? Tessa mused. It had been just as she had predicted, and yet, it was still a sight to behold. While one of her skill sets included the ability to read lips, she couldn't quite make out the specifics of what was transpiring between the two.

But she'd known Corey long enough to be able to interpret his body language. Whatever information he'd gotten, it was good. And precisely how good was written all over his face. She could tell by how, for the briefest moment, his spine had stiffened, an involuntary spasmodic display of his initial shock. By how his jaw squared, as a result of lightly grinding his teeth when he concentrated too hard. And by how he had reached to rub the back of his neck, likely trying to resist his urge to loosen his bowtie.

Now, she could only hope that he remembered the escape tactics she'd laid out for him, before that poor drunken creature tried to drag her partner into a darkened corner somewhere and have her way with him. Then again, at the rate that the woman was throwing them back, she wouldn't be able to stand much longer anyway.

Which made for a solid Plan B.

The wise thing to do would have been to keep walking, where the reckless one was—often and arguably—the most fruitful. Or so Tessa had the tendency to tell herself. The thrill of the unknown was what seemed to keep her upright, seemed

to keep the blood pumping in her veins and the air filtering in her lungs.

At this point, walking away was no longer an option.

The journalist had every intention of following the evening's previously established protocol. Every intention of meeting Corey at the designated spot and hightailing it out of there as quickly and quietly as they'd first entered the room.

That was, until she overheard the conversation behind her. And, in testament to how curiosity had killed the cat, she couldn't resist the opportunity to inch a few steps closer. At first glance, the two men would not have appeared out of place, while Tessa's gut screamed otherwise. Their attire was ostentatious—overtly so—and while they had sought to camouflage themselves with indifference, that same evident posturing hinted towards ulterior motives.

They were... forgettably unforgettable. She mulled over the irony.

Listening intently, in addition to English, she was able to make out: German, Russian, and a peppering of Italian. Though there may have been a few others she couldn't quite distinguish, partially due to all the white noise and partially due to their poor pronunciation. They were multilingual, howbeit, they certainly were not experts, she'd gathered.

In particular, the men sought to distort their French creole accents to sound more Parisian. And yet, their attempts at altering aside, their distinct dialects indicated they were American-born and presumably from the south. Her guess was Louisiana, and if she were being specific, she would have placed her bet on New Orleans. They seemed to effortlessly switch from one vernacular to the other without fumbling. More than likely this technique was used to ensure their anonymity and, by that same token, their agenda.

As if simultaneously sensing her interest as well as the weight of her gaze, the free-flowing chatter was replaced by a pair of reciprocated glares in her direction. She wasn't sure how, but she'd been spotted. Panic at this point would serve no purpose other than to further raise their suspicions. So she

steeled her resolve, as the older of the two men excused himself from his associate before turning to approach her table.

He was attractive in his own right... if sleazy had been her preferred type.

“So, it seems you’ve picked up on my tell, *mademoiselle*,” he remarked, his breath uncomfortably close to her ear. “Would you like to know yours?”

“I’m not sure I know what you’re referring to, *monsieur*,” she rebuffed. “However, you are welcome to explain it to my husband when he returns.”

As if he couldn’t stop himself, or perhaps by reflex, the stranger’s expression turned mocking. “Let’s not play these games, sweetheart. There’s no conning a con man. You’re not married. And we both know it. However, I can waste your time if you like and list the half-dozen reasons why I know this for a fact. But you don’t need me to do that, do you? Because you can recite them all yourself without my help, *no?*” He grinned, responding as though Tessa’s silence had been an open invitation for him to join her.

It was not, she huffed internally.

She wanted to be angry at the man. At his intrusion. But if she were being honest, she could only be angry at herself. She was better than this. At least, she had been better. Until recently. Because, recently, everything felt so completely muddled, her emotions uncontrolled. And, as a result, her other senses seemed to be as well.

“Come now, *cher*,” he pressed. “I could smell the *voodoo* on you a mile away. Why work separately when we can work together?”

“Your accent is slipping, *mon amie*. Then again, you must know your efforts are wasted on such a crowd,” she noted, before motioning towards the waitstaff and ordering a double. “While I admit you have made tonight much, much more interesting, I fear I must leave you to your present company.” She gestured to his cohort just as her drink arrived. Placing the

glass in front of him, she stood and nudged his chin upwards with the tip of her polished fingernail. “For your troubles,” she purred, briskly pivoting on her heel before she did what she should have done from the beginning. Walk away.

Insult. Flatter. Evade. Evade. Evade...

“Philippe Hebert,” he called out. She didn’t pause. Or turn. Or give any indication that she was still listening. But she was—listening, that is—when he remarked ominously, “I want you to know my name for when we meet again.”

Corey

Fucking godsend.

Those were the words that came to mind when the hired photographer loomed closer, fortuitously catching the attention of the drunken socialite pawing at Corey’s waistband. Her appetite for the public eye had been enough of a distraction that the woman had immediately dropped her hands from raking along his chest. One need synchronically replaced by another, Abigail seemed incapable of shying away from the cameraman. Or her thirst for attention, for that matter.

Like a dousing of ice-cold water, each new flash had a sobering effect on Miss Harrington. She didn’t bat an eyelash as Corey buttoned his jacket and hastened towards the exit. When he finally felt as though enough distance separated *him* from *her*, he paused to glance back over his shoulder. And chuckled. Either the woman had yet to notice he left, or she’d noticed and didn’t care. And he was perfectly apathetic over whichever the case may be.

He had more important things to worry about than how easily forgotten he’d been. The evening’s culmination left the journalist torn. His most pressing concern was how he was going to relay the information that had been divulged to him, and how Tessa was going to feel about it. The result of his little venture turned out to be a double-edged sword. They had a new story. Better yet, a scandal.

If proven true...

It *was* fucking career-defining, it was about the Beaumonts, and it was exactly what Tessa had wanted. However, it still centered around Sterling. The same man whose exposition she was trying to circumvent, the same man her counterpart knew she didn't want to betray, and the same man that Corey had been slowly watching her fall for. Even if she wasn't able to—or maybe didn't want—to admit it.

He still couldn't quite figure out what kind of story she thought she would get with all this. Or how she thought she would be able to skirt around any mention of the man ill-fated to a wheelchair, considering her angle focused on the broken engagement. Corey couldn't wrap his mind around it. Any of it.

It didn't make sense. She wasn't making sense.

He hadn't been able to determine if she was blind, whether it be knowingly or unknowingly, to the unavoidable negative outcome should she continue down her path and not pass on the feature piece. In its entirety. Or if she was really just that cocksure. That hopeful... maybe... That she could find something else. Something *better*. Something that let her have her cake and eat it too.

He didn't like the sickening sensation that was gnawing in the pit of his stomach, telling him how everything would come to fruition. And how that fruition would ruin the girl who'd become like a sister to him. A sudden chill crawled up his spine and settled at the base of his neck as he realized what his gut was actually saying. She wouldn't just be ruined; she would be ruined in a way she didn't even know she could be.

She would be numb.

She would close herself off to all emotion, sever whatever ties she perceived as weaknesses, and succumb to the only thing in life she could control. Her career. Because that was what Tessa did. What she felt she had to do, he surmised. There were things he knew she hadn't told him. Things that made her so cautious or at least made her think she had to be. Things he feared she would have to face before the silence destroyed her.

It wasn't until the twenty-minute mark had passed that Corey began to feel anxious. He checked the time on his phone, tapped the screen after a few more breaths, and rechecked. There were no missed calls. No texts. Nothing.

This was completely out of character. Tessa never missed a check-in. Not in the entirety of the going on six years they'd been working together. Even when the trail was hot or she was distracted, there was always a signal. Something that told him she was safe.

Corey glanced down at his device almost as though he thought he could will it to vibrate. Again, it sat in his palm soundless and idle.

"We have to go." The hand on his shoulder left him startled, while in contrast the hushed voice behind it offered a reprieve. "I've been compromised."

"The Beaumonts?" he questioned, locking his arm in hers before ushering her down the back staircase and into the parking garage.

Tessa shook her head. "No. I don't know who they are, nor do I care to wait around to find out."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: THE NOSEDIVE

Corey

“It’s all true.” Tessa paced back and forth over the low-piled carpet in her living room. If it had been possible for her to wear a path into the fibers, she likely would have by this point. “At least, it all appears to be true from what I’ve been able to gather,” she clarified.

“And how do you know?” Corey goaded.

His concern for her and her sanity had intensified over the last few weeks. And it had grown at a rate that was very much congruent to her increased obsession with discovering the truth. He recognized that saying it out loud would come off as sounding cruel; however, for Tessa’s sake, he’d wanted her to be taken aback. Or hurt. Or angry. Or second-guess herself... Or maybe even cry, for reasons she’d yet to figure out. He wanted something from her. For her to react to something. So that he knew that at least she was acknowledging her feelings, no matter how chaotic they may have been.

But after the pair had exchanged and compiled the intel they’d each obtained from their encounters that night at the charity event, Tessa hadn’t reacted. Not to the freshly imparted knowledge about her lover, nor to the lingering threat of being made. Not even, perhaps, to the fear of being tracked down. On the contrary, she was stoic as ever. Consumed by the new angle. She appeared to be on autopilot, her impassivity only tempering when she happened to be in the architect’s presence. It was as if all her efforts to keep her mask in place were resigned for that man and that man alone. As if she was split into two parts and only half of her, Sterling’s half, could emote.

It seemed to be the only time she would smile earnestly anymore, he realized.

“From the accident report and medical records I had faxed over,” she responded.

Though, frankly, Corey’d forgotten he’d even asked the question. “After all the effort that was put into the coverup, they just sent everything over? No questions asked?” He crossed his arms, a single eyebrow raised in a gesture of outward disbelief.

“I may have had to stretch the truth... *a bit*,” she conceded. “Logically speaking, though, there’s no reason for them to suspect that anyone would be looking into it after all this time. No one was killed in the wreck. The only property damage was personal. And there was no insurance involvement. No claims. The case was closed. People move on. Retire. *Die*. Whoever’s hands were greased is more than likely long gone, the money long spent. And, at this point, they can’t be bothered to care.”

“If you say so...” Despite his statement, Corey was unconvinced. “And you know the Harrington recounting is accurate how? You can’t tell me the Beaumonts weren’t smart enough to ensure nothing in the accident report was contradictory to the story they wanted to tell.”

“I called in a favor... from Lane,” she continued.

“You called my sister?” he croaked, unable to disguise the shock in his question. “Wait... Why does the department suddenly owe you a favor?”

“I never said the department owed me anything, *mon chou*.” The nonchalance in her voice was beginning to irritate him.

“I don’t understand...” The realization hit him harder than her fist ever could. “You can’t mean... Why does my sister owe you a favor? What’d you two do!”

“I’m sorry, but you’d have to ask her yourself.” Tessa shrugged. “As Lane likes to say, *chicks before dicks*.” Tessa ignored his distress, her sole focus on the information at hand. “Anyway, Lane reviewed the files and compared the injuries sustained, to the photos taken at the scene and the damage to

the vehicle. She said, without question, it all aligns with our theory that Lucien was the passenger, not the driver.” Again she paused, clearing her throat. “You know, you shouldn’t be so hard on your sister. What’s good enough for the goose is good enough for the gander. She doesn’t give you shit for what you have to do for your job, so you shouldn’t give her shit about what she has to do for hers.”

“So now *you’re* giving *me* life advice? That’s rich.” Corey laughed. He didn’t know how else to respond.

“And what exactly is that supposed to mean?” Tessa halted her incessant pacing, her trance broken.

“Really?” he barked. “Like you don’t know, Tess? Seriously?”

Silence.

“Fine. You wanna pretend like you don’t know what I’m talking about, I’ll take the bait. How can you honestly still be thinking about writing this fucking article?” Corey raked a hand through his hair, scratching his scalp in indecision.

If he didn’t know her better, he’d insist his cohort was playing him. Ironically, he would have almost been happier if she had been. *Almost*. It would mean that at the very least, she was self-aware. But he knew her mannerisms. He knew the real Tessa. And by the look she gave him now, he knew she really had no fucking clue.

She spun on her heel and resumed her pacing, as if confirming that very fact. “I’m not *thinking* about writing anything, *Cormac*,” she snapped.

He didn’t like the way she enunciated the word ‘thinking’ and he really didn’t like the way she had called him by his full first name. He couldn’t remember the last time she’d done that, but if he were guessing, he would have said it was during the initial few months they had started working together. Before she began to trust him.

“...I don’t get it.” He frowned.

“I’m not thinking about it because I already wrote it. The draft is on Fitzgerald’s desk, waiting to be greenlighted.”

“You have got to be kidding me! What the hell, Tess!” Heat traveled up the back of his neck and tinted his ears. “Since when do you turn in articles without me? And what’s the point of these files anyway? Why did you even call me over here to review them? And don’t say professional courtesy, because you sure as hell don’t have any of that, do you?”

She was pushing him away and he didn’t understand why, or if she even understood herself. She hadn’t stopped moving, nor had she attempted to make eye contact.

“You’re overthinking it. You know how it is, how it’s always been. I get the urge to write and I write. Just the same as every time before, as every other assignment and every other mark. And these files...” She gestured towards the towering pile on her coffee table. “I’ve only had them for a couple of days now. I was just waiting on a few more loose ends, a few more fact-checks before it’s all finalized and good for print. I’ve always handled things on the back side. I don’t get why you suddenly care so much.”

“And *I* don’t get why you don’t seem to care at all,” he retorted, his tone harsh and his eyes narrowed. “I can’t believe you. I can’t believe you’re actually doing this. I’ve been waiting for some common sense to smack you upside the head, and apparently I’ve waited too long. The only mark in this whole disaster-waiting-to-happen is you, Tess. The only one you’re fooling is yourself. And I can’t stand by and watch you do it.”

“You’re being ridiculous.” No rumination behind the statement. It was case and point. Matter of fact.

“Me? Ridiculous. Have you looked in the mirror lately, babe? Because you’re losing it. You’re obsessed with this story, nearly as obsessed with that man. And what’s most troubling is that you are obsessed with destroying everything. It’s like that’s your end goal. The whole incident... they covered it up for a reason. And while I agree that the Beaumonts weren’t trying to be altruistic and really give the guy his privacy, *his intentions* at the very least seem selfless. He obviously cared for the woman. You saw how protective he

was over her at the wedding. He didn't look like a man slighted or out for vengeance. And if it's true, what the Harrington woman said—that he ended things with her so she could have a better life—you can't fault him for feeling that way. How do you think he's going to react when you blow up his world? When he finds out you've been lying to him? Betrayed him? Tess, he's never going to forgive you for that. And I can't say I'd blame him either..."

"If he doesn't, he doesn't." She shrugged, her posturing cold. Distant.

"Bullshit. I know you care. What I don't know is why you're so set on ruining the first outside human interaction you've had in years."

"What are you talking about? I have plenty of human interactions. That's all I do, *babe*. I *interact*. It's part of my job, remember?" she attempted to rationalize.

"Ha... no, what you do is act not interact. There's a difference. What do you have that's real?" His tone boasted a hidden challenge, one he knew she had no chance of winning.

"That's not fair. I have plenty that's real. I have you. I have your sisters. I have the team and Fitzy."

"What you have," he countered, "is work."

"And you don't!" She was getting desperate, grasping at straws, he noted. "You work just as much as I do."

"No one works as much as you do, Tess." *It was true*. "I go out. I have friends *outside of the office*. I have my family, nieces and nephews. And, one day, maybe a wife and kids of my own. And what will you have?"

"Fuck you. So what? I'm focused on my career. More women should do the same. You're sadly mistaken if you thought I was ever going to play the part of someone's little housewife." The last word rolled off her tongue like a curse, as if she could taste the indignity of the supposition.

"I never said I wanted you to quit your job and suddenly become fucking Suzy Homemaker, for fuck's sake." *Now she sounded just like his sister*, he thought to himself. "Just that

family life is important too. Balance is important.” His frustration was evident, his normally complex vernacular replaced with variations of the word “fuck.”

“I have my parents. I have a family life,” she argued.

“Yeah? Really? You have a family life all right. So much so you didn’t even notice how bad your mom was...” He regretted saying it. The same moment the words left his mouth, he regretted saying them. But regret didn’t keep them from being audible.

“Get out.” The directive might as well have been a slap to his face. It stung.

“Tess... I—” But the apology was left to die in his throat, stifled by the repeated phrase.

“Get the fuck out.” She was assertive but calm.

Too calm, he feared.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that—” He stopped at the threshold, turned to glance over his shoulder, and he knew... He knew she was barely hanging on. The restraint she was showing outwardly was like everything else. A mask. And it was slipping. She was slipping, and all he wanted to do was catch her. But Corey had crossed a line, and the look she gave him now told him there was no stepping back over it. Not until she was ready to let him.

“Get out!”

And then it slipped... No, it crashed. *Shattered*.

Every piece Tessa had been holding in place slammed to the ground as she shoved him out the door and into the hall. Corey stood there for a moment, hand pressed against the frame. He could hear her as she fumbled with the lock before she sank to the floor. And he could hear her as she muffled her sobs into the fold of her knees. He’d fucked up. Instead of grabbing hold of her to keep her from plummeting over the edge, he’d inched her backwards and pushed her head-first.

He’d sent her spiraling...

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: THE CLIMAX

Tessa

Okay, she may have had to stretch the truth a little more than a bit...

Had she wanted to be transparent, she would have told Corey what she'd really done in order to obtain all the documents in those files. She wouldn't have held back that, to her benefit, she knew that French was the second most commonly used national language in Switzerland. German was the first; and though she was no linguist, she would have reminded him she wasn't half bad at that either.

She would have admitted that she'd posed as a medical assistant, claiming that the records were needed for Lucien's continued care before she'd faxed over the forged release form. She would have commented that it had been surprisingly easy to do, all things considered. And that the hardest part had been the waiting. Because had she been honest with her partner, she wouldn't have failed to mention that—despite the thirty-day grace period—with a polite nudge, shameless pleading, and implied urgency the request had only taken a week to be processed. Though she'd waited two to share the information with her other half.

And lastly, she would have confessed that she didn't know why she felt so compelled to lie to him about everything. But she had. And she did.

Tessa slumped against the door and cradled her legs to her chest. This was what she wanted, right? To seek comfort in her work. And in herself. No one else. To be reliant on just herself and no one else. To be tied to only herself and no one else.

Then why did she suddenly feel so... *alone*?

The voice had been screaming at her long before Tessa was able to place it. Surprisingly, when recognition did finally hit, the voice was her own. Or rather, it was her common sense. The logic that warned her this was a bad idea and the reasoning she had the propensity to ignore. She shouldn't have left her apartment. And she most certainly should not be standing at his front door with her finger hovering above the doorbell, contemplating whether she should press it. Or not. But here she was.

Standing. Hovering. Contemplating.

“Do you want to come in? Or is lurking out there all part of some devious plan of yours, Miss Owens?”

“How did you know—”

His laughter cut in before she could finish the question. “The flood lights and motion-activated cameras have been going on and off for a few minutes now,” he explained.

She looked up and then back down at the intercom. “Oh, right...” Her breath was heavy, her words just above a whisper. “Lucien, can I come in? Please...”

Sterling

He rested his cheek against the top of her head. The familiar scent of her hair and the weight of her body pressed to his was comforting. More so than the smell of fresh drafting paper, than the pressure of a sharpened pencil between his fingertips. It was a stammering realization, but a true one nonetheless.

“I’m starting to feel like maybe I should invest in a red suit. Let the facial hair grow out a bit and buy myself a team of reindeer,” he teased. “If word gets out, you may be facing a crowd next time you’re looking to stop by. Then again, the wait’ll be worth it—I can just picture it now, Charlie in an elf costume. I’d pay to see that.” While his tone was meant to be lighthearted, Sterling was worried about how he’d found her on his doorstep. It wasn’t like Tessa to be so hesitant, nor was it like her to wordlessly curl into his lap.

“Are you complaining?” she retorted, her lips slightly curled at the sides.

“Not in the least bit, love. Merely an observation. Besides, it saves on the heating bill. And I must say you look much better strewn across my legs than one of those old nursing home blankets.” He chuckled, tucking her hair behind her ear before tugging her under his chin.

“Don’t say things like that.” Her response was followed by a backhand to his chest.

“Things like what, love?” he hummed into her ear.

“Self-deprecating things, things you think will make other people feel better at your expense.”

“But what if it’s not about other people. What if it makes *me* feel better?” he offered, though his stare was distant now, his posture slightly tensed.

“Do you? Feel better?”

“Sometimes... sometimes I do,” he mused. “Especially when it makes you smile.”

“It doesn’t make me smile. I don’t like it.”

“You liked it enough to be attracted to me. To be here now.” His argument was weak. Even he knew that much. But he argued all the same.

“No, I was attracted to your bullheadedness, *mon nounours*,” she corrected. “To the fact that you caught me off guard. That you challenged me.”

Sterling had yet to learn what the nickname meant. But she said it to him often and always in a way that seemed more tender than anything else. He wondered if the meaning would be lost in translation. Perhaps, in this instance, the ambiguity outweighed the knowledge.

“*Was*, you say? And what about now?” he cautioned, unsure if he really wanted to know the answer.

“*Now* I’m attracted to this.” She clung a little tighter to the fabric of his shirt. “To everything. To the real you, Lucien.”

“But not to my jokes?” He raised an eyebrow while his lips quirked.

“No. I unequivocally hate your jokes,” she confirmed. “Seeing as you’re such a prudent businessman, I advise you to invest in better ones. Maybe Charlie can help.”

At this hour, the white paint always appeared to be tinted an almost pale blue, the same color as the light that reflected through the windows and onto the ceiling. But it wasn’t a nightmare that held Sterling captive and blinking up at that familiar spot where the coffered grids crossed and intersected above his bed frame. It was the huddled, pliable form of the woman next to him that kept him from his sleep.

Something haunted her; he recognized that look in her eyes. It was the aftermath of trauma. And it was the very same look he saw in the mirror each morning. He just wished he knew what it was that troubled her.

He sighed and nudged her deeper into the crux of his shoulder as he continued that same train of thought.

More than merely identifying the cause, he wished he could rid her of it. Though, even if he could, he knew she would not be inclined to accept his help. He grinned at that fact, as frustrating as it was.

He adored this beautifully broken creature and all the complexities that she seemed to embody. She was a breathing contradiction, with the aptitude of a vixen and the vulnerability of someone as deeply flawed as he was. And she’d somehow given him back a part of himself he’d long thought dead. What that part was exactly was hard for him to verbalize. To put a label on.

However, it was tied to the way she looked at him. The way no one had been able to look at him since the accident. Without pity, without horror, without lamentation over everything he could have been. Should have been. And wasn’t.

It had to do with the reason she was here with him now. Because she wanted to be. Because she found comfort lying beside him. Because out of everyone's doorstep she could have been on, it was his she chose. Seeking nothing more than this right here. She didn't ask for favors or for strings to be pulled. She didn't want his money or connections. And she cared for him despite his bloodline, not because of it. She sought only the warmth of his body and his arms wrapped around hers. It was that feeling alone that allowed her to drift off while simultaneously leaving him to his thoughts.

Because as good as sleeping sounded, watching her finally at peace was better.

He must have fallen asleep at some point in the middle of the night, because his eyes flickered open to the smell of breakfast and a half-clothed woman straddling him. Granted, he could think of far worse ways than this to be woken up.

Her hair was loose and wild—a rare occurrence—and it skimmed along his stomach, then his chest, before stopping at his cheek when she bent down to kiss him. He brushed the dusting of powdered sugar from her nose with his thumb, licking it clean while he struggled against his urge to discover if the rest of her tasted just as sweet.

“Don't tell me you cooked?” Though from the aromatic smell of her, a perfume peppered by cinnamon, he already knew the answer.

“I woke up starving. I must have forgotten to eat yesterday,” she confessed. Her stare was distant for a second, quickly flashing to normal by the time she looked back down at him. “We need to do something about that kitchen of yours. Everything is so... *healthy*. Not a carb in sight.”

“I have a cook, you know. He could have made you whatever you wanted.” Over the last few months, Sterling noted that Tessa had an insatiable sweet tooth. While sugar had never been a weakness of his, the girl seemed to be able to consume her body weight in a single sitting.

“Yes, well, you know what they say: when you want something done right... Besides, the man took one look at me

and ran off with his eyes covered. I think your staff may be afraid of me. What kind of stories have you been telling them?”

“Ah, yes, could be that,” he postulated. “I’ll admit I gave everyone fair warning about your antics. Though, I can’t help but think that it may have something to do with your current state of undress?” He motioned to the partially buttoned dress shirt she’d borrowed and the pair of perfectly toned legs barely hidden beneath it. And grinned. “You probably gave old Gus a heart attack, love.”

“Perhaps.” She lifted a shoulder in a half shrug. “But what sense is there in getting dressed just to take it all off again.” Her shared smirk turned sinister.

“I thought you were hungry?”

“Oh, I’m famished...” she hummed. Though, by the gleam in her eye, he knew she was no longer talking about breakfast.

Agile.

This woman was fucking agile. It was the only word that came to mind when he watched her. Her movements were nearly aerobatic, as she removed her shirt with one hand and his boxers with the other. He never felt more important, more like the man he used to be, than when she admired him the way she was now. Like he was everything she could ever want. *That* was what the flutter of her eyelashes and her labored breathing told him, that there was nowhere else she’d rather be.

And if it was all just a lie, it was one he chose to believe.

When she mounted him, it was as though nothing else... no one else mattered. Not the use of his legs, not the wealth and power behind his family name, and more importantly not any of the other failures that haunted him. He didn’t want, care, or feel any of it. Just her.

She both dulled his pain and enlivened all sensation better than any drug or alcohol or therapy ever could. It didn’t matter how much his joints cried and ached at the end of the day. Her

hands on his chest, her nails digging into the flesh there, and the way she threw her head back and bit her bottom lip—the combination assuaged his every muscle into complacency. While the little whimpers she emitted with each back and forth motion aroused his need to satisfy her. More so than himself. He had to bring her to that point... the moment when her voice grew husky and she blurted out his name as though it were a prayer rolling off her tongue. And when she finally did say it, she collapsed against the thud of his heartbeat. While her panting continued, an even match to his heaving breaths, her aftershock lulled him into his own satisfaction.

It may have been the adrenaline talking. But as he lay there, her body settling against him, he was overcome by the sudden awareness that he had never felt this way before. Not with anyone. There was nothing that compared to this woman in his arms or to the emotions she elicited. It wasn't about the sex.

That was great, of course. Unparalleled.

No, this was something more though. Something different. Something he wasn't sure, until this very moment, if he'd ever even experienced in his lifetime. Despite what he'd told himself and everyone else in the past, this was new. And as the trembling began to ease itself, he realized it wasn't about any chemical reaction either. Because as if reality hit him all at once, like an uppercut to his jaw, Sterling discovered he loved her.

He loved this woman. And there'd never been anyone else. Just her.

CHAPTER TWENTY- THREE: THE WRITING ON THE WALL

Tessa

“You look like you’re trying to solve world hunger over there.” The familiar gruff inflection did what it always seemed to do to her, jarred Tessa from her ruminations while simultaneously evoking a candid smile. “And from the way you’re staring into that cinnamon bun, my guess is that you plan to conquer it one pastry at a time,” Sterling posited, as he approached her at the counter, her elbows pointed and head down.

He reached out, grabbed her waist with one hand, and scooped her up and onto the warmth of his thighs. Sending the platter of rolls she’d just frosted tumbling after her. Tessa crossed her arms, with an air of annoyance she was unable to maintain, as she broke out into full-bodied laughter.

“I was going to eat those, you know?” she chided, sucking the tops of each of her fingertips until she was certain nothing sugary remained.

“I’m sure you were,” Sterling agreed, though his tone suggested a hint of sarcasm. As she lifted a piece she’d salvaged to her lips—the only piece that hadn’t bounced along the floor tiles—he swatted it loose. Before quickly shoving it into his own mouth. She blinked back at him, her shock evolving to indignation and then back again.

“I can’t believe you just did that...” she huffed.

“Believe it, love.” Eyes daggered in challenge, he admitted, “And I’d do it again—” The last word hadn’t fully formed in his mouth, halted by the dessert flying out of Tessa’s hand and splattering on his freshly-shaven face. In a similar

fashion, it was Sterling whose eyes now fluttered back at her in disbelief, his eyelashes caked in the liquified sweet cream.

“And so would I,” she retorted, her own antagonism just as prominent, her posturing just as combative. However, when she raised her arm to fling another pastry in his direction, he caught her by the wrist. He enacted a small amount of pressure at the base of her thumb, forcing her grip to slacken and the offending cake to crumble to the floor. Once she was empty-handed, he drew her captive palm upwards and gently parted his lips along her exposed and quickening pulse line. The ghost of a kiss.

“Tess, I—” Whatever the admission was, Sterling swallowed it back down as footsteps invaded the kitchen.

Glancing up from his phone and surveying the chaos of the room, Charles snorted. “Is this some kind of sex thing?” He looked at the pair, each now plastered with a thick coating of frosting.

“Have I ever told you that your timing is impeccable?” Sterling responded, ineffectually wiping a white glob from his brow while Tessa shook her head and attempted to stifle her laughter.

“...because if this is some kind of sex thing, I can come back later...”

“What is it, Chuck?” Sterling rolled his eyes, quickly turning his chair to face the interloper. “Come out with it already, please.”

“There’s been a last-minute addition to your calendar. A two o’clock.” His cohort’s grin widened as he continued. “I see that you are... *preoccupied*. However, the caller said the work would be of personal interest to you and...” He read verbatim from his cellular device, “That the matter was of utmost urgency.”

“I should go anyway.” Tessa nodded, and everything that had been genuine and expressive was gone. Her mannerisms were once again controlled, backpedaled, and latched in place. Her stomach clenched as if by its own accord, as her breakfast

threatened to travel up her esophagus and project onto her shoes. Her gut was telling her that something about this didn't sit right. Her every instinct screamed it; but her every instinct had been wrong lately. And she couldn't even distinguish if her sudden unease was warranted at the moment.

"Don't..." The singular request came out more like a plea. Sterling grabbed her hand before she could turn towards the bedroom. "Do you have an assignment due or anything?"

His question made her heart sink this time. She didn't want to think about the reality of what she had done and what it was about to do. This was supposed to be her escape, the place she could run away to.

"No." Her statement was as involuntarily dry as her mouth. "I turned everything in already. I haven't been issued anything new... just yet." She chewed on her words. Either Sterling didn't notice, or he had grown used to her shifts in mood.

"Then stay," he insisted. "The meeting will take an hour, two tops, if they bring specs to review." He tugged at his collar.

He was nervous about something, she observed.

"I mean, I'd love for you to sit in. It may give you a little insight into the bigger picture I have planned down the line. Once the Victorian is finished."

She nodded, though she herself didn't understand why she'd agreed. Her initial explanation would have been that she was just curious. She wanted to know what it was about this particular scheduling change that left her with a sense of dread. However, if she were to take an in-depth analysis of her motives, she would have realized that she'd stayed because she'd wanted to.

"So what does this project have to do with any of my personal investments?" Sterling enquired, his fingers tapping impatiently.

“No idea.” Charles shrugged. “The chap who called said you’d know when he got here. Made a big *to-do* about how well-known his name was... Can’t say I have ever heard of him though.” He paused, then seemed to suddenly remember. “He did mention that it had something to do with your growing interest in more international ventures—oddly enough, I couldn’t quite place the accent... But it was definitely foreign.”

Tessa muffled her gasp. *It couldn’t be...*

A knock sounded on the office door. A gesture that was somehow self-important, pompous, and obnoxiously loud. Charles grimaced—almost as if he could hear Tessa’s thoughts and thoroughly agreed—then shook his head before standing to greet whoever was on the other side.

“Luc—” Charles’s polite introduction was severed by the visitor’s sudden entrance.

“Cousin!” The man approached with familiarity and an open wingspan. “You should have told me you’d be joining us, *cher*.”

No wonder Charlie hadn’t recognized the accent, she mused. It was as god-awful as she remembered.

“*Philippe*.” The name felt acidic as it left her lips. “You know full well we aren’t cousins, *mon cher*.” She corrected both the inaccuracy of his statement as well as that of his poor pronunciation. Tessa had yet to figure out what his endgame was here, but she knew she didn’t like it.

“Well, distant cousins...” he seemed to explain with the twirl of his hand. “Twice removed and all that.” He pivoted, veering his attention to Charles seated in front of the desk and Sterling positioned behind it. Tessa could see each of their wheels turning as Philippe continued. “But if you would like, *ma chérie*, we can all get straight down to business.”

His phonetic adjustment had been uttered with a purpose; and it was one that was meant to be mocking.

“As I was telling this *lovely lady*...” The con man stalled. “By the way, she gets her looks from our side of the family.”

But that's neither here nor there. Back to business, right? I was telling Tess about my upcoming endeavors abroad—when was it?" He tapped his foot and tilted his head, implying as though he couldn't recall the date and time that they last saw each other. The threat was veiled but it hung there all the same. "*Cher*, be a dear and refresh my memory, won't you?"

Tessa shot up from her chair, her gaze narrowed and equally as foreboding as her opponent's. "Actually, if you could please give us a moment in private." It wasn't a request, and it was directed at the only two men who actually belonged in that room.

"Ah, yes!" Philippe agreed. "Let's catch up on family matters first. Gentlemen, I'm sure you don't mind." He placed a palm on Tessa's lower back as he guided her towards the door. "How is your dear mother?"

Her toes raked along the floorboards in response to the barred remark. "Excuse us," she called out over her shoulder; though she didn't dare turn to face them, for fear that they would see how rattled she had become. "Lucien. Charlie. We'll be in the drafting room... catching up. We won't be more than a few minutes."

She could feel the weight of their concern against her back, however, she refused to witness it head-on. Instead, the journalist callously chose to further quicken her exit. As they turned down the hall and past several open doorways, Tessa allowed her grip on the man's wrist to express her irritation. Her hold twisted and jerked in angles that were not meant to provide comfort. When she located the farthest room on the left, she swung the hinges sharply and tugged Philippe behind her.

"A rich boyfriend, I see." The curl of his smirk told her what his rhetoric had not.

"What do you want?" At this point, she wasn't sure how this encounter would pan out. So she loosened and flexed her muscles in preparation for a fight, in the event it all came to blows.

“What do I want? That’s what you ask? That’s obvious, *cher*,” he sneered. “I’m surprised you didn’t ask how I found you instead.” One step. Then two. And three. He was closing in on her, campaigning to edge her towards the far wall. “Don’t you want to know about the trail that led me to you... about all the little breadcrumbs you left behind? You know, if I could find you, someone else could too.”

Four. Five. Six.

“You can lie and say it was done with precision, some half-brained scheme meant to lure me here, but your eyes betray you.”

No matter what he said, she didn’t look away. Nor did she respond. Her concentration solely focused on counting. *Fifteen paces*, she surmised. She had fifteen paces before her back would hit the wall.

“But since you asked,” he continued his tirade as most villains did, whether or not someone was listening. “I want in on whatever scheme you have going on here. If not, I’ll tell your boyfriend all about how and where we met. He doesn’t know about your little outing, does he?”

Shit.

“And would you like to know who told me this tidbit of information? You did,” he goaded her.

She paused, losing count. It was ten. Or was it eleven?

“Well, your face did,” he taunted. “Just now, when I mentioned him. There’s that tell of yours, *cher*. You know, we’d make a good team. Much, much better than you and Mr. Wheel-of-Fortune.”

Thirteen. She had to be at thirteen by now. Right? Wrong...

Fuck. The emitting force was much greater than Tessa had anticipated, her back solidly pressed against the wall. She’d been shoved there with enough exertion to leave her now breathless and winded. His form towered over her as he held her in place, his intent clear. There was no escape. And still, she didn’t falter. Not an ounce.

In size, he outweighed her by a near hundred pounds, but with her targeted willpower, she was certain she could outmaneuver him. Just as she had intended. It wouldn't take much more than a duck and a side-step to loosen his grip. He wouldn't expect it, *surprise* the ever-present weapon added to her arsenal of quick wit and indomitability.

But then... then, he did the one thing she hadn't seen coming.

Clutching her face between his thumb and forefingers, he imprinted his grip, his nails nearly digging perfect facsimiles into each of her cheekbones. He clamped her jaw so tightly that she swore the shape of her skin would never return to normal. The room was deafeningly quiet—she could sense every miniscule, nerve-racking movement—and yet she couldn't stop it from happening. She felt her heart in her throat, where it sat, choking her more determinedly than he ever could.

It wasn't the pressure of his crushing embrace that shook her. No, not even the stench of his heaved respirations dampening her flesh could elicit a response. Her expression was stone, chiseled stoicism masking the rage that boiled beneath the surface. What finally ignited her outburst was the aggressive puckering of his lips crashing down on hers.

There was no way for him to predict it...

There was no way for the man to know what that simple unsolicited gesture would invoke. Not that he didn't deserve it. He most certainly did.

However, it didn't change the fact that her reaction was far more incensed and frenzied than any one person should have been humanly capable. Especially one of her stature. She was like a creature possessed. And to some extent, she was. Because the moment his mouth touched hers, she was no longer in that suffocating room. She was back in the warehouse, back somewhere outside the New York City limits. She was the living breathing poltergeist of the girl still captured there. The girl that everyone, including herself, was certain had died.

And that girl was angry.

She didn't think about her next movements; in fact, she didn't think about anything at all. Each and every blow was as if it were by instinct, her body acting out in a way it was predestined to do. The imagery almost beautiful if the aftermath wasn't so god-awful and bloody. Her mind, having long since filed away the trauma, couldn't register what the rest of her was physically doing. Even as her knuckles gaped open, too raw to self-lubricate anymore, she didn't stop. She didn't feel.

She just kept striking over and over and over and over again.

Until some unknown presence seemed to be pulling her back by her arms and off the prone figure—a figure she'd found herself straddling. As she stared down, she stilled, her vision finally returning to the here. To the now. And to the battered body of the man on the ground. A man she'd beaten to a pulp. The same man whose face had returned to its true form, no longer an apparition of the past that still haunted her. Or the memories she'd thought were entombed by lock and key and allowed to rot away to nothing.

Outwardly, she was numb. The pulsing of her broken left fist vibrated up her arm and to her shoulders, and yet she felt no pain. Despite her visible shaking, the only ache she could recognize was that of her psyche, which seemed to have unequivocally and inexplicably shattered, her mental state as noticeably fractured as her offender's facial features. She didn't know when it was exactly that she had collapsed to her knees only that, that's how she suddenly found herself.

Disoriented. Dissociated. Distraught.

There was no sign of the controlled, calculated woman she was thought to be. In her place, curled into a heap of crisscrossed limbs and gore, resided but a shell of a person. Somehow broken, even after all these years. Or maybe especially after all these years.

Through the shuffling of distant silhouettes and the muffling of distant voices, Tessa was frozen in place. Nearly

catatonic. That was, until she felt herself being tugged against her captor's chest. The scent was familiar, comforting, and safe. And as though it were second nature, she sighed, drawing her breath in deeper before expelling it to coat her lungs. A gesture that seemed to soothe her every nerve ending.

Had she been a crier...

But before the thought could take root, tears ushered from the crux of her eyes and streamed down her cheeks. Except they didn't stream; they gushed in ugly gut-wrenching sobs as she buried herself closer into the man's torso. Cradled like the most precious, delicate thing that he'd ever held. Like she was made of glass and too much pressure would crack her, while too little would prompt her to slip through his fingers as if she were sand. A lifetime of unshed emotions dripped from her chin and soaked into the fabric of his shirt. Her body trembled as she gulped in air between each of the choked, unrelenting wails that materialized from some unknown depths of her innermost person.

He didn't speak. He didn't question her or demand an explanation. Though the tightening of his grip spoke for itself. *He wasn't going to let her go either.* He combed his fingers through the matted, sweaty strands of her hair and rested his chin on the top of her head. It wasn't until she shuddered with exhaustion and no longer had the energy or the tears left to cry that his voice finally broke the silence. And it wasn't until she heard it that the recognition washed over her.

"Tell me, Tess..." Sterling whispered, his body still sheltering hers—a physical barrier in place of the one he could not offer her mentally. "You don't have to. Not ever, if you don't want to. Say the word and I'll promise not to ask you about it again. But I need you to know... I need you to understand... I'm here. And you can tell me what happened to you..."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: THE BIG APPLE

Six Years Prior

Tessa

By the time she was tall enough to reach a bag, Tessa had learned to take a punch. And not too long after, she'd perfected how to avoid one. Though, that lesson didn't seem to apply to her current situation. No, at the present moment—bound to a chair with her arms behind her back—avoidance wasn't much of an option. But preparing herself for the inescapable sting of the man's fist meeting her flesh, *that* she could do.

Each time he pulled his arm back, his muscles tightening in anticipation of inflicting another blow: she steadied her breathing, loosened her posture, and braced for impact. She had to keep her jaw clenched, tongue rooted, and mouth shut while simultaneously tucking her chin and presenting her forehead instead. This posturing ensured that the contact would be mutually painful each time he struck her, his knuckles meeting solid cranial bone rather than the delicate, easily fractured features of her nose and orbital cavity. Lastly, she remembered to dip her shoulders in the same direction as the opposing force, allowing his fist to roll off with the least resistance and in turn, the least pursuant damage to her soft tissue.

He was growing both tired and bored; tired from the effort needed to inflict her punishment and bored from her lack of response. He was the kind of sick fuck who indulged in the whimpers and cries of frightened little girls. The kind of monster that held no qualms about beating women and children; in fact, he was the kind of man that seemed to get some sort of depraved satisfaction from the entire ordeal. And right now, he stood in front of her very *unsatisfied*.

Though her ears were beginning to hum from the repeated hits to her temple, Tessa could still hear him shouting at her in some sort of hybrid language. A mixture of both Russian and English. To which, she would only respond in French, half to confuse the man and half because she found gratification in insulting him in terms he couldn't comprehend.

However, her enjoyment was short-lived, as was his patience for her continued antics. She could sense that he finally had enough. See it in the flickering in his eyes, the tick in his clenched jaw. She didn't have a plan—other than staying alive, of course. Nevertheless, she had been stalling. Buying time. Until she was able to formulate a means to get away.

She understood that whether or not he got the information he wanted, her time was limited. He was either too uninformed or too stupid to realize that she didn't have anything he wanted to begin with.

She wasn't who he thought she was. Or nearly as important. If truth be told, she couldn't even guarantee that the Agostinos would notice her absence, let alone barter for her return. And once he—or whoever he worked for—discovered this little tidbit, Tessa was as good as dead. If not worse. After all, she knew there would only be two outcomes to this scenario. She would need to escape, or she'd die in this warehouse. She doubted men such as him would have any other use for her. And if they did, she knew she would prefer death over those possibilities anyway.

She stilled, her eyes drawn to the darkness looming over them, and her hair began to stand on end. They weren't alone...

There was no way for her to know for sure but she could feel eyes on her. On them. It was that same kind of chill that traveled down your spine when you could sense you were being watched. That feeling that somewhere out there someone was looking down on you. And she didn't know who was more twisted, the man beating her to a pulp or the person watching him do it... However, judging by the salacious grin on the figure currently in front of her, it didn't really matter who was worse. Either way, this was the moment of truth.

He stalked over to her, appearing ever the proud predator despite the fact that his prey was tied down and presented to him like a gift for the taking. No man should have had pride in that. But this one certainly did, further proving he wasn't much of a man to begin with. She was beaten, bleeding, and bruised but she wasn't out for the count. She just needed to play her cards right. She needed to remember every lesson her father had ever taught her. Because at this moment, there was no better time for implementation.

With much more vigor than was necessary to restrain a battered hundred-pound girl, he released her bindings before dragging her off behind a wall of pallets and out of view from whosever eyes she was certain were still watching. She didn't fight him. She knew she needed to both conserve her energy as well as ease him into a false sense of security. He had to believe she was more broken than she currently was.

Once they were far enough away that he seemed comfortable with his backdrop, he threw her down onto a makeshift bed; it was really nothing more than an old dirty mattress and a wrinkled sheet. She shivered at the thought of what had likely occurred there. At the thought of what may still occur there. But outwardly, she didn't recoil. Tessa pretended to be dazed, somewhere between consciousness and unconsciousness.

Even as he pawed at her clothing, tore the zipper of her dress, and removed her stockings—she didn't react. Instead, she listened to her surroundings. Making note of any footsteps in the foreground, the subtle creak of any doors, and the likely distance between them. She returned her focus to her carefully measured breaths, ensuring that he found them shallow enough to believe she was still knocked out. She blunted the sickening feeling that crept up her neck, knowing full well what was about to happen. And that she would have to allow it, couldn't fight it, until she had an opening.

Preparing for the inevitable—steeling herself mentally, physically, and emotionally for what was next—couldn't stop the devastation that washed over the journalist as the man dropped his pants, kneeled down over her, and forcibly

inserted himself into her body. She held back her urge to whimper. She held back the tears that she refused to let leave their ducts. And she held back the wave of nausea that threatened to spur from the pit of her stomach. His movements were rough. Vile. Disgusting. And as if violating her lower body wasn't enough to get this sick fuck *off*, he reached up towards her mouth.

Clutching her face between his thumb and forefingers, he imprinted his grip, his nails nearly digging perfect facsimiles into each of her cheekbones. He clamped her jaw so tightly that she swore the shape of her skin would never return to normal. The room was deafeningly quiet—she could sense every miniscule, nerve-racking movement—and yet she couldn't stop it from happening. She felt her heart in her throat, where it sat, choking her more determinedly than he ever could.

It wasn't the pressure of his crushing embrace that shook her. No, not even the stench of his heaved respirations dampening her flesh could elicit a response. Her expression was stone, chiseled stoicism masking the rage that boiled beneath the surface. What finally ignited her outburst was the aggressive puckering of his lips crashing down on hers.

And the secondary double-edged penetration of his tongue snaking passed them. In a flurry of movements that were much quicker than should have been humanly possible, especially for someone of her small stature, Tessa's eyes flew open. And with deadening accuracy, her jaw clamped down and onto the smaller of the two intruding foreign bodies with as much strength as she could exert. Her teeth sunk into the meat of the twitching appendage until they had sawed themselves through, severing the gory pinkened clump of tissue and taste buds from its stem.

The man's system had shocked him into a silent scream, nearly a growl that rumbled in the back of his throat. But the sound didn't quite emit itself from his vocal cords. Instead, blood spurted from his mouth, pouring down over his chin like a pot boiling over. There was no other way she could think to describe the foaming substance discharging from his bottom

lip and onto her chest. She shoved him off her as he curled up on his side and choked, gurgled, and gasped for air. His dignity was as open and on display as his undone fly.

Tessa stared down at the floundering figure. In accordance with her heart, her eyes were fixed in a gaze that was both dead and cold. She watched him flail, attempt to beg, and struggle to breathe—all without a single inclination towards remorse. He'd already killed whatever decency she had left in her soul as assuredly as she planned on leaving him there to die. But before she turned her back on him for good, she left her attacker with one more parting gesture. A swift kick to his groin as she spat at him, her saliva tainted pink by the remnants of his blood still embedded on her teeth.

Then she cracked her neck from side to side and sprinted into the shadows casted by the nearest assemblage of cargo pallets before tiptoeing towards the sound of the hinged creaking. She needed to find the opening and she surmised this one provided her most likely escape route. Slinking through the doorway, Tessa held her breath and clung close to the walls.

The corridor had a small room—or maybe a staircase—to the left but directly in front of her was the exit. It was only a few steps out of reach. That was all that stood between the journalist and her freedom. But she soon discovered that those few steps... were precisely a few steps too many.

Appearing from the opposing aperture, and blocking her only outlet, was a taller, much wider, and more menacing figure than had been her first opponent. He grabbed her by the shoulders. His grip wasn't gentle but she wouldn't have called it violent either. Or perhaps, in actuality, she'd grown numb to the violence. Too desensitized to tell the difference anymore.

And too detached to really care.

Whatever the reasoning, she didn't back down. She didn't crumble. Even as she stared defeat in the eyes—eyes with no discernible color—it was only blackness and intent she saw there. As to what his intent was, however, she hadn't quite figured that out yet.

What she did know was that this man was not her savior; there was no doubt in her mind that he was another Russian mobster. Another member of the Bratva. The tattoos on his knuckles told her as much. And his heavily-laced accent when he vocalized his warning moments later solidified her theory.

“You. Are. Dead.” He spoke harshly and with conviction, though the threat sounded just above a whisper.

Despite the trauma, despite the unmistakable pounding of her half-dead heart, Tessa couldn't hide her true nature any more than a leopard could hide his spots. She smiled a frighteningly swollen, purpled smile. Like something out of a horror flick and much too grotesque to be true to form, nature, or even living.

“*Pas encore, je ne le suis pas.*” *Not yet, I'm not.*

“*Prekrati eto der'mo.* Stop. The. Shit. Speak English. Understand?” He enunciated each word as though it were an additional assaultive strike to her already afflicted and discoloring flesh. “You. Are. Dead,” he repeated, tightening his hold on her with one hand while brushing the blood from her cheek with the other. His actions were as conflicting as his aggressively softened tone.

“I'm perfectly alive. But I can't say the same for your friend.” Her retort slipped out much easier than it should have, like silk dancing along her tongue. She knew that at the very least if she was going to die tonight, she was taking one of them with her.

“*Zatknis'*. Shut up, girl. Don't make me say it again. YOU. ARE. DEAD. Leave. Change your name. Disappear. Tessa Leroux is dead, *ponyat'?*” *Understand?*

“She can't be dead. She never existed...”

He paused at her admission, as if taking a moment to mull over the information she'd so suddenly divulged. “*Sukin syn...* Son of a bitch, so it's more *pizdets* than the Italians know. But *mne pokhuy*. I don't give a fuck. Right now, I just need you to run. And run fast. Before I change my mind. Whoever the fuck it is you are pretending to be, she died in this warehouse

tonight. The *Bratva* killed her. But it's your choice how convincing I need to make it."

"I want my ring back," she hissed the demand between bloodied teeth, her spine steeled despite her lack of a bargaining chip.

"Your life is on the line, girl. And you're worried about a trinket. A piece of jewelry?" The man laughed, though the sound resonated anything but humor. "You're lucky he didn't take the whole finger. Now go or I'll take more than a souvenir."

With those parting words, he offered her both a promise and a warning. And Tessa realized that while he might not have been the devil himself, in that moment, he sure as hell looked like it. There was something in the mobster's voice that told her that he didn't want to hurt her. But if she argued with him... if she fought him... if she forced his hand, he would.

Wanting had little to do with it.

So, for once in her life, she didn't fight. She didn't argue or attempt to negotiate. No, on the contrary, she fled. Though she had believed what he told her, and that he would make good on his threat, that was not why the journalist left New York. However, it had been a good enough reason to not look back when she finally did.

When the adrenaline wore off and her impulses were no longer anesthetized by the need to survive, Tessa's shock morphed into self-loathing. She wasn't the same girl she had been. The one who'd walked into that nightclub, fearless and uninhibited. The one who'd looked the most dangerous of men in the eye and refused to flinch, even as common sense screamed at her that she should run. The one who'd risked facing the targeted onslaught of the criminal underground just to get a better story. No, that wasn't her anymore...

She could never be that same girl again. Her constitutional being, her frame of mind, her entire sense of who she was intrinsically had been forever altered.

A surrogate, a creature blackened by disgust and anguish, crept forward in Tessa's stead. She wrapped her daggered claws around the voice of logic and reason—the voice Tessa relied on hearing even if she hadn't always chosen to listen. And like a noose dropping before pulling tight, the imposter silenced the sound into submission while claiming her rightful place at the forefront of the journalist's mind. The proxy, now firmly positioned at the helm of Tessa's subconscious, guided her arsenal of subliminal warfare, humiliation, and stigma while drowning what remained of the woman's confidence and indomitability in a sea of questions that seemed to bear no answer.

Because it shouldn't have happened.

It wasn't one of the potential outcomes, she told herself. As though she believed doing so would change what couldn't be changed. Why hadn't she seen it? Predicted it? Prevented it? If she couldn't see it, how could she have stopped it? The strategy was simple: designate every action a reaction, every offense a defense.

She glared at the image in the mirror, failure staring back at her in the form of smeared makeup and dried tears, and shook her head.

Every possible measure had been covered, then countered...

Except the one that mattered, her own voice echoed back. The one that would have preserved her self-worth. Her dignity. She just couldn't seem to grasp that fact. She couldn't wrap her mind around it. She couldn't absorb what she couldn't dissect and understand. The reality that there was nothing she could have done differently. Because even though it shouldn't have happened, it did.

In the deep abyss of Tessa's psyche, where she hid her unwanted emotions, she enlisted her hatred to stand guard. It resided as a single soldier, alone and left to battle the sting of her ever-rising hindsight and the self-inflicting voice that lashed out and called her the very thing she had fought so long and hard to deject. The thing she had sought to dispute and

disembody. To diminish and defeat. The phantasmal voice that seemed to make its sole purpose to remind her that she was the manifestation of vulnerability. She was just a girl and...

She was weak.

In that moment, in the moments prior, and in the moments where she'd trusted anyone besides herself, she'd proven just how much so. She hadn't been strong enough, smart enough, or quick enough. She'd allowed the Russian to violate her. To use her body just as easily, just as submissively, just as wantonly as she'd allowed her former partner to exploit and defile her heart.

Tessa could hear her father's voice in her head, his instructions when she took to the ring and he taught her how to take a blow before delivering one twice as potent, and realization ate away at her insides.

Because when push came to shove, she hadn't fought. She hadn't even made it to the ropes. She'd succumbed to her own weight class. She'd tried to play possum with the eight-count, and in the end, like a well-delivered uppercut to a glass jaw, she'd lost anyway.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: THE LIVING DEAD GIRL

The Present

Sterling

She hadn't told him what happened. She didn't seem able...

Instead, she relived it in a way that seemed to separate the woman she was from the girl she had been. Like two sides to the same coin that refused to acknowledge the other even existed. The images, the emotions, each sequence of events was narrated as though some distant being had been observing her. And it was that same being who was now recounting the tabloid writer's backstory as it had played out in front of her all those years ago. Her voice had been devoid of all sentiment. The rage he'd seen firsthand was extinguished, the torment neatly tucked away, where he assumed she thought it belonged.

He didn't know what to say to her. What could he say? That he understood?

He didn't. And he never would. Never could.

That he was sorry?

If he knew anything about the woman in front of him, it was that she didn't want his pity any more than he wanted hers.

That he loved her? That he wanted to... needed to know that that man was really dead. That he would spend every penny of his fortune to locate and dig up the grave just to see with his own eyes what was left of that piece of shit. That if in fact he hadn't met his end by Tessa's hands, Sterling wanted to hunt that man down himself and make sure that fucker knew exactly what it felt like to be tied down and beaten into submission. And worse...

Yes, of course, that would be the perfect response. If he was looking to imply she was just as helpless as her attacker had made her feel in that moment. She didn't need or want him to do any of those things for her. Or in her name. That much, Sterling knew.

It took little effort to list all of the words he was certain were precisely the wrong ones to say. However, what was right, what would ease her suffering, *that list* evaded him. He tried to think back to after his accident. He tried to consider what he had wanted to hear when faced with the worst moment of his own life. And came up short. All he could remember was everything he hadn't, everything that seemed like empathy but came across as disappointment instead.

He supposed there was no correct answer.

Saying something, saying anything, would be self-serving. With the intention of unburdening his own conscience, his own distress, rather than any of hers. Because there was nothing he could ever say that would dull the ache of what she had been through. And so, he remained silent, his outstretched hand still in hers, his fingers itching to squeeze tighter while fear and hesitation kept a single muscle from moving.

Her fist—the same one that sat bruised and billowed, despite her brain's refusal to acknowledge the pain—opened and closed as though by instinct. As though the sting and crunching of bone grounded her to the present while her mind drifted to the past. Common sense urged him to bring her ice to alleviate the swelling; whereas his intimate knowledge of the woman cautioned him that if left to her own devices, she would likely run.

Another stalemate, where both action and inaction were equally as detrimental.

Tessa

Steady your breathing. Loosen your posture. Brace for impact.

The instructions played over and over again in her head, as she repetitiously flexed the knuckles on her left hand.

Jaw clenched. Tongue rooted. Mouth shut, she reminded herself.

The grinding sound of her joints seemed foreign, even as the pulsing heat traveled up her wrist to her chest and back down again. She didn't recognize the sensation of pain. Just the wet, sticky coagulation of torn flesh as it clung to bone. And the rhythmic thuds that confirmed she was still breathing. With each inhalation, the air around her was tied off and strangled, except for her inner monologue and the synchronized palpation of her heart that followed.

She'd lost count of how many times she'd recited the combination. Similar to how—like a first-time ring fighter—she'd lost count of her paces. She'd been unprepared, a boxer caught cold on the ropes. She'd given him the upper hand, lowering her mitts just long enough for the popping feint that jabbed into a sucker punch. A psychological hit (verses a physical one) but a landing blow all the same. And she didn't like that feeling, the unease that told her she'd learned nothing in the six years that'd passed. She was that same girl. Nothing had changed. Not a thing.

She was still weak.

The altercation with Philippe had reiterated that sentiment. She may have bloodied the man beyond recognition, but he'd gotten under her skin. And surface wounds were far easier to heal.

If she hadn't killed him.

The shock of the statement rattled her. She hadn't known when to stop. What was more troubling was the understanding that she wouldn't have if someone hadn't forced her to do so. She would have continued to slam the crackling meat of her fists against whatever part of him was within her reach. She would have remained unresponsive and entranced. And she would have likely added another body to her count.

Her gut lurched at the thought. She felt the caustic burn of bile as it rose and pooled in her throat. She was going to be sick.

“He’s bad, isn’t he...” Though she formed the phrase like it was a question, she spoke as though it were fact. “He’s not... I didn’t... did I?” There was no time for a response. “I need my phone. I need to call Lane. I have to go to the police. I’ve killed a man...” She paused before correcting herself. “*Two men*. I’ve killed two men...”

Sterling

She was frantic. Feral. Clawing at the bedsheets before turning her attention to his nightstand and the drawers of his bureau.

“Where is it! I need my phone,” she pleaded, her voice a mixture of panic and desperation. Both agitated and distraught. “I need to go.” The declaration was nothing more than a whisper as Tessa glanced from Sterling to the open doorway. He could see her thought process. Her intentions were as clear as if she had spoken them aloud.

If she left now, she wasn’t coming back. Not to his home. And not to him.

He wanted to edge closer, and yet he knew he needed to do so without forcing her to feel cornered. He approached her like he would an injured bird. He was afraid she would flutter away just as easily too.

“Tess, it’s okay.” He reached up to brush his hand against her cheek, but quickly removed it when she flinched. His brows furrowed. “You didn’t do anything. You don’t *have to* do anything but rest. He’s—well, I’m not going to sugarcoat it. He’s fucked. But the son of a bitch will live. And everything else is being handled. So please, love, lie down.”

Her retort, akin to joyless laughter, was as transparent as the hostility that bristled beneath it. “Handled? Ha... handled?! Handled, like you *handled* everything for Madelyn. Is that what your plan is? Throw money at the problem? Take the blame yourself? Pretend it all never happened? Thank you,

but no. I can pretend just fine on my own. And without *you* having to *handle* anything.” She stepped back, ensuring there was an appropriate amount of distance between them.

“What do you even know about that?” The phrase wasn’t uttered with curiosity; he hadn’t had time enough to be truly curious. It had been more of an impulse, an automatic reaction driven by shock and bewilderment.

“I know everything, Lucien. Every fucking sordid detail of what you did to protect that woman. Is that your plan now too? To protect me? I don’t need you to protect me. I’ve protected myself before. Just fine. Without anyone. Without you.”

He shook his head. “One thing at a time, Tess. No, I’m not trying to control this situation for you, just stating the obvious. Let’s look at this logically. We don’t need to do anything, *because* he’s not going to report it. He’ll want to keep this as quiet as possible for two reasons: one, his pride. He doesn’t appear to be the type of man who’d want to openly admit he was taken down by a woman half his size. And two, he’ll want to keep his con going. He doesn’t want a paper trail and he sure as hell has to have a record already. If he reports anything, it’ll mean his head too. It was self-defense. *He* assaulted *you*. *You* protected yourself. You’re a...”

He didn’t want to say *victim*. It tasted sour. And he didn’t like the word *survivor* any better. The terms just felt inauthentic, overused. She’d been assaulted. Raped. But Sterling couldn’t bring himself to speak those words aloud either. They made his skin crawl, the labels as superficially inaccurate as being called *crippled*. Nothing could ever verbally encompass what she’d experienced, what made her who she was today, while arguing otherwise only cheapened it.

“You’re... suffering from PTSD,” he chose to say instead. “No judge in the world will prosecute you, but if you still want to go down to the police station tomorrow, I’ll escort you there myself. But right now, you need to rest.”

“So you know about his con...” Once again, she presented a question that wasn’t really a question, he noted.

“Yes,” Sterling sighed. “At least part of it. I’m sure there’s more to it. More you’re not telling me. However, I would rather hear it from you than some dirtbag blubbering between broken teeth.” He paused. “But not now. And not tomorrow...”

He wanted to know. For fuck’s sake, he needed to know. Everything. Who this man was. How he knew Tessa. What they were each looking to achieve. And whether they’d been working together. Those were just a few of the unanswered questions floating in the air. But not like this. Not when she was barely hanging on.

It was frightening because it didn’t seem to matter what the truth was. He realized he would still love her anyway.

To be fair, deep down, he’d always suspected there was more going on behind the curtain. Behind her façade and the games she played. He’d already determined that she wasn’t the sort to just let things go. Meaning, if he’d been using his common sense, he would have looked further into why she was at the wedding in the first place. He would have asked her what story she was currently working on and how it related to him or his family. And he would have gotten those answers long before inviting her into his bed. But Sterling had chosen to be willingly blind. Because he didn’t care to know for sure. He only cared for Tessa. And the way she made him feel. Especially about himself.

Though that sounded selfish now...

She pivoted, turning her back on him. And, for a moment, he was certain she would run. But instead, her posture weakened and her shoulders slumped. “It shouldn’t have happened. All the training... it should have prepared me. I could have taken him if I’d acted quicker. But I... I let it happen. I didn’t fight back until it was too late.”

He didn’t know which instance she was referring to specifically, considering he’d yet to learn all the details of what had transpired between her and the battered con man. Or if she had intended it to be a mixture of the two. But frankly, to Sterling, it didn’t matter.

“Tess, look at me. *Look.*” He waited for her to oblige before continuing. “You’re absolutely right. It shouldn’t have happened. To you or to anyone else. But that’s the *only* thing you’re right about. There’s no amount of training that could prepare someone for something like that. There’s no textbook answer. I know that’s terrifying for you to hear.”

She shifted with unease but he didn’t hesitate.

“Because saying there is or was a way to prevent it means you had—you *have*—control over the situation. And oddly enough, you find comfort in that. In the fact that there’s something to prevent that from ever happening again. It keeps you from being afraid. If you can control every little aspect of your life, every interaction and every emotion, you feel safe. It’s not so terrifying. And you can pretend to move on from the one situation where you had no control whatsoever. But I’m sorry to tell you, love...”

He shook his head because he really was sorry. He wished wholeheartedly that all of it—*any of it*—would have been able to take her pain away.

“None of that is going to work. You think you’re living in a world you control, but in actuality, you’re living in a state of constant fear of losing it.”

He watched as a barrage of emotions travelled across her face before she settled on her preference. The one she seemed to carry with her as a last-ditch defense. Anger.

“You think you know everything, don’t you?” she seethed. “That you have all the fucking answers?” She paced. It was a habit of hers, he’d come to realize. Almost as if she needed the monotonous movement to anchor her.

“No, Tess, it’s quite the opposite actually.” He maneuvered himself to block her path. And warily gestured his fingertips towards her again.

This time she invited his touch, sinking the side of her face into his palm. It was a reminder to them both that neither was the enemy. Or the opposition. It was a reminder that each was equally as unsure and broken and cautious. And it was a

reminder that despite the uncertainty, it was worth it. He wasn't sure who'd sighed, but the release of air brought him back from his thoughts.

His lips twitched into a near smile as he confessed, "The second I met you, it hit me. The fact that I know fucking absolutely nothing. Not a goddamned thing. Except that... the only time I feel anything is when I'm in the same room as you. Good. Bad. Amused. Enraged. Anything other than numb, *indifferent*, is sparked only by you, love."

She closed her eyes. "What am I supposed to say to that, Lucien..."

He pulled her into his lap. Though pleasantly so, he was surprised when she didn't fight him. Instead, she curled against the warmth of his chest willingly, as if it had been what she wanted all along. But wouldn't admit, let alone ask for.

"You're not supposed to say anything. You don't *have to* say anything. I didn't mean to say it in the first place, if I'm being honest. Hell, I don't plan to say half the shit I do when you're around. But it seems to happen anyway."

"I know the feeling, *nounours*," she murmured into his neck before finally giving into exhaustion and falling asleep in his arms.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: THE GUARD DOG

Sterling

He didn't know how much time had passed before he had no choice but to move her. He only knew that it had been long enough for his desensitized thighs to begin to ache. She'd barely fluttered an eyelash as Charles assisted him in positioning her on the bed and under the covers; the architect had thought about bandaging her hand and quickly decided against it. He couldn't care less about the blood staining his sheets; he just didn't have the heart to disturb her again.

Half of what she'd told him about New York had seemed far-fetched. Implausible, really. But he didn't doubt the validity of her story, as much as he wished that he could. Nothing but sheer torment could have caused what he'd witnessed. And it was this same torment that seemed to haunt her for years, erupting and devastating her hard-pressed exterior in an accumulation of today's events.

Sterling had determined that she should stay with him. At his house. Where he could somehow make sure she was recovering. Or starting to recover. Or attempting to start to recover. Or at the very least, that she was *considering* attempting to start to recover.

Though, what she should do was very different from what she was likely to do, he conjectured.

That insight, while maddening, brought a curl to his mouth. He couldn't help but absolutely adore her for it. For her tenacity. For her fortitude. For her ability to gouge her way into his chest cavity, grab onto his heartstrings, and twirl them around her fingertips as if it had been no feat at all. If only he could profess as much aloud.

But this was not the time, he attempted to reiterate to himself.

She was emotionally vulnerable and influencing her in any which way—adding more baggage to her shit pile—would be egocentric on his part. And she deserved far better than another self-serving prick in her life. No, Sterling refused to be that guy.

He glanced over at her slight form, her long dark hair the only thing visible over his comforter, and suddenly remembered there was another issue at hand. Her knowledge of and possible involvement with Madelyn.

The implication, the very idea, that those two worlds had or would or may need to collide made him shudder. It nearly tore Sterling in two. The man he'd thought he was, the one who would do anything to protect Maddy. No matter the cost to himself or anyone else. No matter how presumptuous and utilitarian it may have been. And the man he had become with Tessa, the same man he barely recognized in the mirror anymore. Because this present man was somehow more worthwhile, freer, more content. This present man, for the first time in his life, felt like he was enough. Just as he was. Not because of what he had the potential to offer. And not because of what he never could.

Forcing these two parts of himself to meet—to come together—was not an internal battle he was prepared to witness, let alone one he believed he would win. Though, at this point, what other option did Sterling have?

Fuck. He wrung his hands through his hair, matted with sweat and longer than he usually wore it. *This had turned out to be one hell of a shit day,* he remarked inwardly to the silent room and to no one else in particular.

It was early the next morning when Sterling awoke to the sound of the shower running. He glanced over at the analog clock still glowing in the shadows cast by his tightly drawn curtains. Cinching the bridge of his nose between his index and forefinger, he saw that 05:00 a.m. glared back at him.

“Fuck,” he exhaled.

He'd slept maybe an hour, and his joints seemed to jeer and contest with every breath he took. He hadn't even felt her leave his side. Though, with Tessa, he should have predicted it. He didn't know if he would ever be lucky enough to have that woman stay put.

Once again, the thought of her blatant obstinance provoked his laughter—because, admittedly, he wouldn't want it any other way.

He draped an arm over his eyes, fighting his urge to roll back over, to get just a few more minutes of sleep. Despite his chair, Tessa had never gone easy on the man. Hearing the sound of her bare feet on the bathroom tile, followed by the loud shattering of what he could only assume was his shaving mirror, Sterling grinned. Because nor did it appear as if she planned to start doing so today.

She scratched her heels back and forth over the veneer, etching her trail into the hardwood flooring as she crossed from one side of his office to the other.

“You would escort me there yourself,” she spat, and as if to further reiterate the statement, she gestured first at him and then herself. *“Your words, not mine.”*

“Please, can you just sit for a moment and let me explain?” Sterling raked his hands over his face. He must have been insane to think this would have gone any other way. Daring to look up, he cringed as her head snapped to the side, her gaze shooting daggers in his direction.

Yep, he was crazy, a fucking madman to say the least. Perhaps lack of sleep had driven him there, he debated. But he'd spent the last twelve hours contacting every resource at his disposal, and for fuck's sake, she was going to fucking listen. *Or something like that, right?*

Right... he seemed to answer himself sarcastically while her defiant posture corroborated his conclusion. Because there was no way in hell she was sitting down.

“Right.” This time he said it aloud. “Well, before you decide to run out of here and into the confines of a jail cell, can you please just take a look?” He handed her a plain manila envelope. “There’s no record. No reports. Tess, there’s no mention of any such crime in New Jersey or New York or Pennsylvania, for that matter. I’ve checked. We’ve all checked. I’ve had every detective, every PI—hell, every news outlet that answered their phones in the tristate area—reviewing open case files. How are you turning yourself in for a crime that for all intents and purposes doesn’t even exist?”

“I don’t understand...” She paused mid-stride, dropping her eyes to the bundle of paperwork she was holding—somewhat tighter now—and then back up again.

“Either they covered it up or that man is still alive. And from everything I’ve been able to gather so far, my guess is the latter.” He motioned towards the envelope she was clutching and nodded. “There’s a picture...”

Although she sought to remain stoic, he observed a slight tremble in her hands and again, albeit wordlessly, he offered her a seat. She sunk into the leather material before hesitantly pulling the black and white mugshot out from between the other documents. The sudden sharp drawing in of her breath was the only visible sign of recognition she displayed.

“Tess, you didn’t kill him,” Sterling explained. “Slavi Chelovek. He’s a lower-level enforcer in the Russian mob. Factoring in certain physical attributes, the fucker was easy to track down.” When her eyebrow raised in question, he added for clarity, “It’s rumored that the bastard doesn’t speak because *the devil ate the man’s tongue.*”

Tessa’s spine subconsciously uncoiled at the turn of phrase, as though some part of her relished the vilified analogy. “But all this time... I...” Her voice was wistful. “I assumed... But he’s still out there...”

Quickly realizing his mistake—that instead of comforting her, he’d merely heightened her distress—Sterling continued. “If that’s the case, then for whatever reason, he’s not looking

for you. Let sleeping dogs lie, Tess. Bringing this all up now will have no benefit.”

His sentiments fell on deaf ears. The journalist was in a daze; she wasn't listening. “He said I was dead...” Her expression was vacant as she stared through him and out the stretch of windows on the far wall.

“Tess, it was just an idle threat. They won't come for you here. I'll upgrade the security systems. Increase my staff. Whatever you need.”

Assuming she agreed to stay with him, he mulled, not wanting to think otherwise. Not wanting to consider that she may still walk out that door and he may never see her again.

“No, *he* said I was dead...” she corrected, as if repeating the words would hold a deeper meaning to him.

It didn't. They didn't.

“Tess—”

Her attention bounced back. “No, Lucien. You're not listening. He said I was dead. He told them all I was dead. He told Marco I was dead. That's why he never looked for me, why none of the Agostinos ever looked for me.”

Sterling froze, unexpectedly jarred by the utterance.

Had she wanted them to? He couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy as the infamous Mafia Prince's name rolled off her tongue. Had she felt something for the kid? The same kid who was surely a man by now. Had it been more than just an act for her? Did her theory that the boy likely thought she died all those years ago suddenly change everything for them?

He wanted to ask all these questions. He wanted to know exactly what she was thinking and feeling. But her mental state was far more important than his own, her well-being far more precious than the frailty of his male ego.

Tessa

It was true.

Despite thinking she'd killed the man, despite all the time that had passed—the years that she had been forced to carry that burden—he was still out there. And still very much alive. She didn't know if she was more relieved or frightened by that knowledge. By the knowledge that she *wasn't* a murderer.

Though, she was equally startled by the abrupt realization that both criminal organizations would have needed to accept the narrative. Especially one that ended with her supposed demise. The possibility had never even occurred to her until this moment, probably because the journalist tried her best not to think of it at all. And yet, it was like clarity had rushed up and struck her across the face.

If her attacker was indeed alive—*Slavi*, Lucien had called him—then in retaliation, he and his constituents would have had no choice but to target the Italians. Or face appearing weak in the eyes of the men who already held a tighter grip on the city. Regardless of Tessa's significance, likewise, Marco's family would have been expected to make a show of force. To shed reactionary blood at the insult. For someone daring to lay hands on what was deemed their property.

It was the way things were done. It was the founding principal of that world. And it was what kept those key power players still in power. Still playing. This would have meant all-out war in the streets of New York.

Thus, the only plausible conclusion was that someone had intervened. Someone—and she suspected she knew exactly which someone—had ensured that both parties, both sides of the criminal underground, were equally placated. However, what Tessa couldn't fathom was why he'd chosen to do so...

What had the mobster gotten out of the deal?

She hadn't told Lucien about the second Russian, the one who'd so emphatically suggested she leave the city, that she remain dead. The one who both threatened and safeguarded her. Nor did she intend to. It was better he didn't know that detail, she'd concluded. And she was thankful she had.

If the architect wanted her to *let the sleeping dogs lie*, then she surmised she shouldn't disturb her guard dog either.

CHAPTER TWENTY- SEVEN: THE CAGED CANARY

Sterling

She was miles away. Lost inside herself and her inner workings. Again.

Like she had been since the morning prior. But at the very least, she hadn't run. Not yet anyway. Though Sterling was afraid to question, to even think why that might have been. She was like a bird whose wings had been clipped. She wanted to fly away—the intent was there—but the ability to do so and the fear of falling was holding her back.

This comparison left him wondering if she would ever be happy being caged. Being tied down to a man such as himself. The very idea of it felt like a disservice. Like a weight this incredible creature didn't deserve to be ensnared in and tethered to. And as quickly as the realization had hit him, that he truly loved this woman, he recognized how selfish of a pursuit it would be.

And what kind of life it would mean for her.

Sinking into his own dark thoughts, Sterling hadn't even noticed that Tessa was looking at him. Not until the look turned heated and unrecognizable.

“You aren't going to ask me, are you?” The accusation vibrated with a purpose. She wanted a fight, he suspected. It was Tessa's go-to when things began to feel uncomfortable or whenever she got too close to feeling something real. She would shove him away and force him to pull her back in.

However, today he didn't know if he had it in him to fight back. To further prune those metaphorical feathers of hers. Today he may just have to let her go. Fly.

Dance, he considered, as though he were thinking about Madelyn all over again. His mind lost to the memory of when he realized he could never offer his once-fiancée their first dance.

He shook his head and sighed. “Ask you what, Tess?” He glanced up from his computer screen. He hadn’t been productive over the last few hours anyway; he’d just been staring at the list of unanswered emails as she sat in equal silence. Where once the soundlessness that fell between them had seemed natural, presently it was anything but.

“About my article. About why I was at the charity event. About how and why I know what I know?” she clarified, her eyes ablaze, though not with the kind of passion he’d grown accustomed to. The kind he preferred to *this*. To her wrath.

Ah, so that was it, he posited.

She’d been expecting an interrogation and was tired of waiting for it, whereas Sterling had been internalizing his questions and avoiding the topic altogether for *her* benefit—or so he’d assumed. But obviously, he’d been mistaken. However, he’d already concluded Tessa was more of the *damned if you do, damned if you don’t* type. And whatever he would have done would have been precisely the wrong thing to do. That inkling of familiarity pushed back his doubts, even if only for an instant, and his expression softened.

“I was going to ask, love,” he reaffirmed. “I was always going to ask. I need to. But I didn’t think it was the right time.” He gestured towards her bandaged fist.

Her resounding laugh was fake and forced. “Why? Because you presume I’m as weak as the lot of them? You think I can’t handle whatever it is you plan to throw at me? That I’m delicate? That I’ll wilt, right?” She stood as if a fire had been set beneath her. “Ask me, damn it! Get your fucking answers and stop treating me like I’m so irreparably broken. If I wanted your pity, believe me, I have my ways of getting it. I can easily throw myself at your feet, distraught and doe-eyed, and you’d be none the wiser.”

Her words were meant to sting, but they didn't. She wasn't fooling him, as hard as she seemed to try. He saw the truth behind them. He understood them. He knew them. *Intimately*. At a time, those very words had been his own. And with that appreciation, no matter how hard she lashed her tongue in his direction, it didn't hurt.

“Okay, Tess,” he responded, more as an indulgence than to appease his own curiosity. “Tell me then, what is it that you want from my friends? From my family? I know it isn't money. I know you don't care about my name...”

She snorted with more feigned amusement. “And which one is she?” Tessa hissed.

“She... who?” Sterling countered, his brows upturned. He really hadn't the slightest idea as to what she was getting at...

His outward display of confusion incited the rage that had been boiling below the surface—the same anger that had been waiting for her avoidance and denial to subside so it could uncoil and strike out. She searched the room but didn't appear to find whatever it was that she was looking for.

An escape? Something to throw? Something to break? He could only guess.

She shook her head before again facing him. “*Madelyn*, Lucien.” The name dripped from her lips with the same disdain as the most exacting expletive. “Which one is *Madelyn*? Friend or family? And I'll even give you a hint. Neither. The answer is neither.” The insinuation left him dumbstruck, and so she continued. “And do you want to know why? Why she is deserving of neither endearment?” Though it was a question, she didn't leave time enough for an answer. “Tell me I'm better off without you. Tell me you have nothing to offer me. Tell me we're over, Lucien. Tell me!”

He felt those same heartstrings she held so taut between her fingers wrench forward and tug. Ready and waiting to be severed.

“Tess—” As much as he told himself that it was the right thing to do, he wasn't sure he could.

“Tell me, damn it!” She urged.

“Okay... If that’s what you want,” he conceded. “It’s over, Tess... We’re over.”

“No.” She spun on her heel, her arms crossed, her expression resolute. “See how easy that was? It’s a simple word. Two letters. I’ll even spell it out for you. N-O. *No*. It doesn’t matter what you say, because you can’t make me. It takes two—two people to end a relationship. It’s not that you left her; it’s that she let you.” She turned away again. “So why do you still care so much...”

The last statement had been rhetorical, uttered to the surrounding space itself rather than anyone in particular. But the heavy office air was just as unsure as Sterling was, when it came to how to respond. And therefore, neither he nor the emptiness called after her when she climbed onto his bookshelf, grabbed a picture frame from the top ledge, and threw it against the wall. Her gaze shot downward as if to inspect her handiwork. To confirm that the impact had in fact shattered the glass. Before she stepped back to the floor and stomped off and out of the room.

He knew what photograph she’d inflicted her wrath upon without even having to glimpse the carnage of broken glass that littered the hardwood. Because Sterling himself had been the one to toss it up there in the first place, not long after the same girl who’d destroyed it had first stormed into his life and out his office doors.

It was the one image of himself and Maddy he’d kept over the years. Everything else had been tossed, damaged, or stowed away. However, he supposed the bigger question was how Tessa even knew it was up there in the first place. He could only assume, after observing how quickly she’d located it, that what she had been looking for moments ago wasn’t the picture itself but a way to reach it.

Damn that fucking woman, he growled to himself. He wasn’t sure how it was even possible...

She’d been the one lying. She’d been the one with a hidden agenda. She’d been the one with ulterior motives. And

yet, somehow, Sterling was left feeling like the asshole at the end of it all.

She was good—he'd give her that. Too fucking good for *his own good*.

Tessa

“Es putain de pathétique,” Tessa spat at the reflection glaring back at her in the mirror. “You’re fucking pathetic.”

She wanted to throw her fist through the same wall the picture frame had dented, but as she stretched her knuckles beneath the ACE bandage, she knew it wasn’t one of her better ideas. Besides, she seemed to have no problem getting her point across without having to further injure herself.

Then again, what exactly *had* been her point?

Envy was not a color that suited the journalist; however, the green vixen was rearing its ugly head in the pit of Tessa’s stomach, controlling her actions as if she were the puppet, jealousy the puppet master.

As of late, her behavior had been petty. She knew it, even if she hadn’t been able to stop it. She knew it even as part of her hadn’t *wanted* to do a damned thing about it. And she knew it even as the other part of her had refused to consider it. Her controlled world was in utter chaos and she both hated and craved the upheaval...

Worse yet, Tessa wanted nothing and everything to do with the man that seemed to be the catalyst. She wanted to run away and she wanted to be chased. She wanted to scream and she wanted to cry. She wanted to never see his fucking face again, and she wanted to see it every fucking morning, asleep and beside her own. None of it made any sense. Her very thoughts made no fucking sense.

Though she would never admit it, she had purposely dropped Lucien’s antique shaving mirror the morning prior, after reading the inscription on the back: *with love always, Maddy*. She hadn’t thought out her intentions. She’d just done it. As though her grip had been animated from some external

force—a force that had instructed her to watch the blasted thing fall and bounce along the tile floor.

She'd waited for him to yell at her, to mention the sentimental value behind the gift. But instead, he met her with a half smile and a shake of his head. He'd pulled her into his lap and away from the hazardous shards of glass that scattered along the bathroom floor. And she both hated and loved him for it.

No. She closed her eyes at the poorly chosen turn of phrase. She didn't. She couldn't, right? But even as she told herself otherwise, deep down, she knew the truth. She loved him. And it was tearing her apart from the inside out.

She sunk to her knees and onto the same cold tile that had been the final resting place of that god-forsaken mirror—now clear of the pursuant damage, as if the incident had never even occurred—and she stilled. She had no one anymore. She, by her own hand, had driven them all away, inciting altercation after altercation to avoid the vulnerability of ever needing them. And yet, she found herself not only needing them but truly wanting them all the more.

“Tess...” She looked up but the voice was not derived from the man she had hoped it would be. Noting the disappointment that shone in her eyes, Charles added, “He would have come himself but I think he's still leery of your good aim.”

“So he offered you up as the sacrificial lamb in his stead?” She wiped at her running mascara and chuckled, despite her disheveled appearance.

“Oh, no,” he retorted with a wink. “I volunteered. Who knows? I may just get off on that sort of thing. Unlike Luci, I've never been one to turn down a little rough play.” Crouching to meet her eye level, Charles extended a hand. “Come on, killer. I know where Gus hides all the good stuff.”

Charles

Charles stared at the strange girl currently positioned across the counter from him. Strange and brilliant. In a way he

hadn't seen before. Yes, strange, brilliant, and so unbelievably damaged.

Much like Luci, he thought to himself.

And yet, something about her had begun to slowly piece his friend back together. Where tragedy most often begot more tragedy, with these two, it somehow seemed to act as a salve. Likely because no one seemed able to understand them better than they were able to understand each other. It shouldn't work, he knew. It should have been disastrous. But it wasn't, and he would be a fool to think otherwise.

Then again, he was used to playing the fool. It was easier to watch others when all eyes were on you. It was easier to read the room. To decipher everyone's endgame. But now was not the time. He needed to drop his comedic mask, if only for a moment, or risk the calamity of Lucien facing yet another broken heart—both of the man's own doing. But still, self-destructive or not, Luci deserved happiness in his life. Even if it had to be shoved down his throat.

Of course, Charles wasn't stupid. Despite being Tessa's most vocalized proponent, it wasn't like he'd trusted the girl at first glance. In fact, when it came to most things, he didn't trust her as far as he could throw her. She could hide her every emotion except the one that poured from her eyes every time her gaze fell to Lucien. Ironically, neither of them appeared to realize it—how so unequivocally infatuated each was with the other. Instead, they were surrounded by insecurity. Immobilized by self-doubt.

Dumbasses, the lot of them. He laughed and shook his head before finally speaking his thoughts aloud. "She was never right for him, you know."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT: THE SIMPLE WORD

Charles

Charles didn't wait for his words to sink in before continuing. After all, she should have known by now that he would be eavesdropping.

“Luci was a different person back then. Hell, he was a different person after the accident. And now... now, I'd like to think he's a different person again. A better one.” It was a rare form for Charles: his smirk faded, his eyes darkened, and his expression somber. A form he found as uncomfortable for Tessa to endure as it was for him to embrace. “Before the accident, our boy had never faced a challenge that money and status couldn't surpass. As horrible as it may sound, what happened to his legs... it was probably the best thing for him. It was something Luci had to face internally and externally. Something he had to do alone. It purged him of all the fake relationships in his life, forced him to make his own way.”

He shook his head and thought back to a time when they'd both been different men. Before that night, before the crash, Charles would not have been the kind of friend who would be having this conversation. Who would have had any conversation that bordered so close to this level of sincerity. But seeing the aftermath of the wreck—the shattered glass, the cinched metal, all that blood—it's the kind of thing that sobers you. It urges you to realize your own state of impermanence and how, suddenly, everything is subject to change. How one minute you could be throwing back shots with a man you've known since childhood, a man on the rise, and the next you could be staring at that same man seemingly lifeless. Except for a series of inconsistent, shallow breaths you willed to be more than a figment of your own imagination.

Charles shuttered at the image, at the memory, and continued.

“Sure, I wish Luci had—or could—recognize that for himself, rather than tuck everything away. It may have taken him a long time to get here, but as an outside observer, I can tell you that man is smitten with you, dear. And not like I’ve ever seen him, certainly not like he was with Maddy. I do think he cared deeply for her, but part of it seemed to be out of sheer expectation. She was the type of girl he was supposed to marry. There was no thought process behind it; it was how things were done. However, with you, he has tried everything in his power to resist his impulses, and only finds himself further drawn in. She was the expectation but you, dear, you are the exception. One we do out of duty; the other we do despite it. Which one would you rather be?”

She shook her head and tapped her teaspoon against the sides of the porcelain cup, the rhythmic clanking acting in the place of the pacing her seated frame would not currently permit.

“Pretty words, Charlie. But lest you forget, I’m an expert in pretty words.” She stared across the kitchen at nothing and no one. “And unfortunately, they’re as empty and hollow as the tone in which you offer them to me right now.”

“Hm, perhaps I’ve given you more credit than you deserve.” He grinned, the playful lilt returning to his voice. “Because that’s either naivete or blissful ignorance talking.”

“Charlie, I’m really not interested in games right now... please...”

“Says the woman holding the dice.”

Whether it was shock or annoyance that shot Tessa to her feet, Charles had yet to determine; however, he wasn’t about to let her run off so easily. His thumb and forefinger caught the base of her wrist and clenched just slightly—the pressure enough to stop her from fleeing, but not so much that it would cause her discomfort. She hesitated, her eyes flicking back in his direction, before she returned to her seat and sighed. Or perhaps it was more of a huff. Like a child who’d just been scolded into submission.

“What do you want from me, Charlie.” It was one of those questions that wasn’t a question in the slightest. Therefore, he ignored it the same as if it hadn’t been spoken and proceeded as if their conversation had never paused.

“Why do you think that the only enjoyment he finds is in his work? He’s shut himself off from anyone who tries to get near him. Locking himself away in those dilapidated buildings, and at the risk of his own bloody health. It’s not because he is as driven and as dedicated as he leads you to believe. No, he uses it as a shield to keep everyone at a distance—even me.” He seemed to realize in that moment.

“I don’t understand. He’s always had an infatuation with architecture. This wasn’t a career path he fell into, Charles.” *Yes, Charles. Not Charlie.* “For God’s sake, he’s a fucking artist. He takes numbers, insignificant measurements, and transforms them into this.” Tessa gestured to the open air. To the original, carefully curated barnwood beams. To the exposed brickwork. To the hardwood floors, which had been salvaged from a home that he could not. To each and every small detail that Lucien had obsessed over and had personally appraised.

“Hm, an artist, you say? I suppose so. But with his skill set, the bastard should be drawing up high-rises and skyscrapers. With his name alone, he’d win each and every bid in this city—fuck, in any city. But instead, he chooses the charity cases. The rundown structures that no one else wants. And he pours his heart and soul into them. Sure, he does have respect for preserving history; that’s not a facade. But it goes so much deeper than that. Those broken buildings... he sees himself in them. Forgotten, unwanted, unusable. A mere shadow of what they used to be. In another life.”

Charles shook his head. The truth always cut a little deeper when spoken aloud, and the full brunt of it seemed to level his shoulders and darken his tone.

“It’s the same outcome every time: the immediate pride is replaced by the loss you can see in his eyes, almost as if he were expecting that in fixing the homes, he would somehow be fixed too. Then he moves on to the next project, the next

repair, and the next disappointment. Because he will never be one of those homes; there is no fix for him. And until he realizes that there is nothing to fix in the first place, that his state of self-declared unworthiness—just because he is a different kind of man than the one he thought he was born to be—that it isn't a flaw. That it's part of who he is now. And that he deserves to be as adored as those remodels of his... Until *that day* comes, he will keep repeating the pattern over and over and over again."

"You act as if what he's done here is insignificant. As if it's all just been a placeholder until what? He finds a wife? What's wrong with putting your career above everything else? You say he chooses me despite his obligations, despite his long-term goals. I don't think keeping him from his life's work—something he's sweat and bled into—is a good thing. It's what he's always wanted to do. And now you're telling me he's distracted because of me. *And that's supposed to be a compliment?* He shouldn't have to choose between his accomplishments and whoever's warming his bedsheets. One of those lives on indefinitely while the other is fickle. One will stand tall long after his libido's had its fill and he's come to his good senses. And I've come to mine."

"You don't get it, do you? He loves his work, sure. But it was never his life's passion. It became that so he could keep himself from ever being passionate about anything or *anyone* else. Because he'd given up on ever having more. Hell, even hoping to have more... He constructs physical walls to fortify those long-standing emotional ones." Charles sighed. "Fuck, it's depressingly poetic when you think about it, Tess. Hm, it's funny though. He led *you* right on in, didn't he?"

"What do you mean?" she stammered, her eyes narrowing in on the man in front of her.

"The Victorian. He's never brought anyone to a jobsite before, let alone passed those walls..." Charles knew better than to let the significance hang in the air, fearing the girl may choke on the meaning. Instead, he changed tack. "He's resumed his PT, you know. Since meeting you." He didn't dare make eye contact, his gaze locked on his tea as he sipped.

“You’d think he would have been more intent on his progress with how strenuous those renovations can be. But Luci’s refused to do his required weekly appointments for years now, choosing his own regiment and forcing me to spot him. But more *recently*...” His gaze darted towards Tessa while he inflated the last word with emphasis. “Every Wednesday—like clockwork—he’s been following the prescribed routine. And not being much of an ass about it either.”

Her lips curled and her chest bounced with her subdued laughter, her resolve broken before the realization finally set in. “His two o’clock...”

Charles nodded. “Yep, his two o’clock. In the downstairs gym. I’m actually surprised you haven’t asked about it sooner.” He smirked, raising a single eyebrow, before again avoiding her glare and washing down another gulp of lukewarm liquid.

“So he’s been lying to me. About where he’s going? What he’s doing?” she countered.

“Darling, your every word is peppered by lies and half-truths. Of which I’m certain are countless. You can’t begrudge the man for keeping a few of his own.”

Tessa

Well, fuck...

She should have had a clever retort, but her own state of reticence mocked her instead. Her heart had been torn from her chest cavity, dropped on the table in front of her, and fileted open. And neither her brain nor her mouth could process the relevance of it all. If truth be told, she wasn’t sure what was more disconcerting, her lack of wit or the sudden depth of Charlie’s character. Both facts left her crawling in her own skin, her toes dancing beneath the table and aching to barrel forward.

Flight, she was fucking better than flight.

She couldn’t understand why facing Sterling was so much more terrifying than any physical altercation. She would give anything for Charles to just reach out and gut punch her. To

force her to focus on something other than the reality of her unease. Ironically enough, that's what it felt like—a fist slamming into her abdomen, leaving her breathy and wordless. She hadn't been accustomed to this kind of fear in a very long time; or at least, if she had, she hadn't acknowledged it. And she didn't want to acknowledge it now either. But there it was, floating in front of her. Each little liquid letter spewing from his mouth and thickening the air, causing her to gasp upon inhale. When all she wished she could do was spit some back.

She chewed on this internal dread, rolling the self-destructive thoughts around her tongue as if she were cleansing her palate and preparing to dine on antagonism. Yes, she was still itching for a good fight. She stood, smiling through her throbbing cheeks, the meat of which she hadn't even realized she had been gnawing on. And dipped her head towards Charles, signaling her exit.

There was no point in pretending she had dialogue for him when it was clear he knew she did not. And this time, the suddenly somber wisecracker didn't care to stop her.

“Only a monster would call that non-dairy bullshit dessert. I don't know what it was, but it certainly wasn't ice cream.” It was as good of an entrance as any, Tessa had decided.

It wasn't. It was childish, undignified. Arbitrary at best, and overly guarded at worst. However, her impromptu bout of juvenile regression was a problem for another day.

Sterling glanced up from the paperwork she knew he wasn't reading as she tore through the office door.

“I... um... okay,” he stuttered, his head slightly craned to the side while his eyebrows knitted in confusion.

Without full cognizance of even her own intention, Tessa slammed her palms down onto the flat surface of his desk. She needed to speak before the look in his eyes left her dumbfounded for the second time that day.

“If it comes down to a story or you, I’ll choose the story every time. Without hesitation. Without a doubt. Without a tear shed. I won’t let anything or anyone stand in my way. Not you, not my friends, not family, not even myself. Just ask Corey.” The mention of her partner’s name stung as it left her lips, much more than the erratic journalist cared to admit. “I’ll run off without question, without notice, without permission—though you should know better than to think I’d ever ask it in the first place. I won’t play hostess, nor will I ever entertain the notion of being someone’s perfect little housewife. This is who I am intrinsically. It’s not a phase. I’m not some spirited girl looking to be tamed. I’m not someone who ‘settles down’ or follows suit. Or fits the mold. I break it. I crumble it. I shatter it. Do you understand?”

“I... yes, of course. Tess, do you really think that’s what I want? For you to morph into some imaginary ideal that I have swimming in my head? Do you really think that little of me?”

She didn’t know if it was Lucien’s expression, his tone, or the combination that pierced her heart. Regardless, her shoulders slumped despite her willing them to hold form.

Tessa closed her eyes on an exhale. “I think that little of everyone. Everyone wants something, Lucien. You’re no different and neither am I,” she confessed.

“And what is it that you want?” His voice caressed her, soothed her, while his thumb reached out to do the same.

“Honestly, I don’t even know anymore. But it’s something. And it’s not playing house. It’s not giving up my dreams, and it’s not meeting anyone’s expectations of what it is I am supposed to do. Who I’m supposed to be.”

“Fair enough. However, I do know what I want, Tess, and it’s simple. I want you. Exactly as you are. This maddening—no, *infuriating* woman who’s absolutely impossible to understand half the time and so incredibly readable the other. A woman who simultaneously drives me up a wall and then effortlessly lulls me back down. This utterly captivating creature who monopolizes my dreams and invades my nightmares. In a way I never imagined possible. You throw

things at me. You break stuff on purpose. You act as though you own every room you enter—and somehow you do. You assimilate into any crowd but stand out like no other. You are passionate and intrepid, and yet hold back emotion as effortlessly as you dispel it. You're a goddamned paradox, and fucking hell if I don't love you for it."

"Take that back!"

"Which part, love?"

"That word, that part! All of it! None of it..."

"No. It's a simple word, or so I've been told." Her name parted his lips on a sigh. "Tess, I'm not asking you to change anything. Run off. Go chase that next story. Whatever and wherever it may be. And I'll be here waiting for you, my eyes glued to my phone even as you leave my texts on read, more than aware that you do it just because you know you can."

"I... why?" It was the only response that came to mind, the only viable question.

"Because I want to. It's as simple as that." He shrugged.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE: THE OVATION

Tessa

Words were powerful as often as they were meaningless. They could incite fear or leave you feeling hollow. It all depended on the speaker, the intention, and how deliberately the pen was wielded.

Words like *Wednesday*. There was very little meaning behind that word for many people, but for Tessa, it left her curious.

And maybe not just curious, perhaps a little apprehensive as well. She should have known that Lucien was lying to her. Or at least sensed that he was hiding something. Instead, the man had this way of completely putting her at ease. Of removing any and all doubt—at least as long as she was in his presence. Because when Tessa was alone, with just her thoughts and innermost insecurities, self-doubt was all she ever felt. Sickening, mind-numbing, soul-shattering doubt.

So, yeah, she had secrets of her own, she supposed.

She'd waited until a quarter to three, giving the man a false sense of security before bursting through the heavy wooden double doors.

Sterling

“Huh.”

He heard the hum of her voice before he could even register that the doors had flung open. And his heart sank. It was one of those moments in time. The ones that were unavoidable and you knew as much; however, the dark claws of denial sunk into your chest and you hoped above all hope that somehow you would be the exception. That living in the now would help you sidestep the truth. But there was no evading it. Reality.

“Luci.”

“Stop calling me that!” It was funny—though certainly not in the haha way—how the sound of Maddy’s voice, which was once comforting, somehow grated his ears as of late. Everything from “before” seemed to do the same. It reminded him of what he used to have, of what he’d never have again.

“Fine, Sterling, happy now? I’m not sure why you insist on going by your goddamn last name all of a sudden.” She ignored his moods. She stood by his side and supported his slow-moving recovery, yet it served to only irritate him further. Maddy continued rambling as though Lucien hadn’t just barked at her. “I spoke to Dr. Mattsson. He said you took two steps yesterday! That’s amazing! We should have you fitted for your tux soon. It could take months for Andre to get the measurements right.” She hummed to herself, and her ever blossoming optimism was nothing short of maddening.

“What? You called my doctor?? What happened to patient confidentiality? How dare he disclose my medical information.” Sterling was still getting used to the chair, therefore a slew of expletives followed when his wheels unexpectedly tangled in an abrupt curl in the area rug. “And get this fucking piece of shit out of here for fuck’s sake.”

Ignoring his comment regarding her decor choices, Maddy remained single-minded in her reply, “I’m your wife! Your next of kin. That’s what I told him anyway.” She seemed all too pleased with herself when uttering that last part.

“You are not my fucking wife. You’re not even my fiancée. We’ve talked about this! Goddamn it, Madelyn.”

“Stop being ridiculous, Lucien. You are not running away from me. We just have to get things back to normal and then you’ll see—”

“Back to normal? What the fuck do you mean back to normal! Things are never going back to normal. Look at me!”

“You blame me, don’t you? That’s what this is all about. Isn’t it?” She pivoted to face him, her eyes dilated by unshed

tears. Because Sterling was certain she had cried them all and there was naught one left.

“You know what? You’re right.” He verbalized the very fear that had been eating away at her hardened exterior, no matter how hard she tried to tuck it away. “I do blame you. And I’m not crawling down the fucking aisle. Not with you. Not with anyone. Do you hear me?”

He hadn’t meant it. Not a word. Hell, if he thought he’d even the chance of making her happy, he would drag himself through that church by his teeth. But this wasn’t what she wanted. He saw it in the way she looked at him differently. In the hope that painted her face the first time she saw him take a step. Hope that things would get “back to normal.” Hope that all this would be a distant memory. But there was no hope. The doctors had said as much. This was as good as it was going to get.

A few insignificant steps here and there.

Sterling would never walk again. Not like the man he was, not with his head held high. All he had in him was a shuffle of feet. He looked no better than a colt fumbling about on newborn legs.

God, if it wasn’t for that fucking hope. If she could accept him as he was... maybe. Maybe one day he could get over his insecurities. But, no, that hope that moistened her eyes, it told him this wasn’t what she wanted. More so than her words ever could. She didn’t want to spend the rest of her life as a caregiver for a man who was now only half of one. And so he did what he had to, to push her away.

Even if it meant making her hate him.

He’d apologized after his outburst. It was true that he wanted her to move on. For her own good. But he also didn’t want her living with the guilt. There was no reason for them both to be miserable after all. He didn’t want that for her. He wanted her to have a life and he wanted to give it to her even if it wasn’t with him. And so, he let her go. It was the right thing

to do. He apologized but made it clear that they'd never be together.

Not now. Not a year from now. Not ten. And she needed to accept that.

As much as he tried to forget her over the years, forget the life that was stolen from him that night, it was her eyes that somehow always haunted him. He saw them in his dreams. Staring back at him, reflected in the mirror, and forever breaking his heart.

The same way Sterling had shattered hers.

And all those emotions, so dishearteningly similar to the ones he'd felt five years ago, flashed through him again at seeing that same goddamned sparkle in Tessa's eyes. The same hope he'd been secretly fearing to see from the moment he met the woman.

"Get out..." Sterling didn't know if he was directing the command at Tessa, or the man still gripping onto his shoulder and forearm while guiding him around the room like an infant learning to toddle. And apparently neither did they, since each remained steadfast in his presence. "I said. Get. The. Fuck. Out." This time, the words bit the tip of his tongue even as he dispelled them. But she didn't move.

That girl's backbone could put a goddamned steel rod to shame, he thought to himself.

"Sir?" It was unfair to put Joe in this predicament.

Sterling's legs were shaking from both rage and exhaustion, his labored response resounding as barely a whisper, "Just take me to my chair, Joe. You're dismissed for the day. Thank you for your time."

The physical therapist dipped his head, before brushing past Tessa and shutting the doors with a *clink* that seemed to echo louder than usual in the tension-fueled office.

"Tess..." Her name was issued with a growl. "I already know what you're thinking and you can stop. This is it.

There's no getting better. This is as much as I'll ever be. So, stop."

It was the truth. Nothing had changed. Those few steps... A *man*—for lack of a better word—with the capabilities of a two-year-old. No, less so. Because two-year-olds grew up and Sterling never would.

"Stop setting yourself up for the inevitable disappointment." His tone was seething, regretful, and something else—what he really meant was *him*. Stop setting *him* up for disappointment.

"Funny, seeing as that's not what I was thinking at all." Her omission caught him off guard. It was haughty, condescending. And, as always, it was followed by the raise of her brow.

"What do you mean? If not..."

"I was thinking that you must have liked having me on your lap, considering you've had the strength to push me off this entire time."

He didn't know how to respond to *that*. So, instead, he repeated the demand that seemed to slide off his tongue near effortlessly. "Tess, you've done your good deed. You've humored a broken man. Just go." It was far easier to push her away than face the eventual rejection he knew was coming. But it wasn't rejection nor obedience that greeted him.

In the time that it took him to exhale, Tessa had diminished the space between them, landing a knee on each side of his pulsing thighs.

"So you've figured it out?" When his only inclination was to raise his own eyebrow, she clarified, "That the easiest way to get me to stay... is to tell me to leave." Again, she paused, her teeth marking the pliable flesh of his ear. When she seemed to get the reaction she intended, she pulled back.

As much as he was able to disarm her when she was at her worst, she could inexplicably do the same when he was certain he would not concede. When he was certain he needed to turn

her away. And that was where she differed from Madelyn. *In spirit*. In tenacity. In her ability to twist and bend him to her will. And how she made him want to do it.

“Lucien...” The word parted her lips on a soft moan as his hands sought to both push her away and drag her closer. Logic, lust, and something more were constantly at war in her presence.

“Why do you insist on calling me that? You know very well if I wanted you to use my first name, I would have given it to you when we met.” Though he intended to berate her, the softness with which he spoke suggested some small part of him liked the sound of it.

“Why, you ask...? Well, the answer is simple. I like the way my tongue caresses the roof of my mouth when I say it.” She accentuated the click of her tongue as her hips held him hostage. “Why do you insist that I don’t?” She repeated his name twice more when he refused to look at her.

“After...” He gestured to his chair, unable or perhaps unwilling to say the word *accident*, almost as if it tasted sour had he done so. “An older man, in the hospital, one who knew damn well he was never leaving that bed. Not alive...” Sterling hesitated. He’d never relayed this part of the story, his story, to anyone. And here he was, about to tell a woman whose sole purpose was to tell other people’s stories. To make money off their tragedies. But the words came spilling out anyway. “I was at my worst then...”

He could smell the alcohol from where he was seated, the stench nearly as overwhelming as the odor of rot. Rotting flesh, rotting trash, and rotting souls. It was the last one that sickened Lucien the most, however. Because no matter how often the nurses came in to bathe him, the scent clung to his skin like a parasite embedding itself in his chest. An added weight that only sought to feed the crushing bitterness that resided there.

“Hey, boy.” The old man was calling for him again. It was becoming routine. “Boy, get your ass over here, would

ya?”

There was no point ignoring him either. The blue blood's patience had a tendency to run out long before the elderly fucker's vocal cords ever tired. “Lucien.”

“God bless you.” The long-term resident was fucking with the new guy again.

“No, that's my name. For the millionth time. That brain of yours working or should I tell them to pull the plug already, old man?”

Seeming to ignore the question altogether, Gerald—whose name Lucien did remember but refused to use until the sentiment was returned—gestured a shaky hand to his right. “Look out the window.”

Humoring the man, though he wasn't entirely sure why, Lucien closed the distance between himself and the sill and peered out at the cemetery adjacent to the hospital wing.

“Tell me what you see?”

“Grass?”

Gerald smacked Lucien upside the head. “Stop being a smartass, boy.”

“Fine. Graves. I see a bunch of fucking graves.”

“If you're going to act like 'em, I'll treat ya like 'em. Don't know any of their first names either.”

Sure enough, as Sterling continued to stare at the stone markers, the only letters he could make out in the distance were the bolded surnames chiseled across the tops.

“He used to tell me if I was going to act like I was already in the ground, then he was going to treat me like it. Said he wasn't wasting his time learning the first name of a dead man. I've been Sterling ever since. Reminds me things could be worse, I guess. And it lets me be someone else. I was brought into that hospital with one identity but I left with one of my

choosing. It was easier that way. For everyone. To let that other version of myself die.”

At first, when she didn't speak, Sterling had assumed he'd said too much. He hadn't known Tessa for more than a few months and here he was... unraveling his deepest, darkest, most grotesque truths and setting them out in front of her. A buffet of his insecurities for her to feast upon should she so choose. Therefore when she finally did respond, her assessment was not at all what he was expecting.

“Why do you keep thinking I want to fix you? I met you exactly as you are. Didn't I? I don't know who you were before, but I honestly don't think I'd like him very much. He sounds sort of like a dick.”

After the shock had subsided, Sterling laughed. “You're right. He was. But still a good-looking guy, if I say so myself.”

The gyration of her hips was the only concession she offered; though the heat between her legs told him, at least physically, she agreed. And that attraction was mutual. He couldn't think, not rationally anyway. No, this woman owned him, perhaps more so now that he had purged his innermost thoughts for Tessa to do with as she pleased.

“Goddamn it, Tess.”

“Stop fighting me,” she countered, as if she could read his mind as effortlessly as she played the rest of him.

Despite his waning energy, her fingertips awakened his ever nerve ending. And struck the man dumb. Too dumb to protect him from himself. Though he tried to fight the hold she had over him, the sensation of her grinding against his thighs shut his brain down just long enough for his heart to speak.

“You don't get it, love. I stopped fighting this the moment I fell for you. And I lost long before you knew you won.”

She froze, perhaps as stunned by the weight of his sentiment as he was by the fact that he'd accidentally given it. It wasn't exactly a declaration of love, nor those three overly used and cliché words themselves, but he could tell she knew

damn well what he meant. And Sterling was shocked when she didn't run, instead choosing to swallow his confession with a press of her lips.

“Tess, I'm trying to talk to you.” The attempt was meager, but it was an attempt nonetheless.

“And I'm trying to avoid talking at all costs,” she admitted.

“All costs, huh? Is that what you call this?” He gestured to her hands as they slid beneath his shirt.

“You have no idea what this costs me...” Her revelation was as disconcerting as it was ominous. Still, she didn't run. That in itself was progress.

And Sterling couldn't help but think that perhaps baby steps weren't insignificant after all.

CHAPTER THIRTY: THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Tessa

In actuality, it wasn't hope the journalist had felt when she'd first seen him stand. It was fear. As selfish as it sounded, she didn't want him to get better. She was honest when she said she liked him exactly as he was. He was safe. She could run. And he couldn't chase her. Until maybe he could. And it was that thought that made her realize what she had been doing all this time...

Running.

Where Sterling should have been another story to her. An end which justified the means. Somehow he had become more. And instead of analyzing her mark objectively. She had been in a perpetual spiral of overanalyzing quite *unobjectively*, of avoiding that realization at all costs. And the end result was a story void of any sort of journalistic integrity. However, the only other option was worse—pulling the article ripped her of her *own* integrity. Her self-worth. So instead she had avoided the reality of what either path would mean for her.

Having made up her mind, Tessa stopped at her office to ensure her story would run before she stopped doing that herself.

Running...

From the world, from the truth, from her past.

What she hadn't expected to find was the man (one of many) she'd been running from. His eyes were soft as he stared back at her, his shoulder in its usual position, planted against the doorframe. He always had this way of observing her as if trying to untangle the web of contradictions that somehow made her both fascinating and infuriatingly complex. And instead of appreciating his admiration, she'd

pushed him away. Like she'd done with everyone, anyone who tried to get close to her.

“Hey there, TK.” Corey propelled himself from the threshold, but only chanced two steps in her direction. “I’d say *long time, no see*. But, considering how we left things, I’m assuming that’s the way you wanted to keep it, huh?” As stoic as she tried to present her exterior, even Tessa would have to admit those words stung. When she didn’t reply, he nodded towards her bandaged knuckles. “What happened?”

She shrugged, slamming her desk drawer shut before turning to face him. “Nothing. I just hit the bag a little too hard.”

“Did the bag have teeth?” He knew better, and she knew he knew better. But still she lied. Somehow, it had always been easier that way. To only tell people what you wanted them to know, securing the truth close to your heart, where it couldn’t be used against you.

She didn’t answer him. What was the point? She would just spew more bullshit and he would call her out about it for a second time.

After a few more awkward moments of silence, he spoke up again. “Well, since you’re here... I might as well tell you in person.” For some unknown reason, Tessa’s heart began to beat faster, as if physically foreshadowing whatever Corey was about to say next. “I’ve been thinking about it and you were right. About putting your career first. And it’s time I do the same...”

He paused and the only thought that ran through her mind was: *he’s leaving me*. It was an odd fear to manifest, considering she had been the one to force him out. But it plagued her nonetheless. He then dropped himself into the chair closest to the door as if guarding her only escape route should she try to flee. Now, that fear turned to panic. She felt trapped, like the walls were inching forward and boxing her in. Either he didn’t notice her distress or he chose to ignore it, continuing to explain instead.

“Fitzzy’s sending me to New York. Giving me my own story. Since you made it clear you’d never step foot in that city again, he asked me to follow-up on that missing journalist from back in the day. The one everyone thinks was a mob hit—Fitz mentioned you knew the guy. Sebastian something...”

All it took was the mention of that city, that fucking name, and Tessa’s world crumbled around her. She gasped for air, but the weight, the distress, would not allow her lungs to expand. There was no other way to explain the sensation of drowning, of suffocating, while cognizant of the fact that there was nothing tangible keeping her head below the proverbial water.

“You can’t. No.” She forced the words out, despite choking on them. And used the only card left in her deck. “If you care about me at all, leave it be. Please...”

Because the journalist knew exactly what happened to Bash, or at least she could assume, with what she was sure was a high level of accuracy. And her fear had nothing to do with the *Times* and everything to do with the Agostinos. Tessa didn’t know what would happen to her, what would happen to Corey, if he went digging up the past she’d knocked over the head and buried—figuratively of course.

It was bad enough that Sterling had been snooping around the Russians. She couldn’t put her best friend in danger too. She wouldn’t.

“Seriously?” He shook his head before throwing her own words back at her—the ones she had spoken so effortlessly that day at her apartment. “*You’re being ridiculous*. What’s good enough for the goose is good enough for the gander, am I right? You said it yourself: the story comes first, Tess.”

“Please...” She fell to her knees. It was pathetic but lately she felt like everything about her was. She thought she knew the consequences of her actions, had it all figured out, only to find that she couldn’t be more clueless. Corey dropped down beside her, pulling her into his chest with a sigh. “Leave this one alone,” she begged.

Corey

“I thought you always said the truth was more important...” He braced his chin on the back of her head, as she sobbed against his shirt. He’d never seen her cry before, never seen her walls drop so completely.

Heard it, maybe.

Assumed it, probably.

But never saw for himself.

“Not this truth...” she countered, and again he sighed.

“I’m sorry, dear, but you don’t get to weaponize the truth while simultaneously bending it to your will. It’s one or the other.” Tessa refused to look up at him or even acknowledge the point he was trying to make and so he continued. “I’m not going to New York. I made it all up—I learned from the best, mind you. Tess, I would never, ever, ever, choose a story over you... Don’t you get it? If that means I’ll be remembered as a shit journalist but a great friend, well, I can live with that. I was just trying to get you to understand. To understand what you’re doing with your life. With Sterling. Before it’s too late.”

He knew his deceit hadn’t sunk in because she had yet to push him away. Though he also knew it was only a matter of time before her temper was unleashed.

“He’s just a guy, Corey...”

Was she trying to convince him? Or herself?

“Yeah, well, I’m sure there are still people out there who’d look at you as just some girl. And we both know how wrong they’d be...”

“Who was it?”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“Who told you to lie to me? This wasn’t you...”

He smiled at her accusation. She was right. He could never be so devious on his own. Hell, if it wasn’t for her own good, he wouldn’t have even chanced it. In fact, he was still

waiting for her to kick him in his balls. When he didn't answer right away, she threw an elbow into his gut.

"Laney," he grunted out his sister's nickname.

"That twat... What happened to chicks before dicks?" After another moment of silence, Tessa asked more to the air than anyone else. "What am I going to do, Corey? I already ran it..."

"I know you did. And I don't know, Tess. I really don't. But I have no doubt that if anyone can figure it out, it's you. You love him, don't you?"

"No."

"Liar."

"Yeah, that's what everyone says. It's what I'm good at, right?"

"See, that's where you're wrong. You're good at anything you set your mind to. You just haven't chosen anything else recently."

"I can't face him. Not after this."

Tessa waited until Corey had stepped out in search of a fresh cup of stale coffee from the break room, before drawing her phone from her pocket and hitting the name in her contact list. She took a deep breath, holding it in her lungs until the voice on the other end picked up. And she spoke as soon as she heard the recognizable sound that meant the call hadn't rung out.

"Do you still have that contact—the one you told me about?" The journalist paused for a response, then quickly added. "Yeah, I'm ready... I'm sure... I suppose you're right. It's time... Thank you. I'll be there."

Tessa powered down her cellular device, shoved it into her pocket, and exited out the side door when she heard Corey's footsteps making their way back down the hall, likely with two cups of the cheap stuff in tow.

Sterling

“What you do in your office is up to you. However, you put a whole new meaning to the term physical therapy.” Charles grinned back at his friend, whose face was clearly postcoitally flushed.

“Funny.” Sterling didn’t even look up when his business partner had entered with the usual clever banter the man was known to offer.

“I know I am, aren’t I?” Like the cat who ate the canary, Charles plopped himself in his usual seat facing the rectangular desk while Sterling slammed his laptop closed.

“I know you are awfully proud of yourself, but you had no right to intervene. That setup had your name written all over it.”

“Hmm, and here I thought getting laid would finally help with that whole dark and broody thing you have going on.” Charles flicked his wrist in an up in down motion, the gesture aimed at the tragic figure in front of him.

“You’re right... about *that* anyway.” Sterling nodded, his shoulders dropping, and as quickly as his anger had been roused, it subsided. “It’s hard to stay angry at you when she’s around.”

“So you admit it. You’re happy?”

“Of course I am. Look at her... look at what she has accomplished. And she doesn’t need a damn thing from me.”

Though Tessa wasn’t physically in the room, both men could sense her presence. Sterling felt like his former self again. But then, nothing like that self at all. Like a self he could have been—shouldn’t be—but a self he liked. A different self. A better self.

In enlivening the reclusive architect, the tabloid writer had managed to invigorate the air around him. And he felt lighter, though he would admit that the release of sexual tension had helped ease the burden he frequently carried on his shoulders.

That is, until Charles spoke the words both were thinking but only one of them dared to say.

“Except that story...”

“That’s not why she’s here...”

“You’re right. I don’t think that’s why she’s here either. But you do, or part of you does. That voice in the back of your head is screaming it—and that’s exactly why you haven’t pressed her about what she’s been working on. You’re afraid of what she might tell you. You’re afraid of what she’s after. And you’re afraid that she’s just like everyone else.”

Sterling didn’t need to agree; the observation was far too accurate to need a verbal confirmation.

“There’s only one way to find out. Stop with the secrets. Both of you.” Charles sealed his advice with the tap of his knuckles against the solid wood of the desk before standing and making his exit.

For someone who had suddenly seemed so worldly, doling out life lessons like he was a goddamn human fortune cookie, Charles was speechless when Sterling tossed the crumpled note at the showman’s face, knowing that even the best advice was worthless when given a day too late.

Because when Sterling had shut off his office light, traversed the hallway leading to his bedroom, and opened the door, what he’d expected to see was the woman he’d just cut his chest open for and hand-delivered his heart to. Instead, he found an empty bed, the ghost of her perfume, and a handful of sentences scrawled across a monogrammed notepad—words barely adding up to a sentence. Hardly a complete thought.

I’m sorry. It was always real for me. Even when it wasn’t.

—Tess

It was about the story. It'd always been about the story for her. She had warned him of as much, and yet he'd hoped. Foolishly, he'd hoped. And what's worse, he'd given her that perfect touch of tragedy. That selling point that was known to draw the reader in. It was going to be front-page news.

His image. His family. His ultimate heartbreak. She'd used him for it all.

And none of it mattered. Not a single betrayal, because he still loved the woman. And given the chance, he'd also forgive her.

Fuck, if that wasn't a knife to the heart...

EPILOGUE: THE BEGINNING OF THE END

Tessa

The sun was setting over the city's skyline as she parted the blinds to peer out the window, dust drifting with the movement before settling on the sill. The room itself carried the odor of stale cigarettes and staler dreams—the kind that had decayed long before the occupants had crossed the threshold.

Tessa shot her gaze from left to right, taking in the brown atop brown interior while noting the irony of the tomb-like atmosphere. Yes, this was ambition's final resting place. And least of all spared: hers.

She'd grown tired of waiting for the older gentleman to greet her, so she'd slipped back into his office and, finding little of interest, perched herself against the cool glass and dwindling daylight.

He entered as if he'd been expecting her presence in his personal space, before crossing the distance and situating himself behind his desk. "Come in, sit down. May I offer you some water? Coffee?"

She rolled her eyes in response. She'd heard the click of the recording device, and clearly she was already "in" the room. There was little need for the bravado.

"No, thank you." She was finally able to choke out the unnecessary—however seemingly polite—refusal. Then, with a curt nod, she slipped onto the grief-weathered chair in front of her, the faux-leather material groaning in time with her movements. As her counterpart removed a pen and notepad from his desk drawer, she leaned forward as if she were looking to reposition herself. But instead, she clicked the PAUSE button, halting the tape. "I'm well aware of what

you're doing. And I don't take kindly to having my privacy invaded."

"Miss Owens, I had no intention of doing any such thing. If you'd let me proceed, I was in the process of seeking your permission. This is as much for your benefit as it is for my own. To protect us both." He chastised her as a parent would a child, and she was beginning to second-guess her decision to meet with the would-be paternal figure. "One professional to another," he continued as he gestured to her regressed posturing—her crossed arms barricading her against the emotional onslaught. "I'm sure you have your way of doing things. As do I."

A puff of air parted her lips before Tessa's internal debate ended with a concession. "Do as you must," she offered with a wave of her manicured hand.

Resuming as if the intermission had never taken place, he compressed the button with his left index finger, and the tape shifted back into gear. The whine of the mechanism, which had first alerted her to his deceit, once again carried over the silence in the air. "Before we begin, I have to advise you that our conversation is being recorded. And I must obtain your verbal consent to proceed. May we continue?"

She didn't trust his intentions. Nor his word at the moment. And while there was shared honor among thieves, was it the same for liars? She supposed not. Lies went down much easier; they were sweeter and far more palatable to digest.

Because if there was anything at all that liars shared in common, it was the knowledge that: the harsher the truth...

TO BE CONTINUED...

COMING SOON:

Part two of the Truth and Lies Duet, *The Sweeter the Lies*, will land in your Kindles on 31 March 2023.

BLURB

*If it comes down to the story or you, I will choose the story.
Every damn time.*

She couldn't have been more clear. But that organ in his chest? The one that quickened when a certain smart-mouthed, pain-in-the-ass tabloid writer entered the room. It had a bad habit of hoping what it heard was wrong. And not giving a damn if it wasn't.

After all, she'd said it herself:

It takes two people to end things. One to leave. And the other to let them.

Yep, much like everything else in their relationship, he wasn't about to make it easy for her. No matter how harsh the truth...

Or sweet the lie.

Preorder your copy now.



Wondering what you should read next while you wait for part two?

Curious about Marco and the infamous Agostino Crime Family?

Would you like to know how Tessa spent some of her time undercover?

Check out this excerpt from *Clever as the Devil* by Dahlia Reign in the BONUS section on the next page.

BONUS EXCERPT:

Apollo

I sat opposite Marco and his date—I used that term loosely. He never *courted* the same woman twice. Each was merely a distant memory before he moved on and hunted his next conquest. But this girl was different from his normal variety and it was all in her eyes. It was in the way she stared through you, as if calculating every possibility—every threat—before you made it.

She was a small little thing at five-foot-nothing, while her prominent cheekbones and soft pale skin made her appear almost innocent. She had light brown hair that was in a high and tight ponytail cascading down her back.

But none of it compared to those damn eyes. They were green... an olive green. They had a strange aura, a resounding speculation. She watched everyone with a naturally inquisitive air. And she was exactly the type of person the mafia didn't need sniffing around. She was giving me what she no doubt assumed was a coy smile while simultaneously batting her lashes.

Whatever this *little girl* wanted, it wasn't sex—at least not from Marco. She threw her head back to let out a throaty laugh, seductively running a finger over her chest as she did so. She wore a large yellow ring on her hand. *Ostentatious and a bit out of place*, I thought. But with the way she played with it, I knew it was important to her.

“You can stare all you like, *mon cher*, but at least buy me a drink?” she asked, leaning over the empty stool between us.

“Sorry, little girl, I don't promote alcohol consumption in minors.” I tossed back my whiskey, savoring the flavor.

“Looks can be deceiving. I assure you... I am old *enough*.” She practically purred. “My name is Tessa Leroux. And you are?” She overly announced her last name, making her lips

wrap around the word as she exuded erotic promises sealed by a French accent.

When I didn't answer or lean forward to shake her proffered hand, she seemed taken aback but instantly regained her composure. The girl was dressed like sin and smelled like expensive French perfume, the scent lingering in soft waves of hot, hot sex.

"What're you doing here?" I asked and if I were anyone else, I would have missed the way she tensed at my tone. But again, her recovery was quick, almost undetectable. *Almost.*

"Anything you like." She twisted in her seat like a wanton sex kitten, practically rubbing against me.

"Anything, *mon beau*," she repeated, reaching out a hand to run her fingertips across my chest. But I caught her wrist before she was able to make contact and tugged her forward.

I held it tightly, leaning in close enough to press my mouth to hers. Her breath peppered my face as she gasped. Only I didn't kiss her, just stared deeply into those olive... now almost jade-green eyes.

"Not so fun when the roles are reversed, are they, little girl?" I motioned towards Marco as her jaw dropped open in surprise. "Stick to playing with little boys. You're ill-equipped to handle a man, let alone one like me." I released her wrist and rose to my feet.

She was smart, but apparently not smart enough to know when she should be afraid. A fact that I was certain would get her into trouble one day. And it would be the kind of trouble she wouldn't be able to talk her way out of. But today, she was Marco's problem—I had enough of my own. She straightened herself back in her seat but the harsh movement of her throat showed me I'd succeeded in rattling her.

Something told me it wasn't the last time I would be seeing this girl.

Check out this title and more by Dahlia Reign.



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Thank You!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Sybil is a career-driven Philadelphian native. A crime show enthusiast by day, and a BDSM club hopper by night. When she isn't working or writing, she is talking about working or writing. She is a single mom to her beta fish (Fish) and way too many dead houseplants.

Her stories range from gray to black, with darker themes throughout. She prefers heroines with a kick-ass mentality and the heroes who know how to rein them in. The mental and medical aspects of her books are well-researched, though they are given a humanistic approach and diagnoses aren't the focal points. She believes her characters don't need to wear labels in order to get their messages across.

Her books are mostly standalones, though her characters may interact and intersect worlds. Additionally, she works closely with and writes alongside author Dahlia Reign and some characters will appear in cameos in each of their publications.

Sybil welcomes emails from readers if there are concerns or questions regarding any of her publications.

Email: authorsybilknight@gmail.com

Newsletter: www.sendfox.com/dahliaandsybil

Facebook Group:

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