

The
Next Door
Billionaire's
DECEPTION

JENNI GRAY

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Chapter 1

Richard

Someone's banging the roof.

Or maybe that's just my headache – and now it's only getting worse.

The thumping sound increases and becomes an unfading rhythm that forces me awake from my too-short slumber. Sleeping at five o'clock in the morning, after hours of poring through documents, only to be woken up so rudely isn't on the list of things I fancy.

Who the hell is trying to bring down the building?

I sit up, grimacing slightly as the sunlight's bright glare touches my face. Walking through my apartment half-asleep, I open my door and almost get hit in the face by a man carrying an obscenely large box, and just like that, I'm wide awake.

“What the heck's going on?”

He turns around to face me.

“Sorry, man. Didn't see you there.”

Written boldly on his rumpled gray shirt are the words *Pharst Movers*.

Pharst. Really? “What's going on?” I repeat.

“You have a new neighbor.”

Ah! That.

The obvious explanation.

I move closer, a slight frown creasing my brow. The entire hallway is filled with boxes of different sizes. Several of them are stacked almost in meter-long couches close to my door.

“Can I speak to who's in charge?” I ask the two men moving a white L-shaped sofa.

They both nod toward the direction of the open door. Carefully navigating my way through the boxes, I stop in the doorway. A woman stands at the far end of the mostly empty room with

her back to me. Her raven-black hair is pulled into a ponytail that swings as she gesticulates. She's clad in dark jeans and a pale yellow top. Her voice is low and authoritative, like that of a woman used to giving orders.

"Hello, neighbor."

She turns toward me, and for a few seconds, I peruse her features; sharp nose, high cheekbones, and the most enthralling eyes I've ever seen —green, like moss. Her face pulls into a frown. As she approaches me, a smile is perched on her face.

"Are you one of the movers?"

"Excuse me?"

"Are you one of the movers?" she says again, slowly, this time enunciating each word as if she's convinced I have a hearing disability.

Does she think I'm deaf or something?

"I'm your neighbor, and I don't know if you got the memo, but making so much noise within the first few minutes of your arrival isn't very neighborly. Don't you think so?"

She raises a brow and crosses her arms, her eyes glinting. "If the noise bothers you so much, why don't you get some earplugs?" she says.

"What?" I ask, perking my brows almost in anger.

She huffs. "I don't see anyone else complaining."

"That's because they don't live across from your apartment."

She sighs. "Pleased to meet you, Neighbor-who-hates noise. I'd like to get back to work so I can, you know, stop the noise as soon as possible."

Before I can give her a response, one of the movers passes by, and I spot the logo on one of the boxes he's carrying. *A white hawk!* It belongs to Emerald Inc., the company I'm trying to merge with.

That's when it clicks. *What the heck is going on here?*

The image of her in a skirt and shirt with her hair pinned up is different from the woman before me, but she's the same, nonetheless.

Melissa Durham, CEO of Emerald Inc.? The woman who dines with the board of men and hides their crimes behind a smokescreen of philanthropy ... No way this is a coincidence! *No way in hell.*

She mumbles more commands to one of the movers by her far left. He's a pot-bellied man with a weird-looking mustache that makes him look like a typical circus clown. His belly jerks as he nods to the instruction being murmured by the boss lady. That's exactly what she is. There's no better explanation for her display of superiority over every single person, including me.

"So, Mr. Neighbor, while the movers help me help you reduce the noise, can you at least exhibit some bit of courtesy by, you know, showing me around?" She stands with her arms akimbo, her lips curving into a smile.

"Is that how you roll?" I ask.

She rolls her eyes and cocks her head. Her raven-black hair gimmers under the light as she runs her finger through it.

"You've got a different way of rolling here?"

"Yes, we have a different way of rolling here. Everyone in this building has some sense of courtesy –"

"And I don't?" she asks, stepping aside like I'm some monster who's about to pounce on her.

"I wouldn't give a yes for an answer, but you sure have got it all wrong. You move in on your first day, and you wake everyone up. I call for peace, and you ask me to get my ears blocked."

"But that can help the noise not get across to you. Can't it?" She raises her palms, shrugging. "I was only trying to help."

I adjust the helm of my pajamas and glare at her before turning to the busy movers. None of them are eavesdropping.

“If you ask me. I won’t hesitate to clarify that what you’re putting up doesn’t show any sign of good neighborliness.”

I swing around and head for my door without giving her a chance to say something, but then she does—like a stiff lump, the rage in me hits the walls of my throat.

“Richard Burnes.”

Her words stop me in my tracks. *Did she call my name?*

“What did you just call me?”

I turn to her, my eyes are wide open. She inches closer and pulls a smirk.

“He told me your name ... Ruben ... the agent who secured me the apartment,” she says in a tone softer than she’s sounded since we began talking.

Ruben. The name sounds familiar. I recall hearing about him when I bought the apartment, but I never saw him. He wasn’t the one in charge. *What else does he know about me? What other things has he told her?*

“You look quite surprised. You didn’t expect anyone around here to know your name or something?”

“That’s not it.”

“Then what?” Her tone is sharp and authoritative. Perhaps she’s forgotten that she’s not talking to one of the movers but me. I splay my hands and make to explain, but she switches her posture and studies me, narrowing her eyes slightly.

“You just moved in. We’ve never met. And then, boom, you call me by my name. Anyone would find that surprising.”

Her smile turns sly, and at that moment, I catch a glimpse of the beauty in her soft smile, the motion of her curving light-pink oxbow lips, and the even set of snow-white teeth. They all seem alluring, a perfect sight to behold. I have no idea why I didn’t see these earlier.

“Well, that makes sense. I thought you were some ghost who doesn’t expect anyone to know a thing about him.”

“Not particularly.”

I grunt and glare at the movers. I can't say why but the sudden change in my temperament sets me aback. Some minutes ago, I felt like snapping at her for being careless with her words. Now, I see her from a completely different lens, and I'm curious to know what could be the cause.

"And why does it sound like you recently moved in here too?"

I cough slightly. "Not at all. Let's say I have lived here for like, uhm ... " I roll my eyes in pretense and stare blankly at the white crested ceiling of the hallway. "Three years."

The lie is too easy to tell.

"Three years?"

I nod and fake a smile.

Silence breathes within us as two more movers head toward us, each holding firm to the edges of another sparkling white L-shaped sofa. I can't imagine how much more furniture is still outside the building.

"So, now that I know your name, can we at least show the politeness you talked about?" she says as soon as the movers hurry past.

"We?"

What is she talking about? Slowly, she bites her lips and glares at me.

"Did you say, 'We'?" I ask again.

She blinks and seems to have just regained her senses. Then, she stretches her right hand forward.

"Melissa Durham. Chief Executive Officer, Emerald Inc.," she says with a smile, her eyes crinkling at the corners.

I grab her hand, and my heart twitches. It's warm and soft; the warmth is like a subtle stroke from the edifying heat of a fireplace, and the softness, is like a tender ball of raw and unstained cotton. A gripping sensation runs through the edges of my spine as my hand caresses hers. The feeling is otherworldly.

“Do you mean the Emerald I know?” I let go of her hand slowly, relishing the feel of her soft palm rubbing against mine.

She smiles and wets her lips with her tongue.

“Last I checked, Mr. Richard, there’s only one Emerald in New York City.”

At her slightly funny joke, we both lurch into a laughing fit. A familiar sound dances into my perked-up ears. It comes from the direction of my half-open door. My table alarm.

“Uhm ... ” I nod to my door.

“That must be for you.”

“Yeah. Sorry, I gotta go now.”

She smiles and toys with her bracelet.

“Sure. No problem. And yeah, we’ve got a quiet hallway now. You’re welcome.”

She nods to the movers. More than half of the items have been taken into the apartment.

I take a step back.

“That’s okay.”

“Hope to see you around.” Her soft call echoes along the hallway.

My smile widens. “Of course.”

Chapter 2

Melissa

“I’ve never seen anything this beautiful in a long time.”

A soft voice whispers. I move away from the white L-shaped sofa and drift further, heading right toward the owner of the voice. I smile and sip from my glass of tart wine. It’s Celine Wood, the only person I can comfortably call my friend.

“Never seen this around. Just added it to your collection?”

She asks, turning toward me. The rays of the giant fluorescent chandelier above illuminate her oval-shaped face. Celine is all shades of beauty. Her wide signature smile spreads across her face as her cerulean-blue eyes take in the artwork before her in keen admiration. She cocks her head and slightly brushes the stray strands of her chestnut-brown Italian bob to the side.

“You like it?” I ask, dropping my hand on the part of her shoulder left bare by her sleek blue off-the-shoulder dress.

Slowly, she swings her whiskey-filled margarita glass to the left and grabs my hand in a fairly tight squeeze. It’s warm and tender.

“Like it? I love it!” she says, raising her glass to her lips.

“I knew you would,” I say, turning to the artwork again.
“You’ve always had an eye for beauty.”

“Art is beauty, and beauty is art,” she says in a wistful voice.
“That’s what my dad used to say.”

We both study the crayon-esque painting. The fragrance of her jasmine-scented perfume brushes through my nose instantly. It’s a familiar scent that I never get fed up with, a scent that strikes a memory and clouds my heart with the thoughts of how important Celine is to my lonely world. She’s been a constant in my life, despite the many changes – and challenges – I’ve gone through. Celine’s always been there: firm and unyielding, like a rock.

We admire the artwork together in deadpan silence, and it reminds me of the days we were two dreamy schoolgirls

stunned at the splendor of a perfectly designed Barbie doll in a toy store. At the art gallery the day before moving to Brooklyn Heights, I was engrossed in a thorough search for the perfect artwork to adorn my new apartment. I needed a masterpiece. There, I spotted several masterpieces that would leave the hearts of art lovers pounding. But none were as striking as the painting hung on the wall of my new apartment.

The gallery guide called it *Her Pride*. It's a perfect realistic painting of a white-skinned amazon, bare from the tip of her cornrows down to her slender midsection. She has narrow thick-browed eyes as blue as the sky in spring and skin as smooth as fine water-washed pebbles from the bank of a river. Fire burns in her eyes. There's something about the painting, something I can't place a finger on.

"She has gorgeous eyes, doesn't she?" Celine whispers as if afraid of breaking the silence.

She's always been very keen on art.

"I knew you'd see it too." I caress the edge of the artwork. "Since this is a new place, I felt it'd be nice to spice it up with something new, something beautiful, just like *Her Pride*."

"And you always know what to choose," she responds, taking another sip from her glass. "This whole place is fantastic. I miss your old apartment, though."

Me too.

I stare into the depths of my glass, sighing. I didn't want to move, but I've learned sacrifices are a necessary evil.

"Are the neighbors nice?"

My thoughts drift to the man next door. Richard Burnes.

"As nice as an average neighbor."

Celine drops on the nearest couch and grins at me. "Maybe you'll meet a cute guy."

I bite my lips. She doesn't know. Hiding the truth from her is one of the hardest things I've ever done, but I've been sworn to secrecy. Getting her involved is far too dangerous.

I roll my eyes and join her on the couch.

‘They aren’t my type.’

“Not even the guy next door?”

I jerk my head up. “What do you know about him?”

Celine smirks. “Ah. Look who has a crush.”

“I don’t –”

She raises her hands. “Okay. Okay. I know the drill. You’re too busy,” she makes air quotes, “to be involved with a man. Ugh. I’m sick of hearing it. You should meet my aunt Margaret.”

I raise a brow. “What?”

“She’s a nun. You guys will hit it off together.”

I nearly choke on my drink. Celine throws her head back and laughs. I give her a fake scornful look.

“Point taken.”

She nudges my shoulder. “Geez, live a little. Allow yourself to bask in the beauty of art.”

Rising from my seat, I move around the couch to lean against the headrest. The painting seems to shimmer under the light.

“Right now, the only beauty I enjoy is the beauty of art.”

“Hmm.” Celine joins me, shooting me a knowing look. She knows the drill: a change of subject means: I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I’ve always wondered how you manage to find the most meaningful art.”

I heave a sigh, relieved that she let the matter slide.

“Not particularly. I simply go for pieces that hold beauty and a message.”

“Beauty and a message,” she repeats. “That’s deeper than I thought.”

“*Her Pride* preaches the courage and civility of a White-skinned woman—regardless of wherever she finds herself. It

showcases her endowment through the paintbrush of an artist.”
I pause and let her have yet another close look.

Celine beams. “Gosh, I love it when you talk art.”

“Beauty can’t hide.”

She smiles. Her eyes glow with an intense shimmer as she keeps her gaze on my face.

“But beauty can be ignored, Lissa,” she says softly. The smile on her face has vanished, meaning she’s up to something I may not like.

I empty my glass and head for the fridge. Celine refills her glass. She’s silent for a while, and that’s a sure sign that she wants to have the conversation I’m always unready to discuss.

“You’re now in a comfortable new place, Lissa,” she says, raising her eyes to mine. “You should try something new.”

I shrug. “That’s why I got a new painting and a few other pieces of furniture. Have you seen my other new things?”

“Don’t do that. Do not attempt to trivialize this.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“I love the new apartment. I love the nice furniture. I love the artwork. But this conversation isn’t about furniture and fittings and art, Lissa. You know where I’m driving at.”

“No-no-no. Not again. How is that even possible?”

“You know what I’m talking about.”

“I do not, and when you’re ready to share, it better be meaningful.”

The tempo of the conversation moves into a downward spiral. Whatever she wants to talk about, she’s seen a glimpse of the sign that it might not be something I’d love to discuss. I love Celine. But, sometimes, she can be a hot lump in my throat. She wants me to consider things that are inconsiderable as long as my personality is concerned. In many instances, she wins. But, in this new apartment, I stand my ground.

She places her glass on the glass-topped center table and slowly moves to my seat. Then, she fakes a smile, but the frown on my face refuses to leave. She crashes her frame into the space beside me and wraps her hand across my neck.

“I have a feeling I won’t like what you’re about to say.”

“That’s right: you won’t. Beauty can’t hide, Lissa. You said it yourself. You’re a beautiful woman, and I’m excited that you’ve finally agreed to give yourself another chance to start something new by moving to this beautiful part of the city,” she pauses and gives me a weird look I find eccentric. “But you can take it a step further.”

“Celine –”

“Listen to me. It’s been, what, three years? You’ve remained hung up on the past, refusing to move forward.”

I throw my hands up. Why does she have to bring this up *now*?

“I am moving forward!”

Celine ignores me. “Try again. Meet someone new. Time heals all wounds, right? Well, love heals too. You should consider giving it another chance and ...”

I rise to my feet. Celine stops talking.

“I thought we were over this already? What makes you think love is all I want, Celine?”

“Because I want you to be happy.”

“Oh. And you think love is all I need to be happy? For crying out loud, Celine! I don’t want to have this conversation. Period.”

“But I just want you to be happy.”

I grind my teeth and turn to face her.

“It’s obvious then that we’ll have to redefine *happiness*. We seriously have to. I’m not a sad woman, Celine. I have a good job and an impressive career. What else could give me happiness beyond these?”

Celine is in one of those moods. It's clear in the resolute set of her jaw that she isn't about to let this go. I love her to death, but sometimes, her determination to hold on to things can be infuriating.

"Life isn't all about your job or career. Happiness isn't about material things. What's an impressive career when you return to an empty house every day?"

I raise a brow. "You live alone too, Celine."

She doesn't laugh. "That's not what I meant. I know you, Melissa. I know you're only hiding behind this and that a part of you craves to be loved. You can hide it from yourself, but not from me."

I slump back into the sofa with a weary sigh. I hate that she's making so much sense. Celine sits beside me again. This time, she hugs me fiercely, so tight that the air is squeezed out of me. A lone tear drops down my left cheek as I shut my eyelids.

"We all have wounds from our pasts, but we can't let those wounds prevent us from moving forward, healing, and finding love again."

"You should give a TED talk."

This time, she laughs. "It's on my bucket list."

"I'll get the front-row tickets." I turn to her with a grin. "I hate that you're making sense."

Her smile fades. "I know you do."

"I'm not..." I release a shuddering breath. "I'm not ready for this."

My eyes bore into hers as she pauses. Celine has always been one to tell me the cold hard truth, even if I don't want to hear it. And that happens often.

"It's been years, Lissa. It's time to give love another chance. Let the pain slide and start afresh."

"Just like that?" I ask, my eyes now brimming with tears that can't go beyond my eyelids.

Sympathy swims in the depths of her gaze, and her brows furrow. A lump forms in my throat. When she places her arm around my shoulder, I almost lose it. The words come tumbling it—words that paint a picture we’ve both seen.

“For two years, I spent my life showering love on some monster who didn’t deserve it and never appreciated a pint of it. He played me and gaslighted me for years. While I thought we were building something together, he was ready to settle down with someone else. I thought I had found love; he knew he had found a love-starved jerk. I’ve spent years building back the parts of me he crushed. Is this what you want me to go through again?”

“He wasn’t the right person.”

“And what guarantees the next will be the right person?”

She sits back and says nothing. Her lips fold inward, and she runs a hand down her face. I hold my head in my hands, patting it carefully from the side like it will rip open if my hands leave it.

Again, silence settles heavily in the room. She stares at the fireplace while I focus on the amber-colored walls. From the corners of her eyes, I catch Celine stealing glances at me. I say nothing. The rowdiness of the city suddenly makes its way into the apartment. The squealing of brakes, the ping of crosswalk lights, the whoosh of speeding buses, and the blaring of horns all blend into a perfect cacophony.

“I just wanted this to be a nice relaxing evening,” I whisper.

Celine nods. “I just had to say it.”

“I know.”

Her phone buzzes. She mutters a curse and taps her phone screen. Then she empties her glass and grabs her purse. The folds of skin on her forehead have relaxed.

“I’ll have to run,” she says, reaching for a hug with wide open arms.

After the brief hug, I let go of my grip. She holds on to me and whispers, “I can’t guarantee that the next man will be Mr.

Right. But I know that you deserve a life outside your career. You deserve love, and you have to open your heart to it.”

It’s easier to assign duties to employees and sit in a room with people twice my age than to follow Celine’s advice. She’s been saying the same thing for a long time, and, despite my resistance, she never stops.

“Is that it, Celine?” I ask, angling my head.

“Is that what?”

I want to answer her, but a sharp knock on the door interrupts. Someone’s at the door.

“Expecting someone?” Celine asks.

I shake my head. No one else knows about my new apartment.

Who the hell is at the door?

“Maybe it’s one of your neighbors,” she says with a glint in her eye.

I don’t share her enthusiasm.

“I’ll go check it out.”

I force my feet to move. Inhaling deeply, I push the door open. Silence greets me, accompanied by the morning breeze.

It’s empty.

“No one’s here.” I turn to Celine. “Maybe it was the wind.”

She nods, frowning. “Yeah. Maybe.”

Chapter 3

Richard

My head throbs without mercy as I shuffle to the kitchen. I can't say if it's the leftover of the migraine I had earlier in the week, but it was so horrible that it kept me in bed till nine this morning. Every move I make seems to shatter my zonked head into tiny shards. The more I lie still, the better it gets. But I can't remain in bed all day. My assistant will be here soon.

Anna doesn't work on weekends, and even when she does wish to decongest her workload ahead of the new week, I let her work from home instead. Not today. Today, I want her to report right here in my apartment.

When I could stretch far enough to grab my phone on my oak bedside table, I phoned Anna by 8:45. She was still stuck somewhere in traffic.

"She should be here by nine-thirty," I mumble, taking a sip of my coffee.

Out of the kitchen, I slump into the brown sofa in the living room as the first sip from my mug of steaming coffee journeys down my throat, and I become more awake. The cold subsides, with my almost shivering frame inside a thick wooly white robe, it still has an airtight grip on me. Pure black coffee is the perfect way to shoo it off. It's been my elixir for many years.

An almost inaudible screech from a car hijacks my attention. I lean on the pane of my half-open window to get a fair glimpse of the car before it swerves into the garage below. It's a black Chrysler, the newest addition to the building's garage. It belongs to my new next-door neighbor, Melissa Durham.

Images of her slender frame race through my mind in quick succession. Her sharp nose. Her raven-black hair. Her captivating fragrance. Her sauciness. Four days have passed, but I'm yet to get over the thoughts of our first meeting in the hallway. She reminds me of the deceptive abilities of appearance and looks. She's admirable from a distance. A force in her own right: the youngest CEO to head over

Emerald, the youngest female CEO to make the cover of the biennial *Amazon in Business* magazines.

It's hard to imagine a woman like her involved in the filth the executives at Emerald are undoubtedly rolling in.

It's been roughly a year and a couple of months since I thronged headlong into the quest for convincing evidence to prove the dark games unraveling right inside New York's biggest charity foundation, Emerald Inc. In the same company, my new next-door neighbor is the CEO. The nonprofit perpetuates money laundering and embezzlement right under the nose of the agencies. Under the smokescreen of philanthropy, the firm conceals two rings of Russian black hackers. And under the disguise of charity donations, these fraudsters launder the money received from ransomware out of America, using Emerald as an almost undetectable coverup.

Blueband Technologies has been providing tech solutions to forensic audit firms across the business districts of New York City for two whole years. But two weeks after consulting *Vibrant Corp* for her rebranding campaign, the firm's website suffered a ransomware attack that endangered data worth \$600 million. The firm's investigations pointed to a cartel of black hackers in Staten Island led by two Russians. From their source, the gang had a strong connection with Emerald Inc.

"Emerald Incorporated is a charity foundation. How can this be explained?" I asked Howard Chan, the COO of the firm, when he shared their investigative report with my team in *Vibrant Corp*.

"The fact that laundering money through a reputable charity foundation can't be explained is exactly why we at *Blueband Tech* believe in the report," he explained in his accented English.

"Are you sure about this? I mean, not even the FBI will buy this?"

"We believe in our Asian investigators. We can always bank on their technologies. We've linked the wire transfer ledgers of these two entities, but we need more evidence to get the FBI on it!"

“You have Vibrant’s support, Mr. Chan, but you’ve got to play your cards right. Do not have the wrong guys on your watchlist. This is America.”

“Yeah. And my company just got attacked in this great country. What do I do about it?”

“An important card on the deck is patience. You just gotta be patient. We can’t go in, all guns blazing. We’d just be shooting ourselves in the foot.”

“Oh, I’ll be patient, alright. But you can be sure you’ve not heard the last of me.” Hoisting his frame, he stalked out of my office, enraged.

“Keep an eye on Emerald, Mr. Burnes,” the man’s assistant murmured before rushing through the door.

Seagles Security redeployed her best hands to Vibrant Corp upon request, and their first investigation hinted at the possible involvement of Emerald. Then, the last ransomware attack in Manhattan splayed the metrics. The truth became clear:

It’s Emerald, and Emerald only.

My goal is simple: to put a stop to it by merging Emerald with Vibrant Corp, but the juiciness of the dark venture made the Board of Directors turn down my first merger offer. And while I’m retracing and contemplating plans to repackage my offer, their CEO moves into my neighborhood and becomes my next-door neighbor. That can’t be a coincidence. It’s all part of their plan – whatever that plan is.

Emerald has finally come for me.

And it came in the form of a gorgeous, enigmatic woman who’s managed to spark my interest.



It’s a few minutes to noon, and no crumb of coldness is left in me. Like fog, the headache finally receded. I was up and running even before Anna’s feeble knuckles collided with the door in a sharp knock. She set up her workstation at the desk beside my mini-library and got busy.

The spicy scent of pancakes in the living room hurries into my nostrils, sending my empty stomach into a festive flurry. Anna brought enough for two. She knows how addicted I'm to pancakes. Heaven knows I'm starving.

Anna is my assistant, but we've lost the boss-employee divide in our relationship. She's an integral part of my day-to-day business as the CEO of Vibrant Corp, so keeping her on the other side of the divide seems like a no-no to me. She deserves more than that. She knows me more than anyone else on the planet. And when it comes to her, my new ventures are never to be kept at arm's length. She knows about the ongoing investigation on Emerald and, in some way, has been playing a huge role in it. When Melissa moved in next door, Anna won herself another task: to figure out how much Melissa knew about me.

"You might have to call yourself a ghost, you know," Anna says, looking in my direction.

She's a petite redhead with sharp green eyes and a keen observation. She doesn't miss anything, making her the perfect person for the job.

"A ghost?"

"You're an unmarried thirty-eight-year-old living in an apartment building where no one knows you and living next door to your enemy." She glances up from the laptop screen. "Ghost."

Unhurriedly, I force the last bite of pancake down my throat as I look in her direction. She's stopped typing; now she's looking at me expectantly. I can't get a perfect glimpse of her face since the beams from the sun have made it to my seat through the tiny hole in the windowpane.

"Maybe, not anytime soon. She called me by my name," I say, sipping from my coffee mug.

"I bet that left your heart in your mouth."

"Maybe, there's a deeper explanation to how I felt than just having my heart in my mouth."

She glares at the laptop's screen for a few seconds and turns in my direction. "Any clue where she got that from?" She asks, taking another bite of pancake and shifting her gaze to me.

"From some real estate agent. Ruben, whatever."

"Whatever? Is that someone's name?"

"Just Ruben. I have no idea what his other name is. She said he told her about her next-door neighbor."

"You think there's more?"

"What else was I supposed to think?"

"Have you met him?"

"Just heard of him. He's some former real estate agent who tried ripping off the agency that used to own the building."

"I don't think he knows more. Maybe he bumped into your name in the agency's database as the next-door neighbor to his newest client."

"That doesn't explain why he was so eager to tell her. Something's fishy."

"Maybe you're just overthinking it."

I raise a brow. She shakes her head.

"I take it back. It does seem fishy that she happened to move into the same apartment building while you're planning to merge. But then, what does she hope to achieve? Will she pull off a spy move and bug your house?"

"She doesn't have to investigate me. I'm not the one involved in shady deals; they are."

Anna leans back and crosses her arms on her chest.

"You mean *she* is."

"We don't have proof of that."

Anna scoffs. "One meeting with her, and you're already rethinking everything. What happens next, you become best friends?" She eyes me. "I see what's happening here. Can't trust a man around a beautiful woman."

I push my plate aside. “What are you talking about?”

Anna raises her hands, palms facing each other.

“Man, woman, and,” she makes a sizzling sound, drawing her palms closer. Then she entwines her fingers. “And that’s how it happens.”

My lips twitch. “I am not amused.”

“So you say.” She turns to her laptop. “Now, ready to see this?”

“Hold on.”

I empty my mug and make for the bookshelf. It’s hard to focus on work when the puzzle pieces are dancing around in my head, trying to fit in. But they can’t; I don’t have all the pieces.

Did Ruben actually tell Melissa about me, or was that just her excuse? If Melissa truly knows who I am, she has the upper hand.

But then, how did she find out so soon? In my well-thought-out attempt to suppress my identity and affiliation with Vibrant Corp, Anna stood in for me at the business involving Vibrant Corp, Emerald, and a video game franchise from San Francisco. Anna led the Vibrant Corp delegations to the negotiation of the failed merger offer with Emerald Inc. A staged interview with Melissa is all she needs to drill out the information I need from the young CEO—who has no idea what’s in store for her dubious firm.

“She can’t know about me, Anna,” I say, returning to my seat. “It’s risky for the merger. Risky for Vibrant. Risky for Emerald. Risky for all of us.”

She inches the laptop slightly to the side and stares in my direction.

“She knows little about you, but she does know something.”

I clap the book in my hand close and lean on the bookshelf, my eyes on her.

“She knows about the investigation?”

She shakes her head. “About the merger. She knows we’re coming back with a bigger offer.”

I exhale in relief. At least she doesn’t know about the investigation.

“But I doubt they’ll take even a quadruple of the first offer.”

“She said that?”

“She believes so.”

“She can influence it. Can’t she?”

She looks away sharply. “Melissa is more like a ceremonial CEO.”

A Ceremonial CEO?

“A figurehead.”

“The board does the actual job?”

“They’ve got the biggest share of the bidding. She dances to their tune and does little decision-making. She can’t influence the least, procurement or payrolls.”

“Wow.”

Anna exhales through pursed lips. “Can’t imagine what a woman like that feels about being in a position of power without actually having that power.”

Does she even know about the dark games in the firm? I don’t have to ask Anna that. Whatever question Melissa asked her must have dwelled within the context of gathering information about my identity and affiliation with Vibrant Corp.

Anna leaves her seat and heads for the coffee machine. I pore over the conversation while she makes coffee. The plan to re-fire our merger offer is deep-laid propaganda within the Vibrant Corp team.

“Relax, Richard,” Anna says, returning to her seat with a steaming mug of coffee. “She knows nothing about you beyond your name and as a next-door neighbor who hates noise.”

“She told you that?”

“Maybe. But there’s one last thing she knows but is yet to spill.”

I lean forward. Anna takes a slow sip of her coffee. She always relishes keeping me in suspense.

“What?”

She drops her mug. “Blueband Technologies.”

“Howard Chan?”

“She knows about his watchlist.”

Chapter 4

Melissa

A shiver runs through my spine at the sound of a sharp knock outside my window. After the first, two other harder knocks follow even before I can cover the distance from my study to the window. I have a beef burrito in the microwave, but it has to wait.

My lips curve into a smile when my eyes land on the source of the knock.

Silly me.

I chuckle, shaking my head. The knocks are made by the insistent pecking of a tiny bird with a beak that might never leave a crack on my smoked-glass window even after its hundredth peck. It's a beautiful robin. And it's alone.

The sight strikes a memory. It's a story I read aloud to the ecstatic kids at the orphanage after my second week in office as CEO of Emerald Inc. The beautiful storybook contained a story about the funny window-pecking behavior of birds in urban areas. According to the story, birds get tricked by flashy ceramics and glasses: it could be windows, mirrors, or doors. The reflection of themselves on the object will make them want to strike a series of pecks, thinking it's another bird of their species that they can fight or interact with. I enjoyed the story just like the kids, but I never saw it myself until now. Or maybe I just never paid attention.

I close and open the window slightly. The bird jerks backward and flies off, heading right toward one of the branches of the nearby oak tree. I touch the spot it pecks. Nothing but a faint scratch. Taking a step further, I peek through the window and get a glimpse of robins, more of them singing melodious tones and ransacking the environment, perhaps waiting for another reflection of theirs to start a fight with.

“Looks like it wasn't alone, after all.”

Through the window, I spot a police patrol vehicle packed somewhere outside. Beside the old-looking coffeehouse, a plump pot-bellied policeman converses with a tall blonde with

a low bob. She responds with more nods than words as the policeman scribbles things on the tiny notepad in his hands.

Inching backward, I perceive the pungent smell of something burning. My eyes widen in panic as it dawns on me.

My burrito!

I dash toward the kitchen. Too late. My burrito's ruined. I stare at the charred remains, shoulders slumping.

There goes my lunch.

It's been five days now since I moved in. And despite the infrequent feeling of being watched by God-knows-who, I'm beginning to love this part of Brooklyn. The street booms with life all around the clock. There are always yells from kids playing in puddles, horns from impatient drivers whoosh from speeding buses, and the minute bells of bicycles hurrying beside the sidewalks. I don't particularly enjoy spotting police patrol vehicles every day, but I've not heard rumors of a burglary or other disturbing crime within the neighborhood. The FBI was right; this is the right place for me. At least until everything blows over.

Everything has been put in place – everything except my study. After the movers from *Pharst Movers* finished their job, Celine helped me out with a few other things I would never have done single-handedly. She set up my wardrobe and spent a long time arranging my clothes, something I've always sucked at. But I needed no help with the set-up of my study. It's something I have to handle alone since I have quite several confidential documents in it, the ones I wouldn't let a third party get a glimpse of.

Tossing the burnt burrito into the bin, I settle for making a mug of coffee and head into my study. My table's laden with books and files. Celine would be upset by the mess. I reach for the biggest book on the table. It's the most voluminous book on my bookshelf and pulls a weight that can leave a kid at the library panting in exhaustion.

I take a sip from my coffee and study the bookshelf, searching for the best section to fit the book into. *Business* is perfect.

And this book is the most reliable when I need to research some business legalities without the help of Jason Murdoch, my attorney. The book was the perfect reference I needed when Vibrant Corp struck a merger deal with my firm. However, I'm expecting three other additions. They're arriving this morning, and even if I'm short of groceries, they have to land before I go shopping.

Intermittently, a mail notification pops up on my laptop. I peruse the mail carefully. It's from *Beetle Courier*, confirming that I have received the package they delivered. The mail states: **signed by you.**

Signed by me? What are they talking about?

I search for my phone. Receiving the package is one of the reasons I chose not to go grocery shopping. I wanted to be home when the deliveryman arrived. How did I receive reception mail when the deliveryman never showed up anywhere near my apartment?

Their customer support reps may give a better explanation. They have to. While my hand is halfway through typing *Beetle* on the search tab of my contact list, the doorbell goes.

Before the human-length mirror beside the fireplace, I study my face. It looks dull, like I'm just a hair's breadth from falling back asleep. My tiny bun has gone loose, and the ends rest below my breasts. I lift several strands, grimacing at the sight of the split ends. It'll take some time to have it remade, but I need to get my package. It's all that matters now.

Someone knocks on the door.

I head toward the door, readjusting the ropes of my floral nightie. Whether by a deliveryman or a janitor, I hate being seen unkempt and haggard. I open the door, and I take a step back. I try to say a word, but my lips won't part. I was expecting the deliveryman, not the man before me, smiling sheepishly with a seemingly heavily-wrapped carton clenched in his hands.

"Good Morning, Melissa!" he says in a tone that's way too chirpy for mornings like this.

“Um, what are you doing here?”

“Are you okay?” He stares at me quizzically. “You don’t look too well.”

Gee, thanks.

“Mornings aren’t my best.” I clear my throat. “So, to what do I owe the pleasure of this early-morning visit?”

“Did I wake you?”

I wave it off.

“Hey. It’s fine. Call it payback.”

His lopsided grin brings a small smile to my face.

“Touché.”

My eyes rest on the package. But I don’t want to believe what I’m thinking. Then my eyes travel back to his face. His sleek jet-black side-part hairstyle matches his black leather jacket and rimless polarized sunglasses. He looks like an upgraded version of the Richard Burnes I saw in the hallway when I moved in.

He stretches his hands, handing me the box.

“I believe you were expecting this.”

What the hell!

“You got this delivered to you?” I ask, touching it gingerly.

He nods. “Got it about half an hour ago from some deliveryman from—”

“Beetle Couriers?”

He chuckles. “Exactly.”

I would have doubted if I were told that a deliveryman from *Beetle Courier* could commit such a grave blunder, delivering a package to the wrong address and confirming its reception via email. I retrieve the box from him.

“Thank you so much, Mr. Burnes. This is an annoying mistake. Silly mistakes like this get me wondering why

professionalism keeps missing in the operational equations of these startups.”

He shrugs. “Everyone makes mistakes.”

“Some mistakes shouldn’t be made.”

He nods. “I guess you’re right. New York isn’t a place for the weak. We still have startups that run on the precepts of professionalism.”

“You know so?”

He shrugs. “I think so!”

He turns to the box. “About that, I think the mix-up is from the orderer’s end.”

I raise my brows and fix him with a sharp stare.

“Excuse me?”

He smiles and pokes the spot on my door where my apartment number is emboldened in silver font.

“124 is what we’ve got here on your door, but the orderer’s address contained the wrong number.”

“125. Your apartment’s number?”

He turns and points at his door. “Right there in bold.”

“So, he actually delivered to the right address?”

“Technically, yes.”

We both burst into laughter. I stop when it hits me with a gripping shock that I filled in the wrong address in my order and almost dragged the company through the mud for being carelessly unprofessional.

“Once again, thank you so much, Richard. I really appreciate this.”

“I’m just doing the right thing. Being a good neighbor.”

“Interesting.”

We smile at each other, then fall silent. Without pausing to mull over my decision, I nod to my half-open door and blurt out.

“Would you mind having a cup of coffee with me?”

He frowns and looks across his shoulder.

“Come on. You don’t take coffee? You can have a glass of Vodka. Whiskey? Wine? What is it exactly?”

Okay, what am I doing?

Just being neighborly. He was kind enough to bring my package, so I’m doing something nice in return. That’s it.

Richard cocks his head, studying me. Heat creeps up my cheeks. I’m still in my robe. My hair’s a bedraggled mess, and my large slippers make my feet look like duck feet.

“No. I drink coffee. I mean, who doesn’t? But I gotta run,” he says and keeps looking backward.

Ah. Of course. I should’ve done my homework before asking my neighbor for a morning cup of coffee.

I nod in the direction he’s looking at.

“You’re scared she’s gonna catch you flirting with another woman?”

“She? Flirting?” He shoots me a blank look. Then, he turns in the direction of his door. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about your wife.”

“Wife?”

“Wife. Girlfriend. Maybe, the mother of your kids. That one person that makes you keep looking over your shoulders when talking to someone of the opposite sex.”

He eyes me. Something lurks in his eyes – it’s not amusement. It’s something else, and I can’t place a finger on it.

“Okay. I know you do not know me, so I’ll let that slide. I’ve got no wife, at least not yet. I’m just a hardworking fellow fending for himself.”

“Not even a woman? Like a girlfriend or something?”

He leans closer, and I move back instinctively.

“I don’t think I need one in my life yet.”

“I see. Well, good for you.”

Celine was right. Not every good-looking guy is desperate to have any woman on his arm. Although, it’s hard to believe a man as good-looking as him doesn’t have a woman in his life.

“There’s a lot of a grey area surrounding that topic. But yeah, I’m not going for the ladies. Not yet. There are other things on my plate.”

“Oh. I see,” I say again. “That’s, um, nice.”

He shoves his hands into the pockets of his dark-blue denim jeans and, again, looks over his shoulder.

“It was nice meeting you again, Melissa. I have to go so I won’t run late.”

“Sure,” I smile as he turns. “Richard?” I call out.

He stops and turns toward me again.

“I’ve got a housewarming party, on Friday, at five. You’re invited. Don’t be late.”

Chapter 5

Richard

A gathering of businessmen around Brooklyn Heights is not good for me.

“Thank you for coming,” a smiling blonde lady at the door says, leaning the glass-filled tray close enough for me to grab a glass of red wine. I lower my head a bit as I grab a glass and hurry into Melissa’s apartment, the venue of the housewarming party that I can’t afford to miss.

You’re invited! Don’t be late.

The words took me by surprise when Melissa said them to me that morning. It was a move I didn’t see coming, one I couldn’t evade either. Still, I would’ve regretted it if I didn’t come. Our second meeting was a stark contrast to our first. She was open, warm...inviting. For a moment, I almost thought she was flirting with me.

Maybe it’s all a trick. A plot to get me to warm up to her and be too blinded to notice anything else.

Despite her rather carefree attitude, her meticulousness shows in her apartment. Even though she just moved in, everything seems to have a proper place.

A perfectionist, maybe?

“I didn’t expect to see you,” Melissa says.

She’s dressed in a royal blue dress that shows off her bare shoulders and stops just below her knees. Her ears sparkle with the small studs she has on. Full pink lips curve in a smile

“You invited me.”

“As a formality. Didn’t want you to feel left out.”

I place a hand on my heart. “Scathing words, as always. I’ll never expect any less.”

She gives me her hand, a smirk dancing on her lips. I know what she’s doing, but it’s her housewarming party, so I humor her. I take her hand and place my lips on them.

“If you keep saying such things in public, people will have a bad impression of me, Richard.”

“Be nicer with your words then.”

“Whatever do you mean?” she says with a false accent. “I’m always kind. People say I charmed my way out of the womb.”

I laugh, letting go of her hand. She’s still smirking; from that mischievous glint in her eyes, I can tell she’s up to something. She’s an enigma: one minute she’s snapping at me, the next she’s playful and almost flirty. What exactly is she up to?

“Let me introduce you. I’m sure everyone’s curious to know why an ex-hockey superstar is present at my housewarming party, although I have been praised for my networking skills. Care to escort me, Richard?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“You’re already here. You should meet everyone else.”

That’s a no.

“Sure. It’s not like I have anything else to do.”

I offer her the crook of my arm, and she slides her arm in. Then, she takes the lead immediately, pulling me further into the apartment.

“Smile, Richard. There’s no need to look like you were coerced here,” she whispers to me as we approach a group of men chatting with wine flutes in hand, gathered around the edge of her couch.

People part for her to walk past. The presence she commands is impressive. How can she be a figurehead CEO? The group of men we approach makes way for us.

“Gentlemen, this is Mr. Richard Burnes. He’s a special guest of mine, so I hope you’ll treat him kindly.”

“A special guest? Are you saying we’re not special, Melissa?”

She laughs softly. “I could never say that, Harold! All my guests are special. Mr. Burnes is a newcomer to this scene, so I thought I’d break him in slowly.”

Ouch.

“You’re being unnecessarily considerate again, Melissa. A man should stand up for himself, regardless of whatever situation he finds himself in.”

“I thought you’d say that Harold. You know I’ve always been a kind person. Whether or not he’s a man doesn’t matter. What matters is potential. Am I right?”

“I suppose you’re, Melissa.”

Her eloquence is as impressive as it’s unsurprising. Besides that, her arm is still wrapped around mine. She’s fond of gesticulating as she speaks, so her manicured fingers occasionally brush against my arm. According to her, she’s breaking me in, but I don’t even get the chance to speak at all. All these people here are valuable connections for my company. And none of them know who I am.

Anonymity has never been more thrilling.

“I don’t see the man of the moment. He’s a no-show today as well, huh? I thought you’d be able to bring him this time, Melissa.”

“I tried my best to invite him, Mr. President. He eludes even me.”

“Who are we talking about?” I ask with the intent of worming my way into the conversation.

“It’s the CEO of Vibrant Corporation. I extended an invite, but I didn’t get a reply.”

Her eyes are on me as she says this. The implication in her tone is evident, but why would I go out of my way to validate it? For all I know, I may just be reading meaning into her words.

“Humility is needed in business. I don’t think he’ll make it very far,” one of the men around us says.

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. Which one among them is the poster child for humility? Hypocritical judgments and gossip are the reasons I avoid gatherings like these. The only reason I’m here is to look for evidence.

“It was really an enjoyable time with you, gentlemen. I wish I could stay longer, but I must greet my other guests. I’ll be back to say goodbye.”

Excusing herself, she walks off with her arm still hooked around mine.

“Lovely people, aren’t they?”

“Hmm. I need another glass of wine.”

“Wine’s aged. Don’t drink too much.”

I chuckle. “I know aged wine, Melissa. Retired hockey stars take wine too.”

“I know nothing about hockey stars.”

“Then how did you know about me?”

She hesitates. “I think there are more things to learn about you than what one can see.”

“I appreciate your comments, but don’t make me look more interesting than I actually am. I’m just a person who wants a peaceful life.”

She doesn’t look like she believes me or is going to leave me any time soon. I don’t know if she’s doing it on purpose, but if she keeps sticking to me, I won’t get the chance to get what I came here for.

“Lissa! Over here!” Someone calls out to her. She smiles at her friend and turns back to me.

“I have to go. Don’t get lost, Richard.”

“I’ll try not to. No promises, though.”

Even though it looks different, the basic layouts of our apartments are the same. If I search properly, then I’ll be able to find the master bedroom. I might not find much, but any lead will do wonders for the investigation.

I drop the wine glass on the tray of the server walking past me and grab another one. With the house full of guests, she’ll be hard-pressed to find me easily.

Past the living room, there's a corridor littered with paintings hung on an ivory-painted wall. Two chandeliers cast warm lights on the paintings. The consideration she put into the décor of her home is a lot more intense than I expected. After stumbling around in the array of rooms, I reach the end of the corridor and finally locate the master bedroom.

As expected, the door is locked. I fumble with the locks for a while, then a slow smile forms on my lips. Breaking into rooms isn't exactly my expertise, but if one has been through a pandemic, they will find themselves with a lot more skills than they thought they would ever use in the real world. I only learned how to unlock doors for fun during quarantine. I never knew I would ever use it in such a situation.

Smirking, I get to work. Normally, it's a skill that requires patience and concentration, but I have no one to watch my back.

Click!

The satisfying noise of the lock coming undone makes me grin widely. Taking slow, measured steps, I enter her bedroom. If the living room is the icing on the cake, then her bedroom is the entire cake. She transformed the simple bedroom into one fit for royalty.

A velvet canopy king-sized bed occupies the middle of the room, while a full-length glass window, covered with velvet curtains, is parted just a little to let the sun in. Two giant fluorescent gold chandeliers light up the room, highlighting the aesthetic luxury of her velvet curtains and canopy.

The room has three doors on either side. Located next to the bathroom is the door to the walk-in closet, left slightly ajar. If I wanted to hide something, I'd put it in the closet. The door's probably open because she left in a hurry.

The closet lights are on, so I spot the racks of expensive-looking outfits right before noticing a vanity mirror propped on a makeup table. The table is lined with several products; every inch of the surface is covered in them. The shoes are further back, placed on small individual shelves lined on the wall like they are on display at a store. A golden lightbulb

hangs above the closet, complementing the ivory-painted walls.

Everything is displayed so plainly; it doesn't look like there is space to hide anything. The make-up drawers are the obvious options, but if I move one, everything will come tumbling down. I look around some more, trying to find something out of place. I've already been out of the party for a while. Someone would come to look for ...

"I wish I could say this is a pleasant surprise, Richard. What are you doing in my closet?"

I freeze. Slowly, I turn toward her. How did I not hear her come in?

I left the door of the room and the closet open.

Shit.

"I ... got lost looking for a restroom."

The lie rolls off my tongue. She shakes her head.

"The guest restroom isn't even remotely close to this place. Why didn't you ask one of the waiters attending to show you to it?"

"I didn't want to impose. This door was open, so I thought it was a restroom. My apologies."

She doesn't look convinced. She looks around the closet and looks back at me. Thankfully, I haven't gone through her closet yet.

"Our apartments should be similar, so there's no way you wouldn't have known this was the master bedroom. Except, of course, you're looking for something."

"Of course not. As I said, I was only looking for the bathroom."

The party outside is still in full swing. If she decides to question me, someone will come looking for us both. This isn't exactly the best place for both of us to be caught. She studies the closet for a few heartbeats, before turning toward the door.

“Why don’t we return to the party? There are other people I want to introduce you to.”

“As long as you show me where the guest restroom is first.”

Chapter 6

Melissa

I'm well acquainted with cleaning up after parties, but something about them exhausts me, even if I'm not directly involved in the cleaning. Celine's staying back to assist, but because she already puked once, she's resting in the guest bedroom, leaving me to monitor the work going on alone.

I was taken aback when Richard showed up. I didn't expect him to come, but he always surprised me. All my expectations about him are wrong – all except one, anyways. Suspiciously loitering around someone else's house raises a lot of red flags. His excuse doesn't do much to help his case.

“Miss Durham, where do you want this?”

It's a porcelain sculpture of a goose. The details on it are intricate; it looks remarkably similar to the sculpture in the office of the chairman of the board at Emerald. No doubt it's from him.

“It'll make a nice decoration for my mantelpiece. You can keep it there.”

It's a warning.

The meaning is clear; a goose symbolizes loyalty. He's been probing me, testing me to know which side I'm on. For a seasoned businessman, he's not subtle. I hate his overt familiarity. My lips curl as I stare at the gaudy sculpture.

I really want to smash that thing.

Overt warning or not, he responded to the invitation I sent, saying he wouldn't be present. And I greeted all my guests and had an eye on them, which was how I knew Richard was missing from the living room. How did he get into my room?

I'll have to check all the security cameras.

Minutes later, the cleaning staff is done at last. After seeing them off to the door, I lock the doors properly.

Better safe than sorry.

I instructed the technicians to keep the security cameras hidden when they were being set up. I also surveyed the apartment when I moved in, looking around to see if they did a proper job. I had no idea then that they'd come in handy so soon.

The monitors for the security cameras are all set up in the study. They also have motion sensors and infrared features which are of better quality than ordinary security cameras. After ensuring the doors are locked, I head to the study.

Looking through the feed, I find a peculiar video. It's the video of Richard walking through the corridor to get to my room. It doesn't look like he's stumbling around. He looks like a man on a mission. He finds my room quite quickly. I lean forward, lips drawn into a thin line.

What's he so determined to find?

I have a vague idea, but I can't go off with a basic assumption. There are better ways to catch someone than just making a blind assumption. I keep watching until I get past the time when we both return to the party. Just a few minutes after we leave my room, someone walks in. He's dressed like someone from the party, but I don't recall seeing anyone wearing a cap at the party. The cap covers a part of his face, so his features aren't clear.

He broke into my room more swiftly than Richard did and headed straight for one of my bedside tables. I don't keep anything important there, but –

The key to my safe!

I run out of the study and straight to my room. Unlocking the door, I make a beeline for the bedside table. The key is still there, and it looks untouched, but I can't shake this ill feeling that it's been replaced. If the man could sneak into my room that quickly, replacing my keys would be easy.

Closing the drawer, I walk toward the closet. I don't know how much time I have, but I must get to the safe before he does. After changing into fresh clothes, I hurry out of the room. There's no time to tell Celine where I'm going. There

are just some things she doesn't need to know. Somehow, it feels strange to admit that I keep a safe. But the safe exists for a reason, a reason I'm not ready to share yet.

I reach the parking lot of the building in no time and locate my car. Then, I start it as swiftly as I get into it and drive out of the parking lot. It's been a while since I went to my safe, but it's untouched. If there were a breach, the sensors would've alerted me.

As I enter the freeway, my phone starts to ring. I pick up the call without glancing at the screen.

"So sorry Celine. I'll be back soon."

"Am I on to Miss Melissa Durham?"

The masculine voice coming from my speaker is unfamiliar.

"Yes ...who am I speaking with?"

"It's Chad Tracinski, and I'm calling from the Federal Bureau of Investigation."

The FBI hadn't contacted me since before I moved. Is something going on?

"Is there something wrong, sir?"

"You're not in trouble if that's what you're asking, but I need to meet with you urgently. Where are you now?"

"On the freeway."

"Follow the next exit you see. I'll track your location and meet you at the first restaurant you see. I won't be long."

"Can it wait? I need to check something urgently."

"It can't wait. You'll have to pull over at the next exit. Please, leave your phone in the car. This is a matter of extreme confidentiality."

Even though the matter of my safe is urgent, I can't just say no to an FBI agent. Obstruction of the law is a criminal offense, and I'm not looking to go to court, especially not while the executives are testing me. So, I pull over at the next exit and

drive past several trees before driving into the parking lot of a small restaurant. Then I turn off the engine and wait.

Things are happening too fast. Way too fast. From catching Richard snooping around to realizing someone may or may not have tampered with my safe. And now, a meeting with an FBI agent.

My phone rings again, startling me out of my thoughts.

“Hello?”

“You’re being followed. Look behind.”

A cold feeling slithers through my spine and the hairs on the nape of my neck rise.

“Do you see that blue Volvo?”

“Yes.” My voice comes out in a whimper.

“It’s been following you since you turned off the freeway. It likely has been following you since you left home.”

In my urgency, I didn’t even notice the car. My heart sinks to the bottom of my stomach. What if my key hadn’t been stolen? What if he just broke into my room to give the illusion of stealing or replacing the keys so I could hurry to check if the safe had not been broken into and lead them right to the safe?

It’s a trap.

“Do you understand now?”

“I do. Are you here?”

“Almost. Just go inside the restaurant and order a dish for two. Try not to stand out too much.”

“All right.”

I turn off the engine and walk into the restaurant on shaky limbs. It’s a fast-food restaurant with a moderate crowd. I look out of place, the only one who’s by myself. I ignore the stares and wait for my turn to order.

The door opens behind me, and a man walks into the restaurant. He spots me and begins walking to me with a

smile.

“Melissa.”

“Chad?”

“Yeah. Don’t you remember me?”

“You’re here early.”

“Yeah. I wasn’t that far away. Have you ordered?”

“No, not my turn yet. I thought I would have to sit by a table all by myself for a while. Why’d you even choose a family restaurant?”

“It was the closest to both of us. Come on, let’s order.”

We’re acting like two very normal people meeting in a restaurant for a chat. The pretend normalcy calms my racing heart a little, and when I glance out of the restaurant, the blue Volvo’s gone.

We make our order and walk to a booth. Our food is supposed to take ten minutes. Does Chad want to talk that long?

“Miss Durham, how are you finding your move?”

“I’m settling in well. My neighbor’s a little interesting, though.”

“Interesting how?”

I chew on my lip, deliberating. What do I tell him – that I caught my neighbor snooping around my apartment? I dismiss the thought. It has nothing to do with why we’re here.

“We’re glad. I’ll inform the higher-ups of this development. How far along are you with the project?”

“It’s not exactly as easy as the snap of a finger. I’m sending regular updates on the progress, aren’t I?”

“Some of the higher-ups were concerned. That’s all. If you do need help, please don’t hesitate to contact me. I’ll do my best as I’ve done today. And, be careful next time.”

I nod. “I will. Thank you.”

“Order for Chad! Please come pick up your order!” the server announces.

We glance at each other, and he stands up.

“I’ll be right back. Please, put your mind at ease, Miss Durham. You’re safe here.”

He walks off to collect the order while I stay seated. I look around the restaurant again. A family of four is seated at the table in the far corner, laughing and chatting. The son tugs at his sister’s hair. The sight triggers a rush of memories – memories of simpler, easier times.

Chad soon returns with our order.

“I hope you like cheeseburgers, Miss Durham.”

“I’m not a fan of eating at cheap restaurants, Agent Chad.”

“Please, call me Chad. It’s a real honor to meet you, Miss Durham.”

“Why were you in such a hurry?”

“Someone broke into my room. Two people.”

“Were you able to recognize these two people?”

“One of them is my neighbor, but the other somehow knew I had security cameras installed in my home. He wore a cap to conceal his face and went straight for my bedside drawer, where I keep the keys to the safe. I was driving to the safe when you called me.”

“Hmm, that’s a bit suspicious. It’s a good thing I called when I did, or you would’ve given up the location of the safe. For now, we’ll send agents to secure the safe. Agents have also been dispatched to dispose of the person following you. I’ll send you more information as it’s been updated.”

“Yes, thank you. I...”

My phone rings again. This time, it’s Celine. She’s already discovered that I’m not in the apartment. I answer the call after the third ring.

“Lissa? Where are you?”

“I’m ...with a friend.”

“A friend? Do I know this person?”

“No, but I’ll be back soon.”

“Is this work-related? You never go out unprompted like this.”

“Yes. It was urgent, so I had to leave. Don’t worry. I’ll be back soon. I’ll get dinner on my way. Are you in the mood for some cheeseburger tonight?”

Chapter 7

Richard

“Did you find anything?”

“No, nothing. I didn’t get a good look since she caught me the first time.”

“How did that happen?”

“She came into her room and found me in her closet. I gave a lame excuse, but she didn’t push further. It’s too risky to go back in there. It’s not like I’m a professional spy or anything.”

“I’m surprised you even did anything. I thought you left the situation to us to handle. Don’t you trust us?”

“She invited me to her apartment. I took the chance I got.”

“Do you want to get arrested for breaking and entering? That’ll be an awful way to make your debut into the public as Richard Burnes.”

“Okay, okay, I get it. You can stop telling me off now. I’m your boss, you know.”

“If you keep this up, you might not get to be my boss any longer. I’ll send the information from Chan to you. Please, Mr. Burnes, do not do anything stupid again.”

“Yeah, I got it. You can go now, Anna,” I say, dismissing her.

“I’m the Donna to your Harvey,” she says with a glint in her eye. “And don’t you forget it.”

Chuckling, I wave her away. She gives me one last warning look before she leaves my office.

My phone buzzes. An email from Mr. Chan. He’s received more information than I have and has sent flagged correspondence between Emerald and dubious sources, most of which are encrypted. These files can’t be used as evidence, so they’re kind of pointless to have. But it’s still progress.

I shut my laptop for a while and lean back in my chair. For the duration of the party, till she started sending guests home, Melissa stuck beside me. It’s probably because she found me

inside her master bedroom, but if she had been cautious, she would've just called the police. So, why didn't she?

The door to my office opens again without a prompt. Anna walks in and shoots me a knowing look after seeing my closed laptop.

"You should learn this new thing, Anna. It's called knocking."

"I would keep up formalities if you did your job, Richard. I came in because I sent more files for approval, and you didn't reply. Please, do so as soon as possible. I need to send some of those out."

"Yes, yes. Now, *Donna*, would you be kind enough to order me lunch? I'm starving."

A smile tugs at her lips. "I'll order it right away, sir."

She leaves. The view of downtown New York is visible from my office, providing a distracting view of several people going about their daily, mundane life. It's one of the reasons I chose to keep this office; there's something calming about people-watching. It's therapeutic. I start approving the documents she talked about, and by the time I'm done, my lunch has already been delivered.



The traffic in the city is always horrible in the evenings, but when it's closer to midnight, the roads are somewhat accessible. As I pull into the parking lot, I notice the lights in her apartment are on.

Picking my dinner and locking up my car, I make my way to my apartment, too embarrassed to face her. Before I can make it into my apartment, her words stop me in my tracks.

"Is that dinner for two, Neighbor?"

Halfway through unlocking my door, I turn around to face her. She's standing in her doorway, leaning against the wall with her arms folded on her chest. Her hair's pulled back in a ponytail, and she's wearing a faded t-shirt on a pair of joggers. She looks so adorable, so young.

The urge to draw her into my arms hit me so swiftly that I have to take a step back.

“Unfortunately, it’s for one person. Pizza is easy to order around here, so you can always get that.”

“Pizza?” She pouts. “Are you trying to make me fat, Richard?”

“Of course not. I know a good place—”

“Is this the length you’d go to not to share your dinner?”

“Please, stop misinterpreting my words. I’m exhausted.”

“Fine. Why don’t you have your dinner, take a bath after, and come to my place for a glass of wine? It always works to relax after a stressful day at work. What do you say, Richard?”

My mouth falls open. Is she inviting me over? Getting a second invitation to her place after she caught me in an awkward position the last time isn’t on the list of things I expect. Is she gullible or trying to catch me in a lie?

She must’ve noticed my hesitation because a corner of her lips tilt, and she gives me a quick once-over.

“Don’t worry. I know how to keep these hands to myself.”

I blink. She’s brazen; no doubt about that.

Chuckling, I shake my head.

“I never doubted that. I guess I’ll take you up on your offer, then. See you later then, Melissa.”

She smiles as she returns to her apartment, shutting the door behind her. Entering my apartment, I take off my shoes and jacket and hang them up before placing my briefcase aside. Putting my dinner in the microwave, I fetch clean China and a glass of water while waiting for my dinner to be warm. I dial Anna’s number while I wait.

“Richard, do you know what time it is?” she speaks first. “Some of us have lives outside work.”

“Listen, Anna. This is urgent. She invited me to her apartment again.”

She exhales. ‘Richard, I’m not your gossip partner, and this is outside of work hours. I don’t want to hear about your sex life.’”

My lips curve. “What if I’m offering a bonus?”

“That’s a weird reason to offer a bonus. So, do you want to go to her apartment again? I doubt that you’d get the chance to search her apartment.”

I chuckle. Typical Anna.

“Anything can happen.”

“After she caught you snooping around that first time? Don’t be delusional. I suggest you deny the invitation. It’s a trap.”

“Is it, though? It could be an opportunity.”

She huffs. “If you were already planning on going, why did you call me?”

“In case I get murdered. You’re the only other person I can talk to casually about this matter. If your boss gets murdered, you can be a witness.”

“Or my boss can mind his business and leave me out of it. I already told you, Richard. Leave this issue to the professionals. It’s not worth it.”

“I’m going.”

“Don’t waste my time anymore, then. Good night.”

I stare at the phone for a few seconds after the call ends. Why’s she so pissed?

It doesn’t matter. I made the right call. Even if I don’t get to search her apartment, it’s enough to get a statement from the CEO of Emerald Inc. A few glasses of wine can relax her and loosen her tongue. Maybe she’ll admit to the shady business happening underground. Nothing could be more incriminating. I just want a swift closure to the case.

The microwave rings. Using my oven mittens, I pull my dinner out of the microwave and pour it on the China. As I eat, my mind is abuzz with thoughts of ways to get Melissa to open up.

After I'm done, I load my dish into the dishwasher and head straight to my room for a shower. I'm halfway through the whole routine before it dawns on me that it just looks like I'm preparing for a date. No wonder Anna sounded annoyed.

Date Melissa Durham? I scoff. *No way.*

Minutes later, I'm out of the apartment. Even though she invites me to drink wine, leaving my home to someone else's without a gift doesn't feel good, so I take a bottle of wine as well.

She answers the door after the first knock.

"I didn't think you'd make it. Come in, Richard."

It takes a lot of effort to keep my jaw from dropping. She has changed into a see-through pink robe with a low-cut neck. Her hair flows freely down her neck, and her face is free of make-up, giving her a youthful, fresh glow.

"Oh, don't mind my attire. I like to be comfortable at home. You didn't have to bring me a gift though," she says, but still takes the bottle from my hands.

"Pinot noir? That's so kind of you. I know exactly where to put this!"

She sounds excited. Her skin's flushed pink, like she just got out of the bath.

"Have a seat while I set everything up." She steps aside to let me in. "I put the wine in an ice bucket to cool after inviting you. If you didn't come, I would've finished it myself."

I enter her apartment. It feels warmer, somehow. More soothing. Melissa gestures to a couch.

"Please, make yourself comfortable."

She bends to retrieve the remote from the couch. I avert my gaze from her cleavage, swallowing. My breathing turns a little shallow.

"I don't know what shows you prefer to watch," she says as she flips through channels. "This will do."

It's a boring show about a superstar family with everyday interactions. How do people find it interesting?

"I didn't think you were a fan of reality TV," she says. Her voice is closer now; she's walking toward me from behind the couch. She sits beside me, placing the flutes on the coffee table. I inhale her flowery scent, becoming all too aware of her proximity. She stands after a few seconds.

"Do you need help with the bucket of ice?"

"Nah. I think I've got it. Thanks, though."

She brings over the ice bucket and places it beside the coffee table. Then, she brings out the wine from the bucket.

"Will you do me the honors of opening it?"

"Sure."

Taking the bottle from her, I pour us a glass as soon as I open the bottle and return it into the ice bucket. She picks up her flute first and smirks at me.

"Do you treat the women in your life like you treated that wine?"

"If you're asking me whether I'm considerate, then the answer is yes."

Her eyes glint as she smiles. "I'm not asking if you're considerate."

Her voice is lower, sultry. Or maybe I'm just imagining it.

"What are you asking?"

Melissa's eyes bore into mine. A small cryptic smile dances on her lips. Gradually, she raises her glass to her lips. My eyes drop to her mouth, to the slow movement of her lips as they part. She stares at me from over the rim of her glass, and warmth courses through me.

I tear my gaze from hers and drink my wine in two gulps. My thoughts have strayed twice tonight. That's going too far.

"So, is this a friendly visit between two wine lovers?" I ask after the long silence.

Melissa drops her glass on the table and crosses her legs.

“I like getting to know people around me.”

Her response is evasive. A frown creases my brow. Before I can give a response, she stands and walks toward the kitchen.

“I’ll be back in a moment.”

Just then, I spot a familiar picture on the wall. A familiar face stares at me from the portrait. He looks a lot younger, but his features are easy to recognize.

My best friend, Alex.

My frown deepens. What’s a picture of Alex doing here?

Chapter 8

Melissa

“No way! That didn’t happen!”

“It actually did. Club initiation rituals get more ridiculous as you move, but they make great stories to tell people when you’re drunk.”

“I would imagine so. But now, you have me curious. Have you ever been doxed before?”

“Well, if you consider me doxing myself by accident ... then yes.”

“No way! How’d you even do that?”

Unlike when he first came in, his shoulders are relaxed. The buttons on his shirt are undone so I can get a view of his chest. He has a lean but toned body. Paired with his shirt are black shorts that do not hide the outline of his thighs.

“...then I discovered that I exposed my IP address to everyone. I had to move out that day and stay temporarily with one of my teammates before the whole thing got handled by my management. The manager was mad at me, but it served as publicity for the team ... I think.”

“They do nothing about initiation rituals, but they’re mad if a player accidentally doxes themselves. That just seems hypocritical.”

“It was a long time ago. I got a cool retirement bonus even though I quit too early.”

“Why did you quit? You were at the peak of stardom when you did.”

He hesitates before he answers, swirling the wine flute before downing the content. His words slur a little when he replies.

“Better to die a hero than live long enough to be the villain, right?”

“Where’d you even hear that?”

“A friend. He said he got it from Twitter, though,” he says, chuckling.

Is he the type to get drunk quickly? It’s only our second bottle, after all. He did look exhausted when I saw him earlier.

“You’ve been the only one asking questions since I arrived. It should be my turn to ask a question.”

“Go ahead. I’m curious.”

“That picture. How do you know that person?”

I turn around to see the picture he’s pointing at. It’s a picture of my brother, Alex. It’s an old picture I found in the moving boxes. I thought I had lost it, but it was still there after all that time. I don’t know what moved me to hang it back up instead of the picture of myself that I wanted to put up.

“Why? Does he look familiar?”

“He does. He looks a lot like a business associate of mine, Alex. But it couldn’t possibly be the same person. Right?”

Alex and Richard are associates?

How much of my brother’s life did I miss?

“No, it’s not. You want more wine?”

“How do you know it’s not him? You’ve never met Alex. So, you must know the person in the picture. Is he that important that you’re hanging his picture on your wall?”

“My, is that jealousy I hear, Richard?”

“You’re changing the subject, Melissa.”

“If you move on, you get the chance to ask me another question.”

He clamps his mouth shut, studying me. I look away, leaning forward to fill his empty flute and mine. He picks up his flute while staring at me with suspicion. Maybe hanging that picture wasn’t a good idea. I was so overwhelmed with nostalgia that I acted without thinking.

I’m not ready to tell him – or anyone – about Alex.

“Why do you have such a big apartment when you live alone?”

“I have many people around, like Celine.” I hand him the flute. “Isn’t your apartment the same size as mine?”

“I got it as part of my retirement bonus.”

“That makes sense. Are you sure there’s nothing else you want to ask me? Alcohol makes lips loose, you know.”

“Yet yours is clamped shut.” His tone is hard. “I think I’ve had enough wine.”

He places his flute on the table and rests his back on the couch, closing his eyes. I do the same. I honestly can’t remember the last time I had this much fun talking to a man. It’s always Celine and me. A man hasn’t been in the picture in a long time.

“Richard?”

“Yes?”

“What were you truly doing in my room that day?”

“Just as I said, I was looking for the bathroom.”

“Still sticking to your silly excuse? If you’re curious about my clothes size, you can just ask. Although that’ll just make you a pervert.”

“You’re the one who left your door open when you had strangers in your home. Someone else would’ve walked in there, even if it wasn’t me.”

Oh, if only you knew, Richard.

“Are you trying to gaslight me into thinking I forgot to lock my door?”

“Do you remember locking it?”

“Well, yes.”

“The human memory is a tricky thing.”

Even though he deliberately broke into my room, he didn’t take anything. There’s no need to tell him about the security cameras in my apartment.

I've been mulling over the matter for days, and I've reached a conclusion, although it isn't backed up by fact yet. Richard and the other man who broke into my room are somehow connected, even though I can't prove it. The porcelain goose was also delivered to my house that same day. It can't be a coincidence.

"Have you ever thought of donating to a charity? Many of your teammates have reached out to us to donate some of their earnings to charity, but I think it's strange how we've never received correspondence from you."

Richard's response is fast. "Maybe I'm not that passionate about charity."

"Why do I feel like that's a lie? Do you not trust Emerald?"

"Are you pitching your company to me right now, Miss Durham?"

"Perhaps I am. Charity organizations provide an opportunity to give back to the community. Emerald Incorporation happens to have a splendid public profile. You'll be glad you..."

He suddenly rises from his resting position and looms over me. My words die in my throat. There's a strange glint in his eyes, and I can't decipher the emotions swirling in their depths. I can make out his sharp cheekbones and lips in the dim lights of the living room. My throat suddenly goes dry, and I swallow.

"As I said earlier, I don't care much for charity."

"I ... see ..."

Why am I stuttering?

His face is closer than before. A tingle shoots up my skin as his fingers caress my palm. My heart races. His warm breath caresses my face. We stay like that for a while without moving. My heart pounds so loudly that I'm almost sure he can hear it.

The space between us shrinks. I stop breathing. My gaze drops to his lips.

“I need a snack,” I blurt out, scrambling away from him.
“Gosh, how am I so hungry?”

My laughter sounds nervous and strained, and I flee from him like a frightened rabbit, heart racing as I make a beeline for the kitchen, hiding beside the fridge. Placing my hand on my chest, I shut my eyes and will my rapidly-beating heart to slow down.

What ... was that? Did I really almost kiss Richard?

What the hell were you thinking, Melissa?

I stand there for a while, muttering under my breath and fighting the urge to kick myself. How will I face him after that awkward... whatever that was?

“Melissa? Are you okay?”

I clear my throat and straighten. “Um, yes. Yeah. I just ... One moment.”

“I need to go home.” He laughs. “I think I drank a bit too much.”

“It’s ... it’s fine! Do you need help?”

“No, I don’t. Thank you for the wine and ... I’m sorry.”

His heavy footsteps become more distant as he saunters to the door. Hearing the door click shut, I slide to the ground. Instead of slowing down, my heartbeat increases.

Why did he apologize? Did he really want to kiss me, or was he just drunk, going with the flow? Did I unintentionally lead him on?

I don’t know how long I remained on the floor in the kitchen.

I shouldn’t have invited him over.

My goal was to find out why he did what he did, to know what he was looking for, and figure out the puzzle I’d been mulling over. Instead, I end up almost kissing my neighbor.

And oh, I really wanted to.

Why did he even accept my invitation anyway?

“Get over it, Melissa,” I mumble, rising from the floor.

There's no point thinking about this further. I'll report this to Chad and have him run up a profile on Richard. I can get my answers then.

But as I walk back to the living room, a small portion of my brain assumes that maybe, just maybe, Richard Burnes is into me.

Chapter 9

Richard

“And you’re sure you saw a picture of him in her apartment?”

I pace, staring past the view my office provides as Anna sits nearby, questioning me like a detective.

All morning, Anna and I were going through this new development. Even as lunchtime is nearing, I still have no clue as to how Alex, my best friend, is related to Melissa, Emerald’s CEO.

However they’re related, it’s of utmost importance.

“Positive. I’d recognize Alex from a mile away. When I asked her about it, she didn’t seem so eager to answer. She decided it couldn’t be the same person, which is weird because she doesn’t know if that was the Alex I know. She then changed the subject.”

How did I miss that?

“Lemme get this straight, Mr. Burnes. You saw a framed picture of your best friend, Alex, in Melissa’s apartment, and now you’re confused as to what that has to do with everything else. But you think he must be somebody important to her, which is a crazy coincidence, and you probably want me to do some digging to find out. Missing the point in the nail?”

She can’t be closer to my thoughts.

“He is. His was the only framed picture I saw, which means he is someone to her. The question is, who?” I ask rhetorically.

Anna remains silent. Then, “Why not just call him or text him to ask or something?”

I consider the suggestion for a while, before shaking my head.

“No. There’s a good chance she’ll find out.”

“I have a better idea, Mr. Burnes. Why not find out from Melissa herself?”

I stop walking. “But ... how would that work? Last night, even as we were drinking, she kept sealed lips. What makes you think she’s opening up the next time I ask her?”

Anna flashes me a wide grin. “Instinct.”

I grunt. “No guarantees. Just find out what you can. If you get anything, you know what to do.”

“As you wish, my liege,” Anna replies in an exaggerated medieval accent, making a courteous bow, before leaving my office.

I slump on my chair, reflecting. There are not many ways I can find out without asking either Alex or Melissa herself.

I take off my glasses, cleaning the rims with a napkin.

I’ve known Alex since five years ago. Since then, we’ve become inseparable. A caring but tough person, we hit it off soon as we met, in a friendship that continues even now, as I’m the CEO of Vibrant Corp.

Without warning, however, he disappeared four years ago. We’ve had very little contact since then.

Hours later, I’m pulling up at the apartment garage. Melissa’s Chrysler is parked there.

I heave a sigh. She’s home.

Heading over to her apartment, my fingers pause over her doorbell button once I’m at her door.

This is a bad idea.

As if on cue, the door opens. Melissa’s eyes widen on seeing me there, my hands still hovering over the doorbell.

“Richard? What’re you doing here?”

Wearing a plain t-shirt over casual jeans, her hair not in the ponytail I’ve grown used to seeing, she’s like a goddess in casual clothing. I try hard not to gawk.

I swallow hard. “Um, I just wanted to ... talk.”

“Uh, yeah, sure, come in.”

I walk into her apartment, settling on the L-shaped couch.

“Hot chocolate?”

“Please. Thank you.” I nod.

She leaves for her kitchen.

Minutes later, she’s back, two cups filled to the brim with steamy hot chocolate in her hands. I take one and sip the hot liquid, nearly scalding my tongue. She laughs, throwing her head back.

“Don’t just take it like that!”

I set the cup on a nearby table. “Yeah. I can see why. It’s good stuff, though. Burning hot, but good. Thanks.”

Her smile is contagious. “You’re welcome. So, Neighbor-Who-Hates-Noise, what did you wanna talk about?”

“You’re not going to let that go, are you?”

She sips her chocolate, her eyes on me. She nods after sipping, the corners of her mouth twitching.

I glance at the spot on the wall where the picture hung yesterday. It’s gone.

“I wanted to talk about the picture that hung there yesterday.”

She sets her cup down. “I’m sorry, Mr. Burnes, but I can’t—”

“Please. I need to know.”

She regards me curiously. “Why are you so interested in knowing him?”

I rub my hands. Melissa can’t know Alex is my best friend. At least, not until I’ve found out what their relationship is.

“Alex is, uh, a business partner. How are you related to him, Melissa?”

Silence hangs heavy between us. Melissa rubs her hands together, wringing her fingers. After long moments, she sips her chocolate.

An answer isn’t forthcoming.

“You know what? I’m sorry. This is probably a bad idea. I didn’t mean to pry into your private life. It’s just, seeing Alex,

or someone that looks like him—I'm sorry. Thanks for the drink." I rise from the couch.

She releases a heavy breath. "Alex is my older brother."

Dazed, I slump back.

Her brother?

The sister of my best friend is the woman I've been monitoring all this time?

"Wow. I—I'm sorry. It's just ... it's very surprising. So you're Alex's sister. What are the odds?"

"Not much, I suppose. I'm surprised as well. How did you know Alex?"

"Business, as I said. He's, uh, helped me out with a case before. Been weeks since we last spoke, however."

Melissa, lifting her cup to her mouth, goes quiet once more. Silence fills the living room, but for the occasional sipping from both of us.

It's a long while before she answers, and her voice is low when she does. "I don't know."

She doesn't know where her brother is? That makes no sense, does it?

It doesn't, unless they aren't talking. What could be the reason for that?

"Do you want to talk about it?"

She opens her mouth to answer but stops as if thinking better of it. She pauses for a long moment.

"Not really, no."

I press on. "Can I ask another question?"

She regards me with her remarkable green eyes. "Yeah."

"Why did you remove the frame?"

She glances at the wall where the frame rested less than a day ago. She downs the last of her drink and sets the cup on the coffee table nearby.

“That picture of Alex was taken a few weeks before Mom’s death. We had gone to show her our grades, and Alex was proud of his new camera. He wouldn’t stop bragging about it that day.”

She pauses, her eyes blinking rapidly.

“Hannah, our aunt, took the pictures. She took three more, that day, and Alex was so proud of them that he framed them all, giving us all one each and keeping one for himself. Dad wasn’t there.”

A tear drops from her eye.

After Alex’s mother died, I didn’t see him for a while. When I met him much later, he was still devastated. I can’t imagine how Melissa would have felt.

As if driven by an invisible force, I move closer to her, placing a hand on her back.

“I’m sorry, Melissa. It must have been tough.”

She leans on me, the warmth of her body on mine causing a fluttering in my stomach. Damn butterflies.

Her sobs are soft, her tears staining my shirt. I wrap my arms around her, holding her in a tight embrace.

My hands still around her, I turn to face her. Her eyes are reddened, and her lips partly open. Her gaze, like a black hole, pulls me in further.

Awareness flickers onto me. Here I am, in the apartment of the CEO of an organization funding crime, holding the CEO in question in a tight embrace, her arms around my waist.

“I’m sorry, but I’ll have to go now,” I say, slowly breaking off her embrace.

She sniffs, then reaches for a nearby napkin to blow her nose.

I stand. “Thank you for the hot chocolate. It was wonderful. And thank you for opening up to me. Now that I look at it, you do bear some resemblance to Alex.”

That draws a smile from her. She wipes her face and walks me out. She doesn’t say a word.

At the door, I stop to face her. My fingers move to sweep wayward locks of hair back to her ear. I then rub off a tear still on her face.

“I’ll see you later, Melissa,” I say, so low it almost comes out a whisper.



Later in the evening, I get a call from the last person I expect, Alex.

Just hours after I discovered he’s the big brother of Emerald Inc.’s CEO and my neighbor, Melissa, and he’s contacting me. Has Melissa talked to him already?

Drawing in my breath, I answer, and his lively voice filters through the audio piece. “Hey man! It’s been a while!”

“It certainly has, Lex. Where’ve you been? It’s like you just disappeared from the face of the Earth!”

He chuckles. “Yeah, well, I should have told you in advance, at least. Sorry about that. I’m back in the States, but I’m tied down in Washington DC. But hey, what’s up with you? How’s your love interest?”

I begin to cough, patting my chest to calm down.

“Richie, what’s wrong? Is anything the matter?”

I manage to suppress the cough. “Love interest? Who’s that?”

Alex bursts into laughter. “Vibrant Corp, of course! What else can claim your heart?”

A nervous silence fills the speaker. She didn’t speak to him. Good.

Vibrant Corp is the only thing in my heart. It’s the only thing that matters.

Yet, why do I find myself thinking more of Melissa these days than Vibrant Corp itself?

Earlier, when she burst into tears, was it just compassion I felt or something else? Why did my chest squeeze and tighten? Why did it ... *hurt*?

“You still there, Richie?” Alex asks as I am silent for a while.

I release a deep grunt. “Yes. Just got a lot on my mind these days.”

“Ah, that’s no good, Richie. Talk to me. What’s up?”

“There’s not—ok maybe there might be something. Understand this. There’s someone you’re skeptical about because you feel the person might be shady and all, but you eventually find out that the person is family with someone so close to you. How do you handle that?”

“Hmm. That complicates things.” *You have no idea, Alex.* “But in the end, the right thing must be done. Even if tails that aren’t meant to be stepped on are. The right thing over sentiment, anytime.”

Easy for him to say. I know just how protective Alex can be from his experience with his love interests.

If I expose Emerald, in some way or other, Melissa will be involved, even if she’s not part of the underground dealings. And if anything happened to Melissa, I won’t be able to face Alex.

A decision has to be made.

“Thanks for the advice. I’ll talk to you later Lex.”

I end the call, then rise to pace.

Conflicting thoughts battle for control in my head. A part of me wants to leave Emerald as it is, and another part wants me to go through with my agenda.

I’ve come too far to fear repercussions. I will do whatever it takes to get Emerald and Vibrant merged. If it meant I must burn old bridges, so be it.

Chapter 10

Melissa

Another Saturday morning. The morning air blows through my window, glints of sunlight bouncing off the glass and into my eyes.

A good morning for some yoga. I start the day off with a couple of stretches and exercises. I'm about to go on my regular jog when I see him.

Wearing a tight-fitting merino wool long-sleeved t-shirt over a pair of jogging shorts, which gives me a tantalizing glimpse of thigh muscle, his face glistening with sweat, Richard is a sight for sore eyes. He spots me and runs over.

"Hey there, Melissa," he says, giving me a lookover, "nice outfit you got there."

I flush red. A part of me is glad I picked the matching green-blue jogging sports bra and tights.

"Thanks. You look good yourself."

"Hey, I see you're about to jog. Already went a round myself."

"Well, I like keeping fit. "

"Same here. It helps keep me on track, if you get what I mean. Hey, wanna go? I'll race you. Don't worry. I'll go easy."

That draws a giggle from me. "Sure. Let's make a deal. Breakfast is on the loser."

"Deal."

Jogging together through the Heights, we laugh as each of us breaks into a run, trying to outrun the other.

I win our little race by mere seconds. I lean against a lamppost, taking deep breaths to calm my racing heart as I reach the apartment. I suspect he took it easy on me, however. Richard is breathing just fine as he catches up to me.

"Looks like I'm beaten. That settles it. Breakfast is on me. Hey, I have this new pie recipe I've gotta try out. Are you down with helping me on that?"

It's as harmless an offer as they come. Why not?

"You bet."

I head back to my apartment to wash up and change.

In the shower, as the drops of water hit my body in relentless drizzles, Richard comes to my mind again.

During his visit yesterday, we didn't approach the subject of his snooping around. Instead, the subject of conversation was our brother Alex.

Alex and Richard know each other from work. A coincidence, but one that I can use. If I can get closer to him, I can find out just exactly who he is and why he's always popping up wherever I'm concerned.

Wearing a bathrobe, I head to the kitchen. I grab myself a cup and make some coffee. I'm not fond of it, but I need it for a clear mind. I'm about to take my first sip when my phone rings. It's a private number.

"Hello? Who's this?"

"Agent Chad. Listen carefully. Earlier yesterday, the Chairman of the Board of Directors of Emerald Inc. was seen paying a visit to notorious Mafia boss Don Luigi. We can only assume he's made another generous donation."

I grit my teeth. All these shady deals, happening in my own company, under my nose.

"The board is making moves, and we can only deduce you'll be involved, some time or the other. Do not go to the safe without our knowledge. And if you find anything suspicious, contact me. You know how."

The call ends abruptly, but I get the message. Knowing that underground crime deals and embezzlement are taking place, but being powerless to do anything about it is frustrating. I glance at the cup of coffee and dump the liquid in the sink.

* * *

"Isn't – aren't you supposed to use *one* teaspoon of vanilla?"

Richard stares curiously into his pie mix, then back at me.
“Wasn’t it one I added?”

He scoops a small sample on a finger and licks it. I swallow.

“That last one was the second.”

“We’re good. It’s the eggs I’m worried about.” He chuckles nervously.

Laughter bobbles up my throat. For a reason, he misread the instructions, adding six eggs instead of three.

“We could have just gone for ordinary pie. Why did you insist on Cracker pie?”

Richard gives a soft laugh. “In college, there was this girl in my department. We had a project, along with some other guys. So one day, we all went to this girl’s house to finish our research. Her mother treated us all with cracker pie, and I loved it. I’ve always wanted to try it, but I didn’t get the recipe until a few days ago.”

I cast a side glance at him. I’ve never seen this side of him until today, and it’s a side I’m loving so far.

“That’s a wonderful story.”

He puffs his chest up. “Wait till you taste the pie. You’ll discover a whole new side of wonderful.”

Putting the mixture in the oven, he sets the timer.

“Now, we wait.”

Richard keeps his gaze on me. A corner of his mouth curves up.

“Is there something on your mind, Richard?”

“A lot of things, to be honest.”

I raise an eyebrow.

“Like what?”

His lopsided smile makes me color. “Like which movie we should be watching while we’re eating the pie. Or what to do after. It’s a free Saturday for me.”

He's in a jovial mood, yet his eyes are fixed on me, and he doesn't flinch. Is he asking me to spend my Saturday with him?

Alarm bells ring through my head, screaming for caution. The last thing I want to complicate my life is this man.

This sexy, aggravating man.

Another part of me wants to take him on his offer.

"Are you currently watching any series? That's a start."

His smile evolves into a grin. "Great. Let's binge-watch a series."

The counter ticks. Instead of walking to the oven to remove the pie, he walks over to me, stopping just inches from me.

He leans in, and I lean back until I'm against the cabinet. He looms further, but I can't move back. A wave of heat clouds my brain, and I close my eyes.

He gives a soft chuckle. "You're standing behind the cabinet. We need plates, Melissa."

"Oh."

I step aside, and he gets two plates from the cabinet.

What just happened?

The pie looks nice. He cuts a small portion and tastes it. A smile brightens up his face.

"Holy heck, this *actually* tastes good! We did it! We make a good team."

We?

That single remark sends tingles through my veins.

"I guess we do."

"We should do this more often." *Sure, when I'm not trying to find out why you're snooping around.*

I take a piece of the pie, lifting my chin and nodding in approval, eyes bright. Richard must have noticed because he begins to laugh.

“See? Told you. Hey, let’s take this eat-fest to the living room.”

He divides the pie, serving portions into plates.

“Why don’t you grab a fruit juice pack from the fridge? We could use some of it with this pie,” he says, pointing to a refrigerator in a corner.

I grab the juice pack, then go over to the cabinet to get two glasses. Richard reaches for the cabinet as well to fetch something, and our hands stroke each other. The contact sends my pulse racing, my awareness of him already on the brink.

We maintain eye contact, blinking at intervals. His gaze is on my mouth. Is he thinking of kissing me?

“We –we should get back t–to breakfast,” I say, taking a large, deep breath to calm my throbbing heart.

He doesn’t remove his gaze. “We should, shouldn’t we?”

His face leans closer to mine, but stops. He grabs two spoons, and turns away, not looking back. I put a hand to my chest, as the rapid and loud drumming subsides.

“I’ll get the pie to the living room. You can bring along the fruit juice,” he says, his back still turned to me.

He leaves, the two pie servings in his hands. I pause a moment to gather my thoughts before following suit.

A movie is already playing when I get to the living room. It’s not what I expect.

“*Monty Python?* I love this movie!”

He flashes a wide grin. “Thought I’d surprise you there.”

I settle down on the wide couch with him and take my plate of steamy Cracker pie. Richard has a good sense of humor, laughing at every joke in the movie, even those I miss. I find myself asking him at regular intervals what some particular joke meant.

“That was great,” Richard says after the movie.

“Yeah. The movie and the food were awesome. Thanks for such a great morning, Richard.”

He turns to me, an eyebrow up. “You’re leaving already? But it’s just,” – he glances at a digital clock nearby – “ twelve-fifty-two? Heck, I didn’t know we’d spent almost three hours. Time does fly when you’re having fun, yeah?”

“Yeah, I guess. Listen, I had a great time, but I have to g–”

Richard cuts in. “Are you doing anything else?”

I’m about to answer in the affirmative, but think better of it.

“No.”

“One more movie. I have some popcorn for dessert.”

One more movie. How complicated can things get?

“Alright. But one more, and that’s it.”

“Hey. I have just the thing. *Poltergeist*.”

Of all the movies, a scary one. I spend the better part of the next hour jumping in fright.

“Seems like you’re not one for horror movies, yeah?” Richard asks.

“Who the hell is?”

He bursts into laughter, jerking on the sofa.

A jump scare scene plays and I jump, sending pieces of popcorn up the air. I hold the next thing near me that’s safe and secure. That next thing is Richard.

My arms wrap tightly around him; his masculine strength calms my stray nerves. I feel ... *secure*, in his arms.

“Um... do you want me to change the movie?”

I ease myself from him. “Let’s finish the movie. And sorry about the mess.”

“It’s no problem, Melissa,” he says, brushing some tendrils of hair that had escaped my ponytail off my temples and behind my left ear.

My phone vibrates, distracting me from the moment. I check the notification. My eyebrows wrinkle. It's a mail.

A mail from the Chairman of the Board of Directors of Emerald.

I open the email and skim through it. Heat rushes through my skin.

The short email is a directive. I'm to appear before the board of directors, for a reason unspecified. Dread courses through my spine.

"I'm sorry, but I have to leave right now, Richard. Something important just came up."

"What's wrong? Hope everything is alright—"

I'm already at his door. "Nothing's wrong. Thank you for such a lovely day. I enjoyed every part of it."

I shut his door.

Entering my apartment, I dial Chad. If there's anyone that should know about this new development, it's him.

"Chad?"

"It's me, Miss Durham. Good afternoon."

I delve straight into it. "I just got an email from John Lamar. The board is demanding to see me. An emergency issue, they said. This is the first time in months. What do I do?"

A momentary pause. "Attend the meeting. Don't worry. We'll make sure no harm comes to you. Just attend that meeting. There might be a hint as to what's Lamar's endgame."

"Do you think all this is related to the safe?"

"That'll be looked at. There's no telling what the board is up to now, but we can't avoid leaving any loose ends."

"Is there anything I should do before attending the meeting?" I twirl a random strand of my hair between two fingers.

"Wear the wire. The meeting will be monitored from our end. And be calm, Miss Durham. We can crack this case only with cool heads."

The call ends. I suck air between my teeth, before sighing.

I was enjoying my Saturday before this message. Now, I'm on edge, my pulse racing.

What is Richard thinking now? All through today, he's been ... *friendly*. I've not enjoyed my time with anyone like that since my brother.

I tap the wall. For all I know, Richard could be a spy. I still don't know why he was snooping around during the party. Why does he pop up everywhere?

If Richard is a spy, then I should be cautious. Yet, I'm drawn toward this mysterious man.

I set about preparing for my impromptu meeting with John Lamar and the rest of the board. The sooner I face them, the better.

This meeting can be my best chance at getting a major lead on Lamar and, conversely, a meeting that can undo me.

Chapter 11

Richard

“I got something, Mr. Burnes! Now, I know you asked me to look into Melissa’s relationship with your runaway lawyer, Alex Hawthorne. They’re brother and sister, by the way.”

It’s been days since I gave Anna her task. It’s Monday morning, and she’s in my office, reporting her findings. So far, there’s nothing new.

I grunt, my hands crossed. “That’s not news, Anna.”

“Oh? So you took my advice and asked her? How did it go?”

I tap my forehead with my palm in exaggerated frustration.

“Focus, Anna. You were saying you got something?”

Anna shifts her glass frame, then draws her focus to her laptop.

“Yes, as I was saying. I found something that you might want to see. The lead was a bit obscure at first, but I later did some digging.”

Interested, I hunch over.

“Two hundred thousand dollars was transferred to a bank in Switzerland from Emerald Inc. two months ago. The signatory? Melissa Durham.”

“Maybe it was just made in her name. Or it was intended to make it look that way.”

Anna tilts her head to regard me, her eyebrows slowly raised. Her chin perks up as a smile builds on her lips.

“Mr. Burnes, did you just ... defend Melissa Durham?”

Did I?

“No, of course not. I’m just trying to view every positive option.”

“Sure thing, sir. Except, I did more digging. On Saturday, she met with the board of directors, and after the meeting, another transaction was made. This time, it was two million dollars to

a separate account. Again, the signatory was Melissa. Coincidence?”

I clench my fists. Last Saturday she left suddenly without any explanation. If Anna’s information is correct, then it was to meet the board.

It’s too much information to just ignore. Is Melissa really involved in their laundering deals?

“How did you get this information?”

“Good question. The account officer is a friend.”

All this can mean either of two things. Melissa, based on previous information, is being coerced to sign documents, the contents of which she’s unaware. The second and the more glaring option is that she’s not as powerless as I think and actually has a hand in the company’s underground operations.

“Thank you very much, Anna. I’ll see what I can do with this.”

“You’re welcome, boss. What would you do without your loyal stooge?”

Not much.

Anna shuts her laptop. “That’s by the way, sir. You do remember the fundraising event four days from now, don’t you?”

“Of course I do, Anna. What’s your point?”

“It’s just a reminder. We wouldn’t want a guest of honor to miss the party. Do you have someone you’ll be escorting?”

My eyes widen. It skipped my mind.

“Thank you for your reminder, Anna. And for everything else. I’m paying you, but still, I’m grateful. You’re doing a good job.”

“You’re paying me sir, but you’re welcome.”



It’s Friday night, and I’m waiting just beside the limousine parked just outside of my Brooklyn Heights apartment. I don’t wait long before she arrives.

Wearing a blue, stylish dress diagonally cut across to her cleavage, which hugs her figure to her hip, then split down her legs, with a shawl draped over her shoulders, Melissa is just ... *stunning*. I struggle to inhale air.

“Shall we?” she says, stretching her hand out to me.

I take her hand. “She was a Phantom of delight when at first she gleamed upon my sight.”

“Flattery, Richard. Shakespeare?”

“Wordsworth. But honestly, poetry doesn’t do your beauty tonight justice.”

I give a curt nod to the driver and lead her to our evening ride with a hand on the small of her back. The driver opens the door when we’re close to the limo. She enters first and I follow suit, settling close to her, becoming aware of how good she smells. In a daring move, I take her hand and run my fingers over them. She makes no effort to pull away.

“Nice limo. I’m impressed.”

“Rented finery, I’m afraid. Worth it tonight though.”

It’s by chance Melissa is my partner tonight. Three days ago, she was shopping in a supermarket, which I was also shopping in by chance when we met. Getting back to the apartment, I dropped the question on my mind all evening; would she like to attend a party with me? It took a little convincing to make her agree.

Three days after and I’m questioning the wisdom behind inviting her. What was I thinking? No. I’m not wrong, wanting to get close to her. It’s the best way to find out something, if anything.

The car starts moving.

I’m at a loss for words. Here is a gorgeous woman, just inches from me, in this wide limousine.

“Nice tuxedo.”

I’m jolted from my thoughts. “Come again?”

“I said, nice tuxedo. I fancy luxurious male clothing.” She stretches out her hand to feel the material, but pauses, then withdraws.

“Thank you, Melissa. Your dress is fantastic as well.”

“Oh, this? Well, it’s one of my best. I have to look good for my escort, don’t I?”

I rub my fingers together. She made herself look this good just for me.

“Well, If that’s your aim, then it’s mission accomplished. You look amazing.”

“Thanks, Richard.”

Silence hangs in the limousine once more, in contrast to the world outside the darkened windows, of pedestrians passing by, buzzing like bees, and honking cars facing the evening traffic.

“You never told me the venue of the occasion.”

I turn to face her. “I didn’t?”

She nods in the affirmative.

“The Angel Orensanz Foundation for the Arts. Manhattan.”

“I know that place. It was originally an old church, yeah?”

I nod. “That’s right. An old synagogue to be precise.”

Again, a pervading quiet fills the limousine.

“Champagne?” I ask, after long minutes without any words.

“One glass, please.”

I open the limo’s mini-bar and pull out a bottle. I place two cups on a cabinet and give the cork of the champagne bottle a pop. The lid flies off. Once the cups are half-full, I hand one over to Melissa.

“Thank you,” she says in a low voice.

Music filters through the speakers. *Tonight’s The Night* by Rod Stewart. I sip my champagne. There’s nothing more to be said.

The limo comes to a stop. Soon, the doors are opened by stewards. I step out first, then give Melissa a hand.

Camera lights flash around us like stun grenades as we walk through the entrance, coming from the various reporters that are gathered. I pay them no heed, however, my mind on the woman I'm walking with, arms locked. As a guest of honor, I give the cameras a routine smile.

The moment we're in the hall, Melissa excuses herself. She's withdrawing from me. Again.

I make some light talk with a few notable people here and there. As a server passes, I get a glass of champagne from him and down the contents in a go.

That's when she comes into view. She's talking to a middle-aged man, a glass of champagne with her. It's clear from where I am that he's trying to woo her.

Walking over to her, I set my hands on her lower back. She jumps, before turning to me.

"Good evening, Dr. Brent. I see you've met my date for the evening."

"Ah, evening, Mr. Burnes. You have yourself a wonderful woman there."

"Thank you, Doctor. If you'll excuse us," I say, leading Melissa away.

"What was that about, Richard?"

"You left, Melissa."

She's about to answer when we're interrupted by a man in a white suit.

"It's time for your speech, Mr. Burnes."

"Yes, of course." I shake hands with the man. "I'll just be over."

As the man turns away, I return my gaze to Melissa. "We'll talk later. Duty calls."

She nods without saying a word, and I turn away.

Walking up to the podium, I collect my speech papers, perusing the contents I've already studied. The papers appear blank to me, however.

The friction between Melissa and I is only building. I sigh, wishing it will all just blow away.

But now, I have a speech to make.

"Poverty is a problem that still plagues humanity," I begin, "more than you might imagine. Statistics show that approximately seven hundred million people in developing countries, two-thirds of whom live in Asia and the Pacific, suffer from chronic undernourishment. And it's not just in developing countries. Even in America, more than forty percent of Americans are considered to live below the poverty line. Surely, poverty can be reduced worldwide due to sustainable efforts and aid. But that isn't enough. We should be doing more. We all live on this green-blue planet. Let's put food in the mouths of those that don't have any..."

I finish to a rousing applause. My eyes scan the grand hall for a moment. Chandeliers hanging high in the ceiling, their lighting bouncing off the stained glasses to increase the lightning tenfold. Before I find who I'm looking for, with a smile on her face, Melissa is clapping as well.

Leaving the podium, I stride across the hall to meet her.

"That was a nice speech, Richard. You had the crowd, me included."

"To be honest, I held back, if anything. There's so much we could be doing. A pity some choose instead to use their wealth for nefarious purposes."

"True."

I turn to gauge her reaction. She's unaffected by my remark. I change the topic.

"The fun part of the party is starting soon. May I have your hand for the dance, m'lady?" I say, in a faked accent.

She follows suit, extending her hand. "Why, certainly, mister."

I take it and lead her to the ballroom, arm in arm. As we step onto the dance floor, a slow waltz tune plays.

I place one hand on her waist and hold one of her hands with the other. With me in the lead, we move with ease into the music.

“You’re a good dancer,” I say, impressed by the grace and confidence of her movement.

“You’re an expert yourself, Richard.”

I pull her close and take over the dance with my expertise. With bold, sweeping steps, I maneuver her from a collision with another couple. That draws her closer to me.

“You up for something awesome?” I ask.

She looks up at me. “What’s that?”

“I’ll show you. But first, we have to get out of here.”

I lead her away from the ballroom to a private balcony, with stained glasses decorating the walls and the night sky in view. She stares wide-eyed into the night sky, bejeweled with spots and speckles of stars.

“What a view.”

I chuckle. “What I want to show you is more down-to-earth, Melissa. It’s gonna blow your mind.”

Flicking a switch, the stained-glass windows light up, creating a beautiful arrangement of dazzling colors. The arrangement of bright-colored angels and other ethereal beings on the glasses reflecting the lights from fluorescents creates a harmonic symphony of light and color.

Melissa remains on the spot, speechless. I come in behind her, placing my hands on her waist.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

She turns to me. There are tears in her eyes.

My hands on the curve of her hips, I gaze into her wet eyes.

“Can I kiss you?”

Panting, she licks her lips. I tilt my head and seal my mouth over hers. Her lips are soft on mine. I try to deepen the kiss, my tongue probing her lips, and she opens up, her tongue stroking mine. I taste her in long licks.

My hands tighten on her hips, and as if in response, she strokes my hair with her hands, pulling me closer. I growl, sliding my tongue across hers even fiercer. The raging beat of her heart vibrates against my chest.

I pin her against a wall. My right hand lifts her leg from the slit of her dress, caressing the smooth skin of her thighs.

This is happening. I'm locked in a deep kiss with Melissa, a woman I'm older than by probably a decade, who I'm spying on, and my best friend's sister.

Releasing a heavy breath, I withdraw from her. "I'm sorry. I still have some things to do."

Straightening my clothes, I walk away, not looking back.

What am I doing? What's come over me?"

Melissa is important to my aim. In an effort to get closer to her, I'm going the extra mile. Of course, this is all a means to an end, or so I thought.

Now, we've crossed the barrier, going physical. Memories of the kiss linger in my mind. Stepping back into the hall, with people engaged in idle chatter around me, I head for the banquet session, where I sit.

A server approaches. "Do you need anything, sir?"

"Yes, please. A cup of wine."

Chapter 12

Melissa

A siren wails in the distance, its shrilling sound piercing my thoughts. On the highway, one of many in the city, a flood of yellow taxis, buses, and cars of all shapes and sizes are all parked and squeezed together like sardines in different lines stretching miles on end.

Fortunately, I'm at the vanguard of one such line, waiting for the traffic light to turn green.

On a normal morning, I'd be on my phone or humming to music playing from my car's speaker.

Not today.

My fingers drum on the steering wheel as I wait. Friday plays on my mind once more.

Richard's surprise during the party was wonderful. I've never seen anything like it. The kaleidoscopic arrangement of stained glass art, color, and lighting was like something out of a painting.

What fails to leave my mind, however, is what he did afterward.

Richard and I kissed. His kiss carried a passion ... a *hunger*. I didn't realize I wanted to kiss him so badly as well until Friday. I buried myself in the moment, forsaking all thought and doubt.

God, I wanted so bad for him to take me there and then.

My lust sends pangs of alarm, shrilling through my body.

The incessant honking of car horns brings me back. The green light reflects on my windscreen.

"Hey! Drive, for God's sake!"

I stick out a hand, waving in apology, before driving off. Knowing it's pointless to get riled up over the past, I focus on getting to work as fast as possible, casting all thoughts of Richard from my mind.

Pulling into Tillary street, I heave a sigh of relief when the steel-glass exterior of the skyscraper serving as Emerald Inc.'s headquarters comes into view. After parking, I walk into the building, after checks from security personnel and the receptionist. As the elevator opens, there's no one inside. Good.

The elevator ride to the fifth floor is quiet. I close my eyes, and Richard's lips brush across mine once more...

Ting!

The elevator bell rings and the doors slide open, admitting me to my office floor. Releasing a deep breath, I walk out.

I'm handed a letter by my blonde female secretary, whose office is outside mine. In this digital day and age, with emails existing, who still uses letters to pass messages?

The letter is blank. From previous walkthroughs, there's one way to reveal a message concealed in blank paper.

I open a desk drawer. There's an ointment there. I rub a little on the paper. Sure enough, there's a message.

Board member and director of accounts, Gerard Haynes. Investigate.

I fold the paper, but it falls on my lap. As I retrieve it, my mind goes back once more.

If I needed any confirmation before Friday that Richard wanted me as bad as I wanted him – no, I *want* him, I got it that day.

I retrieve the paper, then toss it into my bag. I'll discard it properly.

Walking out of my office, I make my way to the finance department. I wave away employees in the department whom I pass by. Reaching my destination, I knock at the door. A nameplate with a bold inscription is on it. Gerard Haynes.

There's no answer, so I knock once more. After three more knocks without an answer, I enter. The office is spacious and organized, but I'm not here for sightseeing. I head for his cabinet, looking for anything that might be suspicious.

I'm still searching when my eyes catch something. A false bottom in one of his compartments. I lift the lid and find a folder. The contents make me clench my fists.

My signature is being used to make illegal transfers. If anything goes wrong for them, I'd be dragged along.

Something else comes into sight. A flash drive.

Putting the folders back in place, I place them back in the folder, then close the lid, and place the normal files and journals in, before shutting the drawer, then placing the drive in my bag.

I open the door at a slight angle, peeking to see if anyone is passing by. When I'm sure I'm clear, I stride out of the office and into the hallway.

"Miss Durham."

A chill runs down my spine. I stop and turn. Haynes.

"Mr. Ha-Haynes! Good morning." I stretch out my hand.

My heart is racing, but I remain composed.

The slim, tall man with white hair takes the hand. "Good morning, Miss Durham. Fancy seeing you here."

"Ah, yes." I rub my sweaty hands together. "Well, I just thought I'd check up on how things are going with our finances."

He regards me with cold, grey eyes. "You could have just asked your secretary to bring in a report."

This man isn't letting me off.

I remain upright, looking him in the eye. "I don't think it's smart adding paperwork to what's already on the ground. I thought to make a quick check to save me some precious time, and I did."

"And is everything to your satisfaction?"

"Certainly, Mr. Haynes. It's been a pleasure."

I turn to walk away, putting my hand on my chest when I'm far enough.

In my office, I plug the drive into my laptop. A series of files, each with different dates and numberings, pop up. Transactions.

Without delay, I call agent Chad.

“Miss Durham. Did you get my message?”

I nod, absent-minded.

“Did you?” Chad asks again.

“Ah, yes! Yeah. Sorry about that. I’m a little distracted.”

“Is everything alright, Miss Durham? Do you need backup? Some help?”

I sigh. “Yes, I’m fine.”

“Good to hear. Now, did you find anything?”

“I did. A flash drive.”

“Hmm. And are you in possession of the drive at this moment?”

“Um, yeah, sure. What do I do with it?”

A pause. “Pass it to your secretary. As you are aware, she’s with us. Do not pass it to her carelessly, however. Eyes are watching.”

A short beep signifies the call’s end.

I’m about to put the phone down when I receive an iMessage from someone I’ve not talked to in a long while. My brother, Alex.

It’s me, Alex. I know things are a bit weird between us. Can I call?

Ever since my aunt, Hannah, died about four years ago from cancer, Alex has been nonexistent in my daily life.

The reason isn’t farfetched.

We were the only family all three of us had.

That was until Alex had problems with Aunt Hannah and left, for his ‘freedom’. I was still close to our aunt, and then she got diagnosed with cancer.

Ever since then, we've been in a feud with no end. I love Alex, but why then did he leave? Now, after four years, he's messaging me again

Why? Now you've decided you want in again? And how did you get my number?

I put the phone down, my ire rising. A ping means he's replied.

Look, I know you most likely don't want to talk to me right now, but please, can I call you later? In the evening, maybe?

Oh, Alex. I don't hate him. I never have.

Releasing a long breath, I type a reply.

8 pm.

•♥•♥•♥•♥•♥•

"Um, evening, Melissa."

"Evening, Richard."

Of all the places to meet Richard, it's in the parking lot.

"Just heading back from work?" He asks.

"Yes." I give him a look over. "I guess that's not the case for you though, right?"

He's wearing a casual outfit. As always, he looks irresistible.

He chuckles, rubbing the back of his hair with one hand.

"Right. Well, I'm out of cookies, and I thought I'd stock up on supplies."

"Um."

The air is thick, as silence hangs between us.

"Can I ... walk you to your apartment?"

I eye him. His face is unreadable.

"Sure."

He retrieves his box of cookies, and we walk to our doors in silence.

On Friday, after the kiss, he said little as well. After the party and throughout the jaunt back to our apartment, we didn't say a word to each other.

Good night. That was the first thing he said since the kiss and the last of that night.

We reach our apartments. I rummage through my bag to find my key, but he's already with his. His lock clicks just as I find it, but I fumble, trying to unlock my door with trembling hands. The key falls. I reach for it, but my hands touch his instead.

He reaches for it as well.

My eyes meet his, and my chest flutters, with my cheeks blushing pink.

"Need some help there?" He says, rising to his feet.

"Um..." I find it hard to mutter words.

He inserts my key into the lock, and it clicks open. Turning to me, he hands over the key.

"Th-thanks," I say in a low, muttering voice.

"No problem. And," – he lifts a hand to tuck strands of hair on my temple, but stops, clenching his hands – "uh, goodnight."

He picks up the pack of cookies he dropped and walks into his apartment, shutting the door behind him. I look down at my fingers. They're still trembling.

I walk into my apartment, dumping my bag on a table. I slump to the chair, running my fingers through my hair.

Why did he stop? It's almost habit now for him to tuck my hair behind my ears whenever he sees me.

Did the events of Friday change history mind?

I'm not allowed any more time to think as my phone rings without warning. I check the number. Alex. I pick up the call.

"Hello? Hello? Is that you, 'Lissa?"

There's an evident longing in his voice that breaks some bricks off the wall I've built around my heart.

“Yes, Alex. It’s me.”

“Listen. I know we’ve had our issues, ever since Hannah, but I just really wanted to talk to you.”

If he thinks it’s going to be that easy, he’s wrong.

“Oh, so now family matters to you? Where were you when aunt Hannah was dying from cancer?”

His deep sigh fills the receiver. “I didn’t know. Look, I don’t want to do this. You never gave me a chance to explain –”

“Explain what? Okay. I’m giving you a chance now. Give me one good reason why you left.”

“I ... Look, ‘Lissa, a lot of things have happened. But I’m glad you’re doing well for yourself now. I wish you’d talk to me again like you used to. I wish you’d see me as your big brother again.”

“Is that what you called to say? Alright, *big brother*. Goodbye.”

“Wait, ‘Lissa! Don’t cu–” I hang up before he can go any further.

Damn him. What right does he have, showing up after so long and asking me to treat him like before?

I stop short of tossing my phone to the wall.

Chapter 13

Richard

Why does Melissa affect me this much?

Last night, I stopped short of tucking her hair, as I so often do. I was afraid I'd hold her face, lean in, and bury myself in a deep kiss with her. Afraid she'd give in to me.

Like Friday, five days ago. Memories of that moment still play over in my mind.

I still don't know what made me kiss her. That night, Melissa was a magnetic force that pulled me closer, till I couldn't resist the attraction.

"Hey, you gotta take it easy, man," my gym instructor, Mark says, easing the weight off my hands.

I rub my face with a towel he hands me. I glance at my t-shirt. Soaked, with my sweat.

He takes a long look at me. "What's got you all riled up?"

"Riled up? What do you mean?" I raise an eyebrow.

"You just went more than fifty times with 40lb weights."

More than fifty? I could have sworn I've just thirty...

"I'm just, a bit distracted, that's all."

"A bit? You weren't even here anymore!"

I rise from the bench. "I'm fine, Mark. Thanks. I'm gonna go take a shower now. Gotta head back to work soon."

"Alright. Just take it easy, alright?"

"Sure thing." I head for the showers.

Thirty minutes later, I'm in my car. I turn on some music, hoping to remove my mind from Melissa.

It doesn't work. Tapping on the steering wheel as I drive, my gaze turns to a billboard advertising a new kind of body lotion. The model's smooth skin glistens like polished gold. As the model rubs her glimmering thighs, I conjure up a ravishing image of Melissa's thighs.

Running my fingers across every curve of hers, and across her legs in particular, turned me on, as I almost reached that point of no return.

Images flash in my mind. Images of Melissa, nude, her silhouette highlighted by votive candles nearby; of Melissa and me, bodies joined in natural harmony.

I shake my head. I shouldn't be thinking of her that way.

Melissa is a pretty captivating woman, from her long, dark hair, through the curves of her body and down to her legs. But it's not just her looks. Her confidence and outspokenness also appeal to me.

No doubt about it, Melissa is a woman that could stand up to anyone. She's so much like Alex.

I grip the wheel. Alex.

I didn't even consider my best friend. What will Alex think if I tell him I'm interested in his sister? Or if he finds out?

One thing is for sure. That'll damage our longstanding friendship.

I have no business fraternizing with Melissa in the first place. My only aim is the acquisition of Emerald Inc., and Melissa is just another thing in my way.

Either that or a means to that end.

Why am I so stupid to even try getting close to Melissa after all this?

Pulling up at my office, I leave my car to security personnel. Anna is already on her laptop, with a cup of latte when I get in.

"Good morning sir. Busy morning?"

I check the time. A minute left till eleven a.m.

"Good morning, Anna. I was at the gym."

Anna flashes a witty smile, before turning to her laptop.

"While you were away building those muscles, I ordered some latte, and got a new lead. Oh, and call Alex later – he's been

trying to reach you all morning.”

I groan. “I forgot my phone at home.”

She turns to me, both eyebrows raised. “How? Why?”

“Let’s just say there’s a lot on my mind.”

Her eyes narrow. “Mr. Burnes. Did something happen? By any chance, at the fundraising event last Friday? I couldn’t make it because of personal reasons, but I’m sure something must have happened.”

“Don’t bite yourself, okay? The event happened normally, as expected. Nothing of note happened.”

She keeps her gaze on me. “I doubt. You did go with Melissa, after all, didn’t you?”

“How did you know?”

That sly smile appears once again. “I have my sources. Did something happen between you two?”

My fingers ball so hard they ache. “Nothing happened.”

“Your hand is a fist, Mr. Burnes. Just saying. ”

I glance at them. Gritting my teeth, I unclench my fingers.

“Didn’t you say you had a new lead?”

“Right, that. But before I get to it, do you remember the cyber attack on Bluebell Tech more than a month ago? Well, that wasn’t the only cybercrime going on at the time. Around that time, numerous companies experienced cyber-attacks. What do they all have in common? At one point or the other, they did business with Emerald.”

My eyebrows wrinkle. “And where’s this leading?”

“Technically, Mr. Burnes, if nothing is done about that, Vibrant Corp might be hit herself. That’s just a thought. So, whatever we’re doing, we have to prevent that.”

I pause, contemplating that. Bluband wasn’t in business with Emerald around the time they were hacked, but with my company, Vibrant.

Vibrant might well be next.

“Good observation. I should probably give you a raise.”

“If only, Mr. Burnes. If only.”



It's 8 pm, and I'm in my study, working on my laptop, when I receive the notification from Alex.

FaceTime. I need to talk to you.

I open my FaceTime and dial him. After a short moment, we're connected.

I'm met with a sorry sight. Alex stares into the screen with sunken eyes behind his glasses.

“Lex! What's wrong? You look awfully tired! Talk to me.”

“I'm fine, Richie. It's just late, that's all. I've been trying you all day! I had to call Anna. What happened?”

I rub the corners of my eyes.

“Sorry about that. Forgot my phone at home.”

“Oh. Well, I had to talk to you.”

“I'm here now. Talk to me.”

“Alright, Richie. First off, how's Melissa?”

I cough, beating my chest to control it.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I'm fine. And, uh, so is your sister.”

“Yes. That's what I want to talk to you about.”

I sit up. “Okay. What's the matter?”

“How long have I known you, Richie?”

I raise an eyebrow. “What does that have to do with anything?”

He presses on. “How long?”

“More than two decades. Why?”

“You know how much I love family, yeah?”

“That's not new to me, Alex.”

“Then I’m begging you, for the sake of our friendship, to watch over her. There are a lot of things happening lately, and I just need to make sure she’ll be alright.”

“Where’s all this coming from?”

“I’ll tell you, but please promise me first, Richie.”

“Hmm. Okay. You have my word. I won’t let any harm come to your sister.”

He releases a deep breath. “Thanks a lot, man. I feel so much at ease now.”

I’m sorry, man. I don’t deserve your appreciation. I’m not being honest with you.

Emerald Inc. is my target. I can’t take it, however, without uncovering some dirt. Some dirt that might implicate the CEO.

Seeing Alex sullen and worried about his sister, I reconsider my objectives. This would be so much easier if the board accepted my merger offer. But now, things have progressed beyond my control.

Melissa and I developing something physical between us don’t help the situation.

“Now, what’s wrong?” I focus on the call.

“I finally reached out to Melissa, but she won’t talk to me. I think she still hates me.”

“Why? What happened between you two? When I talked to her, she hinted at a conflict, but I didn’t get a clear picture.”

“It’s about Hannah, our aunt. She was diagnosed with cancer. And, I wasn’t around in her last days. Melissa still won’t forgive me for that.”

“Damn, man. I’m sorry about that. Do you have a reason for disappearing?”

Alex removes his glasses, cleaning the sides of his eyes with a handkerchief, before wearing his glasses.

“At the time, I had a complicated relationship with my aunt. Before my aunt was diagnosed with cancer, I decided it’d be

best to stay away. Melissa didn't share the sentiment."

"I'm sorry, Lex."

He lifts a handkerchief to his nose and blows.

"It's alright, man. Hannah didn't survive. And I wasn't there."

"And she still hates you because she feels you abandoned your family, yeah?"

"It was a hard choice to make. I had to be free. I was being held back. But even then, I still didn't stop thinking about Melissa. The next time I talked to her, her anger toward me had grown into something more. It grew into hate."

"No. She doesn't hate you. She might still be mad at you, but Melissa doesn't hate you. If anything, I think she needs her brother back with her."

"That's kinda what I wanted to talk to you about, Richie. I think Melissa's life is in danger. She's not in a friendly environment. That's why I need you to watch over her. I can't brief you on all the details, but I know you can protect my little sister. Please do."

"Alright, Lex. Your sister is safe." *As long as she's not part of the complex web of corruption in Emerald.*

Chapter 14

Melissa

“You have an appointment at 12 with representatives from the Stock Exchange. Later, you need to review some files. That’s all for the day, ma’am.”

I nod. “Thank you, Brittany. You can go now.”

As my secretary, Brittany leaves, I’m left to ponder my relationship with my brother.

Alex wants back in my life. Before yesterday, we talked just thrice in the four years since he left. Each conversation ended like yesterday’s – with Alex asking – no, *demanding* for me to forgive him and accept him back into my life, without accepting what he did to distance himself from it in the first place.

He left when it mattered most. If he can’t admit that, then to hell with him.

I stare at my computer screen; my hands pause on the keyboards. There’s work to do, but I can’t get Alex out of my mind.

He’s not the only one. Richard also doesn’t leave my thoughts.

Richard and I are closer now. There’s no doubt about that. That’s something I tried to avoid from the start.

Damn him. Damn his handsomeness and charm. Damn his brown hair, which is so easy for my fingers to get lost in. Damn his toned body, which I can’t help stripping naked in my mind.

I need to make sure he doesn’t in any way affect my plans. For all I know, he can be a spy sent to hamper my mission or something.

Work needs to be done. I start typing when I receive a call. Agent Chad?

“Hello?”

“Get back to your apartment. Now.”

The call hangs up, and my heart is already racing. What's wrong?

I pick up my bag and my car keys and hurry to my car. In minutes I'm on my way. Traffic is light as I head back, so I get to my apartment in record time. Hurrying to unlock my door, something dreadful comes to my notice.

The door is already open.

The lock has been broken through, and my apartment has been ransacked. Uprturned chairs and tables, books on the floor, my vase broken, and flowers lying all around, my living room is a mess. I survey the kitchen and bedroom. It's the same scene of mess and carnage everywhere.

The documents!

I hurry to the safe. It has already been looted, its contents emptied.

The documents are gone.

I freeze. Those documents are the only thing that stands between anyone and the total control of Emerald Inc. They were processed as a fail-safe, as I needed a way to secure the company after learning that a few underground deals were already underway.

With those documents in hand, Emerald Inc. could become a private liability, and the underground can seize or buy control of the company with legal standing.

I sit on my bed, my head reeling.

Have all my efforts been in vain?

The phone rings. Dazed, I pick it up.

"Miss Durham?"

"They've taken everything."

A momentary pause. "You're not safe there, Miss Durham. Whoever the perpetrators were, they have no regard. You need to move somewhere else. Somewhere safe. Somewhere they wouldn't expect. My team observed two men in balaclavas

and black clothes break in with guns from the surveillance cams we installed.”

“Do you have an idea who they were working for?”

“We’re still trying to track them, but the men didn’t say a word during the break-in, and they were wearing gloves, so identifying them will be hard. My agents will search your apartment soon. For now, you have to find somewhere safe. Is there anywhere that comes to mind?”

I rack my brain. I have no family in New York. Céline lived in Manhattan, but I can’t bear putting her at risk. I know nobody else, except...

“I think I might know someone.”

“Good. Now, pack a few things you might need, and leave your apartment immediately. And don’t go back to your office until I say so.”

As the call ends, I pack a few of my clothes, amongst others, in a traveling bag and exit the building. I head to the parking lot, where I dump the bag in the trunk and head to the back seat.

My brain runs in circles. Who is responsible? I have a lot of enemies, that’s for sure; the board of Emerald Inc., with their shady deals, and the cybercrime cartel the FBI warns me about, even if I’ve not had any significant encounter with them.

Then, there’s Vibrant Corp, the company trying to seize Emerald Inc. and merge it with theirs, for reasons I don’t know, but am skeptical about.

I don’t know how much time passes, but after a long while, Richard’s car pulls up in the driveway. I check the time—5:37 pm.

As he exits his car after parking, I come out. He jumps on, seeing my silhouette, and his keys drop to the ground. He heaves a sigh when I enter the light.

“Damn, you scared me, Melissa! Good evening. What’s up? Why were you in your car?”

I debate in my head about the best way to approach him. Should I ask him straight or indirectly?

To hell with it. “Can I stay with you for a while?”

My enemies won’t expect me to stay in the same apartment. I just hope this reasoning doesn’t come back to haunt me.



“Who would do such a thing?”

I sip the milk from the glass Richard gave me, then take a deep breath.

“I don’t know.”

He pauses, leaning forward, his face resting on his hands.

After a while, his face jerks up. “Why didn’t you go to a family member or something? Don’t get me wrong. I’m not complaining or anything. I li...”

What’s on my mind is finding an explanation for his question. It’s not until moments later that his pause registers to me.

“You?”

A short groan escapes his throat.

“I, um, like having you here.”

I give him a warm smile. “Thank you. For that. And for allowing me to stay.”

“Yeah, anytime. But as I was asking, don’t you have any family? Friends, that you can inform?”

“None in New York. You’re the only one I could meet on such a short basis. It’s a life-and-death situation.”

“Dreadful. But what would they want from you? I mean, yeah, you’re the CEO of essentially what’s the biggest nonprofit organization in the U.S., but what did they want? Why would someone do that?”

“Emerald is more than just a nonprofit organization. It’s –”

I stop short.

“It’s what?”

“It’s, um, also a philanthropy foundation that deals with a lot of money, even if it’s all for aid.”

He regards me. “So you think it was perhaps a robbery, or worse, a botched hit attempt?”

“I don’t know either. To be honest, I’m scared for my life.”

Richard leans in closer. Taking my trembling hands in his, his blue eyes meet my green ones.

“No matter what, I won’t let any harm come to you.”

His grip tightens around mine. Somehow, his presence assures me. He makes me feel ... *safe*.

“Do you think your brother should know?” he asks, in a low voice.

I haven’t thought of Alex.

“No. He shouldn’t know. I don’t want him worried. Please.”

“Hmm. Okay.” He slowly let go of my hand. “Drink your milk. It’ll help you relax.”

Reaching out, he tucks a strand of hair behind my right ear. I stop short of resting my cheek on his warm and inviting palm.

“Your bedroom is upstairs, the first door to the right in the hall. I’ll be going to my study. There’s food in the kitchen – you know where that is. You can have anything you want. Text me if you need anything.” He gives me his number, then leaves.

Don’t leave me. Not again.

Sighing, I glance at my wristwatch. It’s fifteen minutes until nine. I’m still dressed in my office clothes. Time to change.

After a shower, I fix myself a quick meal of noodles and eggs. Richard still isn’t out of his study.

As I finish dinner and head for my room, I opt for a text, as I still haven’t seen him.

Good night, Richard. Thanks for today.

The room has a carpeted floor, a mahogany bed with a mattress of moderate thickness, a walk-in closet, and a private

washroom and toilet as well. The walls are painted blue, with spots of white as a sort of design, and ceiling fluorescents serve as lighting.

It's not until I'm donning my semi-transparent pink nightdress, which extends just below my knees, that I get a reply from Richard.

Goodnight, Melissa. Sorry I couldn't show up for dinner. Hope the bed is to your liking.



I toss and turn in bed, unable to sleep. After long minutes, I go to the kitchen for a cup of milk. I'm just finished pouring myself a glass when that smooth voice of a rich baritone booms behind me.

“Can't sleep?”

I jump, nearly spilling the milk in my hand.

“Richard? What are you doing here?”

He shrugs a shoulder. “I live here. You can't sleep?”

Right. I don't live alone anymore. I put a hand on my chest.

“Yeah. It's been a crazy day.”

He walks over to the fridge. Taking a bottle of cognac, he walks over to me.

“This will work better. Trust me.”

He reaches out and grabs two glasses from behind me. Pouring the cognac into each glass, he hands me one.

“Try it.”

I sip the cognac. It has a mild taste.

“You can't sleep too?” I ask him.

He chuckles. “Yeah, for very different reasons than yours, I'd imagine.”

After drinking more of the liquid, I set my cup on the kitchen cabinet.

“Richard, thank you again. For everything.”

He steps forward, bringing us close. "It's no matter."

"I should be going to bed tonight. Good night."

As I walk away, he holds me back by my wrist, before pulling me closer to him.

"Aren't you going to give me a goodnight kiss?"

I sigh. The things this man does to me.

"Richard, I –"

I don't finish my sentence, as he seals my lips with his. Completely intoxicated by him, I surrender myself to his touch. His hand plays around my breasts, pinching at my nipples through the thin material of my nightdress.

I open my mouth to him and stroke his tongue with mine. He pins me against the fridge, and I bring one leg up to hug his hips. His mouth leaves mine, traveling down. I arch my neck to allow him access, stroking his hair as he buries his lips in the arch.

His arousal is evident in the bulge in his pants pressing against me.

Sliding my arms to his neck, I hug him tight, basking in the warmth of his lean, hard body. Richard's hands draw up my nightdress, until it's folded just around my hips. His mouth finds mine once more, his tongue dipping into my mouth.

I rub myself against his erection and he groans into my mouth. Our breaths quicken as we go deeper.

A hand probes my sex. With long fingers, he strokes the silk folds through the thin fabric of my panties. Closing my eyes, I emit a moan.

More. A deep longing for sexual pleasure emerges to the fore.

Suddenly, he pulls back, running his fingers through his hair.

"I'm sorry," he says, his voice strained. "It's ... I'm ... Goodnight."

He grabs his glass of cognac and walks away.

Emotions battle in my mind. I'm dazed, confused, and still aroused. I want his warmth on my body. I still want to feel his hands caressing me all around.

In the end, my pride wins out.

"Goodnight," I say, as he's just out of the kitchen he's apologizing. Sighing, I head to bed.

Chapter 15

Richard

“Hi, Richard.”

Melissa, wearing a simple, green dress, is waiting by the door as I return from work. Eyes wide in surprise, I follow her into the living room.

“Melissa. How was your day?”

“Monotonous, as usual.”

I loosen my tie and slump on the nearest sofa nearby.

“Boy, do I understand? What a day. I officially hate office work. Hockey was much more exciting.”

“Hang in there. Hey, about that... I never asked. What’s your job?”

That sends all the alarms in my body tingling. I sit straight.

“Um, I’m a, uh, consultant. Private consultant. I have a startup consultancy firm.”

“Former hockey star turns private consultant. What are the odds?”

Melissa’s remark has me reeling with laughter.

“Well, I had to do something after retirement.”

“Sure thing. Why don’t you do something? Go up to your room, take a shower, and come down for dinner.”

“You made dinner already?”

“Yup.”

“Oh? What’s on the menu?”

“Go up first, neighbor.”

Intrigued and with my stomach rumbling, reminding me I’m starving, I head to the bathroom.

As I’m unbuttoning my shirt in my closet, I pause. Melissa’s surprise gesture is stirring up a longing in me that I thought had died long back.

A longing for a real family.

Sighing, I arrange my discarded clothing, before stepping into the shower.

As the pebbles of water hit my body, vivid images play in my mind.

Melissa, nude, in the same shower with me, pressed against the glass, as I...

I finish showering and wait for my erection to subside. As I walk out of the shower, I stop at the mirror. *Control yourself, Richard.*

Wearing a light red shirt and jeans, I head down to the dining area.

A white linen tablecloth is spread around the dining table. On it are covered dishes surrounded by cutlery. A bottle of wine and two bottles of water complete the dining arrangement.

My gaze moves to Melissa, who's standing by the table. She's changed from the light dress she wore earlier, now in a tight, black dress reaching just above her knees, that hugs her curves. The cut of the dress in front offers me a glimpse of creamy, white cleavage. I swallow.

"Certainly took your time getting to all this, didn't you?" I smirk.

She smiled. I take a seat, ready for dinner.

"So? What's for dinner?"

She bends to open the dishes, a move which flashes more cleavage at me. I shift in my chair.

"Dinner is served," she says as she lifts the lid off my dish. At once, the aroma of the meal floods my nostrils. My eyes glimmer.

"Cullen skink and meatloaf? Wow! How....?"

"I saw the recipe marked with a star in your cookbook, so I guessed it's a favorite meal or one you wanted to try out. And it's so easy to make!"

“Mmm. It’s one of my best meals. If this is as good as its aroma, I’m afraid I’m gonna have to put you in a catering business.”

She giggles, taking her seat at the other side of the table. “I have a business, remember? I’m a hotshot CEO and a noisy neighbor.”

I’m overcome with a bout of laughter so fierce I have to drink some water to stop the cough that follows.

“I’d still be hearing this years later. C’mon, let’s eat. My stomach is rumbling.”

She lifts her glass of water to her face, her eyes on me.

“You can take the man out of Scotland, but you sure can’t take Scotland out of the man,” she says, before drinking.

Dinner is a short affair, with little conversation, most of it banter from Melissa about my supposed ‘Scottishness’. Even I know that’s a made-up word.

After dinner, I help her with the dishes, laughing and making jokes as we clean up. A man can get used to this.

“Wine near the fireplace?” I ask when we’re done.

“Sure thing, Richard.”

The electric fireplace is already burning low when we settle on the low couch just directly opposite the fire, a bottle of wine in my hands and two glasses in hers. To create a serene ambiance, I turn off the lights, making the fire the only illumination source in the room now. In the dim light, I pour myself a glass and Melissa herself one. Setting the bottle down, I hand her glass over.

We raise our glasses for a toast. I clear my throat to begin.

“A toast, to a wonderful neighbor full of surprises.”

“A toast to a neighbor in need.”

Our glasses chime, and we both sip our wine.

Minutes pass. The atmosphere is tense, with silence hanging in the air. I rack my brain for what to say.

Turning to her, I notice another strand of hair on her temples. I move a finger to tuck the strand away, but then stop, moving my finger instead to her cheek. She turns to face me but doesn't withdraw.

Sliding over her, my hands on her face, my mouth slants, finding her soft, wet lips. My tongue slides in, meeting hers, and we stroke each other. Her arms wrap around my neck, drawing me closer. I straddle her hips, my fingers lifting her dress to feel the smooth, spotless skin of her thighs.

My other hand travels down to hug her just beneath the full swell of her tits. I cup a feel of them through the nylon material of her dress, squeezing her delicate weight with care.

My mouth travels to her neck, and she gives a little whimper.

I lift my head to face her.

“I want you. So much I'm going crazy. Tell me you feel the same. Say it.”

She remains quiet for some moments.

“Yes,” she says, almost in a whisper.

I rise, grabbing hold of her thighs and lifting her with me. We make our way through the room and up the stairs, attacking each other's restrictive clothing and barriers preventing our bodies from that natural fusion.

I pin her to the wall once we're upstairs. She succeeds in unbuttoning my shirt, and the material lands on the carpet. The door opens.

The master bedroom. Perfect.

Making our way to the bed, with me still intent on feeling every part of her, I reach for the zipper fastening her dress at the back. Drawing it down, I slide the dress off her legs and toss it away.

Nothing else but a pair of underwear is on her.

She struggles with the zipping of my jeans, her trembling hands unable to bring it down. I assist her, and the jeans are soon flying off, followed by my boxers.

Melissa's hands rest on my chest, and I pull her close, her soft, warm body nestled against hard muscles.

Laying her on the bed, I loom over her, my tongue meeting hers, then moving down. As I circle her areolas, her nipples harden to my touch.

Lowering my head, I slide downward and nuzzle between her breasts.

She releases a gasp as my mouth envelops her nipple, lapping at it, before moving to the other. She arches her back, releasing long, heavy breaths. My tongue moves over her body, dipping into her navel, then sliding lower.

I bring the tip of a middle finger to her clit. A satisfied grin appears on my face.

"You're wet for me. So hot for me. So ready for me."

I pull her legs over my shoulders and tease between her folds, lapping against her sensitive flesh. She breathes out my name, her moans getting louder.

"Richard ..."

My tongue keeps moving around her, with long strokes teasing her, then moving lower to thrust into her.

"Ri...Richard. I'm ... ahn ... I'm close..."

I tilt my head to face her. "Not yet. Not now."

Rising back up, I thread her fingers under mine, restraining her arms. I release an arm and guide it lower.

"Touch me. Feel me."

She strokes my erection, and a groan escapes my throat. I bring the arm back after a few more strokes and part her thighs.

The head of my cock probes the slick entrance of her body, seeking entrance, and I drive into her, unrelenting. She gives a soft gasp, and I seal her lips with mine as they open.

My breath is heavy, and coming in sharp bursts, in sync with Melissa's, I begin to move, with care.

She's tight. A long time has passed since I had sex with any woman, but I've never had it so good – *wanted* it so good, until now. Until Melissa.

She wraps her legs around my hips, pulling me in deeper. I increase the pace of my thrusts, determined to reach depths that haven't been explored before. My butt cheeks contract and release as I drive in deeper.

With our hands still linked, I'm reaching the climax of my movement, gliding in and out of her, the tempo of our movement precise and relentless. Every rock-hard inch of mine is digging into her, exploring, reaching new frontiers.

She moans against my mouth, every plunge I make driving her forward by inches. Beads of sweat on our bodies make them slippery, our glistening bodies moving together in harmony.

I let go of her hands and she wraps them around my back, her nails digging into my drenched skin. Still moving in her, I break off from our kiss to face her.

Her eyes are on mine, darkened with pleasure. Her face is wet with sweat, drool running from her full lips, still open. Are those ... *tears*?

Melissa is most beautiful like this, her face flustered, tears of ecstasy running down her face, and her body slippery, soft, and rosy. I've never had sex so good. Until now. Until Melissa.

Her eyelids shut tight and a series of sharp moans escape her. Her body trembles, quivering under me. My pace quickens, slamming hard into her several times, and her cunt tightens, sucking at me.

The feel of her clutching my entire length is all I need. Wrapping myself around her, I hold her against me, linking my lips with hers once more, before pulling out of her and releasing with a force that leaves me trembling in her arms.

I collapse to the side. Without a word, she stands to go to the bathroom. As she reaches the door, she looks back at me.

“Coming?” she asks.

Grinning, I follow her.

* * *

When I wake the next morning, the space beside me is empty. I blink into consciousness. Was last night a dream?

Fighting off the remnants of sleep, I head to the bathroom. After brushing my teeth and taking a quick bath, I return to get dressed for the day.

Today is a Saturday, thank God. I'm not in the right mind to work.

I find my way to the kitchen. The aroma of frying pancakes filters to my nose, and I follow the scent. It leads me to Melissa, her hair tied back in a ponytail, in a shirt of mine, which is barely her size.

She looks back, her face brightening up with a grin when she sees me. "Morning, sleepyhead."

I heave a sigh. Last night wasn't my imagination.

I had sex with Melissa Durham.

What was I thinking? What happened to 'self-control'?

I walk up to her. "Um, Melissa?"

Her back is still turned to me, as she's focused on making breakfast.

"About last night, um... You're beautiful, sexy, and great, and I lost control, and –"

She cuts me short by placing a finger on my lips. "Do you find me attractive?"

"Yes, I do."

She regards me with green eyes. "Attractive enough that I drive you crazy?"

You have no idea. "Yes."

"You drive me crazy too, Richard. Did you know that? Last night – and earlier this morning – was us just coming to terms with that. So why are you apologizing?"

I chuckle. "I'm a gentleman."

She leans forward to kiss me. As our lips come in contact, I pull her closer, and she wraps her hands around me.

“If you’re truly a gentleman, then help me with breakfast,” she says, breaking off the kiss.

Chapter 16

Melissa

“Miss Durham. I trust you’ve been well?”

“Hello, Agent Chad. I’ve been well. So? Any news?”

“Good and bad. The good news is you’re safe to return to your apartment. We’ve done a cleanup of the area, and we believe we have a lead on the men that broke into your apartment. However, we still don’t know much, so you’ll be posted. Agents will be dispatched nearby to watch for any suspicious activity.”

Relief. “What about work?”

“We believe you should stay away from Emerald for the meantime until we can establish something firm. Is there anything else?”

“Um nothing, thanks. I’ll move back in as soon as I can.”

“Alright, Miss Durham.”

The call ends. Chad is brief and concise, as usual.

The call brought good news for me. I’m now free to go back to my apartment. Yet somehow, that twists a knot in my stomach.

The news means I don’t have to stay with Richard anymore. But after our weekend together, I’m not ready for that.

Something is developing between us too, that I want to explore. Caution pulls at me, however. My experiences with Nathan, my ex from three years back, taught me enough lessons on relationships.

I cast that thought from my mind. Nathan was an immature, sick man who cared only about himself. Sex between us was passive, with me just a sex toy for his pleasures.

Richard, on the other hand, is an entire world of difference.

With Richard, I feel like the woman I am. If there’s anything he’s great at, it’s at making me feel special — In and out of bed.

With him, sex isn't just a basic, biological act. It's something more, with pleasures beyond this world. Sex with him can only be one thing – *phenomenal*.

The doorbell to Richard's apartment rings on repeat, jolting me back to reality. I glance at the keyhole and, jumping with excitement to see who it is, open the door.

“Celine!”

She runs forward, enveloping me in a bear hug.

“In the flesh, ‘Lissa. Been a while! Why didn't you call?”

“Been a while indeed. A lot is going on, girl.”

“Tell me about it.” She looks around. “Literally. I'm dying to know what you're doing in your cute neighbor's house instead of yours.”

Since informing her I'm staying in Richard's apartment instead of mine, I know curiosity is gnawing at my best friend from inside.

“Well ... I can't give you the full details, but I was robbed last week. Being the kind neighbor he is, Richard offered to let me stay in his house until the police finish their investigation and tell me it's safe to go back.”

She glances back at me with an eyebrow raised. “That doesn't add up. Why didn't you just come to stay with me? And how long will it take the police to investigate a break-in? Today is Wednesday, ‘Lissa. And shouldn't you be at work or something?”

“Well, he's nearer. Plus, I'll be back at my apartment soon. Just a couple of more days. The police are probably still chasing leads and ensuring my safety and stuff. I'll go to work when it's considered safe. Richard is a nice host, so yeah, no worries.”

She fixes her gaze on me. “Am I missing something here?”

“No, you are not. Okay, Celine? That's just how things are.”

“You're blushing, Lissa.”

“No, I'm not! Gosh, Celine!”

“Are you two a couple or something?”

“We’re not a couple! Not yet, at least.”

“Yet? You know you can’t hide this from me forever.”

I groan inwardly. Celine isn’t going to let it go until I tell her something. Anything.

“O. K. We’re together now, but it’s not official. Happy?”

“Come again?” Celine drops her bag and leans forward.

“You heard me. We’re something of a couple now.”

Celine bursts into laughter, clapping. “I knew it! Tell me. How did it happen? How did you end up with your hot neighbor?”

“There’s nothing to say, alright? We just enjoy each other’s company, and that’s that.”

“Interesting. Only weeks ago, you were convinced that it was a solo ride life for you. This Richard must be quite the stunner to get you to change your mind.”

“I never said I’m riding solo. I only said I’m happy with my job and my life even without a man.”

A smirk plays on her face. “But happier with one, it seems.”

“You’re so frustrating, Celine!” *Especially when you’re right.*

“The truth can be annoying at times, Lissa. But it’s the truth all the same. Nice house he has here though. If he’s as good-looking as his apartment, then I see why you fell for him.”

Even better-looking. “Is that what I invited you here for? You’re here because I need your advice. Fashion advice.”

“No complaints there, Lissa. Let’s get on with it.”



“Welcome, sir. Ma’am. Your spot is right this way.” A suited waiter waves his arm, inviting us to follow him.

My arm locks around his; I tug at Richard’s clothing.

“You reserved a private spot? Where is it?”

“You’ll see.”

This is a top diner in Brooklyn, and Richard gets us a private space.

Impressive.

As we make our way through the tables, most of them occupied with elites dining and making very little conversation, the enticing aroma of fragrant spices fills the air. Clinking sounds all around, made by forks and knives on ceramic plates, contrast – or rather, compliment an opera piece playing from a sound system, giving the restaurant a classic feel.

We make our way up a staircase and into a private section. There's a table waiting, flanked by two ebony chairs. Flowers placed on Greek-style short pillars decorate the private room, with a fish tank by a corner.

The waiter waits for us to take our seats before giving us each our menu.

“What would you like for dinner?”

Richard pauses a while before answering. “I'll have the seafood special and sauce.”

I turn to the waiter. “I'll have the same.”

The waiter jots, then leaves.

“I'm impressed. This restaurant has class. How did you get a private spot?”

He drinks from his glass of water, then sets it down, gazing at me.

“I have my ways, hon'. Did I mention how gorgeous you look tonight?”

“Yes. Three times already.”

“I could keep saying it, but now it seems like an understatement.”

Just hours ago, I scoured fashion boutiques along with Celine for the perfect dress. It was Celine who suggested what I'm wearing now – a velvety red dress with a fashionable V-cut and no back.

“Thank you. You look quite dashing yourself. Also, there’s something I wanna tell you.

“What’s that?”

“I’ll be moving back to my apartment tomorrow. I’ve already moved my stuff back.”

“Is it safe to go back?”

“Yes. I’ve been cleared by the police to move back in. I’m safe now.”

His gaze moves to his glass cup, a finger swirling around the rim.

“Nice. Good to know you’re safe,” he says, his head staying down.

I stretch my hands to hold his. “We still live close.”

He takes my fingers in his and gives me a squeeze.

“I’ll miss waking up to your meals. Waking up to you.”

“You still can. Just come over.”

The waiter brings our main course, and soon we’re dining on rich seafood.

“Great place, isn’t it?”

“Certainly. Beautiful restaurant, and the food’s great.”

“I’m glad it’s to your liking.”

Wolfing down my meal, I glance across the table. Richard is toying with his meal. Maybe he doesn’t have an appetite. Did the news cause that?

This day was going to come – we both knew but somehow never discussed it. The few days we stayed together were memorable, but all good things end.

I’m about finished with my meal. Richard, on the other hand, has touched little of his.

“Can we get going? It’s been a wonderful night, but I’m a bit tired.”

“Oh, okay. Are you fine?” I ask.

“I’m fine,” comes the reply.

The suited waiter returns to our table just as we’re ready to leave. Passing a card to him, Richard whispers to him. Nodding, he leads us through the cozy premises and out to Richard’s Audi sports car, parked in a private garage.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” I ask again as we enter the car.

Richard, with expert ease, pulls out of the driveway. “Fine. Probably needs some rest, that’s all.”

We’re silent throughout the journey. I gaze out the window before glancing sideways at Richard. He keeps his eyes straight ahead.

“You’re staying at my place tonight, right?” he asks as we enter the parking lot.

“Yes. Moving back to my place tomorrow.”

Getting to his door, I reach for the key. As the lock clicks open, I turn to face Richard.

“Goodnight, Richard. Thanks for tonight. I had a really good time.” I walk towards my bedroom.

He sidesteps me, shutting the door behind him. “Not so fast.”

His dark eyes sweep over me, his handsome face looming over mine.

“I need more of you, hon’.”

With those few words Richard utters, my body heats up, aching for his touch.

There’s a deep tone in his voice that sends a shiver through me. The warmth of his body envelops mine as he draws me to him, and his touch sends tremors of excitement rushing through my body.

“I can’t get enough of you as well.”

Smiling, he lowers his head and presses his lips on my neck.

“You’ve cast a spell on me.”

“You’re the sorcerer here,” I say, breathless, my hands traveling down to the bulge in his pants, “and that’s a nice

wand you got there.

“Mmm. Tempting. I’ll take you here and now.”

I melt into him, giving him control.

“Intriguing. What if I disagree?”

“You can’t.” He nibbles at my earlobe. “I won’t let you.”

I open my mouth to reply and he slants his lips over mine, silencing me with a slow, wet kiss. His tongue laps at mine, and my legs turn weak like jelly. My hands travel to his hair, sliding through it, tugging.

We attack each other’s clothing, pieces of fabric flying off one after the other. He lays me on the carpet, cupping my breasts, kneading them with soft, rhythmic squeezes.

“Richard—”

“Don’t say a word.” His fingers roll around and tug at my tender nipples, which harden to his touch. His mouth soon reaches the tip of my breast, the tingling sensation sending shivers through me.

“Turn. I want you from behind.”

I comply, turning my back to him.

His erection nudges against the lips of my sex. With a single swing of his hips, he pushes deep into me, his breath hissing. Every inch of my skin is sensitive, every nerve on attention, as Richard drills into me, hard.

I suck in some air, finding it hard to breathe. Moans escape my throat, echoing around the living room. He grabs my waist and plunges deeper.

“The things you do to me.”

Quivering, my body tenses, and I climax with a breathless moan, my body shuddering as the ecstasy rippled through me.

Richard grunts, his thrusts faster than ever. I move my hips to meet his fierce lunges, urging him on. He lets go of my waist and holds my shoulder, pinning me down and riding me hard

and fast. With a loud groan, he pulls out of me and erupts violently, flooding my back.

When he's finished, he releases a heavy breath and lifts me in his arms.

"Let's go for a picnic on Saturday."

I wrap my arms around him. "Sure thing."

Chapter 17

Richard

“Run me through it one more time. I can’t afford any further setbacks. If I’m going to offer another bid, I have to make sure it’s convincing enough. I must have a successful takeover of Emerald.”

Thomas, my financial officer, adjusts his glasses. “You have a bid set already, along with your terms, sir. A wealthy sum, plus the current CEO keeps her position for a set duration of time. I’d advise five years sir.”

I nod. Sounds good enough.

“Your second option is to buy off a majority of shares outright. This is a more indirect approach. It’s going to work better if there’s something that reduces the stock prices of the company. A scandal, maybe.”

I’m still working on that.

“What’s your decision, sir? A buyout or direct bid?”

I consider the options. The sooner I acquire Emerald and merge with Vibrant, the better.

“Hold that thought. I’m going to contact my attorney.”

I ring up Alex’s number. He answers on the second ring.

“Richie? What’s up? Good morning.”

“Morning, Lex. It’s about Vibrant Corp.”

“Hmm. Talk to me. What about it? If it’s about me coming back, I told you, I’ll soon—”

“No. You don’t have to be here. I just need your legal advice. What’s the best way to take over a company, on a legal standing?”

Alex pauses for a moment. “Legally, there’s no *best* way. As long as it’s within the law, it’s good enough. However, for me, it’ll be a direct approach.”

“Direct approach, as in offering a bid to such an organization?”

“That’s the best way, Richie.”

“Humor me, Lex. Let’s say I’d made offers that are normally too good to refuse but are still being refused. What do I do then?”

“Well, in that case, you just have to find another way. But where’s all this coming from? Are you planning a takeover of another company?”

“In fact, I am. It’s a large organization, but I suspect the board of the company is involved in shady, underground deals. Deals too profitable they can’t let go of the company.”

“Damn. Then I advise you to move fast. Try a more indirect approach. You can probably try to hire detectives or the FBI to run investigations, so you can expose them or something and make for a smoother takeover.” *Way ahead of you, mate.*

“Thanks for the advice, Lex.”

“Anytime, man. And, in case you eventually find enough dirt, I’m always available to take legal action. Once you succeed in your takeover, and if you plan to merge, I advise you to do a total management reshuffle for a successful transition. The law will always be there to punish those shady crooks.”

“Yeah, it will. I’m counting on that.” I make to end the call.

“By the way, what’s the company’s name in question?” His question rings out, stopping me.

How am I to inform him I have plans to take over Emerald Inc.? With his sister as CEO?

I release a deep sigh. Sooner or later, I have to tell him.

With a wave of two fingers, I signal Thomas to leave my office.

“It’s Emerald. Emerald Incorporated.”

“Wait, Emerald? Why?”

“I told you before. I’m aiming for a merger.”

“But that’s Melissa’s company! What do you think you’re doing, Richard?”

“The right thing. Emerald has become a hive for underground criminal dealings. I have to stop that.”

“Hell, I know about their shady dealings! I’ve been doing some digging of my own! That’s why I asked you to keep my sister safe!”

“And she will be safe. I gave you my word, and I intend to honor that to the last. Melissa will be shielded from the takeover.”

A long pause follows my last statement. “We need to talk. In-person. I’ll be back in New York soon.”

The call cuts and I drop my phone on the table, resting my head on my hands and releasing the heavy breath I was keeping inside for a while.

The caller buzzes, and I press a button. Anna’s voice filters through the speaker.

“The representatives from Emerald Inc. are here, Mr. Burnes.”

I rise to my feet. “Direct them to the conference room. And get Thomas on standby.”



“It’s funny how you asked me out for lunch on such short notice, Richard.”

My fingers drum on the table as Melissa teases me with light banter. Right now, Alex, the takeover of Emerald, and my worry for Melissa’s safety cloud my thoughts.

“... Richard? Richard! Are you alright?”

Melissa lays a hand on mine, her soft and warm fingers bringing me back.

“I’m fine, hon’. I’m sorry. It’s been a long morning.”

“Sorry about that. Work, yeah?”

“Yeah.” I place my hands over hers. “Had a little issue at work, but it’ll be fine.”

Her eyes stare into mine. “Talk to me. What is it?”

“It’s not – ”

I pause. Maybe it won't be much of a bad idea to get a fresh perspective.

“Okay, here's the issue. So my consulting firm wants to merge with another, for various business reasons. We made a bid earlier, but it was rejected. Now, we're making a much bigger offer, while also at the same time trying to buy more stocks to be in a controlling position.”

“Do you have any idea why the first bid was rejected? Maybe you need to take that into consideration when making a bigger one.”

“Well, let's just say, the firm has potential, but is being mismanaged. What do you think we should do? Go forward with the proposal, or take the gradual step of building stocks?”

She remains silent for a minute or two.

“Is there anything else at stake in the merger?”

“Good question. There actually is. The CEO of the other firm is a figurehead, but he's a close friend, and I don't wanna ruin our friendship by leaving him out in the cold with the merger. But with the way his firm is going, it won't be long before they're out of business.”

She relaxes on her chair. “There's only one thing you can do.”

I sit up. “What's that?”

“The right thing. Honestly, I can relate to the story. Emerald has had some takeovers over the years. You just do what you feel is right.”

“Alright. Thanks. For being here.”

She takes a sip of her juice. “Works both ways.”

Lunch is served, and we eat amidst some chatter.



After lunch with Melissa, I drive back to my office, where I'm told the representatives of Emerald are already waiting, back from their lunch break.

All morning, we haggled between the interest of my company and theirs. Unable to reach a consensus before lunchtime, both

parties decided to take a break. I decided to spend my lunch with Melissa, who was free, as it turned out.

Striding to the conference room, I'm greeted at the entrance by Thomas, my financial officer, Jonathan Higgins, my Human Resources and Development manager, and Anna, my secretary.

"Welcome back, sir," Anna says, handing me my tablet.

I glance at my wristwatch — Ten minutes past two.

"Are they back inside?"

Jonathan nods. "Yes sir."

"Alright. Let's go then."

I enter the room, followed by Jonathan and Thomas, and the three representatives of Emerald stand to welcome us, extending their hands.

After shaking them each, I lay down my tablet. "Let's continue the business."

One of the reps clears his throat. "After reviewing our earlier discussions, we've decided to come to an agreement. Emerald Inc. is for sale on three terms."

I observe the three men, all smiles and chins raised.

"First, our asking price for Emerald is one billion dollars, plus a thirty percent interest in all profit for the next ten years. Also, the current members of the board are allowed to keep their share. Last of all, Emerald is not merged with Vibrant, but kept as a separate entity, albeit under your control."

My HR & development manager, Jonathan, leaps up, opening his mouth. I raise a hand.

"No, Jonathan. They've laid down their terms. We cannot deny them that right. Don't lose your cool."

Jonathan, gritting his teeth, sits down. A smirk plays on the lips of one Emerald Inc. rep.

"Those are our terms. Emerald is not available under any other terms but these. They're not negotiable as well."

I smile. Emerald's board has played their hands.

"Thank you for your consideration, gentlemen. Please give us three weeks to review the demands, then arrive at a conclusion."

Rising to my feet, I shake all three once more, before striding out.

Emerald's board has just declared they aren't for sale. This means there's only one way left for me to acquire the company – expose the company's underground dealings and bring down the top people using the company as a means to their own illegal ends.

My phone rings when I'm near my office. It's Melissa.

"Hey. Did you get home safely?"

"I did. Hey, about that thing we discussed earlier. That issue troubling you and all."

"Yeah? What about it?"

"Has it been resolved?"

"No. The other firm brought up some impossible demands."

"There's something you can do about it."

I fall back to my chair. "What's that?"

"It's a takeover strategy that just might work for your consultancy firm."

"I'm intrigued."

"So, here's how it works. You've had a proposal rejected, right? Well, there's a way you can still take over them. By entering a partnership."

"A partnership?" *What?*

"Yes. By entering a partnership with them, you've succeeded in your first task of merging. Now all that's left is for you to simply buy your way into total control of the partnership."

A partnership? With a company that has underground dealings?

Genius. They won't see it coming.

“Hon’, you’re a genius.”

She giggles. “I didn’t become CEO by chance.”

Chapter 18

Melissa

“Miss Durham? Chad speaking.”

I pause my typing. The computer screen lies idle, displaying a worksheet filled with figures and lists.

For more than a week, I was absent from work on the instruction of the FBI, after the burglary of my apartment. As a result, the volume of work I’m handling only piled up. Thank heavens, I did some work from home during that period.

On my ebony desk, files and folders lie stacked on top of each other, clustering the space and leaving little room for other things. There’s a lot to be done. It’s a busy Monday, after all.

I’m sure Chad is busy as well. His calling means there’s a new important development.

“Chad. I’ve resumed work, just as you advised me last weekend.”

“Good. We have some info about a lead on your apartment’s burglary.”

“Really? Who were they working for?”

“We believe it was the work of John Lamar. One of the two burglars was apprehended late yesterday by agents. We’re still working on gathering evidence. But until we can find something solid enough to nail him, please take caution.”

“I’ll try. What about the documents?”

“We didn’t find any trace of the documents. It’s safe to assume they’re already in Mr. Lamar’s possession. It’s only a matter of time before he begins the processing. With the time it takes to process the transition of a company, I’d say we have just over a month before the company goes private.”

I have just a month to expose the corrupt board and redeem my company from the clutches of the underworld.

A thought hits me. “What about the drive? Doesn’t it contain evidence we can use to incriminate the board?”

“I’m sorry, Miss Durham. The drive contained a lot of *valuable* information on the dealings that’s been taking place under the carpet. But the board was smart enough not to include any of their details. All the evidence links not to Lamar or the board but to your company.”

Damn it! Why can’t I just bring those criminals to justice once and for all? Why does it have to be so complex?

“Alright. Thanks, Chad. I’ll do my best from here.”

“Good to hear. We’ll keep an eye on the board and its activities. At one time or the other, they’ll slip, and that’s going to be our chance to swoop in. Bye, for now, Miss Durham.”

Agent Chad’s deep voice gives way to the slow, calming voice of Norah Jones, as my music resumes from the point it stopped when he called. Releasing a deep breath, I resume typing, my fingers rattling on the keyboard.

Chad is right. We don’t have long before Lamar makes the company his to control. It isn’t hard to guess his first step: get rid of me, once and for all. At worst, that means my life will be in danger.

That cannot happen.

I’m just about done with the spreadsheet I’m working on when the music from my AirPods stops again. Another call. One glance at my screen and my lips curve into a smile. Richard.

“Melissa.”

His voice puts me at ease at once, serenading my frayed nerves.

“Richard! Busy Monday, yeah?”

His chuckle is lively. “Yeah. I just wanted to hear your voice again. I wish I could escape it all, you know? I wish I had you in my arms now.”

Yes. Oh, yes. “Oh well. Duty calls.”

“Yeah. One of these days though, I consider quitting altogether. Spend my days traveling the world. Or raise a

family.”

Richard’s last statement makes me pause. As a career woman, I never really thought much of family, especially after Nathan. True, my rise to the top has been fulfilling, but settling down rarely occurred to me all these years. Now that Richard mentions it, it has me thinking.

Wouldn’t it be nice to have a partner to spend my life with and children to raise and care for?

“Are you still there, Melissa?”

“Yes, Richard. I was just thinking about what you said.”

“I want to see you. It’s been three days since I last touched you, and I’m going nuts already.”

“You sex fiend. It’s been two days, not three. And don’t you have better things to do?” I ask, cracking up.

“Having you is the best thing *to* do, Melissa. Can we meet? Tomorrow, 07:00 p.m.?”

I’m about to answer, but a knock on my door distracts me. My assistant enters after another knock.

“I gotta go. I’ll call you back later.”

“Is everything alright?”

Looks like I’m about to find out. “Yeah. Bye, Richard.”

Disconnecting the call with a tap, I glance at my wristwatch – it’s 9:57 a.m. – before turning to my secretary, who’s still standing by the door.

“What’s the matter? I thought my meeting wasn’t until 12:00 p.m.”

“Someone’s here to see you, Miss Durham.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Who?”

“His name is Alex. He says he’s your brother.”

Alex?

I rise to my feet. “Where is he?”

“The reception area.”

Shutting my laptop, I hurry to the reception area. There he is, seated, clutching a briefcase, his left leg repeatedly stomping the floor. He runs a hand through his long, brown hair, then glances sideways. His striking blue eyes meet mine, and in an instant, he's on his feet, heading toward me. He stops just inches from me.

"Lissa."

He's changed since the last time I saw him. As handsome as ever, his boyish features have evolved to a more mature look.

After four years, my big brother is right in front of me. Happiness, stirring up from within, battles with another emotion – anger. In the end, my anger prevails.

"What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see you."

I'm not letting him off. "Sure. After all this time, you decide to show up now? Why?"

"I missed you so much, 'Lissa."

"Okay, so now you've seen me, and I've seen you. Satisfied?"

"Don't do this, please. Just give me a chance. Don't cause a scene."

I gaze around. There's only one person besides us in my reception area, and he's so buried in his newspaper that it's obvious he's pretending to read.

I sigh. "Fine. My office."

I lead Alex and instruct my secretary that I shouldn't be disturbed.

"Alright, Alex. We're alone now. What did you want to talk about?" I ask, sitting on one of the two couches in my office positioned facing each other with a low table in between.

"How've you been?"

Is he kidding me? Is that what he wants to talk to me about? My wellbeing?

Two can play this game. "I've been well. You?"

“Trying. Look, I know we have our issues, especially with Aunt Hannah and all, but believe me when I say I missed you so much, and I’m happy to see you again. You have no idea.”

“I don’t think that’s why you came down here.”

He adjusts the frame of his glasses. “Isn’t that enough reason? I’ve been worried about you, ‘Lissa. Especially with you being involved with Emerald.”

I open my mouth to respond, but a thought stops me. What if someone is eavesdropping on our conversation? Who knows what was done in my office when I was on my brief break? This building is a lion’s den for me. If Alex wants to talk about Emerald, it shouldn’t be here.

“Can we go to a café nearby? I would like some latte as we catch up.”



“We should be safe here. What about Emerald did you wanna talk about?”

Alex heaves a deep sigh, before sipping some coffee. “It’s that bad now, isn’t it?”

“You know about Emerald?”

“Yes. I followed your career, ‘Lissa. When you became the CEO two years ago, I did some checks on the company. A lot of information was either hidden or didn’t add up, so I had to dig in deeper. Thanks to some contacts in intelligence, I discovered a lot of shady stuff was going on in the company.”

“Why can’t you take any legal action? I mean, you have the law on your side, don’t you?”

“You might know the reason why. It’s hard to pin something down when it’s very slippery. There’s not much evidence. I know the criminal dealings the top stakeholders partake in, and so I feared for your safety. It’s why I asked Richard to watch over you when I found out you two are neighbors.”

“Richard Burnes. Your business partner, yeah?”

Alex’s serious expression gives way to laughter. “Business partner? Is that what he told you?”

My eyebrows wrinkle. “What do you mean?”

“Wait. You’re serious. What did Richard say about me?”

“He told me you two are business partners, and that’s about it. You did some legal work for his consultancy firm or something.”

Alex stares onto space, as if in thought. When he talks, the words fall on me like bricks.

“Richie and I are best friends. We’ve been best friends for a while now.”

Alex’s words leave a heavy feeling in my stomach. Breathless, I grip the arm rests.

Why would Richard be lying to me about Alex?

“Wait. I don’t understand. Richard was lying? But why?”

“He probably had his reasons. That’s all I can say. But that’s not the point.”

“Then what is?”

Alex holds my trembling hands, his warm and gentle touch calming my racing heart.

“You’re in danger, but I’m here now. No one is taking anything from you, and certainly not going to harm you, as long as your big brother is around.”

Chapter 19

Richard

“You’re sure Alex is in New York now?”

“Positive, Mr. Burnes. His plane touched down yesterday morning.”

I pace. “If he’s here, he should’ve contacted me like he said he would. Why didn’t he give me a call, at least?”

Anna clears her throat. “Maybe he went to see his sister first. That’s what I would do if I were in his shoes.”

I stop. If Melissa tells Alex anything about her relationship with me, he won’t take it well. Likewise, if Alex tells Melissa about our relationship, or who I am, she’d think I betrayed her by lying. I can’t have any of that.

“Good point. But it’s been a day. He should have contacted me.”

“Why don’t *you* contact *him*?”

“You’re right. Almost forgot I can do that.”

I pick up my phone and dial Alex. There’s no response. I try a second time, but it’s still the same thing.

“I suggest you do that later, though. It’s almost time for your meeting,” Anna says, glancing at her wristwatch.

“I just hope Mr. Lamar accepts my invitation.”

A folder in hand, I head for the conference room with Anna in tow. The receptionist informs me that John Lamar arrived ten minutes ago and is already waiting. Not only did he make it, but he was also quite early at that – the meeting isn’t due for another hour.

As the automatic doors to the conference room swing open, John Lamar, who’s standing by the open glass windows, turns. A tall, old, balding man, Lamar has the aura of a predator. With his hulking stature, and thin, set eyes, his presence dominates the room.

Seeing me, he breaks into a wide grin.

“Ah, Mr. Burnes!”

Striding across the room to meet him, I offer him a hand. He shakes it, his gaze sticking to mine.

“I’m glad you accepted my invitation.”

“Ah, don’t thank me yet. I only did so out of curiosity. What could be so important that you had to see me in person, instead of representatives, or, at most, the CEO?”

“I know the power you wield in Emerald as the head of the board, Mr. Lamar. I also know you’re an acute businessman.”

His grin fades from his face, and he raises his eyebrows. I’ve caught his attention. Good.

“I’m just a man that knows how to maximize profit and minimize loss. So? What did you call me here for? Our representatives have given you our terms for the takeover, haven’t they? I can’t imagine you inviting me here to discuss anything other than that.”

“You’re very astute. But I’m not here to push a takeover deal. Far from it. I have *another* offer for you and your company.”

I lower myself into one of the swiveling chairs. “Please take a seat, Mr. Lamar.”

He sinks into a chair just opposite mine. “What’s the deal, Mr. Burnes?”

“A takeover will be ill-advised at this time. There’s a lot of potential for growth for both of our companies, but a takeover limit that potential. There’s another way both parties can benefit, without anyone being laid off or any unfair deals.”

“Cut to the chase, Mr. Burnes. Why am I here?”

“A partnership. Between both our companies. That’s my deal.”

“What? A partnership? Let me get this straight. You want our companies to enter a partnership?”

Did I stutter?

“Exactly. We both keep our staff, and our profits for the year, but we enter a merger, without any buyouts. There’s no loss,

and there's a lot of gains, because of the fresh exchange of ideas and all."

Lamar rested his face on his knuckles. I've said what I wanted to say. Now I'm giving him time to consider.

After a long moment, he raises his head. "Well, Mr. Burnes. I admit the deal sounds good. But, I must ask, is there any catch?"

I flash him a winning smile. "None, whatsoever."

His gaze narrows. "A few weeks ago, you were so intent on buying Emerald for its growth potential, you said. What changed your mind?"

"If I took over Emerald, I would have eventually merged it. Why do that when I can enter a partnership and keep brilliant minds like yours on board, working hand-in-hand?"

Lamar's wide grin returns. "My, I gotta say, you're a clever man, Mr. Burnes. Alright. I'm in."

We shake hands. "If you'd stay a bit longer, I can arrange for a bottle of red wine to toast to this huge win."

"Hmm. Tempting, but I should be going. I'm a very busy man. You should have an idea, Mr. Burnes."

"I sure do, Mr. Lamar."

The fish has taken the bait. Now, all that's left is to reel it in.

As we walk out of the conference room, Anna approaches me, signaling she has something to tell me. My brows furrow. What's wrong?

"Sorry to intrude, Mr. Burnes. I've gotten a hold of Alex. He's ready to talk to you. Call him."



It's evening, and New York is coming alive with lights in every building and on the streets from vehicles, dotting the landscape like millions of bright stars in the night sky. Central Park isn't left out in this flood of lights and electricity, with lamp poles and fluorescents providing their illumination.

As I wait by a lamppost, a family walks by. The woman holds a young boy while the man pulls a cradle. I remove my glasses and wipe the evening mist off them as a wistful longing for a real family takes hold of me.

There's a light tap on my shoulder.

"Richard."

I turn to see Melissa standing behind me in a long-sleeved t-shirt and jeans.

"Hey, Melissa. I'm glad you could make it."

I pull her into my arms, and my lips brush against hers. My racing pulse slows when she opens to me, warming up to my touch.

Looks like Alex hasn't told her anything about our friendship or my position in Vibrant Corp. Good. It should stay that way.

I pull back from the kiss. "Let's take a stroll, Melissa. The evening is a beautiful one."

"Sure thing."

Wrapping a hand around her shoulder, with a hand of hers around my waist, we stroll through the park.

"How was your day?"

"Stressful, like every day. At least I'm catching up with all the work I left. Yours?"

Why hasn't she mentioned Alex? Hasn't he visited her?

"Same old. Most of these days, it's the merger my firm is processing that's been keeping me busy. Your method is a good one, though. Been working well for the guys and me. It's not easy for a firm of freelancers to merge with an established one, no matter what they might be going through."

"I'm glad you found that useful."

We stroll a few more yards in silence. All the while, a debate goes on in my mind about the best way to approach the subject of Alex. I run simulations of some scenarios in my head, trying to decide which would be best.

In the end, I opt for a direct approach.

“Alex is back.”

We both pause and stare at each other. We said it simultaneously.

“I guess we both knew about that,” I say, chuckling.

Melissa’s lips are straight. Noticing there’s a bench just nearby, I lead her to it.

“When did you find out?”

“Yesterday. Alex came to see me, just as you called.”

“What did you two discuss?”

“Family stuff. When did you find out?”

“Today.”

“Is he still offering his services to your firm?”

“At the moment, no. I’m guessing he has other things to deal with.”

“Tell me. What’s your relationship with Alex again?”

I swallow. “I told you, he’s a lawyer for my freelance firm. We’ve done some business together, and that’s it.”

She looks me right in the eyes. “Oh, okay. It skipped my memory.”

“That happens. A lot of times, due to my sheer workload, I even forget to eat!”

She’s not laughing. What’s wrong?

“Is there something wrong, Melissa?”

“Nothing much. Today was just tiring. Also, I got into a fight with a friend.”

I breathe a sigh of relief.

“What happened?”

“I found out today that she was lying to me and keeping secrets from me about something important. I asked her about

it, and she lied to my face – *again!* – and this, without even flinching.”

The night gets a lot chillier. I shiver as cold air blows on the little skin that my clothes don't cover. It's not the cold air, though.

“Um... damn. That must have been, uh, painful.”

She leans on my shoulder. “Very. I hate deception. I'm so glad I can still count on you.”

“Uh, yeah, sure.”

She tilts her head up. “Why the hesitation? Or, is there something you want to tell me?”

If ever there's a good time to tell Melissa everything, this is it. I open my mouth, ready to explain everything, but then I stop.

How would Melissa react, knowing that the person she's building a relationship with is trying to take over her company? Again, there's Alex. I haven't been truthful to her about my relationship with her brother. I told her that lie when I was still suspicious of her, but now that we're together, I can't tell her the truth.

I clench my fists. I have to protect Melissa. Even if that means lying to her and keeping secrets.

“No. Nothing you don't know, already. Except for some stories of my childhood I must have forgotten to tell you, maybe,” I say, in an attempt to diffuse the tension with a little humor.

She stands up. “I have to go now.”

“Really? But we just got here a few minutes ago. Are you sure you're fine?”

“I'm feeling tired and a bit cold. Plus, I forgot to attend to something, somewhere.”

“Oh. Well, can I drive you there?”

“No! I mean... I'll be fine. I'll take the train.”

She's withdrawing from me.

Why's she withdrawing from me?

“Alright. Goodnight, then.”

I move closer to kiss her. Her face turns, and the kiss lands on her cheek.

“Bye.”

Cleaning her face with her long sleeves, she walks away into the night.

The walk back to my car is a long one. My mind is weighed down by my decision. Is lying to Melissa really for the best?

I stop, my brows wrinkling. Melissa’s story is a bit too specific. There’s definitely something going on with her.

Oh no.

What if she’s already met Alex and was trying to test me?

Chapter 20

Melissa

Knock.

“Who’s there?”

“It’s me. Melissa.”

The door to Alex’s apartment opens. Already in his pajamas, his hair is disheveled, and there are bags in his eyes.

“Oh? ‘Lissa? What’re you doing here? It’s late!”

“We need to talk. Can I come in?” I ask.

“Come in.”

I enter his apartment. The living room is neat and spacious, with couches arranged to form a semicircle, flower vases around the room, and a bookshelf propped up in one corner. A digital clock propped up on a table gives me an idea of how late it is. Twenty minutes before eleven.

“Do you want something? Anything?” He asks as I take a seat.

“I’d like some milk.”

A small smile appears on his face. “You’re still the same, aren’t you, ‘Lissa?”

He exits, leaving me to my thoughts. It’s turning out to be a long night.

Earlier, when Richard skirted the truth and lied about his relationship with Alex, I was so pissed it took all my self-control not to lash at him.

Why is Richard lying about his relationship with Alex? Why can’t he just be plain?

Just a month ago, Richard was one of my top suspects in this web of conspiracy because of his secrecy. To date, I still don’t know what he was doing in my room or why he was there. Is he an agent of Lamar’s? Someone from Vibrant Corp?

I’ve built a trust – no, a *relationship* with him that has been growing since my time at his house after the burglary. Now, I

found out he lied about Alex. What else could he be lying about?

“Is everything alright?”

Alex stands, a cup of hot milk and another of something else in his hands. He hands me the milk, and I take a gulp.

“Alex,” I say, when he’s seated, “I need you to tell me everything you know about Richard. Don’t hide anything from me. Please. I have to know.”

Alex stares into his cup for a while, before sipping its contents.

“Brandy. Always works.”

“Alex –”

“You want to know about Richard, right? Let me guess – he’s been lying to you all this time, and you want to know the truth.”

“Ye...yes. I do.”

He twirls his cup. “Why do you want to know? If you need assurance that Richard isn’t with the underground syndicates or part of this big conspiracy, I can vouch for him.”

He’s not a bad guy. That’s enough good news. Still, why would he lie? I have to know. No one lies without a reason.

“I know he’s not a bad guy. All I want to know is why he would lie to me. That’s why I want you to tell me what you know about him.”

He meets my eyes with his blue ones behind his glasses. “You didn’t answer my question. Why do you want to know? Why is it so important to know about him that you came here this late?”

“Are you going to tell me or not?”

“I just want to know.”

“Ah, forget it! Why did I even bother coming here anyways? I’ll find out myself. Thanks for the drink.” I slam the cup on the table and walk to the door.

“Wait. Don’t go. It’s late. I’ll tell you. But you have to promise me you’ll remain calm,” Alex says, already on his feet.

I let go of the door handle. “Alright. I’m all ears.”

“Sit down, Melissa.”

Dragging my feet back to the couch, I sit at the edge.

“Drink your milk.” His tone is gentle, yet with authority. I lift the cup of milk, downing the rest of its contents.

“Now, are you gonna tell me, or – ”

“Richard is Vibrant Corporation’s CEO.”

“What? No. No, it can’t be. Richard cannot...”

“That’s the truth. Richard is one of the richest men in New York. Not only is he the CEO of Vibrant Corp, but also its major shareholder. This means he’s virtually the owner of Vibrant Corp and the person running it.”

“Then, the acquisition –”

“All his idea. He got tired of all the corruption and shady deals taking place in the shadows and decided to take matters into his hands. He’s been processing a takeover for months now, although he’s been rejected more than once, or so I’m told by his assistant, Anna.”

I sit back, placing my back against the couch as the words sink in. Richard is the owner of Vibrant Corp.

It all clicks, fitting into place like a jigsaw. The fancy apartment he lives in; the housewarming party, when he was sneaking around; the excuse about his freelance firm – it all makes sense now.

“Why would he lie to me?”

“I don’t know what’s between you two, but I can imagine he didn’t tell you because you’re the CEO of the company he wants to take over. If anything, I think it was to keep you safe – ”

I cut him short. “That’s not a fucking excuse!”

“ – from his plans. He intends to bring down the administration running Emerald, ‘Lissa. Anna hinted subtly at that, but it’s clear to see. There’s no other reason to buy Emerald. You’re not in the criminal dealings, but you *are* part of the administration.”

“Or maybe he didn’t tell me because he’s a fucking coward!”
My brain is so clouded by rage that I can’t think.

“Easy, Melissa.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? We talked yesterday, but you never mentioned any of this.”

He stares into his cup before drinking the rest of the brandy.

“Do you know why I’m here in New York?”

My eyes are blurry with tears, and I turn to Alex.

“I’m here because of Richard. Last week, he told me he was moving forward with a plan to merge the two companies. He’s already started the processing. I did some findings, and it seems he has come up with a proposal, according to Anna. It’s not public yet, so I don’t know what it’ll come to. I’m here to make sure you’re not affected in any way. Richard is a determined man and won’t quit until he gets what he wants.”

My legs wobble as it dawns on me. I told Richard a way to take over Emerald indirectly.

“Does this involve a partnership or anything?”

“Yes. Has the board informed you?”

Damn it. Why did you have to be so gullible, Melissa?

“Is that all?”

“All that matters.”

“You mentioned the name, Anna, thrice. You said this Anna was his assistant. Is she a red-haired, petite young woman, who wears glasses?”

“Yes. Have you met her before?”

I have. She’s an employee of Vibrant that I’m acquainted with – the only one.

Did Richard tell her to spy on me?

“Are you thinking of talking to Richard, ‘Lissa?”

“Where’s the bathroom?”

“In the hall, second door to the right. Are you alright?”

I head for the hallway, light-headed. In the bathroom, I gaze at my reflection in the mirror. *You’ve been played again, Melissa.*

I scoop some water onto my face, before glancing at the mirror once more. Then I sit on the tiled floor, bursting into tears – loud sobs that shake my body. A knock comes on the door.

“Melissa? Are you alright? Should I come in?”

“Don’t! I’ll be fine.”

I wipe my face with my sleeves. Tomorrow, I’m giving Richard a piece of my mind. But first, I have to contact someone.



“You wanted to meet me, Miss Durham?”

Anna, in a simple formal dress, sits across me in a busy McDonald’s restaurant, a curious stare registered on her face.

“I did, Anna. Thanks for making out the time to see me.”

It took a lot of thinking yesterday before I remembered I know someone who works in Vibrant Corp. Anna is easy to talk to due to her cheerful nature. Today, I’m counting on that.

“No issue. Do you need me for something?”

Before I can answer, a young waiter approaches our table with the orders we made a few minutes earlier.

“Hamburgers! God, I love them.” She bites out of her serving.

“You work in Vibrant Corp, right?”

“Um, yeah. I mean, you already knew that before, right?”

“Who’s your boss?”

Anna sets her burger down, swallowing. “Excuse me?”

“Who’s your boss? The CEO. And don’t bullshit me, because I already know, and I know you’re his assistant.”

“Oh? If you already know, then why are you asking me?”

Good question.

I take a sip from my Coca-Cola. “I’m the CEO of Emerald, and your boss wants to take what’s mine. What I worked for.”

“But Mr. Burnes doesn’t ... oops.”

So Alex isn’t lying. “Anna. Please. We might not be that close, but I believe I can call you a friend. Help me out here. I just need to know.”

Anna sighs, then draws a napkin from the table to wipe her mouth. I do the same.

“Richard is the CEO of Vibrant. He’s been making a lot of investments to expand the company, but, his merger with Emerald isn’t out of profit or anything. He has his reasons.”

“Oh, I see. Tell me. What are those reasons?”

“Can I ask you a question first, Melissa?”

I lean back in my seat. “Alright. Go ahead.”

“How did you find out? That Mr. Burnes is Vibrant’s CEO?”

I give her a cold stare, before answering.

“My brother, Alex.”

Anna glances out the windows, and I follow her gaze for a moment. There’s nothing of note outside – just people going about their businesses on a busy afternoon and the never-ending traffic.

“Mr. Burnes didn’t know how to approach you when you first moved into your new apartment. More like, he was weary. Emerald is known to many for its prestige and a few for its underground activity,” she says, still staring out the window.

She turns to me, then drinks some water, before continuing.

“He didn’t trust you at first, and that’s really understandable. It seemed too much of a coincidence that he offered a deal to buy

the company, then you moved in just days later. Yeah, that's how it started."

"Because of this, he decided to get close to me?"

"He didn't decide. At least, according to my knowledge. He just wanted to find out if you were, I dunno, someone sent to derail his plans. Somehow, you two got close. Since that time, he stopped doubting you."

"Then why couldn't he tell me the truth?"

"That's another thing I don't know."

"Do you have any information about his current takeover plans?"

Anna sighs, then sips the last of her Coca-Cola.

"It's quite amazing how much about your company is kept from you, even though you're the CEO."

I grit my teeth. She couldn't be more right.

"Mr. Burnes made an offer to Emerald for an alliance of some sort. The two companies merge without one buying out or taking over the other. Emerald's board agreed. It might have you wondering why he would want to merge with a company he considers corrupt. I can't provide the answer to that, though."

"You don't have to." After all, I'm the one that gave him the takeover strategy he's currently employing.

Anna's phone rings. She glances at the screen, before picking.

"Uh-uh.... Okay Alright No, I'm not far from the office... Yes ... I'll be right there, Mr. Burnes."

The mention of the name has my brows furrowing.

Ending the call, she turns to me. "Sorry, Melissa. I'm afraid I have to leave now. Duty calls. Thanks for the burgers. I'm sorry I couldn't be of much help. I'm also sorry my boss lied to you."

I smile at her. "On the contrary. You were of so much help. Thank you, Anna."

We shake hands, and Anna leaves the eatery. I stay behind, mulling over our meeting.

Richard's been lying to me all this time. Even when he had the chance to come clean, he didn't.

All this had to happen just as I developed a soft spot for him.

Chapter 21

Richard

“Run it by me once more.”

“Alright, Mr. Burnes. Tomorrow, you have a meeting with Emerald executives about making the merger processing official. On Thursday, it’s lunch with representatives from the Stock Exchange about issuing new shares. Friday’s less busy, but you’re the guest of honor at a dinner party organized by John Lamar. That’s about it for the week, except for stuff popping up here and there.”

As I pull up in the garage of my apartment, I round up my call with Anna.

“Stuff always pops up. You’re indispensable, and I need some help before I pass out from too much work.”

Anna releases an exaggerated sigh. “Ah, the burden of being CEO. Fortunately, there are perks. If you want, I’m available for the job. That’s if you’re not interested anymore.”

“See you tomorrow, Anna. Don’t forget – we have some work to do this weekend in my apartment.”

“As your Lordship pleases.”

I’m just getting down from my car when the twin headlights of Melissa’s Chrysler flash on my face. Just the person I want to see. I wait for her car to park before going over to her.

“Melissa. I’m glad to – ” I stop, noticing the frown on her face, “ – wha... what’s wrong?”

“How could you lie to me? I trusted you!”

“Melissa, wait. Can we talk about this inside? Let’s not do this here, please.”

“No. Fuck that. Tell me here and now. Why?”

“Please, Melissa. Inside.”

She gives me a long, angry look before she enters my apartment.

“Do you want anything?” I ask, as I follow her in.

“Yes, as a matter of fact. An explanation. And you better give me a good one.”

I sigh. This isn't going to be easy.

“What do you want an explanation about?”

“Hmm. Let's see. Why not everything, Richard? Your relationship with my brother. Your *actual* job. Your *real* purpose for getting closer to me. Where should we start?”

I rub my forehead. Goodness. This is getting out of hand.

“I'm sorry I lied about some things, Melissa.”

“*Some things?* Richard, even our relationship was a fucking lie! You just wanted to get closer to me for whatever fucked up reason!”

“Melissa, I know I've hurt you by not being honest. But believe me, I never meant to hurt you. I just wanted to protect you – ”

“Protect me? From what? Your bullshit plans? Oh, spare me that crap!”

My fists are balled so tight they're aching. I clench and unclench my fists at regular intervals to lessen the pain.

God, Melissa can be so infuriating! If only she'd just *listen*.

“I did want to protect you, Melissa! I wanted to keep you safe! But I can't do that if you know everything because you'll eventually try to either stop me or help me! You're a good person, and you can't stand injustice, so I couldn't risk putting you in danger!”

“Oh really? Well, newsflash; I'll be involved anyways *because* I'm part of it all. Or do you think I didn't know? That you wanted to take over Emerald because of your self-righteousness? The irresistible spur from your ego to handle things because you feel you're the only one that can?”

“Melissa, you're taking this too far.”

“Then tell me one thing. And be fucking honest. What were you doing in my room that day?”

“I ... I was looking for evidence.”

“Evidence linking me to Emerald’s criminal dealings, isn’t it?”

“No.” *God, no.* “At the time, I didn’t know who you were. It was before I got to know you. You’re not part of them.”

“If you deemed me so *good*, then why did you continue to lie? About my brother, for instance. Or were you also trying to protect me from my brother? And about the *freelance firm*. A freelance firm trying to take over an established one? How didn’t I see through that? What a greenie I am!”

“You’re not a greenie, Melissa.” I stretch out an arm to hold her, but she slaps it away.

“Don’t you dare fucking touch me, Richard Burnes!”

“Melissa ... I care about you too much to see you like this. Don’t you get it?”

Tears fall from her eyes. Wiping her face with my palms, I draw her closer, and she starts sobbing.

“I’m sorry, Melissa. I’m sorry for lying to you all this time. I could have done better. I know that.”

She shifts away from me, stretching out her arms to keep a distance.

“You could have done better. You didn’t. It’s too late to change that now.”

“Don’t do this, Melissa. Don’t turn me into the bad guy.”

She shoots me a lethal look. “I didn’t have to. You already did.”

Melissa walks out, slamming the door so hard my nerves jump. Every chance of reconciliation disappears with her. I sink into a chair and run my fingers through my hair.

What the hell is wrong with me? Why do I keep screwing everything up?



“It’s been a while, Richard.”

Seeing Alex for the first time in a while, I can't help but appraise him with a glance. With his Harry Potter-like glasses, combed-back hair, and formal suit, he looks the same as he did months ago, except for the patches of beard on his chin.

Last night, after my confrontation with Melissa, I figured there was only one thing I could do to salvage the situation – call Alex. We agreed on a meeting. Now, seeing him in my office, I'm starting to question my impulse.

“Certainly has, Alex. When did you touch down?”

“A few days ago. I wanted to see you, but I got involved in a few things that kept me busy.”

By a few things, you must mean Melissa. “Oh. Hope you've sorted them out.”

“Not as I'd like. I'm still working on them, though. Fingers crossed.”

“We have a lot to talk about. Where do we start, Lex?”

“Let's start with the reason I had to fast-track my schedule so I could be in New York on time. Emerald.”

Here it comes.

“What about it?”

“How's the takeover coming along?”

I stand, glancing past the floor-to-ceiling windows.

“As well as I've planned out.”

“I see. And what's your contingency plan concerning my sister? I remember telling you I wasn't comfortable with anything that'd put Melissa at risk over the phone.”

“Yes, you did. And as I said, I won't let her be affected in any way. I've come up with some strategies that'll let her keep her position and guarantee her safety. Also, I've developed a close relationship with the board, so I'm in a good position to monitor them.”

Alex tapped his glass cup. “Can't say I'm satisfied, but I'll take you at your word. For now, at least. That doesn't mean

I'll just sit back, though."

I draw in a deep breath. "Fair enough. Just don't get in my way."

Alex's expression changes. His brows furrow, and he narrows his eyes at me.

"Is that a threat, Richard?"

I meet his gaze, not backing down. I can't afford to be weak. Not now.

"It's a warning. You're my best friend, and that's why I'm telling you. I have a goal already set, and anything I see as a hindrance, I'll face head-on. Even if it's you."

"Oh, so you'll meet me head-on if I'm seen as a threat, is that it?"

Yes. "I don't see you as a threat, Lex. But please, don't let your love for your sister drive you to extremes. That's all I'm saying."

"You think I'll be blinded by that? Well, Richie, fear not. I love my sister, yes, but I also know what you're trying to do. And I hope to God you bring those assholes down."

Our little spat over, we both laugh and settle down for more drinks.

"Champagne?"

"Do you have to ask, Richie?"

Chuckling, I pour us each a glass.

"About my sister. Why did you lie to her?" Alex asks as I hand him his glass.

"You've talked to her, right?"

"A few days ago, she came to me, demanding to know the truth about you. We had a long chat that night. She was pretty upset."

The night we went to the park. That night, I felt her withdrawing from me. She'd probably already started discovering the truth by then.

Why didn't I just tell her everything?

"Truth is, I thought I was trying to protect her. When we first met, I saw her as the enemy, you know. I didn't know any better then. She's the CEO of the company I'm trying to take over because their shady underground deals are sickening. Anyone in my place would have thought the same thing."

Nodding, Alex lifts his glass for a sip of champagne.

I clear my throat, before continuing. "When I decided to take the extra step and infiltrate her life, I started with lies. Soon, I understood what was really going on, but even though I knew Melissa was more of a figurehead, who also had good intentions, I couldn't bring myself to tell her."

"I feel you, Richie. At least, you could have told her something, though."

"I know, but I just couldn't! When I found out she was your sister, it became a lot harder. Then, we became a couple, and _"

Alex, with an arm stretched as if clapping the air, cuts me short.

"Hold on. Wait a minute. What did you say?"

I raise an eyebrow. "It became a lot harder, because I found out you're her brother?"

"No, not that. Okay, let me ask you a question. A simple one. What's your relationship with Melissa?"

Why's he asking me when he most likely knows already?

"We were a couple. It was brief. She told you, didn't she?"

In the twinkle of an eye, Alex is on his feet again, fists balled. My eyes widen as it dawns on me. Melissa didn't tell him.

"Now I get it. I asked Melissa many times about what her relationship with you is supposed to be, but not once did she give me an answer. Now I know why. She was too ashamed to say it."

I shoot to my feet. My mind floods with thoughts on how to salvage the situation.

“Lex, calm down. We can talk about this...”

“Don’t tell me to calm down, man! I don’t want you bullshitting me anymore! Oh, so I tell you to watch over my sister, and you decided to take it a step further?”

“No. That’s not what happened. Listen, I can explain,” I say, taking a step closer to him.

Alex stops me with a raised finger. “Don’t you take any step further. You’ve lost it, Richard. My respect. You just threw it in the trash.”

“I can’t deny the fact that Melissa and I had something between us. And I’m done with hiding things. I’m sorry I didn’t let you know, but what’s done is done. Also, we’re a thing of the past now.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better? Because it’s not. I don’t see how I’m supposed to accept my best friend dating my baby sister easily. Honestly, I wish it wasn’t you, Richard. Anyone, but you.”

“Lex –”

Alex storms away, tipping over a glass of champagne in his hurry. The liquid runs through the table and onto the floor, first in gushes, then trickles, until only drops fall on the carpet.

I’ve done it again. I betrayed Melissa’s trust by lying to her and keeping secrets, and now Alex is mad at me. I don’t blame him. It’s not that he’s worried about the kind of person I am or anything; I know that much. He’s angry simply because I dated his sister behind his back.

Sitting on the armchair nearby, I take the bottle of champagne and drink a huge amount in one gulp. I rest a moment, before going again. The intercom buzzes just as I’m going for my third.

“Mr. Burnes. Um, there are some people here to see you. They said you requested a meeting?”

Some people?

“Describe them.”

“They look like normal businessmen, but they didn’t mention their company or purpose. They just asked to see you. I think they’re a group of agents or something.”

Agents?

The FBI. My ‘contingency plan’.

“Send them in.”

Chapter 22

Melissa

“I demand a meeting with him this instant!”

Fuming, I lean over the desk, but the young man I’m talking to doesn’t budge an inch. A good receptionist.

“I’m sorry, ma’am. But, as I’ve told you, Mr. Lamar isn’t available.”

“Don’t you know who I am?”

Little drops of sweat running down his forehead betray his nervousness.

“I do, Miss Durham. U

nfortunately, I can’t help you. If you wish to see him, I can fix an appointment for you.”

“How soon can the appointment be fixed?” I ask, sighing.

“It depends on his schedule, ma’am. Rest assured, you’ll be contacted as soon as Mr. Lamar’s available. Do you perhaps want to leave any message?”

I glance around the reception area. There are cameras in different corners, with red lights blinking. Good.

“Tell him it’s about Vibrant Corp,” I say, as loud as possible.

“Okay, ma’am. I’ll be sure to deliver –” The ringing of the landline telephone on the receptionist’s desk cuts him short.

“Yes? Uh, yes sir Yes, this is her first time here I should allow her in? Alright sir. I understand.”

He drops the phone on its receiver, then turns to me. “Apologies for the inconvenience, Miss Durham. Mr. Lamar will see you now.”

As I walk past the desk, a smile plays on my lips. He isn’t one for missing out on business. This is a deal he’ll be interested in and that’s enough to bait him.

The automatic doors slide open as I get closer to the spacious office that serves as John Lamar’s base of operations. With a

wide sitting area complete with a bar stacked with different wines and spirits, along with decorations like the bronze sculpture of a bull on one side of the room, and a portrait of Lamar himself, no expenses were spared in making this office as regal as possible.

In a corner, a large LCD screen propped up against the wall is showing a golf game, and Lamar's sitting on a swiveling chair nearby, watching. He doesn't move an inch as I enter.

"I've come to talk to you, Mr. Lamar."

"About what?" He asks, his back still turned to me.

"Vibrant Corporation. That's what."

He swivels to face me, his gaze is intense, lips straight.

"Want me to tell you something interesting, Melissa?"

From the time I became CEO, Lamar has shown no respect or regard for me, even though I'm someone with a high position in the company. It's a formal setting, yet he chose to call me by name.

I grit my teeth, taking deep breaths to calm my throbbing heart. Now's not the time to get angry. I hate to admit it, but he's important to me now. Even though he's a corrupt, devious scumbag.

"Please, Mr. Lamar. I came here only for one thing."

"Patience, Melissa. I'm getting somewhere. Just answer the question."

"Okay. What's the interesting thing?"

He gets up and walks to his desk. Bringing out a silver box, he opens it, fetching a cigar. With a lighter in hand, the tobacco is soon burning. He inhales, then breathes out a puff.

"That match," he points with his smoking cigar to the golf match being shown on the television, "is a special one. Why? It was held in honor of the donors of the golf club. I'm a huge donor, so I got a slot. Want to know why I'm not there?"

"How ... why aren't you there?"

“I’m not in that match because there’s something that’s far more important on my plate I have to take care of. Now, I like my pleasures, alright, but business always comes first. Want to know what the *business* in question is?”

This sly fox is driving somewhere. “Vibrant?”

“Exactly! Good one, Melissa. You’re quick. I’m here because of Vibrant. Mr. Burnes has presented before us a mouth-watering merger deal, and I’ll be damned if I don’t take action. The sooner, the better.”

“But you still –”

He waves a finger at me. Getting the message, I fall silent. This is becoming frustrating by the second.

“I’m not done yet. Emerald is a big company – heck, the biggest nonprofit out there! Vibrant Corp herself is by no means a small company. Vibrant Corp can outdo Emerald in revenue in a productive year. Now, imagine if we had those two companies under our control.”

“Can I take a seat?”

As if he’s just noticing I’ve been standing all the while, he waves me to a chair.

“Have a seat! Of course! Forgive my manners. I get carried away sometimes. As I was saying. Now, someone – and not just anyone, but Emerald’s CEP – mentions something about Vibrant, and it’s only obligatory I dig into that.”

Walking up to his bar, he retrieves a bottle of brandy and pours himself a glass. After downing the liquid in one go, he puts his cigar back into his mouth before turning to face me.

“This leads me to my question. What about Vibrant Corp did you want to talk to me?”

My hands, restless, fiddle with the straps of my bag. I swallow several times before talking.

“The deal with Vibrant should be reevaluated. Richard Burnes is planning something. It’ll be ill-advised to rush into a partnership with such a mysterious character.”

Lamar chuckles, before roaring into laughter.

“Is that what you’re worried about, Melissa?” he asks, still laughing.

“Yes. That, and more.”

“More? Let me hear it.”

“The time frame we’ve set for processing this merger is too soon. We should build a solid foundation before entering the partnership deal. My estimates say, a timeframe ranging from a year to three, maybe.”

Every trace of humor has disappeared from Lamar’s face by now, and his trademark scowl is back.

“I want to ask you this, Miss CEO. Do you want us to merge with Vibrant Corp or not? No niceties. I need just a yes, or no.”

“No.”

“I’m pretty sure you have your reasons. Am I on the money?”

“Yes.”

“Good. The board is meeting in three days. You’ll be present to discuss your case and a vote will be held. Sounds good enough?”

The board, Lamar included, is blinded by one thing – money. It’s going to be a herculean task trying to get them off what they see as a profitable deal, but I have to try, as I know Richard’s endgame. For all I know, he might be entering the second phase of his plans now.

“Sounds good enough.”



“Are you sure this is the best step to take?”

“Positive. Richard Burnes might have good intentions, but he’s just gonna complicate things further by entering a partnership with this pack of wolves.”

The line is filled with silence. I tap my office desk, waiting for Agent Chad’s reply. An analytical man who mulls over every

possible outcome and every obstacle before taking any action, he's probably weighing my choices right now.

"I can't say I give you my blessing, as I'm still not sure this is the best course of action," he says, after the long moment of silence, "but I can't say you're making the worst of decisions, either. Just make sure you're in the right mind for this. As you mentioned earlier, the board is like a pack of ravenous wolves, ready to eat you alive if you slip up. Don't give them that chance, okay?"

"Yeah. I won't."

"Good. Give me a briefing of the meeting after it's done."

That's the last I hear from his end. Brief as ever. I glance at my watch. It's just twenty minutes from the meeting. Better to go early and leave a good impression.

It sickens me to summon the board I detest so much like this, but right now, those men are the ones that called the shots, as they hold the most shares. They're the only ones that can put a stop to Richard's quest.

The reasons for Richard's takeover don't matter anymore. Handing over my company and all I've worked for to a liar and deceiver will be the last thing I do.

A rapping sound at the glass door catches my attention. It must be someone sent by the board. Sure enough, as I press a button and the doors slide open, a young brunette woman is standing just outside, with a file in her hands.

"Miss Durham? I'm Becca. I'll be accompanying you to the boardroom. I'll brief you on some things you should know before we get there."

With my phone and a folder containing files about Vibrant, which I gathered and worked on for the better part of a week, I followed Becca to the boardroom.

"What's the briefing you wanted to give me?"

"Just two things, Miss Durham. First, the board will be seated for an hour. That's all they can spare. Second, the board maintains the right to deny your proposal, if it's not in the

interest of the company. If it's detrimental to Emerald's progress, you can be voted out of office. So please, ensure your proposal is as objective as possible and is for the growth of the company. That's all I'm to brief you on."

Well played. In other words, if I say something that pisses them off, I get the boot. At this moment, I'm treading on thin ice.

Less than three minutes later, we arrive at the closed conference room. All fourteen members of the board are already seated. The meeting isn't due for another ten minutes.

Sitting at the far right of the table is John Lamar, a cigar in his mouth, with his gaze following me. A blatant disregard for corporate policy, but I'm powerless to stop him. The chair on the far left has been reserved for me, and I take a seat.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I'm so glad you reserved some time from your busy schedules to be here."

They all murmur in reply. All, except Lamar, who's still releasing huffs of smoke, his gaze set on me.

Drawing my chair back, I stand. "I called this meeting because of an issue I'm sure everyone seated here is aware of. Emerald is about to enter a merger with Richard Burnes's Vibrant Corporation."

The board members converse in hushed tones before the murmurs are put to a stop by John Lamar, who sets his cigar on an ashtray and clears his throat.

"Yes. We're very well aware of that. We're the ones processing the deal, after all. What's your point, Miss Durham?"

"Here's my point – the deal should be called off."

The room lapses into total silence, and it's like I've just uttered blasphemy in the presence of a religious group.

Lamar breaks the silence. "Why don't you tell us why you're suggesting this, Miss Durham?"

"After some research, I discovered this deal will benefit us less and Vibrant more. I can't stand that."

“It’s not your decision to make, Miss Durham. The board will decide what’s best for the company.”

I press on, ignoring the implied criticism. “I’m calling for a reevaluation of this deal, and, if possible, an end to it. That’s my proposal.”

The board falls silent. Lamar, fingers crossed on the table, stares daggers at me.

Gerard Haynes, his right-hand man, breaks the silence. “A partnership with Vibrant Corp will benefit this company in the short *and* long term. My accounting team has worked out the details. Can you give us any figures or facts that’ll make us understand why it’s a bad idea to merge?”

There’s none.

“I don’t have any figures or facts. But I’m well aware of the strategy Richard Burnes is trying to adopt. As the merger is being processed, he’ll start poaching our stocks one way or the other, so when the merger is done, he’ll be in a strong position to convince the lot of you here to sell your shares at much lower prices. Before we can say bull for profit, he’s the major shareholder and de-facto owner of the two companies.”

Lamar chuckles, before bursting into laughter. “Miss Durham. You’re trying to tell me he’ll use such an old method in the book and I won’t notice?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm. What’s your source?”

“I don’t have a source, in the strict sense. I just know it.” *I told him how to go about it after all.*

“I must say, I’m quite disappointed in you, Miss Durham. As CEO, I expect you to know better than summon a board meeting because something came to you in a dream, on a whim, or something. I was mistaken.”

“But –”

“Let me finish. You’ve had your say. What you just did should be getting you booted on a normal day. The board should be voting on your expulsion, as I’m talking, but today’s not the

day. Firing you would mean settling contracts, handling press conferences and the like. There's no time for all that due to the merger processing. An irony is that you owe your job to what you want to stop. This meeting is over."

Lamar, adjusting his suit, moves out of the conference room, followed by the other members. I'm left in the room, my mind reeling.

Lamar and Richard win this round. In the end, nothing changes. The merger is still endorsed by the board.

Chapter 23

Richard

“Mr. Burnes! You’ve arrived! I have some great news for you!”

I take a sip from my coffee, watching my finance officer, Thomas, tremble with sheer excitement as he delivers reports concerning Emerald to me.

My plan is in motion. When Lamar accepted my terms two weeks ago, that was the first step. The processing of the merger is already underway and gaining momentum – my advisers tell me it’s just two weeks at best before my dream of bringing Emerald and Vibrant together is realized.

Despite all these, I’m not as ecstatic as I should be. I’m not punching my fist in the air or slapping the back of people like Thomas, making this deal work; I’m not hosting dinner parties or taking my subordinates out for a drink. If anything, I’m less enthusiastic.

There’s one reason for this – Melissa. Ever since she ended our relationship, I’ve not been myself. It doesn’t help that Alex is also avoiding me now. I’ve not heard from him since our row in my office.

“Morning, Tom. Talk to me. What’s the update?”

I relax on my chair as Thomas rubs his hands together before bringing out his phone.

“Remember the stock sales last week? We advised each member of Emerald’s board to sell at least twenty percent of their stocks in the first step to diversification. Well, sir? They caught the bait.”

“Oh? What’s the update on that, now?”

“As a collective, sir, all fourteen members control about sixty percent. Each selling that amount of stocks reduced that number to forty thereabouts. Here’s the good part. We just got some proxy associates to buy those stocks for us in their name. Technically, you’ll be the top stakeholder before the merger is

even completed if we maintain this buyout policy. Genius move, sir!”

The genius here isn't me. It's Melissa.

We're not a thing anymore, yet I still can't help but worry about Melissa. A week ago, I got in contact with the FBI because I'd gathered some evidence. I'm still uncovering more, but I need to make sure she's safe from the troubles that'll occur from exposing the corruption of Emerald's top dogs.

Another meeting is scheduled for today. This time, I'm to meet with the head of investigations on the Emerald Inc. case, Chad Tracinski.

“I see. Good job. We should be able to transition without any hiccups if things go well, yeah?”

“Things are going well, sir. All we need is to finalize the merger deals, and we're good to go. Emerald is as good as yours.”

“Alright. Keep me informed. Now, please excuse me, Tom. There's a shit ton of work to do.”

“I understand, sir. You can be assured I'll keep you in the loop.” With those words, he leaves the office.

Alone, I dial the number given to me by the FBI agents who visited my office last week. I'm supposed to call a certain Chad Tracinski, head of the Emerald investigation. He's connected almost in an instant.

“Am I speaking to Agent Tracinski? Chad Tracinski?”

There's no answer.

“Hello? Is anyone there?” Again, no response.

Just before I end the call, a deep voice comes through. “Richard Burnes, CEO of Vibrant Corp, is it?”

“It's me. Why wasn't there a reply?”

“Security reasons. We had to confirm it was you. Apologies for that.”

“Um, no problem. So, about what I discussed with your, uh, colleagues before?”

“I can’t be seen anywhere near your office or Emerald Inc. until I’m ready to make a move. Do you have any place in mind?”

I rack my brain for a while. “I know a place.”



It’s the first time I’m visiting Central Park since the night I came with Melissa. In the glimmering sunlight of the afternoon, people are sitting on benches under the shades of trees, or playing with their pets, mostly dogs. Couples walk by, holding hands, and there’s the occasional homeless wanderer.

I clench my fists. Charity should help the poor and homeless like these with food and shelter. People like Lamar who exploit that for their selfish intent should be in jail.

I scan the meadows for agent Chad, who I’m to meet. He told me he was in a blue polo t-shirt and black jeans, with blue-white trainers and a white cap. So far, nobody dressed as that has come into view.

My phone rings, distracting me from my search. It’s a private number.

“Hello?”

“Mr. Burnes. It’s Chad. Chad Tracinski. Turn around.”

I spot him as I turn. He appears to be reading a paperback novel, with earbuds in both ears. I end the call, before striding to the man sitting on a bench under a pin oak tree. As I get to the bench, I bring out my phone to give the appearance of someone texting.

We’re both wearing face masks, so for anyone to get an idea of what we’re saying, or if we’re saying anything at all, the person has to come close. Very close.

“Mr. Burnes. You’ve met with some of my collection before today. According to them, you’ve gathered some evidence on John Lamar and his accomplices. Right?”

“I have. Due to the relationship I’ve established with the Emerald board, I’ve been allowed access to some restricted records. The idea was to study these financial records so we could plot a chart for growth in the future. In reality, though, I used these records to trace their transactions, even those they thought were covered. Criminals always leave a trace behind. For Lamar, that trace was in his financial records.”

“I see. That should be enough to convict him of money laundering and embezzlement. Is there anything else you discovered?”

“Yes. Through those records, I traced their deals. Every time money’s diverted to criminal organizations, there’s a third party that makes sure it stays under the book. A cybercrime outfit. Things like these leave a trace.”

“Now, what do you intend to do with all this evidence?”

“I plan to make Lamar and the rest of the corrupt management pay. With this much evidence in the hands of law enforcement, arrests will be made. They should be charged in court and given their due.”

Chad flips a page. “I’m impressed, Mr. Burnes. But that leaves the question. Why did you demand to see me? This information could have been given to any of my colleagues.”

Good question. “I have enough evidence to bring the entire administration of Emerald to its knees, but there’s someone that I don’t want to be caught up in that.”

“Who? And why don’t you want this person to face justice?”

I can’t bear to see her suffer any longer. “She’s innocent. She’s among the top people in the company, but she’s one of the good ones. I’d rather dispose of all this evidence, so nothing happens to her than let her be punished for something she doesn’t know about.”

“No need to go to such extremes, Mr. Burnes. Just tell us her name.”

“I can’t.”

Chad closes his book and gets on his feet. “Walk with me.”

We walk through the park in silence, and I gaze past the playgrounds and the trees. We're almost at an exit when he stops.

"I understand you want to keep the identity of this person anonymous. But with that, we can't help you. Did you bring the evidence?"

I hand him a candy wrap. There's no candy inside, however – just a drive.

"Your contribution is appreciated, Mr. Burnes. And the woman in question?"

This is for Melissa's safety. I have to tell Chad something.

"On one condition."

"Let me hear it. If it's possible, I'll work on it."

"Take her off the radar. I don't care how. Just make sure she's not around when all this goes down."

"That'll be tough, more so if she's a member of the management."

"I don't care about that. If it's the finances you need, you'll get them. If you can fulfill this condition, you have mine and Vibrant Corp's unconditional support for life."

"Hmm. She must be someone important to you. Alright, if you insist. Now, can you tell me something? Anything?"

"She's Emerald's CEO."

Chapter 24

Melissa

“Agent Chad.” I settle on the low Victorian-style couch facing a large painting, on which Chad’s already sitting, eyes front.

“I’m glad you could come on such short notice, Miss Durham. We have a lot to talk about.”

It’s a bright Saturday morning, and I’m in an art exhibition with the FBI agent assigned to the investigation of corruption within my company. This had better be good.

Earlier this morning, Celine paid me a surprise visit while I was in my yoga session, and we got down to making some apple pie. It’s the first time since my time with Richard that I’ve had a wholesome cooking experience with someone. It was during our cooking and chatting that Chad called, saying he had something on Lamar and the board.

“I agree. Why meet at an art exhibition, though?”

He keeps his focus on the painting in front. “Look around.”

I scan our surroundings. There are very few people apart from us in this exhibit, and everyone else is admiring a painting here and a sculpture there.

“This is the best place we can talk without interruptions. And the things I’m about to tell you will need your full attention. Can I get it?”

I shift my gaze to the painting as well. It’s a large landscape canvas depicting a medieval scene; a man is being hanged, flanked by two soldiers, a priest, and a government official, with a crowd of onlookers in the foreground, while another government official rushes to the scene on horseback, waving an arm.

“You have my full attention, agent Chad.”

“Good. How’s the takeover by Vibrant Corp going? What’s the progress?”

All through the week, I tried to convince the board of directors not to merge with Vibrant Corp. My leadership was questioned, and I was almost voted out. Richard's takeover strategy is so flawless even corrupt businessmen involved in embezzlement fell for it.

"It's almost done. Soon, Emerald, as an entity in its own right, will cease to exist. It'll be Emerald-Vibrant or whatever they decide to name it." Those words are like bile in my mouth.

"I see. Now, let's move to the reason I called you here without further delay."

"You told me you had a breakthrough of some kind. Is that true?"

"It is. I'll tell you all about it. But before that, do you want to know what this painting is about?"

The painting draws me in. The expressions of the onlookers, some of sadness and dejection, and some of mockery and pleasure, appear so real one would imagine the painter asked everyone present in a real execution to pose for a painting.

"Please do. I'd like to know more about it."

"This painting, titled '*damnatio facere rectum, et Justus rusus*', or 'condemnation for the right thing, and the righteous smile' was done by an anonymous Italian painter, sometime in the late 17th century. The painting, according to sources, is based on tradition. The man being hanged was a guard in a castle who overheard a plot by a group of advisers to kill the king and queen. He tried to warn his superiors, but no one paid him any heed, thinking him drunk. It didn't help that he was such a low-rank soldier."

Chad paused for a moment, keeping me in suspense.

"Then? What happened?"

"The guard, however, was determined to save the life of his king and queen. Thus, he made up his mind to risk his own life. A fortnight later, a banquet was being held. The king and queen were to give a toast to the prosperity of the kingdom. The guard, sword drawn, rushed to them before they could

drink it, and with a slash of his sword, broke their cups, spilling the wine.”

I lean forward, captivated by the story.

“Of course, he was pinned down and later sentenced to death for an attempt on the king’s life. He didn’t defend himself, feeling he had achieved his main aim. He did just one thing – mentioning the two advisers who planned the attempt as his accomplices. In medieval times, it was very hard to escape charges of treason, so the advisers were sentenced to death as well.”

I nod. “Serves them right.”

“Two days later, on the day set for the execution, the two advisers were hung first. When the noose went around the guard’s neck and the wooden floor gave way, he choked. The execution was stopped, however, after a few minutes by a messenger from the king. Some dogs had died after licking up the wine from the floor, and it was discovered the wine was laced with poison. It was too late, though. The guard was already dead. A smile was on his face.”

“That’s a sad tale.”

“It is. I was told that story as a teenager by my father and read about it as a college student, but it was after meeting Richard Burnes this week that it came back to me.”

I swerve to face him, an eyebrow raised. “Richard?”

Picking up a bottle of water nearby, Chad has a drink. Clearing his throat, he turns to meet my gaze.

“On Tuesday, I met with Richard in Central Park. Due to his maneuvering with Emerald’s management, Richard put himself in such a position he was able to extract information and evidence even my colleagues and I couldn’t. Miss Durham, Richard Burnes has enough evidence to put all the people embezzling your company’s money behind bars for years to come.”

Richard was pursuing that all along?

“That’s not the best of it. He insisted on one thing – keeping you safe. Unaware you’re working with me already, he refused to mention your name, but your safety was paramount to him. He suggested I take you off the radar and even brokered a deal to this end. A deal that, I assure you, is very expensive.”

No. It can’t be. Eyes widening, I lift a hand to my mouth.

I turn to Chad. “You’re trying to tell me that Richard has been looking out for me all this while? Even though all he did to me was deceive me?”

He reverts his gaze to the painting. “I don’t know the personal history between you two. But sometimes, when it looks like someone does things that hurt our feelings, it might be that the person is trying to save us the best way they know. Even if they know we might be mad at them or even hate them for it, what’s on their mind is our well-being. Just like the Italian guard.”

The message sinks in. When Richard told me he wanted nothing more than to put an end to Lamar’s criminal dealings, he wasn’t wrong. He didn’t lie, either, when he promised to look out for me no matter what.

Tears drop from my eyes, staining my jeans. Chad offers me a box of paper wipes, before standing up.

“That’s the debriefing I have for you today. Can you drive home, or do you need a lift?”

I blow my nose before answering. “Thank you so much, Chad. Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.”

“Alright. We’re making a move against Lamar and the rest of the board on Monday. I’d advise you to stay home that day. It won’t be a pretty sight.”

With those words, he walks out of the exhibition room.

I have to see Richard. Hurrying out of the exhibition gallery and onto the busy Manhattan streets, I make my way to the private parking lot near the art gallery, where I paid to park my Chrysler. Soon, I’m out of the parking lot and on the highway.

As I navigate the heavy New York traffic, the words of agent Chad echo in my ears once more. ‘*when it looks like someone does things that hurt our feelings, it might be that the person is trying to save us the best way they know how*’. Is that the case with Richard?

At first, I too, was wary of Richard. Here was a man that was just ... everywhere. When I was moving in, he was there. So was he in the days that followed, leading to his actions at my housewarming party. Only when we got closer, did I open up to him. Finding out all he did, I distanced myself because I thought he was using me. *God, I was so wrong.*

Lies or not, he has my best interests at heart, and that’s enough to forgive him. The wall I built around my heart to keep Richard out comes tumbling down as I speed through the highway.

I pull up at an intersection near Brooklyn Heights as the traffic lights change to red. I ring Celine’s number and she answers straight away.

“Lissa! Where are you now? Been waiting for you. And so has your pie.”

“I know. I’ll be home soon. Just give me a few more minutes.”

“Well, hurry up, okay? It’s kinda boring here without you. Perhaps I can just keep staring at *Her Pride* while munching on apple pie.”

“You do you, Celine. You can place my pie in the microwave now, though. Won’t be long before I’m there, and right now, I need a good chow-down.”

“I got you, Lissa. How did the emergency stuff at the office turn out? Did you sort it out?”

The light turns green, and I press my foot on the accelerator. “It did. Although, I... Wait, hold on...”

A honking sound from a truck blasts from a corner of the street. A truck with the logo of a milk company imprinted on it appears from nowhere. I try to swerve, but it’s too late.

Little pieces of glass and metal fly all around me. Landing with a bang, my car's airbag explodes on my face. There's silence all around, punctured by an audio distortion in my ear. I take deep breaths, before trying to undo my seatbelt. It's jammed. My head hurts.

After a while, the sound returns, but it's muffled. I can't see well — there's something red blurring my sight. Is that blood? A ray of sunlight greets me from an open car door. I blink, trying to adjust to the light. What's happening? Why does everything feel so...distant?

Lights flash in my face. Someone utters something I can't make out. I try to speak, but my jaw hurts. Everything hurts.

I black out.

Chapter 25

Richard

“You’re on a roll, Mr. Burnes! You need to give yourself more credit. Keep this up, and soon you’ll have not one, but two companies to direct.”

I, before taking a bite from a slice of toast.

“That’s not the main objective, Anna. The main objective is to do the right thing. For us, it’s ending all the corruption within Emerald. Once that’s done, I’ll appoint someone that’ll run the company with efficiency and without any shady dealings.”

Anna’s lips curve into a grin. “You thinking who I’m thinking?”

“No, okay? Look, I don’t know if it’ll be Melissa or if she’ll want to work with me at all after everything.”

“I didn’t mention any name, Mr. Burnes.”

“Haha. Very funny. You got me there.”

This Saturday morning is a strange one. On a normal Saturday, I start my regular exercises or go to the gym, then settle for a relaxing day afterward. Not today.

The merger deal will be finalized this week, on Monday, and once that’s done, the FBI and SWAT will move in and make their raids, arrests, and busts. All through the week, I’ll be busy trying to get a law team, so the criminals face their deserved due in court. Hence, I have to lay down guidelines for the running of both companies for Anna.

“I’ll ask you the same question I asked you before. Are you sure I’m the right person to be given this responsibility?”

“A thousand percent. How hard can it be? I mean, you handle me, and I know I’m much more of a responsibility than both companies combined! You’d do great. Plus, it’s only for a week or two until new management is set up.”

“Alright. You’re the boss. What should we do about the issuing of new stocks?”

“For now, we’ll have to keep that under wraps, as –”

The doorbell rings, distracting both of us. I stop to hear, and it rings again. Then another time. And another. Who the hell is there?

It's Celine, Melissa's friend. She's in tears as I open the door.

"Celine, right? What happened? Come in."

Celine stays rooted on the spot, crying. Anna goes up to her and gives her a consoling hug and rubs on the back.

When she speaks, her voice breaks. "Richard ... it's Melissa. She was coming back fr...from her office, and I was on a call with her, then all ... all of a sudden she ... the car ... I don't know what's happened to her!"

Oh no. "Do you know where she was?"

"N ... no. Only that she ... she was near the neighborhood."

"Wait for me."

I dash inside to get my keys. Once I find them, I run to my car in the garage, start the car, then drive out and into the street.

"Both of you, get in."

Driving as fast as the speed limits permit, I inhale many deep breaths to calm myself. I'm near an intersection when the faint shrill of a siren echoes around the street, growing louder as an ambulance gets closer. Thinking fast, I stop the car, waiting for the ambulance to go past before following. Sure enough, the ambulance leads me to the scene of an accident.

My heart races as a wrecked and upturned Chrysler comes into view. Melissa's car. Beside the car, a milk truck lies by the side, the front of the truck disfigured.

I shake my head in denial. This can't be. I take several deep breaths to clear my foggy head. Darting my gaze around, I notice some police officers in the area, creating a cordon around the scene. A crowd gathers, with many people taking pictures and videos. I rush to a nearby middle-aged policeman.

"Officer, please, where's the woman in the Chrysler car?"

The policeman regarded me with keen, brown eyes. "Do you have any sort of relation to the victim?"

“I’m her ... um, partner. Can you tell me where she is?”

He nods in my direction, but then I realize he’s nodding at something happening behind me. I turn back, and sure enough, there’s Melissa, being wheeled away by paramedics to the awaiting ambulance.

“Melissa? Melissa!”

One of the paramedics looks my way and stops me before I can approach her.

“She’s in critical condition, sir. I’m sorry, but you’ll have to be patient.”

“Can I follow you to the hospital? I want her given the best of care.”

“You’re free to follow the ambulance, but any discussion about the quality of treatment should be done with the doctors that’ll be operating on her and treating her afterward, sir. Also, we’ll need a family member of hers on standby, in case she needs a transfusion.”

I rush back to the car. Celine, who was talking to the paramedics moments earlier, gets back in after me. Without wasting time, I start the car.

“Did they tell you anything?”

“Not much. I don’t like this.” Her voice is trembling.

My heart rate increases. What’s going to happen to Melissa?

The ambulance begins its journey, with my car following close behind. It’s not long before we’re at the nearest hospital, and Melissa is rushed in.

Leaving the parking of the car for Anna, Celine and I rush in. I gasp, trembling, as Melissa is carried in. Behind me, Celine bursts into tears. Melissa’s clothes are stained with blood, and there’s a bandage on her forehead stained crimson.

The paramedics call for the attention of doctors on duty and nurses take over, taking her in.

I hold her hand, running with the nurses as she’s wheeled in. It’s cold.

“Melissa! Don’t die on me, okay? I’m sorry for everything, but please, come back to me! I don’t care if you hate me forever or if I can’t have you in my arms. Please, live! I can’t bear to lose you! I love you, Melissa!”

I stop outside the ICU just as she’s brought in for treatment, my sight blurred by tears.

“Do you hear me? I love you!”

The doors shut, and I’m left with my fears. I stay on the spot for a few more minutes before shambling back to the lobby.

Alex has arrived and is in the lobby, waiting for news. Anna called him, even though it skipped my mind to tell her. His brows wrinkle as his gaze meets mine.

“Alex –”

“Where’s my sister?”

I release a long breath before dropping into one of the waiting benches, resting my face on my hands.

“Didn’t you hear me?”

I don’t bother to look up. “She’s in the ICU. Her condition is critical. The doctors say she’s bled a lot due to a head injury..”

“What are you doing here, Richard?”

I’ve had enough. “I could ask you the same thing.”

“What?”

I lift my head. “I said, I could ask you the same thing.”

“What are you digging at? I’m not the untrustworthy one here!”

I chuckle. “True, I might have lied. But before we cast stones, let’s face facts, shall we? Your sister lived without a brother for four years of her life. She climbed to the top without your support. You left her, Alex. Now you’re back, and you’re the big brother once again?”

“I had my reasons, and she knows – ”

“I’m not done yet. After all that time, you show up, claiming to have been watching over her. You come in all guns blazing,

acting like you're the big brother in control."

Alex, wide-eyed, moves back an inch.

"I lied, right? I can't be trusted, right? You wanna know something? Your sister is safe now. I kept my word. Not because we're best friends or anything, but because that's the right thing."

"Richard, we're attracting –"

"Your sister's life is at stake, Alexander! Yet I'm the one you have an issue with? Well, it looks like you'll be having one hell of an issue because I'm not leaving anytime soon. I didn't come to the hospital for you. I came for Melissa. Why? I love her, that's why."

Alex, now on one of the benches, removes his glasses and wipes his face with a handkerchief, before wearing the frame once more. His hands are trembling.

When he speaks, it's not what I expect. "The truck driver didn't make it. I'm afraid, Richard."

I sigh. He's as worried about Melissa as I am. Maybe even more.

Taking a seat beside him, I draw in a deep breath, before patting him on the back. A tear drops from his eye.

"Nothing will happen to Melissa. She'll be alright. She's a survivor."

He takes a quick glance at me with reddened eyes. His quick breathing slows after a moment.

"I guess so."

"You should have more faith in your sister. She's stronger than you think."

There's a weak smile on his face. "You're right." He inhaled sharply. "She'll be alright."

Chapter 26

Melissa

It's the same dream as before. Everything and everywhere is pitch black, then there's a drop of red. Then another. And another. Soon, the drops become a flood, and I'm almost swept away, but this time, a hand reaches out to me. I grab hold of it, and it pulls me out of the blood-red abyss.

I blink, taking in the lights. My eyes adjust, and everything's blurry at first, before becoming clearer.

A fluorescent bulb in the ceiling. White sheets. Blue overalls. A bag of white liquid hanging over my bed, connected to my body by a thin pipe.

I'm in a hospital.

What happened? The last things I remember before blacking out were loud, crashing noises, the blasting of sirens, and somebody calling out to me.

Who was that? What was the person saying?

"Melissa? Oh, thank God you're awake!"

Someone is sitting by my bed, holding me. Large, warm hands envelop my left hand, and I squint to see who it is. It's a man. A familiar comes into view.

"Alex?"

He hugs me, crying. "Thank goodness! I was so worried about you, 'Lissa. You're the only family I have!"

I wrap my arms around him, holding him close.

"I see you're up. You're a day late. The pie is getting soggy."

I smile at the figure on the other side of the bed. "Celine. You're here. Sorry about that."

"Don't say sorry, blockhead. I'm just glad you're back." Tears stream down her eyes, but she makes no effort to wipe them off.

Taking my fingers to her face, I flick a few drops away, but it has a reverse effect. More tears come out.

Someone standing near the curtain folds speaks out. “It’s good to see you’re safe and sound, Miss Durham.”

“Anna? You came too?”

“Of course I did! What kind of acquaintance would I be if I didn’t?”

“Not an acquaintance. A friend.” My smile turns to a grin.

Richard is very lucky to have someone like Anna as his assistant.

I gasp. Richard!

It all comes back to me. The blurry figure echoing out to me was Richard! What was he saying to me before I blacked out?

“Where’s Richard?”

“Left already. Wasn’t sure you’d want him here after everything,” Alex says just as Anna opens her mouth to answer.

That’s right. On Saturday – yesterday, going by Celine’s words, I hurried home so I could speak with him and clear things between us. He must still think I want to have nothing to do with him.

“When did he leave?”

This time, it’s Anna who answers.

“About thirty minutes ago, when your eyelids started twitching. The doctor informed us you’d be waking up soon.”

“Can you call him for me, Anna?”

“Sure thing. Excuse me, everyone.”

“Thank you.”

Once Anna leaves, Alex clears his throat. “I need to ask you a question, ‘Lissa.’”

I sit up slowly, my right hand going over his.

“Yes. But first, I’m glad you’re here.”

Celine gets up to leave. “I’ll leave you two siblings to each other. Think I’ll get myself a snack or something. Good to

have you back, girl.”

“I was so worried,” Alex says, after the door shuts. “When I got to the scene, it was worse than I imagined, and I feared I’d lose you. I don’t know what I’d do if that happened. To my relief, due to some sort of miracle or something, you only suffered a deep cut in the head, a concussion, and other wounds that didn’t affect any major organs. Also, the bleeding was stopped on time.”

“See? You’re not losing me, Alex. Not in a long while.”

“I’m very sorry, Melissa. I’m sorry I couldn’t handle things with our aunt better. I’m sorry I couldn’t try better. I’m sorry for everything after that. Please, don’t ever leave me.”

I wipe the lone tear on his face. “I’m not. I understand everything. I’m sorry as well. I’ll admit I was a bit blinded by my love for my aunt. I should have given you a chance.”

“We have a lot to catch up on, don’t we?”

“We sure do, ‘Lissa.”

We hold each other in a tight embrace, staying that way for a while.

“You wanted to ask me something?” I ask as he goes back to his seat.

“Why do you want to see Richard so bad?”

“I need to talk to him.”

“About what?”

I smirk. “Look at you acting like my big brother. Well, it’s something important.”

“I *am* your big brother. This is about getting back with Richard, isn’t it?”

There’s nothing to hide at this point. “Yes.”

“Did you find out something about him that changed your mind?”

“Yeah. An agent I work with on the Emerald investigation informed me yesterday the case is as good as solved. Richard

stayed true to his word, and that made me want to talk to him.”

“You want to give him another chance because of that? That doesn’t change the fact that he wasn’t open to you. To us. He acted like the board he so much wanted to pin down, even if he had good intentions.”

“Yes, but everyone makes mistakes. You’ve made mistakes with me as well, and I just forgave you. Why can’t I give Richard that chance?”

Alex leaves his seat and walks to the window. “I’m not sure I can accept your relationship with Richard.”

“I love you, but at this point, I don’t care if you approve of it or not. I know now that Richard cares for me, and I’m giving him a chance.”

He turns to me, eyes wide. Someone walks in, pausing our conversation. My chest flutters and I sit up, but it’s Anna. Crestfallen, I rest on the bed as before. The door is still open, and another person walks in.

“Melissa.”

The sound of that rich baritone voice, one I’ve grown familiar with, is low and soothing, like the evening breeze on my skin. Richard, coming into view, walks to my bedside but keeps his hands in his pockets.

“Richard. You came.”

“Of course I did. How are you feeling?” He holds my hand, rubbing my wrists with his fingers.

“Much better. I wanted to talk to you yesterday before the accident happened.”

Richard takes one of the seats beside my bed. “About what?”

“I heard what you did from Chad. Thank you.”

“You did? Do you know him?”

“I’m cooperating with him on the ongoing investigation. Or, let’s say I was, as you’ve pretty much ended the investigation. Why did you make a deal for me?”

He lay his hands on mine. “I promised to keep you from harm’s way, Melissa. That’s why I went crazy yesterday when Celine told me what happened. You have no idea how happy I am that you’re safe.”

“No need to worry. I’m safe now.”

“I’m sorry, Melissa. For the lies and hidden truths. I thought I was trying to protect you, but I was just afraid what we had would end if you found out who I was. I hid behind my lies, like a coward. Alex was right. I’m ready to fix things between us. I also owe Alex an apology. I said some mean things to him yesterday that I didn’t mean.”

Alex, who’s been at the window all the while, clears his throat. “Yeah, you did. But, you did make a reasonable point or two.”

Jumping from the chair, Richard staggers, close to falling over. A small grin appears on Alex’s face.

“You freaking ghost. Couldn’t you have warned me or something?”

“I cleared my throat. It’s a nice conversation you had with my sister. Also, there’s no point in holding grudges, so I’ll let you off. Next time though, we’ll punch it out in a ring.”

The two men laugh, shaking hands and slapping each other on the back. Alex turns to me, then back to Richard.

“Looks like I can’t stop this freight train, so I’m getting on it instead. Hurt my sister, though, and I’ll search for you, find you, and – well, you get the gist. I’m off now. Have fun, lovebirds. Let’s go get some soda, Anna.”

“You bet.” Anna steps out with a wide grin, with Alex in tow.

As soon as we’re alone, Richard returns to my bedside, sitting on the bed this time.

“Hey, Richard. What were you saying yesterday? When I was being carried away?”

He tucks a strand of hair behind my ears, like in old times. Leaning in closer, his mouth almost on mine, he utters the words I missed yesterday.

“I love you.”

Drawing myself up to him, I meet his waiting lips, enveloping them in a deep kiss. His hand holds my face in place as he takes over, returning the kiss with fervor. Our tongues meet in rhythmic strokes against each other's, and I move my arms around his neck.

I missed this. I missed Richard. Our lips brushing against each other is enough to send pangs of arousal ringing through me.

His lips leave mine, and I take the opportunity to reply to his confession.

“I love you too.”

Chapter 27

Richard

“Richard. It’s time to make this official.”

“Of course, John. More than two weeks of preparation has led to this moment.”

We shake hands as the other members of the delegation file in, ready to put pen to paper and seal the merger deal.

The prestigious Plaza Hotel plays host today to the representatives of both companies, along with some other senior officers and representatives from the government, the NYSE, and some major financial institutions.

“The Vibrant-Emerald merger will be one of the most profitable in the US. There’s so much our companies can do together!”

“I can’t agree with you less. Please excuse me, I have to make a call.”

He pats my back, and I clench my fists. “Businessmen never get any rest now, do we?”

I force a smile. “Deals always have to be made.”

I excuse myself, finding my way to an empty storage room, where I dial Chad.

“Mr. Burnes. We’re in position and on standby.”

“Good. The meeting will start in less than ten minutes. It should be done before thirty minutes.”

“Good. Do you remember what to do after?”

I run him through the process once more. After the deals are completed, a luncheon will be held at a five-star restaurant nearby for Emerald’s management, courtesy of me.

I chose this particular restaurant on purpose; it’s located just by a major intersection of roads, so it’s easy to surround. I’m to excuse myself during the event, and less than five minutes later, the FBI, SWAT and NYPD will surround the place, and Lamar, with all his accomplices, will be arrested.

“Nice. Good going, Mr. Burnes. This operation should proceed without any hitches. We’ve already made arrests in other places. Our major arrest was in Staten Island, where we apprehended the two Russians behind the cybercrime outfit wreaking havoc on companies and individuals at Lamar’s behest.”

Blueband Tech has been avenged after more than three months. I heave a sigh.

“I’d best be getting back to the deal. I’ll inform you as soon as everything is ready, Chad.”

“Copy.”

Straightening my suit, I stride to the Edwardian Room, where the deal is taking place.

Rays of sunshine flood the hall through the large glass windows overlooking Central Park and 5th Avenue. The oak paneling, elaborate trussed ceiling, and stenciled wall patterns set a magnificent backdrop for the meeting. I take my seat beside Lamar, who’s all smiles.

“Ready to make history?”

“Of course, Richard.”

The papers are presented. I don’t bother going through the contents – I formulated the terms, after all – putting my pen to the paper without delay. Lamar takes his pen and signs as well. We shake hands, lights flashing on me as journalists take pictures. The whole process took just eleven minutes.

“Congratulations. We’re now in business together.”

Lamar roars with laughter. “Yes, we are!”



“A toast, to the man that came up with the brilliant idea of entering a partnership! To Richard Burnes!”

John Lamar finishes his toast, lifting his glass.

“Ah, you flatter me, John.”

“To Richard Burnes,” everyone choruses, drowning out my voice.

Lamar drinks all the champagne in his glass in a gulp, but I sip a little. I can't afford even the slightest tipsiness. When he's done, I fill his glass, before tapping mine with a spoon. The buzz dies down.

“Ladies and gentlemen of what was Emerald Incorporated, but is now Vibrant-Emerald PLC, the idea of a merger had been in my head for a long time. I always admired Emerald's growth, investment strategies, and diversity, even though she was a nonprofit organization. I wished Vibrant and Emerald would someday unite.”

I pause, allowing my words to sink in. A few nods and I continue my speech, peeking at my wristwatch at the same time.

“At first, I didn't know how to go about it. I made bids, thinking the best strategy was to go all out and buy the company. At a point, I realized if I did this, I'd be getting the company, not the brains behind the company. Not the people whose business acumen had pushed the company forward.”

I take another side glance at my wristwatch. Time to round the speech up.

“Hence, I went for what should have been my first option. The best option. A partnership. But what if Mr. Lamar had rejected it? Of course, we won't be here. Therefore, I propose a toast to the man who deserves as much credit as I do today. To John Lamar!”

The toast is echoed, and everyone takes a sip of their wine or champagne.

“Also, a toast to the rest of you, who made this happen! Trust me when I say, you all won't forget this day.” *You'll remember it in jail.*

Conversation picks up once more amongst the board members after the toast. Dropping my glass, I excuse myself. As I leave the restaurant through the back door, I text Chad.

It's time. You can move in.

Head high, I make my way to my Audi, and soon I'm cruising through the streets of Manhattan, heading for home and

Melissa.



“That was one hell of a court case. Man, I’m bushed!” Alex’s the first to speak as we all walk out of the court.

“You did well, Alex. Sure, you had great support, but you still did well, countering Lamar’s attorneys like that.”

The court case was such a sensation a journalist dubbed it ‘the corruption case of the decade’. All thirteen members of the board and about thirty-eight other shareholders and members of management were convicted on various counts of bribing, money laundering, embezzlement, and conspiracy, among others. There were also convictions secured against organized criminals who had ties with the laundering cartel John Lamar ran.

Lamar. He was the hardest person to pin down due to his immense wealth. He hired, just for his defense, seven reputed attorneys. In the end, however, Alex and his team, gathered through my efforts and the FBI’s, managed to outmaneuver him, and he got thirty years.

“We should all go grab something to eat. I’m starving,” says Anna, rubbing her belly.

Celine is just steps ahead of Melissa and me. “It’s just nice seeing people who’ve done wrong pay for their crimes, even with all the money they have. Right, ‘Lissa?’”

Melissa, whose left hand is locked with my right, remains silent. I stop, holding both her shoulders and scanning her face. Her eyes are glistening with tears.

“What’s wrong, Melissa?” I ask.

Alex, Anna and Celine stop, turning back.

“All this time. All my efforts. For so long, I worked to put Lamar in jail for what he’s done to my company. Seeing it happen today made me quite teary ... I’m sorry ...”

“No need to be sorry, hon’. You’ve suffered and struggled a lot, but you’re free now. Free from having to fear for your life.

Free from Lamar and his co-conspirators. Isn't it a wonderful feeling?"

She laughs despite her tears. "Yes, it is."

Wrapping my arms around her, I hold her head close to my chest.

"Wow. Beautiful. Let's go get something to eat now, you two!"

"Just a minute, Lex. There's still something I have to do."

Bringing out a small case, I clear my throat.

"Melissa, ever since I met you, you've added something into my life I never thought I missed. You brought color. Like spring, you came, and the cold in my heart and mind disappeared, replaced by a new warmth. I had a goal, but you gave me a purpose. It's for these reasons and more that I wish to spend the rest of my life with you."

Getting on my knees, I open the case. Inside is a ring with a diamond-encrusted top. Melissa covers her mouth with her hand, and people coming from the court stop and stare.

"Melissa Durham, will you marry me?"

"Yes... Yes! I'll marry you, Richard!"

I place the ring on her left finger, then get to my feet and hold her close. Claps and cheers resonate all around, but at that moment, it's just Melissa and me in our world. I tilt my head to meet her lips, and we're soon locked in a deep kiss, holding each other as if our lives depend on it. Nothing else matters. We've fought to get to this moment.

Now, outside the courtroom, with Melissa in my arms, I pour all my love for her into our kiss. She accepts it, pulling me closer with her hands in my hair.

WE WON!

THE END



Epilogue: Melissa

My hair dances in the ocean breeze as I walk along the shore, my feet making imprints on the sand. The waves crash into the shores of the beach, and in the distance, the blue of the ocean and the cloudless sky meet, staying that way like two inseparable lovers.

Gulls circle the sky, crying out as they take deep dives, like some ritual. The waters in the reef reflect the sunlight, glimmering as if particles of diamonds are afloat.

What a pleasant place to be.

A pair of thick hands circle my belly. Turning my head to find my husband, Richard, I lean on his warm, toned body. He's got on a pair of patterned shorts, and nothing else.

"Mmm. Let's get back to the beach house, hon'."

"Not yet. I'm enjoying the scenery."

The wind blows against the palm trees, and the fluttering of the leaves produces a natural symphony, accompanied by the sound of the waves moving back and forth. My shawl moves with the wind, and I pull the transparent material around myself so it doesn't fly off my shoulders. What's there not to enjoy?

"Yes, but I want to enjoy you. Nice bikini you've got there, by the way. I like the color green."

"You're in a good mood today, Richie. I mean, these days you're always in a good mood, but today more so than usual."

"I just got a call from Anna. Let's just say, business is going great. Vibrant's representatives recently signed deals with UNICEF and WHO and our company is now one of the world's top five charity organizations."

When we got married two months ago, Richard dropped the Vibrant-Emerald name, merging the two companies into one, now named The Vibrant Group Inc. Since then, the company has been growing beyond expectations.

“That’s great news, babe! But didn’t we agree to shut ourselves from the outside world and enjoy what nature has to offer us?”

“I’m sorry about that, hon’. There’s no internet, I promise. I just brought something in case of an emergency.”

“I understand. Alright, let’s head to the beach house.”

Hand in hand, we tread along the sand.

Our beach house is a small cabin with a thatched roof, serving as our honeymoon location here in the Bahamas.

We left New York two months ago, but already it’s like we’ve been gone for ages. The bustle of traffic, the never-ending flow of pedestrians, and the lights from a thousand billboards and shops are like a distant memory.

I’m used to the quiet of this island now, along with the soothing chirping of birds, the moving of the tides, the wheeze of the wind, and the voice of my husband.

Entering the hut, I fold my shawl on a chair nearby and remove my beach hat.

“Come here,” Richard says, his voice calm yet commanding. Once I’m close enough his arms wrap around me, pulling me back against him.

Turning to him, I tangle my legs with his, the fine hair brushing against my soft skin. I open my mouth to him and he accepts the gift, sliding in, finding my tongue in next to no time.

Ignoring the bed, we move to the large hammock tied between two trees that stand in the hut, shedding our clothing. We lie on the hammock, nude.

“Mmm. The things you do.” He nibbles on my ear, causing me to giggle.

“Stop that!”

“I love you, Melissa. I always will.”

“I love you too, Richard. And I have news for you.”

His hand slides beneath, holding my waist.

“I’ll tell you. But first, do you want a family?”

He plants a quick kiss on my lips. “I already have one.”

I lay my head on his chest, with his right arm now around my shoulders. “What if I told you there’s going to be an addition to that family?”

“What are you driving at, hon’? Is Alex coming to visit?”

“No, dummy! I’m pregnant!”

Richard’s mouth falls open. It takes him a minute to regain his composure. When he does, he leans over me.

“Say that again.”

“I’m carrying our baby, Richie.”

He gets off the hammock, running his hands through his hair. I come down as well, chest tightening. Why isn’t he happy? Ecstatic?

“Since when have you known?” he asks, facing the wooden wall.

“Two weeks ago.”

When he faces me, his eyes are filled with tears. “I’m going to be a father?”

I heave a sigh. “Yes, babe. We’re going to be parents.”

He envelops me in a tight hug, and I rest in the warmth of his arms.

“Richard and Melissa. Best merger ever.”

I grin. “A merger of a lifetime.”

MORE from JENNI GRAY

[”MY BILLIONAIRE ENEMY \(NOT\)”](#)



My goal is to prove to him that I’m more than just an intern seeking experience, or not just a rich girl playing around in his company.

Julian is my billionaire CEO who looks like a gorgeous celebrity even when he’s cranky...

And he’s got his eyes on me– in a demeaning, “I want to make you suffer” way. At least, that’s what I thought.

From the moment he questioned me in that meeting, I couldn’t stop thinking about him– how to exceed his standards or how to show off my intellect and skills.

A heated argument suddenly turns into flames of passion. And before I know it, I end up losing my “v-card” to him.

Following the tragic passing of my parents, I have to take over the family business alone.

Then I found myself competing against him for an investor. This is an important deal for my business so I am eager to make it happen. But he always gets in the way.

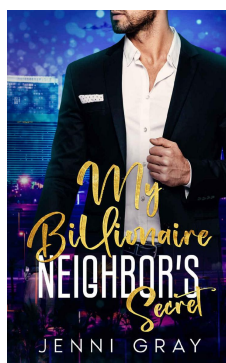
He’s still damn good-looking and even more tempting. I am annoyed, but I still like seeing him.

Could it be that I’m secretly hoping he will kiss and touch me again like he did in the past?

[START READING “MY BILLIONAIRE ENEMY NOT”](#)



“MY BILLIONAIRE NEIGHBOR’S SECRET”



My grumpy neighbor is determined to ruin my fresh start in Las Vegas.

But I’m not going to let him get away so easily.

I just moved to the city after a broken engagement – so I’ve got every right to throw parties and have fun, right?

Well, that’s not what my “geeky” neighbor, Carter, thinks.

There’s something incredibly mysterious about him,

And he is becoming more intriguing as the days go by.

Eventually, those curious glances and intense disagreements lead to a passionate kiss.

Just when the flames between us begin to flare,

My ex-fiance, Drake, appears and complicates everything.

Now, we’re back to square one.

Is it worth risking my heart again with a man who won’t commit?

My mind is saying no, but my body and my heart...

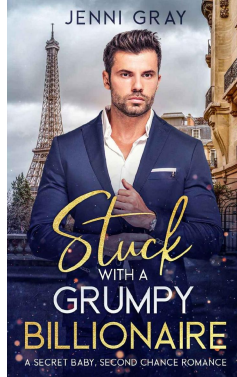
Well, that’s a whole other story.

START READING “MY BILLIONAIRE NEIGHBOR’S SECRET”



Do you like FREEBIE Romance book?

Sign up for my newsletter and get [“Stuck with a Grumpy Billionaire”](#) for free!



You know what’s worse than being drunk, miserable, and pining for your ex-fiancé during a one-night stand?

getting pregnant by a grumpy billionaire!

Of course, he had no clue...

Years later - here I am, a single mom struggling to make ends meet.

After working on the promotion for so long, I finally got it!

Then our paths crossed again.

...and found ourselves giving in to the physical attraction for each other,

...and engaging in a passionate, undefined relationship.

Until a sense of love is beginning to fill the air between us.

But how will he react when he finds out about his son I’ve been keeping secret? Will our intense attraction for one another be enough to keep us together?

Only one thing is certain: my son will change everything.

[YES, I WANT A FREE COPY](#)

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