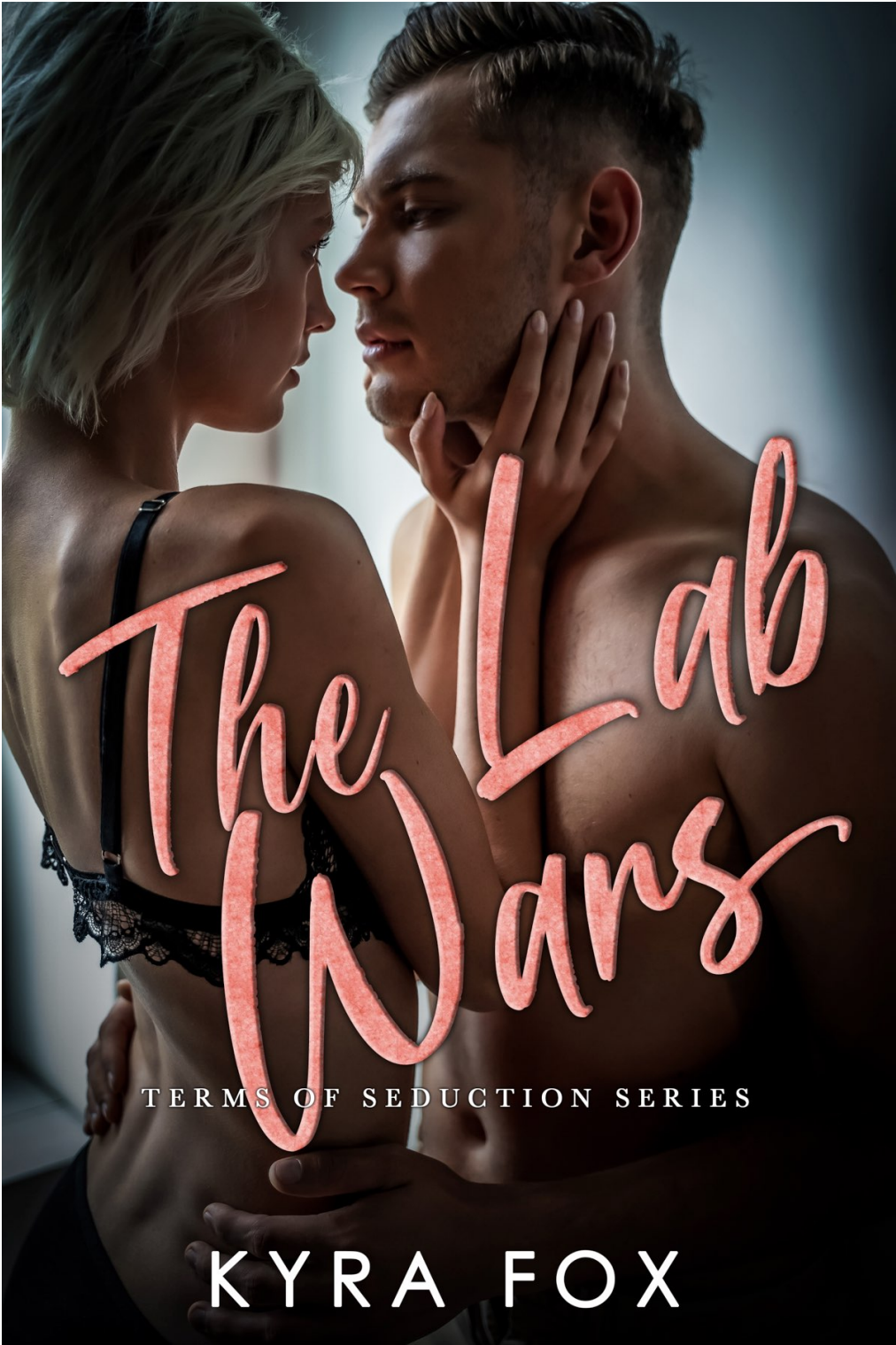


# The Lab Wars

TERMS OF SEDUCTION SERIES

KYRA FOX



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# THE LAB WARS

A TERMS OF SEDUCTION EROTIC LOVE STORY



KYRA FOX

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THE LAB WARS

Cover by Amanda Shepard @Shepard originals

Editing by Taming the Ink

 Created with Vellum



*To all the smut lovers out there -*

*This series is for you.*

*And to Maycee, Ines, Joanie, Jeff, and Michael -*

*you gave me something good to hold onto when I was feeling  
down, I hope this story does the same for you.*



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Acknowledgments

Also by Kyra Fox

## About the Author

## CAST ASIDE



**MIA**

WITH A QUICK STABILIZING BREATH, Mia lifted her fist to knock on the office door of the head of the Physiology, Anatomy, and Genetics department. She felt uneasy. The bubbling excitement she'd been feeling since he requested the meeting earlier that morning was being slowly replaced by nervousness.

Mia couldn't fathom why. She knew this day was coming. She'd been working relentlessly towards it and was prepared for what was beyond the heavy door. In a few minutes, she'd be ticking off a major box on her professional bucket list.

"Come in." The deep, slightly grumbly voice of Professor Herbert Flinch boomed from inside, and Mia pushed the door open, greeted by the familiar scent of old books and oak.

The office wasn't much to look at, aside from the vast collection of professional literature adorning the walls and stacked near Herbert's well-used desk, but there was an aura of importance to this room. Mia always felt somewhat sacrilegious wearing heels when visiting here, the clicking of them against the hardwood floor in complete contrast to the gravity of the atmosphere.



Herbert's kind blue eyes lifted from his papers, observing her as she approached, and she told herself she was only imagining the sadness in them. Herbert was well into his sixties, though the wrinkles around his eyes and mouth caused him to look even older. He'd seen and done enough in his lifetime to earn the respect of everyone who met him, Mia included.

"Mia, darling, come and sit."

She loved it when he called her darling. The undertone of fatherly affection always attached to the endearment made her long for his approval. Mia was aware of how basically Freudian her response was, considering the relationship she had with her father prior to his death over a decade ago. She accepted it as a given state of mind, too ingrained to spend energy on trying to change.

"How are you, Herbert?" she asked, crossing her legs while consciously stopping the right limb from bouncing.

"Old and tired." Herbert huffed in amusement before his expression turned somber. "The faculty has discussed my proposal for social genomics being granted an independent research hub, and they have agreed on a trial period to evaluate."

"Oh?" Mia didn't attempt to feign surprise, she just found it tacky to admit she'd expected as much. Sociogenomics was a rapidly growing field, and while many thought it should be left a small branch in social medicine studies, Mia had been advocating, with the support of Herbert, for the field to be recognized in its own merit as part of his department.

"The trial period will start next month." Herbert gave her a smile, but his usual warmth was lacking. "We'll be officially

announcing who the person spearheading the hub is tomorrow.”

“That’s wonderful news, Herbert.” Mia clapped her hands, ecstatic that they were moving so fast. It showed great faith in her and the research she’d been so dedicated to for the past eight years of her life.

At twenty-seven, she was one of the most highly regarded researchers in the field of human social genomics, a rising star on the horizon of innovative research debunking the age-old nature vs. nurture debate.

Mia had rejected the idea of behavior being separate from genetics around the age of sixteen. The idea of having no control over what her genes said about her made her skin crawl. The scientist in her once again acknowledged her personal desire to escape her own genetics. She made a conscious effort to neutralize that part of her brain when in the lab.

“Yes, a step forward indeed.” His features tightened, and the surge of nervousness from before was becoming a sliver of panic. Herbert was a seasoned scientist with enough social and political skills to score tenure and climb the ranks to his current position in Oxford, but he had an aversion to sugar-coating and seldom held back his words, especially with Mia.

Mia had been steadily working towards spearheading the innovative hub, with Herbert’s full support, or so she thought. Looking at the face of the man she’d considered a father figure for the past decade, the wrinkles doing nothing to hide his pensive frown, Mia was now steadily plummeting into a state of existential dread.

“What is it?” Her question didn’t seem to surprise Herbert. Like him, she preferred not to beat around the bush.

“We’re bringing on someone from the outside,” he answered tentatively, walking over to sit on the chair in front of her. “I wanted to give you fair warning. It didn’t seem appropriate to blindside you after all your hard work and dedication.”

Mia blinked back tears of betrayal that immediately threatened to burst, swallowing down the tremor itching to settle in her voice. “Why?”

“There is an array of considerations, none of which have anything to do with your competency.”

“If I am so competent, then why?” Anger flared alongside the hurt, her voice wavering under the force of it. “What about me is so inadequate that I’ve been overlooked after dedicating my life to this project? To this department?”

“Nothing, Mia, I assure you.” Herbert took her hand in both of his. “You are more than enough. I personally could not have thought of a better candidate, but I am not alone in this choice. A new hub that involves a new position requires division resources. This is above department level right now.”

Mia wanted to argue, send Herbert back to the faculty and tell them they could all fuck off, but Oxford was still her home. She wasn’t about to compromise her chances of making it a permanent home by throwing a childish tantrum.

“Who did they bring in?” she asked, forcing her voice to stay calm.

“Doctor Wyatt Jenkins from MIT,” Herbert answered, and Mia couldn’t suppress her awed gasp. “I gather you’ve heard of him?”

Heard of him? She’d read every single one of his publications. His research of the social genome in shifting

environments and his derived theories were nothing short of brilliant.

“I’m familiar with his work, yes,” she finally managed to say. “But why is he leaving MIT? With his status and family connections, his position there is all but guaranteed.”

“I don’t know, darling, all I know is that he was ecstatic about the hub when we presented it to him,” Herbert answered with a slight shrug of one shoulder, conveying he, too, was surprised that Jenkins had said yes considering what he was leaving behind. “What I *do* know is that those pros you listed will be of immense value to the department and the hub.”

That’s when it clicked. She wasn’t being cast aside due to her lack of skill, but rather her lack of social status in the scientific community. After all, how could she, a young Parisian socialite with no familial ties to lean on, compete with the son of a Nobel Prize laureate scientist?

“Don’t be cross, Mia,” Herbert attempted to soothe her, probably sensing the shift in her demeanor. “This is a wonderful opportunity for you to collaborate with a top scientist in your field, one that will help bring funds much faster than we could have on our own.”

“*I* am a top scientist in my field, Professor Flinch.” The chill in her voice didn’t mirror the raging inferno in her body. Mia had been trained to keep a ladylike façade at all costs, something she usually held against her mother. This offense fell somewhere in the middle of the infinite list of wrongdoings the woman who gave birth to her had committed, but right now the skill was proving useful.

“Yes, and one of the main reasons Doctor Jenkins agreed to head the hub.” Herbert leaned forward and pinned her with a serious gaze that meant he was done with her borderline

petulant behavior. “He insisted on you being his chief scientist, said he’d been following your career and feels that the hub has no merit without your guiding hand.”

“And yet it has merit with him steering the wheel.” Mia shook her head, partially in disdain and partially in resignation. “I will not play lackey in my own laboratory, Herbert.”

“You do not have a choice,” he replied in a voice that made it clear she really didn’t. “The division wants Wyatt Jenkins, and Wyatt Jenkins wants you. If you ever hope to achieve tenure and advance in the division you need to learn to play the game, Mia.” Herbert leaned back with a heavy sigh. “I understand your frustration, I do. I’m not naturally inclined to this kind of bullshit either, pardon my French.” Mia couldn’t help but bark out a laugh at his obviously intended pun, earning a smile from Herbert. “But I bent and flexed and learned what needed to be done to get to where I am today.”

Mia nodded, a desolate feeling settling in her chest. She was cornered, and Herbert knew it. Even if she felt like running off to a different institution, they both knew she wouldn’t. Herbert had put so much effort into mentoring her, stirring her from the lost girl who first entered Oxford’s halls to the proud scientist she now was. She couldn’t disappoint him by throwing it all away and leaving.

She’d already proven enough of a disappointment by not being up to par merely by her genealogy, which, for Mia, was probably the most painful reason to be cast aside and disregarded.

Mia thanked Herbert, squeezing his shoulder to convey she was okay, though she was anything but, and held her head high as she walked out of the building.

*Merde!* All the air left Mia's body as the single word crossed her mind. Her predicament was dire. A man like Wyatt Jenkins would receive tenure faster than she could blink. If his professional skills and notorious charm didn't do the trick, his family name would. But, unlike Mia, Wyatt had somewhere to go back to if things didn't work out in Oxford.

That's when a thought occurred to Mia. She had to stay at the hub and continue to fulfill her duties as a scientist, but she *didn't* have to pretend to like Wyatt or his presence. The man *had* taken her rightful place. Maybe if he didn't feel welcome, if he realized they couldn't coexist in the same research space, Wyatt Jenkins would go back to where he belonged.

## WYATT ARRIVES AT OXFORD



WYATT

“DOCTOR JENKINS, IT’S AN HONOR.” Wyatt shook off his surprise and smiled, taking the hand of the young man approaching him.

“Thank you,” he replied, clearing his throat and adjusting the strap of his messenger bag. “I’m sorry, but I was expecting Doctor Bissonnette.”

“Right.” The man before him laughed awkwardly, scratching the back of his head and looking at the ground with what appeared to be extreme embarrassment.

“Right,” Wyatt repeated slowly. “No one told me she’d be sending someone in her place, so I’m afraid I don’t know your name.”

“Right!” Wyatt almost laughed at the mortified expression that took over the face of his welcome party of one. “I’m Ron Giles, um, Giles. I’m a DPhil student here at Oxford and I’ve been working with Mia, Doctor Bissonnette, for the past couple of years.”

“It’s very nice to meet you, Giles the DPhil.” Wyatt had known the terminology in Oxford would be different, but he hadn’t realized how much of a conscious effort he’d have to

make to not accidentally call his doctoral grad students in Oxford Ph.D. students.

“Thank you, Doctor Jenkins.” Giles seemed relieved, though the anxiousness still hadn’t faded from his features. “I apologize that Mia, um, Doctor Bissonnette, couldn’t be here. There was... an *emergency* in the lab, I guess? She asked me to cover for her since Professor Flinch insisted you’d be more comfortable with a personal tour before the entire faculty swoops in to get a piece of you.”

Wyatt laughed at the bluntness of Giles’s words. He was sure Flinch hadn’t meant for that last line to reach Wyatt’s ears, but he was fond of the older man’s grumpy candor. It was one of the reasons he had agreed to the position, not the top reason but a nice icing on the cake of considerations to leave his home and family and travel across the ocean.

“Nothing to apologize about.” Wyatt smiled reassuringly. “And, please, call me Wyatt.”

“Right,” Giles said again, his posture further relaxing, and he gestured down the path towards the impressive building that shone of age-old stories and legends. However impressive the universities back home were, the ancient knowledge that radiated from these walls was unsurpassed.

Giles’s tour was thorough and surprisingly engaging. The man was full of exuberance and he obviously loved Oxford. Wyatt sensed he would like to work with him.

The last stop of their tour was the hub, a modest complex consisting of a large research lab and two smaller labs that were for specialized applications of their ongoing research. A communal area set as a circular space with laptop stations, a small kitchenette and coffee machine, and an eating area for people to take their lunch breaks together rounded out the tour.



“Are all the hubs like this?” Wyatt wondered, eyes scanning his surroundings in appreciation.

“The university tries to make the hubs as welcoming and comfortable as possible,” Giles answered, pointing at a door at one end of the communal area. “That’s Mia’s office.” Then he pointed at a door across from the first. “That one is yours.”

“Great. Is Mia in her office?”

“Probably in the main lab.” He gestured for Wyatt to walk first and Wyatt nodded, shaking off the uneasiness as he approached the translucent glass door, where he swiped his card against the pad and watched the door slide left to reveal a spotless white lab, his new realm.

Wyatt had never met Doctor Bissonnette in person, despite their research being closely aligned, but he was well aware of her work and reputation. *Revolutionary* is the most accurate word he had read to describe her studies and theories on the fine line between genetics and psychology. If it weren’t for her name attached to the hub, Wyatt wouldn’t have been so fast to agree to the position.

He recognized her right away, her aura of authority, the way she seemed to be the center of gravity in the room even though she was tucked in a corner hunched over datasheets, and he took his time observing her as he slowly approached.

Mia’s frame was swallowed by her lab coat, her choppy platinum bob hiding her profile, but Wyatt got the distinct impression that her delicate features, which he’d seen in headshots, were completely misleading.

“Doctor Bissonnette?” Her face turned up, and he forgot what it was he wanted to say. Her eyes were a blue so dark that

they seemed almost purple, mesmerizing despite the disinterest in them.

“Yes?” Her bored tone, accompanied by a distinctively French accent, snapped him out of his daze, and he smiled, stretching out his hand.

“Wyatt Jenkins.”

“I know,” she replied with that same flat tone, ignoring his hand. It struck him as oddly impolite of her, but he dropped his hand and kept his voice kind and conversational.

“I’m flattered.” Wyatt leaned on the edge of the table, eyeing the papers in front of Mia. “I’m a huge fan of your work.”

“Are you, now?” Mia’s eyebrow arched in skepticism, and she leaned back in her chair, crossing her legs.

“Yes, your theory on modulated perceptions with regard to genetic disposition was one of the most fascinating papers I’ve ever read.” Her neutral expression hadn’t changed an inch, not even a flick of recognition in her eyes. “Your ability to combine both psychological and physical studies in genetic research is awe-inspiring.”

“Unique?” she prodded, and Wyatt nodded, glad she took his compliments at face value and hoping this is a first step to establish a working relationship as equals.

“Absolutely.”

“Well, not unique enough, it seems.” She collected her papers with a resigned sigh and calmly stood, her willowy frame making her no less intimidating than if she stood a foot taller than him. “I’ll see you at your welcome party tonight, Doctor Jenkins.”

“I’d like to have a chance to speak with you beforehand.” Wyatt straightened, facing her with the full intent of blocking her path. “We’re going to be working closely together, we should at least have a formal conversation on the future of the hub.”

“Of course.” Mia nodded tightly, leading the way to *her* office. It was unconventional, considering their respective roles, that they weren’t meeting in his office, but Wyatt didn’t want to do anything to further aggravate her so he dutifully followed, patiently waiting for her to hang her lab coat on a hook beside the door.

“What can I do for you, Doctor Jenkins?” Mia asked once they were seated on opposite sides of her desk.

“Well, you’ve been in that lab longer than anyone, aside from Professor Flinch,” Wyatt paused at the flash of anger and hurt in Mia’s eyes, wondering what he had said that caused such a reaction and considering his next words. “I’d like to receive a full breakdown of the staff, projects, existing and potential funding, any lab intrigues I should be aware of.”

The last request was said in an air of jest with a smirk to go with it, but Mia didn’t seem amused. Instead of answering, she bent down and opened a drawer, pulling out a heavy binder.

“It’s all in there, including protocols.” She slid the information his way. “I suggest you go over the files and we’ll set up another meeting for any questions.”

“Does this include the intrigues?” Wyatt tapped the blue cover of the binder, trying his luck at joking again, only to receive an offended scowl.

“There’s no intrigue in my lab, Doctor Jenkins.” Mia wasn’t even attempting to warm up to him, and as much as it was starting to get on his nerves, Wyatt forced himself to stay calm and reply with a tight nod. “Anything else?”

“I’d appreciate you calling me Wyatt.”

“If you insist.” There was no enthusiasm in Mia’s smile, just the odd sense that she was doing the bare minimum to onboard him, and not gladly. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to call it a day and get ready for that party.”

“Of course.”

They walked out of her office in silence, Wyatt going to stand next to Giles as they both watched Mia walk away.

Once she was out of sight, Wyatt turned to Giles. “What’s her problem?”

“Mia was being groomed for your position,” Giles explained. “She feels ripped off, considering you only got it because of who your dad is.”

Wyatt could only assume his gaze reflected the surge of anger he felt at the words when Giles cringed.

“I earned this position, fair and square, through hard work.” Wyatt could hear the building anger seep into his voice. He could have handled Mia’s resentment at being overlooked, but her spreading rumors that the family name was his only merit for being here was unacceptable.

“I know, I’ve read all your publications, you’re a brilliant scientist,” Giles hurried to reassure him. “But that’s what Mia feels.”

“Well, Mia will have to learn to live with my being the boss.” Wyatt didn’t wait for Giles to reply, just walked off into

his own office and shut the door behind him, immediately starting to pace.

If there's one thing that got Wyatt riled up, it was people who looked at him only to see his father. Hard as Wyatt worked to step out from under his monumental shadow, it somehow lurked in every corner. Wyatt had hoped Oxford would be different, that he'd been invited here because of his groundbreaking research in a field they were looking to expand in.

He held no illusions that his family name was a consideration in the faculty's invitation, but he was confident that the *real* value he brought to the table stemmed from his reputation as a scientist and notable achievements. Now Mia had his confidence wavering, which was unacceptable.

Mia had to go.

## THE SOIRÉE



WYATT

HIS WELCOME PARTY turned out to be more of a soirée for the entire faculty, held in what Giles told him was a former gentlemen’s club. It was the traditional kind, including a formal dining room, library, bar, and billiard rooms. Rooms once used for socializing had either been turned into private meeting rooms or had the walls removed to expand the bar area for social gatherings.

The place had been upgraded and adjusted with modern amenities by the new owners, turned into a study café during the day and an exclusive event venue during the night, but the ambiance remained.

“Doctor Jenkins.” Wyatt turned to look over his shoulder, swallowing an exasperated sigh when he saw yet another Professor from the division approach him with a broad smile. He’d *just* managed to make it to the bar after forty minutes of mingling, and more than anything, he needed a break from answering the same questions repeatedly.

“Professor Carlyle, nice to finally meet you face to face.” Wyatt took the older man’s hand for a firm shake. He was well versed in the art of schmoozing; it was more of a reflex by now. *Probably for the best*, Wyatt thought with internal

resignation, fully aware he wasn't in the mind space for any kind of niceties after his morning encounter with Mia.

Carlyle took another twelve minutes of his time, not bothering to offer him a drink, even though he had found Wyatt at the bar.

"You're good at that," Mia said from behind him. Wyatt spun, startled, and blinked a few times, wondering if he should go on the defensive right now or wait to see what she wanted.

"At what?" he finally asked, leaning on the bar to catch the bartender's attention. "Whiskey sour and...?" He looked at Mia with a questioning gaze.

"A Vesper, please," Mia said before turning to face him. "At the semi-political socialization."

"I would thank you, but I get the distinct feeling that anything you say to me is meant to offend." Mia's lips stretched into an amused smile, completely unabashed by his forward accusation. "Well, you'll have to try harder than that, Doctor Bissonnette."

"Oh, but I've only just begun, Doctor Jenkins," she retorted, her amusement growing, as if this was nothing but a big game.

"I'm not going anywhere, Mia, your time would be better spent working with me than against me." Mia just smiled a cryptic smile, accepting her drink and lifting it in his direction with a small salute before taking a sip and humming in appreciation.

"James Bond's original cocktail of choice, invented by Sir Ian Fleming himself."

Wyatt barely suppressed a snort. Mia did look like a bona fide Bond girl, with her hair slicked back and a little black

dress hugging all her willowy curves. She had legs for miles, the kind of long limbs that a man could kiss up all night.

“Like what you see, Doctor Jenkins?” Her head tilted to the side, her eyes returning a roaming look. Wyatt took a step forward and sipped on his own drink before leaning closer to her.

“Do you, Doctor Bissonnette?” he asked in a low voice, and Mia angled her head to capture his gaze, her witchy eyes hypnotizing him. “I’ve never seen that eye color before.”

“Don’t expect me to fall for your notorious charms, Wyatt.” Her slight breathlessness was telling him a different story, and though he knew better, Wyatt enjoyed *this* game far more than the one Mia was trying to play.

“You haven’t answered my question.”

One corner of Mia’s lips lifted, and she placed her empty martini glass on the bar before reaching up to straighten his perfectly straight collar. “You wear royal blue very well.”

“*Now* who’s working who with their charms?” Wyatt loved that his retort made her laugh. The entire exchange made him hopeful that, with time, they would reach common ground and have an amicable, even friendly, work relationship.

As angry as he was at Mia’s assertions this morning, by the time evening had rolled in, he’d come to see things from her perspective. She had dedicated her entire career to this hub and was its loudest advocate. It meant more to her than a job she was passed up for. It was her world, her life.

Also, he realized how bad it would look if he threw out their lead researcher so soon after he had arrived. So, although it was entirely in his power to get rid of Mia, he decided he



should at least try to make this work, give her a chance to adjust and see he wasn't all bad.

They were still standing dangerously close, Wyatt realized, with Mia's fingers still gliding under his collar, sending a heated rush through his veins every time they brushed his pulse. He needed to step back, but she smelled like pears and sexy promises, and Wyatt found he didn't have the will to tear away from her.

A movement caught the corner of his eye, and he flicked his gaze to another faculty member with that same sort of *'I want a piece of you'* grin walking their way. "Damn it."

Mia's brow crinkled at his sudden change in demeanor, her gaze following his. She made a silent oh, then grabbed Wyatt's hand, pulling him after her to the dance floor. Wyatt took her hand in his, resting the other at the small of Mia's back with practiced ease, taking the lead in the waltz currently playing over the speakers.

She felt warm and soft under his palm, deceptively delicate as she let him sway her to the music. Wyatt knew the sense of control was an illusion. Mia wasn't one to hand over the reins, but Wyatt allowed himself to enjoy the moment.

"Smooth move," Wyatt teased her.

"Very." Mia stuck out her chin audaciously. "You owe me one for letting you use me as a way to ditch your obligations."

"I've had enough of obligations for tonight." Wyatt didn't mean for it to sound suggestive, but Mia's raised eyebrows and amused glare told him that's exactly how she took it.

"Oh?" she said in a soft voice, letting him spin her, then pull her close to his chest. "What did you have in mind for the rest of the night, then?"

Wyatt knew he should nip whatever this was in the bud. He couldn't tell if Mia's flirtation was a tactic or real, but he did recognize his own unfurling attraction. She was sharp and sexy, and she was dangerous in more ways than one.

"Why?" he heard himself ask Mia as he pulled her closer. Her body felt good against his. "What are you offering?"

Mia looked up at him with a twinkle of mischief in her eyes that didn't bode well for Wyatt. She was reeling him in with this back and forth, hooking him on her sultry voice and wicked eyes that were suddenly full of something other than utter boredom when looking at him. "You can't handle what I'm offering."

"I'm sure I can handle anything you try to throw at me." He returned her taunting smile with one of his own, steering them to the other end of the dance floor and to a high table with two barstools, where he let her go and took a seat. "Things are complicated enough, don't you think?"

"So *American* of you," Mia huffed with an eye roll. "Thinking sex is what will further complicate this situation."

"It won't?" Wyatt asked, fascinated at how much sharper her French accent became when she emphasized the word *American*.

"Not that it was, or ever will be, on the table, but no." Mia shook her head to accentuate how strongly she felt on the subject. "Sometimes sex is just a physical outlet, like running or boxing."

Wyatt almost doubled over laughing at her analogy. "What kind have sex have you been having?"

Mia smiled a wicked smile that shone in her eyes, hopping off her stool and coming to stand in front of him, leaning close

to his ear before whispering in a sultry voice that left no doubt as to the challenge her words presented. “Better than you can offer, *Doctor*.”

She plucked her purse off the table and walked away. Her regal posture exuded an air of undeniable confidence, which Wyatt very much liked, and even more so how harmonious it was with the seductive sway of her hips. Wyatt was sure Mia was putting in extra effort for his benefit. He was fully aware that she was trying to bait him, which he wasn't pleased by, but couldn't deny that it had the desired effect.

Though Mia didn't like him, they had chemistry, the kind that could either explode or create something magnificent. Wyatt was hoping for the latter, professionally speaking. He was smarter than letting his guard down, knew better than to be lured by Mia's shameless flirtation.

Mia wanted him gone, and although Wyatt suspected she'd never stoop to using sex as a weapon to get rid of him, he wasn't sold on the *no complications* clause.

He also held no delusions about Mia being more accommodating tomorrow. In her head, she'd declared war on him and everything he represented. Wyatt had to fortify his walls, make them impenetrable to her purple-eyed magic.

He was *not* going to lose.

## LET THE WAR BEGIN



**MIA**

“MIA?” Wyatt’s surprised voice from her back had Mia smiling, and she didn’t bother to hide her gloating when she spun the lab chair to face him.

For a moment, she lost the ability to speak. Wyatt was standing at the lab door in khaki slacks, a bright blue button-down stretching over his chest, and his lab coat hanging open with his broad frame filling out the white fabric perfectly. A delectable sight indeed, one she shouldn’t allow herself to enjoy after their exchange at the party.

“Good morning, Doctor Jenkins.”

Wyatt raised an eyebrow as he strode towards her, his gape fading to cocky confidence that both got under her skin and heated her blood. He wasn’t wrong with his assessment that sex could complicate an already complicated situation, but God was Mia tempted to test that theory. Especially when he leaned a solid hip on the table next to her, examining her with his intelligent bright brown eyes while taking a drink from his reusable coffee mug.

Wyatt lowered his mug, still assessing her with an unreadable expression. “And I thought *I* clocked in early.”

He wasn't wrong. No one would arrive at the hub for another hour at least, but Mia liked to get a considerable head start, that way she had all the assignments of the day sorted out before people poured into the lab and could free herself to deal with the big picture with a quiet mind.

"There are a lot of moving pieces in running a specialized lab, let alone a hub," Mia said with a matter-of-fact tone, though neither she nor Wyatt held any illusion of what she was really saying. "I find it best to arrive much earlier than everyone else to ensure a smooth day."

"Thank you for the tip." Wyatt tipped his coffee in her direction. "See? We're already off to a great first day, sharing pointers."

Mia snorted, then hurried to cover her mouth, and the corner of Wyatt's mouth tilted up in a slow half-grin that did things to Mia's body heat. It was increasingly frustrating, this reaction she had to him.

"May I ask you something?" She looked at Wyatt expectantly, and he nodded. "Why sociogenomics?"

"Are you a comics fan, Mia?"

"I'm familiar with the main storylines."

"Well, I'm a big fan, and when I was about six, I read about the multiverse for the first time in a comic book. Are you familiar with the multiverse theory?" Mia nodded, leaning back in her chair as she kept listening with increasing interest. "The older I got, and the more I learned about genetics, the less sense the idea of the human genome being one-dimensional made."

"The human body as a multiverse. I've read that article."

“Really?” His eyes grew wide, a self-conscious smile blooming over his face. “That’s an old article, pre-PhD.”

“We’ve been on parallel paths for most of our academic careers,” Mia shrugged. “I read it rather closely to its publication date.” *And a few dozen times since.*

“Well, that’s the reason I went into sociogenomics.” Wyatt placed his empty cup on the table before straightening his stance and looking at Mia with an utterly serious gaze. “I refuse to believe that we have one pre-determined code that the environment either manages to suppress or doesn’t.”

“So, what do you believe?” Mia asked, truly curious.

“Life is a series of actions and reactions. We have basic programming, and I’m not refuting the effect of our genetics on our personality, but our code is constantly evolving and developing in accordance with those actions and reactions.” Wyatt took a step forward, so close she caught a hint of his earthy pine scent. “We are each a universe of infinite possibilities, Mia.”

She was fascinated by the conviction radiating from his russet eyes, how his beliefs aligned with hers so perfectly. His words spoke to parts of her that had nothing to do with science.

It was all too present in her body, the desire to touch him, and Mia needed it to stop. She took great care in tidying her notes, carefully setting them aside before standing. “Come on, I’ll give you a tour.”

It was fairly straightforward from that point. They spent most of the tour going over Wyatt’s questions about the information in the binder she’d given him while walking through the lab. Even between two scientists who had devoted

their lives to research, talking about spreadsheets, refrigerators, and beakers didn't make much of an interesting subject for conversation. Next generation sequencing, on the other hand, turned out to be a volatile topic.

“Good.” Wyatt beamed as they approached the state-of-the-art system located in the depths of the lab. “They ordered the model I asked for.”

“Mmm, yes, it seems so.” Mia had to draw from her inner poise to remain calm. “I’ve been asking for a next-gen sequencing system for over a year. Apparently, I wasn’t asking correctly. Next time, I’ll know to go straight for the most expensive one.”

“Yes, well, maybe the department just knew I was good for the money.” Wyatt turned to face her. “Considering all the funding my presence here guarantees.”

“What a noble aspiration, to be made head of such an innovative establishment on the merit that you’re *good for the money*.”

Mia knew her jab was below the belt and had fully intended for her words to sting. The lazy half-grin making another appearance was not the reaction she had expected.

“I’m good at a lot of things, Mia,” Wyatt said in a tone that left no room for interpretation. Though even if Mia had forced herself to ignore the deepening of his voice or the darkening of his bright brown eyes, she couldn’t deny the heat sparking between their bodies when Wyatt took a step towards her, pinning her between his solid bulk and the table behind her with only a breath of air between them.

“Tu es une bête,” Mia hissed at him, hoping the angry words would be enough to mask the equally ardent desire

ignited by this beast of a man claiming her personal space.

“I didn’t learn that one in high school French lessons,” Wyatt said with a snicker, though he seemed anything but amused. “But I’m going to go out on a limb and assume it’s not one you should be saying to *your boss*.”

Mia’s heart was pounding hard and fast under his intense gaze, and the sparse space between them crackled, the energy potent and undeniable. Mia hated that from all the men she’d come across, it was the one she had to get rid of that sparked such a strong physical reaction in her.

Her hand reached out, flattening over Wyatt’s chest to see if his heart was beating just as hard as hers.

“Do you always stand this close to your subordinates, Doctor Jenkins?” she asked, feeling a sliver of excitement at the erratic thuds under her palm.

Wyatt assessed her with a careful gaze before stepping back and out of her reach.

“I was hoping we’d be equals, Mia.” His words sounded sincere, but Mia didn’t believe a single one. “I didn’t come here to flex my name or title. I came here because I am genuinely excited about what we can do in this hub, together. I was hoping you’d be just as thrilled at the prospect.”

“You *wanted* me here, Wyatt,” Mia said with a shake of her head, clearing out some of the lustful fog that had settled in it. “I was *forced* to accept your presence.”

“You can’t blame me for division decisions.”

“No, but I don’t have to pretend to be happy about them.” She stepped around him, walking towards the lab door. Then she stopped and turned to face him, knowing her next words would seal the fate of any potential peace between them. “And



I'm not going to pretend as if your last name isn't the only reason you're the boss, and not me."

Mia hurried to turn her back on Wyatt, catching a glimpse of the pained rage taking over his features. Despite her harsh words, she'd never wanted to undermine his brilliance or competence, neither of which she doubted. She merely wanted to convey that her own brilliance and competence were equal to his, and his name was the only advantage he had over her.

She knew Wyatt wouldn't understand it that way, though. Giles had told her how upset Wyatt was when he learned the reason behind her anger, despite how calm and amicable he had been about her behavior up to that point. It was an exposed nerve, and Mia knew she was poking it hard.

Part of her felt rotten. A large part. She was almost compelled to turn around and clarify her cruel comment, but it would be forfeiting the strongest weapon she had. Herbert was the one who told her she had to learn how to play the game, even if she hated it. Mia wondered if it also came at the cost of hating herself.

"Doctor Bissonnette?" Wyatt's calm and mechanical voice from behind her startled her, and she spun on her heels, almost crashing into his chest.

Mia looked up and was met with a cold stare that caused her insides to twist.

"Yes, Doctor Jenkins?"

"I have some questions on the splicing from the last experiment you conducted in the lab, I'll send them to you via email and I expect an answer no later than tomorrow morning." He waited, and when she nodded, he simply turned to his office and calmly closed the door behind him.

Mia let out a shuddery breath, leaning on the wall with a groan. She was doubting herself. Wyatt's chilliness just now left her anxious and guilty. It was in complete contrast to the intoxicating heat of their previous encounters, and Mia didn't like this interaction between them at all. The knowledge that she was solely responsible for it made the self-reproach even worse.

*No.* She straightened her spine with determination. She'd known it wouldn't be easy to get Wyatt out of the way, but Mia had been preparing for over a month and she hadn't come this far to back down after one day.

This was her life, the only thing that mattered. She was ready to fight for it, and she was going to win.

## RISING TENSIONS



**MIA**

“No,” Mia said, hurrying to step in front of Wyatt before he entered the small lab dedicated to the clinical translation of their genomic studies. “Amika is working in there and she doesn’t like being disturbed.”

“I appreciate that, but I would like to observe her methodology and process,” Wyatt replied in his ever patient and level-headed tone that got under Mia’s skin. He was too accommodating, to the point where she felt as if she were being played.

“Then you should have talked to Amika beforehand.” Mia was putting her foot down on the matter. If it were anyone else, she would have let Wyatt blindside them, even encouraged it. It was a good method for assessing how dedicated, professional, and versed a researcher was in their current work, one Wyatt had been utilizing well in the past two weeks.

He’d spent the first week studying the binder she’d given him, having different members of the hub walk him through the labs and their research, learning how each cog saw the system and their part in it. Mia was beyond impressed, and it

was an irritating sentiment since it made her constantly second-guess herself as to why Wyatt was chosen in her stead.

“I’m not asking for your permission, Mia.” Wyatt was still calm, but his words took on a layer of command, as they tended to every time she’d cross a professional line with him in the past three weeks, and his large palm gently rested on her arm to move her aside.

Mia knew it was a disaster waiting to happen. Though it would play in her favor, considering the outcome would hinder Wyatt’s confidence in his ability to manage the lab, she couldn’t do that to Amika.

“Please.” Her fingers closed around Wyatt’s wrist, and he froze. “Amika is a brilliant young woman, a gifted scientist, she can repeat the entire research log from memory. She’s more serious and committed than any DPhil I’ve ever worked with, but she doesn’t handle surprises well.”

Wyatt stared at her, seemingly torn between acquiescing to her atypical pleading or following through with his executive decree.

“You’ll put her in distress,” Mia continued. “Amika doesn’t deserve that.” She squeezed his wrist for good measure. “Please, Wyatt, I’m asking you, on this one thing, please trust me.”

“Okay.” He nodded slowly, sliding his hand down her arm as if to release his hold, but Mia felt his fingers tighten ever so gently as they kept a firm contact over her lab coat before reluctantly dropping to his side.

“Thank you.” Mia breathed a sigh of relief. She wasn’t sure she’d have listened to Wyatt if it were the other way

around, and she was thankful Wyatt wasn't willing to wage their war on the back of the other members of the hub.

Wyatt nodded again before turning towards the lab, where they focused on using their findings for decreasing health disparities among marginalized groups.

Mia took a stabilizing breath and followed, reaching Wyatt with a few hurried strides. He was standing, staring at the keycard held in his hand before turning his gaze to her. "I do trust you, and I hope in time you'll learn to trust me back."

He never gave her a chance to answer, swiping his card against the panel and opening the door to the lab, where a pair of DPhil students they'd recently accepted immediately went silent and looked up, wide eyes visible behind their protective glasses.

Mia couldn't concentrate on the exchange between Wyatt and the DPhil students, tossing his words around in her mind, trying to make sense of them. He must know trusting her was a terrible idea and that she could never allow herself to trust him, not when, since the moment they met, she'd wanted him out of the way.

Mia knew this was her own doing. Wyatt had arrived hoping for an ally, but she'd decided he was the enemy even before she'd learned his identity. Maybe that was the variable she was missing. Wyatt was still hoping they could overcome the initial animosity and learn to work together. Either that, or it was what he wanted her to believe.

"Lunch?" Wyatt asked once they left the disparities lab, and Mia shrugged, following him into his office.

"Why would I trust you?" she asked once the door closed behind her.

“Because I’ve never given you a reason not to?” Wyatt answered with his back to her, organizing his notes into tidy binders. “Or are you one of those people who distrust everyone they meet until proven otherwise?”

“It’s more sensible that way, don’t you think?”

“Probably.” Wyatt finished tucking away all the papers and turned to her with a thoughtful gaze. “But, every once in a while, someone comes along that deserves the benefit of the doubt.”

Now Mia knew he was bullshitting her. “No, they don’t.”

“Oh?” Wyatt shoved his hands into his pockets and leaned against the table. “Sounds harsh.”

“Sounds safe.” Her response was snippier than she’d intended, and she realized Wyatt had somehow managed to sneak past her guards and push one of her buttons.

“I’m sorry someone made you feel that way,” Wyatt said in that sincere and understanding tone that grated against Mia’s nerves. She was not going to let him play this dirty game with her.

“It’s not about feelings, it’s about rationality,” she replied in an indifferent tone, mimicking his posture and leaning against the door with her hands tucked behind her back. “When we choose rationality, we give up a lot of exciting and questionable things that we would otherwise pursue without a second thought, don’t we, Wyatt?”

His eyes lit up at the underlying meaning of her words, and though nothing else about his body language indicated she was affecting him, the air between them fill with sparks. This wasn’t part of her strategy, just a way to divert the conversation from uncomfortable topics, and Mia knew it

would backfire. She wasn't immune to whatever this thing between them was, but she preferred it to Wyatt psychoanalyzing her.

“What’s your angle, Mia?” Wyatt asked, his voice low. “You’ve been at it since the day I set foot in the lab. What are you playing at?”

“Who said it was a game?” Her heart was beating erratically in her chest, a pulse starting low in her abdomen when Wyatt stood and started towards her in a slow prowl.

“What is it then?” he asked, russet eyes intense as they stayed focused on her face. “Are you trying to prove how untrustworthy you are?” He was getting closer, and Mia pressed herself into the door. She wasn't afraid of Wyatt, rather of him feeling the heat she was sure was radiating off of her like a furnace. “Because the rational course of action would be to let me believe you’re on my side, use it against me.”

“Maybe I just enjoy seeing you lose your cool and show your true colors.”

“Is that so?” Wyatt caged her between his arms, a sinful half-grin breaking across his face.

“Yes, it proves you don’t have what it takes to run this lab.” She stuck out her chin, daring him to take a step back and resume his professional façade, unsure if she wanted him to. “You can’t separate what you want from the logical course of action.”

“The *logical* course of action would be to fire you,” he grumbled, more to himself than to her, it seemed, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. “You smell like pears.” One

palm slid from the door to her neck, thumb rubbing against her pulse. “A very prickly pear.”

Mia’s body was throbbing, painfully aware of Wyatt’s body almost pressing against hers.

“Tu es une bête,” she repeated the insult she’d thrown at him his first day at the lab, though with less venom this time.

Wyatt’s eyes opened lazily, meeting hers with unwavering confidence and a burning fire, thumb pressing more firmly against her pulsing vein, sending a bolt of desire through her. “If I’m a beast, does that make you the belle?”

“Google translate?” Mia asked with a snicker. “It also means brute.”

“I like my version better,” he replied with a smile of his own, loosening his hold on her neck. “You keep talking about what I want, but what do you want, Mia?”

“I want what’s rightfully mine.”

“And bewitching me with those indigo eyes is how you’ll get it?” Wyatt bowed his head, and Mia’s eyes fluttered shut, her lips parting, expecting the soft contact of his. Instead, his breath was light on her ear. “Or are you having a hard time separating what *you* want from what makes sense as well?”

Mia was close to her breaking point. She was desperate for him, wetness pooling between her thighs as his scent clouded her mind.

“You don’t get to fuck me over twice, Wyatt.” She placed her hand on his chest and pushed him back, needing room to pull herself together and remind herself who, *or rather, which body part*, was in control.

“I haven’t fucked you over at all,” he reminded her.



Mia was about to retort when a knock on the door stopped her.

“One minute,” Wyatt called out, closing his lab coat to hide the tenting in his slacks before opening the door, his façade cool and calm. “Yes, Giles?”

“We’re headed out for lunch. Are you two joining?” Giles asked with a big, friendly smile that indicated he had no idea what he’d interrupted.

“I have some work to catch up on...” Mia sensed the next words out of Wyatt’s mouth were going to be about her staying and helping him, so she stepped into Giles’ line of sight.

“I’m starving,” she said in a hurry. “Give me a second to grab my bag?”

“Sure thing.” Giles gave her two thumbs up before turning back to Wyatt. “Should we get you takeaway?”

“Sure, thanks,” Wyatt answered, eyeing Mia with a frown.

“Cool.” Giles was completely oblivious to the tension in the room, happily grinning in typical Giles style. “We’re going clubbing tonight to welcome all the newbies, you included, so no skipping out!”

“I’ll add it to my calendar,” Wyatt promised with a wink, opening the door wider for Mia to exit. Giles went back to the group waiting next to the exit, and Mia walked past Wyatt with her head held high as if nothing about their interaction had affected her.

Despite her aloof attitude Mia knew they had crossed a line. She and Wyatt weren’t done yet, the only question was what happened next.

## THE BREAKING POINT



### WYATT

WYATT WAS ON EDGE. Things with Mia were escalating out of control on all fronts and his frustration was skyrocketing, in more ways than one. She challenged him at every turn, testing his patience and his determination. She was brilliant, so infuriatingly brilliant, and he was drawn like a moth to the flame when her eyes lit up with fiery excitement.

It was what happened behind closed doors that was derailing him, though. Mia wasn't overtly seducing him, but when they were alone, she dropped some of her defiant attitude, making room for a delicate form of battle, one that left him burning and barely in control. Earlier today, he'd lost, and that was unacceptable.

Wyatt needed an outlet, and fast.

As if the universe had manifested his thoughts, as soon as he stepped onto the dance floor a redhead approached him, stepping into his path with an inviting smile. Wyatt smiled back, taking her hand and spinning her so her ass was pressed against his groin. She ground her curves into him, glancing to a spot in the distance as if she was performing for someone else.

Lost in the mass of bodies, her movements became even bolder as she pushed her ass more firmly against his hardening cock, hidden in plain sight by the blinding lights.

This worked for Wyatt, and he set about playing his part, putting up the pretense of seduction while she pretended to make him work for it. They knew how this exchange was going to end.

Operating on autopilot, Wyatt moved through the motions, still distracted by his earlier confrontation with Mia. The nameless redhead with the invitation in her eyes seemed more than willing to help him blow off some much needed steam.

Then she was dragging him to the bar, ordering shots from a sour looking bartender and pressing her breasts against his arm, running her fingers up his chest.

“What’s your name?” Wyatt asked, and the redhead smiled at him coyly before knocking back her shot.

“Does it really matter?” Wyatt supposed it really didn’t.

He tossed back his own drink and slammed the empty glass back on the bar. “Fair enough. Do you want to get out of here?”

“I have a better idea.” She took his hand and pulled him after her to the back of the club, past the toilets, and through a door that turned out to be a storage room with conveniently heighted tables.

*Useful*, Wyatt thought approvingly as she pulled him straight to a table in the middle of the room, hopped onto it with her back facing the door and slipped her underwear off. No prelude or too much expectation of foreplay, they both knew what this was.

He dropped his jeans and boxers, rolling on a condom before stepping between her thighs. Despite her no-nonsense attitude, he ran a finger over her slit, slowly heightening her arousal and teasing her clit while kissing her neck. Things wouldn't go beyond whatever happened in this storage room, but Wyatt still wanted her to enjoy herself.

Once he felt she was ready, Wyatt positioned himself and slowly pushed into her. It felt good to distract himself, despite the requisite, almost fake sounds of pleasure she was making, but the blessed diversion was short lived.

Wyatt's hips thrust forward as the redhead keened her approval of his storage room fucking methods.

"Oh, *yes*, that feels good," she moaned. Wyatt grunted in approval, almost bored and starting to feel slightly guilty. She deserved better than a man who was more preoccupied with thoughts on how random hookups were pretty much the same no matter what continent he was on than on her soft and inviting body.

Pounding mechanically, Wyatt's eyes wandered, landing on Mia peeking at them around the frame of the barely open door.

Their eyes locked and a reddish hue spread over Mia's cheeks, her grip on the wooden frame tightened but she seemed rooted to the spot. Wildfire spread through his body, engulfing him with a burning need, and he grabbed the redhead's thighs, slamming into her.

Mia's eyes grew wide at the delighted shrieks now filling the small space, the flame blazing through the deep indigo mirroring the heat consuming him, and her thighs pressed together. Their gazes stayed locked as Wyatt continued to fuck another woman, barely registering when she climaxed. He

kept up the hard pace of his thrusts as Mia's eyes grew hazy, one hand white-knuckled on the wooden frame, the other covering her mouth to stifle the gasps, her hips rocking in small motions as she rubbed her thighs together.

"That's it," Wyatt gritted through his teeth. "You're going to come for me, aren't you?"

His hookup screamed as she was washed over by another orgasm, but all his focus was on Mia, nodding as her breath grew shorter. He waited until her eyes got that far off look before roaring his release, coming hard to Mia's stifled moans.

"No one has *ever* fucked me like that," the redhead purred, nuzzling his neck.

Wyatt smiled, still somewhat hazy, before turning his attention to carefully pull out of her. When he looked up, Mia was gone.

The redhead turned to look as well.

"Was it him?" she asked, sounding almost smug.

"Who?" Wyatt was confused, was she *hoping* for them to get caught?

"Otto," she said his name as if it was supposed to mean something to Wyatt. "The bartender that gave us the shots, he was my boyfriend until yesterday, when I found him in *our* bed with someone else."

"Oh." It took Wyatt a few seconds to process the information, and then he burst out laughing. "Sorry to disappoint, but our voyeur wasn't Otto."

"Rats," she huffed, jumping off the table and setting herself straight. "Was it at least whoever got *you* in a foul mood?"

“It was.”

“Good, let them know what they’re missing.” She patted Wyatt on the chest. “I always feel better after a good revenge fuck.”

“You can do better than me *and* Otto,” Wyatt said, following the redhead to the door.

“I know.” She turned and winked. “Good luck with whoever’s been getting under your skin.”

With those parting words, she disappeared back into the club. Wyatt wasn’t in the mood for partying anymore though. If he thought that burning through some of the sexual tension he’d been accumulating over the past three weeks was somehow going to help, whatever happened with Mia in the storage room only made it worse.

He needed to figure this out, and fast.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was Monday morning and Wyatt was looking for Mia in the hub. No one was there yet, considering the ungodly hour, but Mia always came in extra early.

He’d been wrestling with himself all weekend, trying to reach one definitive conclusion on how to approach the night at the club.

Wyatt couldn’t stop replaying the hazy gaze that took over Mia’s witchy eyes when she came, how intense their connection was, even at twenty feet apart. His body was desperate for a taste of Mia, a thirst he’d barely managed to keep under control before was now wreaking havoc on him. He needed to make a choice—either he quenched it or one of them had to go.

Which was why he was at the hub so early on a Monday morning, making a beeline to the unlocked lab and finding Mia standing over a tray of samples, fully immersed in examining them and jotting down notes.

The original plan was to talk to her, sort this mess out, but then he was near her again and all his well-laid plans went down the drain. Watching her stand there all serious with a holier-than-thou aura flared his anger as much as it did his desire, the way she acted like he'd worked any less hard than she had to reach his position, the way her mere presence was a challenge that ignited every cell in his body.

Wyatt quietly stalked to her and pressed into her back, covering her mouth with his palm to silence a surprised yelp.

“Now, now, you wouldn't want anyone to come rushing over and see us like this, would you?” he whispered into her ear. Despite the anger in her eyes, Mia's physical reaction to him was undeniable. Her body trembled and turned hot, back pressing into his chest, and Wyatt's logic immediately forfeited the battle.

His hand slid off her mouth and down her chest, lightly grazing over her breast where he could feel the tight peak of her nipple. “Last night was amazing, Mia.”

“I'm glad you had a good fuck,” she snapped in a low voice, still leaning into him despite her hostile tone. “*Queutard.*”

“You know what I'm talking about.” He continued to trail his hand down her body to the waistband of her tan slacks. “I had you climaxing with nothing but a look. Imagine how hard I could make you come if I fucked you?”

“I don’t like you,” Mia answered with a soft moan, arching into his touch.

“Then why’d you follow me to the storage room?” No answer, and Wyatt snickered as his teeth grazed over her neck, his erection pressed firmly into her back, eliciting a needy whimper from Mia. “You may not like me, Prickly Pear, but you want me.”

She reached back, cupping him through his slacks, and Wyatt responded to the light touch with a low growl.

“Wyatt...” the lustful way she gasped his name had his blood boiling. He was beyond turned on at this point, made entirely of pulsing need and desire.

“I love hearing you beg for me.” His finger slid under her waistband, teasing the sensitive skin above her pussy. “I’m starting to get sold on your idea of using sex as a physical outlet.”

Mia snorted, slipping away from his hold and shooting his crotch an amused glance. “I think you’ve already bought into it.”

“You make a very compelling pitch.”

Mia just raised an eyebrow before turning her back and walking off to her office. Wyatt smiled and followed. She was into it, he could practically taste her arousal, feel her need seeping through her skin.

Wyatt had promised himself that he’d keep the hub professional, but right now he was driven by pure lust. He’d worry about a neutral workspace later, after he knew she was on board.

“Wyatt!” Mia’s surprised gasp when he caught her wrist and spun her against the door turned into a deep moan when



he pressed into her and claimed her lips. She was sweet, her lips tasted like the honey and heather of the lip balm he often saw her use. She didn't hesitate to open to him and let him dive into the warm wet depths of her mouth.

A groan was torn from Wyatt's chest when he ground into the vee of Mia's thighs. He hadn't even noticed that he'd lifted her off the ground or that she'd wrapped her legs around him, but he knew this was going one direction fast if he didn't stop it now.

Mia's eyes grew wide when he placed her back on the ground, cheeks flushed and chest heaving.

"I'm not doing this here," he explained, gesturing to the room though it was obvious he was talking about the entire hub. "I'll be waiting for you tonight at my place, 6 pm."

"What makes you think I'll come?" Mia stuck out her chin defiantly, unable to resist pushing back at him despite her body betraying her true desires.

Wyatt took a step forward and caged her between his arms, inhaling her scent with a low rumble.

"Oh, you're going to come," he said, reveling in the goosebumps erupting over her skin and the soft moan leaving her lips even as she was fighting to hide her arousal. "Several times."

"You're such a cocky bastard." Wyatt smiled at her frustrated snip, his lips feathering over her soft skin. "I hate you."

"Your hate is like fuel and I plan to burn your world to ashes," he whispered against her neck before pushing away and nudging her aside to open the door, calling over his shoulder, "I'll see you tonight."

## THE DISCOVERY OF HATE SEX



**MIA**

A QUICK EXHALE, a roll of her shoulders to loosen the tension, back straight, and it's showtime. *Merde*. The word fled through Mia's mind as she knocked on the white door in front of her.

Wyatt opened the door, wearing that lazy half-smirk he seemed to reserve just for her, a pair of low hanging sweatpants, and not much else. The bastard knew his way around a smile. It was the type of lopsided grin that said he was up to no good and held a promise that she would enjoy every second.

Also, that man was too gorgeous for his own good. Mia hated that just the sight of him in nothing but a pair of sweats made her wet faster than she could think of a witty jab about his choice of wardrobe.

He took a step back, clearing the way for her to enter, his gaze following her every move. "You're late."

"I was trying to decide—wear something that would force you to work harder?" Slowly, Mia peeled off the layers of clothes covering her body, sensing Wyatt's hot gaze on her back the entire time. "Or give into the inevitable and just throw on a camisole dress?"

She kept her coat for last, sliding it off her arms and hanging it next to her scarf before turning to face Wyatt.

“I see you went with the latter.” Wyatt’s blazing gaze made her nipples go hard under the silky black fabric. The thin garment did nothing to hide her body’s reaction, and Wyatt’s eyes focused on the hardened peaks, the growing bulge in his sweats an indication she had made the right choice.

*Good.* There wasn’t much point in denying they wanted to fuck, it was just a matter of who broke first.

“Oui, I figured I’ll make you work hard for my orgasm instead.”

“Drink?” Wyatt offered, and Mia nodded. Might as well take the edge off. Plus, she was always harder to get off after a bit of alcohol, but no need to disclose that small detail.

Pulling out two cordials, Wyatt poured them each a serving of eau de vie de pear.

He raised the clear liquid to his lips without so much as a tip of it in her direction, which Mia perceived as extremely rude but not at all surprising. She wouldn’t expect anything else from a brute like Wyatt Jenkins. Following his lead, she sipped on the clear liquid and let the aromatic fluid flood her senses, calming the awareness prickling up her spine from Wyatt’s penetrating gaze.

They were engaging in a silent game of dare, waiting to see which one of them would make the first move, the air thickening with the promise of sex with every passing second.

It was maddening, the small sips they took in tandem, the building tension, Mia’s pounding heart that she was sure Wyatt could hear across the breakfast bar. She was close to her breaking point, emptying the last of the fruity spirit from her

glass, when Wyatt circled the bar, bottle still in hand, and poured them both a second serving.

He didn't wait for her to savor another taste, instead pressing his firm body to hers and placing the bottle on the breakfast bar behind her. His thick fingers wove into Mia's hair, lightly tugging to tilt her head back.

His kiss was soft and imploring, and before she could think better of it her palm smoothed over the hard dips and ridges of his chest to rest on his hip, a contented sigh leaving her lips.

Wyatt broke the kiss with a devil's grin, and it took Mia a few moments to snap out of her daze and for realization to hit her.

"Enfoiré." She pushed against his chest, furious that he had played her so easily and that she had so easily given in, but Wyatt only pressed more firmly into her body, his erection taut against her belly, reminding her how big he had felt in her palm earlier that morning.

He looked at her, waiting, and Mia realized he was waiting for her permission to proceed. She took a moment to think. Yes, he was an animal, a brutish asshole that her body seemed to want more than she could remember wanting anyone in her life. Wyatt would use that against her to break her resistance, as he'd just shown her. Now it was up to Mia to decide if this was a game she was willing to play.

Without a word Mia tossed back the entirety of her cordial, savoring the intense burn, letting it fuel her anger, and placed the glass behind her.

"Are we going to bed now?" she asked, sticking out her chin and staring daggers at Wyatt.

“You haven’t earned my bed yet, Prickly Pear.” Wyatt’s russet eyes were full of a dangerous sort of hunger, her thighs becoming slick under his intense gaze, unwavering from her face even as he swallowed down the remainder of his drink and placed his glass next to hers. “You promised to make me work for it, let’s see if you can uphold that, shall we?”

“You’re so full of yourself.”

“Jealous?” Wyatt leaned close, the aroma of fruity spirit mixed with the delicate scent of an earthy forest filled Mia’s nostrils, sending pleasurable shivers down her spine. “Don’t worry, you’re going to be full of me soon enough.”

Trailing his fingers down each side of Mia’s neck and over her shoulders, Wyatt dragged the straps of her camisole down her arms, leaving a trail of tingling electricity as his fingers gently grazed her flesh until her camisole slid off her body, becoming a puddle around her feet.

“Look how turned on you are, Mia,” Wyatt rumbled into her ear, his hands moving to cup her breasts, pinching a hard nipple before taking it into his warm mouth to soothe the sting. “Are you really going to fight all the pleasure I’m going to give you tonight?” He repeated the process with the other nipple, and Mia’s eyes rolled back in her head, her teeth digging into her lip to stop a moan from escaping.

Mia gripped the counter behind her as one of Wyatt’s palms slid up her inner thigh, his other hand smoothing up her chest and to her face, where he pushed two fingers into her mouth.

Wyatt’s breath was hot against her cheek, his words caressing her heated skin when he spoke. “You’re so fucking beautiful, so goddamn frustrating.”

Mia was burning, everything was a fiery haze, and she barely held on to that part of herself that refused to give Wyatt the satisfaction of so easily succumbing.

While his fingers gently pumped her mouth, another pair touched the satiny black fabric between her legs. A low growl tore from his chest, his gaze lifted to hers and there was something deliciously feral in his eyes.

“You’ve soaked your panties through,” Wyatt gritted through a clenched jaw, pressing his fingers firmly against her pussy.

At the surge of pleasure, Mia bit down on the digits in her mouth and Wyatt pulled them out with a hiss, eyes blazing as he reached out and dragged one wet finger up the column of her throat, hooking it under her chin and tilting her face up and forcing her eyes to stay on his.

Mia gasped when he roughly pulled her panties aside and pushed the two teasing fingers into her, and she leaned back against the bar for support as Wyatt pumped his thick fingers inside her.

“Won’t be... that easy...” she was panting, fighting the pleasure that was bursting at the seams of her skin. She was ready to come undone, but she was in no way ready to lose, and that drive ended up with the upper hand.

Wyatt caught her around the throat and pulled her to him, crashing his mouth against hers with an almost deranged desire. Mia’s hands flew from the counter into his mass of dark honey hair, the moan she’d been fighting so hard to deny him swallowed by their kiss. He could feel the burn as well, Mia was sure of it, and it strengthened her resolve to hold back, push him to the breaking point first.

She was gasping for air when Wyatt pulled away, pushing her panties down and turning Mia to face the counter. His tongue slowly glided over her spine, crack to nape, the rustle of foil as he took his time tasting her skin was almost disappointing. She'd wanted to gain the upper hand, but she was hoping for more resilience on Wyatt's part.

Just as she was about to dish out a mock, he returned his fingers, pressing deep inside her from behind. She was already so wired it took engaging every ounce of her brainpower not to climax.

Wyatt's hot breath feathered against her ear. "Give in, Prickly Pear, I know you're dying to come."

"You'll have to work harder than that." Mia steeled herself, blocking out the desperate signals her body was sending her—the ache between her legs, the throbbing need to have the thick cock currently rubbing against her back fill her. She wished he hadn't turned her. Mia was certain his cock was magnificent, and in any other scenario she would have fulfilled her curiosity as well as her desires, but what was the fun in letting Wyatt win?

Wyatt's pace increased, his other hand joining the first, circling to the front and finding her clit. Mia leaned forward on the counter to brace herself, grinding her teeth to hold back the sounds of pleasure eager to burst out. The cold marble was making her nipples painfully tight, her breath coming out in short pants as her body fought against her mind in a battle of determination and will.

"Damn it, Mia, you're too fucking stubborn," Wyatt snapped in a frustrated growl, grabbing the underside of her knee and lifting it to the counter.

Mia couldn't hold back the cry of pleasure when Wyatt slammed deep into her, nor could she stop the flood of pure bliss that wiped out everything else as he relentlessly pounded into her with accuracy and intent in every movement.

More than the size of him, it was the absolute control Wyatt had of his body that was driving Mia to the edge of madness. He wasn't playing anymore, he was demanding that she yield to this insanity between them, and Mia was powerless to resist any longer.

Sweet release washed over her, her entire body quaking from the force. Guttural cries flowed from her lips until she slumped forward on the countertop, heaving for breath, thankful for the cool marble against her burning skin.

Wyatt slid out of her, tracing the single stem rose tattooed over her spine with surprising delicacy before banding an arm under her chest and hoisting her up.

"You didn't climax." She was both relieved and annoyed at the fact, and Wyatt chuckled, pulling her close and waiting for her gaze to meet his.

"Since I wasn't planning on fucking you until I made you come, we'll call it a draw." He pressed his lips softly to hers. "Don't look so disappointed, we're going to continue this in bed."

"Remind me again, what's so special about your bed?" she asked when he turned towards the closed door at the other side of the living room.

"It's what I *do* on my bed that's special," he answered from over his shoulder, the hard muscles of his back and ass flexing temptingly as he led the way.



He truly was a vision of male perfection, his tapered form well-defined though not overly pumped, with broad shoulders and strong arms, narrowing slightly at the hips, his smooth skin tanned to the color of demerara sugar.

“Enlighten me.” Instead of answering, Wyatt turned around and swept Mia into a deep kiss, his tongue thrusting into her mouth, her knees turning weak at how it swiped and twisted.

“Did you like that, Mia?” he whispered, and she responded by grabbing a fistful of his hair and pulling him in for more toe-curling tongue action. “Now imagine my tongue doing that to your pussy.”

“Mon Dieu,” she moaned with a shaky breath.

“I love eating pussy, Mia, but I don’t just go and do it with any girl,” his rumbling voice was low in her ear as his thick finger glided between her still sensitive lower lips. “Only the ones that end up in my bed, and that hasn’t happened in a long time.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes,” he answered in his deep voice full of sinful promise. “And I’m *starving*.”

## MORE



WYATT

GOOSEBUMPS DOTTED Mia's skin when Wyatt whispered in her ear. She was soft, inviting, so goddamn tempting with her purple witch eyes full of challenge as they gazed up at him.

Wyatt was wound so tight it was almost painful. It took all he had not to blow when Mia's body gripped him, and it took all he had now not to take her against the wall and relieve the strain in his cock.

"I already got what I came for, *la bête*." Her fingernails scraped over his chest. "Think you can outdo yourself?"

Mia's abrasiveness was stoking the blistering fire in Wyatt's body. She wasn't trying to hide how he affected her, she couldn't. The air around them was inundated with the maddening scent of her arousal, but she was making it clear that every sweet moan would be hard earned, and Wyatt wasn't about to cave into her provocations.

"I know I can." He opened the door and gestured for her to enter, waiting until she was at his king-sized bed before moving. It was an opportunity to look her over from afar.

Mia was average in height, around five-feet-five, her willowy form with delicate curves and long legs was

brehtaking. She was truly a beautiful woman, and Wyatt couldn't help but think how fragile she felt when he had held her against his body, how well her delicacy fit there, how good it felt to have her bare skin against his.

He had invited her over tonight with hopes it would get the tension out of their systems, maybe even pave a path to a more habitable work environment. He held no illusions what tomorrow would bring, though, so he decided to concentrate on enjoying the now, finding relief from whatever this insanity was between him and Mia.

Mia turned to look at him, arching an eyebrow. "Are you joining me anytime soon?"

The geometric owl tattoo on her left flank was staring right at him with sharp purple eyes that mirrored its owner's piercing gaze. Anticipation tickled at his spine.

"A word of caution," he warned as he closed the distance between them, lifting her by the waist and throwing her on the bed, enjoying the surprised gasp and the flame flickering in her eyes. "I'm not stopping until I get my fill, even if you beg."

"I can't imagine a scenario where you make me beg." Her indigo eyes delivered an exaggerated roll as Wyatt climbed onto the bed and covered her body with his.

"Now who's full of themselves?" Wyatt rubbed the scruff he made a point of not shaving tonight against her cheek, down the column of her neck, and between the valley of her breasts. He took a deep breath, smelling the delicate aroma of her pear scented body lotion mixed with his forest shower gel, all clouded by the intoxicating scent of sex.

The tip of his tongue dragged down the middle of Mia's abdomen, her back arching off the bed with a purr when he tongued her navel.

"Are you sure you won't beg?"

"*Connard*," she swore at him in French before sighing when he blew a gentle gust of air against her pussy. "*Barbare*."

Wyatt was quickly losing his grip on reality. Mia's hateful words were like an aphrodisiac, turning him inside out. He held her thighs apart and hooked her knees over his shoulders, grazing his teeth over her pelvic bone, then the tender skin of her inner thighs, slowly making his way towards the apex.

His pulse was thudding in his ears by the time his mouth reached her glistening pussy, the need to taste Mia overwhelming. Wetting his lips, Wyatt captured her clit between them, applying light suction and starting to bat the hard nub with his tongue.

"C'est trop bon." Mia ankles hooked over his back, fingers tangling in his hair.

Wyatt was teasing her, driving her high, knowing the crash would be that much harder and sweeter. Wyatt wanted Mia to scream in ecstasy, he wanted to make her fly.

Mia gasped, her fingers tightening in his hair when he increased the suction, two fingers plunging deep into her silky wetness.

He didn't show her mercy, fucking her with his fingers as his tongue worked her clit.

"Yes." *Gasp*. "Oh God, yes."

Her wails spurred him to kick it up a notch on all fronts, her sharp inhale followed by a cry tore a feral growl from his lungs.

He'd lost count of how many times he had growled since Mia walked into his apartment. Either way, it was as many growls as he had produced in a lifetime. Possessive caveman wasn't his style, but, then again, neither was hate sex.

Yet, here he was, lust burning through his veins as he pulled his fingers out of Mia's clenching pussy, spurring his tongue into her, tasting her climax with ravenous hunger. Wyatt clasped her narrow hips and rocked her over his face, flattening his tongue and licking her into another orgasm.

"Baise-moi, Wyatt," she whimpered, begging him to fuck her, tugging at his hair desperately. "Baise-moi."

It should have been his moment of triumph, when he gave her that cocky grin that got her all riled up and swearing up a storm in French, instead he growled, *again*, burying his face between her thighs and ravaging her until she was shaking underneath him.

"Such a sweet pussy," he groaned before taking her clit between his lips and sucking hard, causing Mia to buck under him with a whimper. "I could eat you out all night."

"I want your cock again," Mia moaned in a voice hoarse from screaming.

Wyatt kissed his way up her body, delirious from her taste, crashing his mouth against hers and slamming into her tight pussy. Her knees were still draped over his shoulders, allowing a deep penetration that had Mia gasping for air. Wyatt didn't pause before starting to pound her hard and fast.

It wasn't about winning anymore, it wasn't even about gratification. The need surging through Wyatt's body with every thrust was animalistic, *barbaric*, as Mia had called him a few minutes ago. He wanted to break her, ruin her, make her body his. Wyatt was spellbound by this woman who would rather see him back across the ocean, probably sunk in it, even, and he couldn't care less.

With Mia's fingers tangled in his hair, heels urging his upper back, nails digging into his scalp, and her pert body tightening around him as they both thundered towards the edge together, all Wyatt knew was that something bigger than indulgence was happening.

His head buried in the crook of Mia's neck, inhaling the intoxicating scent of *them*, and it was all it took for his mind to go blank. Searing white heat blinded his vision as he roared into Mia's skin, fists twisted into the sheets as her own climax milked him for all he was worth.

They were spent, a tangle of glistening, panting flesh. Two sparks that had ignited into a blazing inferno and were now struggling to find oxygen as their fires reduced to a flickering flame.

Wyatt had never experienced anything like it, and one word possessed every corner of his mind—*more*.



**MIA**

*MORE.*

The craving was unrelenting, consuming Mia's still quaking body. All she wanted was more of Wyatt, more

sweaty, entwined bodies shaking and gasping for air together.

“You have fifteen minutes,” Wyatt growled into her ear, and Mia’s eyes snapped open, the euphoric high fading into painful awareness at the thought that Wyatt was kicking her out less than two minutes after giving her the best orgasm of her life. “And then—round two.”

Relief washed Mia, and she welcomed Wyatt’s mouth over hers, his lips trailing down her neck and body before he retreated to the bathroom. By the time he was back, Mia had retrieved the bottle of eau de vie from the kitchen and was stretched out on the bed, sipping from her cordial.

“I poured you some.” She pointed at the second cordial waiting on the nightstand.

“I can think of better ways to drink than from a glass,” Wyatt said with a smirk, crawling over her and tasting the spirit on her lips.

Mia lost track of time as the night progressed. As far as she was concerned, she could have been in Wyatt’s apartment for days and never realized. All her focus was on him and the feeling of having his body on top of her, under her, surrounding her from every direction and taking over her senses.

When Mia woke up, it was still dark outside, and she had to blink a few times before remembering where she was. Wyatt’s arm was slung over her stomach as he lightly snored, a satisfied smile decorating his handsome face. He really was an attractive man, and he had proven himself a worthy lover.

*If only that were enough.*

As gently and quietly as she could, Mia slipped out of bed, checking the time and seeing it was 4 am. Wyatt was so deep

in his sated sleep he didn't even budge as Mia collected her clothes and left his flat.

Her body thrummed with delicious aching, every muscle aware and alert, ready for more, but Mia's mind was reeling with thoughts.

Was that just one night of releasing steam or would there be another? Did she want another?

Too many questions Mia couldn't deal with at her current level of exhaustion and hunger, not to mention her desperate need for a shower.

With a sigh, Mia sent out an email that she'd be taking a sick day and headed home, putting off thoughts of Wyatt and what their night together meant for tomorrow.



## THE DEAL



**MIA**

MIA WAS ABOUT to sit for dinner, or an extremely late breakfast considering she'd been asleep most of the day, when a knock on the door stopped her mid wine pouring.

She wasn't expecting anyone but, every now and then, one of the neighbors would drop by asking for a cup of sugar or milk. Out of habit, Mia looked through the peephole, taking a step back and blinking at the periwinkle door before looking again to make sure she wasn't hallucinating.

With her best frown plastered onto her face, she opened the door, greeted by a freshly shaven Wyatt casually leaning on the frame, his expression taking on a smugness that made Mia want to smack him as he scanned her head to toe.

“Good morning,” he greeted, his gaze still roaming her body with increasing heat.

“How do you know where I live?”

“Giles told me.”

“Why?” she asked, though, considering the way he was looking at her, she was quickly losing interest in why he was there and becoming more occupied with thoughts of what they could do once he was inside her flat.

“Because he can’t retain information for shit?” Wyatt shrugged, unbuttoning his trench coat while waltzing into Mia’s apartment uninvited, looking around as he made himself comfortable.

Mia closed the door behind him and locked it, for safety, she told herself, not to keep Wyatt inside. “No, Wyatt, why are you here?”

“Oh, are you avoiding me?” Mia could sense a tone of worry, suggesting the idea didn’t sit well with him. Something about that knowledge thrilled her. Both the idea that he’d spent the day bothered, and that he made an extra effort to come see her were equally exciting to Mia.

“No, I was very tired.” At her words, his all-too smug grin was back, and Mia huffed out a huge sigh, as if resigning herself to the fact he wouldn’t be leaving any time soon. She wanted to seem as if the only reason she wasn’t protesting was that she couldn’t be bothered to argue with him right now. “Are you hungry? I made fish and chips.”

“Sure.” He followed her to the kitchen area, eyes soaking in everything as they crossed the living room, the open floor plan allowing him to take in the entire living space.

Mia threw a glance over her shoulder, amused at the almost child-like curiosity Wyatt was exhibiting. “Like what you see, Doctor Jenkins?”

Wyatt laughed, turning his gaze to her with a warm smile. “I do. It’s very homey and somehow very you.”

“I should hope, considering it is mine.” Mia pulled out an extra plate and poured Wyatt a glass of wine.

“Really?” She nodded, handing him his drink.

“My father left it to me when he died, I’ve been living here since I came to Oxford when I was seventeen.”

“Was your father British?” Wyatt asked, taking the glass of wine she offered and lifting it to his mouth, again skipping the basic etiquette of saluting. Mia decided enough was enough.

“No, and also...” she lifted her glass in his direction, not bothering to hide her annoyance.

“Jenkins don’t toast.”

“Why not?” Mia asked, still irritated, but now also curious.

“My mom is very accident prone, and after a glass of beer magically exploded in her hand when she toasted it and she had to get six stitches, it’s been sort of a big no-no in our house.”

Part of her was surprised at how easily Wyatt was sharing personal information about his family, especially with her. It wasn’t as if they were two friends chatting, they were rivals who happened to engage in one night of epic sex. Of course, people like Wyatt Jenkins would easily talk about their family, they were the epitome of normal, the benchmark to which all other families strived.

DESPITE THE SOMEWHAT BITTER THOUGHT, Mia was startled to find that she wanted to hear more. “So, you don’t toast because your mother is a klutz?”

“Pretty much, yeah.” He laughed again, lightly clinking his glass against hers. “There. I wouldn’t want to offend your culture.”

“And no one ended up in the hospital!” Mia took a sip, hiding a smile that was fighting to emerge. This was new,

talking to Wyatt like a person without constantly being defensive. Or wanting to stab him.

“Yet,” he said with a ridiculously sexy smile. Setting his wine on the table Wyatt gestured at the oven. “Shall we eat?”

The meal continued the trend by being surprisingly comfortable. They talked about high school, their work before Wyatt came to Oxford, even about the hub. There was no bickering or fighting, no clash of wills and the exhausting anger they always seemed to bring out in each other.

“How did you end up in social genomics?” Wyatt asked, his large eyes never leaving hers. It was an innocent and requisite question, but it carried too much weight for Mia to be entirely forthcoming. Unlike Wyatt, she didn’t grow up in a scientific house that exposed her to genetics at an early age or enabled her imagination to spark with theories disguised as comic book storylines.

“I started with social medicine when I first came to Oxford and one of my courses was with Herbert, he took me under his wing and introduced me to social genomics, and I fell in love with the field.”

“As simple as that?” Wyatt raised an eyebrow and Mia shrugged.

“Not everything in life needs to be complicated, Wyatt.” She knew that wasn’t true, and judging by Wyatt’s sardonic smile, he wasn’t sold on the notion either.

“Are you done?” He gestured to her plate and Mia nodded.

Wyatt cleared the dishes and took them to the sink, rolling his sleeves up to his elbows before going about the task of washing them. It was positively unexpected, this civilized side, and Mia wondered what he was hoping to gain by showing it

as she sat there, watching his muscles flex and drinking her wine while enjoying the view.

They spent a few minutes in amicable silence, the sound of running water the only thing breaking it, until Wyatt cleared his throat.

“So, I have a proposition.” He was looking intently at the plate he was scrubbing, placing it on the drying rack next to the rest of the dishes before turning to Mia.

“The real reason you came over?” she speculated, her gaze hungrily scanning his broad form as he approached her, sliding between her chair and the small dining table, and leaning back, arms crossed over his chest and his crotch level with her face.

Mia was tempted to reach out, loosen his belt and free his cock, take it into her mouth and have a repeat performance of the previous night, but Wyatt was going to have to ask for it.

“I came over because I was bothered by the idea that our little tryst last night had you going into hiding, but I admit I had more than one reason.” Wyatt stretched out his hand, hooking a finger under Mia’s chin and tipping her head up as his thumb traced her bottom lip. His smoldering russet eyes set her body aflame, his voice dropping an octave as the air between them became heavy. “I woke up, and you were gone. I wasn’t nearly done with you.”

“What if I was done with you?” she countered playfully.

“I don’t believe that for a second,” he answered, sporting his infuriatingly sexy half-grin as his thumb kept rubbing over her lip. “And I have zero inhibitions about bending you over the table to check how wet your panties are just to prove my point.”

Mia knew he would do it, and part of her wanted to goad him until he made good on the tempting threat, but she also knew Wyatt was right. If they were going to take this beyond one night, it had to be hashed out, no room for interpretation or confusion.

“What is it you propose, *la bête*?” She bit back a moan at the way his pupils dilated when she called him that. He truly was a beast, undeniable feral power and appeal. Mia was finding it increasingly difficult to ignore the growing bulge in front of her or the neediness pooling between her thighs.

“I want to fuck you, Mia.” His hand slid to her throat, thumb tracing the throbbing vein in her neck. “And it seems you want it just as much.”

“I can’t deny you’re more pleasant to be around when you want something other than to get me out of the way.”

“Funny, I was about to say the same thing.”

Mia could sense the resentment in his voice, and she couldn’t hold it against him. She’d been much more dedicated to the task of getting rid of Wyatt than the other way around.

“What are your terms?” she asked, needing to steer away from the guilt simmering inside her.

“I want a *carte blanche*,” Wyatt answered, his eyes full of fire, fingers slightly tightening against the column of her neck. “Let me do anything I want to you.”

Mia sniggered and shook her head, catching his wrist and pulling his hand away from her throat. “And I’m supposed to lay back and take it like a good girl?”

“No. Force me to work for it, Mia.” His eyes flared and he flipped the position of their hands, pulling Mia against his chest where his heart was thudding fast and strong against her

palm. “I want to have to seduce you, I want to earn every sweet moan, every orgasm. I want to go to battle with you and break you.”

“What if I break you first?” Mia knew she was talking a big game for someone who was rapidly becoming a hot quivering mess under the untamed hunger in Wyatt’s gaze, but she couldn’t help herself.

“I think no matter who ends up with the upper hand, we both win.” His logic was sound, though even if it weren’t, his low, husky voice trickling down her spine with a pleasant tingle marked the end of the conversation as far as Mia was concerned.

She pushed up to her toes, pressing her lips against his as a way to seal the deal. There was a sliver of recognition that this may be a terrible idea, but it was a lost fight. Whatever it was that drew them together, it was too strong for logic to ward off.

Mia decided to embrace it and enjoy it while it lasted.

## WHY WOULD MIA NEED A SAFE WORD?



WYATT

WYATT WAS STARTING to think that Mia really was a witch. Something about the fragrance of her body lotion was addictive, the way it gave out a gentle cloud of sweet pear aroma that penetrated even the heavy scent of sex in the air.

He pressed his nose into the soft skin of her back, inhaling before planting a kiss there, then another one a little higher, and another even higher, his lips marking a trail to her neck.

“That was good,” he said, still sprinkling tender kisses over her shoulder, hugging her from behind.

“Too good.” Her hand stretched back to tangle in his hair, bringing his exploring lips to hers. The honey and heather flavor was long gone, but Wyatt could swear he still tasted it. “No one should be that talented at fucking.”

Wyatt couldn't stop a burst of laughter, leaning over Mia and meeting her indigo gaze.

“I told you, Prickly Pear, hate is a strong fuel.”

“So, you're saying it's chemistry, not you?” She raised a skeptical eyebrow. “How unexpectedly modest.”

“You have me all wrong you know.”



“I have you right where I want you, Doctor Jenkins.” She turned away from him and snuggled deeper into his chest.

Wyatt tried to shake off disappointment at Mia’s easy disregard of his statement. She probably thought he was joking, but the truth was he hated how little Mia thought of him. Probably because, on a professional level, he had her on a high pedestal.

Mia was focused, driven, and innovative. Every moment he spent with her, his opinion of her rose. She intrigued him on so many levels, even the parts of her that spit fire and venom at him.

Wyatt liked that his family name didn’t impress her, but he wished she regarded him as an equal rather than a nuisance. Still, he was glad she’d willingly accepted his offer and that he had Mia all to himself for the time being.

Mia sighed in content when Wyatt tightened his hold, wiggling a foot between his ankles to tangle their legs and looking at him with wicked amusement. “For the record, I won this round.”

“I told you, the beauty of this arrangement is that, even when one of us wins a battle, we both win the war.” He nuzzled her neck, breathing her in. “The collateral damage of our combat but a small death.”

Mia laughed softly at his reference to the French metaphor for an orgasm. “I dare say more than one.”

“I like fucking at your house, better than at mine.” He liked being surrounded by things that were so distinctively her.

“Your bed is bigger.” She wasn’t wrong about Wyatt’s king size bed being larger than her queen, but the way Mia

snuggled in close, Wyatt failed to see how that was going to be an issue.

“We need to make a few rules,” Wyatt said, thinking of how to approach the delicate subject of exactly what he wanted to do to her under their arrangement. “Maybe a safe word.”

Mia wiggled out of his hold and turned to face him with a curious gaze. “What for? If I tell you to stop, won’t you?”

“Of course, but these games, they can get out of hand, cross a line, get too much. Or maybe one of us meets someone and wants to stop or gets bored.” With every word he felt growing dread at any of those scenarios coming true. “We need something to signal it’s more than a momentary pause, that it’s over for good.”

“Agastopia,” Mia said after a moment. “It means admiration of a particular part of someone’s body.”

“I know what it means.” Wyatt chuckled at how appropriate her choice was. “That’s a good word.”

“Thank you.” Mia flashed him a sassy smile. “Now that we have a safe word, mind telling me the real reason why I need it?”

“What would be the fun in that?” Mia rolled her eyes and threw herself back in the pillows.

“No gags or blindfolds.”

“Obviously.” Wyatt traced her collarbone with a light touch. “I want to see in your eyes the moment you cave under the pleasure, hear when you finally give in and beg.”

“I don’t like being tied down, either.” She paused, probably waiting for Wyatt’s response, but he just nodded. He

was mildly disappointed, but it wasn't a deal breaker. Restraints were fun, but they weren't what he had in mind when he asked Mia for a safe word. "I don't mind if you restrain me with your hands, but no accessories."

"Okay," Wyatt answered, smiling at her reassuringly. "Anything else?"

"The rules," she reminded him. "What about those?"

"Total separation between work and our private lives, the hub stays professional."

"Agreed." Mia gazed at the ceiling for a few seconds before turning her gaze to Wyatt. "And no talking about personal stuff. Just because we're screwing doesn't mean we're friends."

Wyatt stared at her for a few moments, trying to see something, anything, in her closed off expression that would tip him off as to why Mia would stonewall him like that, before sighing. "If that's what you want."

"I want orgasms and the position I deserved to get in the first place."

"Well," he placed a palm on her knee and slowly dragged it up her thigh, "one of those I'm more than happy to provide."



**MIA**

"MIA?" Giles' concerned voice broke Mia out of her daze. She blinked a couple of times before remembering what he had asked and quickly checked her notes.

“The tray marked red needs to go to sequencing, and the one marked in blue to Amika in the clinical lab.”

“All right,” Giles said slowly, still gazing at her with concern. “Are you alright?”

“Yes, just tired,” Mia reassured him. “I was up late.”

“Reading the new John Hopkins paper?” Giles let out a low whistle that meant he was impressed by whatever he had read. “It was wicked interesting.”

“I haven’t gotten around to it yet,” Mia answered, staring intently at the sheet of paper attached to the clipboard in her hand. She’d been waiting for this specific article to come out for ages, constantly telling every willing listener how they simply must read it, had even marked it in her calendar, then proceeded to completely forget about it.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Giles asked again. “You seem out of sorts.”

She was about to answer when a voice from behind her spoke. “You do seem a bit out of focus, Doctor Bissonnette.” Mia spun on her heels, grip tight on her clipboard and eyes narrowing at Wyatt, daring him to dish out the innuendo laced taunt she knew was coming. “You should call it an early day, go home and straight to bed.”

*Wait for me there*, was said with his eyes. Wyatt presented a stoic exterior, but Mia was quickly learning it was a well-honed professional persona that was hiding a raging fire, one she had been willingly consumed by every night for the last two weeks.

“You know, you’re right.” She tapped her clipboard with her pen, eyes never leaving Wyatt’s. “I should go home, lock the doors, get a good night’s sleep.”

Wyatt's brow arched, and he was clearly fighting the upward tug of his lips at her goading response, but Mia wasn't done. If Wyatt thought he could use sleep deprivation and physical gratification to break her resolve and accept his presence in her lab, he had another thing coming.

Also, Mia was still in the dark as to why she would need a safe word. Wyatt was a ferocious lover, but nothing he did ventured beyond rough fucking and orgasm denial. It was only a matter of pushing him hard enough, though, and Mia was up for the task.

"But I'm not leaving until I'm done with this batch, and that could take a while." Mia turned her clipboard to Wyatt, showing him all the boxes that had yet to be ticked off. "If you want to help, you could grab me a cup of coffee from the shop outside."

Giles froze with the red tray in his hand, eyes wide as they bounced between her and Wyatt. Mia knew she was pushing the boundaries of Wyatt's patience, sending him on a coffee run as if he were some low-level grad, and the dangerous flame that flickered in his eyes sent a hot thrill through her body.

He was back to amicable in a heartbeat, but Mia sensed she'd be paying for her impertinence later tonight.

"One cinnamon mocha coming right up," Wyatt said in a light tone and an easy smile, turning his gaze to Giles. "Double shot cappuccino?"

"Err..." Giles seemed mortified, whether at Wyatt offering to get him coffee or remembering his preferred brew, Mia didn't know, but it was amusing, nonetheless.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Wyatt laughed as he backed out of the lab. “I expect a full report on the initial findings no later than Friday, Doctor Bissonnette.”

“Of course,” Mia answered, wondering if her punishment was going to involve Wyatt keeping her awake through Friday.

“Um, Doctor Jenkins?” Giles said from behind Mia, finally finding his voice. “You’ve got donor meetings in London the entire of next week. You’re leaving Friday morning, remember?”

Wyatt grimaced, and Mia took a few steps closer to him. “It’s alright, I’ll hold down the fort while you’re gone.”

“Will you, now?”

“Yes.” She took another step, close enough so only Wyatt could hear her when she whispered. “I’ll manage just fine without you for a week.”

Mia was met by a scorching gaze, her insides melting into a puddle under it.

“Want to bet on it?” he asked in a low voice, the tips of his fingers grazing hers.

“What do I get when I win?”

Wyatt’s lips stretched into a lazy grin. “I’ll go get you that coffee now.”

Mia watched Wyatt’s broad back and shoulders as he turned away, thinking that this may be one bet she’d enjoy losing.

## PUNISHMENT AND REWARD



**MIA**

MIA WAS WALKING BACK to the lab from a division meeting, immersed in her phone. Specifically in the raunchy exchange she and Wyatt had a couple of nights ago. It pained her to admit that she felt his absence, *mostly* from her bed.

Laughter greeted Mia as she approached the hub. She didn't need to get close to know what the source of excitement was. The second she lifted her head from the screen she could feel Wyatt's energy in the room, quickening her pulse and pulling her to him.

"Mia!" Giles turned to her with a broad smile, radiating with enthusiasm. "Wyatt's back!"

"Doctor Bissonnette." Wyatt nodded her direction from his perch on one of the couches. He addressed her with familiar politeness, no heat or even a sliver of warmth.

"Doctor Jenkins, welcome back," Mia answered with the same intonation. She was just as skilled in playing this game, even with the liquid heat centering low in her abdomen, tugging at her belly with need.

"Thank you." Another courteous smile, and Wyatt was standing. "I have some work to catch up on, but we should

have a hub dinner on Monday, my treat.” He shoved one hand into his pocket and pointed with the other at Giles. “You choose, somewhere fun and tasty.”

Giles was beyond himself, eyes shining and smile broadening. “Fun and tasty, I’ve got you covered, boss.”

“Great. Back to work everyone.” Wyatt retreated to his office and the group quickly scattered to their various duties, but Mia was too stunned to move.

They hadn’t seen each other for a week, but the entire time they’d been texting. Not only sexting but also about the hub and Wyatt’s meetings, sometimes about silly things like a new coffee shop she’d discovered or a new wine he discovered in one of his many official dinners. And here he finally was, flesh and blood standing right in front of her, and he barely gave Mia a second glance, not even for a professional chat.

*The bastard*, she seethed in her mind, turning after Wyatt and making a conscious effort not to stomp. *He thinks he can play me that easily?*

She reached Wyatt’s office. His door was wide open, but she stopped short of entering, lightly rasping her knuckle against the doorframe to get his attention. “Doctor Jenkins, a moment of your time.”

“Yeah, sure, come in,” he answered without lifting his gaze from his computer, pretending to be distracted by whatever he was working on.

Mia walked in and shut the door behind her, the fiery heat in her body amplifying with every inch she cleared between them.

“How was your trip?” she asked, forcing herself to take measured strides.



“Boring but successful.” He shrugged, finally lifting his gaze from the screen to her. He couldn’t mask the fire in his eyes, a flame that seared through Mia’s body with almost painful longing. “I know there are a lot of hub updates from the week I wasn’t here, I saw your report on the newest experiment and Giles’s proposal, and I promise I’ll make time to sit with you properly. But I *have* to finish these funding applications first.”

“That’s not why I’m here.” She rounded his desk, spinning his chair so he faced her and straddling his thighs, crashing her mouth against his.

“Mia,” Wyatt growled in a low rumble, placing his hands on her waist and pushing her away before she managed to wiggle her hips closer to his. “Total separation, it’s the only rule I gave you.”

“You can’t fool me, la bête,” Mia said in a breathless murmur, cupping Wyatt through his gray slacks. He was hard like granite and need flooded Mia’s body. She hadn’t realized how much she’d been craving him until now. “I need you inside of me, now.”

With a swift move, Wyatt stood and placed Mia on the table.

“You think I haven’t been dying to bury myself in your tight little body since the moment you walked into the hub?” His voice had an edge to it, gruff and desperate, his fingers flexing almost painfully against her flesh. “But this is the *one* red line I asked you not to cross, for your protection as much as mine.”

Mia knew Wyatt was right, but the knowledge faded away under the onslaught of yearning for the feel of his body against hers. She fisted his shirt, locking her ankles behind his back

and engaging every muscle in her body to pull his solid bulk to her.

Wyatt groaned into her mouth, loosening his hold enough for Mia to tip her hips into his, the neediest parts of her feverish for any kind of contact.

Mia gasped when Wyatt's fingers closed around her throat, holding her steady as he pulled away. His eyes were dark, dissolute in a way that made Mia tremble with desire under his touch. Dominance was seeping out of his skin, further intoxicating her, edging her closer to madness.

"Wyatt," Mia panted, clutching his shirt. "*Please.*"

"You really can't help yourself, can you?" It was pointless to deny, and she was too far gone to even try. "Did your sweet pussy miss my cock, Mia?"

"Yes." She caught his gaze, licking her lips and reached out to trace his with her fingers. "And your mouth."

Wyatt's lips stretched into a dangerously smug grin under her fingers. "You know what this means, Prickly Pear?"

Mia had no idea, but she sensed it wasn't something she'd like. "That you're going to break your stupid rule and eat me out right here on your desk?"

"No." He tightened his hold on her throat, the vein in his neck throbbing fast and hard. "It means you lost our bet, so tonight I get to collect my reward *and* punish you for breaking my rule."

A pleasurable shiver ran up Mia's spine. She was sure she'd managed to push him beyond his breaking point last week with her coffee order but was proven wrong. Not that she was disappointed by the result, Wyatt had a natural gift of coaxing her to the edge and then keeping her teetering there

with various methods of delicious torture. It was a sweet form of punishment, but not the one she craved.

“You’re an animal,” she hissed at him.

“You have no idea,” he said with that same cocky grin, stepping away and resuming his seat, rolling a few inches back to allow Mia easy passage. “Go back to work, Mia. I’ll see you tonight.”



MIA WAS *NOT* SITTING and staring at her front door in restless anticipation for Wyatt. No, she was doing perfectly fine. In fact, Wyatt shouldn’t even bother showing up as far as she was concerned.

After all, she hadn’t tidied and taken a long, soothing bath with scented oils just for his benefit. And she *most certainly did not* buy the bottle of wine she was currently drinking from simply because he’d raved about it during their text exchange.

It was after 8 pm, and Mia was sipping from her glass in the dimmed light of her flat. *Alone*. Not that she was bothered.

Her thoughts were cut short by the sound of soft knocking, and she sprang off the couch, almost spilling wine all over herself, rushing to the door and pausing to smooth out her silk robe before opening it.

Mia’s breath stalled at the sight that greeted her. A freshly shaved and showered Wyatt filled her doorway, eyes blazing over the exposed skin of her legs and thighs, delaying on the deep vee revealing the skin between her breasts, before lifting to meet hers.

There was a moment where everything except the crackling energy around them froze, and then Wyatt was devouring her lips, pulling the panels of her robe open and cupping her breasts, backing Mia deeper into the flat until they were in her bathroom.

Mia's ass bumped into the vanity countertop and Wyatt pulled away, uninhibited lust burning in his eyes when he looked at her.

“What am I going to do with you?” He sounded almost irritated, but in a sexy, Wyatt manner that made Mia want to push all his buttons until he unleashed that feral side he kept neatly tucked under his highbrow exterior.

“You can fuck me, for starters,” Mia said with a purposefully challenging tone, and Wyatt bowed his head, skipping her mouth and pressing his lips to her ear.

“We'll get there, Prickly Pear,” he promised with a hush that jolted through Mia's body all the way down to her toes. “But you need to learn a lesson about the importance of following the rules before I give you what you want.”

Wyatt straightened, whipping his shirt over his head and looming over her. A wall of defined dips and ridges that Mia was starting to know as well as she knew her own body.

“Take it off.” He indicated her robe, and Mia let the smooth fabric slide down her arms. “Turn around.” Once again, she complied without argument. “Bend over.”

Mia bit her bottom lip at the last command, lowering herself over the counter and bracing her forearms on the cool marble, watching Wyatt through the mirror.

“Such a sexy ass,” he rumbled in appreciation, caressing the soft skin of her cheeks. “One might say I'm full of

admiration for it.” He delivered a light swat to her right ass cheek, enough to make his intentions clear, before lifting his gaze to meet hers in the mirror. “What would you call that, Mia?”

She knew what he was asking, and she knew what she wanted.

Without hesitation she flashed him a wicked smile, her gaze never wavering from his. “I’d call that a perfectly understandable fixation on a beautiful bottom.”

Wyatt’s eyes gleamed with satisfaction, and before Mia could prepare the flat of his palm landed on her rear again, this time with a resounding crack. Mia yelped at the sudden sting, heat from the point of contact licked over her skin, slicking her thighs. She’d finally pushed him over the edge, she’d won.

“Do you want to know a secret?” he asked, smoothing a hand over her warmed skin, and Mia nodded. “I’ve been back since yesterday evening.”

Mia’s eyes flew open in time to see Wyatt’s palm descend for another whack, crying out when it made contact with her skin. He was sporting a smug grin, and Mia cursed herself for not realizing she’d been played. *Again.*

She may have voluntarily pushed Wyatt over the edge, but he was expecting it, hoping for it, even. And he’d lured her into taking the plunge with him.

## PUNISHING MIA



WYATT

THE SOUND of his palm contacting Mia's ass filled the air. Her cheeks turned a rosy red under his punishing hand, and Wyatt was harder than he could ever remember being.

He'd been fantasizing about spanking Mia for a while, but he hadn't realized how deep the desire flowed until he landed that first smack.

She was perfect, sticking her firm ass up and out, throwing her head back with soft gasps and moans with every crack of his palm. If it were up to Wyatt, he'd keep going, but Mia's whimper indicated she was at the end of her rope.

Wyatt ran his hand over her inner thigh, the slickness greeting him on her skin was enough to drive him mad. "You're dripping wet."

Mia looked at him through the mirror, her eyes heavy with arousal. "Are you ready for your reward, *la bête*?"

Wyatt's gaze wandered down, to where his fingers met Mia's wet need, and he slowly stroked through her folds.

"This isn't my reward, Prickly Pear." He dragged one lathered finger between her cheeks, circling the puckered hole

that had been taunting him since he'd bent Mia over the counter. "That's my reward."

Mia's witchy eyes met his through the mirror, her brows knitted together, and for a moment Wyatt was worried she'd use her safe word.

"You really do have a fixation with my ass, don't you?" His concern turned into the half-grin that got Mia all huffy and puffy with irritation. "Just fuck me already."

Wyatt grabbed the lube and condom from his back pocket, releasing his erection from its denim confinement and sheathing it with rubber before teasing his length through Mia's lips, ratcheting her need. He kept teasing her until she was shuddering and whimpering, begging him, then he notched at her opening, slowly pushing, watching her spread open for him.

"Oi..." Mia's satisfied sigh when he was seated deep shot straight to Wyatt's chest. Knowing she'd missed him, if only on a physical level, exhilarated him. He told himself it was gloating, but that was a lie if he'd ever heard one before. Wyatt knew his satisfaction stemmed from his own longing being reciprocated.

It was a dangerous place to go to, mutual feelings and such nonsense that Wyatt knew could never exist between him and Mia. The only mutuality they had was a desire fueled by varying levels of disdain, depending on the time of the day and if Mia had skipped lunch or not.

"You feel good," Wyatt said as he worked deeper into the heaven that was Mia's body.

"More, I need more," Mia begged in a ragged voice, pushing back.

Wyatt set a steady rhythm, one he knew would keep Mia on the brink of an orgasm but not push her over, and flipped open the lube, letting it drizzle down to her crack. She let out a low hiss when the cold gel touched her skin, then moaned when Wyatt spread it over her rosy cheeks and the valley in between.

His fingers gently probed her, teasing the sensitive nerve endings then sliding in, first one, then two.

“Mmm, yes,” Mia mewled with approval when Wyatt started moving his wrist at the same pace as his hips.

“You like that?” he asked, pumping his fingers deeper and scissoring them. Mia’s head lifted, her gaze full of defiance. She wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of answering, but she wasn’t going to lie either. Wyatt admired that about Mia, how she never hid from the truth. That didn’t mean he’d let her off the hook. Wyatt came to an abrupt stop, and Mia’s eyes grew wide, her mouth opening, to protest no doubt, but Wyatt didn’t give her a chance. “I can stay like this all night without moving. Answer me, Mia—do you like it when I play with your ass?”

Mia glared at him through the mirror, her irises a deep purple flame that threatened to burn him, but he held his ground.

“Answer...” he slightly shifted his fingers, “...me.”

Mia clenched her jaw, so Wyatt inserted a third digit, pressing them deep and wide, causing Mia to hiss with pleasure.

“Answer.”

“Yes,” she breathed out in defeat. “I like it.”



Wyatt smirked at her livid reflection, picking up his methodical thrusts, hips starting to move faster, angling to reach her sweet spots.

It didn't take long for Mia's eyes to grow unfocused, her inner walls gripping him forcefully as she climaxed with guttural cries. Wyatt gritted his teeth as she tried to pull him over with her. He had other plans, and he was a man who saw his plans through, even in the face of sweet temptation.

Pulling out, Wyatt brought his cock to Mia's rim, rubbing the tip over it before aligning and slowly pushing the head in.

Wyatt braced one hand on Mia's hip and smoothed the other up her spine, over her tattoo, weaving his fingers into her short hair, tugging her head up and locking eyes with her through the mirror.

“Gardez vos yeux sur moi, ma figue de Barbarie.”

Mia's jaw dropped and her eyes grew wide as she gaped at Wyatt. “You speak French?”

And there was his real reward. He could fuck Mia six ways to Sunday and it wouldn't give him the same satisfaction he got from that flicker of guilt that shadowed her features, evidence that she felt something other than loathing for him.

“Oui, Mia.” He fastened his palm on her hip and sunk deep into her ass, a cry ripping from her heaving chest as she struggled to accommodate him. Wyatt waited patiently until the tension dissipated from Mia's body before pulling back.

“I understood every insult...” pound. “...every hateful word...” pound. “...every bit of venom you spit at me.” pound.

Mia arched her back in an attempt to match his movements, her expression that of pure pleasure as Wyatt

slammed into her. The globes of her ass were a tenderized pink, and Wyatt couldn't resist bringing his palm down hard, the sound of her gasp was the only thing louder than the spank.

“Putain de merde,” Mia fumed at his reflection, and Wyatt landed another strike. “Connard.” Crack. “Branler.” She was provoking him, swearing with a fiery rage though she knew Wyatt would punish her for every ill-spoken word. “Tas de merde. Fils de pute...”

Mia was moaning her curses, practically begging him to keep spanking her while he pounded her ass, and Wyatt lost track of the insults. His fingers were curled tightly in her hair, their eyes locked in the mirror. *Definitely a witch*, and Wyatt was hexed.

Returning his hand to her waist, Wyatt picked up his pace. Mia's eyes glazed over, her gaze seemed almost broken from the overload of pleasure.

“Fuck, Mia, the look on your face.” She was beautiful. So receptive and responsive. Utterly perfect in the way her entire body tightened around him when she came with a desperate cry of his name.

Wyatt let go of Mia's hair and she sagged with her forehead against her arms. He took hold of her hips with both hands, thundering towards his own climax, fingers digging into Mia's flesh and undoubtedly leaving a mark.

He'd lost his rhythm, his control, his very grasp on reality, his entire body shaking under the force of his release before slumping forward, panting into Mia's damp flesh as the tantalizing scent of her skin mixed with the carnality hanging heavy in the air of her bathroom. It was a blissful haze that Wyatt had missed more than he was willing to admit.

“You really are an animal,” Mia said from underneath him with a murmur.

Wyatt laughed, kissing up Mia’s back as he slid out of her and helped her stand. She leaned into his body and let Wyatt lead her to the shower, where he gently washed her before cleaning himself.

Mia’s left butt cheek was a glowing red while her right was a tender pink, the shape of his fingers starting to form at her hips. Wyatt dried Mia off and, despite her meek grumbles of protest, carried her to bed before going to dig through her freezer.

When he came back, Mia was curled on her side, eyelids drooping and a satisfied smile on her face.

“Brussel sprouts?” Wyatt asked, holding up the only eligible substitute for an icepack he managed to find. “Really?”

Mia scrunched her nose, then laughed. “I think those are from Christmas three years ago.”

Wyatt turned the bag in his hands, finding an alarmingly old expiration date and rolling his eyes before wrapping the makeshift ice pack in a towel and sitting next to Mia on the bed.

“On your stomach,” he ordered, and Mia huffed, snuggling deeper into her position.

“I’m fine like this.”

“Stop being so stubborn, let me take care of you.” Mia just pulled the covers tighter around her body. “How are you going to get any work done if you can’t sit tomorrow?”

It was a trump card. Mia was dedicated to a fault when it came to her work in the hub, and it took her less than three seconds of thinking about it before she threw the duvet aside and turned onto her stomach.

“Thank you,” Wyatt said somewhat sardonically, pressing the compress into her left cheek. Mia cringed but otherwise stayed still. They stayed quiet for a while, lost in their individual thoughts before Wyatt decided to share his. “I wasn’t expecting you to enjoy the spanking that much.”

“Sorry to disappoint.”

“Nothing about that was disappointing.” Wyatt repositioned the compress, glad to see the redness of Mia’s skin had lessened. “Ton petit cul serré était incroyable.”

Mia gaped at him, though she was smiling in amusement. “That is terribly crude.”

“That’s rich coming from someone who was practically begging me to spank her ass raw less than five minutes ago.” Wyatt lay next to her, leaning on his arm. “Not to mention the terribly crude names you’ve been calling me over the past few weeks. You don’t get to act all prim and proper all of a sudden just because I said fucking your tight little ass feels incredible.”

Mia scrunched her nose. “That sounded much better in French.”

“Everything sounds better in French.” Wyatt laughed, dipping his head to press a soft kiss on her lips. “More aftercare or enough?”

“Enough, I’m tired.”

“Okay, Prickly Pear.” He kissed her again before placing the packet on the nightstand and turning off the lights.

Mia immediately snuggled into him, breathing a sigh of relief, and in a matter of minutes her breathing turned shallow and steady. Wyatt was just as spent, but the exhaustion wasn't enough to bring sleep to his doorstep.

His thoughts were racing, all the things that were easily pushed aside during intercourse rushing to the forefront of his mind. He'd missed her. Not just the sex, but everything they shared in and out of bed. The willowy woman sleeping soundly next to him had somehow become an integral part of his life, an inevitability. And she still hated him.

Wyatt was in trouble.

## RIGHT ALL ALONG



WYATT

WYATT SUPPRESSED a grin at the audible gasps and awe-filled sounds coming from the small group of undergrads that had followed Mia into the hub.

His eyes met Mia's and they exchanged an amused glance as she led the half-dozen prospective future DPhil students to the common area, ushering them to the sofas that were pre-arranged in a semi-circle.

Once they were seated, Mia came to stand next to Wyatt.

“Welcome to the Social Genomics Science hub,” she started, turning to look at Wyatt with a professionally amicable smile. “This is Doctor Wyatt Jenkins, head of the hub, and he'll answer some of your questions before you continue the tour with one of our DPhil researchers.”

“Thank you, Doctor Bissonnette.” Wyatt returned her courteous smile and nodded when she pulled out her vibrating phone and signed that she had to take the call. It was an act they'd perfected since getting involved, being mildly polite towards one another while on campus.

The pretense was a huge turn-on. By the time they'd get home they had an entire day of buildup burning through their

veins. Even now, *even* while he was telling the grads about the future of sociogenomics and the opportunities it presented in helping underprivileged and underrepresented groups, the unanswered itch to touch Mia was prickling at his fingertips.

Denial *was* one of Wyatt's favorite games, after all, and practicing his self-restraint under conditions of extreme temptation was proving the best version of denial he'd ever experienced. The fact that Mia made a point of pushing all his buttons made it all the better.

"And those are just a few examples of the research we conduct at the hub," Wyatt concluded his well-rehearsed speech, gesturing at the small group of wide-eyed post-teens. "Any questions?"

A multitude of hands shot up, and Wyatt pointed at a girl with big, round glasses and dark hair.

"Are you *really* Professor Brian Jenkins' son?" The entire room hushed at her question, staring at him expectantly. Wyatt felt burning heat rise from his chest and spread through his limbs.

He forced a smile, tucking his hands into his pockets. "I am."

Another hand, this time a boy who didn't wait for Wyatt to give him the go-ahead. "Are you planning any joint projects with him?"

"Social genomics isn't really his field of choice," Wyatt answered with entirely fake amusement. "You'd know that if you'd read his research."

People around the boy snickered as he turned beet red and looked away.

“How has he influenced *your* choice of field, Doctor Jenkins?” a different boy asked, which Wyatt guessed was a fair question.

“My father always instilled the notion that we should use science to change the world for the better. Social genomics is where I felt I could have the largest contribution in that aspect.” There was a murmur of approval from the small crowd. “Ask me how.”

Even more hands than before were raised, and although he was apprehensive, the rest of the questions were on-point to the tour. Wyatt made a few notes on the students who showed most potential before giving Giles the signal to cut him loose.

“Thank you for those wonderful questions,” Giles said with a bright smile, coming to stand next to Wyatt. “I’m Ron Giles, the most promising DPhil here in the hub.” There was a collective chuckle. “I’ll be taking you on a short tour of the labs and answer all the questions you were too scared to ask the bosses.”

This time everyone laughed loudly, a spring in their step as they followed Giles, allowing Wyatt to slip away to Mia’s office.

He could hear Mia speaking French through the partially open door. Her tone was almost business-like though he detected a strained edge to it. It was the first time he’d heard Mia speak fluently in her mother-tongue. Even when he addressed her in French, she’d answer in English. Wyatt was even more curious about the reason than before.

He knocked on the door and walked in, closing it behind him. Mia shot him a wary gaze from her seat on the couch and wrapped up her call.



“That went well,” Mia said, as Wyatt came to sit on the couch next to her.

“For the most part,” Wyatt agreed. “Who were you speaking to?”

“Why is that your business?”

“It isn’t.” Wyatt shrugged. “I’m just curious since I’ve never heard you use French unless it was to swear, mostly at me.”

“I was speaking to my mother,” Mia answered with a wry tone, signaling the subject was not open for discussion. “What part of the tour didn’t go well?”

“The questions.” Wyatt grimaced. “They seemed more interested in my dad than the hub until I managed to steer them back to the subject.”

“And it bothered you, when they asked about your father?” Wyatt nodded. “Why? You must be used to it by now, and they meant no malice.”

“I refuse to get used to it and I’m aware that it isn’t done with bad intentions.” Wyatt fixed Mia with a pointed gaze. “Most of the time.”

Mia laughed softly, her eyes shining with amusement. “Are you fishing for an apology?”

“Why? Will I get one?” Wyatt matched Mia’s teasing tone. He wasn’t hopeful, though an apology would have been nice.

“I think you know the answer to that question, Doctor Jenkins.”

“I really am too smart for my own good,” Wyatt said with a grin, and Mia lifted an eyebrow. “No snarky comeback?” he

asked, and Mia pulled a single shoulder. “Oh, you want something.”

“What makes you think that?” Mia asked, but her expression showed he had guessed correctly.

“You’re being nice.”

“I can be nice!”

“Mia,” Wyatt warned with a shake of his head before leaning close to her. “Qu’est-ce que tu veux, ma Figue de Barbarie?”

“Your mouth.” Mia’s fingers traced his lips and Wyatt’s eyes fluttered shut with a soft groan. “And your tongue. All over me, inside of me.”

Wyatt kissed the tips of her fingers. “We’ll see how the rest of the day goes.”

He was full of it. Wyatt would do anything Mia asked of him, especially when she was looking at him the way she was right now, with her witchy gaze full of need.

“I can be nice for a few more hours,” she said with a sly smile, finger lingering on his lips as she stood. “I’m going to get something to eat. You want anything?”

“No, thank you.” Wyatt loved the feel of her fingertips brushing over him as he spoke. He loved the way things were between them now, still full of fire but not so much animosity.

He wasn’t delusional, he knew Mia wasn’t falling for him the way he was for her. She was adamant in her refusal to talk about anything personal and reminded him often that she still wanted his job, but he dared to believe she didn’t loathe him to the depths she had when he had only arrived at Oxford a couple of months ago.

Wyatt took what he could, fully aware that he was setting himself up for a world of pain. But that was in the distant future. For now, he allowed himself to enjoy the sight of Mia sauntering in front of him as they exited her office without dwelling on the repercussions.

A few minutes later, Wyatt was in his own office, engrossed in answering emails when yelling pierced through his closed door, causing him to jump out of his chair and bolt to the common area. People were starting to gather with alarm and curiosity in their stares.

“Why did you move it?” Wyatt recognized Amika’s panicked voice coming from the clinical applications lab. He sprinted there, pushing people aside and away from the door, shutting it in the face of the onlookers to try to provide a semblance of privacy before turning to take in the scene in front of him.

One of the undergrads that had joined them earlier that week was standing, seemingly shell shocked with her mouth gaping as she stared at Amika who was screaming at the open door of a laboratory refrigerator.

“Carissa, what happened?” The undergrad turned to Wyatt, but just kept gaping. “Carissa.”

His commanding tone must have penetrated, because Carissa started sobbing, telling him she was only doing as she was told, and now Wyatt had two hysterical scientists to deal with.

Deciding Amika was the priority, he went to stand beside her.

“Amika?” he said her name tentatively. “Can you tell me what happened?”

“She moved it, the tray.” Amika pointed at the blue tray with her samples. “It was in the front right corner on the second level, and now it’s in the back right corner on the third.”

“Okay, can we move it back?”

“I don’t know how long it’s been there, it changes everything, all my variables, my baseline.”

Wyatt was thoroughly confused. “These are state-of-the-art refrigerators, Amika. I assure you, your experiment hasn’t been compromised because of its location in the fridge.”

Apparently, that was *not* the right thing to say.

Amika turned a deep shade of red, her eyes livid as she fixed her gaze on him, seemingly ready to unleash her fury.

“Oh, no, your tray.” Mia’s voice seemed to immediately change the atmosphere. Wyatt hadn’t even noticed her walking in on the scene, and he didn’t recognize that soft and sympathetic tone, but it worked like a charm.

Amika immediately deflated. “What am I going to do, Mia?”

“Do you have the baseline data and last recorded data from your samples?” Mia asked in that same gentle voice, and Amika nodded. “Well, how about you take Carissa and the two of you run the samples through the spectro, run some labs, compare it to what you have and make sure nothing’s changed?”

“Yes.” Amika nodded again, turning to look at Carissa, her eyes growing large when she saw the tears still streaming down Carissa’s face. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“I’m sorry I moved your tray,” Carissa answered, sniffing.

“You didn’t know,” Mia assured Carissa, patting her on the arm. Wyatt noted she hadn’t touched Amika to offer comfort. “Go clean up and come back to help Amika, okay?”

Carissa nodded and turned to leave, squeaking in alarm when the door slid open and she was met with a sea of curious eyes.

“Back to work,” Wyatt barked at the onlookers, who scurried away in a slight panic. Wyatt had yet to yell or scold anyone since he arrived. He didn’t like doing so now.

“My apologies, Doctor Jenkins,” Amika said, meeting his gaze to show her sincerity. “I like things a certain way and sometimes don’t react well when they aren’t how I need them to be.”

“No, Amika, I’m the one who owes you an apology.” He tucked his hands into his pockets, looking over Amika’s shoulder at Mia. “I should have known how to handle the situation better.” Amika opened her mouth to respond, but Wyatt needed to get out of there, fast. “I assure you, you did nothing wrong. I’ll let you get to your testing.”

Amika nodded and Wyatt hurried away, ignoring the clicking sound of Mia’s heels following him.

“Wyatt,” Mia said once the door to his office closed behind her.

“No, don’t.” He lifted a finger in her direction before pulling his hand back and raking his fingers through his hair. “I know what you’re going to say, but please, don’t.”

“What is it you think I’m going to say?”

“That you were right. That you should be the one running this hub and I’m only here because my *dad’s* name helps get funds.” Wyatt felt the weight on his chest grow heavier with every word. “I can’t do what you do, I don’t know the people who work for me the way you do. Jesus, Mia, I’ve been fucking you for over a month and I wouldn’t know what to do if you had a meltdown like that. What am I even doing here?”

Wyatt let out a sharp exhale, willing himself to calm down, reason away the self-doubt gnawing at his insides.

“Are you done?” Mia asked in a calm voice, waiting for Wyatt to nod. “I wasn’t going to say any of that.”

“But you were *thinking* it.”

“Since when do you care what I think about you?” Wyatt snorted. *If only Mia knew how much he cared.*

“Never mind.” Wyatt shook his head, rounding his desk and plopping down in his chair. “I’m fine.”

“Bullshit,” Mia said, following him and straddling his lap. “You’re frustrated because you can’t manage your underlings. You’re a control freak who lost control of his kingdom today.” Mia pressed her breasts against his chest, cupping his jaw. “Do you need to feel powerful over a subordinate, *Doctor Jenkins?*”

Wyatt knew Mia was only trying to make him feel better, but that knowledge didn’t stop the bile rising from his gut, so he pushed Mia off him and stood.

“Don’t *ever* play that game with me, Mia,” he warned through a clenched jaw before grabbing his satchel and coat, intent on putting as much distance as possible between himself and the hub.

Could this day get any worse?

## THE HUMAN SIDE OF THE BEAST



### MIA

MIA WAS OFFICIALLY WORRIED. Wyatt had stormed out of the hub almost three hours ago and seemed to have disappeared.

At first, she figured he'd cool off and come back, but after an hour she realized he wasn't planning on returning to the hub.

She went to the campus café, to his flat, to her own, then circled back to the hub. Wyatt was nowhere to be found.

There was only one place left, the one place Mia was hoping *not* to find Wyatt at barely 4pm. Of course, that's exactly where she found him when she pushed the doors of the dimly lit pub open, sitting on the bar and nursing a lowball of clear liquid.

"Gin on the rocks before happy hour, Doctor Jenkins?" Mia said as she took the stool next to him. "Seems out of character."

Wyatt lifted the glass to his lips, pausing for a moment then tilting his head back and emptying it with one gulp, coughing before speaking in a rough voice. "Why'd you come here, Mia?"

She turned the question in her head a few times, not sure how to answer. She knew she had to find Wyatt but was stumped on the *why*.

“Does it matter?” she finally asked. “I’m here, so you can either talk to me or we can sit in brooding silence while you drown yourself in booze.”

“Well, when you put it that way...” Wyatt signaled the bartender for a refill.

“Fine.” Mia threw her hands in the air. “I’ll just point out that if you didn’t want me to find you, you wouldn’t have chosen the *one pub* you never shut up about.”

“I’ve finally managed to get you here, haven’t I?” he asked in a sour tone.

He had been badgering her to have a drink with him at this pub for a while, promising her no one they knew would be there, that they would have privacy in a sexy atmosphere with good alcohol and even better food. There was something sultry in the ambiance, Mia gave him that, but staying indoors was safe, defined.

“Honestly? I was curious why you’d be so upset about people admiring your picture-perfect family.”

Wyatt chuckled, a dark and gruff sort of laughter, before looking at her. His eyes were full of pain and resignation, something Mia wasn’t accustomed to. She’d seen him serious, angry, excited, full of fiery passion, but never vulnerable.

“Just because we’re photogenic doesn’t mean we’re perfect.” He thanked the bartender who placed his drink in front of him. “And that wasn’t what I was upset about.”

Wyatt turned his face away from her and lifted his drink.



“Just...” Mia huffed and covered the top of his glass with her palm before Wyatt could get any more alcohol into his system. “Would you stop with this ridiculous mantrum and talk to me?” Wyatt scowled at her disruptive hand. “If it’s about the hub, it’s as much my business as yours, we can figure it out together.”

Wyatt produced a derisive sort of sound, between a snort and a huff, but lowered his drink back to the bar.

There were a few moments of silence where he twisted the lowball between his fingers before letting out a sigh.

“Did you know my dad is adopted?” he asked without looking up at her.

“He talked about it in his Nobel prize acceptance speech,” Mia answered, wondering if he was still caught up in his ego-driven annoyance over the undergrads asking about his father.

“Right.” Wyatt leaned against the bar, rubbing his palm over his face. He looked tired. “That speech was one of the main reasons I chose social genomics.”

“I thought it was the comic books.”

“The comics sparked my imagination, but that could have gone a million different directions.” Wyatt spun his stool to face Mia, reaching out to sweep the strands of hair that escaped her short ponytail away from her forehead. “Have you ever heard of Professor Sebastian Duke?”

“No.” Mia was transfixed by the sadness in Wyatt’s eyes as his gaze roamed her face. She got the sense he was asking her for something, but she couldn’t pinpoint what.

“He was a researcher based in the Philippines, obsessed with the genius gene,” Wyatt explained, and Mia nodded, a

zing of familiarity tingling at her cortex. “He’s also my biological grandfather.”

“Oh, it was an open adoption?” Mia asked, and Wyatt shook his head.

“More like, he dumped my dad at his college roommate’s doorstep and fled the country before anyone had the chance to strip him of his academic decree.”

“That’s dreadful.” Mia reached out and caressed Wyatt’s jaw. “What about your biological grandmother?”

“Died during his birth,” Wyatt answered, leaning into her touch. “She’d barely celebrated her nineteenth birthday when it happened, and a week later Sebastian left my dad with my grandparents.”

“She was his student?” Mia asked with alarm.

“Handpicked as his *‘special assistant’*, a position he tailored especially for fresh college girls he deemed fit for his *‘experiment’*.” Wyatt’s expression mirrored Mia’s nausea. “After what happened, the university launched an investigation and found out he’d been planning on using his position to seduce and try to impregnate young students as part of his research on hereditary genius IQ.” Wyatt rubbed a hand over his face with a sigh. “He was long gone by then and they never managed to make anything stick.”

The vague recognition turned into realization. Mia had heard this story before in different variations. It was almost an urban legend in the world of genetics, the professor who dabbled in questionable practices to prove genius was a dominant gene, including methods such as grooming and breeding young students.

“So, they just let him go?” Wyatt nodded. “Let me guess, he kept on with his *‘experiment’* in the new faculty he joined?”

“Yes, only, the next time he knocked up a student, she was from a strong family. They weren’t happy with the situation.” Wyatt quickly grabbed his gin and took a drink, eyeing Mia who simply reached out and downed what was left of the clear, now watered down, liquid.

“Was he finally held accountable?”

“God, no.” Wyatt’s face twisted in disgust. “He claimed *true love* and married her, they have two kids.”

“What a bastard.” Mia had met her fair share of men like that in her ten years in the academy, and she couldn’t stand them. Though they were mostly looking for a good time with a young girl, not an incubator.

“My dad always said that even if his IQ came from the Duke gene pool, it was the Jenkins in him that made him into the man he is today.”

“Nature versus nurture,” Mia realized with a sad smile.

“He was always so scared of turning out like *him*.” Mia didn’t need to ask which *him* Wyatt was referring to.

“And you carry the weight of that fear with you?” Mia guessed, and Wyatt shrugged, turning his gaze away from her. “Is that why you stormed away? Because I suggested you hold some sort of power position over me?”

“I do, though, don’t I?” he said quietly, tapping the bar with one finger. “For all intents and purposes—I’m your boss.”

“It was a silly game, Wyatt. I thought you’d enjoy it, that it would speak to your dominant side.” Mia couldn’t fathom why

she'd care enough to cheer Wyatt up in the first place, or why she was trying so hard to get him to talk to her now.

"There's a difference between dominance and superiority," Wyatt said, lifting his gaze and locking it onto hers, his russet eyes intense and full of sincere emotion. "I never wanted to be your superior, Mia, I wanted to be your equal."

"Oh, Wyatt, we were never equals." She placed her hand over his. "I was always better than you."

Wyatt burst into loud laughter. "You're dreadful."

"But in a sexy, *I want to take you home and spank your impertinent ass*, kind of way?" Mia teased, glad she could pull him out of his gloom.

Wyatt caught Mia's hand and tugged her off her stool to stand between his knees, sliding his free hand to her nape and sealing his lips over hers.

His kiss was slow and soft, full of emotion more than passion, and against her better judgment, Mia got lost in it.

"Thank you," Wyatt said, gently rubbing his lips against hers.

"Don't thank me just yet, *la bête*." Mia ran her hand through his unruly mass of hair. "You've just told me a very personal story, do you know what that means?"

Wyatt's eyes lit up and his lips tugged into a sexy half-grin. "Tell me."

"You've broken my *one* rule." Mia's arms circled Wyatt's neck as she pressed her torso against his. "And since I was extra nice to you today, it means tonight I get to collect my reward *and* punish you."

“What kind of punishment are we talking about?” Wyatt asked in a low, husky voice, fingers closing over her hips.

“The worst kind for a control freak brute like you,” she whispered in a near moan, Wyatt’s fingers flexing against her body possessively. “Tonight, you’re mine to do with as I please, Doctor Jenkins.”

## A MAN WHO LIKES SHOPPING



**MIA**

MIA LAUGHED at the erratic noises coming from Wyatt's bedroom. It never ceased to amuse her, Wyatt getting hastily dressed to make it to the hub in the morning.

She was already showered, dressed, made up, fed, and on her second coffee. Any other day she'd have been at the lab by now, but there was something irresistible about this version of Wyatt that compelled her to stay.

"Damn it, damn it, damn it." Wyatt was running around the living room, stuffing his laptop into his satchel, then doing a three-sixty to scan for anything he may have forgotten.

"You are aware you'll still be plenty early to work, right?" Mia asked with an amused smile from her perch on the breakfast bar.

Wyatt spun to her with a scowl, his messy hair even rowdier than usual and one tail of his dress shirt untucked. He looked almost boyish, all disheveled and scattered like that.

"Early in layman terms, late in Mia terms," he answered with a raised eyebrow, properly tucking his shirt into his slacks.

Mia laughed and hopped off her chair, going to pour coffee into Wyatt's to-go mug. No matter how hard he tried, mornings always got the better of Wyatt. It was the one aspect of his life he seemed unable to curate into the perfectly polished display he so zealously guarded, a tiny part of Wyatt that was all-too human and for her eyes only.

Mia felt Wyatt's heat at her back, his arm circling her waist and his warm breath at her ear. "Am I having you for dinner tonight?"

"Maybe dessert," Mia answered, angling her head to give Wyatt room to nuzzle her neck. "I need to go buy a dress for the banquet next week."

"Sounds fun." Mia snorted. "No really, I like shopping."

"Of course you do." Mia turned to face Wyatt, arms circling his neck. "There are better lies to tell to get on my good side."

"I don't lie."

"Everybody lies," Mia said, inexplicably annoyed at Wyatt's ridiculous assertion. "You've never faked your parent's signature for school? Taken a sick day even when you weren't sick?"

Wyatt's lips pursed tight, then he rolled his eyes with a sigh. "Okay, fine, I've told *white* lies. Never faked my parent's signature," he hurried to clarify. "But I get your point. I *am* telling the truth about liking to shop, though. I used to go with my twin, Kylie, all the time."

"Still..." Mia shrugged, not sure what about the idea of her and Wyatt strolling together down High Street unsettled her so much.

“Plus, we’re going to the banquet together, I need to approve your dress.” Mia pushed a laughing Wyatt away with a scandalized gasp and a slap to his chest.

“Enfoiré!” Mia tried to wriggle out of Wyatt’s hold, but he easily held her in place. “Who said we’re going together, anyway?” She stuck her chin out, giving up the futile struggle. “You don’t have a claim on me just because I let you fuck me.”

Something flashed through Wyatt’s eyes, but he gained control of the emotion too quickly for Mia to decipher the meaning of it.

“No, but since neither of us is romantically involved, it’s expected that we represent the hub as a unified front.”

*Politics.* Mia both hated it and was surprisingly relieved at the handy excuse.

“Fine, we’ll go ball gown shopping after work,” she said with a huff, making a big show of resigning to the logical justification. “Can we leave the house now?”

Wyatt’s grin stretched ear to ear and with a small swat to her bottom, he grabbed his coffee and turned towards the door.

“You’re intolerable,” Mia called after him, quickly rinsing her mug and following Wyatt.

She barely caught up before finding herself in a hard press between Wyatt’s body and the front door, his breath hot against her lips as he spoke.

“Thank goodness for my intolerability,” he said in a low voice before nipping at her lower lip. “It’s why we end up spending every weeknight in my bed and every weekend in yours.”



“We only spend weeknights in *your* bed because your flat is closer to uni.” Wyatt hummed something of an affirmation before claiming her mouth, deep and hot. “You’re going to make me late.”

“I’m going to make you come,” Wyatt rumbled against her skin, already undoing her trousers.

Mia considered arguing even though she knew she’d cave to Wyatt’s seduction but realized it would cost them valuable time and the risk of being seen leaving his apartment together early in the morning.

She pushed down her trousers and underwear while Wyatt dropped his own and rolled on a condom, ducking between her legs and lifting her up against the door with her trousers around her ankles and her knees spread wide. His fingers teased her from behind, readying her.

Mia gasped when Wyatt entered her with a slow stretch, rocking his hips to the sound of their shortening breaths.

“Deeper,” she said in a quiet moan, and Wyatt swallowed the shuddery breath leaving her lips as he acquiesced. “Harder.” They were groaning and gasping, the door rattling at Mia’s back with every pound. “Faster,” she begged, a high-pitched pant, clutching onto Wyatt’s shoulders as her climax rolled over her, followed by Wyatt.

“Worth being late for,” Wyatt declared with a half-grin, gently untangling their bodies.

Mia huffed and shook her head, pulling herself back together and shooting Wyatt a raised eyebrow challenge when she turned to leave the house, leaving him there to clean up.

“I’ll see you at work, Doctor Jenkins.”

Wyatt's laughter followed her out, and Mia couldn't help but smile.



WYATT

"I'M TELLING YOU, the golden dress was stunning on you," Wyatt said, coming to a halt and spinning to face Mia, finger pointing at the general direction of Mia's face. "The color brings out the purple in your eyes."

"That cut was unseemly," Mia answered with a revolted expression.

"Unseemly?" Wyatt laughed, pulling Mia after him into the next store and holding the door open for her. "Are you going to tell me how I *vex* you next?"

"Well, you do."

"And I quite enjoy it." Wyatt winked before turning to the dresses on display. "Alright, let's find you a *seemly* dress, Doctor Bissonnette."

"Same as last time?" Mia asked, rolling her shoulders and neck.

"Five minutes, three dresses each," Wyatt affirmed the rules of the challenge. "Starting... now!"

They sprinted in different directions, each trying to locate the perfect dress for Mia. It was a silly competition he often played with Kylie back home, but it was an entirely different matter to engage in such a game with Mia.

It was a game based on honesty, on having full trust that the person in front of you will give their candid opinion even

under the threat of losing. So, when Mia didn't hesitate to play, he had a small but significant affirmation that she trusted him as well.

An excited "Ha!" from an obscure part of the store snapped him out of his over-romanticized thoughts. Mia had found a dress she deemed perfect. She was in it for the win, not for the show of confidence, a cruel reminder to Wyatt that she still viewed their relationship as a fleeting pastime and he was bound to get his heart broken. Still, that didn't mean he'd let Mia best him.

With a few choice superlatives, Wyatt hurried to look through the available garments, when a soft reflection of the lights shimmered at the corner of his eye. He rushed to the source of it, grinning when he saw the beckoning gown.

Taking two additional random dresses, Wyatt returned to the starting point where Mia was waiting with a grin of her own.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Let's do this."

Wyatt followed Mia as far as he could before she disappeared into the fitting rooms with her six dresses. One after the other she promenaded the various choices. The first four were clearly the least successful of the pile, which meant Mia was underwhelming him to enhance the effect of her dress of choice.

*Smart.* Not that it came as a surprise, but it was a pleasant reminder of one of Mia's most appealing traits. It also meant she had known which dress was *his* preferred, a sure sign she was noticing things about him, bothering to learn him and his character.

“Ready?” Mia’s voice once again cut his wishful thinking short.

“Just get out here, no need to over dramatize the whole thing.” Wyatt was smiling, trying to convey an air of banter, but his sensibility was at war with his heart, and the former was building tension in his chest that was splintering the enjoyment of the moment.

“You’re no fun,” Mia said with a huff, swaying out through the velvet curtains in a burgundy red dress that hugged all her slender curves with shimmering strands running through it.

“Oh, wow.” She was breathtaking, heartachingly beautiful.

“The winner?” Mia asked with a triumphant grin.

“You still have one more to try on,” Wyatt answered with a wave of his hand in the general direction of the dressing room.

Mia shrugged, returning to the dressing room with a twinkle of victory in her eyes, but Wyatt knew he still had a fighting chance. When Mia exited with the golden silk gown caressing her body with every step and a stunned expression, Wyatt knew he had won.

He stood from the cushioned stool and walked behind Mia, his fingers trailing down her arms as their eyes met through the mirror.

“You don’t require elaborate or shiny, ma Figue de Barberie,” he whispered in her ear, inhaling her scent. “You need a dress that allows your beauty to shine uninterrupted.” Mia’s breath left her body with a shuddery exhale, her eyes fluttering shut as Wyatt’s fingers feathered up to her neck and down her exposed back, tracing the lattice of fabric adorning her shoulder blades. “You’re so beautiful, Mia.”

“Are you trying to convince me that your dress is the *chosen one*?” Mia asked with a quirk of her lips.

“You were convinced before you came out here,” Wyatt answered with a smirk. “But I do adore how you never make it easy for me to compliment you.”

“One mustn’t take flattery at face value until one is sure such flattery is made with the purest of intentions.”

Wyatt laughed. “You need to stop reading so much Julia Quinn.”

“Never.” Mia gasped, spinning to glare at Wyatt in horror with her hand on her chest. “For you to even suggest such a scandalous thing...”

“You’re ridiculous,” Wyatt shook his head with a chuckle before bending down to kiss Mia softly. “Go change, I’m hungry.”

“Fine.” Mia sighed. “In the meantime, think about your prize.”

“I’m not sure you’re up for the prize I have in mind.” Wyatt’s words were spoken with sexual innuendo, but his thoughts were anywhere but on sex. Mia wiggled her eyebrows as she backed up into the dressing rooms. She wouldn’t have been so amused or accommodating had she known that the only prize Wyatt was vying for was her heart.

## BELL OF THE BALL



**MIA**

MIA WASN'T new to the world of lavish banquets.

While never a member of the upper milieu in terms of title, her family's economic status, combined with her mother's social ambitions, had ensured her initiation into the circle of the Parisian one-percentile at an early age.

It was always her mother's hope that Mia would marry a French man of title, thus checking the last box that would ensure the family's status within the country's elite. Of course, Mia's father had savagely ripped those plans to shreds, *as well as Mia's heart and soul in the process*, but her mother was persistent, if not anything else.

Her experience notwithstanding, she still felt a flutter of excitement at the thought of entering Oxford's grand banquet hall on Wyatt's arm. He'd insisted they meet at the venue, which struck her as odd until she'd stepped out to the candlelit path and found him waiting for her there, a handkerchief of the same golden silk of her dress folded to perfection in his dress jacket and a large jewel box in the hand not folded behind his back.

"Is that a necklace?" Mia asked, touching the simple pendant on her neck.

“No.” Wyatt smiled, opening the box to reveal a delicate golden tiara. “May I?”

Mia willed the sarcastic reply to come but Wyatt’s soft gaze, his hope-filled voice, the thoughtful and beautiful gift with a wink to her affinity for historical romances all dulled her jaded sense of self-preservation away, and she simply nodded.

With a relieved smile, Wyatt plucked the tiara out of the box and placed it on her head, taking great care not to ruin her hairdo.

“Perfect?” Mia asked with a little twirl, and Wyatt caught her around the waist, pulling her close.

“Third in rank of perfection,” he answered, grazing her cheek with his thumb. “Preceded only by you in a lab coat, though there’s no competition to first place.”

“Which is?”

“Birthday suit,” Wyatt said with his devilish half-grin, and Mia couldn’t stop the bubbling laughter.

“You are *too* predictable.” She straightened his immaculate collar before sliding out of his arms and to his side. “Shall we?”

Wyatt offered his arm and Mia took it, the flutters in her stomach signifying what she deemed an entirely unnecessary yet absolutely undeniable excitement.

Yes, Mia had been to her fair share of banquets and balls in her twenty-eight years, yet walking into the grand hall tonight, she was just as exhilarated at the prospect of a magical evening like she only ever was as a child.

There was only one reason, one variable that had changed since she'd become disillusioned some ten years ago.

"My, my, aren't you two a sight," Herbert said with a beaming smile as he approached them with open arms, giving Mia's arm a brief fatherly squeeze. "Gorgeous."

"Thank you, Herbert." Mia bowed her head slightly. It wasn't customary to hug at these events, no matter how close you were to the person in front of you.

"Professor Flinch." Wyatt took Herbert's hand with a firm shake.

"Doctor Jenkins, I have been hearing wonderful things about your work at the hub over the past few months."

"That's good to know," Wyatt said with a polite smile, though warmer than what he usually mustered for other faculty members.

Herbert seemed to want to say something else, a glint of mischief in his eyes, but someone called his name.

"I must go and charm the higher ranks." Herbert sighed. "If you'll excuse me."

Both Mia and Wyatt nodded. Once Herbert was out of earshot, Wyatt bent down to Mia's ear. "From the praises I gather he still hasn't asked *your* opinion of me."

"Your deduction skills are second to none, Doctor Jenkins," Mia answered with a sly smile. "Come, let's fulfill our *duties*."

Despite his protesting groan, Wyatt dutifully followed Mia to a group of professors not far away from them. By the time they reached the huddle of loudly conversing academics, Wyatt was fully in character.



They spent the next hour or so doing their rounds with the department and university heads, seamlessly completing each other's sentences in their pitch in favor of their fledgling hub. They were a good team, despite their differences, since they both wanted to ensure the hub's success.

Mia couldn't deny working with Wyatt was much more pleasant than working against him.

"If it isn't our department's very own power couple," someone said from behind them. It was a voice Mia recognized well, and she fought to keep the disgust from showing on her face.

"Professor Durant, I hadn't realized you were back from France already," Mia said in as neutrally ambient a tone as she could muster towards the wiry man with the receding hairline and toothy grin. Wyatt shot her a questioning glance, which Mia ignored.

"My business there was concluded," Durant chuckled, winking at her. Mia resisted the urge to cringe. Durant's 'business' included a small collection of mistresses, one of them Mia's mother. Though in the case of Marie Bissonnette, she was the one using Durant to spy on Mia. Durant was fully aware of this fact and didn't bother with being subtle when hinting at his voracious encounters with her mother and projecting them onto Mia.

He was a man with little regard for women and even less refinement when speaking of them.

"Doctor Wyatt Jenkins," Wyatt said, stepping between them and sticking out his hand for a shake. "A pleasure to meet you, Professor Durant."

“Ah, the man of the hour.” Durant grabbed Wyatt’s hand in both of his and shook it vigorously. “Great job securing the Gendry Fund for the hub, I’ve been trying to persuade them to support one of my research projects for years, tough nut to crack,” Durant said with a conspiratorial smirk. “Though, for all my achievements, I’ve yet to be in close relations with a laureate.”

Wyatt tensed, his fists curling at the sides of his body, and Mia was half hoping he’d punch Durant, but the vile man had too much influence within the halls of Oxford and it would bring an end to the hub. To her relief, Wyatt laughed and thumped Durant’s back, albeit slightly harder than required.

Durant opened his mouth, undoubtedly to spew more offensive nonsense.

“I must tell you about my newest research, Professor Durant,” Mia said with a girly enthusiasm she knew would capture Durant’s attention and distract him from asking Wyatt about his father. She emphasized her French accent, aware of Durant’s almost perverse attraction to the drawl. “I’ve been exploring the effect of midlife transformation of socioeconomic status on the appearance of genetically related diseases in the second generation and third. The results have been astounding.”

“Interesting, what is your take on this subject matter, Doctor Jenkins?” Professor Durant hadn’t bothered to shift his interest away from Wyatt, and although she held Durant’s opinion in extremely low esteem, Mia still deflated at the easy dismissal.

It wasn’t Wyatt’s fault. Some pompous professors were, and always would be, prone to dismissing her based on gender alone, Durant more than anyone. But having it happen so

bluntly in front of Wyatt made the experience all the more bitter. However mad Mia was at his appointment in her stead, Wyatt was a good scientist whose professional opinion she held in high regard.

Despite the stabbing feeling, Mia kept her spine straight and plastered on a saccharine smile as she turned to look at Wyatt as if the next words out of his mouth were gospel, only to find his gaze fixed intently on her in a way that made her knees weak and her stomach quiver.

“I think I could recite Doctor Bissonnette’s research log and subsequent results word to word just because you’ll find it easier to accept when said in baritone rather than mezzo, but I’d rather spend that time dancing with the most brilliant and beautiful person in the room.” With that, Wyatt handed his lowball to a gaping Durant and offered Mia his arm.

“Why, yes, I’d love to dance, Doctor Jenkins.” Mia wove her arm through Wyatt’s, letting him lead her to the dancefloor and pull her close, their bodies in an intimate press as they swayed to the music.

“You look ravishing tonight,” Wyatt said with a smile, thumb moving over the small of Mia’s back. Even through the thin layer of silk, his touch was titillating, igniting a swirl of desire in Mia that she no longer had the will to fight.

“Thank you.” Mia was lost in the warmth of Wyatt’s gaze and in the perfect rhythm to which they moved together. “And thank you for not showing me up.”

“Why would I ever do that?”

His words seemed sincere, but Mia was too easily swayed by him to trust her own instincts. “Don’t play games with me, Wyatt, not about this.”

“I would never.” He seemed offended that she’d think otherwise. “I don’t play games with people’s lives and careers, and I don’t play this stupid gender game, I grew up surrounded by women, all of them wildly smarter and more talented than me, my sisters included. I’m the last person in the world to mansplain an intelligent woman like you, *especially* not for the sake of advancing my own career.”

“Tell me about how your sisters surpass you,” Mia said in a teasing voice, though she *was* curious. She’d been avoiding in-depth talks about Wyatt’s family, about anything that wasn’t hub or bed related, but little leaks out of the boundaries she had set were bound to happen considering the amount of time she and Wyatt spent together.

“Well, Kylie is currently teaching history of science, technology, and medicine during the Imperial era at Harvard. She’s also a bestselling historical romance author, and yes, I’ve seen you read her books.” Mia opened her mouth but Wyatt tutted her into silence. “No, I will *not* tell you her pen name.”

“Tease.” Mia pouted. “Though I bet I can convince you.”

She slid her hand over Wyatt’s chest and under his dress coat with a sly smile, and Wyatt shook his head, flashing a sinful grin.

“Not likely, though I admit someone using me to get close to my sister is a novelty.” There was an undertone of resentment to his words, but the seductive smile was firmly back in place before Mia could dwell. “She *did* help me choose your gift.”

Mia’s hand left Wyatt’s shoulder to touch the tiara with a small smile.

“That’s one sister,” Mia said, figuring she wouldn’t get the coveted information from Wyatt here on the dancefloor. “And the other?”

“Iris, she’s almost twenty-two and just completed her masters in neurobiology, the only one to follow dad’s professional footsteps, though her focus is vastly different.” Wyatt’s eyes twinkled when he talked about his siblings, Mia was almost envious at the affection radiating from him. “There’s also Reed, he’s twenty, probably has a higher IQ than all the people in this room combined.”

Mia snorted, quickly covering her mouth with her hand when people turned to look at her curiously.

“I’m serious, that kid is a whole different level of smart,” Wyatt said with an amused smile, twirling Mia and pulling her back to his chest. “What about you?”

“Only child.”

“Makes sense.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Mia’s brow creased and Wyatt broke into a wide grin. “T’es rien qu’un petit connard.”

He pulled her even closer, grin spreading wider. “God, it turns me on when you hate on me in French.”

“You like it when I call you an asshole?” Heat rose through Mia’s entire body at the knowledge of what was coming next. “I have a few more choice words since it seems to turn you on so much.”

Wyatt’s russet eyes darkened, his palm sliding low down her back, coming to rest at the edge of appropriate.

“I liked asshole.” His voice dropped to that low rumble that never failed to set Mia’s insides on fire. “It reminds me

that it's been a while since I had my cock deep in that tight ass of yours.”

“Yes, over a week, how tragic.” Mia rolled her eyes, making a show of trying to disentangle from Wyatt's embrace just to get a rise out of him.

Wyatt easily kept her firmly in his arms, eyes gleaming with a dangerous fire and lips quirking in a half-smirk.

“Now you're just being cheeky,” he said. “Are you in the mood for some punishment tonight, Prickly Pear?”

Mia was in the mood for *self*-punishment. After all, she'd broken her cardinal rule and asked Wyatt about his personal life. The crumbs of information had only proved to stoke her appetite but her plans to get Wyatt out of the way so she could finally claim her spot in the hub hadn't changed.

Mia needed to remember the plan and force herself back on course.

## TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN



### WYATT

WYATT WAS on his knees on the bedroom floor, face buried between Mia's reddened ass cheeks and fingers curling in her pussy, coaxing her closer and closer to the edge despite her attempts to fight the pleasure. Wyatt loved the way Mia resisted the beautiful desire between them and how it cascaded over her when her body finally yielded to him.

Kissing up Mia's back, Wyatt breathed her in. His heart was beating frantically, breath coming in short pants. He was burning for her, aching for the fleeting moments of intimacy she granted him when he was inside of her.

Wyatt banded his arm under Mia's breasts and pulled her onto her knees, back flush against his chest, and entered her wet heat from behind. She wove her fingers through his that were splayed over her ribs, pressing his palm firmer against her flushed skin. Her other hand slid into his hair, holding tight.

Wyatt groaned into Mia's skin. The feeling of her desperate clutch, as if she was attempting to mold them together, the way her body tightened around him every time he pulled back, desperate to keep him deep inside, flooded him with emotions of both the tender and the primal kind.

“Mia,” he breathed out her name like it was his last hold on sanity, his hand not claimed by hers skimming down her hip and pelvic bone, between her legs. With a few strokes of his fingers, Mia unraveled, pulling him over with her.

They stayed like that for a few seconds, wrapped up in each other in a sated stillness save for their ragged breaths. Mia’s hand slid out of Wyatt’s hair, her fingers releasing his. It was almost painful, the sense of separation. Wyatt hurried to the bathroom under the pretense of washing up, needing the distance to gain control of the emotions raging through him, afraid they were written all over his face.

When he returned to the bedroom, Mia was waiting splayed over the covers, her witchy eyes beckoning him to her. Wyatt lay next to Mia and pulled her over his chest, amazed at how delicate she looked nestled there.

“Tu es une telle bête,” Mia fondly whispered her usual insult against his skin, her fingers feathering over his chest and abs while his traced lightly up and down her arm.

“Je suis, ma Figue de Barbarie,” Wyatt agreed, nuzzling her hair and planting a soft kiss on her crown, breathing in her soft pear scent that never failed to calm him.

“Do you miss them?” Mia asked.

“Who?”

“Your family.”

“Uh, yeah, I guess so.” Wyatt didn’t know what to make of Mia’s sudden interest in his family. It was her own rules she was breaking, but Wyatt wasn’t about to miss the opportunity to encourage Mia showing active interest in his life, so he put a pin in his inquisitive thoughts. “I miss them a lot.”

“Who do you miss the most?”



“I don’t know, I miss them each in a different way.” Wyatt took a few moments to think. He’d been so hyper focused on his success in Oxford that he hadn’t taken the time to process leaving his family and the only place he’d ever called home. “My parents have this Sunday morning tradition, where they sit at the breakfast bar and each of us gets time alone to talk with them. No matter how long it takes, no matter how old we are or what we want to talk about. I miss that, you know?”

“Not really,” Mia shrugged, her palm coming to rest on Wyatt’s chest and her ear against his heart. She tried to sound indifferent, but Wyatt detected the sadness tarnishing her words. “And your siblings?”

“Ky and I are exactly the same but somehow total opposites.”

“Two sides of the same coin?” Mia smiled up at him and Wyatt laughed.

“Something like that,” he said. “We can’t seem to stop bickering but god forbid anyone messes with one of us, the other would tear them down.”

“It must be nice, having someone to look out for you like that.” Mia’s words were cutting through him, the pain she tried so hard to mask bleeding through.

“Mia,” Wyatt choked out in a quiet voice, tilting her head up to meet his eyes.

“And Iris?” Mia asked before he had a chance to tell her *he* was there to look out for her, for as long as she’d let him.

Wyatt didn’t push. He sensed this wasn’t the time to reveal his feelings. Mia was just starting to open up to him, too much this soon would scare her away.

“Riri, she’s a tornado–valedictorian, cheerleader, debate team star, sum cum laude in both her BSc and MSc. She had a rough run a few years back, a crazy obsessive ex who stalked her, but she bounced back like a rockstar.” Wyatt scooted down and turned on his side to face Mia. “Ri never ceases to amaze me. And she looks just like our mom, down to a T, it’s insane.”

“Who do you look like?” Mia wondered, pushing strands of Wyatt’s untamable mane out of his face.

“Mom’s hair, only a bit darker, dad’s eyes but brighter. I’m a good mix, I guess, like Ky and Reed, you?”

Mia averted her gaze but Wyatt didn’t miss the flash of heartbreak his question generated. It pained him to realize how deep a cut Mia’s familial life, whatever it may have been, left in her, but he was starting to understand her aversion to attachment.

“And the smarter-than-the-entire-faculty Reed?” Mia asked, putting the focus back on Wyatt. “What’s he like?”

“Well, he’s the only one of us that chose to graduate early, he finished high school just before turning sixteen but decided to take a break and do volunteer work before going to college.”

“That’s admirable.”

“Yeah, he’s somewhere in Bolivia now, doing research. He’s the more amicable Doctor Jenkins.” Wyatt smiled at Mia’s rolling laughter. “I’ll see them again in a few weeks. I’m flying home for my grandmother’s birthday.”

Mia cupped Wyatt’s cheek with a soft smile. “They all sound amazing.”

“They kind of are,” Wyatt agreed, running his fingers through the short silky strands of her platinum hair.

“How *you* turned out to be such a bastard is beyond me.”

“Someone’s not done being cheeky, I see,” Wyatt said with a raised eyebrow, palm smoothing down to Mia’s still rosy ass. “Why are you so intent on getting spanked today, Prickly Pear?”

“Maybe I’m in the mood to feel extra bad,” she answered with a sly smile, pressing her body against Wyatt’s. “Maybe I like the way you fuck me after a good spanking.”

Wyatt molded his mouth over hers in a deep kiss, letting himself get swept away in Mia’s sweet flavor. He’d give her what she wanted, a distraction from all the unpleasant memories their conversation brought up, but her pain settled deep in his chest.

Hours later, when Mia was deep in sleep, his own sleep eluded him.

The idea that Mia wasn’t shutting him out because she hated him, but rather because the emotions she felt for him were so strong they scared her, wasn’t farfetched. Wyatt had seen the brokenness in her eyes, heard the fear in her voice.

Someone, somewhere, had shattered Mia’s heart in a way that caused her to shut herself away from anyone she perceived could hurt her like that again.

It was up to Wyatt to prove to her that he never would.

## IN YOUR EYES



**MIA**

A CHILL RAN THROUGH MIA, waking her up to an empty bed.

She pulled on her robe and wandered out to the living room, finding Wyatt perched on the windowsill in nothing but his slacks, cold night air ruffling through his unruly golden mane.

“Are you alright, mon Bête?” she asked as she made her way to him, accepting his silent invitation to sit in his lap when he stretched out his legs to make room for her.

“Oui, *ma* Figue de Barbarie,” he answered, sporting that infuriatingly smug grin. It took Mia a few seconds to figure out why he was so pleased when it dawned on her that she had called him *mon* bête. *Mine*.

It should have been a disturbing slip of the tongue, but Mia couldn't help but revel at how right it sounded.

Wyatt's thumbs lightly stroked the skin of her thigh. “I couldn't sleep, too many thoughts.”

“What's bothering you?” she asked, shivering as a cool breeze blew over her bare skin.

“Tes yeux.” Wyatt pulled Mia closer, sharing his body warmth.

Mia rested her head on his chest, listening to his steady heartbeat. “Why are my eyes bothering you?”

“You looked so sad when I asked you about your family,” Wyatt said, looking down at her with intense russet eyes.

Mia turned her face down, wrapping her arms around her middle. “Maybe if I had a family like yours, I’d be talking about them too.”

“We aren’t perfect, Mia,” Wyatt said with a sigh. “Come on, you wouldn’t even be here if you hadn’t caught me with that girl in a club storage room. You want to know why I used to prefer random hookups?”

“Because you’re a pig?”

“You’ve got a mouth on you, Prickly Pear.” He kneaded her ass and Mia winced. “It’s how you ended up with a red behind.”

Mia smiled and looked up at Wyatt. “I’m not sorry, but please continue.”

“I used to be a romantic through and through, it’s hard not to be when your role models for relationships have these great love stories.” Wyatt seemed to get lost in his thoughts before looking back at Mia. “Unfortunately, I seemed to attract a specific type of woman and, being a starry-eyed idiot, I kept getting used.”

“How do you mean?” Mia asked, sitting up straight to get a better view of Wyatt’s face as he spoke.

“My father attracts... attention. Commands it, even. He doesn’t mean to, it’s just the way he is.”

“Sounds familiar,” Mia said with a raised eyebrow, palm smoothing to Wyatt’s neck.

“Yes, well, it took me time to grow into it, and even then, I was never a match for the great Brian Jenkins.” Wyatt’s lips pressed firmly together, his head shaking from left to right. “From high school through college, they’d always use me to get closer to him. The opportunists I could handle, they were after my mom’s attention as much as my dad’s. We’ve always been told that some people will seek our proximity to advance their career or because of money, I was ready for that.”

“Then what was the issue?” Mia had an inkling as to the answer, but part of her still refused to believe it was possible.

“The girls that tried to get him into bed.” Wyatt seemed somewhere between furious and revolted. “He never did anything, I know I can’t be mad at him for being *him*, but sometimes I wish he was *less*, you know?” His gaze darkened the more he confided in her. “What finally broke me was the last girl, four years ago, we dated for over four months and I really liked her. She was pressuring me to go meet my parents, asking about my dad and his relationship with my mom. I recognized the signs but convinced myself not to read too much into it, told myself she was just curious about my family and that it was a good sign but I knew better, told her it was too soon. Four months into the relationship I caught her trying to get into my phone to grab my dad’s number, apparently she was in one of his guest lectures and was *smitten*, tried using me to get to him.”

“That’s terrible, you must have been so hurt.” Mia could feel Wyatt’s pain. She understood the girls wanting to advance their careers through Wyatt’s world-renowned fashion photographer mother or Nobel prize-winning scientist father. She didn’t condone it, but she could make sense of it.

Seducing a married man twice your age while dating his son, on the other hand, was beyond her comprehension on every possible level, not to mention that the mere idea irked her. She couldn't fathom how awful Wyatt felt.

"I felt so stupid." Wyatt gritted his teeth, looking away from her. "This kept happening, I was repeatedly making myself vulnerable. No matter how hard I tried, not a single woman was interested in *me*. So, I decided—no more emotional attachments."

"That sounds very lonely," Mia said, stroking a thumb over his smooth jawline.

"Kind of boring after a while as well." Wyatt shrugged, leaning into her touch. "Nothing about you is boring, though."

Mia considered his words, the way he had been with her over the past few months. They had a tumultuous relationship, especially at start, but if there was one thing she was positive about when it came to Wyatt, was his sincerity when he talked about his emotions, especially regarding his family.

"My mother is a self-centered bitch," Mia said. Wyatt's head snapped up, his back pressing against the windowsill as his widened eyes searched her face. "She's only ever cared about herself, about her parties, and lovers and social status. She was never around from the day I was born. My father was amazing until I turned ten, then he just became cold and cruel."

"What do you mean by cruel?" Anger flashed through Wyatt's eyes and Mia shook her head.

"Not like that. He stopped treating me like his child, would barely speak to me, stopped hugging me, stopped..." The tears welled up in her eyes as memories she'd worked so hard to

subdue surfaced to the forefront of her mind. “Stopped loving me.”

“No parent just *stops* loving their child.”

Mia released a bitter laugh at Wyatt’s on point observation.

“He died when I was sixteen, and at his will reading I found out that he wasn’t my biological father. My mother had an affair with the pool boy one summer, fifteen years her junior, how cliché.”

“That’s not an excuse,” Wyatt said in determination, wiping a tear rolling down Mia’s cheek.

“Not everyone is as lucky as your father, Wyatt,” Mia whispered. “Not everyone is as lucky as you.”

“Mia...” Her name was a shuddery exhale, followed by a trembling kiss that stole her breath away. “What happened after the reading?”

“I wanted to find the pool boy, but my mother blew me off, said he was a seasonal worker that moved on and never came back, she *thinks* his name was Anton, though she doesn’t understand why I even care.” Mia rolled her eyes in dismay. “My father left me this house and enough money so I can live comfortably while focusing on my academics, under the provision I live in London. My mother hates this city, so he knew if I were here, she’d never see me. I assume it was his bit of revenge for her many infidelities.”

“Or his way of looking out for you by distancing you from her,” Wyatt said, his eyes full of warmth rather than the pity Mia was expecting.

“Maybe.” Mia dropped her head back onto Wyatt’s chest, trying to push down the feeling of comfort that washed over her under Wyatt’s soft and caring gaze. “It hasn’t stopped her



from sending eligible suitors my way over the years, trying to guilt me back to Paris and marry me into a titled family.”

“Has she *met* you?” Wyatt asked with an incredulous tone, and Mia swatted his arm. “I’m serious, you’re *barely* duchess material, Prickly Pear.”

Mia planted her palms on Wyatt’s chest and pushed herself up to glare at him in amusement. “Well, lucky for me, you aren’t exactly a *duke*, now are you?”

“No.” He laughed, a warm and deep rumble that ignited a bubbling joy in Mia’s chest. “I am definitely not a Duke, I’m a Jenkins through and through.” Then he leaned forward, planting a soft kiss on Mia’s lips before whispering in a voice full of sincere gratitude. “Thank you for telling me all that.”

“Thank you for listening,” Mia said against his lips, pulling him closer, deepening the kiss.

Wyatt’s palm smoothed up her back until he was cupping her nape, their eyes meeting. For a brief moment, something unspoken passed between them.

And just like that, Mia realized that she no longer hated Wyatt Jenkins, and that she hadn’t hated him for some time.

## REVELATIONS AND BETRAYALS



**MIA**

MIA YELPED in surprise when she was suddenly pulled back onto the bed.

“Wyatt,” she scolded with a laugh, trying to wriggle free from his warm embrace. “I have a meeting with Herbert, I need to get ready.”

“All this targeted squirming isn’t convincing me you want to be released,” Wyatt said in a groggy voice, pressing his hardening length against her back.

It was tempting, but Mia was already cutting it close.

“Sorry, mon Bête, you’ll have to handle this one on your own.” Wyatt sighed dramatically but flopped onto his back, releasing Mia from his hold.

Mia hurried to the bathroom, and by the time she was showered and primped, Wyatt was already gone from the bedroom. She found him sitting at the small breakfast table in her kitchen, reading the newspaper with a stern expression while drinking coffee.

It was a scene she was both accustomed to and couldn’t get used to, Wyatt as an integral part of her home life, but Mia was

surprisingly comfortable with the direction their relationship had taken.

Things had changed between them after the banquet, a silent understanding that they were attempting a different course of action than the one they had initially opted for.

Once Mia had stopped fighting Wyatt at every turn in the lab, he released the reins of control and gave her more free range and managerial power. True to his word, all Wyatt ever wanted was an ally to work with as his equal. And, while Mia had come to terms that she no longer hated Wyatt, she struggled to label their relationship. Nothing had changed except more open discussions of their life outside the confinements of the lab and the bedroom, but they were still a well-kept secret and Mia preferred it stay that way.

“Is the world any better today?” Mia asked the same question she’d been asking every morning when Wyatt sat down with the paper.

“No.” Wyatt smiled without looking up, and Mia waited for his daily dose of positive news tidbits. “Though grape prices have dropped.”

“It does not say that.” Mia marched the short distance and peered over Wyatt’s shoulder only to find he wasn’t teasing her. “I hate grapes.”

“How can a wine enthusiast hate grapes?” Wyatt asked, *again*, folding his newspaper before looking up at her with amusement. “You look amazing. Should I be jealous of your teatime date with Professor Flinch?”

“I look amazing for *me*, mon Bête.” Mia bent down and kissed Wyatt. “Are you staying here while I’m gone?”

Wyatt's brow pinched and he ran his fingers through his thick hair. "Um, I don't know. Am I?"

"If you want to." Mia shrugged with a smile. "But only if you cook dinner tonight."

"Absolutely, I cannot take another fish and chips dinner," Wyatt said with a devilish grin, and Mia guffawed, smacking his shoulder.

"Ingrate," she accused, shaking her head in face of his rolling laughter. "Dinner better be good or you'll never hear the end of it."

Mia turned to leave but Wyatt clasped his palms at her waist, pulling her closer until she was bent over him, holding on to the backrest of his chair with mere inches between their faces.

Wyatt seemed to want to say something clever, but when their eyes locked, his gaze turned soft, almost forlorn.

"I'll be here when you get back," he promised.

"Good." Mia cupped his jaw and stroked it with her thumb. "Don't have too much fun without me."

Wyatt flashed Mia a cheeky grin, she gave him a warning glare and pushed off the chair, hurrying away before he made a compelling case for her to stay.

As hasty as she tried to be, Mia still arrived a few minutes late to the tea room, finding Herbert already seated and waiting.

"I'm sorry," she hurried to say when Herbert stood to greet her.

"You're only three minutes late," Herbert dismissed her apology with a chuckle and a quick peck on her cheek.

“Unusual, but nothing to be sorry for.”

“How are you?” Mia asked as they took their respective seats. “We haven’t talked in what feels like forever.”

“Yes, well, I admit it was somewhat intentional on my part,” Herbert said, seeming somewhat abashed.

“I had a feeling.” Mia poured herself a cup of tea from the pot sitting in the middle of the table. Herbert was still an old-fashioned British gentleman with a soft spot for teatime.

“I wanted to give you time to adjust.” Mia nodded, sipping on her tea even though she wasn’t a fan of the beverage. Another side effect of her mother’s rigorous education was to adhere to the social standards of the immediate environment, *when in Rome*, as the saying went. “How are things at the hub?”

“Good,” Mia answered, smiling as she set her delicate porcelain cup down. “Very good, actually.”

Herbert’s mouth formed a self-satisfied grin that Mia found amusing, if somewhat baffling.

“*Very* good, eh?” Herbert chuckled. “You two did seem to get along fantastically at the banquet.”

*Oh, so that’s what this is about.*

Mia lifted the tea back to her lips, delaying her reaction as she thought of the best way to deflect Herbert.

“We were presenting a unified front for the benefit of the hub,” Mia finally said, figuring that staying as close to the truth as possible would be easiest. “You’re the one who told me to learn how to play the game, were you not?”

“Yes.” Herbert had the decency to seem abashed. “I was. But I was hoping it was more than appearances, that you and

Doctor Jenkins presenting a unified front was more than just an act.”

“It was,” Mia assured him. “Wyatt seems truly dedicated to the hub and to treating me as a peer, not a subordinate, and I’ve come to realize that working with him will benefit the hub, which is the ultimate goal.”

“I’m so glad to hear that,” Herbert beamed at her. “I knew he’d be a perfect fit when I offered him the position.”

A smile started forming on Mia’s lips before she grasped the full meaning of Herbert’s words. Her grip on the delicate cup tightened, and she stared at the golden-brown liquid inside. It was rippling against the white porcelain, and Mia realized her hands were shaking.

Taking a deep breath, she looked up at Herbert, who was happily munching on a scone.

“May I ask what you mean by that?” Her voice was surprisingly level, enough for Herbert to remain oblivious as to how close to the edge she was.

“By what?”

“You said you knew Wyatt would be a perfect fit when you offered him the position,” Mia repeated Herbert’s words. “What did you mean?”

“Oh.” Herbert cleared his throat, his jolly demeanor gone in an instant. “Well, the division was insisting on bringing in someone with a big name, they gave me a deadline to appoint someone myself or they would do it for me.”

“Why?”

“They felt this sort of undertaking required someone with better ability to raise funds, ‘a new endeavor that would be a

hard sell', were their exact words," Herbert said, tapping his scone against the matching plate in front of him. "I wasn't happy about it."

"But you let them bully you into it?" Mia asked, finally resting her cup back on its saucer before it shattered in her hands.

"It's how things work, Mia, I've told you this before." Herbert sighed, sounding almost exasperated with her. "This is academic politics. We may not like it, but it is what it is. I made the best of the situation."

"I didn't want you to make the best of the situation!" Herbert startled at the sudden rise in Mia's voice, but something inside her had snapped. "I've spent the past few months thinking I somehow failed you by being skipped for the position *you* have been telling me I *have to* get."

"Mia..." Herbert's gaze was full of pity when he said her name, but Mia didn't want his pity or his sympathy. He had been hiding the truth from her, pushing her to play a game when all she was for him was a pawn in his own game.

"I thought you fought for me and lost because I was inadequate, because something was wrong with me."

"I did fight for you, as long and as hard as I could," Herbert said, his gaze hardened and his tone turned scolding. "And I was smart enough to know when I had to change my strategy. Any person the division would have chosen would have treated you like an inferior, if not fired you immediately. Wyatt gave you a chance to preserve your position, your hard work and achievements, the man was an admirer before he even met you. What else would you have me do, Mia?"

“Fight for me,” Mia answered quietly, defeated and deflated, a wave of pain rising in her chest and reaching her eyes. “I would have rather lost *everything* professionally but have you stick with me until the end.” She slid her phone into her purse and looked up at Herbert, at the pain in his wary eyes. “I just needed *you* to make me feel as if I were enough.”

Mia knew she was asking more than he could give her, that he wasn't the person she needed these things from. The man who needed to hear these words had been dead for a long time, long enough for Mia to pretend her scars had faded into near nothing rather than still being bleeding wounds.

It was pointless to deny now. Mia had merely substituted the attention she had sought from her father with the attention she received from Herbert. She knew, at some basic level, but she never fully acknowledged the depths of it.

As she hailed a taxi and gave him her address, she realized Wyatt was there, waiting for her, and the knowledge of how far she was willing to go to prove herself worthy, how much she had hurt Wyatt for the sake of fighting windmills, flooded her with a sense of grief.

She wasn't worthy. It was a fact that had been thrown in her face time and time again, that something was so fundamentally wrong with her she was deemed unlovable by any man she ever cared about.

Wyatt was no exception.



## THE WORD



WYATT

WYATT WAS STARING at the two full plates in front of him.

It had been over an hour since he sent Mia a message that dinner would be ready soon, that he was waiting, and she had yet to answer him. It wasn't the first time, either.

She'd been steadily pulling away since her meeting with Professor Flinch, and no matter how much Wyatt tried to understand what had happened, he couldn't get a straight answer from her. In his desperation he even went to Flinch, only to find him on an extended vacation for *personal reasons*.

Of course, Flinch may not have been the cause behind Mia's sudden shift in attitude. Wyatt had overheard Mia speaking with her mother at all hours of the day over the past few weeks, and none of the conversations sounded pleasant or warm.

From the bits and pieces of information he managed to collect before Mia noticed him and abruptly hung up, Mia's mother was trying to persuade her to come to Paris for some sort of party, an event Mia didn't seem keen to attend.

Either way, nothing between Wyatt and Mia felt right.

On the surface, everything seemed fine. They were still working alongside one another at the hub with the same professional courtesy and collaboration, but Mia lacked her usual spark and pushback. She'd also been finding excuses not to come over to his apartment or why he couldn't spend weekends at hers.

Wyatt was trying to be patient, considerate of whatever it was Mia was going through, but over two weeks of being blatantly shut out and ignored were slowly weighing down on Wyatt's psyche.

The worst part was that he was certain Mia had been starting to see them as more. Up to the point she left to meet Flinch, Mia appeared to be opening up to him, carving out space for him in her life. The cold turkey change in her attitude was baffling and sent Wyatt into a tailspin of filling in the blanks with his worst fears.

Wyatt decided to clear the table. He'd lost his appetite and the heavy feeling in his chest was nearing the point of nausea. Just as he placed the plates in the sink, there was a knock on the door. It was soft and slow as if the person on the other side was hesitant.

The weight in Wyatt's chest grew another pound heavier.

"I didn't think you'd come," Wyatt said when he opened the door.

Mia shrugged and stepped inside. "I got caught up in the lab."

It was a cop-out, nothing they were working on prevented Mia from leaving earlier or at least texting him back.

"I was waiting for you." He closed the door behind her. "I made dinner."

“Thank you.” Mia’s smile didn’t reach her eyes and she made no move to put down her bag. “I already ate.”

Wyatt’s frustration and anger flared, and before he could stop himself, Mia’s blazer was twisted firmly in his fist, her gasp filling the space between them when he pulled her close.

“Well, that’s just rude,” he said in a gruff and low voice, popping the two buttons that kept her blazer closed while holding her gaze, searching for a flicker of the heat he could so easily ignite before. “It seems like someone needs disciplining.”

For a fraction of a second Wyatt thought Mia was going to push him away, but then the indigo in her eyes blazed to life.

“As if a brute like you could teach me manners.”

Wyatt growled from deep in his chest, pressing his lips against Mia’s in a bruising kiss, craving the honey and heather flavor they offered.

They stumbled to the bedroom, and by the time they reached the bed, Wyatt was already naked. Mia was harder to get out of her work attire. He pushed her onto the bed, pulling off her slacks and underwear in one move before following her down to claim her lips again, not bothering with her top.

“God, I missed you,” Wyatt groaned out when Mia tangled her fingers into his hair, curling them into a tight hold.

The change was almost immediate. Mia froze for a short moment before pulling him into another kiss, but something was suddenly missing.

Wyatt’s heart was racing, fear seeping into every cell and taking over. She was slipping away again, and he couldn’t bear it.

Without too much thought, Wyatt pushed them up the bed and grabbed the lube from his nightstand, quickly lathering his cock before lining it to Mia's rim, realizing his mistake when she pushed her knee between them and shoved him away.

"You didn't put a condom on," Mia whispered.

He knew he should apologize, tell her he got caught up in the heat of the moment, did something stupid and that it would *never* happen again, but the look in Mia's eyes, as if whatever he said moving forward wouldn't matter, pushed Wyatt to argue reason rather than emotion.

"I haven't so much as looked at another woman since that night at the club," Wyatt said, leaning back on his ankles. "And since this is a pretty foolproof way to avoid any unfortunate accidents, I prefer to go bare."

"You should have asked me."

"That's not what we agreed to." Even as the words left his mouth, Wyatt realized how screwed up a thing it was to say. Words driven by panic that stemmed from the numbing fear of losing her which was slowly turning him mindless.

Mia stared at him, her expression blank.

"This wasn't part of the agreement," she said in a voice void of emotion. "What if I'm not comfortable having sex with you without protection? What if *I've* been fucking around?"

"Have you?" Wyatt asked, trying to keep the angry tremor out of his voice at the thought of Mia letting someone else touch her.

"No, Wyatt, but that's not the point." Mia sighed in resignation and rolled off the bed. "I'm going home."

“What? Why?” Wyatt knew why, but he needed to keep her in his apartment, get her to talk to him, to listen so he’d have a chance to fix the damage.

“Because it’s one thing to use me like a little fuck-toy, it’s an entirely different thing to blatantly disregard my autonomy over my body.”

“I would *never* do that.” Wyatt was still on the bed, watching Mia pull on her clothes while he sat there, immobile.

Mia didn’t bother arguing, didn’t look up with a sarcastic or indignant gaze. She wasn’t yelling or getting angry, just calmly getting dressed, as if she had been waiting for an excuse to up and leave and Wyatt had handed it to her.

“Mia, stop,” Wyatt pleaded, but she was already walking out of the room. “Please, Mia, stop.”

Wyatt finally managed to move off the bed and rushed out after Mia, finding her in the final stages of putting on her shoes. Swearing under his breath, Wyatt scurried to find his own clothes while trying to cut Mia off on the way to the door.

“Mia, I’m sorry, just please, don’t go,” he begged, hopping backwards on one foot in front of her as he attempted to pull on his shoe.

“You know what, Wyatt?” Mia stopped, her eyes glued to her feet as if she couldn’t meet his stare. “I’m done.”

Wyatt’s breath whooshed out of him all at once when he realized what was about to happen.

“No. Don’t do it, Mia.” he rushed to her and cradled her face in his palms, lifting her gaze to his. “I’m so sorry, please, I’ll do anything, but please...”

Conflicting emotions zapped through her eyes, and for a fleeting few seconds Wyatt allowed himself to believe she had changed her mind, but then she turned her face away, lip trembling.

“Agastopia,” Mia whispered in a shaky voice, and the world around him came crashing down.

## TENDERNESS



**MIA**

THE MOMENT the word left her mouth Mia was flooded with regret. The silence was so loud she could hear both their hearts breaking in the void that stupid word had created, but she couldn't take it back.

They stood there, unable to move from the intensity of the emotions between them, when suddenly there was pounding at the door followed by insistent ringing. Wyatt ignored it at first, but whoever was on the other side was adamant that he let them in.

With a single swear word, Wyatt stomped to the door and threw it open.

“Kylie?” He managed to ask right before a chocolate-haired girl stumbled into his arms with heart-wrenching sobs. “Ky, what happened?”

Wyatt wrapped his arms around his sister with such tenderness and fierce protectiveness it caused Mia's chest to squeeze.

No one ever held her like that, cared for her so intensely, and she'd accepted the simple fact that no one ever would.

Every time she allowed herself to believe otherwise the universe proved her a fool.

As quietly as she could, Mia went to the door and picked up her bag, fully intending to slip out unnoticed.

“Wy...” Kylie kept crying into Wyatt’s chest, unable to continue the sentence through her tears.

“Ky, tell me what happened,” Wyatt ordered, panic lacing his voice. “I can’t help if you don’t tell me.”

Kylie’s sobs just increased and, despite herself, Mia turned to look at them, meeting Wyatt’s gaze. It was full of pain and pleading with her to stay, but Mia was determined to leave before Wyatt could convince her otherwise.

“Don’t.” Wyatt took an abrupt step, releasing Kylie and reaching out to Mia.

Kylie jumped with a start and spun to face Mia, her bloodshot cornflower blues widening in horror.

“You weren’t alone,” she turned back to Wyatt. “I’m sorry, Wy, I’ll leave.”

“What? No, nobody is leaving.” Wyatt was practically scolding her, and Kylie’s lips started quivering at his harsh tone.

Mia struggled with her decision for a few seconds before resigning to the fact that Wyatt wouldn’t let her leave so easily and poor, distraught Kylie was going to get caught in the middle.

“It’s okay, you weren’t interrupting.” Mia dropped her bag to the floor and placed a hand on Kylie’s arm. “Wyatt, make some tea.”



“What?” Wyatt stared at Mia with a dumbfounded expression as she herded Kylie to the couch.

“Make. Some. Tea.” Mia repeated slowly.

“Oh.” Wyatt seemed torn between following them or following Mia’s instructions, but in the end, he turned and went to the kitchen.

“Are you okay?” Mia asked when they sat down. “It’s alright if you need to cry some more.”

Kylie sniffled and shook her head, examining Mia with increasing curiosity. “Thank you, but I don’t even know your name.”

“I’m Mia,” Mia answered just as Wyatt walked in with a tray holding three mugs and a kettle, his gaze jumping between Kylie and Mia.

“Kylie.” Kylie offered her hand and Mia shook it, mostly out of politeness.

Wyatt poured tea into the three cups, eyes barely leaving the girls. Kylie took the mug Wyatt offered her with a grateful smile and Mia accepted one as well, again out of sheer politeness, before the three of them settled into an awkward silence.

“What happened, Ky?” Wyatt asked again after Kylie took a few sips. They both had visibly calmed down, Kylie seeming more occupied with Mia’s presence than with whatever had upset her.

“Gustav.” Kylie twisted her face, tears springing to her eyes.

“The cook?” Wyatt frowned, a look of disapproval settling on his features.

“He wanted to move to Paris, work in the best kitchens in the world, or some shit like that.” Kylie rolled her eyes. “Asked me to come with him so we flew in together last week, then this morning I caught him balls deep in a waitress.”

“So, you just got on a plane and flew halfway across the world for a guy?” Wyatt’s tone was beyond scolding, it was bordering on disappointment.

“Mom did that for dad.”

“Mom and dad knew each other their entire lives, they were best friends, you’ve known Gustav for four months,” Wyatt answered with a sigh. “Did you even bother learning his last name before upending your life for him?”

“It’s not like I bought a one-way ticket, I flew in with him for one month to see how it would feel.” Kylie wiped the tears from her cheeks. “I just wanted an epic love story, I thought he was the one.”

“You always think they’re the one, Ky.” Wyatt slumped back in his chair running his fingers through the unruly mass of dark blonde hair on his head. “Not everyone gets an epic love story.”

“That’s true,” Mia said, her gaze meeting Wyatt’s.

“Oh.” Kylie looked between them mortified. “I really did show up at the worst time, didn’t I?”

“No, your timing was perfect,” Mia assured her with a sad smile, placing her untouched tea back on the table. “I’ll leave you two alone now.”

“Mia...” Wyatt started, only to stop when she turned to look at him. “I’ll walk you out.”

“It was nice meeting you, Kylie.”

“You too, Mia.” Kylie caught Mia’s hand between both of hers. “I hope I’ll get the chance to see you again when I’m less of a sordid mess.”

Mia forced a smile, the lump in her throat preventing the well-mannered reply she’d been programmed to give. She extracted her hand from Kylie’s grip and walked to the door with Wyatt at her heels, every step a new kind of torture.

“Mia...” Wyatt started, reaching out to touch her hand.

“You two seem to have a deep connection.”

“Twins.” He shrugged, hesitating before dropping his hand to his side. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t.” Mia shook her head, forcing herself to meet his tortured gaze.

“I got carried away.” Wyatt took a step forward, cupping her cheek. “I freaked out and I did something horrible and I am *so* sorry. I never would have done *anything* to hurt you.”

“Hurting each other is all we seem to know how to do, mon Bête.” Mia closed the gap between them and briefly pressed her lips to his. “You have so much more than a brute in you, Wyatt, just not for me.”

“That’s not true,” he whispered, pulling Mia close and breathing her in. “I’ll come by a bit later and we’ll work this out, together.”

“Don’t come over.”

“Mia, *please*.” The way Wyatt’s voice cracked at that last word was almost enough to break Mia’s resolve. She ached to tell Wyatt it wasn’t his fault, that she was simply unlovable, and the painful truth was that she would never recover from

the inevitable day where he, too, would realize she wasn't enough and turn his back on her.

The epiphany threw Mia off balance. She couldn't afford to let Wyatt any deeper into her heart.

“Don't come over,” she repeated, stepping away from Wyatt's touch. “Don't call me, don't try to convince me to recant. Like you said—we had an arrangement. That's all this was, and according to the terms of our deal, that arrangement is now over.”

Wyatt stood and stared at Mia, the vein in his neck throbbing fast and hard as his breath left him in short pants.

Mia forced herself to stand erect, make it clear she had the last word.

“I'll see you at work, Doctor Jenkins,” she said before turning her back on Wyatt and walking away, managing to hold back the tears until the doors of the lift closed behind her.

## HEARTBREAK IN OXFORD



WYATT

WYATT WATCHED Mia disappear behind the elevator doors. He waited for a few more seconds before closing the door and locking it.

Slowly, Wyatt turned and started walking to the kitchen. He felt as if he were trudging through mud, his brain as sluggish as his feet. He barely noticed that he'd reached the sink, mindlessly starting to wash the dishes with the untouched dinner he had made for himself and Mia.

“Wy?” Kylie’s tentative voice penetrated the thicket padding his brain, and Wyatt looked down at the plate he was scrubbing.

“Could you get the mugs from the living room, please?” he asked, his tone as mechanical as the circular motion of his hand, still working on the same spotless plate.

“Sure.” Despite her answer, Kylie moved closer to Wyatt, hesitantly placing a hand on his shoulder. “You know you’re wearing only one shoe, right?”

Wyatt’s gaze dropped to his feet and he barked out a laugh that quickly turned into a pained heave. The sponge and plate dropped from his shaking hands with a crash and Wyatt sank

to his knees, chest heaving and blood pounding in his ears at an almost deafening volume.

“Hey.” Kylie crouched down next to him, her grip on his shoulder tightening. “Talk to me.”

“What just happened?” Wyatt barely recognized his own voice.

“I don’t know,” Kylie answered, her voice full of regret. “I’m sorry if my coming here caused this, I didn’t know...”

“No,” Wyatt cut her off. “I did this.” He clenched his fists and squeezed his eyes shut, and Kylie pulled him into a crushing hug. “I did this.”

They stayed like that for a while, Wyatt trying to make sense and order of the overwhelming emotions wrecking him. Kylie was talking, something about how everything was going to be okay, but Wyatt couldn’t bring himself to listen.

“I don’t know how to fix this,” he finally said, slumping back on his heels and away from Kylie’s embrace.

“Not with your brain.” Kylie tapped his head with her finger and offered a meek smile.

“Solid advice.”

“I’m serious, Wy.” Kylie sighed and stood, offering him her hand and pulling him up. “Girls don’t want logic, they want passion and romance.”

“Yeah, well, passion wasn’t the problem,” Wyatt said, walking to the sink to clean up the broken plate. Kylie followed and leaned against the counter next to him, eyeing the shards still inside the sink. She had their mother’s propensity for self-injury and was smarter than to try to help.

“And you don’t know Mia. She’s calculated and driven, methodical, brilliant.”

“So, you as a woman.”

Wyatt hated how close to home that observation was. Despite being more open than Mia to the idea of a real relationship, he’d been tiptoeing around the subject, escaping to analytical actions rather than being honest with Mia about how he felt. He really was an idiot, and the acknowledgment that his mind had utterly failed him was devastating.

“Her head isn’t filled with fluffy notions about love.” It was a low jab, one Wyatt immediately regretted, but Kylie just shrugged.

“Maybe, but in the end, all women want the same thing,” she said, looking up at Wyatt with her bright blue eyes identical to their mother’s, and a pang of longing for home mixed into the pain oozing out of every pore.

“And that thing would be?”

“Someone who doesn’t easily give up on them,” Kylie answered. “Someone who fights for them and is worth fighting for.” Wyatt stared silently at the sink while Kylie stared at him. “Is Mia worth fighting for?”

Wyatt nodded. “*She* is. I’m not sure she feels the same way about me, though.”

“Come on, Wy, I saw the way she looked at you. I don’t know what her story is, but she’s in just as deep as you.” Kylie sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. She was tired, Wyatt realized, probably hungry as well if judging by her slight frown, and he cursed himself for throwing away the food he’d cooked.

“I still haven’t eaten,” Wyatt said as he finished cleaning up the sink. “Want to order something? Indian?”

“Yeah, sounds good.” Kylie’s frown lifted a bit in gratitude, and Wyatt pulled out his phone.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t nicer about the whole Gustav thing,” Wyatt said, pausing his takeaway order to look at his twin. “I hate that he hurt you like that.”

“It’s okay.” Kylie stared at the strand of hair she was twirling around her index finger, her tell for when she was analyzing something. “You were right. I run into these romantic adventures without thinking. If I would have taken more than thirty seconds, I would have realized Gustav wasn’t the type I want to spend my life with, cheater or not.”

“So, not a guy worth fighting for?”

“Not by a long shot.” Kylie laughed softly. “He *is* a great cook though.”

“Ah, the way to Kylie’s heart...” Kylie playfully punched him in the shoulder, but she still laughed.

“It’ll be okay,” she said, releasing her finger from its chocolaty brown shroud. “We’ll be okay.”

“Promise?” Wyatt asked with a sad smile and Kylie nodded. “I just want her back. What if that never happens?”

“As long as you know you tried your hardest, did everything you possibly could, you’ll figure out how to move on.”

“I don’t know what to do, though.” Wyatt sighed and rubbed a hand over his face.

“Stop thinking, just feel.” Kylie’s advice was met with a snort.



“Yeah, I’m not feeling great right now, thinking seems like the better option.”

“No, you idiot, it isn’t.” Kylie groaned and rolled her eyes. “You’re *supposed* to feel like shit, you love her.”

*He loved her.*

Wyatt knew it was true, had known for a while. He wondered if Mia knew as well, and maybe that’s why she pulled away.

“Are you trying to think again?” Kylie asked, shaking her head in dismay.

Wyatt ignored her, mainly because she was right. He was making another jump of logic, an assumption based on what he thought he knew.

“She’s a big fan of yours, you know,” he said instead.

“Was the gift you asked me about for her?” Kylie asked, seeming almost amused. “A lover of historical romances with a head totally empty of all fluffy notions about love? Right.”

“It’s kind of weird, honestly.” Wyatt frowned, wondering how this was the first time the thought had occurred to him. “Mia’s a debutante. She spent her entire life in the world of titles and ballrooms. She hates it, couldn’t get away from it fast enough, but her choice of genre is full of all the things she claims to despise.”

“Are you serious?” Kylie was gaping at him, eyes wide.

“Yeah, she even has that special edition box set of your series in hardback, the one with the white, baby blue, and gold.”

“It’s periwinkle, and are you *serious* that she has the Gilded Gowns five-year publish-versary set?” Wyatt nodded.

“That box set was priced over three-hundred dollars, Wyatt, *without* shipment costs.”

“Okay?” Wyatt wasn’t sure what about that information had caused Kylie to appear so scandalized.

“Oh, dear lord, have mercy.” Kylie dropped her head into her hands. “Mia is rational and calculated, but she spent an *insane* amount of money on books she could have easily read for a tenth of the price on her phone, or just gotten the paperback for much cheaper. She escapes from her reality, the one you claim she despises, by reading historical romance depicting an extreme version of that reality.”

“And...?” Wyatt had a hunch about what Kylie was about to say, but, in a much more real sense, he had no idea and needed it spelled out.

“Her head is *full* of fluffy romance!” Kylie practically yelled at him, her hands flailing about, implying she was either over his density or *really* hungry. Maybe both. *Most likely both*. “She’s just waiting to be swept off her feet, for a grand gesture of love, Jesus, Wy.” Wyatt took a step back, sensing Kylie was about ready to smack him. “Turn off your brain for once and let your heart make the decisions.” Kylie pushed off the counter when the doorbell rang, announcing the arrival of their food. “*That’s* how you get her back.”

*Let his heart make the decisions*, now that was a novelty Wyatt wasn’t ready for. No, he couldn’t give up on logic yet, he just had to come up with a plan to win Mia back.

# TITANIC



## MIA

IT WAS after midnight and Mia was staring at a historical documentary about the Titanic. It was the only thing mildly worth watching at this hour, and it was exponentially better than lying awake in bed alone with her thoughts.

Today was supposed to be the first time she saw Wyatt since ending things a few days prior, but he had packed his days with meetings outside the hub, presumably to avoid her. Mia knew she should be grateful, but she couldn't muster a positive notion regarding the situation no matter how hard she tried.

The knock on her door caused Mia to shoot up from her perch on the couch, the remote rolling out of her lap and onto the floor with a thud. She wasn't expecting company at this hour, but she had a fair guess who she'd find on the other side when she peered through the peephole.

"Mia, please." Wyatt's distress when she didn't open the door carried through the heavy wood.

Mia took a deep breath before unlatching the chain and turning the key, opening the door a crack. Wyatt let out a relieved breath. He looked tired and defeated, his eyes red and his complexion pale.

“I can’t eat, I can’t sleep, you’re everywhere I look, every time I close my eyes I see you, smell you, I *need* you, Mia.” He took a step forward, his fingers slightly shaking when he reached out to swipe a strand of hair from her forehead. “I need you.”

“I said the word, Wyatt,” Mia whispered, unable to tear herself away from his delicate touch.

“Screw the word.” Wyatt took a step closer, weaving his fingers into her hair and bowing his head down, his lips feathering over hers as he spoke. “Tell me to leave and I will.”

“Wyatt.” His name left her lips on a plea, but it was all she could manage. Going up on her tiptoes, Mia pressed her lips to his. Wyatt’s muscles unwound and a groan shuddered out of him as his arm circled her waist and pulled her close.

The sound of the door slamming shut registered in the back of Mia’s consciousness, but she was wholly occupied with the need to feel Wyatt’s bare skin against hers. They managed to remove all their clothes before reaching the couch, and Wyatt sat, pulling her down to straddle him. He was already sheathed, ready for her, his lips closing around a taut nipple as Mia rubbed herself against the lower ridges of his cock before taking it in her hand and aligning it to her opening.

Mia gasped when she sunk herself over Wyatt, the emptiness she had been struggling with since that night in his flat gone. He pressed his forehead to hers when she started rocking her hips.

“Ma figue de Barbarie,” Wyatt whispered in reverence, his palms sliding down her waist, over the curve of her hips, coming to rest on her thighs.

Wyatt rocked up into her, matching her movements and pushing deeper, pressing his torso against her body to capture her clit between them, sending spirals of pleasure through Mia.

She was holding onto him for dear life, pressing as close as she could with her fingers firmly gripping his hair, but as her body yielded to the pleasure, her heart shattered in her chest knowing it was the last time.

Wyatt had claimed he needed her, but the simple truth was that Mia had given pieces of herself to people who told her she was important only to discard her, and she never got those pieces back. She never intended to give any part of herself to Wyatt but, somehow, she'd lost herself in him completely, and she couldn't afford what it would cost her when he walked away.

The sound of a ship's horn coming from her television cleared some of the orgasmic fog in her head, making room for one panicked thought to settle—*she shouldn't have let him in.*

Her hands slid from around Wyatt's neck and down to his chest, palms flattening against it with light pressure.

Wyatt inhaled sharply, arms tightening around her and nose rubbing over her shoulder as he shook his head.

"No," he whispered, a barely suppressed tremble in his voice. "This isn't goodbye, Mia, it can't be goodbye."

"Wyatt, please," Mia begged, forcing the sobs down.

Wyatt's entire body was tense under her, his breathing labored and head still shaking. "Don't do this."

"I don't like you, remember?"

"No, you love me." He kissed up her neck, soft kisses that burned against her skin as if they were branding her, until his

lips pressed against hers and his palms cradled her face, forcing her eyes to meet his when he pulled back. “You *love* me. And I love you. Why isn’t that enough?”

“I said the word.”

“I don’t care.”

“I said the word,” Mia repeated, tears escaping her eyes under Wyatt’s torn gaze.

“I don’t care.”

“I said the word.” They were speaking over each other, repeating the same line as if it were a mantra that could somehow change the reality of their situation.

“I don’t care!” Wyatt finally yelled, causing Mia to startle. “The word only meant something when *we* meant nothing.” He wiped her tears with his thumbs, eyes never leaving hers. “This, us, it means *everything*, Mia.”

Mia’s lip was quivering, a flood threatening to burst from her eyes. “I can’t trust you not to break my heart.”

“You’re the only one doing the breaking,” Wyatt said, his eyes squeezing shut. “I tried. I spent days trying to think of a plan, but everything seemed pointless and stupid, logic just wasn’t working because nothing about us makes sense, Mia, but it *feels* right, it’s always felt right.” Wyatt’s voice cracked, russet eyes full of unshed tears lifting to her face, pleading with her. “I know you’re scared, but I won’t just stop loving you one day.” He wiped away some more of her tears. “I won’t ever stop loving you.”

A sob escaped Mia, and she covered her mouth with her hand, turning her head away from Wyatt.

“I can’t, I’m sorry.” Mia pushed off him, grabbing her TV blanket and wrapping herself in it, unable to meet Wyatt’s eyes when forcing her next words out. “You should leave.”

She rushed to lock herself in the bathroom, leaning on the wall and sliding to the floor as she clutched the fabric to her heaving chest. A few minutes later she heard her front door closing.

Mia curled into herself, hugging her knees and resting her forehead on them, crying until the tears dried out and all she could feel was overwhelming numbness. Eventually, she managed to drag herself off the floor and back to the living room. Her home felt cold and empty, all traces of Wyatt being there were gone except for her discarded clothes, now waiting in a neat pile on the couch.

The documentary was still playing in the background, an expert giving their two cents on the ship sinking, and Mia’s phone was blinking with a small green light, showing she had a message.

Part of her was hoping it was from Wyatt, another part was dreading it, but when she unlocked her phone the only message waiting was another bot-sent RSVP for her mother’s annual birthday ball.

She’d been badgering Mia to attend for weeks and made no attempt to hide her interest in Wyatt, whom she only knew about through Durant.

Mia was more than reluctant, especially considering her mother’s propensity to be the center of attention by any means, especially with Mia’s friends. She never stooped so low as to try to seduce any of them, but she always demanded everyone’s full attention.

Wyatt wasn't a factor anymore, though, and when she thought about facing him at the hub, escaping to Paris for a few days seemed like the lesser evil. Also, the division would be happy that she was finally using some of her vacation days.

With resignation, Mia pressed *attending* and input 1 next to the number of guests, slumping down on the couch to book the earliest flight to Paris.



## TAKE FLIGHT



### MIA

MIA WANDERED into the dark and empty hub, drifting aimlessly into her office to collect some files to take with her to Paris. It had been over a week since Wyatt had shown up at her house, and the numbness was refusing to go away.

Wyatt hadn't been at the hub since that night. Mia kept telling herself that it was for the best. She and Wyatt couldn't keep working together, and after what she'd discovered about Herbert, she'd resolved to hand in her resignation when her vacation was over.

In the grand scheme of things, giving up her position in the faculty wasn't even that painful.

Mia finished packing her backpack and grabbed her trolley. She was headed straight to the airport, a couple of hours too early but she couldn't bring herself to talk to people today. She had just ordered a car when someone called her name.

"Mia." Giles' voice sent a small panic through Mia, but she forced a smile and turned to face him.

"Hi, Giles."

“Oh, wow.” Giles leaned back as if to assess her more fully, his gaze worried. “You look like shite.” Mia lifted an eyebrow. “No offense.”

Mia rolled her eyes, glancing down at her phone to check how much longer she had to wait for her ride. “What can I do for you, Giles?”

“Could I send you some of my research data?” He steepled his palms in a begging gesture. “I need help.”

“Can’t Wyatt do that?” Mia asked. Any other day she would have helped Giles without thinking twice, but since she was quitting, minimizing her involvement was the sensible choice.

“Wyatt’s back in America, has been for days.” Giles tilted his head to the side, a slight frown forming on his lips. “I thought you knew, considering the two of you have been shagging for the past few months.”

Mia swallowed the lump in her throat, shaking her head as she looked down at her feet.

“No,” she whispered. “I didn’t know.”

“Oh, okay, sorry.” Giles scratched the back of his head. “Err... You know what? I’ll just ask Amika, she’ll probably be able to help.”

“Sounds good,” Mia said, eyes still on her stilettos. She couldn’t seem to think about anything other than how impractical they were, yet somehow an integral part of who she was, and insensible as they may have been, Mia would never give her heels up.

*A woman must always stand to her fullest height, Chérie, especially in a world dominated by men.* It was one of the few valuable lessons her mother had taught her.

Her phone pinged, signaling that her ride to the airport had arrived.

“Right, I’ll see you later, then?” Giles asked, and Mia nodded distractedly. “Have a good visit home.”

Mia refrained from telling Giles that Paris was as far away from home as she could get. Oxford was her home, or at least it *used* to be. The past week was spent nodding off on the couch in front of the television. Her bed was too big, her apartment too quiet. Mia wasn’t sure where home was anymore.

The drive to the airport was torture. Mia’s thoughts kept circling back to how meaningless everything she once held dear had become, how untethered *she* had become. She didn’t need to think too hard on why Wyatt up and left so abruptly. While she never thought he’d give up the position as head of the hub over an affair that ended badly, Mia wished she had a safe place to escape to as well.

Wyatt had a home to go back to, with or without Mia. He had a solid sense of belonging, something she had tried to earn her entire life and failed miserably.

“Miss?” The driver’s voice from right next to her forced Mia back to reality, and she blinked a few times, looked at her surroundings and realized she was at the airport, and that the driver had unloaded her luggage and opened the door for her to exit.

She’d been lost in her own thoughts for almost two hours.

“Thank you,” she said to the driver, pulling out a bill and handing it to him as a tip.

“Much obliged.” The driver smiled and closed the back door before returning to the driver’s seat and heading off.

Mia spent a few more seconds staring at the sliding doors of Heathrow before extending her trolley's handle and forcing herself to walk into the terminal. The flight logs showed hers hadn't begun check-in yet, which she'd expected considering how early it was.

With a sigh, Mia made her way through the people hurrying to their lines. Families, businesspeople, young men and women—all of them full of a sort of buzz that people tended to adopt right before a flight. Mia couldn't drum up the same sort of energy, though. She felt more in tune with the cashier who took her coffee and croissant order and the barista who served her, both seemed disinterested in anything but getting this part of their day over with. Like Mia, they weren't there to go anywhere exciting.

Mia spent the next hour in a mild attempt to drown her thoughts, first in work and then in a book. She'd never had trouble immersing herself in research and she usually got lost in her books, but after almost sixty minutes of her mind wandering back to Wyatt and the knowledge that she'll probably never see him again, Mia gave up.

Instead, she ordered another coffee and listened to people's conversations. Most of them were mundane, but they proved a more useful distraction than her earlier attempts.

Mia was just starting to get invested in an argument the woman sitting two tables behind her was having over the phone with whom Mia assumed was her husband, when a man in a suit sat at the table next to her and answered a call on his phone.

She wouldn't have given him a second look, except that the second sentence out of his mouth grabbed her attention immediately.

“I should be back in Boston in about twelve hours, maybe less.” He paused to listen to the response on the other end of the line. “Yes, I’ve got the paperwork on me, I’ll come straight to the office. Just make sure there’s a car waiting for me.” Another short pause. “British Airways, flight BA0213.”

Mia looked up at the outbound flights board. The next flight to Boston was direct and set to leave in less than four hours. Her train of thought defied all logic. Wyatt left, she broke his heart, and he wanted nothing to do with her. Spontaneously jumping on a flight wouldn’t change that, but Mia already had her phone in hand and the British Airways website uploaded.

After a quick search, she was relieved to find that there were still tickets available for flight BA0213. They were for first class and would cost her a pretty penny, which did nothing to stop Mia from booking one as quickly as possible before it also disappeared.

It was a risk, a leap of faith that she’d even manage to locate Wyatt, let alone have him agree to speak with her, but it was the only course of action that made sense. She just hoped she wasn’t too late.

## THE GRAND GESTURE



WYATT

“HEY, KIDDO.” Wyatt looked up from his papers with a smile at the nickname his dad refused to give up no matter how old Wyatt was.

“I’m twenty-eight, Dad.”

“So? Doesn’t make you any less my kid.” His dad sat next to him on the couch, picking up one of the papers he was working on and examining it. “Where is everyone?”

“Mom went shopping with Riri, Ky is having lunch with the girls, and I have no idea where Reed took off to. He seemed pretty hell-bent, though, wherever he was going.”

“That boy, he reminds me of your aunt at that age, always on a mission to save the world.” His dad laughed ruefully, running his hand through his dark brown hair sprinkled with white. “How about you? We haven’t had much time to talk since you got back from Oxford, everything going okay there?”

“Yeah, the lab is great, the people are great, the weather—not so much, but I do rock those trench coats.”

“Meet anyone interesting?” Brian Jenkins was many things, a good actor wasn’t one of them.

Wyatt raised an eyebrow, not fooled for a second by his father's attempt to seem nonchalant. "Kylie told you about Mia?"

"No, she told your mom about Mia."

"Ah, so, same-same."

"Want to talk about it?"

"Nope, I just want to wrap up my work in Oxford and come back home."

"I thought you wanted to work towards tenure at Oxford." Worry lines creased over his dad's forehead.

"I did, but I can't. I can't be that close to her every day without being with her." Wyatt raked a hand through his hair with a desperate groan. "I messed up so bad, Dad."

"What did you do?"

"We didn't really like each other at the beginning," Wyatt said, tossing his pen onto the table and leaning back on the couch. "Mia was in the running for my position at the lab and when I got it, she assumed it was because of you."

"Which is a pretty serious button for you." His dad leaned back as well, brown eyes full of compassion.

"I wasn't exactly nice to her, either. Even after we got involved, it started out as a big game of 'who can get the upper hand'." Wyatt rubbed his hands over his face before looking at his dad, desperately seeking an answer. "I thought we moved past that, I thought she trusted me."

"Trust is everything in a relationship, Wyatt, doesn't matter what type of relationship it is."

"I know, and I never gave Mia a reason to trust me."

“Sounds like she had her mind made up before anything happened between the two of you.”

“Yeah, but I had months to prove her otherwise.” Wyatt’s chest constricted painfully. “All I did was prove her right.”

“Whatever was going on between the two of you, I’ll assume Mia could have stopped it at any time?” his dad asked, and Wyatt nodded. “But she didn’t.”

“No.”

“I think you may be taking too much blame on yourself, Wy,” his dad said, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Mia was there willingly, up until the second it ended. She trusted you enough to stick around for much longer than a girl who doesn’t feel safe with you would.”

“When Kylie came to Oxford Mia was at my house, we had just had a big argument and she, uh, broke it off.” Wyatt was washed with a burning slew of shame thinking about that night. “Mia saw how worried I was for Ky, how I took care of her, and she told me she doesn’t think I could ever be that way with her.”

“What was the fight about?”

“I...” Wyatt buried his face in his hands with a groan before looking straight into his dad’s eyes. “I don’t want to lie to you, but I really don’t want to tell you either, so let’s just say I did something very bad and Mia walked away for a good reason.”

“Wyatt, did you cheat on her?” Contrary to his acting skills, Brian Jenkins’ stern gaze was no laughing matter.

“No!” Wyatt hurried to say, his face burning. “Look, I know what I did was wrong, I feel crappy enough without you having to know how much of an idiot I am.”



“Okay.” His dad seemed slightly concerned at his response, but let the subject go. “Ky said you went over to Mia’s place and when you came back you practically dragged her to the airport to take the first flight back to Boston.”

The weight on Wyatt’s chest doubled and his gaze turned to the chart laying on top of his work pile.

“She let me in. I spilled my heart and guts out, and, for a second, I thought there was a chance everything would be okay, but she told me to leave.”

“That must have hurt.” His dad squeezed his shoulder.

“Yeah, but not as much as knowing she can’t accept how much I respect and admire her, how much I love her.” Wyatt shrugged, too exhausted to fight the pain away. “She looked so scared, and I don’t think there’s anything I can do to change that.”

His dad’s eyes filled with understanding.

“You know, your mother and I didn’t get off to a good start either when we...” his dad’s forehead wrinkled, a pinkish hue spreading over his cheeks, and he cleared his throat. “...got involved.”

“Okay.” Wyatt couldn’t keep the amusement out of his voice at his dad’s embarrassment. Despite the PG fairytale version they were told as kids, Wyatt had the sense to fill in some blanks about the earlier stages of his parent’s relationship.

*Wyatt Jenkins, choosing logic over emotions since he learned how to walk.*

“Hey, you okay?” his dad asked with a worried frown, and Wyatt shrugged. His dad seemed to want to say something when they were interrupted by a knock at the door.

“This conversation isn’t over,” his dad said as he stood from the couch.

Wyatt smiled. He really had missed his family, his dad even more than anyone else. It was surprising, considering he left home to step out of the man’s monumental shadow, but also a pleasant realization.

“Can I help you?” his dad asked whoever was on the other side of the door.

“Professor Jenkins, hello, is Wyatt here?” Wyatt’s heart leaped into his throat when he heard the voice, and he was up and at the door, pushing his dad out of the way before he had a chance to reply.

“Mia.” Her lips parted with a relieved sigh when he said her name, her eyes were red and puffy with circles under them and she seemed as if she was about to burst into tears.

“I can’t eat,” she began, only to be cut short when Wyatt closed the gap between them and pulled her in for a kiss. “I can’t ....” His lips were met with a content sigh. “...sleep, you’re...” His next kiss elicited a giggle. “Let me finish, mon Bête,” Mia scolded him fondly. “You’re everywhere I look, every time I close my eyes, I see you. I need you, Wyatt.”

The moment the last word was out of her mouth, Wyatt pulled Mia close, sealing his mouth over hers with a deep kiss. Tasting her, breathing her in.

“I’m sorry I said the word,” Mia said against his lips. “We’ll figure out how to get you your job at the hub back.”

“What are you talking about?” Wyatt looked down at her with a frown.

“Giles said you were back in America.”

“For a visit.” Wyatt suddenly realized what had happened, and the cocky grin Mia loved to hate spread over his face. “You thought I left for good and came after me.”

“Yes?” Mia’s cheeks turned red. “Didn’t you?”

“This was a planned vacation for my grandma’s birthday.” Wyatt couldn’t stop the laughter from bursting out of him. “I told you about it at least four times.”

Mia’s eyes grew wide, then her head dropped to his chest with a thud. “Putain.”

“I still appreciate the grand gesture.” Wyatt tilted her head up, locking his gaze onto hers. Mia’s eyes were void of the detachment that seeped into their relationship over the past few weeks, instead the fiery heat he had missed so much was blazing in her indigo eyes. “This is for real, right? No more games?”

“No more games,” Mia said, her palms smoothing up Wyatt’s chest and weaving into his hair, pulling him to her for another smoldering kiss.

“Aw, you two are so cute.” Kylie’s saccharine voice took Wyatt straight out of the moment, and his head swerved her direction with a menacing glare. She grinned at him, winking, and Wyatt mouthed *I hate you* before acknowledging the other two girls who were walking up the pathway with Kylie.

“Mia, you remember Kylie, and those are my cousins—Audrey and Olivia.”

“Nice to meet you,” Mia greeted the girls with a smile, her hands moving to Wyatt’s shoulders.

“I’m happy you two patched things up and that you invited Mia to Momma J’s birthday,” Kylie patted his head, and it was Wyatt’s turn to grin.

“I didn’t, she thought I left Oxford for good and came to get me back.” Audrey and Olivia sighed with starry eyes, but Kylie just gaped.

“You grand-gestured him?” She asked Mia, who stared at Wyatt in confusion.

“Oh, she grand-gestured me, alright,” Wyatt said with a satisfied smirk. “She even called in some unsavory favors to find out mom and dad’s address.”

“I did no such thing.” Mia glared at him as if he were insane. “I asked Giles, you gave him the address in case of emergency.”

“Oh, right.” Wyatt’s smile turned sheepish. “That makes more sense.”

“You’re an idiot.” Kylie rolled her eyes. “Do you guys have a place to stay?”

“What do you mean?” Wyatt looked at his parents’ house, then thought of all the ways he wanted to make Mia scream. “Right, point taken.” He looked back at Mia. “We’ll just go to your hotel room.”

“I never booked one.” Mia’s cheeks turned rosy again, and she cleared her throat. “I, uh, didn’t plan that far ahead.”

“Really?” Wyatt was overjoyed. He was also smug, knowing Mia was so out of sorts she couldn’t bring herself to think of something as basic as booking a hotel, but mostly overjoyed.

“Tu es une bête,” Mia said, pushing against his chest while the girls all doubled over with laughter.

“He really is,” Kylie said, still laughing. “Word of advice, though, *everyone* in our house knows French.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Mia glowered at Wyatt, undoubtedly thinking about how she found out *he* spoke French.

“Here,” Olivia said, tossing Wyatt her car keys. “Just don’t have sex in my car, okay?”

“Scouts honor.” Wyatt lifted his right hand in a scout’s salute.

“You weren’t a boy scout,” Olivia said in a dry tone, taking a step in his direction and pointing a finger at him. “I will know if you have sex in my car, Jenkins, and I *will* hurt you.”

“Jeez, Liv, way to make an impression on the new girl.” Kylie indicated Mia, who seemed giddy at the exchange. “Be here tomorrow for breakfast, kay?”

“We’ll try.” Wyatt pulled Mia closer, and Kylie made a gagging sound from somewhere behind him. “Now, let’s go find a hotel, Prickly Pear.”

## ALL I NEED



WYATT

WYATT WAS HANGING by a thread throughout the drive to the hotel. The car was rapidly filling with tension, but not of the awkward kind. Rather, the small space between them was vibrating with delicious anticipation.

Mia sat next to him, hands folded in her lap as she sat in silence, which Wyatt was thankful for since the sound of her voice would have probably pushed him over the edge, and he had no doubt Liv would make true on her threat.

Wyatt counted three motels leaving West Roxbury, and he saw Mia glance out the window when they passed them, though she didn't ask why he wasn't stopping.

They drove for almost forty minutes, but Wyatt knew it would be worth it. As much as he wanted to get Mia somewhere private, he also wanted a more upscale hotel, one that had room service and wouldn't require them to leave the room. The game of denial that amped up their desire was an added bonus.

“The Four Seasons, how fancy,” Mia said when he pulled up next to the hotel.

Wyatt looked at her, not even cracking a smile at her sarcasm. “Out.”

Mia’s eyes blazed to life at the single word, and she quickly climbed out of the car, followed by Wyatt, who rushed to the front desk to secure a room.

It wasn’t until they were upstairs that he’d realized his mistake.

“Shit.” He looked around the room as if it’d offer some magic solution and ran his fingers through his hair with a groan.

“What?” Mia asked, her gaze following his.

“I don’t have any condoms on me.” Wyatt ruffled his fingers through his hair and sighed. “I’ll go get some.”

“We don’t need condoms,” Mia said, coming to stand in front of him and stroking a palm over his neck. “All I need is you, mon Bête.”

An overwhelm of emotions flooded Wyatt, his chest expanding as he pulled Mia close. She felt fragile in his arms, but Wyatt had no intention of letting her break.

“Let’s get you into the shower, ma Figue de Barbarie.” Mia raised an eyebrow, seeming ready to argue. “You’ve had a long day, let me take care of you.”

He was expecting some sort of pushback, but instead, Mia’s lips formed a cautious smile and she took Wyatt’s hand, letting him lead her to the bathroom.

There was something almost ritualistic about slowly undressing Mia and watching her step under the stream of water.

Mia's head lolled back with a soft moan when Wyatt massaged her scalp with shampoo, his palms caressed her body, stroking every inch, whispering the word *mine* into Mia's ear as her breaths became shorts pants.

Wyatt's touch turned urgent as he continued to worship Mia's body, his lips joining his hands to greedily taste her skin, trailing down her back until he was on his knees, spreading her legs wide.

When Wyatt finally put his mouth on her, Mia threw her head back with a cry. He had no intention of drawing out the torture and, holding Mia steady by her thighs, Wyatt licked into her with a crazed sort of desperation to feel her come undone on his tongue. He didn't stop until her knees were quivering and her forehead rested on the tiles.

He sprinkled soft kisses up Mia's back, nuzzling her neck and breathing her in.

"I missed you."

Mia reached back to thread her fingers through his hair. "I missed you, too."

Wyatt lifted his head, their eyes locking, and stroked Mia's cheek with his thumb.

"I love you," he said, part of him still scared that Mia would run at the sound of those three words.

"I love you, too."

Wyatt turned off the water and grabbed a towel to dry Mia. He was meticulous, rubbing over every spot to make sure she was completely dry, slowly driving Mia mad with need.

"Wyatt..." his name broke from her lips on a quivering breath.



“What am I going to do with you?” he asked in a low voice, pulling Mia against him and pressing his forehead to hers as he walked them to the bed.

“You can make love to me, for starters,” Mia said with a teasing smile, and Wyatt landed both palms on her ass cheeks, bringing her even closer.

“We’ll get there, Prickly Pear,” he said, his voice husky, his control wavering with every pear scented inhale. “But first you’re going to get a reminder of who you belong to.”

“Tu es un animal,” Mia moaned when Wyatt took a nipple into his mouth and sucked on it hard enough to sting.

With a smirk, Wyatt lightly pushed Mia onto the bed.

“Non,” he answered, following her down and glaring at her when she slid further up the bed and away from him with a sly smile, heat rushing through his veins. “Je suis une bête, *ta bête.*”

Wyatt edged closer to Mia and she inched back. Then, without warning, he grabbed her ankles and pulled her to him, settling between her thighs and pinning her to the bed with his weight.

With one hand, Wyatt restrained Mia’s wrists over her head, leaning on his elbow and slowly sliding his free palm up her body until it settled around her throat.

“You are *mine*,” he said with a low growl, not caring how uninhibited he sounded.

Wyatt teased his shaft through Mia’s folds before notching himself at her opening, greeted by her familiar warmth and wetness, sealing his mouth over hers to swallow the deep moan when he slowly entered her.

The unfettered sensation caused him to break the kiss with a groan, his fingers releasing Mia's wrists to free more of his arm for support. Mia's hands flew straight to his hair, tethering herself to him as he relinquished his hold on her throat in favor of lifting her leg to sink even deeper.

"Mia." It was a plea, a desperate and primal need to hear her voice, to know she was as deep in this moment as he was.

Mia tugged at his hair, forcing him to meet her witchy eyes.

"Mine," she said, working her words through her moans. "You are *mine*."

Wyatt captured Mia's lips, driving into her harder and faster until Mia was screaming, her back arching off the mattress as it tightened around him and pulled him deeper and over the edge with a guttural cry.

"That was amazing," Wyatt mumbled into Mia's shoulder. "Being inside you like that was amazing."

"I wish I wouldn't have stopped you the first time," Mia said in a sad voice, and Wyatt pushed himself up on his forearm to look at her face. "I wish I wouldn't have said the word, I'm sorry."

"No." Wyatt shook his head and feathered a finger over Mia's forehead. "What I did was inexcusable. I was scared of losing you and I hurt you, you're not the one who should apologize, I am."

"We both made a lot of mistakes." Mia cradled his jaw, turning to her side to look at him when he rolled off her. "I don't want to use them as an excuse to run anymore."

"Good." Wyatt felt as if the weight of the world was lifted from his shoulders. "What did your mother want that pushed

you to close off like that?”

“My mother?” Mia seemed confused.

“You were talking to her almost daily when you started to pull away from me.”

“Oh, she was pressuring me into attending her annual birthday banquet, nothing new.” Mia looked away, and Wyatt’s heart started pounding in his chest. She was closing off again.

Forcing himself to calm down, Wyatt decided he wasn’t walking on eggshells anymore. If Mia was serious about making their relationship work, she’d tell him the truth.

“So, it *was* something that happened during the meeting with Professor Flinch,” Wyatt said, tipping her head up and searching her eyes.

With a sad sigh, Mia nodded. “Hebert told me he was the one to offer you the position in the hub.”

“You didn’t know?” Wyatt asked, his heart breaking at the sadness in Mia’s eyes when she shook her head no. “Oh, Mia, I’m so sorry. I would have told you myself if I had known it was a secret.”

“I know.” Mia placed a soft hand on his face. “Herbert pushed me so hard towards that position, and then left me high and dry when things got a little difficult with the division. I understand he was doing what he thought best, but it seems we were both pawns in his grand plan.”

“I’ll step down and recommend you as my replacement if that’s what you want,” Wyatt said, pressing his forehead against hers.

“I don’t want that.” Mia kissed him softly. “I wouldn’t mind being officially named co-head of the hub, but not

instead of you.”

Wyatt smiled down at Mia, taking in her delicate features. “We’ll get to work on that the minute we’re back in Oxford.”

“And I want to go to breakfast at your parent’s house tomorrow.” Wyatt groaned in protest. “I want to meet them while I’m here, see what the big deal with your dad is.”

Wyatt shot Mia a dirty look, and she laughed.

“That was low.” Wyatt rolled off the bed. “I’m going to go clean up.”

“And when you come back you’re going to punish me?” Wyatt smirked at Mia, leaning down to whisper in her ear.

“You’ve got a mouth on you, Prickly Pear.” He landed a palm on her ass cheek, and Mia gasped. “Don’t move, I’ll be right back.”

## ART IMITATES LIFE



WYATT

“HOW LATE ARE WE?” Mia asked for the millionth time since they left the hotel to join Wyatt’s family for breakfast.

“It’s breakfast at my parent’s, not a formal dinner.” Wyatt pulled Liv’s car into the driveway.

“It’s after 10 am.”

“Which is even a bit early, I probably could have squeezed in another quickie.” Wyatt flashed Mia a grin, and she rolled her eyes.

“Enfoiré.”

“Don’t start, Prickly Pear, or I’ll be forced to turn the car around.”

“And do what?” Mia stuck her chin out, the dare flashing in her deep purple eyes.

Wyatt weaved his fingers through her hair and pulled her to him, covering her lips with his and thrusting his tongue into her sweet mouth. *Honey and heather*. He couldn’t get enough of her, of the challenges she threw at him, of how she craved his firm hand just as much as his soft touch.

A tap on Mia's window startled them apart, and they turned their heads to find Kylie's grinning face greeting them. Wyatt frowned when Kylie waved, and her grin became even wider.

"Come on, mon Bête, let's go inside," Mia said with a laugh, opening her door and letting out a small yelp when Kylie pulled her into a tight hug.

Wyatt stepped out of the car and threw a rolled-up tissue at Kylie. "Stop interrupting us all the time."

Kylie flipped him the bird before turning back to Mia. "I'm glad you decided to keep putting up with my insufferable brother."

"He is a bit of an *ass* sometimes, isn't he?" Mia said with a wicked smile, and Wyatt raised an eyebrow. They didn't need more than those gestures to know what was going to happen when they got back to the hotel, though Wyatt was wondering *why* Mia was so adamant about pushing his buttons.

"We'll catch up in a bit," Wyatt said to Kylie. She nodded and turned to walk to the house. His sister could be a pain in his ass, but in her defense, she could read a room.

"What's wrong?" Mia asked, her gaze scanning him with worry.

"I was going to ask you the same thing." Mia stared at him, clearly confused. "You know there's nothing I love more than to bend you over and spank your sexy ass raw, but you've been laying it thick with the sass since yesterday. I know you feel guilty about using your safe word but if that's what this is about, I'm not going to punish you. You did nothing wrong."

Mia searched Wyatt's face, her expression that of contemplation before she cracked a sly smile.

“I just like how you fuck me after a good spanking, Doctor Jenkins,” she said, patting his behind before continuing the trail to the front door. “Are you coming?”

“I need a sec,” Wyatt answered, adjusting his jeans. Mia laughed, blowing him a kiss before disappearing into the house.

A few minutes later, when Wyatt finally managed to cool down enough to follow Mia, he found her sitting at the breakfast bar with the papers he had left mid-work the previous day, her brow creased and a pink pen in her hand.

“I put them there for you to take and Mia just...” his dad sounded thoroughly entertained as he vaguely gestured in Mia’s direction before returning to the chopping board.

“You would have given them to me to go over, anyway,” Mia said, her frown deepening when reading one of his comments, then she muttered something in French and started scribbling furiously.

Wyatt opened his mouth to protest, before resigning himself to his fate with a sigh.

“Where’d Ky go?” he asked no one in particular.

“She’s up in her room,” Iris, his younger sister, answered, coming to stand next to their dad while mixing a bowl of batter. Her honey blonde hair was in a high ponytail, vibrant blue eyes fixed on Mia with a curiously amused gaze. “Can I also write up your comments?”

“Only if you let me write up yours.” Wyatt leaned on the bar with a grin, knowing full well that Iris would rather die than let him touch her research.

“As if.”

“Good morning.” Wyatt’s mom came down the stairs. Her eyes were still a bit droopy as if she had just woken up, which she probably had, placing a hand on Mia’s shoulder. “You must be Mia, I’m Trista.”

“Hi, I’m so glad to finally meet you,” Mia answered, then looked at the pen in her hand and at the surrounding people. “Oh, I’m being terribly impolite, aren’t I?”

“Please.” His mom laughed, taking the coffee his dad offered and tilting her head for a quick kiss. “I’ve been married to Brian Jenkins for three decades and raised his kids.”

Mia seemed slightly confused, her cheeks flaring pink and she capped the pen, placing it on top of the papers.

“She’s saying you fit right into the Jenkins household, Prickly Pear,” Wyatt said quietly into Mia’s ear, though judging by his parent’s and Iris’s smiles they heard him as well. He winked at his mom before kissing Mia’s temple. “I’m going to find Kylie, don’t let Riri touch my work.”

“Get your brother as well while you’re up there,” his mother called as he climbed two steps at a time.

“Wy.” Reed smiled broadly as he walked out of the bathroom, bright brown hair glistening and a freshly shaved face.

“Hey, look who finally got rid of his jungle beard.” Wyatt reached out to lightly smack Reed’s cheek, only to get his hand slapped away.

“Fuck off,” Reed said, still smiling. “I had to, do you remember Momma J’s reaction last time I showed up with five months’ worth of facial hair?”



“I’m kind of sorry you shaved the atrocity off now.” Wyatt cleared his throat before delivering his best impression of their grandmother. “What died on your face, Reed?”

Reed grinned and joined in. “Almost six months and you can’t give your old grandma the joy of seeing your handsome face.”

They both laughed and Wyatt patted Reed on the back. “Breakfast is ready, Mia is waiting to meet you.”

“Did you tell her how awesome I am?”

“You know I did,” Wyatt said over his shoulder as he made his way to Kylie’s room. He knocked and waited. After a few seconds without an answer, he knocked again. When Kylie still didn’t answer, Wyatt rolled his eyes and pushed the door open, finding Kylie hunched over a notebook on her bed, scribbling away, post-its in various colors scattered around her with short notes in her tidy handwriting. “New story idea?”

“Hmm, what?” Kylie looked up at him with a dazed gaze. “Oh, yeah.”

“Want to share?”

“It’s about a lord’s daughter who finds out she’s actually a pirate’s daughter and sneaks onto a merchant’s ship in hopes of finding her biological father, only to be revealed during a battle with said man who is trying to commandeer the ship she’s on, but since she’s smart and resourceful and way too driven to do what’s right, she basically saves the day. The captain sees her potential and makes her second in command, grooming her to take over once he retires.” Kylie’s eyes scan her notes, picking up an orange post-it and crinkling her nose at it. “I’m still working on the technicalities of that one.”

“Okay, so the conflict is that she’s a woman in command?” Wyatt asked, sitting at the edge of the bed.

“Sort of. The crew is on board, but the company that owns the ship finds it difficult to accept, so a young captain is appointed instead and they have to work side by side.”

“Let me guess.” Wyatt scanned the bed until his eyes landed on a cluster of purple post-its. “One of those says the new captain has a revered seaman father whose shadow he’s trying to step out of?” Kylie shrugged half-apologetically. “And your main characters start off hating each other until they don’t?”

“Something like that.” Kylie collected her notes and placed them on the nightstand. “Art imitates life. Not so much the other way around, in my case.”

“Are you still gloomy over Gustav?” Wyatt asked, attempting not to sound *too* judgmental.

“No.” Kylie sighed, leaning back on her headboard. “I actually met a guy, Ben, the new owner of the Velvet Keg.”

“Kylie.” This time Wyatt didn’t bother to hide the scolding tone.

“Don’t worry, I’m off the dating scene. We’re just bar buddies,” Kylie said with a sad smile. “I’m bummed because Audrey is moving to Ohio.”

“Oh, that sucks.” Audrey was Kylie’s roommate and best friend. Her mother was their dad’s cousin and her father his closest friend. Audrey and her family lived three houses down from theirs and she and Kylie were inseparable since birth.

“Yeah, well, life in general sucks, so...” Kylie threw her hands up in the air.

Wyatt scootched close and put his arm around Kylie's shoulders. As much as they got on each other's nerves, he hated seeing her like this.

"It's going to be okay, Ky." He squeezed her, and she nodded before placing her head on his shoulder.

They sat like that for a bit before Kylie sighed and looked up at him. "Let's go downstairs."

When they reached the open floor dining and kitchen area, it was as hectic as Wyatt remembered it being, bursting with life and laughter and silly scientific arguments he was pretty sure were unique to his family.

Only today Mia was in the center of it all, setting the table with his siblings as if she'd been doing it for years.

"I really like her," Kylie said, bumping her shoulder into Wyatt.

"Yeah." Wyatt smiled, flooded with a sense of joy he never knew existed. "So do I."

**THE END**



**Thank you so much for reading *The Lab Wars*.**

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