



**TRIPLET BABY SECRET**  
*for my Best Friend's  
Brother*

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# TRIPLET BABY SECRET FOR MY BEST FRIEND'S BROTHER

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A BWWM SECRET BABY ROMANCE

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## NINA

I seriously can't believe this.

Palm trees, sweet humidity, the rush of the tide out every window. Steph's fancy, designer towel is plush beneath me. The bikini I borrowed from her is not exactly my style—a two piece that reveals more than I ever would back home, but hey, it's vacation, right?—and I can feel the sun on me, on every inch of my legs, my stomach, my face. It's glorious.

Coming from a northeast winter, to *this*? It's what the bougie patrons of the country club I worked at in high school always talked about. 'Heading somewhere tropical before the frost sets in.' It was something I rolled my eyes at, something I never, ever dreamed I would be able to participate in. Of course, that was before I met Steph.

I roll onto my side and lift my sunglasses (well, *her* sunglasses—I could never afford these chunky, gorgeous things). My college best friend is draped over a pop-up bar on the beach, schmoozing up the girl who's making our next round of Mai Tais. Steph says something that makes the girl giggle, then blush. I roll my eyes, smiling as I settle on my stomach.

The Hawaiian beach is astonishingly empty, only a few locals jogging here and there. Steph insisted we visit her brother's beach house here, which is, of course, built far, far from the fancy resorts and tourist hotspots. *He hates people*, she reminded me. *So it's perfect*. I'd playfully asked why he didn't just buy his own island, and she'd told me, in all

seriousness, that he had his eye on a certain A-list celebrity's. Sometimes I feel like my friend isn't from another tax bracket—more like a different planet.

I debate slipping off my bikini. I don't want tan lines, and there's pretty much no one around except for Steph—who played college volleyball with me and has seen me in various states of undress—and the bartender, who is clearly too absorbed in Steph's attention to notice me. What the hell? I'm on vacation.

Feeling a little reckless, I undo the tie and settle into the towel, pillowing my hands beneath my chin. The sun feels unreal after a particularly harsh November. I focus on drinking it in.

“It's not a nudist beach, you know.”

I jolt, looking up in shock to find Steph's brother towering over me. I gulp and clutch my bikini to my front. “I—I know that. I was just—”

“I'm joking, Nina. Relax.”

Relax? *Relax?* *When you're here?* My face floods with heat. I debate tying my bikini back on, but lying the way I am, I'd just look like an overturned bug, writhing to get upright. I force myself to do as he says, and relax. And just to put to the test how *relaxed* I am, I say, “Sit.”

He sighs, but does as I invite him to, sliding elegantly onto the beach chair erected under our tent. I bite my cheek, seizing the moment to drink him in.

I've known Sebastian Mathews for over five years now, and I've never shared more than a brief conversation of niceties with him. Usually he's busy, with his group of hyper-masculine, stupidly gorgeous rich friends. Or otherwise, a woman. A model. An actress. The daughter of some New York City Oscar-winning director. I happen to know, though, that his friends are at a soccer match in Europe—and that he just broke up with his most recent girlfriend.

For the first time since I've known him, in at least some new, slight way, Sebastian Mathews is...vulnerable.

He doesn't look it. He looks like he has never had a care in the world. His rich chestnut curls are wind-tousled. His beard is flawlessly shaven and shaped, sharpening the arrow edges of his jaw and chin. He wears designer sunglasses that make him look like he's in some kind of European perfume ad, rather than on his own, practically private, beach. The cream-colored linen shirt he wears is open at the collar, revealing a golden-tan triangle of his muscular chest. The sleeves are rolled to the elbow. I try not to drool over his strong forearms, his elegant hands.

The first time Steph admitted to me—in a library at our private liberal arts college—that she was rich, I thought she meant, like, *well off*. I was not thinking in the right language. She was talking yachts, mansions, islands. She was talking real estate: as in, *castles*. Her father and grandfather basically built the real estate market on the east coast, and have long since advanced to Europe and Asia. And despite his playboy image, according to my internet searching, Sebastian Mathews is poised to outsell his forefathers.

That is, if Steph doesn't get to it first. *Speaking of Steph... where the hell is she? Doesn't she see I need to be rescued?* I hear the bartender giggle again. Steph isn't coming to save me anytime soon. But I have next to no idea how to even *talk* to Sebastian. Steph might come from his world, but she's learned how to walk in mine. Despite her riches, we both worked on campus in college, wrote for the paper, and even made grocery money as baristas. Seb, on the other hand, has three sports cars, and is considering buying an island from an A-list actor.

“Are you...” *Don't say anything stupid*, I beg myself. *Just treat him like a normal person!* “How's work?”

He snorts. “Work is work. Same shit, different day.”

I work as a writer for an online magazine. I cover everything from beauty to travel to college sports. I'm pretty sure *my* job is the same shit, different day. “Weren't you just hanging out with a Saudi prince in Croatia?”

He looks at me, a sudden, wicked grin lighting his face. “You stalking me, Nina?”



I flush, wishing I could sit up and look him in the face. But I'm afraid I'd lose my dignity faster than I already am, lying on my stomach beside him, right now. "Yes," I say finally. "My methods are very professional. I shop at my local grocery store and accidentally glance at the tabloids."

His grin sharpens, and he removes his sunglasses. I'm startled, not for the first time, at the electric, vivid sapphire of his eyes. "You're funny. Did I know that before?"

"Probably not."

"You're really squirming. I'll look away if you want to sit up." His smile, suddenly, is not so rakish. It's almost warm. "See? I'm looking away."

I roll my eyes, but to be honest, I can't resist the temptation to get even a little bit more comfortable in his presence. I'm already in a bikini. Well, *half* in a bikini. I quickly sit up, checking to make sure he's still looking away as I fumble with the tie. "Don't look."

"Not looking."

My hands shake as I try to tie the strings. "This is why I never wear bikinis."

He chuckles. "Shame. You wear it well." He's still looking away when he says, "Let me help you with that, Nina. This is actually pathetic."

I flush, but I can't help but laugh. "Can you do it without looking?"

"Easily."

I bite my lip, pressing my palms to the front of the bikini to keep it in place as I shift my back toward him. An instant later, his warm, deft fingers alight there, dancing for half a heartbeat before falling away.

"There," he says, sitting back. "Easy as pie."

I scooch into a sitting position, happy to be able to look him in the face now. That in itself is...well, a new sensation. I've never even wanted to talk to Sebastian. I'm not even sure

what to say now, as our eyes meet. As I still feel the ghost of his fingers on my skin.

“Well,” I say, bringing my knees to my chest and resting my cheek on them to look at him. “Are you going to tell me what’s bothering you, or are we both going to pretend it’s normal that we’re even talking right now like human beings?”

He sighs, but I note the faint smile that touches the corners of his mouth. “My father was supposed to join us on this trip.”

“Oh. I had no idea.” When Steph begged me to go with her, insisting she pay for everything, she said it was purely to get drunk on the beach and hook up with delicious strangers. She’s as eager to please her father as Sebastian is—actually, maybe even more so these days, now that she, too, is getting into the family business. “Steph didn’t mention that.”

“Of course she didn’t. You probably wouldn’t have come if you knew our oppressive bully of a father would be at every family meal. That’s *why* she brought you, I’m sure. To be a buffer.”

Huh. I hadn’t considered that. I’ve met the Mathews patriarch many times, but like with his son, I’ve never exchanged more than a few words with him. He’s cold and austere. I’ve never thought of him as a bully though. “Sorry I can’t help out. I’d be a buffer if he were here. For both of you.” Oh, my God. Why did I just say that?

“Generous of you, but you don’t know the man enough to fear him.”

True. “Do you? Fear him?”

“No. But I...dislike him. More often than not.”

I can’t relate to that. My parents aren’t billionaires running a real estate dynasty known across the globe, but they’re good, salt-of-the-earth people, prone to quiet mornings, huge Christmas dinners, and laughing easily. I almost laugh now, picturing Sebastian Mathews at my parents’ ranch. The image is too ridiculous to even seem possible.

“Either way,” Seb says, leaning back and sighing, “you’re a good friend for coming. I assume you knew she’d be

ditching you for local ass.”

I steal a peek at Steph, who is now behind the bar, leaning against it as the bartender tells some tale that has them both laughing. I grin. “Yeah. I don’t mind though. She’d do it for me. She *has* done it for me.”

“She tried to do it for you this time around too.”

I look at him quizzically. “She was trying to hook me up with someone?” This is news to me. “Who?”

Seb’s smile this time is completely different. Not mischievous. Not amused.

Seductive.

And suddenly it all makes sense. Her begging me to come, even if she knew her father wouldn’t be there. Her insisting we stay at her brother’s place, rather than somewhere in town. Her insisting I wear this bikini. Today. Him, being here.

“*You?*” I ask shrilly. “What—are you serious?”

“You sound surprised.”

I laugh in shock. “Yeah, well. I am. Me and *you*? Like, in what world?”

His smile withers slightly. “Am I so revolting to you?”

“No! But...we’re just different. Like, so different. Too different.”

“I see.”

He can’t be offended, can he? *Why* would he be offended? I’m just some girl his sister went to school with. He could have anyone. He’s *had* anyone, and everyone. I’m no prude, and I’ve certainly gotten around myself. But Sebastian Mathews is on a completely different level.

“Don’t be like that,” I say, reading the notch between his brows as offense. I don’t think as I reach for him, placing my hand on his arm. “Don’t even try to tell me that *you’ve* thought of *me* that way.”

He looks out at the sea. Then slowly, his eyes shift to mine. I've never noticed how thick, how dark his lashes are. How rich the color of his irises is. It's hypnotizing. "Since you're not going to ask, I guess we'll never know, Nina."

*What the hell? Has he thought of me like that?* Before I can fumble out the question, he's standing, dusting his hands off and replacing his sunglasses.

"See you later," he says, and he disappears like he hasn't just kind of dropped a bomb in my lap.

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## SEB

“Well?” I ask. “How was the bartender?”

Steph drags herself in, grinning. Shortly after she and Nina got home from the beach, Steph was gone again. Now she’s back so the three of us can go into town for dinner. “She was...*sweet*. All those Mai Tais. Is that totally gross and cliché to say?”

I snort. “I’m not sure if it’s gross. It’s certainly cliché.”

She sighs, trailing into the kitchen and pouring herself a glass of water. Her hair is mussed, her face slightly sunburnt. She looks happier than I’ve seen her in a long time. I’m a little envious. “I miss being out here. Agree or disagree—Dad ruins everything on the mainland.”

“Agree.” But he’s the key to our success, and as much as neither of us wants to admit it, he’s also the key to our pride. Neither of us can be proud of our work if he isn’t. “Go get dressed. We’re going to be late, and I had to pull a lot of strings for this reservation.”

“Sorry, I’m gonna have to request a raincheck.”

I straighten, annoyed. As soon as I got back from the beach—and my strange but illuminating little talk with Nina—I got to work. I swore I wouldn’t do it while I was out here. This was supposed to be a break from work and life and the stressors of our family. But I couldn’t help myself, and honestly, I’ve been looking forward to a fine island dinner with my sister and Nina.

Perhaps Nina more than my sister. I admit that when Steph suggested I go out with Nina, I was deeply amused. Nina is beautiful. I've always thought so. She has rich, dark brown skin, and silken corkscrew curls that she has a habit of hiding behind. But she's young. Naïve. And to be honest, I've always gotten a feeling of aloof indifference from her—like she could only ever like me against her better judgement.

But speaking with her today on the beach, I got the sense that I don't know her at all. Even if she did basically say she wouldn't date me even if I were the last man on earth. I have every intention of testing her willpower on that claim.

"Besides," says Steph, smirking as if reading my mind, "don't tell me you're not at least a *little* intrigued about her. She's amazing in bed."

I look at my sister in dead astonishment, and she bursts into laughter.

"*Kidding*," Steph says, waving a hand at me dismissively. "I mean, I've heard she is—obviously, I've never enjoyed her company that way. Oh, my God, relax, Seb. We're just friends. Swearsies."

I cock a brow at her, but I know Steph better than that. If she were actually interested in Nina, we wouldn't be having this conversation. She's never been good at sharing toys. "Fine. I'll take her out if she still wants to go. But I doubt that she would—"

"Nina!" Steph cuts me off, looking past me with light in her eyes as Nina descends the stairs and rounds the corner. "There you are! I was just telling Seb that I'm beat, and the two of you will just have to go out to dinner without me. Cool?"

Nina's eyes glimmer with amused fury. "Cool. Of course." She wears a long summer dress the color of dark sapphires, and matching sandals. Pearls glint in her ears. She looks like she's stepped out of a dream. "I mean, if Seb doesn't mind?"

"Oh, no. Not in the slightest," Steph says, clapping me on the shoulder. She turns her back on Nina and throws me a

mischievous wink. “You two play nice.”

She leaves Nina and I alone. It’s already dark, a starry sky pressing against the windows of my massive hillside mansion. Suddenly, the silence in the huge house feels vacuous. Impossible to fill. Nina bites her lip, looking bashful as she meets my eyes.

“Do you?” she asks nervously. “Mind, I mean?”

“Do you?”

She smiles and crosses the room, stopping before me. “About what I said earlier—I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“No offense taken.”

“You’re totally full of it. It bothered you. Admit it.” Her smile is...cute. Irresistible. It’s kind of amazing I never noticed just how electric her presence is. Or is it? I’ve never looked twice at her. Maybe I *am* blind, and she’s right to be shocked that Steph thinks we might enjoy one another. “Or am I crazy?”

“Oh, you’re definitely crazy.” But not in a way that I dislike. I allow a smile. “Your vehemence surprised me, is all.”

“We’ve never even had a full conversation,” she points out. “I mean, this is probably the first.”

“True. So. Should we do as Steph wishes, and go get to know one another? We could come out of it hating each other, you know.”

“Hey,” Nina says with a shrug and a smile. “At least it will be interesting.”

---

The rooftop restaurant is beautiful, settled at the end of a peninsula and surrounded by a night-blackened sea. It’s so clear out here in the jungle that every star seems visible, duplicated in the dark waters below.

We order a bottle of wine, and even before we're drinking, I think Nina is drunk. Not literally. But on...this. Me, maybe. There's a faint smile on her full lips, which are painted in a rich plum that only highlights the luster of her dark skin. She seems effervescent, light on her feet. Bubbly. Is she always like this? Or am I having some kind of an effect on her? Is it terrible that that idea pleases me?

"To first dates," she says when the wine arrives, raising her glass to me. She practically giggles as she says it. "If that's what this is, I guess."

I tap my glass against hers. "Is that what you want it to be?"

"Honestly? I haven't decided yet."

"That's fair." I study her, our eyes meeting and holding. I'm used to people looking away from me. Flinching, even, sometimes. I'm an intimidating person. Or, my family name is. My wealth. The *meaning* of me, more than the man. But it seems Nina has gotten past whatever bashfulness infected her on the beach today. She seems, and maybe I'm crazy—like she wants to be here. "Tell me about yourself."

She sighs, reclining. We're isolated from the other tables on the rooftop, hidden away by lush, manicured hedges. Torches flicker against the dark. "Well. You know I went to college with Steph. I'm a writer now."

"Boyfriend?"

"Oh, God. Do you really think I'd be out here with you if I had a boyfriend?" She snorts, giving me a look of humor or derision. I can't tell which. "What about you? Tell me about you."

"Weren't you on about knowing *me* earlier? Besides, you *are* a writer, aren't you? I can't imagine you came here for vacation without even looking me up." In truth, this isn't something I'm just asking her—this is a point I always feel out when I'm with someone new. A girlfriend. A friend. A business partner. In my experience, people never want *you*.



They want what you can offer. “Tell me what you know about me, Nina.”

“You’re cocky. That’s all I know, because I’m learning it right now.” She cocks a brow. Derision. Definitely not humor. “Look, I know you’re rich and talented and handsome and everything—”

“You think I’m handsome?”

“I *know* you’re handsome. But look, I’m not here to be like, patronized, OK? I thought this might be fun, because earlier, on the beach, you were...I don’t know. Let’s just say you weren’t like I thought you would be.”

“And now?”

“And now you’re being exactly how I thought you would be.” She takes a sip of her wine and cocks her head at me. “You know, even if we date, or sleep together, or whatever, I’m not going to just vanish when it’s over. I’m here for Steph. I’ll always be here for Steph. So if I sense this is going sideways, I’m going to bail.”

To protect my sister, and their relationship? It’s noble, weirdly. And it makes me think Nina doesn’t give two shits what she can find out about me on the internet. “Fine. You win. I’ll tell you about myself.”

Her grin lights up the whole rooftop. And for the first time in as long as I can remember, I actually feel...safe. Like she actually doesn’t want anything from me. “Do go on,” she says, leaning forward. “I’m all ears.”

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## NINA

The dinner is...too easy.

When Steph bailed, I felt a pang of total terror, and one of pure, naïve hope. I've never had a long-term boyfriend. I've never even had a real *boyfriend*, actually. More like flings here and there. Sometimes for a month, sometimes for a few, sometimes for one night and one night alone. And that's because I've just never felt a desire for something more.

Maybe it's the ambience of the restaurant. Maybe it's the absolute bizarreness of he and I, together, after knowing each other for half a decade and never having had a full conversation.

Maybe, though—it's him. As soon as he's decided I'm not an enemy, or some long-con gold-digger after his and his family's wealth, he just opens right up. Suddenly, those dark eyes are bright, almost glowing. Suddenly, the conversation is flowing. Suddenly, he's laughing. Easily. Often. And I feel like I'm drunk, but I'm not. I feel like I've known him forever.

*How the hell is this even possible?* It's like the Seb I've always thought I knew is just a mask, just a face that the real one wears to get through life, to get away from those who would take advantage of him. I'm suddenly so grateful that Steph brought me on this vacation, even if it was for sneaky purposes. In truth, anyway, I would do anything for her. But tonight, it seems like she did something for me. She must think highly of me if she wants her brother to consider me as a potential date.

“Oh, damn,” he says suddenly, looking around. “I think they’re waiting on us.”

I blink, realizing at the same time Seb does that we’re the last of the restaurant’s guests on the roof. Everyone else has gone. The stars have shifted position, and over the water, a storm is slowly rolling in. How long have we been talking? It felt like half an hour, but when I check my phone, I realize it’s midnight.

“Shit, I’m sorry,” I say to Seb. “I wasn’t even paying attention to the time. We should probably get out of here.”

He meets me out front, where I wait beside his car, some fancy, brilliant red thing I couldn’t even guess the name of. When he ducks out of the restaurant, he has a bottle of wine in hand, and a grin on his face.

Warmth rushes through me. I thought we were going to call the night quits. I thought he might even be annoyed that I took up so much of his time. But he wants this to keep going? I try not to look too pathetically pleased. “More wine?”

“I know a place. Can I take you?” His voice is low, his eyes glittering. There’s...*something* in the way he asks me that question. Another layer. Another implication.

*No, no, no. No way. That is over the line. That can’t be what Steph wanted.*

Right?

But my heart is fluttering, my pulse going wild. I can’t even recall a time where a man made me feel so excited. And I can’t turn him down. “Where are we going?”

---

I try not to overthink this.

Wine in hand, I follow Seb down the rocks. We left the car in the restaurant’s private parking lot, and now we’re navigating by starlight. In the distance, lightning flashes, illuminating huge dark clouds as they devour the stars.

“Careful.” Seb stops, offering his hand. I take it, holding fast as he guides me down the sloping rocks. My sandals sink into plush white sand, silver in the starlight. “You OK?”

“Yes,” I whisper. I don’t know why I feel the need to be quiet here—maybe because it feels like the rest of the island is already asleep. His smile glows in the dark. “You’re not going to kill me, are you?”

“This would be a pretty obvious way to do it, don’t you think?” And to my shock, he slides his hand to my waist, directing me gently toward the beach ahead. “And besides, I try to keep that kind of thing for the third or fourth date.”

“So not funny.”

“You’re right. It’s not.” He leans forward, his breath brushing my ear. “I’m sorry, Nina.”

I flush, biting my cheek to keep from saying anything stupid. The ocean is in sight now, over a pale dune. Its froth seems to glow as it rushes up over the sand. “Is it safe? To be on the beach this late at night?”

“Of course. But if it makes you uncomfortable, we can leave at any time.” He says this very seriously, his palm still resting on my hip. “You just say the word.”

“No. I want to stay.” And that’s what scares me.

Seb says nothing. Instead, he brushes past me, his fingers seeking mine. In his other hand, he carries the blanket he pulled out of the small, pristine trunk of his fancy car. When he reaches a place he deems good enough, he lays it out, and holds my hand as I carefully sink onto it, my dress pooling around me like a shadow.

“Comfortable?” he asks, searching my face as he sits beside me. “Because—”

“It’s good, Seb.” I smile, hoping he doesn’t see *quite* how pleased I am with the direction the night is taking. “I didn’t know you had it in you to be so romantic.”

“Is this romantic?” he asks, giving me a joking smile as he pops the cork out of the wine. “I thought this was what all

guys did on first dates.”

“So it *is* a date.”

“Of course it is, Nina. I bought you wine, after all.” When he winks, I get a glimpse of that funnier, more vulnerable side of him. It fills me with a desperate warmth. It makes me want to not mess this up—but I have no idea how to do that. “Does that freak you out?”

“Yes, and no.” When he offers the wine, I drink straight from the bottle. It’s delicious. Velvety and sweet and rich. I hand it back, and he drinks too. I think about how, indirectly, our lips just touched. *Am I seriously this prudish? I sound like I’ve never even kissed a guy!* But right now, this all feels new. Like uncharted territory. “Do me a favor.”

“Anything.”

“What if we just...don’t worry about it? What comes next? What if we just enjoy this? In the moment?” I don’t know where my conviction comes from, or really where those words come from. But they’re exactly what I realize I’m thinking: I’m scared of what comes next. Because maybe I like him right now, maybe I like this—but he and I don’t add up. We don’t make sense. And there’s a reason why we’ve never had a conversation before today.

But if I think about that, I won’t be able to enjoy this. And right now, that’s what I’m doing. Even if it’s wild and frivolous and maybe a little stupid. Even if it can, really, only end badly.

Seb stares at me. He’s reclining back on his elbows, his sapphire eyes dancing in the dark. “I’d like that,” he finally says, softly. “I would really like that.”

And I feel it. That connection again. A deep, throbbing electricity. Something way deeper than attraction—it’s chemistry. I wait, gazing at him. I beg him to do it. To make the first move. To prove I’m not crazy.

His eyes slide to my lips. My heart is in my throat. Am I panicking? Am I imagining this? Is he not feeling it? Is he *messing* with me?

“Seb,” I say, my voice barely a whisper. The ocean rushes softly down the beach. Thunder sounds in the distance. “I think I’m going to need you to kiss me now.”

“Is that so?” His voice has a lilt of humor. Is he making fun of me? “What if I think I’m going to need *you* to kiss *me*, Nina?”

The way he says my name. *Jesus*. My heart is going so fast I can barely breathe. And then he raises his hand, and brushes his knuckles over my cheekbone. “Seb,” I begin, not sure what I’m going to say. Not trusting myself. “Maybe this is a mistake. Maybe—”

He sits up, hand sliding gently into my hair. And our mouths meet.

Fire catches and floods through me, my heart leaping into my throat. I tell myself to play it cool. Go easy. But no sooner do I think this than my hands are in his hair, my lips are parting, my mouth is welcoming his tongue. He tastes like wine. He smells like sandalwood. His beard is rough but silken beneath my hands, and before I can even think it through, I’m letting him pull me onto his lap.

*This crazy*, I think suddenly. *This is fucking crazy! Isn’t it? I basically just met him!* But that’s not true, is it? And even if it were, would that alone be enough to stop me? When I feel like this—a way I’ve never felt before?

His hands are locked on my waist. His tongue is in my mouth. And that’s when thunder claps violently overhead, and a cold, torrential tropical rain begins. I expect him to pull away, to maybe laugh as he gathers everything and rushes me back up the rocks to the car. But he doesn’t falter, not even for a second.

And I realize this is really going to happen.

*Fuck reason. Fuck mature.* Steph wanted us together. There’s nothing standing in our way. And if there is, I’m not seeing it. If I were, I’d look away willfully.

I want him.

Rain drenches us instantly. Lightning illuminates the beach. At once, the whole thing feels dreamlike and surreal; impossible. And at the same time, every inch of his skin against mine burns, delicious and near and electric. His hands rush over my breasts, dropping to my thighs. He rakes my dress up over them, his mouth never leaving mine. We're crossing the line. I'm committed to it now. I'm not looking back.

I reach for him, fumbling with his belt. It's been a little while since I've been with a guy. But to be fair, this isn't just *a guy*. I don't even want to think about the implications of sleeping with Seb Mathews. But I think he and I can both agree—it's just sex. No matter what else I'm feeling.

I sit up on my knees, breath hitching as his hands drop, and he pulls himself free of his pants. Our eyes lock. His dark hair hangs wet in his eyes. But there is a clear question in them: *Are you sure you want to do this?*

But I couldn't stop myself now even if I wanted to. I wrap my arms around his shoulders, holding his gaze as I slowly lower myself onto his lap. My eyes flutter shut, pleasure flooding through me. I bite my cheek, but I can't keep a soft groan from rising to my lips. He takes my face in his hands and kisses me hard, his tongue gliding into my mouth as I softly grind my hips against him. He grunts in pleasure. Rain crashes down around us.

*Is this really happening?* He feels so good. So, *so* good. I can barely breathe; I can barely hold onto him as his body answers mine. My fingers tangle in his hair. He kisses me roughly, his hands running over my body, falling to rest on my hips. He grips me hard, his fingers digging into me.

"Nina," he grunts, and I understand. In one motion, he has me on my back on the blanket. His mouth is against my neck, his teeth sinking into my skin, his tongue flicking over it almost in apology. Suddenly, he has my hands above my head, one of his locked around my wrists. My dress is hoicked up to my waist as he begins to fuck me harder. "You're so beautiful."

I laugh, amused and dazed and drunk on pleasure. *I'm* beautiful? He's insane. His eyes when they meet mine are electric blue, glowing in the dark. The furrow between his brow makes him look fierce and dominant as he thrusts into me.

His hand falls between my legs and I gasp at the intensity, the immediacy of the pleasure it brings. "Do you like that?" His voice is a low growl.

My bucking hips answer him when my voice cannot. I lock my thighs around him, arching my back as his thumb moves in deft circles between them. *Fuck*. I feel the pleasure coming fast and hard now. I'm helpless as I crash into it.

"Seb," I gasp. "Fuck, Seb, I—"

He grunts, plunging into me again, triggering my climax so hard I can't breathe. I throw back my head, hearing my own moans of pleasure as if from a distance. Pleasure shatters through me, only intensifying when I hear him groan, his body going rigid. His hand releases me, and I clutch his rock-hard biceps as though to anchor myself, pleasure still flooding through me in wave after dizzying wave.

His breathing is labored as he bends over me, our mouths meeting again. This kiss is gentler, sweeter. More tender as both of us slowly come off the high of orgasm. After a moment, he practically collapses next to me, his chest rising and falling rapidly. Our fingers are intertwined.

We lie there in the rain. I realize I'm smiling. Stupidly, like a girl on her very first date with the cutest boy in school. When I finally look at him, I find him studying me.

"You're a good sport," he says, brushing soaked curls from my eyes. "Most women wouldn't be so...invigorated by a night like this."

"You must not know many women," I say with a laugh. I can't think of many women who *wouldn't* be invigorated by a night like this. Then I think of his dating history, of the perfect, plastic girls he's photographed with for tabloids and blogs. "At least not any real ones."



“Are you? A real one?” His fingers stroke my lips, our eyes still locked. “You felt pretty fucking real to me.”

Heat dances in my belly. He’s flirting with me. He’s feeling me out.

Maybe this isn’t just sex.

“Yes, I am.” I roll onto my side, the chill of the rain finally getting to me. Seb seems to notice, sliding an arm around my shoulders and pulling me close. “And you felt pretty fucking real, too, for the record.”

His smile is crooked. Mischievous. “So. I guess we’ve been wasting the last five years.”

“Seems that way.”

“Maybe we should do this again.” His eyes still hold mine, but even in the dark, I can see, maybe for the first time ever—a hint of uncertainty. Maybe I’m not the only one who feels like a smitten teenager. *How is that even possible? And why the hell does it make me so happy?* “That is, if you’re up for it.”

*Dangerous.* Super dangerous. I can’t expect to *date* Seb. Sex? OK. Maybe. No strings attached. No family minefields. But to date him...wouldn’t I have to be, or at least become, one of those plastic girls?

But still, I don’t have it in me to say no. After this, I don’t think I’ll ever be able to say no to him again. It’s more than the sex. It’s *him*. I like him, genuinely. And our chemistry is... well, unexpected. And very, very intense. Maybe this is just one of those things you can’t plan for. Maybe it’s just one of those things you take—while it lasts.

I decide that I’ll let this take its course. No expectations. No strings attached. And certainly, *certainly* no love.

“What the hell?” I say, bending over to press my lips to his. His smile becomes wicked. “I’m up for it if you are, Sebastian Mathews.”

And it feels like the start of something totally, completely, truly new.

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## SEB

If only we could stay on vacation forever.

But almost as soon as Nina and I have struck something up, it's time to go back to the real world. We don't even get a second date. And it's not for lack of trying.

The day after our night together, my father calls.

"I hope you and your sister are having a good time doing God knows what on that tropical fucking island." Though the words are bitter, his voice is perfectly, utterly cool. Calm. Almost monotone. And yet, it sets my teeth immediately on edge. "I understand you think you deserve a vacation. Perhaps in your mind, you do. But in reality, if you have any interest at all in inheriting the empire my father and I have built for you, I suggest you bring your ass back home."

And without waiting for my reply, the line dies. I try to insist that Nina and Steph stay behind and enjoy a few more days of freedom, but my sister isn't interested in playing second fiddle to me, apparently. Not anymore.

"Yeah, right," she says, when I tell her about Dad's phone call. She gives me a side-eye, and immediately begins hurling things into her Chanel suitcase. "Like I'm going to just let you go home and get all the glory. You know *I'm* going to inherit that stupid empire too, right?"

And just like that, it's decided. It's not even evening by the time we're on the family jet, flying back to the mainland.

Against my better judgement, and all of my desire—I steer clear of Nina. It’s easier said than done on a private plane. After our...*moment of passion* on the beach, we’ve barely spoken. We left soon after the sex, and parted ways at the house. The following morning, I found her in the sunroom eating breakfast with Steph. When I entered, she flicked a look of amusement at me, then quickly began to ignore me—as per our agreement.

See, it’s clear that Steph isn’t bothered by the idea of her brother and best friend sleeping together. Not now, at least. But Nina pointed out that Steph can be...mercurial. We decided that if we wanted anything to continue, it would be smart for it to be kept private, even from Steph. Perhaps *especially* from Steph. We agreed that we would tell my sister we didn’t click, that nothing happened, that there was no spark, and there never would be. To me, it feels like a win, either way. Nina and I seem to be implying the same thing: there are no strings attached to this, whatever *this* is. No expectations. And therefore, no consequences.

And as it turns out, keeping a secret together is actually quite hot.

This is new for me. Every girlfriend I’ve ever had has been advertised—by herself or the paparazzi—all over the internet. I’ve never had a secret one. If that’s what Nina even is, and I have a suspicion she is not.

What she is, right now, in this moment, is a girl halfway down the aisle of my father’s plane. A girl whose dark eyes keep sliding to mine. A girl who is biting her lip in an unconscious way that is making me crazy. Even though that night was barely a day ago, I feel like I haven’t touched her in forever. It’s a new sensation, this craving. And it needs to be answered. Soon. Now, preferably.

The occasion comes when Steph, sitting across from Nina, dozes off. Only a moment later, Nina is sneaking quietly down the aisle. Smiling, she arranges herself across from me.

After a moment of watching me, her eyes bright with amusement, she asks, “Is this too obvious?”

I sit back, studying her. Trying not to be too obvious myself. “Perhaps.”

“No problem.” She stands and brushes past me, her fingers dancing over my arm. A moment later, I hear the lavatory door close. It doesn’t lock.

I know I should be smarter about this. Steph would be annoyed at being kept in the dark, and I’m not interested in any drama if she finds out about Nina and I. Even though the lie, at the moment, is quite small, my sister has a penchant for grudges.

But the pull of temptation is too strong. I stand discreetly, and follow Nina into the lavatory. As soon as I close the door behind me, her hands are on me. I reach for her, taking her by the waist and pushing her against the wall. Her mouth meets mine, opening pliantly, her hands running over my chest. I feel her body, her hips, her waist, her breasts, then take her face in my hands and thrust my tongue into her mouth. She moans softly, and hunger awakens in me. I want her again. I want her the way I had her on that beach.

But though I sense she wants me too, she’s more reasonable and rational than I am. And as soon as she’s kissed me, she’s pulling away, a devilish smile on her lips. She slips out the door, leaving me out of breath, stiff with want.

Is this how it’s going to be? Stolen kisses and touches? A dark secret, throbbing like a heart between us? Brief, hungry, desperate moments, clandestine? Dangerous?

I smooth my clothes, check my reflection in the mirror. My eyes are lit up. I silently return to my seat and wait to land. All the while, I feel Nina’s gaze on me, heavy as velvet.

*Is this how it’s going to be?*

Because I’m quite sure I like it.

---

Back in the city, I report to my father’s downtown office rather than my penthouse. I’ve been bracing myself since he called—

maybe since before I left. The man doesn't approve of vacations, or of downtime, or really, of anything that doesn't somehow increase his wealth or power.

He'd never admit it, but I've been able to manage more of a balance in my life than he has ever been able to do in his. Of course, this has led to some...*less productive* times. Weeks-long binges on yachts or in princes' palaces the world over. Partying across Europe, hopping countries like bars. Although in college I was able to maintain flawless grades, I spent much of my time there drunk, and the rest of it hungover.

I've not always been the virtual workaholic I am now, even with a vacation here and there, mostly at the behest of Steph. But it's not good enough for my father. It never is.

"There you are, come in, come in." Impatient as ever, though his lukewarm voice could be mistaken for simple boredom. My father gestures for me to enter his office, and with a steeling breath, I do. "What the hell are you waiting for? Did you think I called you back for nothing? Sit down."

I do. My father's office isn't to my taste. Or maybe my taste is the way it is because I don't want to be anything like him. Hard to say. Rich leather and mahogany furniture make up much of the space, the walls an exposed brick the same color as everything else. The building itself is extremely old, nothing like the fine high-rises my friends work in or own across the city. But Dad calls it *structure* and *integrity*. And people tend to like his old-fashioned sensibilities.

"Well?" I prompt, sitting back. "What is it?"

He doesn't answer. He's busy behind the massive desk between us, tapping away at a slick computer that looks three decades too new for the rest of the décor. My father is a handsome man, sturdy, and the finery he wears is so subtle a layman might not even pick up on it: the diamond-studded watch, handed down through the family for decades; the suit so personally tailored it doesn't have a label, and has to be shipped from Germany on private planes. He's not ostentatious, my father. But he is a cut above the company, and knows it, even if he'd never say it aloud.

“This property,” he says after a moment more of fervent clicking. “I want you to look into it.” He turns the computer screen to face me, and I raise my eyebrows, leaning forward. “It’s a thirteenth-century castle in the English countryside. And I want it. I have a buyer from Tuscany whose been looking for something to pop up—something that doesn’t need to much money sunk into it. Well, this place was redone five years ago, and kept up to date since. Everything inside is state of the art, even though it still looks ancient on the outside.”

“It’s incredible,” I say. It is. I’ve been lucky enough to deal in real estate in the UK and Europe before, as my father’s company has footholds just about everywhere. There’s a lot of money to be made, especially when you have someone lined up to buy even before you own the property yourself. Which brings me to my first question. “But if you want it, why haven’t you purchased it?”

My father’s eyes shadow. He sits back, turning the computer to face him. “The current owner and I have...well, a little bit of a history. Well, her father and I do. Did. He’s dead, died two months ago of a heart attack. All that bloody bangers and mash and stout, I always did tell him.”

I might be surprised, if I didn’t know my father. He has more enemies than properties for sale. Despite his seemingly calm demeanor, he has a habit of ensuring that people he dislikes know they’re beneath him. If he weren’t so rich, and getting richer all the time, I suspect fewer people would do business with him. And, although he might be slowing down in his older age, he’s still damn good at what he does. One of the best.

“And?” I press. “I’m guessing that’s where I come in.”

“How astute.” His expression is cold. “The girl, his daughter, is about your age. Very pretty. Very accomplished. She played professional soccer for a bit, and is considered somewhat of a muse for a certain Paris couture house.”

I snort, half at hearing my American father reference French fashion, and half at the expectation that I’ll fly halfway

across the world to seduce some rich socialite into selling her father's property to us. "No. I won't do it."

"You've done it before, you'll do it now, and if I tell you to, you'll do it again." There's the subtlest edge to his voice as he says it. "You know that since Will is retiring, I'm looking to promote someone to partner. It's going to be you, Seb." He holds my eyes for a very long moment. I don't speak. I don't look away. I don't even breathe. "It's going to be you, Seb. Or it's going to be your sister. You can bet your ass that if I told her to go seduce this woman, she'd be on the plane before I finished the sentence."

Bitterness coils like a snake in my gut. "Why are you asking me then?"

"You're more experienced than your sister. You didn't waste four years bullshitting at some pathetic excuse of a private college, or serving coffee to broke students for pennies."

In other words, he's still punishing Steph for striking out on her own, even though she's since come back around to the family business. "I see. And what makes you think this woman will do as I ask?"

"Because you have talent, Seb. Only a few, to be sure, but most of them revolve around convincing women to do what you want them to. So do it. And the partnership is yours."

I stare at my father, feeling a familiar hatred blistering inside me. The way he speaks brooks no argument. I don't stand a chance. "Fine," I say, my voice lifeless. "I'll leave tomorrow."

"You'll leave tonight. And you'll take your sister."

I bristle. "I don't need a babysitter."

"No. You need competition. A reminder that if you don't want to take what is rightfully yours, someone else will." My father doesn't even look at me as he waves a hand in dismissal. "My assistant has everything arranged. You'll be back within the month, and you'll have all the paperwork



signed and in hand. And Seb,” he says, as I stand up, “close the door behind you.”

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## NINA

“Steph,” I say, pacing my apartment living room. “I just—I don’t think it’s a good idea, OK?”

“Oh, come *on*. Don’t be boring. You were just being fun! Seriously, I still can’t believe you actually went out on a bad date with my brother.” She giggles on the other end of the phone. I can hear her packing. “It will be completely awesome. And you’re always saying how you want to travel more, right? Get more, like, *worldly*?”

“Yeah, but this is so not what I meant. It’s a work trip! I don’t want to tag along and distract you.”

*More like, I don’t want to tag along and distract your brother.* I force myself to stop pacing and sit on my couch. I was cool with the idea of exploring whatever is going on between me and Seb, here in the city. With safe distance, from each other, and from Steph. It might have been cute to flirt on the plane, but even though I think it’s necessary, I don’t like lying to my best friend. And being in close proximity to both of them? For a prolonged, unplanned, unsupervised trip to the UK? It sounds like a recipe for trouble.

“And,” I press on, before Steph can argue. “I just unpacked. I don’t want to get all packed up again—”

“You’re kidding me, right? I’m offering you an all-expenses-paid trip to the UK, and the best excuse you can come up with is that you don’t want to *pack*? You are seriously killing me, girl.”

“I have work,” I say desperately. “And I just got back from a vacation. I can’t just up and leave again.”

“No way! You work *from home*, Nina. That’s an even worse excuse than the packing thing!” Steph sighs. “Think about it, please? I can’t be alone with Seb for that long. I’ll claw his eyes out. Especially when he’s going to be working up on some girl, trying to schmooze her into selling her dad’s estate to his mortal enemy.”

I stop, going blank. “Wait, what?”

“My dad. He was, like, mortal enemies with her dad. I don’t know, bad blood, business gone wrong—who cares? The guy is dead.”

“No—the other thing. Seb. Working up on some girl?” I hate the way my heart flutters with nervousness. “What do you mean?”

“It’s like, his style, you know? He’s a playboy billionaire in real estate, it’s what he does. He sleeps his way wherever he can, makes killer purchases and sales, and gets on with his life.” She sounds impatient, almost annoyed. Not with me. With Seb. I guess I didn’t realize just how competitive she’s been feeling toward her brother. “Look. Whatever. All that matters is that I’m there to swoop in and save the day if Seb screws up. I need this, Nina.” Her voice gets serious, more serious than I’ve heard it in a long time. “This might be my only chance to make it up to my dad for telling him to fuck off when I went to college. OK? He’ll never hire me, not as a partner, if I don’t do something grand. This might be my shot, and I can’t do it alone. I need you. You’re my best friend, and my best cheerleader, and just—please say yes, Nina.”

I hesitate, drumming my fingers on my knee. As much as I’d love to stay home and recharge for a few weeks—not to mention save up some money—going to England might actually not be such a bad idea. It’s true I can work from anywhere, and I’m sure there are loads of great things to cover over there. My editor would eat up something about a haunted countryside manor, or even just the idyllic lifestyle in the English countryside.

Besides, Steph really doesn't ask for anything unless she needs it. And she's practically begging. And OK, maybe I feel a *little* guilty for lying to her about Seb.

I bite my lip. "Are you sure? I mean, are you that sure that Seb will fail?"

"No. I don't know. Probably not. He's like, the perfect child." She sighs. "Or at least the perfect businessman. But I can just feel that this might be it for me."

And I can't say no to that. Not to her. "OK," I finally say. "OK, I'm in."

She squeals, so loud and so long I have to hold the phone away from my ear. "Good," she finally cries. "Because the car is already headed to your place—see you at the airport in twenty!"

And just like that, she hangs up. Fear and anxiety and just a tiny pinprick of a thrill crash into me, and I give my suitcase a wary look.

Just what the hell have I gotten myself into?

---

I don't tempt Seb into the private plane lavatory this time. In fact, I do what I can to not even look at him.

Suddenly our pact to keep our night of passion from Steph feels...almost cruel. Or, at least, unnecessary. But obviously, it's way too late to go back on it now. If I don't think that when I board the plane, awkwardly avoiding eye contact with Seb, who looks like he's in the mood to brood (can I blame him? I know what their father is like), then I certainly feel it when Steph starts telling me all about what we're going to do in England.

"But the main thing," she says, after listing all the places we're going to hit for drinks (every club and pub on the island, apparently), "is that I owe you."

“Owe me?” I look at her incredulously. It’s late, nighttime rushing by out the plane windows. I yawn. “Steph, you’re bringing me along on two separate vacations within two weeks. You don’t owe me anything.”

“No. For...*you know*.” She casts a surreptitious look at Seb, who is sitting down the aisle, looking like his old, cold, aloof self as he types on his laptop. She lowers her voice. “I can’t bear the fact that I got laid when you didn’t.”

“Ew, Steph. I mean, he’s still your brother.” I say it to distract from the flush creeping up my neck. “And seriously, I’m OK. It wasn’t even that bad of a date.” My traitor mind flashes back to that night: the rain, the ocean, his tongue hot in my mouth, his hand between my legs. “Forget it. You don’t owe me anything. At all.”

“Totally do. Also because I basically guilted you into coming.” She flashes me a grin. “Actually. I have a guy in mind.”

“What?” When I cast a look up the aisle, I’m surprised—and a little embarrassed—to see that Seb is now listening. His dark eyes meet mine, glittering with amusement. “No, that’s not necessary—”

“You’ll love him. Trust me. No, don’t bother arguing with me—the deal is basically sealed already. Anyway, I’m going to sleep. I’m dead.” She throws me a wink, then plugs her earphones in and snuggles into her pillows before I can argue.

I bite my cheek, fighting the urge to look at Seb. But after a moment, I can’t bear it anymore. When our eyes meet, he’s smiling. I resist the urge to smile back. I’m not surprised that Seb is amused. I’m sure he loves to see me squirm. Maybe I’m embarrassed—really embarrassed—by the fact that he just overheard his sister trying to set me up with some guy after the night we shared. But truthfully, it’s just nice to see him smile after he’s been so sullen all day.

I let myself smile back.

---

“We do *not* need to share a place with Seb,” Steph tells me, flopping onto a decked-out queen bed in the three-room cottage their father booked for us. “Seriously, say the word and we’ll ditch his ass. I so don’t want things to be weird.”

She didn’t seem to consider this for the lengthy plane ride here, which I’m now feeling serious jetlag from. “Don’t worry about it. This place is amazing.” This much is true. The cottage is picturesque, settled among a glen of white birches downhill from the literal castle that we’re here to purchase. “And I don’t want to impose. Besides, he and I are cool. It’s not awkward.” Well. It is. But for different reasons entirely.

“It is cute. ‘Kay, do you mind if I do some work?’” She yawns and drags herself off the bed, reaching for her bag. “I gotta get going if I’m going to have a chance at winning this one for Dad.”

“It’s not weird, is it? Competing with him?” I’d never really noticed the sibling rivalry between Steph and Sebastian. Now it seems obvious. I guess that’s what I get for never looking closely at her brother. “You know I have no siblings, so I have nothing to compare it to.”

“It’s not weird. Honestly, it’s like, built in at this point. Dad always wanted us to compete. Maybe he just figured we would work twice as hard, and be that much better for the business.” She shrugs. “That’s why I went to college like I did, you know. To show him that I didn’t want or need his approval.”

I give her a warm smile. “And now?”

“And now I’m bored with my life, and I’m tired of pretending I’m not interested in real estate. This is what I know. You know, when I was a kid, Dad brought us out just like this. To luxurious, exotic places all over the world. He didn’t bring us for vacation. He brought us so we could learn the legacy of his business.” She looks out the window, a dreamy smile on her face. “I always thought he would just choose Seb. He’s the oldest child. He’s a boy. I didn’t really think I had a chance until the last year. And now it feels meant to be.”

I poke her arm. “Then get to work,” I say, feeling only a little weird cheering against Seb. But I can’t help it—at the end of the day, I love Steph, and she’s my best friend no matter what. “I’ll go occupy myself looking for things to write about.”

She winks. “You’re the best.”

I don’t feel like it, but I’m glad she thinks so. Even though I’m exhausted, I shower, change, and strike out to find some inspiration.

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## SEB

Nina brushes out from her room, dressed warmly. The woolen leggings she wears show off long, slender legs; her corkscrew curls are escaping from the edges of her hat. She doesn't seem to see me watching from a reading chair in the parlor as she wrestles with a pair of rubber boots, and wriggles into an overcoat and scarf.

"Why," I say, and she jumps in surprise, turning to look at me with wide eyes. "Why am I not surprised you finagled your way into this trip? This house? Are you trying to drive me crazy?"

"Shh!" She presses a finger to her lips, eyes darting down the hall, but Steph's door is sealed shut. We're alone, or as alone as we can be, given the situation. Nina tiptoes over to me, which is a comedic sight in her big rubber boots. She kneels beside my chair. "Look. I'm sorry. Steph wouldn't let me hear the end of it. I didn't want to come, but I really had no choice."

I leaf through the book in my hands. It might seem like a leisurely activity, but I know from a bit of digging that *Wuthering Heights* is the favorite holiday read of my mark: Emilie Hanson, the owner of the estate I'm here to buy. "And why, exactly, did you not want to come?"

She gives me a look. "This...*us*, would be way easier if we were back home. Like, in our own apartments. With some distance."



I feel myself smile. She's blushing. "Am I so difficult to resist?"

Her own smile is dangerous, charming. "Stop. No. Yes, maybe." She looks over her shoulder and back at me. "Maybe we just put this on hold. Just until we're back in the United States."

"I can manage that," I say. It may or may not be a lie. Even traveling up the aisle from her in the plane was difficult. It took everything in me not to drag her into the lavatory and do everything we did to each other that first night. I should be focused on work, but in truth, I've thought of little else than rain and thunder, her moans, her soft skin beneath my hands. "But can you?"

"Of course." But her face is bright with color, and her eyes dart tellingly to my lips. So. She's having trouble resisting me too. The realization is surprisingly relieving. "Let's just...set some ground rules. OK?"

"Ground rules?"

"Yes."

"Like school children?"

"No. Like adults making bad decisions." She cocks a brow, smiling. "Like...no touching." As she says it, I drop my hand to hers, where it rests on the arm of the reading chair. Her breath catches, but she doesn't pull away. "And maybe it's best if we're not alone together."

I trace circles on the back of her hand with my thumb. "And why is that, Nina? Do you think something will happen?"

"No. Maybe." She bites her lip, and I resist the urge to pull her toward me, to take her mouth against my own.

"And? Any other rules, Nina?"

"No flirting." But this she says softly, her eyes hooded, as though my mere touch is beginning to hypnotize her.

I sway toward her slightly. I can smell her perfume. Her shampoo. I can see the gloss of her eyelashes. "Tell me. What

constitutes flirting?” I turn her hand over in mine, and bring it to my lips. She watches me as though bewitched, saying nothing as I press my mouth to her palm. “This?” She remains silent, and I brush the sleeve of her jacket aside, touching my lips to the dark curve of her wrist. “This?” I hear her breath hitch. When I reach for her, she doesn’t shy away. I slide my hand delicately behind her neck, and draw her toward me. I touch my mouth to the hollow where her jaw meets her neck. I whisper in her ear: “This?”

I expect her to get up and run out the door. But I have a habit, it seems, of underestimating Nina’s courage. She turns toward me, her eyes wide and hopeful and desperate. She doesn’t need to say a word.

I pull her toward me, catching her mouth hungrily. She makes a soft, mewling sound, her hands pressing against my chest. But she doesn’t push me away. And when I part her lips with my own, she doesn’t resist. My tongue glides over hers, and she makes a muffled moaning sound. And I’m back on the beach, her body beneath mine, her body answering mine, her body coming apart beneath my hands. I kiss her harder, more roughly, my book falling from my lap to the floor as I sit up toward her.

She practically falls onto my lap, taking my face in her hands, her tongue pushing between my lips. I grunt in pleasure, leaning back as she straddles me, my hands falling to her hips.

The door down the hall opens. “Nina?”

Nina gasps, practically leaping out of the chair and off of my lap. She staggers away, barely reaching the door as Steph emerges from the hall, tired-eyed and yawning. She doesn’t seem to have seen anything.

“What’s up?” Steph asks. She bends to grab my book. “Ew, seriously? *Wuthering Heights*? So boring.” She tosses it to me, then looks over at Nina. “Oh, there you are. Jeez, are you OK? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Fine,” Nina blurts. “Totally fine. I was just heading out. To walk around. Maybe go into town.”

“Oh. Cool. I was just thinking I’ll go up to the house, Seb, if you wanna tag along.” Steph studies her fingernails. “Dad says we should take this one together, head on. Cool?”

I simmer, Nina momentarily forgotten. “No. Not cool. This is my assignment. You’re just here to clean up any messes.”

“Yeah. I *was*. Then Dad texted me, and told me not to let you go unsupervised. He must really be losing faith in you.” Her smile is one I know well. It’s the kind that says, *I’ve already won, and you just don’t know it yet*. “So, like, get dressed. We have a castle to buy, big brother.” She gives Nina a playful smile, then disappears down the hall again.

As soon as the door closes, Nina looks at me. There’s an apology in her eyes. For the kiss? For my sister? For this entire situation? I don’t know. And I don’t care. Not right now. “We’ll talk later,” I tell her, standing. I go to my room, and close the door behind me before she can answer.

The last thing I need right now is her pity.

---

The castle is, truly, grand. I’ve seen beautiful buildings all over the world, but nothing like this. We take a town car up the long, winding drive, which is made of cobblestone and lined with towering ash trees. Old-fashioned gas lamps stand amid the trees like sentinels, glowing against the drizzly, cold English day.

Behind tall stone walls, the castle emerges. It’s a beautiful blend of modern and ancient, with new light fixtures, doors, and windows, all set into a grand stone façade.

“Wow,” Steph says, marveling as we step out of the car and into the cold. “This is way cooler in person. Have you ever seen a place like this?”

“No.” I gaze up at its spires, its immense gabled rooftops. “Honestly, I haven’t.” She’s back to her cool, playful self. I wonder if she even knows how much of a frustrating effect she has on me. Or, I suppose, how much Dad affects me *through*

her. Like a weapon he uses against us. “Come on. She’s expecting us.”

I’ve been doing my research since I got the assignment, and I’m pretty sure I know everything there is to know about this Emilie Hanson. But, chiefly, I know that’s she’s beautiful. Youthful. And currently single. My father would want me to use this to my advantage. But with Nina just down the hill, and the ghost of her lips on mine, her body against me, I don’t know if I can commit to it. Flirting, maybe. But even then. In truth, my heart just isn’t in this.

*That’s how a loser thinks, my father would say. You’re admitting defeat before you’ve even entered the damn battle.* If he could see me now, getting hung up on a girl I’ve really only known for a few weeks, he would laugh me straight out of the family business. No. I can’t afford that. I can’t afford to let my feelings cloud my judgment, or worse, cloud my ambition. Nina is nothing to me. Not now. Not yet. Maybe never. Just a girl who makes me feel a little wild; a little crazy.

Is she worth giving up my future for?

“Hey,” says Steph, elbowing me as we’re ushered inside. “Game face, OK?”

And she’s right. I tell myself to forget Nina. And I do.

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## NINA

By the time Steph and Sebastian get back to our cottage, it's pouring rain, and pitch black. I see the headlights of their town car sweep the gravel drive, and a few minutes later, they glide through the door, in the middle of what seems to be a heated argument.

I ordered in dinner, and have the table set. I'm just pouring the wine when Steph takes off her rain-soaked coat, and instead of hanging it on the peg by the door, she throws it into Sebastian's face.

"Garbage," she shouts at him. "Seriously, Seb? I can't even fucking believe you."

I gape, astonished. I've seen the two of them fight. They fight like cats when they do, and tend to cool off pretty quickly. But I'm not sure I've ever seen Steph look so genuinely *hurt*. It's not just anger. She's wounded.

"Relax," growls Seb, clearly annoyed as he takes her coat and hangs it on the peg beside his own. "You knew what you were signing up for when you decided to play babysitter for Dad. Don't act like such a child now you're not getting what you want."

I bite my cheek, not sure if I should intervene, or try to disappear before I can be dragged into the conflict. I decide to play neutral, discreetly crossing the room to hand the siblings a glass of wine each.

"You're such an asshole," Steph bites out, swigging the wine without even acknowledging how it appeared in her

hand. “God. Here I thought you and me could team up *against* Dad. I should have known you would just resort to your same old bullshit. You know what the worst part is? You *know* I don’t stand a chance! The only way I get into the partnership with Dad is if you fail. Don’t you see how unfair that is?”

“I can’t, and won’t, apologize for being born before you, Stephanie.”

Steph’s face goes red with rage. “Don’t you *dare* call me that.”

Oh, man. This is going south quick. I slip into the kitchen, drinking my own wine a little desperately. It’s the first time in five years of friendship that I’m even slightly compelled to look at Seb’s point of view. But I don’t know the whole story yet, and honestly, I’m not sure I want to. Seb came here to basically seduce the owner of the house, right? Is that what he was up there doing? Do I have any right at all to be jealous? To be angry? Because beneath my confusion, truthfully, I am.

“I’m not staying here with you,” Steph says suddenly. “You acted like we could do this together.”

“I did no such thing,” says Seb staunchly, giving her a cold look. “However you interpreted my behavior is on you. I came here with one goal. *You* came here uninvited.”

“So, what? You’re seriously going to fuck this girl? Get her to fall in love with you so Dad can buy that house and sell it for profit and leave her in the dust? You know what? Go ahead. Do it. You’re just like Dad. His perfect little carbon copy.”

Seb stares at her, his nostrils flaring, and it hits me right then how little I know about him. His father. This family. Even my best friend. The Steph I’ve always known has been a different version to the woman before me now, the woman who wants to be a part of the family business she for so long reviled. Will *she* do whatever it takes, like she’s saying Seb does? Like she knows her father does?

Am I completely out of my depth here?

“I’ll find somewhere in town to stay.” Steph grabs her coat again. “I’ll let you know the minute I find a place, Nina,” she says, not even looking at me as she goes back to the door. “I wouldn’t want you trapped here with my brother. Who knows what kind of little power games he’ll start playing with you?”

She shoves her wine glass into her brother’s hand and leaves, slamming the front door behind her.

I wait until I hear the town car’s wheels on the gravel drive. “What the hell?” I ask Seb, my heart still pounding. I take Steph’s wine glass and go to the kitchen. After a moment, he follows, dropping heavily into one of the chairs around the dining table. “What happened?”

“I flirted with the woman who owns the house.” He waves his hand dismissively, and I try again in vain not to be hurt by this. “Of course I did. She’s right. It’s my style. It’s the only way I know to get what I want.” He rubs his hands over his face. There’s rain gathered in his hair. “Fuck. Nina. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have dragged you into this.”

“You didn’t,” I insist, sitting beside him and placing my hand over his. “It was Steph who convinced me to come.”

“I don’t mean *this*, as in this trip.” He looks at me warily. My heart skips a beat at his expression—almost defeated. Resigned. “I mean *this*, as in this family.”

I shake my head. “I’ve been involved with your family for years, Seb—”

“Not like this. You’ve been at Steph’s side. Now you’re between us. And anyway...I’m not the good sibling, if I’m honest.” He sits back, taking his hand from mine. I flush, embarrassed. Does he not want me touching him? “I think this might have been a mistake.”

My flush deepens. “Oh.” I see now. He’s calling it off. He’s calling us off. “You don’t want me to damage my friendship with her if she finds out.” I should have known that mercurial Steph could be offering me her brother one day, and hating me for taking him the next. It’s the main reason we

chose to keep it from her. Now, though, it seems to be backfiring. “You want to end this before it gets dicier.”

“It’s not that.” He sighs, drinking his wine. Not looking at me. “Nina. It’s me. I’m not good for you. Do you see what I do to the people in my life? To the people around me? The people I love? You and I...we’re not even anything yet. Maybe I can still save you from me before that changes.”

I stare at him. My heart is in my throat. *Before that changes*. Does that mean he thinks we have a chance? To be more than just fun, a fling, a good fuck? Do *I* think that? It’s too early to tell. But one thing is for certain: I’m not ready to let go of the chance.

“I’m an adult,” I say, looking at him squarely. “Remember, that night, I said yes to going out with you, didn’t I? And we talked all night. And we went down to the beach, *together*.”

There’s a faint smile on his lips. He watches me. “And everything after?”

“And everything after, we did together. And I liked it. And so did you.” Where is this confidence coming from? I don’t even care. I just don’t want it to go. Because even though I feel for Steph, and I feel for the siblings that they have this rift their father has built between them, I can’t deny my feelings for Seb. I may not know what they are, but I know they’re there. They’re powerful. “You don’t have to save me from anything, Seb. Much less *you*. As it so happens, I actually like you.”

“Is that so?” His eyes glitter. His finger traces a circle on the stem of his wineglass. “Even though I’m being told to seduce this woman for work?”

“I like you,” I repeat. “I didn’t say I like *that*.”

“So. You’re jealous.”

I flush, but this time, I’m not embarrassed. I’m flattered. That I can even *be* jealous. That I have any claim to Seb at all. “Looks that way.”

“Come here then.”



I bite my lip, but I do as he says. He stands, sliding his hands over my waist. When he kisses me, he tastes like rain and wine, like that night.

“Let me make you forget,” he whispers, his fingers seeking the hem of my sweater. His lips leave mine, leaving a trail of kisses along my jaw. His teeth graze my earlobe, and heat stokes in my belly. “Let me remind you that right now, you have my full attention.”

I giggle, startling myself with the sound. I sound...*happy*. Despite everything. How is that possible? “OK,” I tell him, as he tugs the collar of my sweater to the side, his lips burning over my skin, my throat, my clavicle. “Remind me.”

His dark sapphire eyes meet mine. And he lifts me into his arms. I laugh, wrapping my arms around his shoulders as he carries me down the hall and pushes open the door to his room. Am I being callous? Leaving Steph to go fume and seethe? I resolve that I’ll answer the instant she calls. I’ll go wherever she wants me to. I’ll agree that her brother is a menace. I’ll do it all, just to have this moment. I’ll do anything, just to forget everything for this moment.

He lays me on his bed, and the glee inside of me, the girlish flattery and honeymoon happiness, burns into something brighter. Something deeper.

Hunger.

The night on the beach wasn’t long ago at all. And yet it feels like I haven’t had him inside me in an eternity. He’s on top of me now, helping my fumbling fingers to pull the shirt over his head. I lie back as he casts it aside, drinking him in. His beautiful, mouth-watering body. Powerful arms, thick shoulders, perfectly chiseled abs. His chestnut hair is still damp, curling into those dark, burning eyes.

Everything else disappears.

He leans forward and kisses me hard, one hand loose around my throat. The other glides between my breasts, dragging slowly to the hem of my sweater. He reaches beneath

it, unhooking my bra easily, his burning palm brushing my breasts. I struggle to suppress a moan, my heart throbbing.

“I’ve missed you,” he growls, tugging my chin down with one thumb. When my lips part, he bends to slide his tongue into my mouth. Weak, trembling with want, I moan. “I like that you’re not afraid of me, Nina. I like that you’re not afraid of getting hurt.”

*Should I be?* Is he right to try to protect me from himself? Will this—will *we*—inevitably end in disaster?

With his hands on me, do I even care?

I reach for him, threading my fingers through his curls. I kiss him deeply, heat rushing through me when he grunts in pleasure. His hands find the hem of my leggings. Wriggling my hips, I help him pull them off and cast them aside. I sit forward, and let him slip my sweater over my head. And he is kissing me again, hungrier this time, more desperate, both hands on my breasts. I fumble with his belt.

He sinks his teeth into my neck and I groan, reaching down between us to pull him free. He kisses my neck, my collarbone, taking one of my breasts into his mouth as he presses himself between my legs. I’m throbbing with want, with need. My knees tremble.

“Seb,” I say, my voice husky. Desperate. His eyes lift and lock with mine. And then he thrusts himself inside me.

I gasp, arching my back. Stars cross my vision. Every inch of my body is acutely awake, tuned to the brush of his skin, the heat of him. He drags his tongue between my breasts, up the column of my throat, and dips it into my mouth, plunging himself into me again.

I grasp his shoulders, clinging to him as he begins to fuck me. His breath comes hard and fast, ragged, and I’m deliriously happy that *I’m* making him feel this way. I’m not the only one being brought to my knees. Why does that please me so much? Why does that make *this* that much more pleasurable?

“God, you feel good,” he growls against my ear. His breath is hot, his body rock hard everywhere it touches mine. “You feel so fucking good, Nina.”

“So do you,” I gasp, lifting my hips in time to meet him, stroke for delicious stroke. Pleasure is building between my thighs, our friction burning hotter and hotter. “Harder, Seb.”

He obeys, and my spine bends in answer. I hear myself crying out, but I’m barely grounded anymore. I dig my fingers into his shoulders, each thrust sending a frantic cascade of ecstasy through my body. He grabs my ass, hoicking my thigh up over his hip. And then he’s hitting me just right, so hard, so deep that I can’t breathe.

I gasp desperately as climax comes shattering through me. I know I’m saying his name, crying it out. Maybe I should be embarrassed, but it’s the furthest thought from my mind. All I can think is that he feels so impossibly good, that he makes *me* feel so impossibly good, that I can’t even breathe because I’m falling headfirst into sweet pleasure.

He groans as he comes, and a fresh wave of ecstasy rushes through me. Every muscle in my body pulls taut, and I see white, clinging to him as he kisses my chest, as his tongue flicks over my sensitive skin.

Then my body begins to unwind, and I collapse, heaving for breath. He falls onto the bed beside me. Our fingers are intertwined between us, just like they were before.

“Jesus,” I finally manage, my heartbeat raging, sweat clinging to my hairline. “That was...”

“Not bad.” He shoots me a sly smile, but there’s color in his cheeks, and he’s breathing hard. “Not bad at all.”

I return his grin. When I have enough strength, I draw myself over to him. He wraps an arm around me and pulls me close, and I rest my cheek on his chest. His heart is still beating hard. “So. I guess this isn’t going to be so easy to just stop doing, huh?”

“Clearly.” He chuckles, stroking my curls. “But...”

I peer up at him. His sapphire eyes are troubled. “But what?”

“Is it enough? For you, I mean. Is this, just this, enough?” His fingers catch softly in my curls. The earnestness in his eyes catches me off guard—he’s really worried. About me. My happiness. My satisfaction.

That alone has a little fire of fear building in my chest. I knew I liked Seb after our first night. But it’s much easier to call it a fling when the guy is a gorgeous, off-limits billionaire playboy bachelor.

It’s a much harder thing not to catch feelings for a good guy.

“It’s enough,” I say softly. “Don’t worry about me.”

He smiles, pressing a kiss to my hair. “And the woman, Emilie? Should I worry about her?”

I bite my cheek. What the hell am I supposed to say to that? We’re not dating, Seb and I. We’re sleeping together. And asking if this is enough...doesn’t that imply that that’s *all* this is? At least to him? And now, by my own admission, to me? I can’t ask him to be exclusive. I can’t tell him not to sleep with someone else.

But...

“Are there other ways?” I ask sheepishly, tracing circles on his chest. “To get the house?”

To my surprise, he chuckles again. I look up at him, embarrassed.

“You really are jealous. You really do want me to yourself, don’t you?”

I hesitate. If I say yes, will I be *that girl*? The girl who is possessive? Petty? Insecure? If I say no...will I be lying to him, and myself? Will I be playing my cards too soon by admitting that at least some part of me wants him to just be mine?

Fuck *that girl*. There’s no such thing. There’s just the truth, and being brave enough to say it out loud, even knowing

what's at stake. I look up into his eyes. "I really do. For now."

He lifts a brow, but again, he just looks amused. "So, you don't want me sleeping with anyone else."

I hesitate again. But I've already shown my true colors. What the hell do I have to lose? "No."

For a moment, he's silent. My heart is suspended in my ribs, too afraid to beat.

Until finally, he says, "Good. I don't want you sleeping with anyone else either. For now," he adds with a rakish smirk, repeating my own words back to me. "I guess that's one of our new ground rules."

Elation fills me. I try not to let it show, but I'm pretty sure I'm literally glowing. Did Sebastian Mathews just agree to be exclusive? With *me*? After two dates that can hardly be classified as dates?

*So. He feels it too. Whatever this is. Chemistry. Attraction. Something else entirely...*

"I guess it is," I say, pressing my lips together to keep from smiling.

"But if we're only allowed to sleep with each other, we'll have to keep busy." He rolls over, pinning me beneath him. His eyes are bright, dancing. I giggle. "I hope you don't have a problem with that."

As a matter of fact, I don't. I run my hands over his chest, gazing up at him, heat already gathering in my belly. "Well?" I ask, smiling. "What are you waiting for?"

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## SEB

Steph didn't come home last night. She also didn't call Nina to tell her where to meet up.

I hate to admit that I'm not angry. I don't think I could have let Nina go if my sister had summoned her. Especially since Steph is so angry with me. What if she turned Nina against me? Could she, now?

Nina sleeps in the crook of my arm. It's early, but I'm already on my phone. My father has left me a barrage of messages. I realize that if I could, I wouldn't answer a single one. If I could, I'd throw my phone out the window and forget the job. I'd stay here, with her, in bed. All day. All night.

*I'm happy.*

It's almost a shocking realization. Nina has barely been in my life a few weeks, and yet, it feels completely different. She's like a drug, altering my very brain chemistry, reshaping the world around me. A drug I can't stop using, and don't want to.

But I don't have a choice. This is a fairy tale, and I know that eventually, I'll have to wake up.

As if on cue, Nina's phone rings. She jolts awake, rubbing her eyes. When she sees me, she blushes and smiles, leaning over to the nightstand to grab her phone. "Oh, shit," she says, her voice heavy with sleep. "It's Steph."

"Do you want me to step out?"

“No, no,” she says, waving away the suggestion. She brings the phone to her ear. “Hey. Are you OK? I was worried when I didn’t hear from you—did you get my texts?” Nina is quiet a moment, listening to my sister on the other end. She laughs. “No. It’s OK. I get it. I’m just glad you’re all right. You found a place to sleep, I take it?”

I scan through my text messages. I was expecting one from Emilie. My father was right—I didn’t have a difficult time connecting with her. She’s pretty, smart, self-assured. And again—single. If I weren’t with Nina, I could have slept with her last night. I’d have had Emilie in love with me by the end of the week.

But strangely, I don’t have any messages from her. Maybe she was playing at being interested in me. It seems unlikely, but it’s certainly not impossible. Or maybe she’s playing hard to get, and she wants me to come chase her.

“Wait,” says Nina suddenly, looking at me. Her eyes are wide. “You stayed *there*? But how did you...oh. *Oh*.” She looks at me in faint horror. I wish I could hear Steph on the other end of the line. What the hell is my sister saying? “Wait—me? Well, yeah, I mean, of course I can write it. Yeah, my editor would love that...oh, now? OK. Yeah, I’ll just...yeah, I’ll talk to him. I’ll ask him. Are you sure? Yeah? OK.” She listens for another minute. “OK. Yeah, I’ll see you then. Bye.”

When she hangs up, I look at her blankly. In the deepest recesses of my mind, I think I know what she’s about to say. But somehow, I know I won’t believe it until she does.

“Steph stayed up at the castle last night,” Nina tells me soberly, her eyes wide. “Apparently that woman, Emilie... invited her to stay.”

*Son of a fucking bitch.* How did I not see this coming? Of course there’s a reason Emilie didn’t message me last night. I didn’t seduce her.

My sister did.

---

Nina is clearly uncomfortable as we take the car up to the house, but her discomfort begins to fade as the castle comes into view. She sits up in her seat, eyes wide as she drinks it in through the rainy window. Her lips part, and I'm able to forget my rage and frustration at my sister, if just for a moment, to enjoy Nina.

It strikes me that if she weren't here, if she weren't at my side, this would all be so much harder. I'd be drinking. Raging. In truth, I probably would be sleeping with Emilie. But Nina... she has this strange ability to ground me, even after so little time together. She makes everything feel real and near. She makes me feel wide awake.

*That should scare me.* That means she's a distraction. Just like my father would hate.

"So," I finally say, to break the silence. "What is it Steph wants you to write about?"

"Emilie's garden, of all things." She flashes me a smile. "I guess it was originally planted by some English noblewoman. Some of the roses are centuries old."

"Ah." It sounds boring to me, but there's a light in her eyes when she speaks of it. I wonder if writing makes her happy in the way that real estate used to make *me* happy. It used to be thrilling, a game to be won. Now it feels dry. Manipulative. Now I feel like a drone dispatched by my father to win him more wealth. "Interesting."

"It is, but probably not to you." She reaches over and squeezes my hand. I could fall into her eyes. Their sympathy. Their warmth. She has an uncanny ability to make me feel safe, and unjudged. "Look. I know this situation is weird, but I hope you can see it from Steph's point of view too."

"I do. I sympathize. She's essentially in the same position as me."

"Yes, but she doesn't have the same opportunity you do. Your father has never looked at her the way he looks at you." Her thumb traces circles on the back of my hand. Hypnotizing. "Just—I'm being selfish, Seb, but I don't want to lose either of



you. And I don't want to get between you. I just want you both to be happy."

I don't tell her that as long as my father is around, dangling that partnership in front of both me and Steph, this is impossible. One of us will win, and one of us will lose. And unwittingly, Nina has placed herself between my sister and I, whether that was her intention or not. It would be easier if I could forget Nina now. Cast her aside and focus on winning this battle. But with her looking at me, with her hand on me, with her at my side, I realize this is already impossible. I'm drawn to her in a way I've never been drawn to anyone.

It makes me feel weak, almost as much as it makes me feel happy.

"We will be," I tell her, and it's my first lie. "At the end of this, we'll all be happy, Nina."

She smiles out the window for the rest of the ride, and I don't have the heart to take that away from her.

Inside, Nina is ushered away by a member of the house staff, to observe the gardens and review some ledgers in the library. I'm led to a breakfast parlor with a glass ceiling, where Emilie awaits at a fully set table.

Steph sits at her side. Smiling, like she's already won. "Good morning, brother. Tea?"

Emilie, beautiful, blonde, shares Steph's smile. Her cheeks color, and my worst suspicions are confirmed. Steph didn't just stay the night. She *stayed the night*. Fucking perfect.

"Yes," I say, smiling stiffly. "Please." I sit, and a servant appears to pour our tea. "I'm happy to be back, Emilie. I wasn't sure I'd receive an invite."

"Whyever not?" She cocks her head, playing at being guileless. But there's a spark of mischief in her eye. "After all, we have so much more business to discuss. I've heard Stephanie's proposals."

"I talked her ear off," laughs Steph, beaming over at Emilie. "All night. Didn't I?"

“You did.” Emilie sips her tea, studying me. “I’ve heard her proposals. I’d like to hear yours, Sebastian.”

I bristle. I don’t like the way this woman is behaving. Like she’s a queen holding court. *Isn’t she, though? She has all the power in this situation.* My job is, essentially, to find out what she wants, and to give it to her. I’m to do anything and everything necessary to make sure my father procures this property.

The only hang-up is, I’d usually use *myself* to get what I want. Now that Emilie is...*preoccupied* with my sister, that currency is off the table. I can’t even remember a time when I didn’t use my body, my charm, my flirtation and seduction to get what I want. What I need. For so long, that’s really been part of the fun. Do I even have enough business sense left to win this *without* that tool?

Out the parlor window, I catch a glimpse of Nina. She’s walking with a woman dressed like a servant, the two of them laughing under a shared umbrella. They’re amid dark thatches of rose bushes, their black, brambly fingers bare of blooms and leaves. The servant says something that makes Nina’s face open up in awe. I can practically see her eyes glittering from here.

*Real.*

She sees something in me. Something good. And if Nina does, it has to be true. I look at my sister, whose cold expression reminds me of my father. Too much of my father. But I don’t want to be like him—not even to make him proud. Maybe Emilie really is open to my perspective. I know how to make her rich from this deal. I know how to make it worth her while. And I don’t have to use my charms to convince her.

“OK,” I say seriously. I fold my hands on the table. “Let’s talk business.”

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## NINA

“Hey. Really beautiful flowers this time of year, huh?”  
Steph’s voice is dry, but when I turn to look at her, I find her expression bashful. Almost guilty. “Thanks for coming, Nina.”

I stand up straight, shifting my umbrella. “Hey. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I mean. I just feel bad about basically abandoning you last night.” She sighs, coming to join me under the umbrella when I gesture for her to do so. I’m surprised she’s even out here, wasting time with me when she could be winning Emilie over. “I’m sorry. Was it terrible? I know you and Seb don’t get along. Am I the worst friend?”

“No,” I say determinedly. *But I might be.* “Not at all. Besides, I appreciate you finding me the lead on this job. The history of this garden is actually incredible, and they’re going to pay me way more than I’m worth.”

She laughs. “Good. I’m glad. So, tonight, you can stay here, if you want to. I’m going to.” Her smile becomes devious. “Emilie and I have a lot to teach one another.”

“Careful,” I warn, nudging her with my arm. “I don’t want you to get hurt. I know you’re just doing this to get a leg up on Seb, but she has a lot to gain from this situation too.”

“Aw. You’re sweet to worry, but I know what I’m doing.” She gives me a grin, then sighs, looking out over the grounds. Devoid of leaves and blooms, the roses have a look of beautiful melancholy, especially in the rain. “Can you imagine

living somewhere like this? I mean, yeah, I grew up grossly rich. But *this*? In a castle? It's pretty cool."

"It is." It really is. But there's something hollow to the place. I much prefer the little cottage we're staying in, but I don't say this to Steph. "Hey. You know your dad is just trying to pit you two against each other, right?"

"Of course. But that doesn't mean I don't want to win. Seb will do anything to win. I need to be on that same level if I want to stand a chance, you know?" Her smile doesn't quite reach her eyes. "Hey, let's go out tonight. I have that hook-up for you."

"Oh." I flush. "No, that's OK, I—"

"I owe you one. Please. Let me make it up to you."

"I should really stay in and work—"

"Nina, I'm not going to take no for an answer." She elbows me, grinning wolfishly. "Besides, I have *got* to get you out of that house. Seb has to be driving you totally crazy."

*Oh, he is. Just not in the way you think.* Guilt catches me with sharp claws. For a scary minute, I debate coming clean about the whole thing, and telling Steph the truth about me and Seb. But it would feel selfish, throwing more drama into the mix and distracting her from her job here. Besides, I still don't know *what* the truth is about me and Seb. I don't know what we are, or what we're doing, or where or how this is all going to end. Which means that really, I have no excuse to save me.

"OK," I say on an exhale. "Fine. We can go out, but I'm not agreeing to hooking up with anyone. Got it?"

"Totally. Got it." But her eyes are bright with mischief. "I brought the perfect dress for you."

Oh, God. What the hell have I gotten myself into?

---

The pub in town is way more crowded than I expected. The town itself is more of a hamlet, complete with tiny one-way

streets, most made of cobblestone. But we're near enough to the city that there are plenty of young people, and the vibe is surprisingly good.

"You look so hot!" cries Steph in delight, returning to our little booth with a pair of enormous, foaming beers. "That dress is just ridiculously cute on you. Keep it."

"What?" I shout over the din of the pub. "No way! This thing looks crazy expensive!"

She waves away my protest. "No. Don't even think of it. You look way too good in it; I'll never be able to put it on and look at myself the same again. It's yours."

I roll my eyes, but smile. This is the Steph I know and love. Generous, easy-going, fun. Sweet. "Thank you." And I hate to admit it—but the dress *does* look good on me. It's the color of eggplant, a formfitting sheath covered with tiny little seed pearls that dance under even the smallest drop of light. I feel like a mermaid.

And I wish Seb could see me in it. Of course, he was not invited tonight.

"So," I say, "how are you feeling about Emilie? Do you think she'll swing your way? Or Seb's? Or is she totally unmovable?"

"Not unmovable, I don't think," Steph says, but her voice wobbles, a telltale sign she's not as confident as she's trying to seem. "I don't know. I mean, I got her to sleep with me, but... it was like, almost *too* easy."

"Like maybe she's playing you too?" I don't know Emilie. I didn't even get a chance to meet her face to face when I went up to the house. But someone who comes from *that* kind of wealth? Well, I hate to be judgmental, but I wouldn't be surprised if, like Steph and Seb, she had the kind of existential boredom that leads to game playing. "I just want you to be careful."

"Oh, please, Nina. I'm *always* careful. And you know why? Because I never actually let my heart get involved." She throws me a wink, then laughs. "Speaking of—I really am

sorry about last night. I feel like such a bitch. I know you're probably so sick of my brother."

I hesitate, blushing. I need to get better at being confronted by this lie. *Or, who knows? Maybe I can just find a way to tell her the truth...* "It's fine, Steph. Forget about it."

"And about the fight I had with him—I'm sorry you had to see that. We're not always like that, I swear. This whole thing is just...I don't know. More intense than I thought it would be." She smiles, and again, she looks like the old Steph, *my* Steph. Until her eyes slip past me, and go wide as dinner plates. "Oh, hey!" She leaps up suddenly, waving through the crowd at someone I can't see. "Oh, my God, *hi!*"

I look up. A man is shouldering his way through the crush of the pub toward us. When I see him, I feel my eyebrows go up.

"Ricky! It's been forever!" Steph squeals, throwing her arms around his shoulders and dancing a little jig as he holds her in a laughing embrace. "How *are* you? No, wait, forget it—this is my friend, the one I've been telling you about. Nina, meet Ricky. Ricky, meet Nina."

"Hi," I say awkwardly, rising from the booth to shake his hand. "Nice to meet you."

"I'll get you a beer," Steph volunteers, grinning toothily. *Subtle*. She's already rushing back to the bar before I can stop her.

"Would you like to sit?" I was expecting Ricky to be English, but his accent is American. He gestures for me to sit, and I do. "By the way," he says guiltily, "I hope I don't need to apologize for Steph. You know her pretty well, right?"

I laugh. "Yeah, I'm pretty used to her. She's always trying to hook someone up with someone else."

"Yeah, but usually at least one of those 'someone elses' is her."

I laugh, drinking my beer and trying not to stare at him. It's not easy. He has dark brown hair, buzzed close to his scalp. Matching dark brown eyes hold mine in a way that is clearly not just *friendly*. Ordinarily, I'd be eating this up. He's sweet and polite—not to mention tall, dark, and handsome. And yet. There's only one man on my mind right now.

“Look,” I say. “I don't want to waste your time...”

“Ouch.” But his smile is warm. “You have a boyfriend, don't you? I can't say I'm surprised. You're gorgeous. And a writer too, Steph tells me. I should have expected you to be taken.” There's no bitterness in his voice at all, and his smile stays in place. “Well, you should know you're not wasting my time. I like a good beer, a good conversation, and a good night out with friends.”

I grin. “In another life, I guess.”

“I'll drink to that.” He raises his glass. “Can I suggest we at least put on a show for Steph? Nothing too crazy. But maybe we give her the impression we're getting on. She'll give us hell if we don't, you know.”

“True. I'm in.” I touch my glass to his, and we drink. “To putting on a show.”

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## SEB

The first few weeks in England pass all too quickly.

As soon as I've put my hat in the ring for Emilie's attention, it seems all of my time slips like sand through my fingers. And Steph's hold on Emilie proves just as mercurial. The day we both talk shop with Emilie, my sister returns to the cottage.

"Don't take this as any kind of concession," Steph warns me with narrowed eyes. "Just because I'm not staying at her place doesn't mean I don't have her wrapped around my finger."

But judging by how my conversations have been going with the beautiful blonde in the castle, this isn't true—at least, not entirely. Emilie is the queen of the noncommittal. But she hasn't sent us home yet. And she's been taking every meeting Steph and I have scheduled with her, her lawyers, and her staff. I haven't wasted my time flirting with her, though this would infuriate my father if he knew. That's Steph's tactic, and she's free to take it as far as she wants to. But for me, this game feels different. And with all of the work just business for once—it actually feels...well, fun.

I find myself remembering why I followed in my father's footsteps in the first place. I do love this work; I love travel and exotic places and people. I love the thrill of the chase, of locking down a wishy-washy client that everyone wants to get their hands on. I like learning who a person is and what works for them. I love winning.



It feels good to be doing well again, even if Steph is barely talking to me. I mean, what did either of us think would come of this? Dad knows exactly what he's doing, putting us both here. In the same house. On the same job. He's pitting us against one another, just hedging his bets on who will emerge the winner.

Work occupies my days.

But my nights are another thing entirely.

Most days, the best I can hope for is just to touch Nina; to brush my palm over hers. To briskly touch my lips to her neck. To catch the smell of her perfume. To steal a glance at her over my sister's shoulder. Most days, it's not enough to satisfy me. Most days, it's enough to drive me insane.

And at night, when the cottage is silent, when Steph is long asleep, she appears like a dream in my room. We're silent. Secretive. Clandestine. She climbs into my bed, and most nights, it's the best I can do not to rip her clothes off. It's the best I can do to say her name before I'm inside her.

When we're done—unlike most women I've slept with or even dated—she doesn't gather her clothes and scurry out. She stays. Sometimes she sleeps, her head resting on my arm or my chest, her lips parted as she dreams. But more often than not, we stay up through the hours, sometimes until dawn is at the window—just talking.

I learn her, as I learn her body. I learn of her upbringing, of her parents, her childhood home. She tells me about college, about ex-boyfriends and her best and worst dates. She tells me about the books that made her want to become a writer. She tells me about the writer she wants to be someday.

“I write about nothing now,” she says one night, naked and pressed against me as rain ripples down the window. “But I'm working up to it, to writing *something*. About the things I care about.”

“What do you care about?”

She shrugs. “Plenty of things. The world. People.” Her eyes flick up to mine, and she smiles mischievously. “You.”

I can't help but smile back, running my fingers through her plush curls. "You're going to write about me?"

"I could fill a whole book."

"And what would it say?"

"It would say..." Her cheeks color, and she presses her lips together, trying to suppress a bigger smile. "That you're secretly a good guy."

I chuckle. "Really."

"As much as you *love* to play into your little playboy image." She turns onto her stomach, gazing up at me. Stars in her eyes. "It would say that you're far smarter than you let on, and that you actually have a real beating heart somewhere in there." She runs cool fingers over my chest. I catch her wrist and hold it, pressing her palm to my heart. "It would say that you're actually a romantic."

"Am I? What proof do you have of that?"

"A night of lovemaking on the beach, for starters. Not to mention, you took me to dinner first—with wine."

"Expensive wine."

"*Very* expensive wine." Her fingers circle my skin. She leans forward, curls falling into her dark eyes. "I wish we didn't have to keep this a secret."

*This*. "And what is *this*, exactly?" I don't like how uneasy the question makes me. Usually, I'm the one answering that question. Usually, I know the answer. But this time, I don't. I have no idea. I've never had a relationship like the one I have with Nina. We're friends now, that much is clear. We're... *involved*. But we're not dating. Are we?

Do I want us to be? And if I did, would it be worth potentially damaging my relationship with Steph, or Nina damaging hers?

"I have no fucking clue what this is," Nina says, her smile a little wild as she leans forward and presses her lips to mine. The next part is just a whisper, her breath tangling with mine. "All I know is that I don't want it to stop. Ever."

*Ever*. A word that should scare the shit out of me.

It doesn't. She kisses me again, and I take her face in my hands, and neither of us says anything again for a good long while.

---

It could go on forever this way.

Me and Steph, fighting one another to win over Emilie. Emilie, coyly playing both sides. The warmth of the cottage against the English cold. Nina in my arms night after night after night. Her heartbeat against mine. Her soft, dreaming breaths as she sleeps.

But all good things must come to an end. And this one comes to an end I'm not sure I could ever have expected.

We're nearing a deal with Emilie. And by *we*—I mean my father and I. I've cut Steph out of any deals that would give her any claim to a sale. After the shit she's been pulling, flirting with Emilie, using anything she can against me, I have no interest in partnering with her. In fact, I'm hoping this won't just show my father that I'm the ideal option—I'm hoping it will show my little sister that she has no shot in hell at the partnership position. I love Steph. But this is a world she turned her back on, and can't simply come back and take from me.

And I believe, truly, that I am going to win this.

I think this. Until my father arrives a month after we arrived in the UK. His town car pulls up to the cottage early one evening, when Steph and Nina are out on the town. I feel a chill go down my spine. I spent the day going over numbers with the company, and I was planning to pitch them as a final offer to Emilie in the morning. I was, until my father arrived.

He doesn't knock, but simply lets himself in and closes the door behind him. I meet him in the entry, rendered stupidly silent by his unannounced arrival. He gives me a terse smile,

one that I clock immediately as angry. Then he sheds his coat, and gestures for me to follow him into the dining room.

“Well,” he says, pouring himself a glass of cognac and sliding one to me across the dining room table. “I must confess, I did not expect such a royal fuck-up from you.”

I stare at him, my neck heating. I know he’s looking for a chink in my armor. I don’t give him one. “Would you care to explain what you’re talking about?”

“Ah. Of course. I was foolish to think you might be keeping a closer eye on your work. Sit, son.” When I don’t, he gestures to a chair and says, cold as ice, “Sit the fuck down, Sebastian.”

Stiffly, I do as I’m told. My father remains standing.

“Do you recall a certain firm operating out of New York, by the name of Calvin and Sons?” His voice remains as cold as it was a moment ago. “They bought out that Saudi prince’s villa in Punta Cana last year? Outbid us by a hair by learning your numbers?”

“Those numbers,” I say sharply, “were leaked. I know you think I’m careless—”

“How were they leaked, son, if you were not careless? Don’t argue with me. You fucked up then. And you’ve fucked up now.”

“That’s impossible,” I say sharply. “I’ve only cemented the numbers today. There’s no way someone else got their hands on them—”

“Do you think I’m a stupid man, Sebastian?”

I stare at him hard, feeling like a chastised little boy. “No.”

“You don’t work in pen and ink. There are many ways to access *private* information these days, and frankly, I don’t give a fuck what way was used, or really, even who used that way. Your numbers were leaked. And Calvin and Sons has moved in at the last minute, and made an offer to Emilie. She took it.”

I stand up, pulling out my phone. “I’ll call her now, I’ll talk her out of it and—”

“It’s too late for that. I was an idiot to entrust such business to you.” My father drinks, sighs, and sits slowly in the chair. “But luckily, not all of my eggs were in one basket this time.”

*Steph?* “What are you talking about?”

“Your sister, of course. Unlike you, she’s had one eye open. She was able to outbid your outbidder—and, it seems, she’s cultivated a private relationship with Emilie. One she’s leveraging to her advantage, it would seem.”

“But...” Emilie was playing with Steph. There was nothing serious going on between them—I would have known. I would have noticed.

*But would I have? Truly?* I’ve been...distracted. Even working as much and as hard as I have, I know it’s true. I let myself get comfortable. I let myself underestimate Steph.

And now I have lost.

“Let me make it up to you,” I say quickly. “Look—”

“Sit down.”

This time, I don’t hesitate before doing as my father tells me. The smile on his face is utterly devoid of humor or happiness. He’s raging. Seething. And all because of me.

“I’ll ask you one more time, Sebastian. Do you think I’m stupid?” This time, he doesn’t wait for my answer. “I’ve tolerated your behavior for a long, long time. I’ve tolerated the women, the drinking, the foolish boys you’ve befriended over the years. And for once, I asked you to step up to the plate. To work hard. To focus, and discipline yourself. I entrusted a task to you I wouldn’t entrust to just anyone, and you failed me.”

“It was out of my control—”

“The leak was out of your control, perhaps. Arguably.” He swirls the dark amber liquid in his glass, studying it as though it might tell him something. “But your focus—that was yours alone to take in hand. And you did not.”

*Oh. Fuck.* My heart goes to stone. *No, no. He can’t know. How the fuck would he know?*

“You were supposed to get Emilie by any means necessary. You have a certain means you have succeeded with in the past.” He finishes the cognac, and slams the glass on the table so hard and so suddenly I startle. My heart hammers. “I thought you were trying to prove something to me—that you were cleverer than I gave you credit for. That you had more business sense than I thought. But no. You weren’t trying to take the high road. You were just busy fucking some other girl. So busy, you forgot why you came here in the first place.”

I take a moment to catch my breath. “She is not,” I finally manage, my voice low, heavy with anger, “some other girl.”

“No. I suppose she isn’t. She’s your sister’s poor college friend.” His eyes meet mine, cold as ice. “She’s not connected. Not rich. She’s not an opportunity. In fact, I could argue that she is the exact opposite—an obstacle to opportunity.”

I close my hands into fists. I’m almost shaking with anger. “Don’t talk about her like that.”

“When did you become such a coward? You’ve always been a fool. Always been lazy. Resistant. I thought if I gave you the proper opportunity, you would grow out of that. But here you are, growing more worthless to me by the day. At least your sister has some sense. At least she knows her value.”

“Our value is measured by how well we can manipulate people,” I say, practically spitting. “Is that what you’re saying? That as long as we can persuade people by any means necessary, we’re valuable to you?”

“That,” says my father sharply, “is the nature of this business. If you are too naïve and childish to see that, then I have made a grave miscalculation. And perhaps I am about to make another. But the truth is that, though Stephanie has succeeded this time, she has a track record of being... inconsistent. For all your faults, you are not that. In fact, you’re the opposite. Predictable.”

I’m seeing red, I’m so angry. I don’t even look at my father as he stands, buttoning his suit jacket.

“Stephanie won the battle, but the war is yours, son. If you’re willing to take it.”

I force myself to look up at him. For the first time in my life, I see my own face in his. Callous. Cold. Calculating. “What are you talking about?”

“I want to see your commitment to this company. To this family. To the empire I have built, and will hand down. I’ll give you one last shot at the partnership. And there is only one thing you must do. One tiny, simple little thing.”

My heart is in my throat. And I think I know, before he says a word, what my father is going to ask of me. “I’m listening.”

“The girl,” he says, and my heart turns to stone in my chest. “End things with her. Tonight. Cut her off, and don’t ever speak to her again—and the job is yours. Refuse, and you forfeit not only the position, but any claim to my empire at all. Think carefully, son.” His eyes are cold and empty. “Because whatever you do now cannot be undone.”

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## NINA

I t's pouring rain by the time I get back to the cottage, dropped off by the town car. The lights are on even though it's late; Seb is awake. I tried not to seem too easy when Steph told me she was going home with a woman she'd met at the bar. But the truth is, I take every minute I can with Seb. Often, I think it would just be easier to come clean. At this point, it's clear that Seb and I aren't simply going to blow over. Neither of us has had the guts to say it yet, and maybe neither of us ever will—but whatever is happening between us, it's serious.

And that makes me happier than I think I deserve to be.

But when I get back in, heart beating fast already and a smile on my face, I don't expect to find Seb as I do. I hang up my coat and close the door—it's strange how this little place has become ours, our strange little home away from home. A place where we're actually possible. Where maybe we even make sense.

But all comfort and hope flees me. Sebastian sits facing the fire in the parlor, a glass of whiskey drunk to the dregs in one fist. He wears a button-down, rolled to the elbow, loose at the collar. His chestnut curls are mussed and hanging in his eyes. I can tell by the look in them that he's drunk. On the mahogany stand beside his chair, there is a crystal decanter of whiskey, getting low.

"What is it?" I ask instantly, going to him. I kneel on the rug before him, taking his hand. He doesn't even look at me,



only stares into the fire, the flames dancing in his eyes. “Sebastian, look at me.”

He doesn't.

“Is someone hurt? Did something happen?” I consider the people in his life. The friends he's told me about, the ones he laughs with on the phone and stops into town to talk business and drink with. I think of his father, the only other person in his life I think he truly cares about, even if you'd be hard pressed to get him to admit it. “Your father?” I press. “One of your friends?”

“Stop,” he says quietly, his voice low and rough. “Enough, Nina. I don't deserve your concern.”

*He doesn't deserve my concern?* “What are you talking about?” My heart pounds, fast and hard. “Seb, are you OK? Talk to me. Tell me what happened.”

“You,” he whispers gravely. His eyes slide to mine, cold and hard and accusing. The faintest glitter of tears in them. “You happened, Nina.”

*Me? What does he mean by that?* “Have I done something?” I ask, suddenly flashing back through the last few days, the weeks, the month we've spent together in stolen touches and kisses and moments. In lies and secrets. Did I slip up? Did I say something to Steph to make her suspect? “Seb. Anything I've done—”

“Stop. Don't. I can't bear it.” He runs his hand roughly over his face, swigging the rest of his liquor and placing the glass on the table. Then he stands, pacing away. He gestures to the chair. “Sit down, Nina.”

I do, barely able to breathe. Suddenly, I feel it. As undeniable as if it were physical: what is about to happen. Suddenly, I know, as certainly as if I have already experienced it.

Sebastian is going to end things with me. And it's my fault—not that it's happening, maybe, but that I let myself believe it wouldn't. I got too comfortable. When I should have known, from the beginning, from that first night on the beach, that

Sebastian and I could never be. Nothing real. Nothing lasting. It was a fairy tale then, and in its way, it has been since. Fairy tales end.

“Just say it,” I whisper. My voice trembles, and I can’t help but hate myself for showing the weakness. *How naïve could I be?* “Just say it, Sebastian. Get it over with.”

He looks at me sharply. His eyes glint with sobriety through the drink. “Really,” he murmurs. “So callous, Nina?”

“Don’t.” Tears sting my eyes. I bite my cheek hard enough to draw blood, but it’s not enough to keep the tears from falling, leaving tracks down my cheeks. “Please, don’t. Don’t make this harder than it has to be. Just say it, Sebastian, and let me go.”

He approaches me, stopping when he stands above me. His eyes blaze. One hand finds my face, and I shudder at his touch. His thumb traces a rough circle on my cheekbone. When I try to look away, he turns my chin upward so I have to meet his eyes.

“Could you go?” he asks bitterly. “So easily?”

*No.* “I have no choice.” I try to say this as calmly as possible, even with tears trailing down my face. “We both knew this would run its course.”

“Did we.” It’s not a question, but a grim, humorless declaration. “You must have.”

A shiver plunges down my spine. What is he saying? “You thought we would last? Did you, really? Or were we both just pretending that it would, that it *could* all be OK?”

He seals his lips, his hand falling from my face and to his side. He stands so close to me that our knees are touching. Even in my anger, in my hurt and confusion and disbelief—the bare touch makes me want him. Desperately. Badly. As though touching him, as though feeling his hands on me, feeling him inside of me, could make all of this reality seem less real. As though having him again would make the fairy tale the real thing.

“Say it,” I say instead of reaching for him, my voice trembling. “I need to hear you say it.”

“Yes. You seem desperate to.”

“Should I not be?” I demand, voice breaking. I jump to my feet. “Should I let you drag this on, drag *me* on? I don’t want to feel like this, Sebastian! I shouldn’t have...” I look away from him, scorned. “I should have been smarter.”

“You shouldn’t have wasted any time or energy on me, is that what you’re saying?” He takes a step toward me, closing what few inches remain between us. I lean back, but his hand falls to my hip, holding me fast. I don’t try to pull away. I don’t *want* to pull away. “Or was it something else? You thought it would be once, twice? And then—why not? I was just some playboy bachelor you could enjoy until you were done with me?”

“Until *you* were done with *me*,” I shoot back, angry. “How can you talk to me like this? How can you take the high road, like this isn’t what we *both* agreed to? What do you want me to do, Seb? Do you want me to beg you? Do you want me to cry harder? To fight harder? I was an idiot as much as you to let this go on for as long as it did and you *know it!*”

Seb takes my face in both his hands, his eyes lit with anger and passion and desperation. He kisses me hard, and I shove him away. When he kisses me again, I don’t have the strength to fight him.

His tongue is in my mouth, his hands rough on my body. When we break for air, I take his face in my hands, glaring up at him with fire in my eyes, fire in my heart. “Say it,” I whisper. “Please just say it, Seb.”

“It’s over,” he says, and my mouth against his again. I need to silence him. I can’t hear a word more. It doesn’t matter. This is inevitable. It was always inevitable. But I can still have him. One more time, I can still have him.

I fumble with his shirt, ripping off a button in my haste. My hands explore his chest, his shoulders, his arms. He’s stiff against my thigh as he pulls me down to the floor, pinning me

to the plush rug. The fire roars beside us as he shoves my shirt up and presses his mouth to my belly. His lips leave a trail of fire over my navel, my hip bone. He drags my skirt from my ankles, pushing it up, his face falling between my thighs.

*Over. Over. Over.*

Tears sting my eyes. Grief pulses through me. *How can it hurt so badly, when I knew it was coming? I knew it was coming.*

And I was still the idiot who fell in love with him. Who was I kidding? It didn't take a month. I started falling for him that first night, to the sound of his laughter, to the weight of his hands on my body.

His tongue moves between my legs, in perfect harmony with his fingers. It's not enough. My desperation is building. "Seb," I gasp, and he understands, surging forward to kiss me. I help him strip my skirt. I fumble to get my shirt off, and my bra, and then he's on top of me again. "Please," I beg, even though I swore to myself I wouldn't. "Please, I need you—"

He thrusts into me. I arch my back, gasping sharply at the depth, the immediacy of the pleasure.

"I need you," he says back, his voice rough against my ear. "Nina."

*He doesn't want to end things, does he?*

So why is he? Why am I letting him? What the hell am I so afraid of?

Is this why I've never had a serious boyfriend? Because I knew that if I fell for someone, it would hurt more to hang on to them, than to let go? If I let him break my heart now, I won't risk falling any more in love with him.

*It's too late now.*

I draw back, moving my hips in time with his, running my hands through his hair. Those treacherous eyes lock with mine. In them, I'm naïve enough to think I see something more than fondness or attraction. Could I be seeing in him what I know I feel?

He pulls me against him, plunging into me hard, fast. I cry out my pleasure, moving with him until the friction building between us is unbearable. My grief disappears. For a moment, there is nothing complicated about us. We're simple, a woman and a man. We're not keeping our relationship secret from his sister and my best friend; we're not from worlds so different they could never be bridged, not even by love. We're not both cowards, too terrified to admit what we feel for each other, too terrified to admit we don't want this to end at all.

We're just us. Together. Against the world.

"Nina," he whispers, fingers tangling in my hair. "Nina."

As I arch toward climax, his hands travel over my body, and he draws me close, every inch of me against every inch of him. *I love you*, I think. But I don't say it. I'm too scared to shatter the fantasy of this moment.

He groans, and the sound of his pleasure triggers mine easily as a button. I slip straight into orgasm, throwing back my head, pumping my hips against him. He clutches my waist and plunges into me hard, over and over, his face ignited with pleasure. Heat explodes through me, a flood that just keeps coming until I can't breathe, my head thrown back, my eyes closed as stars fly behind my eyelids.

When it stops, it stops at once, and I collapse back on the rug, panting hard. Seb doesn't move. He stays on top of me, panting, our foreheads touching, his hand resting against my heart.

Finally, he lies beside me. The fire whispers into the still, unnatural quiet of the cottage. How can it still feel like home? How can it still feel like our place? Our safe space? Our sanctuary?

It's a long while before I work up the courage to speak. I don't want to know the answer to the question I'm about to ask. But to end this, to sever myself from him, I need to hear it.

"Why?" I ask. His arm is around me, his fingers gently twisting and untwisting a curl of my hair. "You can tell me the

truth. I need you to tell me the truth. I can handle it.”

“My father.”

The answer is so simple, so matter-of-fact it takes my breath away. Tears prick anew in my eyes. “Why?”

“He believes you’re beneath me. He believes you are an obstacle to my success.”

“And you agree with him?” My voice sounds strangely disembodied, like someone else is speaking for me.

Seb is silent a long time. His fingers in my hair keep stroking, hypnotic. “Yes.”

It is a knife in my heart. And I hate myself. Because I knew better. I knew that night. I knew every night after. That if I let myself fall for him, I would be the one hurt. And I kept going to him. Night after night, day after day. I began to know him as far more than a lover. I began to know him, to feel him, to crave him like a lover; a boyfriend. I told myself I was capable of separating attraction and chemistry from love. I was lying.

But was Seb? “Did you...” Tears burn down my cheeks. I’m trembling. His fingers in my hair fall still. “Did you ever care about me?”

“No.” He says it easily. He says it like it’s nothing. He says it like he means it. “You know that I didn’t, Nina.” He slides his arm out from under me and sits up, his back to me, his face in shadow. Firelight dances on his skin. “I’ll make arrangements for you to go home now. You’ve finished your work for Emilie, I believe?”

I just wrapped up a fourth piece for her today. “Yes.” My voice is hollow. As dead inside as I am.

“Then there is nothing left to keep you here.” And with that he stands, gathers his clothing, and walks away. Leaving me naked on the floor, crying beside the fire.

Heartbroken, as I swore to myself I never would be. Heartbroken, as I have let him make me. He’s right about one thing though.

It's time to go home.

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## SEB

The office that is allotted to me is newer than my father's, but it looks just like his. Old. Dark. Cold.

Lonely.

Or maybe that's just me. The first time I see it, I smile. Not out of happiness or pride or warmth. Out of self-loathing, as deep and incurable as disease. I smile, because I understand: This is what I have bought for myself, with my sacrifice. This is my reward. I am, officially, and finally, as cruel and callous a man as my father. I am the man he always wanted me to be.

I sit and gaze out the window. It's been a month since I returned from England. That night, after I arranged for Nina to go home, I went too. I didn't visit the castle again. I did not look for my sister. I didn't call or message her. I thought, if I saw her again, it would be for the last time. Because I don't think I'll ever look at her the same again. And I know she'll never look at *me* the same.

Can I fault her? For doing what Dad raised us to do? Can I fault her for taking her shot when she could?

Can she fault me for taking mine?

After I came home, my sister stayed behind. Because she had won the estate—but against all rule and reason, I had been awarded the partnership. Well, technically I don't have it. Yet. But my father has assured me I will have it soon. Just as he agreed when I signed my life away in England.



“Sebastian.” My father appears in the doorway of my office. He enters without waiting to be invited, and sits in the leather armchair opposite my desk. “Did you get the paperwork I sent you? About the villa in Bangkok?”

I grit my teeth, keeping my expression blank. It is my new face. My new mask. The mask of a man who can't be moved. Who can't be motivated.

Who can't be hurt.

“Yes,” I say. “I'll fly out tomorrow.”

“Excellent. And I trust I won't need to send your sister to clean up your mess this time.” My father smiles, leaning forward to drum his fingers across the top of my desk. “Because you will not fail this time. There's no distraction hanging off your arm or waiting in your bed. The owner of the place is...well, she isn't young, per se. But she is beautiful. And if rumor is to be believed—generous.”

My blood boils. Is this what I've become? A stud to be deployed? A body? Charm and money and charisma? Is this what I've traded my soul for?

“And you'll have it done in a week this time,” my father says, standing. It isn't a request or a suggestion. It is a command. “You don't need a month. I know you, son. I know what you're capable of. Get it done.”

“You said the partnership would be mine.” My voice leaves me before I can think better of it. It catches my father as he passes through my office doorway, one ringed hand resting on the door frame. He cocks his head, like he's not sure I've spoken. I decide to confirm it. “You said if I broke things off with Nina, the partnership would be mine.”

“You have your office,” he says, turning, gesturing blandly at the space. “You have my approval. Is it really the title you're after? You know your name is in bold in my will, son.”

I stare at him. “You're dangling it in front of me still. Even after I did what you asked.”

“The fact is that the girl should not have been a point of contention in the first place, Sebastian. You only wanted her

because you knew I wouldn't approve. She wasn't of good stock. She wasn't a good...*use* for you."

Use. That's all I am to him. A tool in his kit. "Yes."

"You'll have the partnership. I just need to see some consistency from you. Some assurance." He smiles. "A better track record, if you will."

"I understand." I understand that I am at his disposal. I understand that I am only worth whatever money I can make him, whatever currency I can earn for him. "I understand completely."

---

A knock sounds at my penthouse door. I answer tiredly. I've been packing. It's a task that shouldn't take more than an hour, but I've been at it for what feels like years. How can something so mundane take up all of my attention?

When I open the door, my heart stops.

I'm afforded only an instant of shock. Then my sister's hand is flying through the air, fast and sure, and colliding with my cheek. She hits surprisingly hard, jerking my head sideways.

"You," she seethes. "You fucking *asshole*."

I stare at her, touching my stinging face in astonishment. For some reason, I expect her to leave with that, to storm back down the hall without a backward look. Instead, she charges straight into my penthouse, shoving me unceremoniously out of the way.

I close the door, my mind completely blank. I haven't seen or heard from my sister since our father gave me the ultimatum. I didn't have anything to say to her. I figured she had nothing to say to me.

"What," I finally manage, as she paces back and forth in my living room, "are you doing here, Steph?"

“I can’t even believe you. I can’t *fucking believe you!*” She stops and whirls to face me. Her eyes are huge, and to my shock—bright with tears. Her face is splotchy, and she looks tired, disheveled, like she came straight from the plane. Unlike her. “I knew you were capable of being a real shit-head. A *real* shit-head. But this is...beneath even you, Seb.”

I stare at her. “You cut things off with me, recall? You wanted your win with Emilie, and you got it. I’m not sorry about Dad giving me the partnership. It was mine to begin with, and you’re the one who tried to butt your head in where it didn’t belong.”

“Seriously? You think I’m this mad about that?” A tear rushes down her cheek. “I *lost*, Seb. I fucked up. And you want to know the craziest thing?” She laughs sharply, in a humorless way. “I didn’t fucking *care*. I thought I would. I hoped I would. I wanted, more than anything, to be devastated to fail. To win Emilie, to pass Dad’s test—but still, to come up second to you. To lose the partnership, Dad’s favor, to *you*.”

I stare at her. She’s smiling now, in a way that lights her eyes. And I realize I don’t know my sister at all. This isn’t the girl who begged me to take her to parties in high school. This isn’t the girl who beat me at every game on Xbox, and rubbed it in proudly. This is...a woman. A woman I don’t recognize.

I ask the only thing that seems to make sense in that moment. “Is this about Emilie? I didn’t sleep with her, you have to know that.”

“No. This isn’t about Emilie.” But her cheeks color, and I realize there’s more to that story than she’s willing to tell me. “Sebastian. This is about Nina.”

The floor seems to rock and buckle beneath my feet. I sit heavily. Looking at my sister. I say nothing, because I have no concept of how much she knows. I say nothing, because if I speak of Nina, if I let myself think of her, I will lose what little control I still have over myself.

Because I did not leave Nina because of my father’s ultimatum. I left her because I loved her. I left her, because if I didn’t, my father would see her ruined.

“Say something,” I finally manage, looking up at my sister. But her angry expression has changed. She looks at me strangely now, like I might have been looking at her a moment ago. She looks at me like she’s seeing me for the first time. “Please, Steph. Don’t make me beg.”

Slowly, my sister sits on the sofa across from me. “Seb,” she says very measuredly. “Tell me about her.”

“You know her,” I say, as though this is the explanation she’s looking for.

“Yes, I know her.” Steph looks at me. “Look. We’ve fought, you and me. Off and on for what seems like forever. But you know I care about you, right? And you know I care about her.”

“Yes.” I don’t get her point.

“Do you think it was an accident? Me setting you two up? I didn’t think you and Nina would be some cute tropical fling. I didn’t think you guys would, like, *have fun* together.” She bites her lip, then sighs. “Seb, I *saw* you together. Like, big picture. Do you really think I would set you up with just anyone?”

I shake my head. “I...Steph. Why are you telling me this?”

“You idiot.” She stares at me hard. “I’m telling you, Seb, because she’s pregnant.”

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## NINA

I sit at my desk at home. Smiling like an idiot.

An idiot who is single. An idiot who fell in love with the most beautiful, funny, romantic, passionate, mercurial man in the space of a few months. An idiot who is now pregnant with his children, and left to have and raise them alone. Not just one child, but three. I should be terrified. I should be on my knees sobbing.

*So why am I smiling?*

Because the sonogram in my hand is too beautiful *not* to elicit a smile. No matter how hard I try, I can't manage to smother it. Black and white streaks, three beating, tiny little hearts. I didn't ask the sex of the babies. I want it to be a surprise.

As much as I try to act like I don't—I secretly want girls. With a dreamy sigh, I replace the sonogram on my desk, propped against the window. Outside it's snowing, gathering in the windowsill as I work. Ever since I sent my work to my editor, the work I did on the historical rose garden and various other aspects of the castle, I've had freer reign over my work. Lately, I've been writing about travel, about the weight and value of a new perspective. Today, I'm writing about my trepidation about becoming a single mother.

It wasn't until a few weeks after I returned from England, bereft and broken-hearted, that I began to feel ill. It occurred to me one morning, when I hunched over the toilet in my bathroom, that I'd missed my period. I've always had an

inconsistent cycle, and I just figured the stress of travel and the newness of my relationship with Sebastian had somehow halted it. I can't say I was upset when I realized. I was apprehensive. Not to mention terrified of having to confess to Seb.

But as soon as I took the pregnancy test, my perspective shifted. Suddenly, it didn't matter how I'd gotten pregnant. It didn't matter that I'd been foolish enough to fall in love with a man I knew in my heart I could never have; a man who was, in every way, incompatible with me. Suddenly, all that mattered in the world was that tiny little life. A life I loved, before I had even witnessed its heartbeat.

It seems that in all of the ways the stars had come uncrossed for me, some had found themselves aligned. My work is going so well, that for the first time in my life, I have a good excess. Plenty to build on, to set aside for the babies. Besides, it's early yet. I have time to make arrangements.

And I'm happy to say that I'll at least have one friend to rely on when the babies do come.

By the time I touched down in the United States, I had a dozen missed calls from Steph, and twice as many texts. Most of them said some iteration of *I'm sorry*. For abandoning me left and right in England; for leaving me stranded with Seb. For my father, who told her he'd sent me away, as I'd proven a distraction. She assumed he meant I was a distraction to *her*—at the time, I didn't correct her.

It would be a few weeks before I saw her, and by then, I knew I was pregnant. She showed up unannounced at my apartment, and was in a flurry of movement and motion, rambling about her father, the partnership, about Seb and Emilie—when she stopped dead looking at me. Strangely. As though she could tell just by looking at my face.

My belly was barely beginning to show, an annoying side effect of my petite body and the multiple pregnancy. But in the end, it was my expression that gave me away. At once, Steph was elated. Bouncing around the apartment, going on and on about a baby toddling between us at the park, at the pool, at

the zoo—it didn't seem to occur to her until she'd been talking for minutes that I hadn't gotten pregnant alone.

And then her jaw dropped. And she said, "Don't tell me. *It was Ricky.*"

My heart leapt into my throat. We'd seen Ricky a few times in England, and each time the three of us went out, Ricky and I put on a small show of liking one another. We never kissed or held hands; at most, we danced together and bought one another beers. It was all in good fun, and to put Steph at ease so she could focus on work, and not on making my supposed fallout with Seb up to me.

I considered keeping up the lie. Truly, I did. But what I had with Seb was over, and in no uncertain terms. I couldn't lie to her anymore.

So I told my friend the truth.

And though I didn't know it just yet, everything in the world—in that very moment, it would later seem—changed.

---

I made Steph promise she would not tell Seb. And I shared everything that had transpired between her brother and me. She was furious. Pacing, fuming, spitting. Not at Seb, not at me—but at her father.

"How did everything get to be such a mess?" she demanded.

I thought her anger would be directed at me. After all, I was the one who had lied to her, over and over, for over a month. All the while, falling in love with her brother. Making love to him each night. Becoming more and more frivolously happy. But Steph, it seemed, against all odds—understood.

And I was grateful. Again, I remembered why we were friends in the first place. As mercurial and unpredictable as Steph can be, she is a true friend, and a good person. But when she'd gone, despite all the promises she'd made to me about keeping this secret from Seb, my heart was in my throat.

And here I am now, gazing at this sonogram, smiling. Smiling, until my smile falls. Should I have tried harder to hide the truth from Steph? Am I in some way grateful that she—that *someone*—knows?

*She is not the person I wish knew.*

I sigh, closing my computer and sitting back, gazing out the window as snow spirals down from a silvery sky. I press my palm to my belly. And I let myself remember it, like I haven't since it happened.

That night.

The black coldness in Sebastian's face; the anger, the near-hatred in his eyes. And yet...the way he'd held me. The way he took me. The way he was so desperate for me, for his hands on my body, for his tongue in my mouth. That hatred in him—I thought then, in fear and heartbreak, that it was for me. But it wasn't. Despite how he spoke to me, despite how he drank, how he raged...that hatred was for someone else.

Himself. If I could venture a guess, I'd say he hated himself in that moment.

Tears sting my eyes. I take a rattling breath. I think in that moment I hated him too. He chose something above me. He chose his life, his father, his future, above me. And how the hell can I blame him? He told me himself that he never truly cared for me. We were only together for a little over a month, and I was the idiot who let myself fall for him. How could I hold it against him that the same didn't happen on his side? It was inevitable. I knew what I was risking. I risked it all the same.

And here I am, the happy, heartbroken fool.

Until a knock sounds at the door.

---

I stop dead when I look through the peephole, my heart leaping into my throat and my stomach dropping. *Don't open*



*the door.* My mind revolts, but my body doesn't obey. Stiffly, like I'm suddenly on autopilot, I unlock and open the door.

"Mr. Mathews," I say, more coldly than I mean to. I hesitate, then step aside to allow Sebastian and Steph's father to walk into my apartment. "I wasn't expecting you."

"No. I gather you weren't." He looks around my tidy but modest apartment, removing his coat and extending it toward me. I don't take it, and he gives me a sharp smile as he drapes it over his arm. "Come, Nina. Sit."

What fearful politeness I'd felt erodes at once. I close the door against the cold, but I don't sit. I stare at him. "How can I help you, Mr. Mathews?"

He studies me, seeming to accept that I'm not going to be cowed by him. Then he paces into my kitchen, pulls out a chair, and takes a seat at my small dining room table. "This is a fine little place," he says, though the mockery in his expression says he thinks otherwise. "But I do wonder if it's quite large enough for a mother and three young children."

I sink slowly into the chair across from him, knees trembling. "How did you find out?"

"There is little to nothing I don't know about the affairs of my own children." He holds unnerving eye contact. I force myself not to look away. "I listen closely. I monitor closely. To prevent incidents such as this from...spiraling out of control."

"Nothing is spiraling out of control," I say sharply, sensing a threat. "I haven't told Sebastian, and I'm not going to. He ended things between us. I'm not some desperate, naïve little girl. I've accepted the end."

"Yes, well. There are more permanent ends."

I stare at him. I stare at him, begging him not to mean what I think he means.

But he doesn't let the mystery sit too long. "I would be interested in...*financing* this permanent end," Mr. Mathews continues, his expression, his tone never changing. "And further—a comfortable, *quiet* lifestyle for you, after it's done."

I can barely breathe. The fury roaring through me is so hot, so blinding, I don't trust myself to move. I think I might strangle this man where he sits.

"By comfortable," he continues, reaching into his coat pocket and removing a sleek leather checkbook, "I mean what number you set, Nina. Whatever number."

I take a long, deep breath. I try not to fly into the red rage that is sucking at my ribs like a wound. This man—this *bastard*—believes he can spy on me, steal my personal information, force himself into my home...and *pay me* to have an abortion? *Pay me* to disappear?

"There is nothing," I whisper, shaking with rage, unable to look away from his cold, dead eyes. I slowly stand, my hands trembling as I raise one in accusation. "There is *nothing* in this world you could offer me that I would take from you. Now you will, before I call the police and have you removed, get up, and walk out of my house, and never, *never* come back. I don't want to hear a word from you again, Mr. Mathews. *Get out.*"

For all his cool and calm, I don't miss the flash of surprise in his face. It's gone as soon as it's come. He files away his checkbook and stands, looking down on me with a cool, predatory smile.

"There is time, yet," says Mr. Mathews. "When you change your mind, let me know. My offer will stand. Until then, Nina, you will be silent, or you will be silenced."

My face blazes. I place a protective hand over my belly, my other a fist at my side. "Get the fuck out of my house."

Without a word, but with that smile in place, he turns and lets himself out.

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## SEB

When I touch back down from Bangkok, I'm more tired than I can recall ever having been. The trip was taxing, and not for reasons I might once have enjoyed. Once, seducing a wealthy, beautiful woman for financial gain and real estate might have been an enjoyable task. But my heart wasn't in it. How could it have been?

I sit in my office, gazing out the window as snow falls on the city. As for the last week, since Steph told me, I think of nothing. Nothing but her.

Nothing but the children blooming inside her.

*My children.* The children I'm not supposed to know about. The children I can't claim. When Steph told me, my first reaction was joy. I was blind with it. When I came back to myself, I was pacing in front of her in my penthouse, hands in my hair. Grinning like a fool.

Like a man who had any right at all to claim the children, much less the woman.

Then the joy was poisoned, and I sat heavily. Steph didn't understand. She yelled at me, berated me, begged and questioned me. Why wouldn't I go to her? It was clear I loved her. Why wouldn't I beg her forgiveness? Throw myself at her feet and beg her to come back to me? Why wouldn't I give it all up for Nina?

"You are *selfish*," Steph finally said at the end of the night, wiping tears from her eyes. "Everything is set up to be perfect. For you. For Nina. For those babies. For me! We could be a

family, all of us. Why would you give all of that up—for our *father* of all things?”

I didn't respond to any of it, and as she turned her back on me and went to the door, she looked back.

“You,” said my sister, “are not the man I thought you were.”

The funny thing is, I am the man *I* thought I was. It's easier this way. To be shallow. To be easy, predictable; to not truly want anything. I had hoped sleeping with my mark in Bangkok would help get Nina out of my mind. But when push came to shove, I couldn't lay a hand on her. I couldn't even properly flirt. Hell, I could barely even look at her, and not see someone else.

In the end, it didn't affect the purchase; I got the property. But will my father see it that way?

I sigh. I'll have to face him sooner or later. I get heavily to my feet, and go to his office. He's not in, so I pour myself a whiskey and stand by the window. When I look out at the city, it's all I can do not to picture her in it. Is she at home? At the grocery store, the park, the salon? Is she cooking? Sleeping? Working? What is she wearing? I imagine the silk of her curls between my fingers. The rich deep brown of her skin, warm against mine. The soft, restful breaths of her sleeping beside me.

*Pregnant.* I drink my whiskey. I feel a smile come to my lips. *I could be a father.* Well, I *will* be a father, in the most literal sense. But in every other, I will be nothing.

I can't be.

My life will ruin her. It has already hurt her; broken her. What will it do to a child? I don't deserve it. I don't deserve Nina, and I can't possibly deserve children with her. A family. A life. A future. And that's why I ended things with her. The pregnancy is only a confirmation that I made the right decision. This way, I can protect her. From me. From my complicated life. She is safe now, and so are my children. I don't care that I have to lose everything for it to be this way.

It's the least I can do; the last declaration of my feelings for her. Of my love.

My father's computer dings once, twice. Out of boredom, I glance at it.

And freeze.

*Nathan Long*—that's the name on the email. Where do I know it? Why does it send a shudder down my spine?

I flick my eyes toward the open door of his office, but the hall beyond is empty. Cautiously, I sit at his desk and open the email. It's a long chain, and as I read it, I remember. Who Nathan Long is. And why I know his name.

He is a private investigator—the man my father uses for gathering intelligence on potential buyers and sellers for high-end properties. Only, the email is not about any buyer. It's not about real estate at all.

It is about Nina.

My pulse skitters as my eyes go over the chain of emails. Email after email about her: where she is, what she's doing, what she's wearing, who she's with. It dates back to her flying to the UK with Steph and me. And it follows her to the doctor's office; there are photos of her, leaving. Sonogram in hand, palm pressed to her belly. A dazed, happy smile on her face in the moments after she learned she was pregnant with my children.

And there are discussions of dates, and times. Nathan tells my father when he can go to her. What day, what time she will be home. Alone. So he can incentivize her. So he can offer any amount to disappear; so he can offer her any amount to see the 'thing taken care of.'

My hand trembles on the keyboard. I realize I'm not breathing, but I can't take a breath. This moment cuts like a knife through all others. Delusion falls away. And reality comes searing back to me, as clear as crystal, as bright as fire.

I was never protecting her. I was an idiot to think that I was. I was an idiot to cast her off, to leave her to fend for herself. Because of the children, she is linked to me, to my

family—to my father—forever. I can't protect her by walking away.

The only way to protect Nina is to stand at her side.

And I think, deep down, I have always known that. I was to simply too frightened to admit it. That I need her. That I want her. That for us to both be happy, we have to be together.

“I wasn't expecting you.”

I look up. Cold, black rage seeps into every vein as I meet my father's eyes. I expect him to glide in as he always does, to take possession of the room. To usher me out. Instead, for perhaps the first time in my life, my father hangs back. He stands in the doorway, his usual blank cool conspicuously absent. He looks...wary. As though for the first time in *his* life, he's not sure what his son is going to do.

He's right to be afraid.

“Did you,” I say, my voice a growl, “offer Nina money to have an abortion?”

His face remains impassive. He gazes at me almost blankly. “It was for your own good.”

The rage in me is back-bending. It feels violent enough to break my bones. I look away because I don't trust myself not to resort to violence if I have to look at him for even a second more.

“Son,” says my father, and he moves into the room, seeming to regain some of his usual slick, unmovable confidence. “You are at your prime. Poised to become a partner. Earning more than I could have dreamed of at your age. You have your entire life ahead of you, and with your skillset, Sebastian, you would be crippled by a woman like that. By a child. Three children, no less.”

I try to breathe. Slowly, I stand, bracing myself against the desk. “Keep your partnership,” I say, my voice thin. “I resign.”

My father looks stricken. Real rage flashes across his face. “Don't you dare,” he growls. “Don't you dare waste your life. Don't you dare throw away everything I've earned, everything

I've built for you—because make no mistake. If you resign, you will find yourself cut off. From me. From this world. From your sister.”

“You're wrong.” I stare at him, my shoulders trembling. “I've made my own way as much as you made yours.” I have my own millions, and I'm making more all the time. I'll have to restart, but not from nothing.

If Nina takes me back, if she accepts me—I won't have nothing at all.

“Walk away,” says my father, his face reddening, his eyes black and cold, “and *I will ruin you.*”

But suddenly, there is no question. Maybe there never was. I smooth my suit and walk to my father, standing before him. Eye to eye. Unflinching. “You no longer have that power.”

I don't trust myself to linger an instant more; I fear I will do something that can't be undone. So I do what I should have done years ago.

I walk away.

---

Steph answers on the first ring. “Dad called,” she says, her voice sharp with fear. “You did it. Didn't you? You really walked away? Are you sure?” There's an edge of excitement in her voice, almost pride. “I'll make it official for me too, Seb. I'll cut him off. I'm done with him.”

I'm caught in traffic, snow thick on the windshield. I'm smiling, despite everything. “We'll do it together.”

“For once,” says Steph with a laugh. “For once, we'll be on the same side instead of forced to fight each other.”

“Like real siblings,” I say. “Stephanie.”

She sounds aghast to be called by her full name. “What? What is it?”

“Dad. He tried to pay Nina to have an abortion.”

She answers me with silence. I pull onto the highway. Finally, my sister says, her voice full of tears, “You’re going to her now? Tell me you are, Seb. Don’t let her face this alone.”

“No. Never. Never again.” Then my voice hitches. “If she’ll have me.”

I hope Steph will reply with assurances, but she doesn’t. “I hope that she will, Seb. Truly. I hope you’re not too late.”

And by God, so do I. More than anything in the world, so do I.

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## NINA

When the knock sounds at the door, my heart stops. Fear lances through me. I grab the mace I've been keeping by the door, gripping it fast. My heart is in my throat as I stand on my toes to look, as I did a little over a week ago, through the peephole.

I drop the mace.

"Nina," he says. His voice desperate. His voice as I remember it. His voice as I've craved. "I know about everything."

*Everything? Steph!* I swallow, pressing one hand to my lips, the other to my belly. But why is he here? After everything—after telling me he didn't care about me and never had...why the hell is he *here*?

Wind howls, beating snow against the windows. I can't breathe. I can't think past the desperation in my mind, the want, so deep and wide it hurts. I want this. I want him. I want everything to change. I want everything to be fixed.

After everything, how can I still want him?

How can I still love him?

"I know," Seb repeats softly. I peer through the peephole to find him standing with shoulders hunched and head hung, his hands planted against the door. His face is full of grief, regret, anger, hurt. "You," he says, "owe me nothing in the world, Nina. What I did...what I said to you—you have no idea what it cost me."

*What it cost you?* My eyes sting with tears.

“No, no,” he says, so low I almost miss the words. “Not what it cost me. What it’s cost you. That’s why I’m here, Nina. I would have stayed away for the rest of my life, if...if I thought it would make you safe. From me. From my family. From him—my father.”

My blood runs cold. So. He *does* know everything.

“I was wrong,” Seb says. Snow clings to his chestnut curls. “I thought I could protect you by lying to you. By casting you aside. I thought I could save you from myself. But I was wrong. Nina, I...”

And the world goes silent. Everything in it points to this moment, frames it, holds it to the light. I don’t breathe, for fear I’ll fracture it. I don’t move. My heart doesn’t even seem to beat.

“I love you, Nina,” says Seb, pressing his forehead to the closed door as the storm blows behind him. “I love you so much that I forced myself to push you away. But the truth is that I’m not strong enough to do it. I can’t. I won’t. I can’t live without you.”

My heart hammers.

“I have no right to ask it of you,” Seb says. “None at all after everything I’ve done. I have no right to ask for your forgiveness. But Nina—I am. Because I don’t just love you. I want you. I want the life I can see us having together. I want the children that are growing inside you. I want you to stand by me through all things. And the worst of it is—I’ve known this. Since that night, on the beach, I think I’ve known this.”

My face blazes. I press my hand harder against my mouth. Silent tears rush down my face. So—I’m not the only fool. I’m not the only fool at all.

“Please,” Seb says, his voice bare. “I’ll go. But please—just promise you’ll consider what I’ve said. I’ve resigned. I’ve cut myself off from my father. After what he’s done, what he *tried* to do, I’ll never see him again. He’s sick. And there’s no

amount of money or anything else in the world to buy my forgiveness for what he tried to do to you.”

With that, he heaves a heavy sigh, as though the weight of the world is on his shoulders. He stands up straight. I see his eyes are bright with tears.

“You know where to find me,” he says, pressing one hand to the door, as though through it, he can feel mine. “I will be waiting, Nina. For whatever you have to say, whatever you feel, whatever you need. I am one phone call away.”

And he turns to walk away.

But I can't let that happen. I open the door. Cold wind rushes at me, blowing snow across the floor. Seb turns sharply, his eyes going wide and bright—with hope.

“You sent me away,” I say. Somehow, it's all I *can* say. Looking at him, so close, within reach for the first time in so long, I'm scared it's all a dream. “You told me you didn't care about me.”

He takes a cautious step toward me. “I lied.”

“To protect me. That's pretty misguided.”

He cracks a faint smile, and I feel light bloom in my heart. “Yes,” he says. “It was pretty misguided.”

Tears flow down my face. Every instinct in me says to flee. That I can't have this. That *we* can't have this. And yet—here he is, right in front of me. He was the coward, once. But he's being brave now.

How the hell can I turn my back on that?

“I think,” I whisper, feeling myself smile as I press my hands to my belly, “They're going to be girls.”

He takes a step toward me, his face full of desperation. “Really?” He laughs, the sound soft and choked. “What makes you say that?”

“An instinct, that's all.” When he reaches for me, I take his hands, and press them to my stomach. “What do you think?”

“I think that I am the luckiest man in the world, in this moment.” Slowly, he draws nearer, until his body is pressed against mine. “And I think that it’s too cold for you to be outside.”

I gaze up at him. The cold he speaks of, I don’t even feel. I take his hands in mine and step back, drawing him toward the door. “Will you come in?”

He smiles in answer.

---

It’s warm inside the apartment. But maybe I’m just warm from the inside out, as Seb brings a blanket to the couch and lays it over me. He kneels on the carpet, my hand in his.

“Forgive me,” he whispers. “For all of it.”

“Forgiven.” I reach for him. I touch his cheek and his eyes flutter shut. He feels so real. But this all feels like such a dream. *It’s not*, I remind myself, over and over. *Let yourself have this. Let yourself be happy.* “You should know I didn’t consider it, Seb. There was no amount of money, no amount of anything in the world that would have made me say yes. To giving up the babies. To disappearing.”

His eyes flick open and lock with mine, and warmth rushes through my blood. He brings my hand to his lips. “If you had, I would have forgiven you. It’s all my fault.”

“Are you sure you want this? Triplets? Me?”

“If you will have me,” says Sebastian, reaching out to place his hand on my cheek, “then there is nothing I’m more sure of.”

And it’s all I need. All I desperately need, and want—and deserve.

“Kiss me,” I whisper, and no sooner do I whisper the words than his mouth is against mine, my face in his hands. The kiss is urgent but tender, his hands tangling in my curls.

When he pulls aside the blanket, I lie back, desperately pulling him against me. “I love you.”

“I love you.” He whispers the words against my lips, leaving a trail of kisses down my jaw, my neck, my chest. He draws my shirt to my ribs, running a hand softly over my belly, showing just the slightest swell. Tenderly, he presses his lips there. “I love you.”

And all of the wrongs, it seems then, are righted.

---

The swell of my belly seems unimaginable. I look a lot different in a bikini today than I did that day so long ago.

“I hate you,” Steph says from beneath enormous designer sunglasses. She pulls them down, glaring at me over the rim. “Seriously? The way you’re glowing right now is literally so unfair.”

I grin at her, squinting in the tropical sun. “You’re jealous now. Wait until I’m in labor. I think you’ll be over it by then.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. But I’ll still be there. Letting you squeeze the bejeezus out of my hand.” Steph reaches over and takes it now. “Tell me. Are you happy?”

“I’m glowing, right? Do you even have to ask?”

She beams back at me. “So. You should probably thank me then. After all, I’m the one who set you up, aren’t I?”

I know she’s teasing, but I give her hand a squeeze and meet her eyes. “Thank you,” I say. And her grin widens. “Seriously, Steph. Thank you.”

“OK, enough sappy cuddles or whatever. I’m going in.” She gets up and drops her towel, leaning over to kiss my cheek. Then she skips down the beach to the tide, where Emilie—who apparently was also disguising some more serious feelings during our time in the UK—is swimming. The two meet, giggling, sharing a kiss before Steph drags her girlfriend into the water.

I sigh, content. More than content, brushing my hands over my swollen belly.

“Well? How hard are they kicking today?”

I look up as Seb ducks under my umbrella, joining me on my towel in the sand. I take his hand, pressing it against my belly. He waits; when one of the baby kicks, his face fills with joy. “Not too hard today,” I tell him. “But they’re going to be fighters, for sure.”

“Just like their mom.”

“Just like their dad.”

He bends his head, pressing his lips to my belly. Then he lies beside me, letting me rest my head on his arm. I shift onto my side so I can gaze up at him. He’s shirtless, his golden-tan body glistening and on display in the hot tropical sun. He strokes my curls, as he always does.

“Are you happy?” he asks me after a moment. I’m so happy, so warm and safe and content, in fact, that I’m almost dozing here on the beach. “Truly, are you happy?”

I run my hand over the hard ridges of his stomach, over his chest. I don’t stop until I can feel his heart beating against my palm. “I am truly happy. Are you?”

“Stupidly.” His smile is wicked. He leans toward me, brushing his thumb over my bottom lip. When he kisses me, my heart begins to beat, fast, excited. “Do you know what I’m thinking of?”

“What are you thinking of?”

“That first night.”

I blush, biting my lip. I was thinking of that night too. Thunder, sand, red wine. His body on top of mine, his mouth hungry, wanting. “What were you thinking about it?” I ask, leaning back to gaze into his eyes.

“I was thinking,” he says, thumb circling my bottom lip, “that we had no idea what it was going to set off.”

“Set off? Like a bomb?”

“Well. Sort of, I suppose.” He kisses me softly. “It was just a date then.”

“It pretty quickly became more than a date.” I grin, kissing him back. “But that was the best sex I’d ever had.”

He chuckles as though I’ve embarrassed him, and kisses me again. “And now?”

“And now we’ve had a lot of the best sex I’ve ever had. And,” I add, between gentle kisses. “I plan to have a lot more. That’s what this is for, right?” I hold up my left hand between us, and he threads it with his. My engagement ring shines as though from within. We’ll be married once the babies are born; maybe here, I think, on this very beach. And though it’s not custom, he wears a band that matches mine. A promise.

“That,” he answers, looking at our intertwined hands, “is for a great many things. But most of all, it’s so you always know.”

I lie back, resting my head on his arm and gazing up at him. “So I always know what?”

“That I’m with you,” he says, leaning down to kiss me. “That I love you. And that I’ll never make the mistake of letting you go again.”

My heart is warm and full. His body is solid. Real. This is no fairy tale. He’s a man who makes mistakes, a man who missteps. A man I would forgive anything.

*Real.*

“I know,” I whisper, when he kisses me again. “I know all of that, and more.” I kiss him deeply, our intertwined hands falling to rest on my belly, where our babies sleep, preparing to come into the world. “And I know that I love you, and I’ll never let you go again.”

It’s a promise I intend to keep; the best kind there is.

It’s a promise of forever.

THE END

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## PROLOGUE

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### ANDREI

I paused, staring at my cousin in front of me. His body trembled violently, and he shifted back and forth from foot to foot as if he was a nervous child. His red, round face was covered with sweat, and the collar of his faded gray t-shirt was soaked dark. My heart had stopped beating in my chest, and the blood in my veins was replaced by cold steel. My back was stiff, and I towered over him, refusing to look away despite each little whimper that escaped his throat.

“What did you say?”

“It wasn’t my fault, Andrei, I—” he began with big, pleading eyes that drooped and were rimmed with pink.

I whipped my gun off of my hip, pointing it down at his foot and pulling the trigger in one swift, instinctive movement. The gunshot echoed through the large living room. Charles let out a high-pitched scream, the scream of a little girl, and collapsed to the floor. He clutched his foot, unable to keep the blood from gathering in a pool on the carpet. The pool spread as he cried on the floor in front of me. I poked him with my foot.

“Next time, take some responsibility for yourself. Get the hell out of my sight. If I see you again...”

“But you’re my cous—” he protested with a squeal.

“I will shoot your other foot,” I warned in a flat, dead voice, staring him deep in the eyes, forcing him to look away as he climbed to his feet, trying to balance on the one that didn’t have a hole in it. He gave me one last glance, his eyes

so wide they were nearly bulging. His thin eyebrows rose as far as they would go, wrinkling his forehead, knitting together. I challenged him to say anything at all, but he didn't. Instead, he hobbled away with small, shaky sobs. The trail of blood left on the floor stained everything along his path. I picked up my glass of whiskey, taking a long sip. The living room was completely empty other than myself and furniture that cost more than most houses.

My whole body became alert when I heard a car door slam outside. I remained still, holding my gun at my side until I heard a key in the door. Brandon threw it open and stepped in, gaping with his mouth wide open.

He stood in the doorway, not coming in. "What did you do to my floor?"

"I had—someone to discipline," I said sheepishly, running my hand through my hair.

"On my floor, Andrei? Do you know how expensive this carpet was?"

"I will replace your carpet," I said, unable to keep from giving him a sly grin. He gave a sigh that turned downward with exasperation. I leaned against the bar, giving him a casual, innocent look.

"You will buy me a carpet at least twice as expensive," he said firmly, arms crossed over his chest.

I laughed, pinching his cheek. "I'll just buy you a new house."

He rolled his eyes. "Are you staying here?"

"Yep. We will have a slumber party. You and me, some sleeping bags, hot gossip. Maybe a pillow fight..."

"You could have helped me with—" came a soft, familiar voice from the doorway, one that stopped dead when Nicolette walked into the room. This time, it was my mouth that dropped open. The moment I saw her face, something fluttered in my stomach. I could feel the back of my neck growing hot, my palms beginning to sweat. She wore a creamy yellow dress that fit her perfectly, showing off her hips, her waist, the soft

curve of a belly. Her dark skin glowed so brightly that it nearly sparkled in the light.

“Nic,” I said, the only word I could get out. The word escaped my throat in an exhale, as if I had just taken my first breath in years.

She opened her mouth, but was interrupted by the sound of giggling behind her, the shouts and laughter of children. The sound was high and musical, and I couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe as she blocked the doorway with her back.

“Brandon, take them to the front room,” she said, her eyes grazing over the blood on the carpet.

“Uncle Brandon!” I heard once he went past her, the tiny sounds of two girls’ voices crying out when they saw him. My jaw went tight as a cold sensation blanketed my whole body.

“I didn’t tell Brandon I was coming home,” Nicolette explained in her smokey voice. It came out thin and slightly raspy, as if her throat was as dry and tight as mine. I heard Brandon in the next room over, talking to the girls.

“I see,” I said, holding her dark gaze. Her eyes were such a deep brown that they looked almost black. I found myself spiraling downward when she nervously batted her lashes, chewing on her full bottom lip. The sight of her made my whole body stir, a heat swirling between my hips. Her breath seemed to be caught in her throat as mine was, and she shifted on her feet, making me ache knowing that she did it when she was in a place of want.

“And who are they?” I asked, glancing over her shoulder, catching a glimpse of a tiny little girl with skin a softer brown than Nicolette’s, with loose curls in pigtails on her head. Nicolette didn’t answer me, but looked down at her hands.

“They’re mine?” I said.

She put her finger to her lips to shush me, a reminder to keep my voice low so her brother wouldn’t overhear us, and shook her head. I watched her walk toward me, and breathed in the scent of her sweet honeysuckle perfume as she passed. I couldn’t help it—I took her wrist, holding her back, pulling

her closer, though not close enough to touch in any real way. My whole body was tense, rage beginning to slowly coil in my stomach.

“We need to talk. Meet me at our spot,” I said softly, my jaw tight, temples throbbing with fury.

“Andrei—”

“No, Nic. We need to talk,” I growled, staring into her large brown eyes.

She glanced away then back up at me with a tiny, almost imperceptible nod.

“Ten tonight,” she whispered. “Just to talk.”

My hand rose before I could stop it, touching her cheek with the backs of my fingers. She took a deep breath before slapping my hand.

“Just to talk,” she said in a hard tone before turning to follow her girls.

From the adjoining room Brandon studied my face for a long moment, and I had to look away, clearing my throat. My skin was hot all over, and suddenly I could hardly breathe.

“I’m going for a walk,” I said, my voice gravelly, pulling on my jacket as I left the house.

I took a long, deep breath, trying to steady the pounding of my heart in my chest as I walked along the sand path that was surrounded by soft grass, leading to a private area of the beach. My feet carried me along the soft bumps of sand to a part of the property where a cliff overlooked the ocean. For a moment, I stood there, watching the waves swell in the dark. The movement made me think of Nicolette, how making love to her was like dancing with a force of nature, our bodies moving perfectly together—utterly devastating to the world around us. I pulled off my jacket, my body immediately starting to shiver in the chilly air. Still, I felt hot. Caught off-guard. Unable to form thoughts about what I had just learned.

I paused, my body perking up when I heard a sound behind me. It was the crunching of sand, as if there was someone

wearing shoes coming up the path toward me. I glanced over my shoulder, my heart stopping when in an instant, a figure in a puffy hooded coat flew at me, shoving me off the cliff with two strong hands. A grunt erupted from my throat as I started to fall, my heart dropping, hands automatically grasping at the edge of the cliff. My hand caught on a thick, thorny vine with roots that went deep into the rock. I wrapped it around my wrist, feeling it start to pull, to tear apart. I tried to catch my breath, my heart pounding in my ears louder than the crashing of the waves below. Just as the vine started to tear, I got a handhold on a small rock shelf. I gripped it as tightly as I could, found a hole to slip my foot into, and managed to climb back to the top of the cliff with a gasp.

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