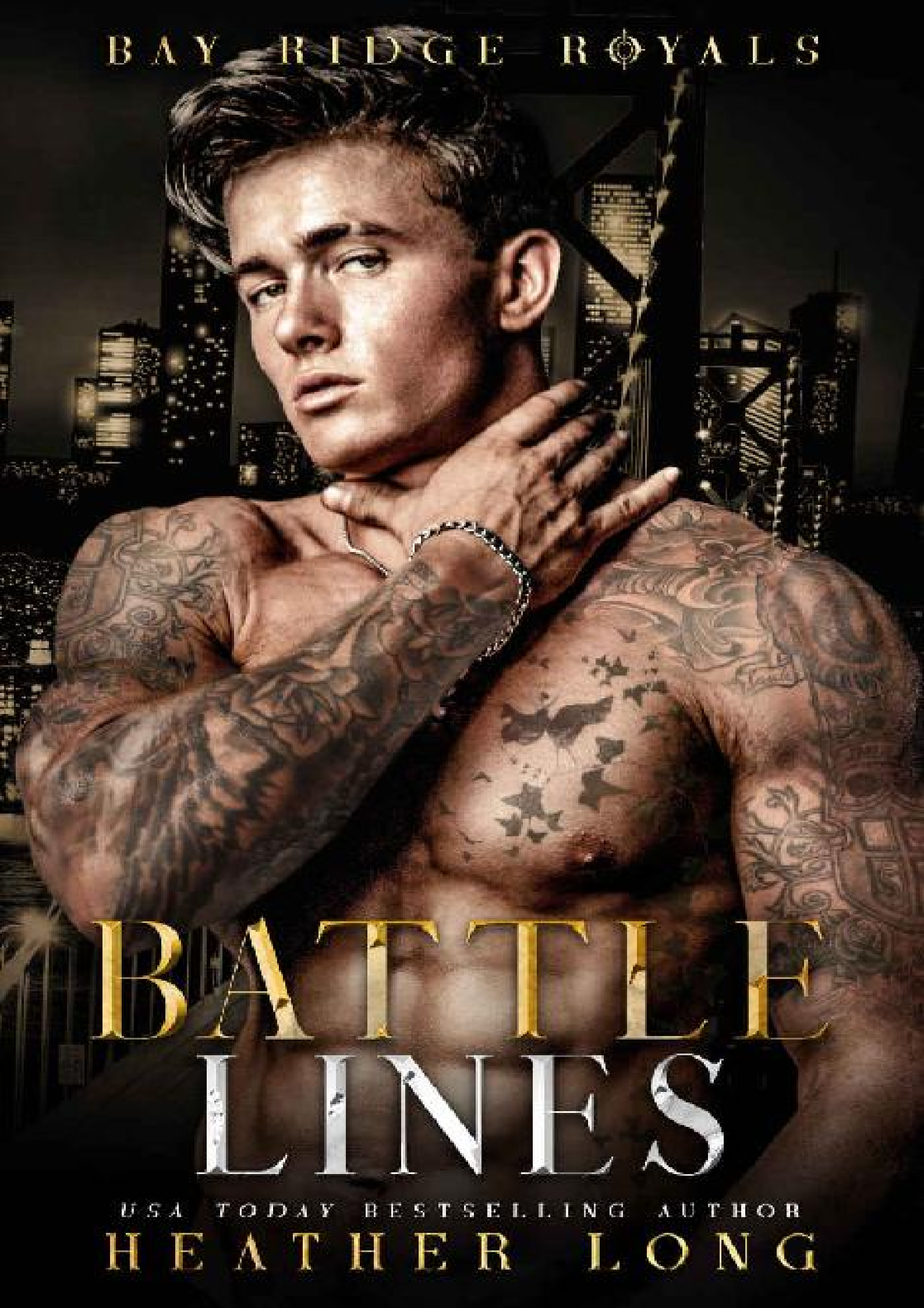


BAY RIDGE ROYALS



BATTLE
LINES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
HEATHER LONG

BATTLE LINES

BAY RIDGE ROYALS

BOOK TWO

HEATHER LONG

BATTLE LINES

BAY RIDGE ROYALS BOOK 2

Violence chose me a long time ago...

Survival isn't everything. I've fought to protect my family. I've bled for them, killed for them, and gone to jail for them. There is no fight I will not take on for them...

I've been waging this war since I was seven years old. The only thing that's changed is the battlefield itself.

For Mayhem, I'll trade in the grime of the streets for the illusions of her shimmering world. Only, all that glitter is hiding a well of sin and corruption that leaves blood in its wake. This isn't my world, but I won't be defeated by it.

I may have lost battles before, but I won't lose this one. If that means I have to drown in darkness, then it's a price I'm willing to pay.

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Battle Lines/Heather Long – 1st ed.

*This is for Mayhem and to all the chaos we
will raise in our villain era.*

*(Wasn't the last book also for Mayhem? Yes,
yes it was. Why? Cause she asked. *winks*)*

SERIES SO FAR



Shamelessly Loyal (Novella)

Battle Lines

Deceptive Truce

FOREWORD

Dear Reader,

Welcome to Battle Lines, this is officially book 2 of the Bay Ridge Royals, but it's also the first full length novel. Book 1, was a crossover novella that took place during books four and five of the 82nd Street Vandals. Our timeline for Battle Lines is a nebulous few months not covered at the end of Fierce Dancer.

Confused? Don't worry. My goal is not to say you *have* to read 82nd Street Vandals in order to enjoy this series. Will it enhance your experience? Yes. Should you have to read it in its entirety? No. I believe in reintroducing characters, though I would highly recommend reading Shamelessly Loyal as it sets the table for where Lainey and Milo are at the beginning of this book.

But Heather, there are some time gaps? What about those? Don't worry, again, we have six books in this series and this is only book two. There will be four more books and I will also be fleshing out those missing gaps as we go along. All of that said, what do you *need* to know? Let's talk, previously, for the Bay Ridge Royals...

Lainey and Milo met *again* when she went to warn the Vandals about what Emersyn's uncle had done in having her committed to an exclusive, yet corrupt mental facility. While with the Vandals, Lainey found herself locked up in Milo's room as he seemed determined to protect her. As the other Vandals worked to deal with their problems, Milo pursued a

lead on the person trying to have him killed—a figure known only as the King.

Using her contacts, Lainey gets them access to an exclusive casino and game where the man is rumored to play. Though they did not locate him at the time, they did end up spending the night together in the hotel and the pair had sex. Milo discovered Lainey was a virgin, their contentious relationship grew even more passionate.

After Emersyn is returned, Lainey spends some time with her and then she calls Ezra to come and get her. Milo didn't want her to leave, but Lainey has a life and a younger sister she needs to get back to and the book ended with her leaving with an angry Ezra who is determined to make sure she never returns. With that, we're ready to dive into *Battle Lines* which picks up almost a year later, give or take a couple of months.

There are missing pieces of the puzzle, but don't worry, we will unravel it all together. This series will contain some spoilers for *82nd Street Vandals*, there's no way to get around that. If you do decide to check out *82nd Street Vandals*, be sure to start with *Savage Vandal*.

For a little housekeeping. *Bay Ridge Royals* is a why choose romance with characters exploring and coming to terms with their evolving sexuality, identities and relationships.

TWs: Mentions of SA. Kidnapping. Threats of violence. Discussion of trafficking. Smuggling. Be kind to yourself, this is a dark romance series.

Thanks for checking out *Battle Lines*, I can't wait for you to get to know them.

Happy reading.

xoxo

Heather

BAY RIDGE ROYALS

The Families

Benedict

Reed

Graham

Adley

Clifton

Marlowe

Cavendish

Main Characters

Elaine “Lainey” Benedict

Milo Hardigan

Adam Reed

Ezra Graham

Bohdi Cavendish

CHAPTER
ONE



MILO

In a world consumed by shadows, Elaine Benedict—my mayhem—was a single spark of defiance. Her presence could ignite a war. Tracking more than one gaze fixed on her, I had a feeling it already had.

“Relax,” Mayhem said, resting a hand against my arm as she leaned in to whisper. This close, the light floral of her perfume beckoned to me. If we were somewhere more private, I’d pin her against the wall...

“Miss Benedict.” The intrusion of the smooth Italian voice had me shifting my weight and straightening. Mayhem didn’t move away as we turned to face the new arrival together. “Bella, it is always such a pleasure to see you.”

He extended both of his hands as though to grip Mayhem’s shoulders. If she hadn’t been digging her nails into my forearm, I would have shoved this asshole backward. Well, that and the fact he didn’t actually make contact with her skin.

“Mr. Sivan,” she said, offering her cheeks as he kissed the air just above them. “I did not expect you to be here tonight.” Her tone was soft, effervescent and downright flirtatious.

Sivan, all six feet of him, was definitely intrigued as he smiled at Mayhem. He didn’t give me a second glance, but I was all too aware of him.

“No?” He closed his hand over her free one. “Well, then I hope this is a pleasant surprise.”

She giggled. The sound set my teeth on edge. It wasn’t my mayhem but the person she’d donned the moment we arrived at this party. I was ready to get rid of my tux and get her out of that silky dress.

That was a plan for later. For now, we were here to get information.

“Definitely a surprise I appreciate,” Mayhem teased him. The guy couldn’t take his eyes off of her. Of course he

couldn't, she was sensuality incarnate, but I had to keep my temper in check.

There was a plan.

This asshole was why we were here.

“Wonderful, may I steal you away for a dance?”

“Hmm,” she hummed the sound, head tilted as if thinking it over. “I might be persuaded to let you *borrow* me, but for one dance only. I can't be seen showing any kind of favor.”

Sivan smiled, his dark eyes danced. While he wasn't quite drooling, he couldn't contain his excitement. “Then I shall have to make the most of my dance.”

Mayhem stroked her hand down my arm as she smiled up at me. “I'll be back. Get us drinks?”

“Of course,” I murmured, then flicked my gaze up to Sivan's. Surprise flickered over his face. “One dance,” I reminded him. “I'll be watching.”

And I'd interrupt if necessary.

Mayhem didn't correct me, but she did give me a faintly exasperated look, even as she laughed. Then she was heading out to the dance floor with Sivan. Despite his height, hell despite my own, she moved with confidence. Her heels added to her already considerable presence, but honestly, I couldn't take my gaze off her.

Didn't want to. There was something earthy and at the same time ethereal about her. Her smile wrapped you up and made you want to lean into the warmth. Her laughter was the fire and then the hazel of her eyes housed shadows and flame. Knowledge was its own aphrodisiac but so was confidence. Fit and trim with breasts that I loved to cup and tease, but she was so much more than just her looks.

I was the lucky son of a bitch who got to truly see behind the gorgeous set dressing she offered the world.

The song had just begun. I didn't move away, taking my position right there at the edge of the dance floor. Waiters made their way through the crowd, delivering glasses of

champagne and white wine. I'd take two just before the song ended.

In the meanwhile, I kept an eye on Mayhem and Sivan. His hand drifted from her hip more than once, but she corrected him with a gentle verbal reprimand.

I'd rather have broken his fingers.

As they turned in a slow waltz, I caught her gaze. She smiled then returned her attention to her dance partner. They still had at least two more minutes to go. Movement in my periphery alerted me to a new arrival.

"Son," Julius King said by way of greeting. Also known as Jeff Hardigan, the wealthy bastard was my sperm donor. Mine and Ivy's, my sister. "You should be careful of that one. He enjoys pursuing women he considers unobtainable."

I didn't respond. Tonight wasn't about King, or Hardigan, or whatever he wanted to call himself. I kept my attention on Mayhem as she entertained whatever it was Sivan was saying.

When a waiter paused, I accepted two glasses and continued to ignore King as he took his own. "If you are after his shipping contracts," King commented, "you need to deal with the sister and not him. She has more sway with their board and he spends more time in the bedroom than the office."

The song came to a close and there was polite clapping as Mayhem took a step back from Sivan. She gave him a smile he definitely didn't deserve before she inclined her head. Then she was strolling across the dance floor toward me.

A definite sway to her hips drew the attention of more than just the asshole she'd been dancing with, and as attractive as she was, I watched the people around her until she was back in my orbit.

Her gaze flicked from me to King then back. The question was clear. What did I want to do?

I handed her the wine. "Shall we walk? You mentioned something about the new arrivals..."

“Oh,” she said with a soft laugh. “I did.” She accepted the glass then nodded to King. “Mr. King.”

“Miss Benedict.”

I put a hand against Mayhem’s lower back.

“Son.”

I ignored him, focusing on maneuvering Mayhem through the others at this vapid party and into one of the wings of the museum. There we could take a break from the crowd and maybe I could persuade her to go.

“You’re not going to like this,” Mayhem said softly. “And I am sorry, I’ll explain more later.” Then with that as her warning, she pivoted and tossed her drink in my face.

The act caught a great deal of attention and I used a hand to wipe the drink away from my eyes.

“I think I’ll do as I please,” she informed me, her voice rising just enough to carry.

“You do,” I said slowly. “Do you?” Apparently, the antagonist was my role tonight.

“Yes,” she said, then gave me a dismissive look. “You should go clean up.” Then without another word, she turned her back on me and made her way across the room. Not to Sivan. I didn’t quite see who her target was, but Sivan was tracking her.

King held out a handkerchief and I stared at it a beat before glancing at him.

“What the hell do you want?” I told myself I wouldn’t give him the time of day, but this was ridiculous.

“I thought I’d help you clean that up,” King said with a hint of amusement. “I’m rather glad that they aren’t serving red wine.”

Pulling out my own handkerchief, I wiped my face and set the wine glass on a waiter’s passing tray before I tracked Mayhem again.

“I don’t need your help,” I informed King.

“You don’t want to need my help,” King countered. “There’s a difference. In this case, however, you will get a lot further with it than without.”

Mayhem was speaking to another woman. No, not to just another woman, she was speaking to a couple.

“Excuse me,” I said to King and left him to do whatever the fuck it was he was here to do tonight. Mayhem wanted a few minutes and a scene to get some attention or take attention off of her.

I’d given it to her. There were more than a few eyes on me as it was.

“Mr. Hardigan,” a woman said, pulling my attention as I circled the dance floor in pursuit of Mayhem. I paused, facing the speaker. She was an older woman with the perfect snowy-white hair and laughing blue eyes.

I did not know her.

But she knew my name...

“Ma’am,” I said, politely and shifted to keep Mayhem in my periphery.

“I’m not one to ask a man to dance,” the woman said. “But would you mind taking me around the dance floor once or twice?”

I frowned.

“Oh, don’t look so broken up about it. I saw your young lady throw a drink in your face. Best thing to do to shake it off is to dance like you don’t have a care in the world.” Then she reached up and fixed my tie before she smoothed down the lapels. “You are a big boy. What do you say?”

“Forgive me,” I said slowly, cobbling together my manners. “Do I know you?”

She chuckled. “No, Mr. Hardigan,” she told me as she held out a hand. “You do not know me. Not yet. But I know you—all of us know you. Now, dance?”

Who were all of us? I couldn't ignore the proffered hand unless I planned on being exceptionally rude. "What should I call you?"

I took her hand. She placed her free hand on my shoulder and I rested mine on her waist and kept a respectable distance between us.

"For now, I like ma'am. You say it very respectfully, almost like you mean it." She smiled. I didn't know the music or the dance, but I managed a semi-decent shuffle step.

This was *not* my speed. I maneuvered her carefully, so I could keep an eye on Mayhem.

"I apologize then, ma'am, because this type of waltzing is not something I've done often."

"Not to worry," she informed me. "It's a simple box step. Left, right, left, right. One, two, three, four."

She recited out the instructions again and I followed her steps.

"Very good," she told me. "Now, you continue in that simple step, avoid the other dancers, while pretending to be interested in what I have to say, and you can keep an eye on the young lady who threw a drink in your face."

There was something almost aristocratic in her bearing and her voice, but there was also a kind of warmth I didn't expect. She actually sounded like she was giving me shit.

"Pretending I'm interested won't take that much effort," I informed her. "But you will have to tell me more than how to dance."

She laughed.

"Touché, Mr. Hardigan. Touché."

We paused as the music ended and I clapped politely. When it began again, she raised her eyebrows at me. Mayhem was still caught up in conversation with the couple, and my shirt was still damp and smelling of wine.

"Ma'am?" I asked, offering my hand.

“I would be honored.” My dance partner was absolutely laughing at me, but she also gave me a nod of approval. After she glided into my arms, she tilted her head. “Box step will work with this one,” she said after a moment. “It’s a solid move and you handle it well.”

“I have a very good teacher.” And a sister who would give me so much shit. The corners of my mouth twitched upward. I should ask Ivy to teach me to dance. She would get so much entertainment out of it.

Fuck knew she deserved to smile.

“Now, that look,” my partner said, reminding me I wasn’t alone. “What put that look on your face?”

Mayhem actually glanced at me, there was a flicker of apology on her face but it smoothed away and then Ezra *fucking* Graham walked over to take her arm.

When the hell did he get back?

“Oh, now I am definitely intrigued,” she said. “You have to tell me...”

“It’s not polite to gossip,” I informed her as I fought the need to glare. Why the fuck was Ezra here? We hadn’t even mentioned this event. The last time I checked, he was still recovering from his wounds.

Not that it shut him up any.

“Oh, my dear, Mr. Hardigan, the first rule of business you should learn is that gossip is currency. It’s not just who you know, but what you know about them...”

“Really?” I said. “That seems—a little more street than I would have expected.”

We moved in the simple box step and she let me lead. Mayhem didn’t look any happier about Ezra’s arrival than I was. When he slid his arm around her waist, I fought the need to grind my teeth.

“What is the difference between an executive and a gang member?”

That pulled my attention. I focused on her. The measured intelligence in her eyes dared me to really listen. “Money?”

“Sometimes.”

The song drew to a close and we paused to applaud again. “Only sometimes?”

“Yes, Mr. Hardigan. Only sometimes. Now, you should go and fetch your young lady before her latest suitor decides to steal away with her.”

Yes, I really should and at the same time. “It’s been a pleasure, ma’am.”

She chuckled as I offered her a hand and she shook it once. “Until next time.” Then without another glance in my direction she was walking away. “Gerard, darling...”

I glanced after her for a moment, then shook my head as I left the dance floor and headed for Mayhem.

CHAPTER
TWO



LAINY

Genevieve Whitten tilted her head as Mark Rolson continued to drone on, at length, about the upcoming exhibition. The man was in love with the sound of his own voice. His wife, Hayle, had half-checked out of the conversation, her attention elsewhere. I was certain the only reason Genevieve bothered to focus on him at all was the same reason I was. Rolson and his wife served as chair people for tonight's charity and the event's de facto hosts.

If anyone would have the information on the secret pieces up for tonight's auction it would be them. Of course, Rolson's droning tone could be marketed as a cure for insomnia. The man's inflections barely altered. He spoke about the selection of hors d'oeuvres being offered with the same enthusiasm he would use when discussing the weather or the current music the ensemble was playing.

Across the room, Pretty Boy danced with an older woman I didn't know. The woman was quite handsome, her eyes sharp and almost polar blue. They popped even from where I was standing. Her snow-white hair was styled impeccably and her evening gown dramatic, if understated. There was a sharp intelligence in her expression that made me curious. Especially when Milo's attention dipped to the woman with just a flicker of surprise.

Not much surprised Pretty Boy. Whatever she said, it restored some of his humor. A good thing. Tossing my drink in his face had been rude, but I needed to "escape" to just intrude on the Rolsons, at least initially. They weren't always keen on "drop-ins." Their arrogance far exceeded their social credit and yet they wielded the elitist capital they had accumulated with a kind of blunt-nosed charm that older families tended to indulge.

To a point.

I'd rather just walk away and ignore them myself, but again...Grandfather had a passion for art and Degas was one

of his favorite artists. The auction was by invitation only. If I could net us a chance at the possible *Count Lepic and his Daughters*, said to be available as part of tonight's shadow auction, then I could endure a few minutes of social boredom.

As much as I pretended otherwise, I kept a visual check on Pretty Boy. Attending galas and other events was not comfortable for him. Dressing up, the expensive clothing, and the shoes—he was not a fan. He disliked it even more that I purchased him a whole wardrobe and had several suits custom made. We'd had more than one argument and more than once he decided to fuck his way to winning it.

My thighs flexed at the memory. While I definitely enjoyed his efforts, I couldn't let him change my mind. For a moment, our gazes locked and I couldn't quite suppress the smile that curved my lips. He'd taken the wine incident without missing a blink, despite the brief surprise. Guilt slid out to rake its claws across my belly.

If Rolson were anyone else, I wouldn't have bothered. The man and his wife, however, loved a good bit of gossip. Speaking of which, I reoriented my attention to whatever Rolson was saying because I'd let Pretty Boy distract me. Genevieve spared me a rather bland look.

The Whittens were a rather inconsequential family who'd benefitted from some sound investments. Her mother, Tara, had worked for the Benedicts before I was born. She married Clancy Whitten, who was making a name for himself in politics as a fixer. Everyone needed a fixer.

Genevieve traded on that reputation and the accumulated new money of her family's investments to net a socialite status. But she was low tier. Wealth tended to diminish as it trickled through generations. If their family money lasted to her grandchildren, the Whittens would gain more influence. Until then...

I flicked a look to Pretty Boy again, I really was sorry I'd needed to separate us for this part. At least if he were here, I could be bored *with* him. Genevieve let out a little sound that pulled me back to my audience. Dammit, Pretty Boy.

What had I missed?

Before I could do a full assessment though, a hand glided down my arm. Electricity seemed to follow the light brush of fingers even as the scent of sandalwood, vetiver, where the woodiness held elements of fire and jasmine. The cologne—an exclusive edition of Baccarat Rouge—elicited a very primitive response before Ezra even opened his mouth.

“Lainey, why are you over here with these bores?” He barely spared them a look as he turned me toward him. The light seemed to catch on the suggestion of gold flecks of his deep green eyes as he dipped his gaze to mine. The curve of his mouth deepened as he dipped his head, a wordless kiss to my jaw, then another to my ear. “I’ve come to rescue you.”

There was nothing quiet about his teasing remark nor subtle about his rudeness. I tilted my head but he was already focusing on my companions. The friendliness evaporated from his expression.

“That was your cue,” he said. “You can go now.”

Mark Rolson began to sputter but then his jaw clamped shut and I stole a look at Ezra. The dark look he wore had my tummy tightening for a moment.

“Of course,” Rolson said abruptly, taking his wife’s arm. “Forgive me, Miss Benedict. I didn’t mean to take up so much of your time.”

“You weren’t—” I started to say but Ezra dragged me back against him. Where Milo’s chest was broad and his arms were thickly muscled, Ezra was all lean, toned, and tall. They both wore a tux really well but there was no mistaking whose arms were around me. I flicked a look from him to the Rolsons then back. The sculpted line of Ezra’s jaw just added to the disapproval radiating from his expression. There were times when he was very much a chiseled work of art.

Then he opened his mouth.

“She’s too polite and you’ve taken too much advantage. Goodbye.” He all but shooed them away. When I would have rounded on him, Genevieve let out a throaty laugh.

While the Rolsons bolted, she stayed. Her attention was very much on Ezra. “It has been a while...”

“Who are you?” His dismissive question didn’t hold one single note of curiosity. “Never mind. I don’t care. If you aren’t serving drinks, you can follow the bores.”

Ezra’s abrasiveness was nothing new to me. Perhaps it was petty on my part, but Genevieve reacted like he’d slapped her. Her eyes narrowed and her lips compressed. Before she could find a response, Ezra turned us away from her and started walking. Now, I could dig my heels in—a little hard in the four-inch pair I was wearing but not impossible—and make a scene, or I could avoid the scandal and find out what he wanted.

Before I could decide on the best approach, Milo appeared in front of us. “Ezra.”

“Asshole,” Ezra responded. “We’re leaving...”

A sigh escaped me. “No,” I said even as Pretty Boy shifted to block our path. Now, I did dig my heels in, half-pivoting to face Ezra. It put Milo at my back and forced Ezra to loosen his grip on my arm. “We’re not. This evening is far from over. If you just wanted to rescue me from the Rolsons, then mission accomplished.”

The look Ezra fixed on me held the promise of retribution. “You damn well know better.” I suppose I did. I’d known Ezra Graham for most of my life. He’d been Adam’s best friend for as long as I could remember. The two were inseparable, as well as insufferable. The past couple of years had been difficult, with Adam’s choices pulling him away from Ezra.

Somehow, that meant I’d inherited him. While Ezra could wax and wane in his affections, I was rather used to it. It was worse when he drank—he was either the cuddliest of drunks or the cruelest. I never knew which he would be at any given moment, sometimes both in the same night.

Swallowing the next sigh before it could escape, I tugged my arm free of him and then fixed his tie. It was a little crooked. While the rest of him was quite well put together,

he'd been tugging at his tie. He always did secure it too tightly, like he needed a bite of pain to go with the evening.

Maybe we all did.

The room around us hummed with dozens of conversations. The faint chiming of glasses being served. There was music from the ensemble. The hush of shoes over the ballroom floor. Somewhere, the faint motorized propulsion of the air conditioning kicked in. From the tasteful crystal on the high-top tables to the silk drapes over the windows and the bunting around the edges. It was all quite welcoming, but it was still just the beginning of the evening.

I had zero intentions of leaving yet.

“Are you finished?” I asked after I smoothed down Ezra's lapels.

He dipped his chin, his mouth flattening as he spared the briefest of glares for Pretty Boy behind me, then focused on me again. “I'll be finished when you are. Walk out with me right now.”

“No,” I told him, keeping my tone soft to avoid aggravating him any more than he was. The fact he was here was enough of a complication. Just a few short weeks ago, he'd sustained injuries when we'd finally extracted the vengeance my best friend had been so richly due.

A lot of people had been injured, including Ezra. For a few hours—I shook off that thought. The inherent darkness in it hadn't come to pass.

“Dammit, Lainey,” Ezra half-growled as he closed the distance between us. But Pretty Boy slid an arm around me and one minute I was facing off with Ezra and the next Pretty Boy was between us.

Oh, this was not ideal.

“Back off, Graham,” Milo told him, his voice as hushed and even as mine had been. “You don't get to show up and manhandle her like you own her.”

“You mean like you are?” Ezra sneered. “Without her, you wouldn’t even have gotten inside. Instead, you’d be out there parking cars—probably where you belong.”

Right, he was definitely in a mood. I caught the eye of a waitress who hurried over with champagne. Tucking my little clutch under my arm, I accepted two glasses with a smile. “Thank you.”

“Of course,” she said, her smile as impersonally polite as any of the staff. She turned to Ezra to offer him a drink and I beckoned Milo to me. It didn’t take much for him to join me and he took the glass I offered him.

“Not throwing this one in my face?” Pretty Boy asked, the tease of his growl licking over every syllable.

“Did you want me to?” I dared him, head tilted.

“Not particularly,” he murmured. “But I could be persuaded.” He’d never removed his attention from Ezra, who glared at both of us now. For someone who understood the politics of appearance every bit as much as I did, Ezra made no attempt to soften his behavior. If anything, his poor manners and abysmal micro-expression control continued to earn us more of an audience.

“Don’t,” I said when Ezra opened his mouth. I used the champagne glass and the miming of a sip to hide my lips. “I don’t want to play this game with you tonight, Ezra. I’m here on business.”

“It’s not a game,” Ezra countered, narrowing the gap between the three of us.

“No,” Pretty Boy agreed with me. “It’s not. It’s obnoxious and uncalled for. Maybe you should go back to licking your wounds and letting them heal.”

“Maybe you should go back to Braxton Harbor, or anywhere that isn’t here. You don’t know what you’re doing and you sure as hell don’t know us.” Hostility erupted into the chilly air between them.

The tension threading through Pretty Boy’s arm tightened it under my hand. He hadn’t moved away but even his jaw set.

I'd seen them both in violent situations. This was not going to end well for anyone.

“Ezra, either find your manners or excuse yourself,” I told him and he ripped his glare off Pretty Boy to scorch me with it. “Petty doesn't become you.”

A vein throbbed in his forehead, then he tipped up the glass of champagne and downed it. Without another word, he put the glass on a passing server's tray and raked his gaze over me before he turned to the room. The corner of his mouth curled up into a faint sneer and he stalked away.

Relief vied with frustration as Ezra made his way across the room. As much as I tried to ignore it, his path took him directly toward Genevieve Whitten. Her smirk was almost triumphant as she glanced past him toward me. I kept a firm grip on my expression. Something she should learn. Without context, her earlier comment had been a flirt. The fact she floated right up to Ezra even after his earlier dismissal told me it had been an actual invitation. Or maybe acknowledgement of previous contact.

Ezra was hardly a monk.

The sting that accompanied that thought dug deep and ignited a wave of disappointment and annoyance. Neither of which I had time for, so I shifted my stance and my gaze. If Ezra wanted to make a fool out of himself, I didn't have to watch it.

“Are you all right?” Pretty Boy asked and I sighed.

“Perfectly fine,” I lied, then gave him a once over. “At least the wine didn't stain your suit too badly. I owe you a shirt.”

“I don't care about the shirt,” he said. “Did you get what you needed before he showed up?”

“No,” I admitted, scanning the room while taking another sip of the champagne and trying not to look like I was looking.

“They left the ballroom toward the east hall.” The information startled me and I swung my gaze back up to his. It shouldn't, Pretty Boy was far from an idiot, but at the same

time...“Would you care to take a walk with me?” He offered his arm. “Maybe we can just run into them.”

“If we do—”

“I know, you might have to ‘get rid of me’ again,” he said, his neutral tone betraying nothing. “You’ll do what you think is necessary.”

“You don’t mind?” I raised my brows.

“Didn’t say that, Mayhem,” he murmured, then dipped his head closer so he could whisper against my ear. “We came for a reason, right?”

A shiver raced over my skin and my nipples went taut. “We did...”

“So we need to do that, complete whatever task it is, and get out of here before I can take you to bed.” Another kiss, this one right over my pulse. “Do I have that right?”

My eyes drifted half shut at the hedonism promised in those words. “You do.”

“Wonderful.” He sucked against my earlobe briefly. A pulse of pure need flashed through me as he straightened. Without comment, he took my champagne glass and set it with his untouched one on a side table before he offered me his arm. “Shall we?”

So many unspoken promises vibrated in those two words. I threaded my arm with his and let him guide me across the room. I did not focus on Ezra disappearing out of a side door with Whitten. Nor did I look at Julius King as he eyed us from across the room. The older woman Milo had danced with gave us a little smile as we passed and Milo nodded to her.

“You’ve been making friends,” I murmured and he chuckled.

He didn’t deny it though.

I glanced at her again, just enough to try and memorize her face. She seemed familiar but I couldn’t place her name.

I would have to rectify that. When we reached the doors to the east hall, Milo pushed it open for me and then guided me out. Now, to find the Rolsons. Hopefully, Ezra hadn't cost me the chance at the auction.

Or this could end up being a much longer evening.

CHAPTER
THREE



EZRA

G alas, charity events, fundraisers—they bored me. Every single one. This one was no exception. King’s message, however, had been clear. There was an auction tonight, he wanted certain pieces and I was to acquire them for him. Why he couldn’t just acquire them himself had been on the tip of my tongue to ask—then he said Lainey was here.

The cool defiance that flashed in her eyes when she told me to find my manners left me with a solitary desire. That desire had absolutely nothing to do with the golden-haired blonde currently clinging to my arm. “I’ve missed you,” she said in a sultry tease. “You haven’t called in a while.”

“I’ve been busy,” I said. The mirrors on the walls gave me a brief glimpse of where Lainey still stood with Hardigan. If he were anyone else, I could have gotten rid of him the same way we had every other interloper over the years. But he wasn’t. More, she looked attached. I blamed Adam for this.

If he could have torn himself away from his schemes to at least read me in, maybe I could have prevented Lainey from going to the Vandals in the first place. Instead, I was two steps behind and the King wanted me here for the auction.

Fine. I was here.

“Ezra,” the blonde pouted, stroking my arm. I barely glanced at her as we moved out of the main gala and toward the hall.

Auctions of this type were never held with the main event. They were by invitation only, those names culled down to only specific individuals vetted and approved. You didn’t always have to show up in person, you could send a proxy. The last time an auction took place during a gala here at the Demming, it had been in a private suite on the third floor. Elevators provided the perfect gatekeeping instrument.

Staff had taken discreet positions along the hallway, though they were more there to move the guests along and not

let them sneak off into the closed galleries. That was fine. I had no interest in their version of modern art anyway.

“Ezra,” the blonde repeated, digging her nails into my arm not that the pinch affected me much through the layers of suit. I spared her a look.

“What?”

“Are we slipping out for the evening?” The hopeful and hungry note to her smile wasn’t lost on me. I could probably shuttle her into one of these side rooms and feed her my cock and she’d hum happily.

As pleasant a thought as that was, I had more important things on my mind. More important people.

“No,” I told her and continued to where the velvet ropes provided the first “blockade.” Ignoring her grip, I reached into the inner pocket of my jacket and removed the calling card.

“Sir,” the man said as he waited for me to place the card on his silver tray. He glanced down at it. The Royals insignia flashed up at him and he nodded once before he extended the tray to me again. At no point did he touch the card. He waited for me to put the card away before he unhooked the velvet rope. “Thank you. If you’ll follow me.”

Aware of my clinging passenger, I waited for the attendant to close the rope behind us before he guided us over to the elevator bank. After a swipe of his own card, he pressed the call button. Another attendant waited just inside.

“Sir,” he said with a respectful nod. Like the suited gentleman who took our card, this attendant was also armed. The lines of his suit didn’t quite cover his shoulder holster. At least not when he leaned forward.

I took the opposite corner and the blonde followed, tucking right against me. She wouldn’t make for much of a shield, but I could always shove her at the other man and get my weapon out first. The slight weight of her didn’t promise to be much of a distraction. I dipped my gaze as she flattened her palm against my chest and began to rub it in little circles.

She was a touchy feely little thing.

Irritating.

The elevator stopped neatly on the third floor and the doors glided open.

“Have a good evening, sir,” the man said, not bothering to follow us out. Another man in a black-tie suit waited and used one gloved hand to gesture to the hallway. Yes, we were heading for the same private suite as other auctions. Good.

It had been over a year since I last attended one of these functions. The room at the end of the hall was about a third the size of the ballroom downstairs. It was arranged with high-top tables, no seating, and a dais toward the center. Security was also heavy, making no pretense of why they were there or how armed they were.

My companion pouted when I removed her hand from my chest. She settled for clinging to my arm, and I moved her to my right arm, rather than my left. I’d prefer to have my shooting hand free. Not that I expected anything more heated than words to be flying tonight. Though, I supposed cash would also be flowing.

I moved to one of the corner tables with good eye-lines for the dais where the items would be presented. I was here for one ugly-ass painting and then I was leaving. I didn’t care much for art, classical or modern.

“Champagne?” A waiter asked as he approached with fresh glasses of the bubbly.

Tugging my arm from the blonde’s grasp, I nodded and took one glass. She let out a little huff and I ignored her irritation. If she wanted a glass, she could get it herself. The waiter served her. As it was, I scanned the other players in attendance. I recognized more than a few of them. Too many newcomers though.

I wasn’t a fan. What was Rolson’s game? The recent downfall of the Sharpe family had ripples far beyond the social landscape. The more private business side had taken a significant hit. Shifting alliances, corporate intrigue, and

power plays turned friends and lovers against each other in a bid for control.

Power was an aphrodisiac that few could decline. I was no exception. Julius King made a call and here I was, like a good dog, ready to do his bidding. I missed the days when he kept himself a mysterious secret, when he was just a phone call or a text message. The man was both a letdown and a curse. Lips pressed against my jaw then up toward my ear as the blonde pressed herself up against my side. “Care to join me after the auction for a little celebration?”

The husky invitation dripped with sex. Beneath the cloying nature of her perfume, there was another hint of musk. Before I could remove her though, movement at the door attracted my attention.

Goddammit Lainey.

She swept through the door like she owned the place. There was no sexy sashay to her hips. She didn’t strut, she didn’t need to show off. The dark dress she wore moved with her like a second skin. It dipped in the back, caressing her lines and leaving all that skin naked to the eye. Her dark hair piled up high showed off the glorious column of her neck.

Unlike most of the women present, her jewelry and cosmetics were gloriously understated. Cool confidence accompanied her every step. Unfortunately, she wasn’t alone. Milo Hardigan escorted her like he had every right to be here, but a custom suit and a beautiful woman couldn’t disguise the man beneath.

Irritation feathered through my veins. I started forward, but the blonde blocked me with her clinging and I spared her a single look. “You’re in the way.”

Her eyes narrowed and her lips parted. Even her nostrils flared as a ruddy flush reddened her cheeks. “How dare you speak to me that way?”

“I’ll speak to you any damn way I choose,” I told her. “Now move.”

“Ezra, you damn well know who I am.”

I snorted. “I don’t even know your name, sweetheart. And I don’t care.” Her eyes dilated and her head snapped back. Offense was stamped all over her. I meant it when I said I didn’t care, she was in my way and the woman I needed to talk to was passing right by. The words were effective, the blonde withdrew a step and I headed for Lainey.

I’d hoped she hadn’t netted an invitation, but goddammit, the Rolsons were just there and Mark had taken Lainey’s hand. He cradled it like it was a prized possession. Not that he held onto it for long, not with Hardigan staring at him wearing something close to murder face.

Huh. Maybe he was good for something.

I claimed another glass of champagne on my way to them and offered it to Lainey as she stepped back from Mark Rolson. She blinked in surprise, then flicked a look from me to where I’d been before then back. No, the blonde wasn’t with me and I smiled. “You looked thirsty,” I told her and Lainey shook her head before refocusing on Mark again.

“Thank you for the invitation,” she said. “I’m very excited to be here.”

“Graham,” Rolson greeted me. “It’s good to see you again, if you’ll give me a moment, I want to get Miss Benedict a good spot.”

“Not at all,” I replied, locking eyes with the man. “I’m here to look after her interests as well, so we’ll just go together.”

I could almost *feel* Lainey’s sigh, but Rolson’s objections died unspoken when he glanced from me to Hardigan. No, Rolson wasn’t finding any alliances there.

“Of course,” Rolson said, then led the way. Lainey fell into step with him, her champagne glass in hand, and Milo eyed me. I ignored him. Hardigan was a problem. A huge one. The last place he needed to be was in the middle of all of this, particularly if he was bringing Lainey with him.

Rolson moved as though to put his hand on Lainey’s lower back and Hardigan just cleared his throat. The other man

didn't quite jump but it was moderately amusing to see his hand fall away like he meant it.

"As I was saying," Rolson continued when we reached a high-top near the front of the room, "this evening's auction will include a number of pieces from various collections, some private, some—more than private. All transactions will be handled electronically. We like to keep these events civilized. Merely raise your hand to increase the bids, everything goes up in increments of five thousand, unless otherwise specified."

"Of course." Lainey placed her glass on the table, she hadn't touched it. "The provenance of the pieces?"

Rolson chuckled. "Lainey—may I call you Lainey?"

"You can call her Miss Benedict," I interjected, fixing the other man with a hard stare. Mark Rolson damn well knew better. Lainey was well beyond his realm of possibility. If he didn't behave, I'd deliver a lesson he wouldn't soon forget. "She also doesn't need you anymore. Move along. I'll look after her."

Dislike filled Rolson's eyes. I didn't care. He was a nobody. A broker. A middleman. They came and they went. He couldn't afford to offend or contradict me and he damn well knew it. "Of course, Mr. Graham. Miss Benedict," he said, with a nod to her then flicked a look past her to Hardigan. Since neither of us offered him an introduction, he just excused himself.

"Was that really necessary?" Lainey asked and I glanced down at her. She was so fucking beautiful. Too beautiful for the shit floating in this room tonight.

"Yes, I told you earlier. He's a bore. This isn't the place for you. I can call a car to get you home—or better, I can take you there myself." King wanted a painting, but he wanted her out of the way more. So, if I got her to leave, he could get his own damn painting.

"You're in a mood," she said with a shake of her head. Another server came by with fresh champagne. I finished my glass and took another.

“You should have a drink,” I told her. “These evenings go much better when lubricated.”

“Hmmm,” she hummed the sound noncommittally then turned all of her attention on Hardigan. “Pretty Boy...”

I hated that fucking nickname.

The man in question didn't quite smile as he locked gazes with me. Yeah, we understood each other. He didn't like me. I didn't like him. She didn't belong with him. She never would. I just needed to let her get it out of her system.

It was that or take her back to the island. Now *that* was a tempting thought. The island had done a lot for us.

“Could you see if you could get us water? They're only going to circulate alcohol right here but there's a bar and bartender...”

Hardigan flicked another look at me then down at her. “You will stay right here?”

“Promise. If Ezra tries to kidnap me, I'll scream.”

I rolled my eyes.

“I'll keep an eye on you the whole time.” That was a warning for me. Dick. “I'll be right back.” Then he pressed a kiss to the corner of her mouth before straightening and strolling away.

As soon as he was gone, she pivoted to face me. “What's going on?”

“Excuse me?” The power of all that intelligence, cunning, and beauty was intoxicating, especially when she focused it on me.

“I haven't seen or heard from you in weeks and tonight, you're just here. You're trying to keep me away from this auction and sabotage my interactions. So—what's going on?”

Direct, artless, and far too vulnerable for our world. I shook my head. “Nothing, you just don't belong here.”

Her indelicate snort irked me. “Fine, keep your secrets. Genevieve looks willing to forgive, though I doubt there's

much you can do, considering who you are, to turn her off... Class and taste are fairly far apart these days.”

The remark amused me, but then I frowned. “Who?”

“Genevieve Whitten? The blonde you were plastered to when we came in.” Lainey raised her brows at me, daring me to deny it.

“Didn’t know her name,” I muttered before I took another drink. Our alone time was already coming to an end as Hardigan made his way over. I wasn’t remotely drunk enough for this. But as it was... “Besides, the only mouth I want to fuck here tonight is yours. Are you sure I can’t convince you to leave?”

CHAPTER
FOUR



LAINY

“...**T**he only mouth I want to fuck here tonight is yours.”
The heat in Ezra’s eyes seemed to support his comment. Surprise speared me as he leaned closer. The combination of his cologne and champagne not remotely as unattractive as it should be. “Are you sure I can’t convince you to leave?”

The distance between us closed as he wrapped a hand around my bicep. Instead of squeezing though, he just stroked the skin on the inside of my arm. The caress sent shivers radiating throughout my whole system.

“Ezra,” I said, keeping my voice low. “This isn’t the time...”

“Sure it is,” he taunted, the corners of his mouth curving into that devil-may-care smirk. Charming provocateur and insufferable jackass. “It’s always the time. You. Me. A beach. We could be at the airport in an hour. The plane has a bed...we could fuck our way to the island and then spend the next few weeks naked...”

Every silky syllable whispered goosebumps into life. The last thing I needed was to be tantalized when my mind had to be on business. Even my nipples tightened and I was glad the shaped cups in the dress hid the evidence, even if my thighs were squeezing together as if of their own volition.

The auction hadn’t started, but it would be soon. Not to mention, we were hardly alone as a crowd of influential individuals filtered into the room. I recognized more than a few of the faces—including the older woman Pretty Boy had taken dancing. The high-top tables were filling. I rather suspected the space had most likely been apportioned by how many would be here.

When everyone arrived, they would begin...

“It’s not polite to ignore me,” Ezra scolded, continuing to stroke his fingers down my arm. The slight chill they’d picked

up from holding the glass only left me flushed with more heat. He dipped his head closer to mine, the whisper of his breath a tease. “You remember what happened the last time, don’t you, Kotyonok?”

My throat and mouth went dry as I cut my gaze to meet his. The fire in his eyes dared me to deny it. Deny him. His lashes lowered as though he glanced at my mouth. As much as I wanted to resist the temptation, I flicked a look at his lips. This close, they seemed to glisten. Worse, he ran his tongue over his lower lip as if savoring the taste of something he’d had earlier.

Damn you, Ezra. He wasn’t even drunk. I’d seen him kill an entire bottle of whiskey and maintain an air of sobriety. A few glasses of bubbly, no matter how expensive, were unlikely to even make him tipsy.

“That was *then*,” I told him, keeping my tone flat even if the heat racing through my system threatened to make me sweat. Then with care, I pulled my arm away and turned to give him my back.

Thankfully, Pretty Boy was on a direct course for me with a pair of glasses in hand. Relief chased the heat as I found his eyes fixed on me. He flicked one look toward Ezra even as his jaw tightened. Yeah, Pretty Boy wasn’t happy either.

“You think turning away is all it takes?” Dark amusement licked each word as he pressed right up against my back. His behavior was creating a scene and more than one person glanced in our direction. I kept my spine straight and my shoulders back. The appearance of weakness only lured more predators to the field.

“Thank you,” I said as Pretty Boy rejoined us. He passed me the Waterford crystal glass. I welcomed the cold. The hint of bubbles in the water had me raising my brows. “They only had sparkling,” he explained before he transferred his attention to Ezra. “All sorted?”

“If you’re taking drink orders,” Ezra said, holding out his empty champagne glass. “I could use a refill.”

Milo didn't even indulge him with a response as he stared at him briefly before glancing at me.

"I'm fine," I assured him, and I was. Ezra's nearness was uncomfortable, but I accepted Milo's hand when he held it out and he tugged me away easily. "I'm hoping we will—"

Before I could even complete the thought, the lights flashed three times before dimming to indicate we should all take our places. Grateful, I moved toward the table with Milo, and smothered a sigh when Ezra took the spot on my other side. Of course, he wouldn't just see himself out.

"I think your girlfriend is back there," Pretty Boy said and I pursed my lips before I forced myself to take a drink of water.

"She's free," Ezra drawled. "Help yourself. I'll take care of Lainey."

Irritation feathered through me as I focused on Mark Rolson as he took center stage as it were.

"Good evening ladies," Rolson said, making brief eye contact with me and smiling before he looked away to somewhere else in the room, "and gentlemen. I'm not going to bore you with the pleasantries. We have ten items in our catalog available this evening, all payments are due upon acceptance of the bid and must be completed before you leave the room. Without further adieu..."

He moved to the side as an assistant carried out a painting. Not the one I was looking for, though this one had been missing for several years. He detailed the provenance, and the man with the painting certified the authenticity. They also showed the pictures of the painting's edges where they bore distinctive markings.

It went for a cool four million. In a hush of quiet, yet intense, bidding. The next item was a jade dragon, the carving was exquisite and it dated back several centuries. Milo set his water glass on the table and rested his free hand lightly against my lower back. Ezra leaned toward me, head tipped as though covering the fact he was speaking.

“That would look lovely if we tattooed it along your spine... You like dragons, don't you, Kotyonok?”

“Don't,” I told him as I took a drink of the water. Ezra chuckled but Milo went tense, then Ezra raised his hand and Rolson looked right at him.

“Seven hundred thousand is the bid, do I have seven five?” He flicked a look past us. “Seven five, do I have eight?”

Ezra lifted a fresh glass of champagne I hadn't even seen him receive. The bidding went back and forth until they settled on one point five million for the dragon. “You're welcome,” Ezra murmured as he trailed a finger down my arm and Pretty Boy wrapped his arm more firmly around my waist. When he settled his hand on my hip and pulled me under his arm, I let him.

While I didn't need the protection, Ezra seemed determined to get under my skin tonight. Even more than usual. I didn't know what game he was playing, but he was definitely up to something.

Still chuckling, Ezra used his phone to transfer the money while new items were presented and quickly sold. The bidding grew contentious more than once, though it was done with a kind of ferocious intensity that belied actual disagreement and yet—a real menace.

Then *Count Lepic and his Daughters* came out and Ezra gestured for another glass from a passing waiter. He took my glass of water and replaced it with the champagne. I shook my head and focused as Rolson listed off the provenance. The painting had been missing for years. The fact it had been resting in a private collection meant nothing to anyone here.

It shouldn't mean anything to me either, except my grandfather wanted the painting. Items like this were too valuable to disappear entirely, unless they were actively destroyed. Even then, without concrete evidence, most art collectors would not accept it. They would always search for their unicorn.

“Bidding will begin at five million,” Mark Rolson said and I lifted my hand only to have Ezra take it. He locked his hand like a shackle around my wrist, then he pressed his lips to my palm. “I have five, do I hear six? Six, what about seven?”

“Let me go, Ezra,” I ordered him. Rather than obey, he scraped his teeth over the heel of my hand.

“Let her go,” Milo ordered and he shifted around to get between us.

“Ten million,” Mark Rolson said. “Do I have eleven?”

Milo clamped his hand down on Ezra’s shoulder. It was his bad one. He’d taken a bullet through that shoulder just a couple of months earlier. A grimace crossed Ezra’s face as Milo’s knuckles went white.

“Fifteen million...” Mark kept track of the bidding and then Ezra released my hand and I turned, catching Mark’s eye and raised my hand.

“Sixteen million, there’s seventeen,” he looked back at me and I nodded. “Eighteen. What about nineteen?” It kept going all the way up to twenty-eight million. One by one the other bidders fell off.

Someone behind me was also bidding but I didn’t dare take my attention off Rolson. He wasn’t slowing the bidding.

“Thirty million,” he said, looking at me.

“Thirty-five,” I countered, speaking for the first time directly rather than just motioning.

A faint smile touched his lips. “Thirty-five million, do I have forty?” He looked past me and the silence elongated. My heart hammered and even though I was aware of Milo and Ezra glaring at each other next to me, I kept my whole focus on Rolson. “I have forty,” Rolson said, then looked at me.

I nodded.

“Forty-five,” he said and this time the quiet went on for an interminable amount of time. Finally, he nodded. “Sold for forty-five million dollars.” His gaze tracked back to me and there was polite applause.

Relief threatened to take me out at the knees. Expensive, but worth it. The painting was removed as another item was placed up there but I ignored it. I had what I wanted. I opened my clutch and pulled out my phone. It would take a call to the banker to free the money. One of Rolson's assistants was already heading toward me.

He handed me a slip of paper with the account numbers on it. Moving away from the table, I circled the boys and headed for a spot of privacy. The sense of them following me was right there but I said nothing. While most bankers kept rigid hours, ours took our call whenever we made it. It was crucial the wire not be held. He could authorize it immediately.

Five minutes later, I entered the account numbers for the auction into the banking app and placed the transfer. Confirmation came through within three minutes. The last item sold while I was handling the banking, I turned to find Ezra glaring at Milo as Milo kept him from coming anywhere near me.

"We're finished," I said as I tucked my phone back into my clutch. "We just need to pick up the painting and the paperwork." I also wanted to make sure it was exactly what they'd put on display for us. Authentication was an important part of Rolson's reputation. As a middleman, he couldn't afford to try and con either the buyers or the sellers.

At the same time, it didn't mean he was honest either. Look at what he was negotiating the sales for.

"Then we'll get it and go," Ezra said. "Or send your little helper here to play fetch and I'll take you home." There was just the barest hint of a slur. But he was not drunk—I'd seen Ezra drunk. Endured his drunkenness. What was he doing...?

"Did the King send you?" Milo asked. "I noticed he stopped bidding there towards the end. Did he want you to keep Mayhem from getting the painting?"

Ezra's jaw tightened and he cut his glare from Milo briefly to me then back again. Son of a bitch. The so-called *king* had sent him. Milo and Emersyn's deadbeat father who had been

playing all these games behind the scenes—and for whom Ezra and Adam had been working all these years.

“Pretty Boy,” I said, fisting my anger. “Would you please collect my painting?” I handed him the card. Rage poisoned my veins bleeding hot then cold. Both extinguished the desire Ezra had been feeding earlier.

“Are you sure?” Milo frowned. He didn’t want to leave me with him.

“You’ll be quick,” I assured him. “And I’m not going anywhere.”

But I did want a word with Ezra. Privately.

“I’ll be right back.” Aggravation scored those words and I had a feeling that we would be revisiting this in bed later.

Fine.

I could live with that.

As soon as Pretty Boy walked away, I faced Ezra. Not an ounce of repentance reflected in his expression. If anything, Ezra looked angry with *me*. “You need to stop,” he told me. “I know you think you’re more than capable of swimming in these waters, but you’re not.”

I opened my mouth, but Ezra dragged me to him and wrapped his hand around my jaw, holding me right there.

“Your freedom came at a price, Kotyonok. You have to stop or I’m going to have to stop you. Neither of us has Adam to rely on anymore.”

The last sentence was a punch to the solar plexus. He fused his mouth to mine and seemed to suck all the air from my lungs. The earlier heat licked up through me and left me burned as he yanked his head back.

“Stop,” he whispered, touching his finger to my lips. “Or it won’t end well for anyone...”

Then he pivoted and walked away, leaving me breathless and flushed. The intensity in him was as wild and unpredictable as a summer storm. It also seemed just as

violent. Movement around me reminded me that once again, I wasn't alone, and I searched the faces of those who glanced at me. More than one smirked, at the inappropriate display most likely.

Julius King, however, stared at me for a long moment then looked toward the front where Pretty Boy took possession of the painting in a sealed case. Just behind King was the woman Milo had danced with and she spoke to another man I didn't recognize. The mixture of unfamiliar sprinkled amongst those I'd known for years reminded me that I was traveling in different circles.

Or maybe it was the circle that had changed. Old families fell out of favor and new ones clawed their way in. Some would look to make their names by knocking out a vulnerable family, the old money versus the new.

I had no friends in this room.

“Lainey...”

Pretty Boy frowned as he studied me. Had he seen Ezra kiss me? I wasn't sure if he had or not. He hadn't charged across the room to “save me” but he'd also been playing this game with me tonight. Letting me take the lead—maybe he still was.

“I'm ready to go,” I said and my voice only shook a little. I had one friend in this room.

I had Pretty Boy.

“Take me home?”

CHAPTER
FIVE



LAINY

Leaving the event seemed almost anticlimactic after the auction and Ezra's antics. Pretty Boy kept a firm grip on the case with the painting in it and I moved next to him. While he moved his free hand to my lower back periodically, he didn't try to take my arm. It didn't faze me. His watchfulness wrapped around me like a security blanket.

It was easy to forget his rougher background at events like this. Pretty Boy's gorgeous face gave him this—damn near angelic air but I had zero intention of telling him that. He wore custom suits like he'd been born in them and demonstrated a near effortless restraint I could almost envy.

Wood waited for us with the car. The older man nodded as we descended the steps. When he offered to take the case from Pretty Boy, Milo shook his head. "I have it. Thank you."

Since Milo rarely let him carry anything, it rolled right off my driver. Once we were in the car and secured, Wood took his place behind the wheel. "Home, Miss?"

"The apartment," I said. I didn't want to go all the way out to Grandfather's tonight. I had a place in the city for such occasions. One I stayed at more and more because it meant Milo could stay with me. I wasn't quite prepared for that particular conversation with Grandfather.

"Very well, are we dropping Mr. Hardigan off on the way?" The very proper tone held just a hint of suggestion. Wood had worked for my grandfather for as long as I could remember. His father worked for our family. So did his mother. I respected his rather natural protectiveness.

However, I couldn't afford to indulge it too far. I kept my expression as smooth as possible. "No, Mr. Hardigan will be joining me. And privacy, please, Wood."

"Of course," he said without another objection. The shield between the driver and the backseat rolled up with a soft, if electronic whir. Then sealed with a soft whump. Turning in the

seat, I never quite finished opening my mouth before Pretty Boy kissed me.

He framed my face with his fingers. The calluses were smooth and rough in equal measure. The warmth of his skin sent heat to melt the icy chill in my bones. It was his mouth that demanded all of my attention. The firmness of his lips coupled with the pressure as he tilted my head back focused the intensity of his passion on me. When his tongue swept in for a taste, I groaned.

The embers of desire he'd been stoking all evening flamed to life. It didn't help that Ezra's behavior had alternately inflamed and extinguished, then inflamed again, a hunger that threatened to consume me. Particularly now, as Pretty Boy kissed all the oxygen from me. What air I had came only because he allowed it.

Trusting Wood to do his job, I freed the buckle of my seatbelt and twisted to climb onto Pretty Boy's lap. He half-lifted me as I straddled him and then his hands were under my skirt, pushing it higher and I slid my hands down to his lap. I don't know which of us was faster and I didn't care.

His kiss was all tongue and teeth, biting and licking. I sucked against his lower lip as I got his belt open and his zipper down, then I had my hand wrapped around the hot, silken length of him. His cock practically throbbed against my palm. The lace of my panties tore at the crotch. A fleeting sense of disappointment was consumed in the raging fire racing throughout my system. I'd worn them for Pretty Boy and now he wouldn't see them.

Then he was lifting me as I angled his dick between us, I mounted him and then slid down as he pushed upward. The stretch of his cock was a burn I craved. I wasn't quite wet enough, even if I felt like I was soaking, or maybe he just felt bigger. Maybe it was the angle, and then he thrust upward and those spiraling thoughts shattered.

I wrapped my arms around him, devouring his mouth with the same fervor he'd poured into his kiss. He had one hand in my hair, fisting it. The tug lit up my scalp even as he gripped

my hip and drove me downward. The force was damn near bruising as I rode him. The grind on every downward thrust teased my clit.

Tension wound hot cords of pleasure tighter. My cunt clenched around him, the spasm of my inner muscles almost beyond my control. It was like riding a horse, the rolling hip motion as I posted helped me maintain some control, but Milo only gave me so much before he had both hands on my hips.

Then he took over, the pace frenetic and brutal. He slammed upward as I drove downward. A mewling cry escaped me as he released my mouth. Then his lips were on my throat. Biting kisses that would leave marks. Sharp pinches from his teeth, then the hard pull of his mouth as he sucked a hickey into being. The pulse went all the way to my pussy and I clamped down on him as I chased that orgasm.

It was right there. I dug my nails into his nape as he kissed his way to my ear and then ground us both to a halt.

“No,” I whimpered almost as he locked his hands and there was no moving. Even flexing around him, I couldn’t lift my hips or roll them. Dragging my head upward, I stared at him in the darkness of the car.

The passing lights didn’t betray his expression to me, only that his eyes were as fixed on me as mine were on him.

“What?” I demanded.

“Who are you fucking?” The question slashed through the haze of need and want.

“You...” What the hell was he asking?

He bumped his hips upward while still keeping me immobile. It pushed the air out of my lungs. “Who am I?”

“You saw Ezra kiss me...”

The growl from his chest vibrated through and he bit my lower lip enough that it hurt. “Not what I asked, Mayhem.”

I flexed my inner muscles, fighting with their shaking to grip his cock tighter. The stretch and burn almost made it

easier, because impaled on the thickness of his dick meant I couldn't go anywhere or really feel anything that wasn't him.

"Don't be jealous," I told him in between little gasps. He'd stopped right when I was on the cusp and the frustration held me captive. I wanted to move so badly, but even clenching and squeezing my ass didn't get me much. The strength in his hands promised I wasn't going anywhere.

"I'm not jealous." That was a lie, but I let it go for now. Raw fury decorated his words in a way it hadn't while we'd been at the event. "I thought I behaved admirably, I let that son of a bitch touch you, crowd you, and then kiss you without breaking his fucking jaw."

I swallowed. Not at the pure, undiluted anger underscoring each word. No, that was fierce enough—but the possessiveness in his touch, in his expression, and in the liquid heat every move and syllable he made echoed within me. Milo Hardigan was so bad for me in all the right ways.

"You did wonderfully," I promised. "Better than I could have dreamed... I know I didn't explain much, but thank you."

"You never have to thank me, Mayhem." He slid a hand up from my hip even as he dragged me down, seating himself deeply. The push and pull of his cock sliding inside of me was delicious and I didn't try to swallow my groan. The spark of him hitting deep, striking that perfect spot, was too much and not enough. "Never. But that fucker doesn't get to manhandle you and he sure as shit doesn't get to betray you."

There was the sting. The betrayal. Ezra had been there for the king. For Pretty Boy's father, a man Pretty Boy hated more than anyone else. Well, save for a dead man who couldn't hurt Em ever again. Those ugly thoughts pinged off each other and I shook them. The car was slowing and the drive from the event to the apartment wouldn't be much longer.

"He's not here," I told Milo, cupping his cheek. There was a hint of roughness to his jaw. He'd shaved earlier before we got dressed, but the hint of growth there promised a harsher bite to his kisses. "I am."

He flexed his hand against my hip.

“And I’m fucking you, Pretty Boy,” I promised him.

“You’re goddamn right you are,” he whispered, his breath hot on my lips. “Mine, Mayhem...”

“Then fuck me, Pretty Boy,” I demanded, before tracing my tongue along his lower lip, “Make me come...” I groaned when he shifted me himself. “Fuck me...”

“I’m going to fuck you,” he declared, biting my lip then kissing me with a hot sweep of his tongue. “I’m going to fuck you and fill you up and it’s going to be my cum sliding down your legs when we get out of the car...”

My mouth went absolutely dry at the description.

“You’re going to be filthy from me,” he swore as he began to rock me again and I couldn’t focus for the feel of him hitting deep with every upward thrust. “Me, Mayhem. My cum. When we get inside...I’m going to fill you again.”

My focus splintered as the pleasure fountained up inside of me. I wasn’t sure if it was his words or his movements, but the orgasm stormed through me. Fighting to catch my breath, I writhed on his lap, adding a twist to every rock of my hips. We kissed like we were in a battle and maybe we were. Pretty Boy shattered me as his hips stuttered and the first gush of wet heat flooded inside of me.

I swallowed his groan as he twisted on the seat and I was on it and he was still inside of me, while resting on his knees. “It’s all staying in there,” he whispered, little thrusts lighting me up. “Every drop.”

Shivers wracked me and then Milo kissed me, sweet and tender. The gentle laves of his tongue against the sting of my lower lip, soothed it. Then he eased out and he pressed his fingers to my cunt. Another shudder shook me as I realized he was pushing his cum back inside me.

The panties were gone so they’d be no help. Belatedly, my floating plummeted to earth as he stuffed his still wet cock back into his pants and then did them up. He smoothed down my skirt before taking a seat next to me. My legs were still

spread and my hips tilted. The minute I moved, he was going to start slipping and sliding down my legs.

We had to walk through the lobby, past the doorman and the concierge, to the elevators. There might even be other residents or delivery people—strangers. They were all going to see us as I moved and his cum slid down my legs.

I licked my lips and then Milo pressed his wet fingertips, still salty with his release, to my mouth and I sucked them against my tongue.

“Good girl,” he murmured.

Another shudder traveled up from my toes. Pretty Boy was rapidly becoming an addiction. From our first time together until now, it didn’t seem to matter when I had to leave him—I was so desperate to return that I risked mistakes and tactical errors to see him again.

Now, he was here... More, he seemed determined to stay. The car slowed to a stop and the door opened up front. A moment later, Wood opened the back door to let us out. Pretty Boy shot me a heated look as he took the case and climbed out first. Then he turned and offered me his free hand. My breasts ached a little as I took it and I didn’t even get one foot out of the car before the cum began to drip.

The smell of sex and Milo wrapped around me. Heat flushed my face and I lifted my chin as I met the knowing twinkle in Pretty Boy’s eyes. “Thank you, Wood,” I said almost automatically as Milo guided me toward the doors.

James, the doorman, opened up for us right away. “Miss Benedict. Mr. Hardigan.”

I smiled at him, half-floating on the surrealness of the way it felt, the phantom thrust of Milo’s cock seemed to still be inside me even if he was sticking to my thighs, slicking them as I walked. I rubbed them together for that brief few seconds as James got the door open.

Milton was at the desk and he stood as we came in. “Good evening Miss Benedict, Mr. Hardigan. The dry cleaning was delivered earlier, I had it taken up to your apartment.”

“Thank you,” I told him as we moved to the elevators, where Milo had to let go of my hand to swipe the card I’d made sure he had. If he was staying with me, he needed a key to get in and out after all. Wonder flushed through me as I caught sight of my appearance. My hair was mussed, my lipstick gone, my lips swollen and the pink flush on my cheeks extended to my chest.

That elicited another shiver and then we were inside the elevator and alone. I tilted my head, catching the scorching thirst in Pretty Boy’s eyes as he watched me. The smile on his lips was a dark promise and fresh heat speared me. It didn’t matter that I’d just had him and could still feel him.

When the doors opened, I strolled out with Pretty Boy right behind me. I had one of the two penthouse suites on this floor. I let us in and Pretty Boy locked up as I dropped my keys and clutch onto the table inside. The heat of him was behind me and then the zipper glided downward. I caught his gaze in the mirror across the room as the dress fell to the floor and left me in the strapless bra and torn panties.

“Show me,” Pretty Boy ordered and I spread my legs. He skated his hand down my belly to cup my cunt. “Good girl... now you’re going to get on your knees and suck my cock. Then I’m going to carry you into that bedroom and fuck you until you can’t walk. Understood?”

Leaning my head back against his shoulder, I looked up to find those whiskey brown eyes boring into mine. “Shoes on or off?”

The reminder of our first time seemed to flash across his expression. “On,” he ordered and I straightened to walk the four steps down into the sunken living room. I pulled a pillow off the sofa and dropped it onto the floor before I went to my knees.

If he wanted me on my knees, he had to come to me. Without a word, he stripped off his jacket and tie as he prowled forward. The white dress shirt pulled taut against his thick chest and the shoulder holster served as the warning of how dangerous he could be.

His belt slid away and then his pants were open and his slick cock faced me, half-hard and sticky with our release. “Open up, Mayhem...”

CHAPTER

SIX



MILO

Morning arrived with a kind of abruptness as my eyes snapped open. Shadowy dreams lingered like the half-remembered nightmares they were. Sweat dotted my face and I twisted my head to find the bed next to me cool and empty. Closing my eyes, I fell back against the pillows. My heart wasn't quite racing, but it was definitely unsteady.

The sound of bars slotting shut echoed in my ears and I scrubbed a hand over my face. I wasn't going back to sleep. Tossing the expensive sheets off, I rolled out of bed and onto the floor. Starting the day with push-ups was part rehab, part discipline. Scars on my lower back tugged, the skin there tighter than before.

Keeping my pushes sharp, and aligned, I ignored the ache from the knife wounds. The stabs in the back had been deep and they'd bled a fuck ton, but they hadn't killed me. I healed. If I felt them for the rest of my life—fucking fine. The bastard who had me stabbed was dead, my sister was safe, and I was alive.

I could live with a little pain. Hell, I was alive and doing my push-ups on plush carpet that was softer than the beds I'd slept in growing up.

At fifty push-ups, I rolled over to do sit-ups. The coffered ceiling with their pearlescent white grid lines replaced my view of the pale gray carpet. A strip of lighting ran around the edges of the room, allowing for varying degrees of illumination. The simplicity of Mayhem's rooms in the apartment seemed to suggest she didn't live here full time. But I had a feeling the lack of personality was more of a personal choice.

My lower back protested as I forced an extra ten sit-ups and then I rose to stretch. There was a small workout room in the apartment. The building boasted a much more luxurious gym. Everything in it was too clean and too shiny. The

equipment looked freshly installed rather than used. Instead of hard work and sweat, it smelled of polish and lemon water.

Mayhem said there was a treadmill, an elliptical, and a standard exercise bike as well as a television and a virtual trainer if I wanted to use it. The treadmill was fine. I didn't need the bells and whistles. Straightening, I eyed the note on my side of the bed.

Pretty Boy,

I have meetings today for two charities. I doubt very much you want to attend the Upper West Side Conservatory Board meeting or the Mercy Hospital luncheon. Normally, I'd skip these but appearances need to be kept. I won't be back until this evening. If you decide that I've been stubborn and made decisions for you, ring Milton downstairs. They'll call Wood and he can bring you to where I am.

If, however, you don't feel like joining me—and I promise you that I am absolutely not offended by the prospect—then don't and enjoy your day. I had more research pulled on Julius King's business activities and various interests. There is a significant number of shell companies and corporations standing between him and his investments. My investigators are cracking the code. Everything is on my desk in the

*library and I got you a laptop because I
needed mine today.*

See you tonight...

L.

Blowing out a breath, I glanced back at the rumpled bed again. It was almost nine. What time had she gotten up this morning? We'd been up until after two. It didn't seem to matter how often I had her, I always wanted more.

Well, she was right about the charities. If she *needed* me there or *wanted* me, I'd go in a heartbeat. But she was fine and as she often tried to remind me, she could take care of herself.

Still...I'd keep an eye on the time. How late could a luncheon go? I went to the drawers and pulled out a pair of boxer briefs and shorts, then dragged on a t-shirt. I hadn't intended to have so many clothes here but one of the maids had unpacked me and Mayhem ordered me a number of outfits.

The suits alone were a ridiculous expense. Arguing with her on that front did nothing, because I need them to navigate in her world. Liam would cover the costs if I asked him, so would Ivy. But I didn't want their money.

I didn't want Mayhem's either. I just needed to keep a solid accounting so I could pay her back. I carried my shoes through the apartment to the kitchen. The sound of humming reminded me that Marlene was there. I'd scared the hell out of the housekeeper the first night I spent here. Mayhem had laughed so hard she'd nearly cried.

As it was, I apologized and Marlene forgave me. I also never left Mayhem's room naked again. Not unless I was dead certain the apartment was empty. The staff did not live in the apartment. They did have smaller apartments on one of the lower floors. That way, the housekeeper and the driver were available as needed. Apparently, that wasn't as often until lately.

I cleared my throat as I reached the kitchen door and the older German woman pivoted to face me. “Mr. Hardigan,” she greeted me with a warm smile. “Good morning.”

“Good morning, Marlene.” I wanted to address her properly or for her to just call me Milo, neither she allowed. So I just did as I was told. “Sorry to interrupt. I wanted to get a bottle of water for my run.”

“No interruption. I was just going over your schedules for the week so I could plan for meals. You have no food allergies, yes?”

“No,” I told her.

“Do you have any preferences? Any favorites?” She moved to a cabinet and pulled out a reusable water bottle that she filled from the chilled refrigerator dispenser. “Miss Benedict, for example, loves stroganoff. She won’t eat it that often, because she worries about too many calories.” The last she delivered with a scoff like it shouldn’t remotely be a problem. “But she does adore it, so once a month, I make her stroganoff.”

“That sounds really good,” I said as she passed me the bottle. “And I could have done that.”

“My kitchen, Mr. Hardigan. When I am here, this is my kitchen, therefore my rules.” She fixed those stern, dark blue eyes on me like she was ready for my arguments. The woman probably was. She was over fifty, but I could only peg that because Mayhem mentioned she’d just celebrated that birthday. Otherwise, I wouldn’t even try.

I had a feeling Ms. Stephanie would have gotten along fine with Marlene. That twinge robbed me of some of my mirth and teasing. “Yes, ma’am.” I told her. “I’m going to run... and whatever May—Miss Benedict prefers. I can eat anything.”

With that salute, I left the kitchen and retreated deeper into the apartment and toward the gym. The place was huge. Even the new suite the guys had built at the clubhouse couldn’t compete with this apartment. It was two stories, and more than six thousand square feet of space. Easily.

It was probably bigger. I didn't ask.

There were four bedrooms, four full bathrooms, a half bathroom for visitors, the kitchen, library, living room, formal dining room, and a billiards room. She said they didn't use it often unless she or her grandfather were entertaining. All of this, staff, charities, and she spent forty-five million dollars on some ugly-ass painting.

Rome could do so much better.

Once in the gym, I cracked open the water and took a long drink before I sat down and pulled on my shoes. It didn't take me long to get started. I'd rather do weights, but she didn't have the right ones here and I would be damned if I asked for them. I sure as shit wasn't going down to the fancy gym. A run would be fine. While I needed to get to know the city better, I'd cleared my first mile on the treadmill before I even started to feel the burn.

I'd lost some muscle during recovery and stamina. I couldn't afford to be without either. At two miles, I hit the incline button and increased the speed. The punishing pace demanded focus on my breathing and at least helped to bring some of the more tangled thoughts into sharp focus. I kept it up until I hit mile five and then allowed the treadmill to slow down and the incline to return to level.

Sweat soaked my shirt. The muscles in my back, my abdomen, and my legs burned with protest. When I finally stopped, I actually slid a hand to my lower back to check one of the old scars to see if it had reopened. When my fingers came away with only sweat and not blood, I shook my head.

Like the shadows of the half-remembered nightmare, the feeling of the steel biting into my flesh, driving in deeper and deeper while I fought to get to Ivy lingered. All at once, I wanted Mayhem in front of me, but she was at her charities.

I could go—she'd left me info on how to get there but I also couldn't smother her. She wouldn't tolerate it. Considering the shit she had to put up with from Graham...

Thoughts of the night before lit a match on the temper the run had attempted to sand down. I was going to beat the shit out of that little prick. He didn't get to keep doing that to her.

Part of the reason I had to resist my own urges to keep Mayhem within my line of sight at all times, that's what those assholes had done. To the point they'd practically tried to shut her out of everything and keep her shut away.

It would never work.

She was too goddamn independent. Draining my water, I left the gym and retreated to shower. I didn't take as much time under the jets as I could. The fact they pulsed from four different directions was downright hedonistic. I liked the privacy even more, that and the fact I wasn't remotely cramped in the shower. It would fit me and Mayhem just fine.

I shaved, then checked the scars briefly in the mirror while I toweled off. Doc warned me that I'd need more therapy, but I'd blown him off. That didn't mean I wouldn't do the exercises. I wanted him focused on Ivy though and not me. After I dressed—jeans and a long-sleeved shirt that was probably a lot more Braxton Harbor seaside than New York high-rise, I headed down to the office with the bottle I refilled in the bathroom.

After Marlene finished, I'd head to the kitchen to get—

Speak of the devil, she stood at the entryway to the library with a tray in her hands. The smell of bacon, eggs, and coffee greeted me. "I thought you might want something to eat after your workout, and Miss Benedict has told me that you prefer black coffee."

Not quite gritting my teeth, I summoned a smile. "That I do, thank you, Marlene." The words "you really didn't have to" danced unspoken on my tongue. I opened the door to the library for her and she inclined her head.

"*Danke schön,*" she murmured, the light German accent didn't appear all the time but it was definitely there.

"*Bitte schön,*" I replied and her smile widened.

“You have been practicing German?” She carried the silver tray over to the desk where a stack of folders waited alongside the promised laptop.

“A little,” I admitted. “It seemed the polite thing to do.”

After placing the tray, she removed the lid on the food, which was steaming hot. It was more than just bacon and eggs. There were fried home potatoes with onions as well as a slab of ham. “You are a good boy, Mr. Hardigan. You also have a lot of homework—so eat your breakfast. I’ll bring in more coffee in a little while and pick up your tray.”

“I could bring it back to you when I finish,” I offered and she merely gave me an angelic smile. “Or,” I said, accepting that answer because I’d seen that same expression on Ms. Stephanie. This wasn’t open to debate. “I will wait for you to get it while I work.”

“It is good to understand these things. Now... I will leave you to it. And I will see you in a half hour.”

I swore she was laughing at me as she closed the doors. Alone, I turned to the food and my stomach rumbled at the rich scents. Everything looked perfect. One sip of the coffee told me it was. Not that I needed the confirmation, Marlene had prepared all the meals we’d had at the apartment since coming to stay here. Even the ones that Mayhem simply took out of the warmer.

“Right...” I looked at the stack of folders and the food. Eat first. Then deal with what she’d dug up.

Julius King was still out there, and he was the other reason I was here. Not the only reason, no, he was far from that. But he was still a potential threat and one I needed to make sure didn’t touch Ivy, the guys, *or* Mayhem.

CHAPTER
SEVEN



ADAM

The downstairs buzzer sliced through the dark at three in the morning, yanking me to wakefulness. The insistence had me rolling over to slap the answer button with one hand, even as my free hand closed around the grip of the gun. The comforting weight and coolness of the handle erasing the lingering web of sleep.

Jock Colville had night duty on the front desk and I kept him well-paid for his service as security for the building in general as well as for me specifically.

“Yes?” It had better be his fucking voice that responded.

“You have a visitor, Mr. Reed,” Jock said, his tone conveying warning and apology. “He is not quite himself.”

“Let me talk to the son of a bitch myself,” a slurring, yet familiar voice demanded. “Took you too fucking long to call him as it is.”

Goddammit. “Is he alone?” I sat up.

“Yes, sir,” Jock responded with patience. “He’s also now unarmed.”

Setting the gun down, I scrubbed a hand over my face. “Send him up. Keep his weapons.”

“Of course.”

A yawn cracked my jaw as I left the bed, cell phone in hand, and went straight to the bathroom. I’d barely managed two consecutive hours. Emptying my bladder gave me a minute to clear the cobwebs. I got rid of the rest by splashing cold water on my face. The roughness of the stubble was abrasive against my palm.

The past few weeks had been an exercise in the intense. My phone vibrated a warning that the elevator had arrived. It would request my authorization to open. Another measure of security.

I used my thumbprint and facial scan on the way out of the bathroom to let him in before I headed out of the bedroom. The elevator chimed as it opened and a drunken Ezra staggered out. I'd have known he was drunk without the warning from Jock.

He smelled like a distillery and it wafted off of him like he'd soaked alcohol into his pores. His hair askew, his face flushed, and his eyes—

Pausing, I narrowed my gaze to study him. Like a wounded animal and unfocused, he didn't even bother to glance in my direction. Instead, he just headed for the bar. His gait was unsteady and he swayed on his feet.

“Coffee,” I told him as I descended the steps into the sitting room. The bar itself was locked. Old habits. He could try it all he wanted, but he'd have to break into the cabinet. Leaving him to discover that fact, I headed for the kitchen.

Normally, staff would take care of all these things for me. But I allowed for no staff here save for one day a week. A housekeeper who came in, cleaned everything, changed out the sheets, and restocked the fridge; and the valet who retrieved suits for cleaning and pressing while delivering new ones.

It was a two hour window under strict scrutiny from security while I worked in my office. I set up the coffee maker to pull shots while I checked my phone.

The crash of glassware in the other room and an aggrieved grunt told me Ezra had discovered the locked bar cabinets. I didn't care. If he wanted more alcohol, he had plenty of his own homes.

No urgent messages required my attention. There was an email from Andrea with an image attached. The horse in the picture was a beautiful young filly, good conformation, and coloring. The red in her coat seemed to shimmer under the summer sun.

Flicking to the email itself, I frowned.

Dad is selling her. He said I don't ride enough to justify keeping her and she is better for racing. Help? I emailed Lainey too, but she's been tied up with Grandfather all week.

I'm home on the weekend. They moved the masquerade up this year, so don't yell it's too early for break. I'm getting an extra week. Reed perks.

The corners of my lips twitched.

Anyway, can you save my horse? I'll see you soon. Love A.

It was followed by a far more droll postscript.

P.S. If you want, I'm stuck at the club first thing on Saturday, I wouldn't mind if you broke me out.

If I wanted...

Shaking my head, I poured the shots into a demitasse cup and downed them before I started another set going. Sunset's Egyptian Princess was out of one of Dad's premier racing studs and another mare with good bloodlines but not a proven track record.

Whatever—I copied the information and sent it to the lawyer. He could buy the horse and have her sent to the Benedict stables for Andrea. If nothing else, old man Benedict would sooner swallow acid than let my father anywhere near his property, much less his barn.

Lainey was the far more accomplished equestrian; she could decide what to do with her.

The door to the kitchen slammed open. "What the fuck is wrong with your staff? Your bar is locked up and there's nothing in the crystal."

"Coffee is ready," I answered ignoring the rest of his question. From here, the aroma of alcohol was already strong. How much had he been drinking?

"I don't want fucking coffee," Ezra snarled. "I came here to have a drink."

"Too bad," I told him, locking the phone before I set it down. "You have plenty of places you can get alcohol from."

I'm not your fucking bartender.”

Scowling, Ezra picked up the demitasse with its espresso and scowled at me. “It’s all your goddamn fault.” Then he tossed back the espresso like it was vodka and set the cup back down with the kind of force we’d use when doing shots.

“Okay.” I accepted whatever the fuck it was and went about pulling another shot. Fuck, I just wanted to go to bed. But Ezra in this mood would take a while to settle. So while he prowled around the kitchen, muttering, I focused on making a latte.

“That’s all you have to say?” Ezra demanded. “Okay? That’s it?”

“What do you want me to say?” Relying on patience, I made the first latte for him and the second for me.

Instead of answering, Ezra started opening the cabinets. I had no idea what he was hunting for and I didn’t care. My phone buzzed as I finished making my own coffee. A series of appointments appeared on the screen.

It was closing in on four. My alarm would go off within the hour. I was supposed to go to the gym, workout, then a fight session before I had a breakfast meeting.

Sparing a glance toward Ezra, I shook my head. I doubted I’d get that workout in, much less the fight session. Not with his current mood.

“Living room,” I told him as I carried my coffee and phone out. The windows overlooking the river gave us a gorgeous view. The lower lights out here would probably help with his fidgeting.

We’d see.

It took Ezra more than a minute, but he finally stalked out of the kitchen with his coffee. He came to stand next to me where I stared out over the city, where it was beginning to wake up.

“Can I crash here for a couple of days?”

Not an unexpected question. Still... “Problems?”

Instead of answering, Ezra paced away from the window. So yes, there were problems. I sipped my coffee and waited for him to get his shit together. At least his stagger and sway didn't seem as pronounced.

“The Masquerade is coming.” The announcement didn't deserve a response from me, nor did it require one. The Masq had been my mother's favorite event, unfailingly the event that kicked off the slew of parties that would culminate in the Christmas Ball before giving way to debutante season once more.

I didn't give a damn about any of them—save for the Masquerade. I didn't care about this one now, except Andrea emailed she would be home for it. She was too young for these more formal occasions, but she was Melissa's daughter and our father was intent on showing off his mistress-turned-wife, which meant trotting out their child.

“Lainey will be there,” Ezra continued, though uncertainty crept into his voice. “Right? I know Melissa will be this year's hostess.”

I spared him a look. “Why would I know Lainey's schedule?” I assumed she'd be there. She never missed a single event when my mother was alive. My mother had been very fond of Lainey and I'd always suspected the feeling was mutual.

My mother was the reason I'd tried to look after Lainey, but her death had changed a lot of things...

“Fuck,” Ezra muttered, then scowled at me. “It's your goddamn fault.”

“So you said.” He'd mentioned it earlier. “Care to share what I am being blamed for?”

“Milo fucking Hardigan.”

Maintaining a smooth face and no reaction took some effort. I glanced at Ezra to meet his wild-eyed glare. When he didn't retreat, I raised my eyebrows.

“He's still in town.”

“I’m aware.” I was. He’d all but moved in with Lainey. They’d settled into her grandfather’s apartment three buildings over. If I looked out my bedroom windows, I could see the windows of her penthouse apartment.

The illusion of closeness was just that—an illusion. But I had to settle for it.

“If she comes to the party, he’ll probably be with her.”

“I would suppose.” Typically, plus ones were included. Not that Lainey had ever brought an escort to a party. Once—she’d considered it once. We made sure it didn’t happen and she never made the mistake of repeating that choice.

Now?

Now, she was in kissing range of her twenty-first birthday and living with a man I would rather have seen dead than ever touching what belonged—

“You would suppose,” Ezra scoffed, disdain etching every single word. “What the fuck happened to you? She’s—”

No sooner did he stomp onto that potentially bloodied ground than he retreated once more. When I pivoted, he withdrew and flung himself down on the sofa.

“She’s?” I said when he chose to not continue.

“Doesn’t matter,” Ezra muttered, slumping back and throwing an arm over his eyes. “None of it matters.”

Except it did and Ezra knew that. Attending the Masquerade was the very last thing I wanted to do and that meant I had to be there. Just like he did.

“It would be better if he went back to Braxton Harbor,” Ezra complained.

“Probably.” I didn’t disagree with that assessment. “Undoubtedly, the king wants him here.”

“His fucking son,” Ezra slurred, the anger in his voice submerging beneath the complaint. “Why did he have to be his fucking kid?”

Not an answer I had readily available. Emersyn was his biological daughter. Hardigan his biological son. The whole situation would almost be hilarious if it weren't so damn frustrating.

“Well, nothing with him has ever been easy.” A reminder Ezra shouldn't need. His grunt said as much. I spared a look at him. “Do you want to tell me what happened?”

“No.” Succinct.

For now, we just had to accept that Hardigan was in the equation. He would kill to protect Lainey. That made him useful. We had to make use of it for as long as we could. Then again... maybe his presence was why King hadn't come after me yet.

I'd been ready for that assault for weeks, but so far, he'd ignored my existence. Considering he'd been the one to order my death, one would think he'd find my life an offense.

Still, here we were.

“You should cultivate a better relationship with him.” I forced the words out. “As aggravating as we find him, he still has a part to play. King wants his son in his life... we can use that.” I shouldn't have to remind him and yet, here we were.

A soft snore echoed through the room and I glanced over my shoulder. Ezra's mouth was open and his face had gone slack. His arm still blocked his eyes but he was asleep.

Passed out.

Picking up his feet, I straightened him on the sofa before I dumped a blanket on him. Leaving him to sleep it off, I headed back to my room.

I didn't even make it to the bed before my phone buzzed.

Brixton's name appeared on the screen.

Waldemar wants to see you. Breakfast. Seven.

An address followed.

Fuck.

So much for sleep.

CHAPTER
EIGHT



LAINY

Grandfather was late, so I headed for the bar and ordered a drink while waiting for him there, rather than at the table. Technically, he wasn't *late-late*. No, his meeting with *Le Strärke* had run over, so he rescheduled our dinner—I checked the message—ten minutes prior to my arrival. Leopold Benedict didn't suffer fools, tardiness, or miscommunication.

I'd already been in the car, so I'd just continued to Céleste. We dined here at least three times a year, it was one of his favorites. Pierre, the *maitre d'*, knew us well and never batted an eye if we had to reschedule a table. He was there the day my grandfather took me out for my fifth birthday and had been the one to seat us for my sixteenth. With my twenty-first around the corner, no doubt existed within me that he would be opening the champagne for that celebratory drink.

For now, though, he merely snapped his fingers and a wine selection was delivered to the table I'd taken in the lounge. "Thank you, Pierre."

"I will have canapés and cheese tarts brought over." The fact a waiter was already moving to fill the order spoke to how well Pierre ran the restaurant. He expressed a wish, they fulfilled it. "Mr. Benedict expressed some concern that his hosts would seek to delay their meeting once more and he didn't want you to go hungry while you waited."

I didn't laugh, because that absolutely sounded like my grandfather. That he'd already had to reschedule had probably vexed him. If they lingered and impeded him once more, he would be cross. That would hamper our meal and I would likely be hungry.

"That sounds delightful," I said, keeping my smile easy. "Any chance Chef might sneak some raspberries onto my tarts?"

Pierre appeared to consider it. “I shall discuss it with him. I might be able to persuade him.”

“You are too good to me, Pierre,” I murmured and he inclined his head.

“Just let me know if I can do anything else, Martin will take care of you from here.” The last was as much a command to *Martin* as it was a promise to me. Sparkling water and wine were the first round of choices for the evening. While the fizz and the chill were quite welcome, the dryness was not. Grandfather preferred his fruit on a plate, not his vintage.

Normally, I didn’t care but tonight I wasn’t quite feeling the mood. Rather than pulling out my phone and perusing it, I let my gaze wander over the other guests. The lounge offered comfort, as well as a modicum of privacy. Well, dinner at Céleste was a formal affair. The lounge allowed a more casual atmosphere.

Even amongst the most astringent of businessmen, alcohol had a tendency to loosen the more stiff and unyielding demeanors by providing an access route past years of social training. It would be a mistake, however, to think everyone in the room presented exactly as they were. Society’s rules are not so forgiving. One of grandfather’s earliest lessons, do not present that which you do not want to be seen.

We made a point of testing what we knew about people by observing them in public. Some people were exactly who they seemed to be, I wanted the businessman out for a meal with his mistress. His wife could even be dining in the same restaurant, although that would show an incredible lack of manners. But his mistress was as well-known to those in our circles as his wife was. How they lived their lives, it’s none of my business—except when it was.

My mother had once played a similar role to perfection. She had been the mistress for many years and, now, *she* was the wife. While I had never actually looked to see if Harper Reed had taken a new mistress, I could say that the idea would surprise me. Of course, now that the thought occurred to me, I found myself turning it over and over, examining it from all

the angles. He probably had a mistress-in-waiting before their wedding announcements had been sent out, because Melissa Benedict, now Melissa Reed, would no longer fill that filthy angle for him.

I really didn't wanna think about that, and thankfully, Martin brought over some raspberry decorated cheese tarts and a plate of salmon canapés.

"Pierre wished me to inform you that Mr. Benedict is on his way and is expected within thirty minutes. Would you like me to move you to your table now? Or continue to await Mr. Benedict?"

"I'll wait," I said easily, before I unrolled the linen napkin—he'd brought a dark set so they would match my dress—and set it in my lap. "Would you thank the chef for me? The raspberries look amazing."

"Of course," Martin agreed and then he left me to my wine and observation. At the thirty minute mark exactly, I rose as my grandfather crossed the room. More than one person nodded to him but he allowed for no delays. A hint of silver in his hair added dignity to the reddish-brown. It had begun to thin in the last couple of years, though unlike other men his age—his hair wasn't receding.

"Darling girl," he said, his tone dipping into warmth that he reserved for the rare individual. Me. Em—on the occasions he had met her. Tally, *sometimes*. He preferred Em to Tally, though he'd never been so gauche as to comment directly. Of course, my grandmother. His hands engulfed mine as he pressed a warm kiss to each of my cheeks and I returned the favor. "My apologies for being so tardy."

"Well, I'm sure they had their reasons."

The frost kissing his eyes said those reasons were hardly acceptable. Still, I kept my smile in place. I was equally sure whatever their reasons had been, if he didn't care for them it would be *Le Strärke* who paid the cost, not me.

"But you're here now," I said, sliding my arm through his and ignoring the remnants on the table. There would be a

proper meal with new wine at our table. “I’m so excited to see you.”

“Are you?” Indulgence crept into his voice.

“Of course,” I said. “You have now kept me waiting, which means I get to choose dessert.”

He chuckled, the rumble dislodging some of the darker shadows in his eyes. “You make an excellent point, darling girl. Excellent.” With my hand on the crook of his arm, he turned us to face Pierre as the *maître d’* hurried to welcome him. “Pierre, I’ve kept my enchanting granddaughter waiting far too long. Tell me our table is ready?”

“*Absolument.*” Pierre gestured for us to follow him. “If you will come with me. I’ve taken the time to prepare a Chateau Mouton Rothschild. I think you will find it pairs perfectly with the chef’s selection of duck and lamb for your evening meal...”

My mouth was watering before he settled us at our table tucked into one of the alcoves overlooking the restaurant. It put us on display but also beyond reach. It meant we were free to chat and no one could just *drop by* to join us.

The staff was more than ready for us. The wine was open and breathing. Grandfather took care to pull out my chair and seat me before he took his own seat and he let Pierre fuss before the chef came out to introduce the first course of our meal.

Grandfather listened with the same intensity he displayed in meetings and during stockholder calls. Like him, I focused on the chef’s body language and inflections. There were parts of the menu he was very confident in, but in two areas—he worried. Whether it was the dish itself or our tardiness in the beginning, I wasn’t entirely certain.

The quirk to Grandfather’s lips said he’d noticed something similar. But once the first course was served, the staff withdrew to leave us to our meal. The first course of canapés were different from my aperitifs in the lounge and Grandfather only tasted one or two before he took a sip of the

first course wine. The Bordeaux would wait for the main course.

It wasn't until the soup course, that grandfather nodded to the room below. "Mr. Aberforth is here this evening."

"Do you plan to take his shirt in cards this week or should I give you an excuse to take me home?"

Grandfather's soft snort made me smile. "I could use a little vicious card play, so if you have no objections..."

I swirled the wine and kept my smile restrained, though amusement fountained within me. "I'll let you know after dessert."

His approving nod was a reward of its own. "Never agree to a deal when you can make a better one."

"You know, I've heard that before."

"I seem to recall," he said, keeping it light. After the soup, came the fish. The sole was particularly flaky and well-cooked. "Tell me about the auction."

So I briefed him on the event, and his expression barely flickered as I listed the details of the other art pieces as well as those in attendance.

"Graham was there?" Disapproval hung off each syllable and I gave a graceless shrug.

"Ezra had his own business. It didn't affect ours."

Rather than just accept that answer, Grandfather studied me for a moment and I considered the different angles.

"He drove the cost up," I could admit. "Which did affect how much we paid."

"The price is irrelevant," Grandfather scolded. "His motives, however..."

He'd been there for Julius King. "His motives are his own. I was successful in the endeavor, the piece is on its way to Der Sonne." The family estate was on Long Island.

Rather than comment, Grandfather waited for the fish to be cleared away and the Clapassade to be served and the Chateau Mouton to be poured. Only after we were alone again did he give me a firm look. “Mr. Hardigan?”

“...is very well,” I told him, choosing to deflect the actual question. “Thank you for asking.”

“Elaine,” Grandfather corrected and I lifted my shoulders.

“I enjoy his company and he’s Emersyn’s brother—”

“He’s also the child of that bastard King.”

“Through no fault of his own,” I reminded him. “The sins of the father—or the mother—do not belong to the child.”

Of all of us, I should not have to remind him of this and Grandfather’s expression darkened. “King is not to be trusted.”

“Agreed. He continues to play whatever game it is, and Milo continues to be on our side. There is no love lost there. He doesn’t trust King any more than we do. His goal *and* mine is to protect our families.”

Grandfather sighed. He did not like it. Not that anyone required him to like it. I didn’t care for it either. Still, he seemed to consider all of it before he took a sip of his wine and then cut into the meal. The lamb was an especially tender cut and it had been cooked to perfection.

The only question that remained was whether Grandfather would let the topic of Milo go. He knew Milo and I were sharing the apartment. I hadn’t hidden it, nor would I pretend anything else. I had also taken care to not flaunt Milo in his face. Something he would disapprove of—at least right now.

The silence went on long enough that concern nibbled at me.

“The Masquerade is coming,” he said finally. “Invitations have gone out.”

I didn’t sigh in relief because this change of subject was not a pleasant one. “Andrea will be coming home for it.”

She'd already sent me a message. "I've made an appointment for dresses..."

"You will probably be expected," Grandfather continued. "They will be hosting it at Waltham Corners. You'll represent the family..."

"Andrea—" I barely got her name out but Grandfather merely shook his head. Andrea was a Reed. She was also a Benedict, but he wouldn't countenance the argument.

"As I was saying," he continued. "You will represent the family. Take Mr. Hardigan as your escort. It will stymie the others and create a stir."

I frowned.

"It's a bold play, one they won't care for nor will they understand."

I wasn't sure I understood. "I don't want to use Milo that way..."

"We all use the people around us, darling girl. It is the cost of doing business. His presence will unsettle enough and I rather look forward to what the discussion will be in the weeks after."

His very unfriendly expression didn't linger.

"Your grandmother's birthday is also coming up."

A better subject. "I won't miss it," I promised.

"I know you won't—perhaps the rum dessert tonight."

I hid a smile. "It is one of her favorites."

It absolutely was.

Grandfather grinned and I raised my wine glass. "I'll consider it."

His smile grew. "You wish me to be more persuasive?"

Challenge offered.

"Were you being persuasive?" I dared him.

Challenge accepted.

His laughter was far more genuine and some of the darker streaks through the evening lightened. As it was, I did choose the rum dessert and I was more than amply full when I left him to his card games. It wasn't that late, but restlessness invaded and instead of heading directly to the apartment, I called my trainer.

Fortunately, he was available.

CHAPTER
NINE



BODHI

“*Q*uis custodiet ipsos custodes?”

My question earned a roll of eyes, but I didn't take offense. Instead, I just shrugged. Collin Farnsworth Cavendish IV was a pompous dickhead. But he was also on my side.

For the moment.

“You wanted to see me,” I reminded him as I ignored the waiter and pulled out the chair next to Collin's, rather than across from him. The waiter's little huff didn't matter to me, nor did Collin's faintly amused smile. In fact, I just filled a glass of water myself, ignoring all sense of decorum and protocol. The sooner the waiter figured out I didn't give two flying fucks about him, the better.

“Leave us,” Collin said to the man who hovered. Exasperation flickered into the man's eyes and I allowed myself a single smile before I took a sip of the water.

“Are you—” Oh, I was not the only one stomping on protocol. Unfortunately for the white silk wearing waiter, Collin's impatience did matter to him.

“I said leave us,” he repeated in a stern tone and I shook my head before taking another long drink.

Not quite churlish in his behavior, the waiter seemed to vibrate with his need to respond. Amusement curled through me before the man walked away. Granted, he wasn't stalking off, but it was close.

“Don't sleep with the staff,” I reminded Collin.

“I'm not.” The immediate denial came far too swiftly. Something he had to have known because he paled the minute I pinned a look on him. “I'm—I wasn't.”

I just raised my brows.

“He means well.”

“He’ll get killed,” I reminded him. “He can’t hold his tongue for you to meet with family? That’s going to cause more problems.”

“You don’t get it.” Collin sighed and while he didn’t sag back into his seat, he might as well have.

“I don’t have to get it.” That was the one thing he forgot. “He can be a great listener and even better at sucking your cock. He’d still die just as fast. Or worse.”

The last two words sucked all the oxygen away from the table. Collin was my age. Only a handful of months separated us. Our mothers had been the closest of friends. Sisters by marriage.

It hadn’t saved them.

“Don’t hurt him,” Collin said slowly as he reached for the vodka he’d been ignoring and took a short drink. “Please.”

“I’m not the one who would hurt him,” I said, not remotely insulted by the request. Could I? Sure. Only a fool thought someone wasn’t capable of inflicting pain and suffering. We were too intimately acquainted with all of the above to think anything else. “But he’s a weakness. One that can be exploited. Teach him or cut him loose.”

Collin scowled. “I’ve tried.”

“No, you are coddling him. Teach him.”

Paling beneath his tan, Collin downed the rest of the vodka. “I don’t know if I can.”

“Then enjoy him while you can.” I shrugged. I couldn’t fix stupid, Collin understood our family. Our world.

This fucking life we’d been born into. We had no choices—his lover boy did.

If he didn’t want to exercise that...not my problem.

A different waiter delivered a fresh vodka and a plate of appetizers. They did not linger. Collin, however, stared after them with a flicker of pain in his expression.

Honestly, Collin was going to get the little shit killed all by himself. “Was that it?” I asked abruptly.

“You just got here,” Collin said, scowling at me.

“So?”

“No, that’s not it.” Collin sat forward, then shot a glance around the room before he reached for one of the stuffed mushrooms. “There’s been movement on one of the accounts you have me tracking.”

I studied him. Waiting.

“Isaiah Voss moved a considerable amount of money over the last three weeks. It started in trickles. Drips really, then he escalated.” Collin spooned four more mushrooms onto his little plate before he spooned some out for me. He downed the vodka tonic, then leaned forward. “He wasn’t the one doing the initial moves.”

“Someone was draining his account.”

A single nod. A fresh vodka tonic arrived, this time with a sliced lime in it. I took the glass before he could pick it up and replaced it with the water. His scowl was epic. I didn’t give a fuck. I wanted him sober for this. He could cry into his alcohol about his lover after.

“Yes,” Collin answered, as if gritting out that single syllable took every ounce of effort he possessed. “He reacted.”

“Good. Then you know where he moved his money.” Voss’ exercise of restraint and caution made it difficult to track him.

Difficult didn’t mean impossible. It had, however, begun to get on my nerves.

“If I tell you, am I going to regret it?” The question didn’t deserve an answer so I didn’t offer one, instead I just waited. Irritation flickered in his eyes and all at once his whole expression muted. Not reacting, I lifted his vodka tonic to mime a drink as I checked the mirror to our left for what I could see behind us.

A table of bankers had risen abruptly at the arrival of Harper Reed. More than one appeared a little guilty, but they were fighting to cover it as they shook his hand. A laconic smile kept his thoughts from being as transparent as theirs. They were turning to the woman with him.

Melissa Benedict Reed.

His wife.

Her smile was nowhere near as austere or controlled. He made a point of introducing her to each of them and used the diversion for assessment.

Fools.

“Stop staring,” I ordered Collin and he jerked his gaze to mine. “Tell me about Voss.”

“Not sure we should discuss it.”

“He’s on the other side of the room with twelve men intent on sucking his cock. He isn’t listening to us. Tell me.”

If he made me repeat myself again, we would have an issue. I had no use for the Reeds.

Any of them.

“Cayman Islands,” Collin told me. Then our waiter returned. Ah, the lover this time. He brought dinner plates and set them down. No more appetizers. Steaks for both of us. The meat still sizzled so it’d come directly from the grill to us. The rest would take place here if we chose to give it that long. The potatoes were fully loaded. The vegetables grilled.

“Another drink, sir?” the lover asked, his tone stiff and chilly.

“No,” Collin told him without softening the rejection. “That will be all. Don’t disturb us again.”

It might have been kinder to slap him. As it was, the lover boy offered no reaction at all before he inclined his head and withdrew. The same could not be said for Collin. He made such a point of *not* tracking him with his gaze it screamed for the effort.

“Savannah Acres,” Collin continued abruptly. “He has a house there. Another on Tortola. He used to have a place on St. John, but he doesn’t return to any U.S. territories.”

I nodded. “Anything else?”

“His wife.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“She’s filed for divorce.”

Ah.

“Another reason to relocate his assets.”

“She knows his codes—I can reach out to her.”

“No.” If she was getting out. Let her get out. If Voss didn’t cooperate, she’d be a widow and have all the assets regardless. “I’ll take care of it.”

Collin said nothing, his moody gaze on his food and finally he began to cut into the steak. The arrival of the Reeds kept me in the club longer than I planned, but I kept a mental tally of who they engaged with and who they avoided. Loverboy lingered near the dining room.

Maybe he could be discreet, not that there was any evidence of it in his current behavior. “Do you need me to deal with him?”

“I will handle it.” For the first time since I noticed the issue with his lover, Collin’s tone took a distinctly unfriendly note. “Thank you.”

I nodded. “If that changes, let me know.” Otherwise, I would stay out of it. Meal finished, I rose and took care of paying for it. Collin glared, but I ignored him. This counted as a business meal. The path Collin took across the club to leave shouldered the attention. I skipped the dog and pony show, following a waitress out through a staff entrance then strolling down the hall.

The manager’s office was open so I settled at his desk and did a quick scan of the staff for the day, then found Loverboy’s name. His address didn’t take much longer. The gardeners who

were having a coffee and a smoke near the staff gazebo paused at my approach.

Only Duerte took off his hat when I held out the hundred dollar bill. “*Obrigado*, Mr. Cavendish.”

I lifted my chin and continued toward the staff parking lot. The car I’d driven to the club wouldn’t have been allowed in the valet. As it was, the only reason they hadn’t removed it from the staff lot was Duerte’s employee badge in the window.

He had a truck he preferred to drive, but he was also content to walk to work. I’d asked for his spot today. He provided. I shed the jacket and tie before I climbed into the driver’s side.

Ninety minutes and a change of clothes later, I let myself into Loverboy’s apartment. Fifteenth floor, the elevator was old and the security was pathetic. The place itself was clean, understated, and he was definitely not living beyond his means. A couple of expensive presents sat in his top drawer next to the bed.

Diamond cufflinks were not this man’s style. Collin needed to choose better gifts. Then again, they were being kept and not sold on an auction site. So maybe he appreciated them even if he couldn’t wear them. I spent the rest of the day waiting.

Loverboy arrived home just after seven. The slam of the door echoed through the place. There was a measured, and controlled, agitation to his movements. He put up groceries, stalked into the bedroom, showered and changed. When he exited, he was dressed in sweatpants and a t-shirt.

Settling in for the night.

He was also not alone.

The person who followed him, came in while he showered. That one just waited until Loverboy took a seat on the sofa. In the dark of the apartment, Loverboy didn’t move or say anything. He just stared down at his phone.

If not for the soft, almost inaudible gasp of tears, I would have wondered if he was just waiting for the assassin. Another

painful sniff, this one far more agonized. Finally, he put his phone to his ear.

“I don’t know...what I did.” The man’s words were uneven, but he was fighting for control and showing a great deal more of it than he had at the club. “I know I spoke out of turn. I didn’t realize he was your cousin and I was being an ass.” He cleared his throat. “Just... maybe give us another chance? I will be better. I promise.”

The silence elongated.

Then... “I miss you.”

Heartbreak lingered in those last three words and decided me.

Apparently, it decided the assassin as well cause he went for Loverboy. The garrote in his hand would be around his throat—or would have been if I hadn’t crashed into him, picked him all the way up and carried him at speed to the balcony doors I’d opened earlier. I flung him out, sent him flying across the alley to hit the building next door.

Well... technically he hit one of the balustrades.

The man never made a sound.

One minute he was there and the next, he hit the ground below.

Rest in pavement, you son of a bitch.

A lamp crashed to the floor and I turned to find Loverboy standing there in the dark, fumbling with his phone.

“Don’t,” I told him. “I wasn’t here. You didn’t see anything. The mess on the street will be cleaned up.”

Fear locked the other man up.

That happened to some people.

Right now, it would keep Collin’s erstwhile lover alive.

“I don’t know what the Reeds were paying you. I don’t care. Find a new job. Find it tonight. Move.”

His sharp indrawn breath was all the answer I needed.

“There’s money in the drawer with the cufflinks. Untraceable.”

“You—you killed that man...” The broken words almost made me smile.

“I was never here. So if someone was killed—it wasn’t me.” I spared a glance over my shoulder. It also wasn’t my best work.

Efficient though.

With that, I headed for the door.

“Wait—”

I paused.

“That’s—that’s it?”

Pivoting, I faced his silhouette. My eyes were well-used to the shadows of the room. I could make him out. The way his chest rose and fell and how he flexed his grip.

“You’re not going to say anything to me about Collin? About—”

I waited.

“I—he broke up with me. That’s because of you.”

I said nothing.

“They know...”

Well, clearly, or they wouldn’t have sent someone to tie off this thread.

“I never wanted to hurt him.”

Want had nothing to do with it.

“I—I turned down their money. I never gave them anything, but they knew—the man on the phone. He knew. Said all I had to do was make Collin happy and tell them when Collin was here.”

He swallowed. The gulp echoed in the quiet.

“I swear I never betrayed him. I just—didn’t know how to make it all stop.”

“That’s why he’s dead and you’re not. Wash your face, get a drink, then move.”

I wouldn’t be here to stop the next one. Collin didn’t want him hurt. I couldn’t protect them both from stupid.

Leaving the apartment, I headed down the steps to the ground floor. I went out on a different side of the building and climbed into a taxi. The mess was already being scraped up.

Good.

“Where to?” the driver asked.

“La Guardia,” I told him. I had a flight to catch.

CHAPTER
TEN



LAINY

A heavy leg draped mine, half-pinning me to the bed. The arm curled over my breasts dragged me closer when I shifted. A very stiff erection pressed right against my ass. Warmth blanketed me.

Fuck that, it was like the sun blanketed me. The intensity of the heat striking like a blast furnace. Lips moved along the column of my throat, hard, biting kisses that had my nipples straining. Releasing a groan, I ground back against the heavy cock leaving a damp trail on my skin.

“Pretty Boy,” I exhaled the greeting and then his hand cupped my face and I went from being groped so beautifully to pinned to the bed and all that masculine weight pressed me down. His mouth fused to mine and I didn’t even have a moment to process if morning breath was an issue.

The heat of his tongue stroking mine just stoked the fire soaking through me. The roll of his hips as he settled between my legs had me straining, and then he was pushing in. The relentless thrust was pleasure and pain, twinned, stretching me out until he was deep enough to leave a mark on my soul.

Head back against the bed, I stared up at the ceiling. The pillows were gone and the drag of the sheet had all but fallen away. The only thing covering me was Milo. Only the city lights beyond the windows served to give us any illumination and I gripped his shoulders.

“Good morning...” The last word came out in a rush as he rocked his hips forward, the thrust forced the air out of me.

“Not yet,” he said on a growl. “But we’re getting there.” There was no more room for words or thought as he devoured my mouth. The biting kiss was all consuming. When I would have wrapped my legs around his hips, he slid an arm under one thigh and hooked my foot up over his shoulder.

Fuck, the movement let him push deeper and I was tilting my pelvis up to meet every surge of his. Tension coiled tighter

and tighter with every frenetic slam and grind of our skin together. The patience he could show, the deliberateness—there was no time for that.

Our coupling was fierce, ferocious, and fiery. The bastard kept taking me right to the edge and then he would drag back, slowing his movements. The third time, it struck me he'd done it on purpose. I dug my nails into his shoulders as he began to chuckle.

“Eyes on me, Mayhem,” he commanded and I scowled at him.

“Dick in me, Pretty Boy.”

His laughter deepened, the chuckles threatening to detonate my system all over again, but he stilled. He stilled and even arching up to meet him, I couldn't achieve the friction he'd managed.

“Oh, my dick knows exactly where he is,” he promised in a sensuous growl. “Buried to my balls in your sweet pussy. I'm just giving you a taste of your own medicine.”

“What?” Confusion filtered through me. “What did I do?”

“You've been gone a lot, Mayhem,” he narrowed that game between us, thrusting deep and I swore he was going to leave a fucking imprint on my soul. “Too much. You made me miss you—so every orgasm I hold back—that's a moment in my day where I wanted you here. Or to be with you...”

The rawness in his confession turned the threat from erotic torture to seductive promise. “You could have come with me,” I reminded him as he bit down on my earlobe and I arched my back. The roughness in his hands was always there—the calluses a reminder that his life had been far from soft.

It reflected in the shadows housed within his eyes. Shadows and fire and the kind of restraint that made me want to chip away all the chains until it was just Milo in all his unrefined glory. He was so damn direct, it almost hurt my heart how brutally honest he could be, and at the same time—the connection flaring to life every single time he touched me.

The scrape of his teeth, a sharpness to remind that pain was always present, and then the teasing lunge of his tongue as if to soothe the injury. Yes, pain and life were forever intertwined, but so were pain and pleasure. Darkness and light. The caress of a hand could become the heavy weight of a slap—not to harm but to just draw us more into the present.

I'd never been more present than I was with Milo. The ease with which he could move me and then fill me, never failed to delight me. Nor did the fact that desperation for him seemed to edge every one of our encounters.

"You invited me," he murmured right next to my ear, the whisper of breath a tease as he began to rock his hips again. The slow glide was a torturous reminder of how close my orgasm had been earlier.

"So is this punishment for me going..." I gasped out the last couple of syllables as white edged my vision. He thrust so deep, it was like striking sparks on stone. "Or for you—" I managed to push out. "Because you didn't?"

The throaty chuckle he released was pure bedevilment. He rolled over onto his back, and I sank down on him, the fullness stretching me perfectly. Tilting my head down, I met his hungry stare as he stroked my hips.

"I've missed you, Mayhem." The words threatened to undo all of my defiance. "So, now I have to make sure we fuck at least twice a day—especially if the day is going to keep pulling you away."

I opened my mouth to debate the point then raised my eyebrows instead as I smiled. "Don't threaten me with a good time, Pretty Boy."

Real laughter escaped him. It softened the harsh tightness in his eyes and relaxed the slash of his mouth as he grinned—truly. So much better. He was always a pretty boy, but the man was a damn heartbreaker and I didn't think he had any real understanding of how truly beautiful he was.

"Ride me, Mayhem," he ordered with the lightest of slaps to my ass. The sting was right at the edge of too much and I bit

my lip as I clenched around his cock. His mouth curved into a darker smile. Yes, I didn't hide my reactions all that well. I'd never thought I'd be a person who craved pain.

And I didn't—not really. But there were some that I did enjoy, and the edge of his hands on me, the heat he could pull to my skin, and the way he powered all that strength into my body?

Hell yes...

Holding his gaze, I began to ride him. One of the best parts of having Pretty Boy around so much—besides just enjoying him—was I'd truly begun to learn what he liked. Watching me come was one of his kinks. So was making me work for it. A little twist to each roll of my hips would earn a grimace then a gasp.

Yes, he could do the wildest things to my body, and he'd had me damn near weeping for the pleasure before. But it was thrilling getting to know his body. How tight to clench. When to twist. Speeding up and then slowing down. The way the muscles in his arms and chest would begin to flex in the split second between his eyes dilating and his patience shredding.

When he tumbled us this time it was to take over, my orgasm was right there. The first slam of his body driving mine into the mattress and I began to split apart. The heat of his skin, the way the hairs on his legs rubbed against me, the weight of him pressing me down, and the hot sweep of his tongue demanding entrance even as a scream escaped me all combined to set me on fire.

The slap of our skin only seemed to heighten and elongate my own pleasure. His deeper groans extended into a long exhale and then he shuddered. The stutter of his release added another layer to the spiral of pleasure curling through me. It seemed to last forever and at the same time, I was wrapped up entirely in him.

The staccato beat of his heart raced alongside mine. Our breathing came in uneven gasps and when he finally dragged his head up, his wrecked expression summoned a real smile to

my face. He looked rough, the stubble on his cheeks rakish, particularly with how his hair seemed to fall over one eye.

A little shaggy. A little unkempt.

All fucking Pretty Boy.

I wanted him all over again.

“I should have shaved,” he mumbled, then pressed the sweetest of kisses to my jaw. If I had any kind of stubble burn, I’d cover it later. Cosmetics were great. I could feel him everywhere. Even soaking around us where we were still linked, even if he was slowly softening.

“We can shave you in the shower,” I offered.

“Already trying to get away.” If not for the hint of teasing, I’d have pinched him. As it was, I indulged myself in running a hand over his ass before I slapped it. The sting jerked him up and light kindled in his eyes all over again.

“If I was trying to get away, I would have said *you*,” I reminded him. “Now, if you can move this gorgeous body and let me up—I need to pee and then we can shower, shave, and if someone’s an especially good pretty boy—I’ll let you riot in my mouth.”

The speed with which he rolled us off the bed had me laughing. I was also over his shoulder and eye-to-butt with his back—so I paddled his ass again. That earned me another slap and fresh laughter.

Thirty-five bone melting minutes later, I settled onto the chair in the library and smiled at Marlene as she delivered coffee and croissants for me, and a much heartier breakfast for Milo. He eyed mine with a narrow look, but said nothing as she poured the orange juice.

“Thank you,” I murmured and she gave me a fond smile before she let herself out and closed the library doors behind her. I needed to go over the lists for the week today. But our appointment was at three and she wouldn’t thank me for disrupting her schedule.

One leg over the other, I sipped my coffee before I flipped open the news on my phone. The morning papers were laid out, but I liked to read the highlights in email first, then dig down into the papers proper afterward.

The weight of Milo's regard continued to press in, so I glanced at him. "What's wrong?"

"I was going to ask you that," he said. "That invitation arrived last night but you've barely looked at it."

Invitation? Oh, Marlene had brought in the mail. I didn't usually worry about that until after breakfast. "If you want to know what's in it, go ahead and open it." I offered.

"You know what it is," he said and I nodded.

"It's the Reed family Masquerade. Big social event. They have it every year." This year would be my mother's second year playing hostess, her first doing it for real. The year before had been too soon after their wedding and so they played it a little more low-key.

Not anymore.

No comment.

Pulling apart the hot fluffy croissant, I spread just a bit of butter and jam on it while Milo opened the black and silver invitation with its heavily embossed lettering and stencils. He stared at it.

"It's for you and a guest."

I nodded.

"I would have expected they'd invite your grandfather." He wasn't digging, at least not how most people did. When he had a question, he just... "Why didn't they invite him?"

"They probably did, not that he'd ever accept. But his invitation would go to Der Sonne, the family residence. And yes—this apartment is technically his as well, but he doesn't use it and it's been mine since I turned eighteen. I always had the use of it before, but he wanted to make sure I was never out in the cold somewhere."

Milo frowned. “Do we have to go to this?”

“I do,” I said. “I would love to have you with me.”

“But?” He narrowed his gaze. “Your grandfather wouldn’t approve.”

“Actually, my grandfather wanted me to invite you, so—that’s another wrinkle to deal with later. And I want you to meet him. My hesitation comes more from why he wants me to invite you.”

“Because I’ll make all the blue bloods uncomfortable?”

It wasn’t a bad guess. “Yes and no. You are an unknown, and while they think they know you and they’ve been getting a good look at you, your arrival there means a willingness to play the socio-political games. There’s also the issue that my mother is the current Mrs. Reed. Adam will be there. Ezra too, probably. All of them aside, because I don’t give a damn about Harper—that’s Adam’s father—Andrea will be there. It’s the first year she’s been old enough to attend.”

All of the sternness in Milo’s expression relaxed. “So, we’ll suffer through an evening of costumes, uncomfortable suits, bad food, and probably worse company, for your sister.”

It wasn’t even a question.

“You don’t have to though—”

He raised a hand. “It’s for you and for her. I get putting yourself through just about anything for your sister.”

Yes, he did.

“I’ve got your back on this, Mayhem—but if Graham gets as handsy as he was at the auction, I make no promises to not toss him on his ass.”

I didn’t laugh. That was a whole other conversation. “Oh, I’m sure there will be something going on with them...”

There always was.

“Does this mean I need another new suit?” The resignation in his voice had me reaching over to take his hand.

“You’re going to look amazing...”

“Uh-huh.”

“And I am getting good at those blow jobs.”

That earned me a real smile. “After the fitting and before the masquerade.”

I grinned. “Done.”

He nodded. “And I get to pick out your dress and lingerie...”

Surprise flickered through me. “Well, the dress will have to meet certain criteria.”

“Find the ones that do and then let me choose.”

“I dress you and you dress me?” Amusement brushed aside the surprise.

“I’d prefer to keep us naked, but if we have to get dressed...”

I laughed, but that humor was fleeting.

He frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“I need to brief you on the politics and the people...” I made a face. “I’m also going to call Tally over to help. She knows *everyone*.”

With a slow nod, Milo cut into the omelet that Marlene had made him. He didn’t ask any questions yet and I reveled in the trust. Still, even as I went back to skimming the news, I couldn’t escape the shiver of apprehension. Nothing about the masquerades had ever been fun when I was younger, and I somehow doubted that had changed now.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN



MILO

The drive felt good. I hadn't left the city in a while and frankly, I'd half-forgotten what it was like to not climb in the back of a car or have a driver pick me up and deliver me somewhere. Getting too comfortable, Hardigan. Far too comfortable.

For now though, I was heading south from Manhattan, through New Jersey to Pennsylvania. The GPS said the drive would take a couple of hours. So far, the drive out via the tunnel had gone well, without any of the choked traffic I half-expected.

Hopefully, the return drive would be as easy. As it was, I kept the speedometer pegged at the limit or just barely above. I also kept my head on a swivel for a possible tail. I'd planned to rent a car, but Mayhem spotted the reservation on my screen. Without comment, she'd left the library then returned with three sets of keys.

Lexus.

Stingray.

Porsche. Granted it was a Porsche SUV, but it was still a Porsche.

"Help yourself to any of them."

"Mayhem," I'd growled as she headed back to her seat. "You can't keep just giving me things."

"Pretty Boy," she said, a slow smile curving her lips that promised me she was going to do whatever she wanted. "I said you could drive them, not keep them."

I frowned.

"Or don't," she continued, with the barest lift of her shoulder as she returned her attention to the spreadsheet she'd been working on for the last hour. I didn't think she was as blasé as she pretended. "Might be simpler to not have a paper trail. But then, maybe you want to pick something different."

It wasn't the point and I sighed. So here I was behind the wheel of the Lexus, eating up the highway. What I wanted to drive was that Stingray. I had a feeling it would give Kellan a hard-on if I showed up in it. Too bad he wasn't going to be there. I picked up a tail just outside of the tunnel, but they disappeared when I got "lost" in Trenton.

Once I was back on the highway, my escort seemed to have fucked off. Mayhem was at the dressmaker's today. She and Tally were going for fittings then making a day of it. The fact this ball wasn't just *fancy* dress but actual costumes had been a bit of a shock. How was this my life?

I had to see a tailor in a couple of days, or I should say a tailor was coming to me, for the full-fitting. Mayhem didn't want anyone to see my choices until the night of the ball.

"I know it seems silly," she told me. "But half the fun is no one knows who anyone is. Unless you recognize a voice, you can be anyone, and talk to anyone. So it's important no one knows who we are..."

"You want to take advantage of the anonymity..." To spy, to eavesdrop, or maybe just to enjoy.

Head tilted, she'd considered me. "Something like that. There's a freedom when no one knows who you are and an expectation when they do—you're going to knock their socks off, Pretty Boy. Trust me."

The only socks I wanted off were hers, but I kept that thought to myself. The woman was already in my blood and my bones. I couldn't get enough of her. I didn't think I ever would. So much, I'd agreed to all the lace and velvet with their ridiculous high collars and elaborate decoration.

If my guys could see me—

Well, they wouldn't, but I'd get a picture with Mayhem for Ivy.

She would enjoy it and I'd have to live with all the shit they'd give me.

Two hours and forty-five minutes after I left Manhattan, I pulled into the parking lot of the shipping warehouse after

double-checking the address. A challenge at the gate from security made me wait until they cleared me in. Thankfully, the reason I drove all this way was striding out of the warehouse as I parked next to a standard, black SUV.

Hand outstretched, Liam caught mine in a firm grip before he gave me a brief hug then he stood back. Only a half-inch taller than me, Liam matched me bulk for bulk, though I suspected he'd been losing some of his muscle weight. I doubted he haunted the fights as much as he used to.

"You look good," he said, giving me a once-over. "I wasn't sure if I was gonna need to do first aid or some shit."

I snorted. "You and Jasper picked fights. I finished them." I avoided them now if at all possible. It didn't mean I wasn't capable, I just didn't look to borrow trouble.

"Mr. O'Connell..." A man called from inside and Liam shot a look over his shoulder. "Did you want to go over the shipping invoices now or...?"

"I'll check in with you in a bit," Liam told him. "Go ahead and start separating out the west coast pieces. I want to inspect those. The last few have been iffy and I'm thinking we're going to need a new designer."

"Yes, sir." The man didn't quite salute with his clipboard but he did bob his head once before he disappeared back inside.

Power sat comfortably on him. It always had yet somehow, he seemed... "You're enjoying yourself," I commented when he faced me again.

The shrug of his shoulders didn't betray any tension. "You know, I am... weird as it is. I am enjoying it. I prefer to be more hands-on than sitting in the office at the main store or the board room. Fuck going to Paris, though Hellspawn did say she would go with me if I got stuck doing a fashion week."

I chuckled. "My sister is generous."

Liam flashed me a smile. "She's the best." Walking side by side, we headed toward the river that wound through this area. The sound of trucks beeping as they backed up, the shouts of

loaders and the hum of equipment were all familiar. Comfortable and familiar.

The tug of wanting to be back in Braxton Harbor, having a beer with the guys and getting shit done was right there. “She’s left for the tour,” I said slowly, trying to think where she was at the moment. She messaged me regularly, I had to admit, it was nice. She and Mayhem talked all the time too.

That was also—*nice*.

“Yeah, about a week ago. Since I’m here, I’m going to fly down and meet them in Tennessee for two nights while she performs in Nashville, then head back to the Harbor.”

I cut a look at him. “You guys handling the separation?” The fact my sister was with seven guys had bugged the shit out of me in the beginning. Not just seven guys, but my guys. My brothers. My best friends.

It had taken me a long time to make my peace with that. At the end of the day though, Ivy was happy and that was the only goddamn thing that mattered. Happy. Safe. Loved.

That was the life I’d wanted for her and it was the life she had.

“We’re fine, Raptor,” Liam said, the tweak of my street name a reminder. “Don’t worry. We miss her, but it’s good for us. It’s good for her too. Vaughn and Freddie need her more at the moment. Rome is with her. I visit. Kellan and Jasper will. Doc plans to, but his safe houses are taking a lot of his attention. The thing is, we’re good.”

I nodded and the closer we got to the water, the air took on a damper quality. The breeze chased away the hints of motor oil and exhaust.

“It’s my turn to ask,” Liam said. “You good?”

“I’m fine.” The answer was automatic. Almost dismissive. At the same time... “I don’t know.”

“Okay,” he said, a little too accepting of the answer. “You want to clarify that or need me to dig a little more? Cause Hellspawn is the one who coaxes, I just punch.”

I snorted. He wasn't wrong.

"Milo, what's up?" The quiet question required an answer.

"Not even going to play the 'it's good to see you' card, first?" I deflected, because now that I was here, it seemed almost stupid that I'd needed to make this call. At the same time...

"Don't get me wrong," Liam said. "It is good to see you, though I'd rather be seeing your sister, and the last I checked, you'd rather be seeing her best friend."

As fishing attempts went, it was a good one. "Mayhem is fine," I assured him. She was better than fine. She was exceptional.

"Except?" He prodded and I shook my head. "Look, we can shoot the shit or you can tell me what's happening, but you did not drive three hours to look at my face."

"That's true."

His snort eased the fist of tension and the corner of my mouth kicked a little higher.

"Mayhem is up to her eyeballs in all of this," I admitted. "She's—more than capable of holding her own in some unsavory situations." More than I cared to admit.

"But...?"

I shook my head. "There's no but. She's been helping me work on the King situation. I could wish she would distance herself, but..." That wasn't happening. "Now there's this masquerade coming up."

"The Reed party," he said easily.

"Of course you know..." I grimaced.

"Yes, and I already RSVP'd that I wouldn't be there this year. Mom isn't up for it and Hellspawn is on the road, but—" He paused and I went another couple of steps before I pivoted to face him.

"What?"

“Do you need us there?”

“Ivy doesn’t need to be anywhere near him.” The knee-jerk response was there. To stand between everything and Ivy. “I can’t say that I wouldn’t mind seeing her, nor would Mayhem, but there’s—” I went back over the charts Mayhem had been building, the family trees and connections. “I think there’s a lot more to this party than just a party.”

“Probably,” he exhaled. “Parties are social cover for a lot of business—above board and beneath the table. Negotiations, machinations, affairs, secret business deals—it all happens at these events. It’s like a rave meets a street race, only dressed in fancy clothes and drinking more expensive booze.”

“King will probably be there.” King. My father. The man who abandoned Ivy and me only to show up now for some fucked up reason. Liam had worked for him for years, fishing for info long before we knew the King’s identity. Only that for some reason he was interested in the Vandals, in me—and in getting rid of me.

What he wanted now?

I had no idea, but I wanted to find out.

Then make sure he never fucking got it.

“I would imagine. Julius King has kept a circumspect social profile. The more we’ve dug into him the more obvious it becomes that he set up the Royals, and pulled all the strings behind the scenes. The why—” Liam spread his hands. “Power. It always comes down to power. He still trying to make up with you?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know what he’s doing. I can’t get a read on his game. He talks to me like we’re close, or should be. Periodically, he throws advice at me—like I want or need it.”

“It’s the Reed’s party, that means Adam will be there. I can call him, make sure he watches your back.”

I shook my head. “I’d rather he kept his boy Graham under control.”

Liam raised his eyebrows. “What’s Ezra doing?”

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t trust him—and yes, I know he came through for us and for Ivy. He got shot in the process. I was there. I don’t like how he looks at Mayhem *or* how he treats her.” I could live with his envy and his lust. But it was something else altogether in how he circled her.

“He’s got a thing for her,” Liam pointed out unnecessarily. “And he doesn’t like that you’ve shown up and poached.” At my glare, he grinned and raised his hands. “Look, I get it. Finding out Adam proposed to Hellspawn at one point was enough to make me want to break his jaw. Ezra’s an ass—he excels at it. Don’t let him push your buttons, ‘cause the minute he knows he can—you’ve lost.”

Folding my arms, I sighed and shook my head. “What am I doing? I’m no closer to finding out King’s endgame or even why he wanted me in prison. He wanted you to kill Adam for proposing to Ivy—” I hadn’t forgotten that little salient piece of information. “But he’s accepted your marriage to her and—he’s keeping his distance.”

“Not going to lie, I think that’s more her than us,” Liam said. “She’s refusing to bend in any way to him and her loyalty to you is absolute. I think if you two ever work it out, she might consider it, but she is so angry with him for what his absence did to you.”

I didn’t quite grind my teeth, but my eyes burned and I had to blink them fiercely. I blamed him for her being adopted by the damn Sharpes—for what happened to her in their care. For the hell she survived.

“I get it,” Liam said, gripping my shoulder. “I get it. Tell me what you need...”

Dropping my chin, I fisted all that emotion and barricaded it behind the door I’d had to lock up all my reactions behind. Growing up in the homes, we couldn’t afford to be seen as troublemakers, that meant muting responses. You got away with more at school and in business if you were seen as easy-going. And prison? Prison didn’t forgive weakness.

This world I was floundering in now didn't either.

“Tell me about Venetian Balls and what I need to do at one...”

“How much do you know?” No laughter or judgment marked the inquiry, just a straightforward question. At my bland look, he smirked. “We're going to need food—and probably alcohol for this. When do you have to be back?”

I checked my watch. “I need to head that way in about four hours.”

“Four hours—we can do a lot in four hours.”

Not for the first time, I was grateful to Liam. “How long before you give me hell about this later?”

He grinned. “Six months—easy.”

I could live with it.

CHAPTER
TWELVE



LAINY

“Wood called. Your car is here,” Marlene said from the doorway and I glanced from where I’d been skimming the news and Page Six. Gossip was tender. It always has been. “And your bodyguard.”

Surprise flickered through me. Pretty Boy had left earlier for a meeting of his own. He’d planned to rent a car when I told him to take one of mine. His reaction, even suppressed, told me he wasn’t that comfortable. This life was a struggle for him, though he covered well—most of the time. I needed to make this easier for him somehow.

But—that was a future problem.

“Bodyguard?”

“Mr. Karagiani,” Marlene said, her expression neutral. “I didn’t realize he was still escorting you.”

“That would make two of us,” I said, with far more ease than I was feeling. Ezra’s bodyguard had returned. The man had shadowed me for months after we got back from the island. I thought we were past this. Ezra’s behavior at the auction flashed through my mind.

“Should I send him away?” Marlene squared her shoulders like a soldier preparing for war. Despite her easy smiles and near maternal manner, one should never underestimate Marlene. I’d seen her take charge, and she was a force to be reckoned with. Even Grandfather gave her a wide berth when her temper was up.

“No,” I said, sliding my phone into my purse before slipping the strap over my shoulder. “I’ll handle him.”

“Hmm.” The non-committal sound held no judgment. I’d dressed for lunch in a skirt that fell just below my knees, a silk top, and a blazer to give it a more formal business look than a fussy lunch outfit. The heels were sensible and the black-seamed stockings were my only concession to fashion. The

skirt had a slit that went to the back of my knees and the peek at the seam gave the ensemble a flirty element.

Meeting Andrea at the club for lunch meant putting on a show. As much as I disliked the club, it was the lesser of two evils when compared to heading out to Waltham Corners. The house meant memories, and the potential of running into our mother. I liked to minimize those opportunities. It didn't hurt that Andrea liked to dress up and eat in the main dining room there, not something she got to do often. She was thirteen and the world was her oyster.

I planned to keep it that way.

Dolion Karagiani stood just inside the door. The Greek man with his razor sharp cheekbones, hard jaw, clipped short dark hair, and dark eyes looked comfortable—well, as comfortable as he ever looked—waiting for me.

“Mr. Karagiani,” I greeted him as I set down my purse and collected my leather coat. The weather had been growing chillier and the day had a bit of a damp feel to it. “I wasn't expecting you.”

He inclined his head without even a hint of a polite smile. The man had expressions of granite. Resistant to all forms of charm and even imperiousness. Still, he seemed extremely capable. Ezra hadn't hired him to be a companion after all.

“Mr. Graham's orders,” Karagiani said with a kind of *fait accompli*.

“Hmm,” was my only response. I would deal with Ezra later. “I have a lunch to attend. You need to be a little less conspicuous because I don't want my sister bothered or worried.”

The man nodded. “I need to sweep the room, but I can take another table if necessary.”

Oh, it would be necessary.

“It's at the Bay Ridge Club on Long Island,” I informed him. “We've been there before.” I retrieved my purse and glanced over my shoulder. “Thank you, Marlene.”

“Of course,” she said, her neutral tone warming a fraction. “Have a lovely lunch.”

I would do my best. Ready, I looked at Karagiani pointedly. He opened the door and stepped out ahead of me and pressed the button to call the elevator. During our previous acquaintance, he informed me of his rules.

He wouldn't carry bags or open doors. He would go through all doors first, unless he needed to cover my back. I was not to step out of the apartment when he summoned the elevator until it arrived and he cleared it.

If, for some baffling reason, someone else was in the elevator, he would send it away and wait for the next one. It wasn't just the elevators here, it was *any* elevator. Beyond that, he didn't care where I went or with who, as long as I informed him ahead of time.

He would clear any homes I visited, and in public places I was always to be within his sightline. Including the bathroom. He wore the same cold, impersonal mask. The only thing that made it all bearable was he truly didn't seem to give a damn about my choices, just my safety, and he behaved in a professional and respectful manner.

Despite that, I doubted Pretty Boy would be happy with this development. Ezra was no doubt aggravated by the auction. If he really had an issue, he should learn to pick up a phone.

The drive to the club was uneventful, as expected. Conversation remained at a bare minimum. At the club, Karagiani exited first, and circled the car, where he waited a beat as Wood opened my door.

The valets, used to the various rules and roles, smiled and nodded as I headed up the steps with Karagiani. The *portes-cochères* kept the now misting rain off. The doorman let us in and the hostess stepped up to greet us. It wasn't long before my coat was checked and they took my request for a shift in arrangements in stride.

Fortunately, I arrived ahead of Andrea so I didn't need to explain a table change. Karagiani had his own table and I'd barely ordered a coffee when a waitress began resetting the table for two to three. The explanation for why followed in her wake.

"Lainey!" Andrea's voice climbed on the second syllable of my name. Excitement flooded me as I rose to meet my sister. While not the running squealing hugs of her youth, she didn't hesitate to wrap her arms around me.

I hugged her close as I met Adam's blue-violet gaze. Those eyes could tell me so much, the shift in color between the blue and the purple were a tell he couldn't hide. The barest sliver of a smile softened the hard lines of his mouth. He shifted his gaze briefly to glance past me. A tiny furrow appeared between his brows.

Someone had clocked Karagiani. That would require an introduction. When Adam looked at me, I shook my head once and mouthed "later."

Here was hoping he would listen.

But his expression softened as Andrea leaned back. The smile on her face was radiant. "I totally tricked Adam into coming to brunch with us."

"You tricked me," he said in an idle, almost bored if amused tone. "That's what you call fourteen text messages and three phone calls?"

"Aww," Andrea scolded as she swatted at him. Laughter filled her eyes. "You could at least play along."

"Hmm. Read me into the plan next time," he informed her and I had to bite back my own smile as Andrea rolled her eyes.

When she was around, Adam regained some of his humanity. He was the caring, thoughtful guy he'd been when I was younger. The contrast was startling.

Adam pulled out Andrea's chair and I slid back into my own. He unbuttoned his suit coat before he took the chair opposite me. It put Andrea between us, which was good. If there was one thing the two of us agreed on, it was our sister.

At least we still had that.

The staff wasted no time in delivering drinks and taking our orders. I chose a salad, Andrea went with breakfast options, and Adam settled for a sandwich with french fries.

As soon as the waitress left us, however, Andrea turned to me. “So, the gala—The Masquerade—you said you’d help me get a dress right?”

“I did.” Tally and I had already begun to look at possible dresses and I needed to dress up Pretty Boy too. The more I thought about it, the more I knew how I wanted to dress us. Honestly, I was probably looking forward to that more than I should admit. “But you should probably check that Mother didn’t make arrangements to get you a dress.”

“She didn’t,” Andrea said with all the confidence of a thirteen-year-old.

“She isn’t back from her trip,” Adam said idly. “How do you know?”

The wording, however, was very specific. She was on a trip without Harper. I pocketed that information for now.

“Because,” Andrea said, lifting her chin and giving Adam an imperious look that was so like his it made me want to laugh. “I spoke to the housekeeper and to Alison. They both told me Mother didn’t want to order anything without knowing my sizes because I’m being inconsiderate and growing so much.”

“I don’t think you’ve grown that much, you’re still six, right?” Adam teased her in that warm baritone.

“Oh my god, don’t even,” Andrea said with a wrinkle of her nose then she looked at me again. “If I go with you to get a dress, then I can surprise her when she gets back.”

“And you don’t have to endure whatever lacy monstrosity she picks out.” Having endured more than my fair share, I understood that on a chemical level.

“You’re also more fun to shop with,” Andrea said, like she needed to sweeten the deal.

“Because she spoils you,” Adam observed and it was my turn to give him a dismissive look.

“The horse you bought for her arrived at Der Sonne.” As if I were the only one who spoiled her.

“That’s an investment.”

“So are clothes.”

He shook his head but Andrea laughed, and it cut any tension that had begun to form. It didn’t take long for our meal to be served. Though he tried to refrain, Adam’s gaze drifted to Karagiani repeatedly.

Good, let him suffer for his curiosity.

“So, I was thinking of asking for one more favor, but this one might take both of you.” Andrea took a long swallow of the soda she’d ordered to go with her breakfast. I’d stuck to water and would get more coffee now that I finished my salad.

I flicked a look to Adam and caught the same curiosity in his gaze. I shook my head once. I didn’t know. He shook his head too. So, neither of us did.

“You can ask,” I told her.

“But we’re not promising anything.” While a little harsher than I would have put it, I didn’t disagree.

She took the time to set aside her silverware on her plate and folded her napkin. Whatever it was seemed important to her. She shot a look at Adam then at me. Finally, she decided on me.

So, she thought I’d be the softer target. “We’re listening,” I prompted her and from the corner of my eye I caught the faintest flicker of a smile on Adam’s face.

“I want to add an invitation to the gala, well, it would probably have to be three so we could invite his parents too. But they’re very interesting. His father’s an engineer, he used to be in the army and now he does something with cars and his mother is a neurosurgeon. Really impressive people. And clearly, he goes to my school, so they have the money. Maybe they aren’t one of the older families, but Dad is always saying

that new blood needs to be cultivated and Simon's parents could be considered new blood. I mean...maybe they have some family money, but I didn't ask. That would have been rude."

The words spilled out of her a hurried rush like she was going to forget something if she didn't get it all out.

Simon.

She wanted to invite a boy.

Any trace of an expression vanished from Adam's face. "Family name?"

Yeah, that wasn't going to go over well. "The Masquerade is not necessarily an event to introduce new people at." It wasn't a bad one, but depending on the family, it might be more intimidating than welcoming.

"It would be the perfect one. Mom and Dad will be too busy hosting it to spend that much time worrying and I could hang out with Simon." Her enthusiasm coupled with the earnestness in her eyes made me want to say yes, which was why I needed to say no, or at least to mitigate it.

"Family name," Adam repeated.

Andrea glanced at him. "Promise me you're not going to look them up and get all judgy."

"No," he said and I put my hand on Andrea's arm.

"Why don't you freshen up, and we'll make our dress shopping plans when you're back."

"I—" Andrea looked between us. She was clearly torn but this was one time when she really needed to listen to me. Her explosive sigh didn't bode well but then she finally stood. "If you'll excuse me."

She didn't quite flounce her way across the room and Adam already had his phone out when I looked at him.

"Don't tell me," I said. "You're looking up the Simons in her class."

He didn't bother to look up. "I won't tell you. There can't be that many. And look at that, there's only two. One is a senior and the other is in her class. Last name Chalamont. I don't know it offhand."

"Well, that could be a good thing."

He didn't bother to answer me.

"Adam," I said and when he still didn't look up, I kicked him under the table. The cloth hid the action quite neatly. That jerked his chin up.

"What?" Nothing friendly inhabited his tone. All the veneer of getting along was abandoned in Andrea's absence.

"He's a thirteen-year-old boy."

"So? I was a thirteen-year-old boy once."

"I'm aware, you were far nicer back then." That said, I shook my head. "The point is, he's a thirteen-year-old and she's telling us about him. That gives us a chance to vet him, yes, but it also lets her see him in a situation we can control."

"Or we can just make sure he doesn't bother her again. She doesn't need social climbers getting their fingers on her."

I rolled my eyes. "An engineer and a neurosurgeon, his parents are well-educated professionals. Nothing about that says social climber."

"He's not his parents."

At my bland look, his eyes narrowed.

"You hadn't heard of him before today," Adam pointed out. "Not to mention your own judgment is compromised."

"Excuse me?"

"You know who I'm discussing," Adam said, then he flicked a look behind me. "Who is that?"

"Dolion Karagiani, bodyguard."

His eyes narrowed and Adam focused on me. "What happened?"

Andrea would be back any minute. So we had to keep this short. While I'd like to tweak him... it would have to wait.

"Ezra happened," I said with a shrug. "He sent his guard dog back to follow me around. I'll deal with him later."

Adam's frown deepened, but I caught sight of Andrea heading back to us.

"Let it go for now and let the boy go for now. Do your research and we can talk about it later..."

His dark look promised me he wasn't done, but it smoothed away as Andrea returned. She looked nervous so I just raised a hand before she could bring the subject up.

"We'll think about it and let you know." Mutiny and disappointment vied for supremacy on her face. "That's all you're getting for now, so I suggest you let it sit there and we can discuss what you were thinking of for a dress..."

Thankfully, Adam didn't dispute me and despite her upset, Andrea fought her own objections. "I was thinking something in pink and silver... maybe a swan look?"

It was only a diversion and it would only last so long. I recognized the look on Adam's face. He didn't want boys around our sister. He hadn't liked them around me either and he'd been a pain in the ass about it.

Him and Ezra both.

Fortunately, they couldn't run Pretty Boy off and that thought made me smile. Ice shivered over my skin and I knew without looking, Adam glared at me. He didn't like my smile.

Too damn bad.

"What do you think, Lainey? Would I make a good swan?"

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN



EZRA

Dinner at Harrows Park was not my idea of a good time. At least the plentiful alcohol could lubricate the ten-course meal. We'd switched to wine for the meal proper and I'd finished two glasses before the meat course.

"Ezra, darling," Mother said. "You've been to see their girl, right? She's doing well?"

Their girl? I'd checked out of the conversation sometime between the appetizer and the salad. Considering Julius King was also a guest at tonight's dinner along with the Cliftons, the Marlowes, and the Adleys. At least he hadn't brought a date. Then I hadn't either. The Marlowes brought their daughter Tally and she was seated at the other end of the table from me.

Good plan.

"He's referring to Emersyn Sharpe," Claudette Marlowe, Tally's mother, was seated to my right. "Poor girl. Her whole family, though...Moirra is still alive, right? We haven't heard from her in a while."

"She's in California," Imogene Adley offered. "I think she's taking the time to be in the sun and to be away. She buried both Reginald and Bradley. It can't have been easy on them. But I heard Emersyn is touring again."

"I don't really see it as a loss," Lloyd Clifton mused. "Bradley was terrible at sharing business opportunities and his absence has left the field open."

"Lloyd," his wife scolded, it was more automatic though, being that her amused smile said she didn't disagree. Course, the Sharpes had controlled a great deal of influence, it was why he disguised everything he did and kept it hidden. He never let anyone see the monster he truly was. Then again, who among us wanted to show our monstrous sides to the world?.

People knew, they just didn't discuss it publicly.

“That seems so soon,” Mother mused, but she looked at me as I sectioned off another piece of meat and took the bite. “You have seen her, haven’t you, darling? Is she well? Should we invite her back here? Do something for them?”

I needed more wine, in fact, I emptied my glass then nodded to the evening’s waiter who hurried over to fill my glass. “She’s fine. She’s married.” The last I offered up without a flicker of a glance to King.

We weren’t supposed to know each other. My father had introduced him when I arrived since he’d already been there having pre-dinner drinks. Pity, I could go with pre-dinner and after-dinner drinks at the moment.

Wine glass in hand, I looked to my mother’s end of the table. “She married Liam O’Connell...you remember him from my school.”

“Oh, the fashion house—that’s good a family. A little nouveau but solid.” She looked pleased. “I shall have to send them a wedding present.”

“I’m rather put out we weren’t even invited, or at least notified,” Claudette murmured. “It must have been a recent thing.”

“Maybe she wanted something small,” Tally suggested from where she sat across from the King. Poor her, he was a terrible conversationalist. “With all the deaths in the family, it might have been seen to be poor taste to have something large.”

“Oh, that’s true,” Claudette said. “You’re right, Dinah, we should send the girl something. Maybe we can host a reception for them in the spring... she’s inherited all of Sharpe, I would expect. They are old friends.”

“Maybe just—a card,” I said. “Something small. I doubt they wanted the fuss.” Then, because it might actually shut them up and move them on to a different subject... “She was never presented to society, so maybe she wanted to keep it that way.”

“True,” Mother hummed as she picked up her glass. “Well, the season is a ways off. Though the Masquerade is coming up...”

And she ran with it. Good. The talk turned to costumes and dance and past Reed events. I tuned most of it out. King offered a comment here or there, but he seemed more amused than anything else. Tally was enthusiastic about the discussion.

Maybe she agreed with me on leaving Emersyn Sharpe and her family out of it. Bradley Sharpe had been a disgusting, depraved piece of shit. His loss was a benefit to the world. I managed a fourth glass of wine by the time dessert was served.

Not that the length of the courses did me any favors. After, we left the table for the sitting room and after-dinner drinks. Mother and her friends would probably go play cards.

“Ezra,” Father said as I poured a bourbon.

“Sir?”

“Join me in my office for a moment.”

Kill me.

“Yes, sir.”

“If you gentlemen—and ladies—will excuse us for a moment,” my father said. “We’ll be right with you. Have a drink, and I promised Dinah that we might indulge them in a few rounds of cards tonight if you gentlemen are up to it.”

The answering laughter was far more polite than enthusiastic. I brought the drink with me as I followed him down the hall to the office behind the great cherry wood doors.

You didn’t go into his office unless he invited you. Not even the staff dared his wrath on it. In fact, it was better to not go in at all. Beyond those doors, the true Wallace Graham lived and I’d dealt with him enough.

A mouthful of courage added fuel to the fire. He pushed open both doors and waited for me to pass him before he closed them again.

The room was cool, the fireplace dark and only a pair of lamps offered illumination on the old, squat desk he preferred. Hand carved and handed down through the generations, he would joke there were teeth impressions on it from multiple generations.

“Have a seat,” he said as he moved to his own bar and poured himself a drink. Well, I guess I could have waited to get one in here but I’d already started pouring the bourbon.

Unwilling to drag this out, I dropped into one of the seats facing his desk and sat back, drink in hand. “This isn’t a social visit.”

“You’re not that stupid,” Father said as he moved to his desk and took a seat. “You’ve never been that stupid, though you were not successful at the auction.”

“No,” I told him. “I wasn’t. More determined bidders. Though I did get you the name you wanted.” The landscape had been shifting since Bradley Sharpe’s death. New players moving in to fill the void. Or maybe not so new, some of them had been around for a while, they were just looking for an opening.

“It’s fine. I wasn’t that interested in the books, those were more for your mother. I’ll find her something else.” The books. The painting. Lainey. I hadn’t managed to win anything that night I was supposed to leave with.

Pity.

“Name?”

“Antonio De Guerda. He’s part of the...”

“Bastille Foundation,” Father said as he leaned back in his chair.

“He was,” I corrected him. “He left six months ago. They just didn’t announce it. In fact, they kept it very quiet.”

“Embezzlement?” Father narrowed his eyes and I shrugged.

“I don’t think so, he’s a little too smooth. I think he used their resources for non-charitable interests or focused on

charity at home. Either way, he's setting up here. Opening a consulting firm or something. The details were rather boring—that said, he knows more than he pretends.”

That much had been clear.

“Good to know. I want you to set up a meeting with him.”

I didn't bother to ask why. He wouldn't tell me unless he felt like it. “Urgent?”

“No. It can wait until after the Masquerade. Have you arranged a date?” The transition wasn't his most graceful, then again, he didn't usually worry about smoothing over things when it was just us.

This was definitely not a conversation I wanted to have. Not right now.

“No, sir.” I downed another mouthful of bourbon. “I thought we agreed that attending social events stag offered us better opportunities.”

The faintest of smirks touched his face. “Hmm... possibly. Oksana will be in town though, you should consider inviting her.”

“Of course,” I said smoothly. I'd just make arrangements to get her out of town.

“If not, perhaps Tally. She might need an escort. It would offer a bone to the Marlowes.”

I was definitely not Tally's type. While that suited me fine, she was more likely to stab me than attend with me so, maybe not. “I will reach out to Oksana.”

“Good.” Father tilted his head, his gaze assessing. “Tell me what's going on with Adam these days.”

“Not much. He was out of town for a few months and now he's back. I'm assuming he's working.”

“You two used to be close.”

I shrugged. Our friendship was none of his business. “I've been busy for you.” And for the king. “I would presume he is as well—I did see him briefly a few nights ago.” Better not to

let that slide. “After the auction. I crashed at his place in the city rather than drive back out here. But he was gone before I woke up.”

All true.

Father nodded slowly. “See if you can wrangle something with him. Harper’s been making some moves lately and I want more information.”

“I’ll see what I can do. We rarely discuss his parents...”

“Have a few drinks, loosen him up. I’m sure you can manage it.” He favored me with a firm look that said agree, so I nodded.

“Meet with Antonio de Guerda, invite Oksana to the Masquerade, and see what I can find out about the Reed family business from Adam.” I ticked the items off. “Anything else, sir?” I drained the bourbon. The warmth did little to unknot my spine even as I kept everything as blasé as possible.

“Emersyn Sharpe.”

I waited.

“You were at school with the man she married.” It wasn’t a question. He already knew this so I just waited him out. “Reach out and begin social overtures. If she is interested in divesting of some Sharpe holdings, we can make her a solid offer.”

Liam would go for that sometime between never and over his dead body. “I’ll grab him the next time he’s in town. Better to not look too eager.”

Father smirked. “Good point.” He drained his own glass. “We should get back out there. Don’t just disappear. It gets noticed.”

“An hour?” I offered.

He nodded. “Acceptable.”

Plenty of time for a couple more drinks. As it was, I rose to follow him out of his office. The alcohol was helping, but the warm buzz kept getting trumped by the conversations.

Returning to the sitting room, we walked into cool laughter, calculated smiles, and too many eyes housing secrets.

We also found Julius King sitting with my mother and Tally's, entertaining them with some story. Tally actually caught my glance and rolled her eyes. I nodded to the bar and she mouthed "please."

I fixed a drink for each of us. Then I crossed over to join them. She took the whiskey sour with an amused look. "You remembered."

"That you're sour," I murmured. "Never forgot."

She snorted a laugh and I caught King studying me.

"Can I refill your drink, sir?" I offered. After all, I was here to be host. "Mother? Mrs. Marlowe?"

"Claudette, dear Ezra, I've told you that you are more than old enough to call me Claudette. I'll take another too—but make mine a double." She said the last with a playful wink.

"But Mrs. Marlowe is so much more respectful," I teased in return, willing to indulge her. "But I will try to remember."

She laughed.

"I would love another one, darling," Mother said. "Maybe only a half. It's a bit warm in here..."

It was definitely a bit something. When I looked at King he raised his mostly half-full glass. "I'm fine, thank you, son."

Son.

All at once it reminded me of his actual son and that just set my teeth on edge. I kept my smile firm, if a little more gritted teeth than a grin. I downed my bourbon before I prepared drinks for Mrs. Marlowe and Mother.

After, I made a pass of the room and offered refills to more. By my fourth bourbon, the irritation scraping over my skin had been muted and I almost managed to make a full round of conversation with the Adleys—they were looking at a new yacht and wanted to know what I thought of ours and if we were looking to upgrade.

The Cliftons were a little more pedestrian. Mrs. Clifton's Daughters of the Something or Other were planning a bachelor auction for the spring. Maybe something a bit saucy, but the idea was literally for dancing and drinks. Would I consider it?

I'd consider getting shot beforehand but I only murmured that she should send me the details. Father had moved over to join Mother in conversation with King and the Marlowes. Tally drifted from conversation to conversation like I did, but we kept our distance. It suited me fine. At the hour mark, I made my excuses.

"Oh if you have to, darling," Mother said when I pressed a kiss to her cheek. "You could stay the night and just go back early in the morning."

"I could," I said. "But I have some work to do tonight that I put off to be here for you."

"You are too much like your father," she said with a hint of exasperation. "But off you go. I'll see you soon, yes?"

Not a request.

"Absolutely."

A few handshakes and I was free. At least the blood pounding in my head was more alcohol than anger. I'd take it. At least I'd had the foresight to hire a driver for the night rather than bring my own car.

I wanted there to be no reason I couldn't leave. I slid into the back and poured myself another drink. My phone had a handful of messages that I ignored as I gave the driver the address.

"Are you sure, sir?"

"Did I stutter?"

That shut him up. The drive back into Manhattan took another couple of hours with traffic. It wasn't as late as it felt. He pulled up to the building as I finished the last drink I'd been nursing.

"Should I wait for you?"

“No,” I told him. “You’re done for the night.”

So was I.

Inside, the doorman eyed me as I drifted in. I wasn’t staggering so he could fuck right off. The concierge nodded to me. “Mr. Graham.”

Look, someone knew how to do their job. He buzzed the elevator for me and I stepped inside. I had a keycard and it let me ride up to the penthouse level.

It wasn’t until I knocked on the door that I considered my choice. I braced a hand on the doorframe. Maybe I should have called.

If I had, she could have said no.

Then she opened the door and blinked up at me.

“Ezra...”

“Lainey,” I said, stepping right into her and cupping her face. I swooped my head down to seal my lips to hers and she tasted better than any alcohol. Her gasp opened her mouth to me and I feasted.

So much better than a phone call.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN



LAINIEY

The pound on the door pulled my attention from the text message Pretty Boy sent. He wouldn't be back tonight. He had a lead he wanted to follow and he would fill me in later. It was—disappointing, but he had his work and I had mine. Still...

The fist hitting the door was so insistent, I checked the security camera first. The desk hadn't called up and only a handful of people had access to this floor without concierge assistance.

Ezra.

Dressed in a suit and tie, with the tie loose and his hair disheveled, he braced a hand on the doorframe like he needed it to keep himself upright. Worry spread through me as I entered the code to turn off the alarm, then I opened the door.

“Ezra...”

The burn in his green eyes slammed into me. “Lainey...” He practically exhaled my name like it was the only thing keeping him upright. He seemed to launch off the door and collapse into and around me.

Warm hands cupped my face and then his mouth was on mine. He tasted of warm brandy and sugar. The sweetness and alcohol flooded my senses. The teasing strokes of his tongue were like rapier thrusts shredding my protests.

“Lainey,” he repeated, barely breaking the kiss long enough to let me take a breath before he kissed me again. The sensuous invasion consumed every bit of my attention.

I pressed my hands to his chest. Shove him away? Drag him closer?

“Lainey,” he said once more, like a prayer, a reverence. He stroked his thumbs against my cheek, staring down at me. “Let me in?”

Let him...

I wanted to groan and my hesitation sent darkness rippling through his eyes. “Is that bastard here?”

“Don’t start. He’s not a bastard,” I told him firmly. “No, he’s not here. So stop it.”

The swiftness of his relief almost made me regret admitting it. Then he pressed a kiss to my cheek, almost an apology and then nuzzled another along my jaw. “Let me in, Lainey...”

“You’re drunk,” I muttered. What I should have done was call a car for him and sent him on his way. But Ezra had two modes when he’d been drinking. One was cuddly and sweet, the other was a downright bastard.

I really wasn’t in the mood for bastard.

“Not that drunk,” he whispered, then pressed a kiss to my throat. “I promise. I had a full meal and everything.”

Fisting his shirt, I closed my eyes momentarily and flattened out my hands. It took a moment to disentangle myself. Ezra’s expression was so crestfallen, it hurt. “C’mon,” I told him, holding out my hand. “I’ll make you some coffee.”

Probably better to sober him up before I sent him on his way. He clasped my hand and followed me inside. While he locked the door, I went ahead and re-engaged the alarm.

He eyed the action with approval. “Good, I like when you’re safe.”

“Is that why you sent your guard dog back?” I countered and led the way across the living area to the kitchen.

What I’d been planning to do was have a glass of wine, and maybe watch a movie while I waited on Pretty Boy. But since he wasn’t coming back tonight, I probably would have just gone to bed. The past week had been exhausting.

“You are playing with fire,” he said. “I don’t want you to get burned.”

It took another moment to get Ezra to let go of my hand so I could make the coffee. Instead of retreating, he was

practically fused to my back, his hands on my hips and his lips on my neck.

“This isn’t terribly helpful for making coffee.”

“I like it.” He rubbed his hands in slow circles against the soft fabric of my silk pajamas. I’d changed when I got home because I hadn’t planned to go out again. “I like this too. I like you safe and warm...you know where else is safe and warm?”

“I’m sure you’re going to tell me.” It took tremendous effort to focus on the coffee pull when he was like this. The gentle rub of his cheek to my hair was all sweet and cuddly.

He chuckled and his fingers skimmed along the edge of my top, teasing against the skin of my abdomen. My eyes were drifting closed and I had to force them open even as I sighed.

“The island is safe and warm,” he whispered. “It’s far away from all this bullshit. A few hours in the air, then we’re there. You liked the island, didn’t you?” The plaintive note at the end begged me to agree.

The thing was... “Yes,” I admitted. “I did. I wasn’t especially fond of you dragging me there in the first place.” Or keeping me there.

“But we worked that out.” There was a hint of laughter as he flattened his hand against my abdomen. The press of his palm spread scorching heat through my system. “Didn’t we?”

I groaned. “Ezra—what are you doing?” I couldn’t focus on coffee while he was doing this, especially as he stroked his hand upward toward my breasts.

“Seducing you,” he whispered against my ear as he massaged a nipple through my shirt then bit down gently on the lobe. The grind of his hips to my ass left absolutely nothing to the imagination. The stiffness of his erection an erotic tease. “I need you.” The last three words shredded me. Everything about this was a mistake.

Eyes closed, I fought to count to ten in English. Then in French. Then German. When I got to Italian, I gave up.

“Please, Lainey.” Want and need twined in those words and I twisted, the coffee all but forgotten. His hands skimmed over my flesh as I faced him. The contact of his palm to my breast earlier seemed to still warm me.

“Ezra—” I put a hand to his cheek. “How drunk are you?”

“Not that drunk,” he said, his smile growing. “I know exactly what I’m asking you for.” Then his mouth was on mine and my objections began to collapse on one another. When Ezra picked me up, I wrapped my arms around his neck.

This was a mistake.

I knew it.

On some level, he had to know it. Wasn’t that what we were? A mistake?

Yet, I leaned into the kiss, devouring every drop of affection he rained down on me. He carried me out of the kitchen and into the living room. Not once did his lips leave mine.

Not when I pushed his jacket off or when I undid the buttons on his shirt. Lean, but still solidly muscled, he had a runner’s body. Although there was also so much strength corded in his arms and his chest. All hidden from the world.

Like he hid himself. All under the guise of business, society, and brutal humor.

He bit my lip and then dragged his head back as he hooked his fingers under my top and dragged the silk upward. I had to let go of him to raise my arms and then he leaned back to stare at my breasts.

“Hello my beauties,” he whispered. “I’ve missed you.”

My pussy clenched at the raw desire making each word ragged. He kissed a path along my shoulder down to my breast and I pushed at his chest.

“What?” He lifted his head at the rejection, the dark pupils so swollen they swallowed all the color in his eyes.

“Clothes,” I told him and then pushed at his shirt and jacket. He blinked then glanced at himself like he’d half-forgotten he was still dressed. His shoes came off even as he stripped the jacket and the shirt.

His gaze lifted to mine as he went for his belt and I had to lick my lips. There was an intensity to Ezra when he got like this. It threatened to consume me like a fire rippling toward the explosive. When we made contact—it would burn everything up.

What are you doing? The question circled through my mind as he stripped his pants, boxers and all, then let them fall. His cock was straining as it slapped against his belly. The solid gold piercing through the glans seemed to gleam in the light, even deeper along his shaft was a second gold piercing.

The first time I’d seen them, all the moisture in my mouth had fled. They were—gorgeous and so like Ezra. Beautiful and pained. Erotic and teasing.

“Your turn,” he mumbled, then he hooked his fingers into the sides of my pajama bottoms and peeled them downward. His gaze roved over me, a caress all its own. “I’ve missed you...”

Then there were no more words. He locked his mouth over one of my nipples as he stroked his hands down my sides. One cupped my pussy, his finger stroking and teasing through the dampness soaking me.

I gripped his dick carefully, constantly aware of those piercings. He liked it a little rougher, but I never wanted to hurt him. With careful strokes, I teased his shaft from base to tip.

Thoughts formed and crumpled as he scraped his teeth over my nipple then moved his head to the other breast and teased it. The moans vibrating out of me seemed to gain in strength.

Heat scorched through my system and when I teased one of the piercings, Ezra let out a little growl. “Again.”

Laughter swelled up from somewhere and I fisted his hair because my breasts were getting too sensitive. The stubble on his jaw scraped them, leaving them reddened and tender.

Dragging his head up, he stared at me, picked me up, and moved me onto the sofa. He knelt between my legs and then stroked his hands down my thighs.

The kiss he pressed to one hipbone was gentle, but the bite to the inside of my thigh was a tease. Electricity spiked through me at the promise of his lips so close to my pussy, then he kissed the thigh and I shuddered.

“Come with me,” he whispered and I found myself wanting to drown in his eyes as he stared up at me. “I want to take you to the island, Lainey. Let’s just run away from all of this... we don’t need to be here. Let them burn the world down. You loved it there...I know you did.”

The pleading sliced through me like a hot knife. “Ezra—I can’t...”

His expression tightened. “All you have to do is say yes—I will get you there. We can go...”

Despite the heat suffusing every inch of me, and the ache he’d already created with his touch, I shook my head. “I can’t —” There was too much here. “I *need* to be here.”

“For him.” It wasn’t a question. Darkness shrouded the words. “You have to be here for *him*.” The actual anger licking those last few syllables made my stomach clench.

“It’s—”

He didn’t let me finish, gripping my face in his hands as his mouth claimed mine. The savagery in the kiss tasted of anger and demand. I fought to duel his tongue even as he slid a hand into my hair.

Pure fury seemed to burst into life between us. The chemical explosion of the fire burning out of control. Even as he bit my lip, he curved his free hand down my body to my ass and I dug my nails into his shoulders.

I couldn't breathe around his kiss. What oxygen he allowed me was short and panting. Then he was hauling me forward and his dick pressed right against my folds for a few, almost meaningless seconds before he thrust inside.

The weight of his piercings stroking against my inner walls lit up a whole new wave of sensations. The thrust of his tongue mirrored the push of his cock and then he was powering into me. Some distant part of me wanted to scream.

There was nothing to do but hold on, digging my nails into him, which only seemed to encourage him. The wild pace pushed me away from him, even as his fist in my hair kept me still.

Too much.

Not enough.

The tension spiraling through me went tighter and tighter as he abandoned my lips. When he bit just below my ear, pain spiked through the pleasure and I came in a rush of dampness. The scream that tore out of my throat was primal.

But he wasn't done. No, he pulled out abruptly and I could have wept at the sudden loss. Pulling me from the sofa as he stood, he brushed his dick against my lips.

"Open up, Lainey." The order rocked me, I was all trembling limbs and fogged brain. Shooting my gaze up at him, I parted my lips.

He didn't give me a chance to reply—not verbally. Instead, he pushed his dick against my lips and I tasted him, then me, and he was all the way to my throat where I gagged around him.

"Swallow," he ordered, his fist still in my hair so I couldn't pull away. I tried to breathe through my nose, and I pressed my hands to his thighs.

Swallowing around his length took effort and I groaned, or maybe it was another gag, but the sound hummed through me.

"Fuck yes," he growled as he pulled back until the tip rested at my lips. "Relax that mouth—I'm going to fuck it

until I come and you're taking every drop."

I shuddered.

"Fuck you," I whispered and his grin was all teeth.

"No, Kotyonok, I'm fucking you and you're going to be full of me." Then he pushed in again. I could scrape him with my teeth. I could bite. I was digging my nails into his thighs, but there was something so wild and primitive about Ezra like this.

It didn't matter that I'd just come, I wanted him all over again. The man pivoted his hips as he rocked them, the steady rhythm gaining in strength. I was swallowing around him as he pushed deeper into my throat.

The burn in my eyes gave way to tears as I fought to breathe with him and not lose the pace. Whenever his piercings moved over my tongue, I hummed and he would shudder.

The sound added another layer. Then his hips began to jerk unevenly.

"Every drop," he growled. "Every fucking drop..."

It was his only warning before he pressed so deep my nose buried against his abdomen. The hot, musky scent of Ezra filled my lungs as he released. Salty and bitter, he flooded my mouth but I had to swallow to keep from choking as the tears poured down my face and I clung to him.

Sweaty and sticky, I lasted until his hand eased and his head tipped back as he let out a low groan of his own. We hung there, suspended in that moment before he staggered backward a step.

Free of his dick and his hand, I half collapsed on my knees and dragged in a fresh breath of air before I lifted my tear-filled gaze to meet his eyes.

The coldness in his expression sliced through the haze of passion. He was already dragging his clothes back on and said nothing as he dressed. Nothing as he stuffed his feet into his shoes. Or pressed his still-wet dick into his boxers.

“This was a mistake,” he said, then stalked toward the door. The beep of the alarm code being entered filled the silence, followed by the hollow echo of the door closing.

I wiped a hand over my mouth, still tasting him as he left.

A mistake.

Just like the island he wanted me to go back to so badly.

I don't know how long I knelt there before I gathered up my pajamas and headed for my room. I needed to shower.

A mistake.

Pain vibrated through me.

I ignored my disheveled appearance in the mirror. It was a mistake before it even started and I still embraced it.

So why did it hurt so damn much?

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN



ADAM

Leaving the conference room table, I poured a glass of water and took a slow drink. The board meeting for Reed Enterprises had taken the better part of four hours to review the prospectus and earnings as well as the upcoming quarters.

What few decisions had been made were not really all that important. A vote to approve a potential vice-president of media, along with the final approvals for a shipping deal that had been in the works for months.

Standing like the three ghouls of the apocalypse, my father, along with my uncles—his brothers—formed an almost reception line as they shook hands and said farewell to each member of the board.

Some would be reminded of what they had on them. Some would be given promises. Others would be assessed for how they could be better manipulated. It was all a dramatic waste of time. Even if they united all of them on their side, I controlled enough stock to be a serious blockade.

I might not be able to stop everything, but I could prevent a simple majority. While a thorn may not be much of a deterrent, I could be the nuisance that didn't go away. There had already been a few decisions rammed through during my absence that I would need to work out later.

For now, I would settle for being as annoying as possible. The farewells dragged on, however the last of the board was gone shortly after. Gone were the easy smiles as each man retreated into the stone-faced gargoyle they all had the capability of becoming.

I should know. I relied on the technique far too often.

“Late lunch?” Hamilton asked as he loosened his tie. Of the three, he definitely qualified as the sleaziest. He'd never married, preferring his affairs to be short-lived and with women who wouldn't make a fuss.

“That was what Harper said when we got here,” Jason, the youngest of my uncles, said in a snark-filled manner. He never really pretended with Hamilton.

None of us did, but Jason least of all. Hamilton would cheerfully knife us all in the back and step over our bleeding corpses to get what he wanted. The only thing that kept him from doing so was whatever Dad had on him.

The one thing Jason had going for him—he was Fletcher’s father. I liked my cousin. He was one of maybe three people in my entire family who I liked. And the only one to escape the lunacy that was this family.

“Are you joining us?” Dad asked, focusing on me. The frigid chill in his eyes dared me to say no.

So tempting.

“I assumed lunch was why you invited me,” I commented before draining the water. “You didn’t need me for the board.”

It was always better to show him a flicker of weakness. A strand of insubstantial self-doubt, or perhaps irritation at being called in at his bidding. He watched for those morsels, ready to swoop in like a carrion bird to pick their meat right off the bones.

If prepared correctly, it was a poisoned pill and wouldn’t fill his gullet so much as sour it.

“No,” my father agreed with a faint smile. “I didn’t.” The smugness suggested he needed no one. Of course, he didn’t. He was Harper Reed.

Hamilton scowled at him, but Jason kept his responses more buttoned down.

“Lunch?” I prompted. I’d rather get this over and done with. Mrs. Waldemar had changed the game and while I didn’t mind working for everyone—the enemy of my enemy was not my friend, but they could be useful—I was growing tired of the game.

It had cost me my mother.

Now La—

I shut that line of thought down. Focusing on her was a distraction neither of us could afford.

“Yes, we’ll eat in my office.” With that, Dad turned and led the way out of the boardroom. Hamilton shifted his glare to me and I just met his dark look blandly. Finally, he stalked out after my father and I crossed the room to where Jason waited. He fell into step with me.

I could practically feel the unspoken questions pinging in the air around him. The executive board room was on the same level as my father’s office. Hamilton’s was two floors down. Jason’s a floor below that. Hierarchy was definitely a Reed thing.

There was an office for me on this floor. I’d never used it.

At Dad’s office door, I paused a beat and swept a hand ahead of me for Jason to enter. He shot me a look, his brows tightening.

Once upon a time, I liked Jason. He was probably the least terrible of the three when it came to bad choices and horrible decisions. Then he’d shut Fletcher down.

Shut him down and the family cleaned everything up.

Fletcher never got over it.

He never got over it, and he cut his losses, and the Reeds, and got the fuck out.

I would never be Jason’s friend, even if he wasn’t currently my enemy. The office was large, undoubtedly twice the size of the conference room.

In addition to his desk, there was a conversation area with sofas and chairs, a wet bar, and a large table capable of seating six to eight. Silver-domed plates were already waiting along with drinks.

A waiter took care of setting everything out and once we were seated, he swept away the domes.

“That’ll be all,” Dad said to him, sending him out of the room. The waiter didn’t quite run out of the room, but he also didn’t lag. I could wish it was me.

No one said anything for a few moments while napkins were unfurled, drinks were sampled and food was eaten. I wasn't that hungry, but I'd long since mastered the art of moving the food around to make it look like I was eating more than I was.

"Melissa and Sable are still in France?" Hamilton asked abruptly.

"Yes," Jason answered before Dad did. "They aren't due back until just before the Masquerade."

"Good, then I don't have to clear my plus one with them." He smirked.

"How much does this one cost?" Dad asked with a bored, dry tenor. "And does she have a website?"

"She's not a hooker," Hamilton sniffed.

"Call girl?" Jason sounded almost smug.

Hamilton's expression darkened. "Heiress."

"Divorced or widowed?" Dad asked him before he took another bite. I ignored them since they were working their way around the table. "Either will do. It's more than Adam's managed."

Of course, it couldn't last.

"He's still playing the field."

"At his age, I'd married his mother," Dad countered, killing whatever appetite I had left. "You were married to Sable. The only person he's emulating is Hamilton." The last was delivered in such a derogatory tone, the insult was clear.

"He could do worse," Hamilton threw in, not that Jason or Dad paid any attention to him.

"You could just marry Lainey," Jason suggested. "You two would make an excellent match, and she already knows you."

Hamilton actually snorted. "You'd have to get her grandfather on board." The look he favored Dad with more than pointed out who the dig was aimed at. "That isn't going to happen. He hates the Reeds. Some more than others."

I feigned a yawn before I took a drink then met Hamilton's malice-filled gaze with boredom. "I think they were discussing your companion and the social cost as well as the financial."

My mother had been fond of both of Dad's brothers. She was too damn kind, though. Hamilton, she used to say, had spent far too long in Harper's shadow. He didn't know how to define himself except in opposition. Jason survived because he'd gone to a different school and pursued other passions.

He never competed with them.

I didn't want to compete with them either. It wasn't a game. It had never been a game. It had always been about survival.

"Perhaps you could use the Masquerade to your benefit," Dad said as he spared me a look. "She will be there."

"She will have an escort." And as much as I had no interest in providing him any information, he didn't need to keep holding Lainey out like she was a piece of bait. His eyes narrowed.

Since he merely hummed and didn't ask me who, it was a safe bet to assume he was aware of the who. That was an unsettling thought. I put it away for now.

"In other business," Dad continued. "Jason, I'll be delegating all calls from Julius King to you."

I didn't react. The name was not supposed to mean anything to me.

"I thought you wanted to see what he could bring to the table," Hamilton argued. "And why aren't you letting me do it?"

"Because you can't be trusted," Jason said as he picked up his glass. "I'll instruct my secretary to deal with him. If he's actually serious, he'll work for the conversation."

"Agreed," Harper said with a nod of approval. My father was not remotely surprised that Jason had a plan. They'd discussed this previously. The little show was for me and Hamilton.

Something he was obviously aware of.

“What did we decide about the Sharpe interests?” Jason continued, cutting into his fish like Hamilton wasn’t there. “Do you still want me to reach out to the O’Connells and begin negotiations? Look into their previous clients? I don’t know how many are even going to be looking or if the collapse of the whole family will have them guarding their interests.”

“No, the Adleys have already begun to look into those interests. So is Wallace,” Harper said with a faint grimace. “I suspect that Ezra and Christian have begun to dig their hooks in. After all, they went to school with—” my father glanced at me.

“O’Connell?” I made a point of considering it. “Liam.”

“You went to school with him too.” Jason focused on me.

“He would prefer I drop dead, so don’t expect me to find a way to charm him.”

“What disagreement does he have with you?” Harper narrowed his eyes at me.

“A girl,” I said with a careless shrug. “It’s inconsequential. He holds a grudge. If you want me to reach out, I can—but I doubt anyone will get far with him. His father died recently, he’s likely closing his own ranks.”

Harper looked thoughtful. “And he’s newly married. That does make a man dig in and build up his fortifications. Reach out, extend our condolences and offer any assistance.”

“Soften him up?” I suggested, and Harper nodded. “I’ll see what I can do.” They switched subjects to another client and deal. This one had to do with another company and the Marlowes.

King had the Royals spread out, pocketing interests in numerous areas. Whenever the subject swung toward the Benedicts, Harper changed it. Nothing he’d done had gotten old Leopold to even give him the time of day.

Lainey's grandfather despised Harper. I would say it would put us in good standing, but he also despised me. He hated all of us.

Even his own daughter now that she'd become one. I could wish that he didn't blame Andrea for the accident of her birth. I thought he wouldn't—not after how fierce he was with Lainey.

Then again, I'd only ever assumed she was my sister. It was Mother who worried about her—she presumed too. Wanted me to look after her, keep her safe. The world was far too unkind to those who were alone, and she liked Lainey.

I liked her as well—too damn much for a sister, and then she wasn't a sister, and Mother was dying.

Through it all, Harper and Melissa continued their damned affair. She practically lived in the house with Mother dying down the hall. The fact Lainey took time to sit and see my mother—

“Adam,” Harper's voice cut through the memories and I focused on him. I hated him.

Hated him for how he'd ignored Lainey when I thought she was his daughter.

How he'd ignored my mother when she grew too ill to host his parties.

How he treated Andrea now.

Commodities.

That was all we were.

“Sir?”

“Are you ready for a project of your own?”

I had plenty of projects. “I'm listening...”

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN



LAINY

“If he’s here,” Pretty Boy said as the car pulled down the drive toward the club. “I’m not making any promises.”

“You didn’t have to come,” I reminded him. A day of golf. Not my favorite activity. I’d rather go riding. Or shooting.

Or pretty much anything that didn’t involve a weekend at the club with everyone out to see and be seen.

Milo glanced at me. I’d dressed him in a dark blue polo and cream-colored slacks. The expression on his face when I’d laid out the outfit this morning had been adorable. The grimace, coupled with the impatient huff, had spoken volumes for his opinion.

Yet, he dressed in it and wore it well. Even with his tattoos on display, he cleaned up nicely. His hair had been brushed back from his face and he was clean-shaven. He really was a pretty boy...

The more time I spent with him, the more I found myself enjoying him.

“I don’t want you around King without me there,” Milo countered and I sighed. Then he dipped his gaze to where my legs were crossed one over the other. I’d gone with a dark blue birdie skort and a short-sleeved top in a matching color.

It was comfortable and perhaps a bit cool for the weather, but I also had a sweater I could put on. There was something to be said for having legs on display. He’d been gone longer than planned, but his search had actually taken him close to where Em’s show was performing.

I could hardly blame him for wanting to see her. He’d sent me pictures and the extra time let me smooth over the ruffled edges that Ezra had left in his wake. I hadn’t seen or heard from Ezra since he left.

Of course, there was also... “Don’t forget, I have Karagiani with me as well.” I had to introduce the pair earlier. That had been—interesting.

“You need to explain that one to me again,” Pretty Boy said. It was a far more gracious response than I probably deserved. I hadn’t explained it at all.

“He’s a bodyguard,” I said, glancing at the drive as Wood took us up it. The privacy window to the front seat was closed, so at least I didn’t have to deal with Karagiani listening to this part.

The cold assessment between him and Milo had been testosterone-laden enough. I also didn’t owe Karagiani any explanations, particularly when it came to Milo and mine’s arrangements.

“So you mentioned,” Pretty Boy said. “I wasn’t gone that long, since when do you have a bodyguard again? Or do you want to deflect and put me off again about what happened?”

I sighed. “Nothing happened,” I told him, and at his skeptical expression, I put a hand on his arm. “No one threatened me, I promise—at least, not that I am aware of. Ezra hired him before—when everything was happening with the Sharpes.”

Pretty Boy’s scowl deepened. Not a topic either of us wanted to discuss.

“I don’t know why Ezra has decided all over again that I need a babysitter, but he sent him. And I haven’t had a chance to dissuade Ezra yet.”

The frown on his face didn’t ease. “So he goes where you go?”

“For the moment.”

Milo nodded. “Do you trust him?”

“He was quite cooperative before. He didn’t intrude, just did his job, and I seem to have come through all right.” I didn’t want to be flippant, least of all now. There was a

conversation that Pretty Boy and I needed to have but I didn't want to do it here.

And definitely not with an audience.

"Do you *trust* him?" The question held a lot of weight. Did I?

"I trust him to do his job," I admitted.

Then we were there and Wood was opening the door. Karagiani was already out and dressed in his suit and, even khaki-colored, he stood out. I'd wondered about the suit coat, although Milo had murmured he was wearing a gun.

The two looked at each other. I slid my sunglasses into place, as much to shield my eyes as anything. Wood took the time to open the trunk and pulled out my clubs and a second bag.

It took all my willpower not to laugh at Pretty Boy's expression. "What would you have done if I told you I didn't play golf?"

"You haven't told me you do play," I countered. A pair of caddies descended the steps.

"Miss Benedict..."

I pivoted to meet them. "Hello, Mr. Hardigan and I have a tee time at ten-thirty. Are you both available to caddy?"

"Yes, ma'am," the darker-haired one said. "I'm Robby. This is Mike. I'll be your caddy. Mike will take care of things for Mr. Hardigan."

"Thank you," Milo said, his smoother tone a lovely surprise. He was never going to have the dulcet, cultured tones of someone born and raised in this life. Thankfully. I much preferred the rough, bluntness of his honesty, both in what he said and how he said it. "You might need to instruct me on the finer habits of caddies and what I should and shouldn't do."

Mike chuckled. "Yes, sir. Not a problem. We'll have everything ready to set out."

“Cart or walk, Miss Benedict?” Robby asked and I glanced up at the sky. With the sweater tied lightly over my shoulders, I could slip it on as needed.

The sun was out and the breeze, while cool, wasn't cold.

“Let's walk, if you gentlemen don't mind.” The last I directed at Milo. I wanted the time between the holes. Carts would also force us to split up and Karagiani was going to insist on riding with me.

“A walk sounds good,” Pretty Boy said before he offered his arm. I grinned and slid my hand onto the crook of his elbow. Karagiani moved with us as we headed up the steps. Robby and Mike took care of our golf clubs.

We'd barely taken three steps inside when I stopped abruptly. My surprise communicated itself because Milo went stiff and still.

“What is it?”

“It's—” I glanced up at him with a quick smile before pulling away. “My grandfather.”

He was already rising from the table where he'd been seated when we came in. His genial expression did nothing for the sharpness in his eyes as he glanced from me to Milo to Karagiani.

“Grandfather,” I said by way of greeting as I crossed the few short steps to him. He held out his arms, but he wasn't looking at me. “I had no idea you were going to be here.”

He truly preferred to keep his business and pleasure separate. “I couldn't miss out on a day with my darling girl,” he said, pressing a kiss to my cheek before he gave me a brief hug. “And her friend. Introduce me?”

My stomach bottomed out at the request. Not the least of which was because I spotted Adam moving through the room toward us and behind him were his father and my mother.

I expected to see them, but out on the greens, not in here. And not five minutes after we arrived.

“Of course,” I said, picking up my composure and threading my arm through Grandfather’s as I turned. “Milo Hardigan, this is my grandfather, Leopold Benedict. Grandfather—this is Milo.”

“Mr. Benedict,” Pretty Boy said, meeting my grandfather’s gaze with a kind of quiet self-confidence as he also extended his hand. “Lainey—” Not Mayhem, but probably better that he didn’t use a pet name here. “—has told me so much about you. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Is it?” Grandfather said as he seemed to assess Milo but also didn’t leave him hanging. With the barest tilt of his head, he gripped Milo’s hand and shook it once. “You might want to reserve that opinion for after you’ve spent some time with me.”

“Only if you’ll do the same,” Milo countered without missing a beat and I remembered how to breathe as Grandfather chuckled.

“I’ll take it under advisement.” Then he let go of his hand and glanced down at me. “They told me you booked the tee time for ten-thirty.”

“I did.” I eyed him. He was dressed in a polo and khakis, and his gloves were tucked into his pocket. “Would you like to join us?”

“I was considering it. It’s been a while since I had a real challenge.” The last was definitely nothing to do with the game. I eyed him and he gave me the most beatific of smiles.

Why did I not believe him?

“Well, I’m sure Lainey can give you an excellent challenge,” Pretty Boy offered. “I’m afraid I’m a bit of a novice at the game.”

“A novice, hmm?” Grandfather eyed him. However before he could continue, Mother was there.

“Daddy.”

He looked at her but didn’t say a word.

“Elaine, darling.”

“Mother,” I said, then when Grandfather still didn’t say anything, I squeezed his arm as I stepped up to her and pressed a kiss next to her cheek. Harper walked up and he nodded to me. “Harper.”

“Lainey,” he said, then looked at Grandfather. “Leopold.”

“Reed.” That was it. The single syllable and not another word for Mother. She might as well not exist. “If you’ll excuse us, I have plans with my granddaughter and her young man.”

Mother frowned as she glanced at Milo, and I caught Grandfather eyeing Adam where he stood, hands in his pockets before he beckoned to me.

“I’ll call you later,” I offered to Mother, not that she seemed to notice and I nodded to Harper again. I really had no interest in talking to them, and Grandfather wasn’t even making a pretense of politeness.

Karagiani said nothing throughout the whole interaction, but he followed along as I tangled my fingers with Milo’s and let Grandfather lead the way.

He’d made a fuss.

He’d made enough of a fuss to get us noticed and to get *Pretty Boy* noticed. He was involving Milo in the game, whether I agreed or not.

“You okay?” Milo murmured as we moved through the club and out to the deck leading to the greens. The first hole wasn’t that far from the clubhouse.

Robby and Mike were waiting for us, along with a third caddy. Grandfather’s, I supposed.

“Mr. Hardigan,” a woman called and Milo pivoted. I turned with him and Grandfather paused. The woman who was seated at one of the tables was the same woman he’d danced with at the benefit the night of the auction. “It’s good to see you again.”

“And you,” Milo said politely at her approach.

“You don’t remember my name, do you?” The teasing warmth was a definitive means of flirting.

“You didn’t offer it,” Milo reminded her and she chuckled. The laughter and the light touch of her hand to his other arm seemed to offer a hint of possessiveness.

Amusement danced in her eyes as she focused on me and then past us to where Grandfather presumably waited. “Waldemar,” she said easily, the emphasis on the hint of Eastern European accent to her name suggested it probably affected the spelling. “Margreta Waldemar.”

“It’s a pleasure, Mrs. Waldemar.” He was being downright charming. I could kiss him. “This is Elaine Benedict, and her grandfather, Leopold Benedict.”

“Miss Benedict,” she said, returning her attention to me. I had to let go of Milo’s arm to shake her hand. She was almost effervescent in her smile. This close...there was something familiar about her yet I just couldn’t place it. Then she turned to Grandfather. “Mr. Benedict.”

“Ma’am,” he said, shaking her hand briefly. “We’ve met.”

“We have?” The coyness was a play; she wasn’t surprised even if she faked it. “I’m sorry, I don’t recall.”

“It was a few months ago,” Grandfather told her. “Just another event...”

“Ah,” she said, her expression shifting. “I go to so many.”

He didn’t though.

“Well, it was lovely to meet you,” I said. “But we have a tee time.”

“Absolutely, I don’t want to hold you up. Maybe we can have tea another time, Miss Benedict, Mr. Benedict.” She turned. “Mr. Hardigan.”

I shook my head as she strolled away and as I turned, I caught Adam staring daggers out the window. Right. After Ezra’s visit the other night, I didn’t have it in me to deal with Adam’s attitude.

Just no.

Facing Milo, I met his concerned gaze. I squeezed his hand as he took mine. I was fine. He didn't believe me, yet he nodded all the same.

"Come along," Grandfather said. "You're with me, Mr. Hardigan. Maybe I can teach you a thing or two while I beat my granddaughter."

"I'm looking forward to it," Milo said as he glimpsed down at me. "Are we allowed to wager on these matches?"

Surprise flashed through me. We neared the first hole as the group playing began to move on.

"What did you have in mind?" Grandfather asked him.

"Small stakes, but a lot of faith," Pretty Boy said. "How about a hundred on Lainey?"

Grandfather raised his eyebrows and glanced at me before flicking a look at Karagiani then back to Milo. "You're on, Mr. Hardigan."

"Good," Milo said. "No throwing the match for her."

"I would never." Grandfather wouldn't. He'd much rather I won fair and square.

So would I.

They even shook on it.

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN



BODHI

The sunrise over the beach offered a captivating view. My flight landed before dawn, giving me plenty of time to acquire a rental vehicle and drive out here. My last trip to the Cayman Islands had been when I was a teenager.

Pretty girls in bikinis. Dolphins. Turtles. Nipping some rum before going dancing. I didn't pay much attention to the island itself.

The breeze tugged at my shirt. I'd gone with island fashion. It was easier to blend in if I looked like I belonged here. I even had a fishing hat. Watching the sunrise while sipping coffee and perched on the hood of the rental car offered a rare moment of perfect peace.

Eyes half-closed, I soaked in the sounds. Seagulls shouting at each other as they dove at the surf. A hum of a motor in the distance. The rustle of trees. The water rushing up to caress the sand. Even the little pop of cooling metal in the engine beneath me added to the symphony.

A man could get used to this.

It would probably get him killed—but he could get used to it.

With that in mind, I savored the streaks of red and orange with hints of pink as the sun continued its relentless ascent. That was the thing about the universe; there were constants.

The sun always rose, even when you couldn't see it. It didn't matter if the skies were dark, leaden gray, and a storm raged. Beyond that storm, the sun was out there. The same was true for when it was time to set.

Sunny days ended. Period.

Even now, as the sun came up here, it was going down somewhere else. There was a peace in accepting the inevitable.

Relentless and inevitable, both were worth aspiring too.

By the time I finished my coffee, the sun was up and the time for ruminating was over. Pushing off the car, I crumpled up the empty cup and tossed it into a nearby trash receptacle before I climbed back in. The car came with its own GPS, but I used a burner phone set up for these occasions.

Savannah Acres wasn't that far, so I pulled out and headed for the address. An hour later, I parked just down the block from his house. Leaning back, I waited. The schedule said he went for a run most mornings at seven.

So I'd either see him leaving or returning. If not for a run, I was patient. Everything else I'd learned said he lived alone. I could do my own footwork, but I paid someone else this time.

I didn't want Voss alerted to my presence. Not until I was ready for him to know. He was one of the few who'd managed to stay in hiding long enough that it had to be deliberate.

So, what did he know? When did he know it? I planned to find out.

Almost thirty minutes after I parked, the door to the house I watched opened and let out a man in his mid-to-late forties. Salt-and-pepper decorated his hair, but his tan was definitely a product of life here.

Dressed in t-shirt, shorts, and running shoes, he put in his earbuds, clicked something on his phone then tucked the phone into an armband before he started running.

Fortunately for me, he headed in this direction. I'd seen the photos. Now I wanted to see him.

As he passed on the other side of the street, I memorized his face. He'd aged, but it matched the original photos I had. I tracked him via the rearview mirror as he continued down the street and toward the beach.

It would be a little while before he returned. Sliding the fishing hat on, I reached into the back and pulled out the work duffel. Fishing hat on to cover my hair, I pushed out of the car and made my way down the street.

I'd clocked most of the surveillance cameras. Few were pointed at the street itself, but even if they were, my steady

gait wasn't going to attract attention. The work duffel looked like a handyman's bag.

I was just here to get some work done.

A fact.

The locks on the door weren't much of a challenge. In fact, they were pretty insulting. There was a security system and I had the base override code, but—it wasn't armed.

I stared at that for a beat.

Voss had been here long enough to get comfortable.

Too comfortable.

I shook my head. Peace and quiet—it was how men got killed. They relaxed and then someone like me showed up. I gloved up before I got started. After a brief search of the house, I verified the occupancy was only one.

Toiletries for one.

Men's clothes only in the closet.

A sad queen-sized bed with only one side indented.

Men's shoes.

The kitchen was almost sad. A set of four for everything but only one cup, one glass, one plate, and one set of silver in the drying rack.

Isaiah Voss lived alone.

A computer in his office was set for a fingerprint to unlock it. Useful. I would have to take care of that later. I limited the search after that for weapons and internal surveillance.

He had one, but like his security system, it wasn't engaged. It wasn't even plugged in. No gun safe. Probably island laws.

Satisfied, I returned to the kitchen and studied the layout then to the master bathroom. No external windows, it was also on the interior of the house.

Better for sound.

A check of my watch showed only twenty minutes had elapsed since I let myself in. It would take time to get the bathroom ready. I cleared out the towels and the toiletries, anything not bolted down.

I had everything I needed in the bag: heavy cling wrap to cover the drains, the floor, the walls. It took a little effort and painters tape to secure it. By the time I finished, there wasn't an uncovered surface in the room.

A chair from the dining room would have to do. I covered it in a similar cling wrap, making sure to triple up over the legs and feet. Give the fluid nowhere to go.

Done, I set out my tools, including the heavy duct tape and guitar wire. Most people worried about getting weapons. While I just went to the hardware store.

Creative places.

At the one-hour mark, I was ready. I returned to the kitchen, filled a glass with water and took a long drink. I didn't want to hydrate too much. This was going to be a long day and I didn't want too many breaks.

Thankfully, there was a bathroom right off the living room so I could relieve myself. Afterwards, I pulled on my work jumpsuit over my clothes and sealed it up before the booties went over my shoes.

Now, I just had to wait.

Voss was another thirty minutes. Almost two hours for his run—or maybe he paused somewhere for coffee and a newspaper. I really didn't care. The key in the lock alerted me to his arrival.

Once inside, he turned the deadbolt but still didn't engage the security system.

What. An. Idiot.

Convenient for me, however. The smell of sweat rolled off of him. His hair was wet and his shirt soaked. Well, there would be other unpleasant smells soon enough. He didn't

seem to notice anything amiss; the sound of the music he was listening to was almost tinny in the silence.

I followed in his shadow after he stripped off his shoes and headed for the bedroom. It wasn't until he reached the bathroom that he stopped suddenly.

“What the—”

Not giving him the chance to finish the thought, I had him in a chokehold. He came to life, trying to fight. He dug his fingers at my arm and tried to throw himself backward. I was ready for his defense. Not that he had much time. Properly applied pressure to the carotid knocked a person out in eight seconds. The shift to adjust made mine take ten seconds.

It didn't matter.

He dropped.

Not wasting time, I stripped him down to his briefs and ignored the speedo quality and color. Lifting him into the chair, I went to work binding his arms and legs. Duct tape worked very nicely, even on his sweaty skin.

Once he was fully secure, I checked his phone and then his wallet. He had facial recognition turned on so it gave me full access. Oh and look, even his watch let me through his security.

Lazy.

Lazy.

This used to be harder.

While I waited for him to wake up, I skimmed his emails and my eyes narrowed when I came to one name.

The doctor.

He was dead, that was fine. But someone had emailed Voss about the death and warned him.

Voss hadn't responded.

Probably wise to make them think the email was a dead end. Of course, he mitigated any points for that by keeping the

email in the first place.

His bank account showed regular infusions of cash from a company name I didn't recognize. There was a cash transaction ID and an account one.

I made a note of them then glanced up when Voss groaned. Good.

The phone was getting boring.

Another slow groan escaped him. The headache was probably brutal. So sad.

Moving on.

“What the fuck—” Voss muttered, as if even speaking the words caused him pain. He stilled abruptly as his eyes opened and he took in where we were. Then he jerked his head up to look at me. “Who—”

“Good morning, Mr. Voss,” I said. “I would like to say it's a pleasure to meet you but I doubt this will be pleasurable—for you.”

“Who are you?” He wheezed out the words, and it was almost entertaining to see the terrified reality crawl back into his expression.

I ignored his question. “Unfortunately, you made locating you difficult. While I normally don't mind a challenge, you are among the few people with the information I need. That means I had to find you. As games of hide and seek go—you're good.”

He swallowed with a grimace, his pupils dilating as the faint smell of urine filled the air.

“I'm better.”

“Fuck,” he muttered, then began to struggle. I let him fumble as he pulled at his arms and legs, not managing to do much at all beyond rock the chair. Eventually, he gave up.

They all did.

Panic still reflecting in his eyes, he stared at me. “What do you want?”

“Better. Cooperation is always appreciated.”

“Then what do you want?” He coughed after he repeated the question, then licked at his lips. I doubted he had much moisture in his mouth. The trickle of golden liquid on the floor made me glad for the coverings on my shoes.

“Beacon Point.”

Isaiah Voss blanched and a little thrill went through me. He did know something. Everyone had a tell, and his *fear* was riding him right now.

“What—what’s that?” The stutter hardly covered for the confession he’d already made.

I sighed. “This could have gone much easier, Mr. Voss.” I closed the door to the bathroom. “Far easier. But you had to lie.”

“I’m not lying,” he denied abruptly. “I don’t know what Beacon Point is.”

I faced him again, eyebrows raised.

“You’re pale. You’re sweating *again*. Your heart is racing right now, hammering faster than when you were running. You’re having trouble catching your breath.” I ticked off each physiological reaction, and his chest rose and fell faster.

“I—”

“The body,” I told him, “is far more honest than the mind. The mind, it can conceive lies and tales. It has that creativity. The body?”

I stroked my finger over the tools I’d brought with me. Did I want to start big or small?

“You’re insane.”

“Probably,” I agreed. “But my physician reports would deny that.” Selecting a pair of pruning shears, I studied it. The point was sharp enough, but it would work on his fingertips. That was as good a place as any to start. “As I was saying, the body finds it much harder to lie. You can train it, but it takes a

lot of time and willpower. Even then...adrenaline, dopamine, serotonin—they can all work against you.”

Pivoting, I faced him and he paled further at seeing the tool in my hand.

“The body knows fight or flight. Quite basic.”

Panic screamed from Voss’ every pore. “What do you want to know?”

“I wanted to know about Beacon Point—but you’re not ready to tell me yet. That’s okay.”

“It is?” His eyes widened.

“Absolutely.”

“Then what...?” Terror trickled through those words. “... what do you want to know now?”

“Do you have a favorite way to die?”

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN



LAINY

The day at the club was far more successful than it had any right to be. Grandfather and Milo seemed to get along. I actually did win, by one stroke under par. The numbers were tight enough to make me watch Grandfather at the last two holes, but he wasn't *letting* me win.

Milo didn't do too badly. Grandfather eyed his first couple of strokes then walked him through the next one. He wasn't patronizing and Milo wasn't insulted. By the fifth hole, Milo parred it like he'd always played.

"It makes sense—it's like pool, only with a different way of hitting."

That pulled Grandfather around to stare at him. "I can't tell if you're serious or joking."

With a wry grin, Milo said, "Who says I can't be both?"

At that, Grandfather chuckled, and I let myself relax for the first time in three days. We played all the way up until lunchtime. The clouds had begun to roll in, and I'd actually slid my sweater on toward the ninth hole.

When Grandfather invited us for lunch, I glanced at Milo and he nodded once. We hadn't planned on staying here for food, but Grandfather was trying to make a point. Eating in the club dining room in front of everyone definitely seemed to have that effect.

Mother and Harper came in, but they didn't approach us. They joined another table. I caught sight of Tally's parents, but Tally wasn't with them either. Observing what others were doing while not looking like you were observing them was a challenge.

"You were on course for law school," Grandfather said and Milo straightened in his seat.

"Grandfather," I said, cutting into what could be the beginning of an interrogation.

“Don’t be so defensive,” he scolded me in return. “I have a right to ask him a few questions.”

“It’s okay, Mayhem,” Milo murmured. “I half-expected this out on the course.”

“Because you’re not a stupid man,” Grandfather pointed out. “Intelligence and common sense are solid qualities. A prison record is not.”

“No,” Milo said slowly. “It’s not. However, I served my time and I was released. It’s done.”

“Nothing is ever done,” Grandfather stated. “Not until you’re dead or they are.” He took a drink of his water before he focused on Milo again. “I understand the charges. I understand that you plead guilty to reduced charges for a reduced sentence.”

Milo didn’t move.

“What I don’t know—is what you’re going to do about it now.”

“There’s nothing to do about it now,” Milo said slowly. “I made a deal. I honored that deal. The rest—is irrelevant.”

Grandfather studied him. And with me glancing between them, Milo didn’t flinch.

“I understand your concerns, sir,” Milo said. “I wouldn’t lift a finger to harm Mayhem—”

The corner of my grandfather’s mouth lifted slightly at that.

“But I’m also not going to retreat from disapproval. I learned how to make my own way a long time ago. I plan to continue doing it my way, and as long as she’ll have me, my way is going to be right here.”

My heart did a little flip at the declaration.

“Mayhem?” Grandfather asked.

“According to Pretty Boy here, I’m trouble, and I turned his life upside down when I walked into it.” I didn’t bother to try and cover my own smile.

They were getting along. It was better than I could have hoped or imagined.

“The best ones do,” Grandfather said slowly as he sat back. His measured look held for another few seconds before he seemed to relax. “Do you have plans to return to law school? Pick up where you left off?”

“Felony convictions make getting a bar license challenging,” Milo admitted.

“That can always be dealt with,” Grandfather countered. “And there’s a great deal more you can do with a law degree...”

After lunch, they shook hands and Grandfather gave me a kiss before we parted ways. “I’ll see you soon,” I promised him and he smiled.

Wood was there with the car and Karagiani, who I’d almost forgotten had been with us all day, waited for Milo and I to climb in before he took his spot. Exhaustion struck the moment the doors closed.

Twisting in the seat, I opened my mouth but no words escaped before Milo kissed me. He half dragged me out of my seat and onto his lap. The wrap of his arms around me were steel bands and I drank in his touch.

When he finally let me up for air, I rested my forehead against his. “Hi,” I whispered.

“I needed that,” he muttered in a hoarse tone. “I’ve wanted to kiss the hell out of you since the second hole.”

Surprise speared me. What happened at the second hole?

My confusion must have shown because Milo chuckled. “You rock your hips from side to side in the gentlest of sways when lining up your shot. It’s the sexiest fucking thing ever.”

I opened my mouth then closed my mouth as he grinned.

“Then I spent the next seven holes reminding myself of every car part I know so I didn’t drag you off right there and then. Didn’t think that would go well with your grandfather.”

I bit my lip. “Sorry?”

He snorted. “Nothing to be sorry about, Mayhem. I enjoy torturing myself. It’s why I’m with you.”

The last few words killed my amusement. We had so much to talk about, and there just hadn’t been time since he got back. We were about to be immersed in the Masquerade so I had to make time.

“Hey,” he said, tucking his finger under my chin. “What was that?”

“It’s—” I wasn’t going to say nothing, so I just shook my head. “I want to talk to you but not—” I gestured to the car.

He nodded slowly. “When we’re back at your apartment?”

Even as I nodded, my stomach clenched.

“Whatever it is,” he said, tucking me against him. “We’ll handle it.”

I really hoped so. The drive back did little to take the edge off. We talked about a lot of nothing, but Milo kept me in his lap and rubbed my lower spine, massaging all the knots that formed there.

It was only late afternoon when we returned, but it felt so much later. Karagiani rode up in the elevator with us and I stopped him at the door. “I’m in for the night,” I told him. “So you’re free to go.”

He eyed me. “You know the rules.”

“I do, but I also know this is my apartment and I’ll be in it with Milo. If you need someone to sweep it, he can do it. Thank you.”

The silence elongated for a moment and Karagiani nodded once. “Very well, inside, and let me hear the locks. Call me with any schedule changes for tomorrow.”

I could practically feel Milo assessing the bodyguard. Not that he hadn’t been. The two weren’t quite glaring, but it wasn’t far off. Milo followed me inside and locked the door while I disarmed, then rearmed the system.

He strode off and I turned to track. “Where—”

“I’m going to sweep the place,” he said and I sighed. “You told him I would and the guy is paranoid, but it won’t hurt. Now, stay right there.”

Arms folded, I waited. It didn’t take Milo long before he returned with a smile.

“All clear,” he said, gathering my hands into his. “Do you want to shower and change before we talk or just want to tell me what’s eating away at you?”

“Honestly?” I blew out a long breath. “I doubt either will make it any easier, and I’ve put this off long enough. Do you need a shower, or can we talk now?”

“I’m good, Mayhem. Where do you want me?”

Everywhere. However I kept that to myself even if I summoned a smile. I glanced at the sofa and then reconsidered that plan.

There was another more formal sitting room and then the library... so we headed there. For once, I went to the bar and mixed up a drink. When I glanced at Milo, he shook his head.

“I have beer,” I offered, and his smile softened his whole face. “And yes, it’s for you.” I opened up the fridge and pulled out a bottle. It was even his brand. I made sure to check with Emersyn on what he liked.

“You’re pretty damn perfect, Mayhem.” He dropped a kiss on my lips before he took the bottle and then moved over to the chairs near the empty fireplace.

“I wish that was true,” I admitted before taking a sip of the gin and tonic. I didn’t really want to drink, but I needed something to do with my hands. “I probably should have told you about this before,” I said. “I’m not making excuses. I made a choice, and now I’m making a new one.”

“Okay.” He set the beer down and leaned forward, his attention on me.

I wasn’t going to put any caveats or provisos on this. I wasn’t a little girl, and I wasn’t scared of the dark. “The first

time we were together, when Em was in Pinetree and then I left with Ezra...”

“I remember.”

He’d been angry then. Angry and maybe hurt. I wasn’t going to look too closely at that.

“I had to come back here, for Andrea.”

He nodded once.

“But I didn’t need to stay here long because she was back to school. Then Ezra took me to his island—it’s not his, it’s his family’s. But there was so much going on and he wanted me somewhere safe. I didn’t realize we were going there until we were already in the air.” I frowned. “It was a turbulent time. Adam had been missing, and Ezra was worried about him. Then what happened when Em and I had disappeared on him. He didn’t want me to disappear again.”

Right, get to the point, I told myself.

“While we were on the island, we had sex.”

Milo leaned back in the chair and his expression didn’t shift.

“It was—a couple of times...although he acted like it was a huge mistake and then pretty much told me to forget it happened. We came back here and pretended it hadn’t.”

I turned those memories over in my mind. On the island, Ezra had been—warm and funny, and kind and caring. He’d been incredible—even when he was infuriating.

Then he just flipped that switch and turned into an asshole again.

“Nothing’s happened between us since then...until a few nights ago.”

“While I was gone?” Milo’s only question.

My heart hammered and I met his gaze head-on. “Yes.”

“Did he force you?”

I frowned. “No.”

“Did he hurt you?”

I supposed that was relative, except... “No, he didn’t hurt me. At least not deliberately. He—wanted me to go back to the island with him. To leave all of this—to leave you, the city, my family... and he wanted me to go and I told him no.”

“And he did what?”

“He finished,” was all I said since I wasn’t going into details. “But then he stormed out because he said it had been a mistake.”

Milo’s lips compressed. “That didn’t hurt you?”

“I can live with having my feelings hurt.” I wasn’t a child. “I just—I should have told you before. I know we didn’t make any commitments. We haven’t made any commitments. Certainly the first time, I wasn’t sure I would get to see you again even if I wanted to—”

I hesitated.

“That might have been my first lie. Sorry,” I admitted. “I would have seen you again. Considering I wanted to see you again, Pretty Boy. I like having you here. I liked that you stayed.”

“But we still haven’t made any commitments,” Milo said slowly.

“It’s not that, I promise. I—Ezra can be sweet and warm and funny. I let him...I got carried away with him.”

“Because you care about him.”

“Sometimes,” I said softly. “I wish I didn’t. It might make so much of this easier. Nevertheless, Ezra and Adam have been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. I used to imagine it sometimes when I was younger—before I realized they were beating up any possible boyfriends or frightening them away.”

I made a face.

“Now...now I wonder if that was just another way to control me, and that’s what the sex is, or if it’s something

else.”

“You want it to be something else.” It wasn’t a question, and Milo let out a long sigh. “Mayhem—it’s okay to admit you want someone to care.”

“I don’t know. It sounds kind of pathetic to me. Like...I can’t handle it.”

“You can handle anything.”

“I just—I don’t like feeling like I was lying to you.”

“Well, I don’t like the idea of you lying to me or me lying to you,” he said with a faint smile that never reached his eyes. “Not real sure I like the idea of you having sex with that handsy entitled asshole either.”

“I want to say I’m sorry...and I am sorry because the last thing I want to do is hurt you.”

He nodded once, but he didn’t say anything. His guarded expression was almost impossible to read.

“I’m—going to ask you for some time to sit with this.” Each word was carefully enunciated and controlled. “But answer this for me... do you want more with him?”

“I don’t even know if that’s possible with Ezra,” I admitted. “I used to think I understood him. More and more he seems like a stranger.”

“But do you *want* more with him?”

Did I?

There was an easy answer and a complicated answer.

“I don’t know,” was the easy answer, but I didn’t leave it there. “Sometimes, when he kisses me, he makes me want all the possibilities.” That was the complicated answer, but I took it a step further and met the difficult one head-on. “Like you do. I never imagined you, Pretty Boy. I don’t know that I could have, and now—I can’t imagine it without you.”

“Or him.”

“That part is to be decided.”

Fuck, my heart hurt. The last person I wanted to wound was Milo.

“Okay, thank you for being honest with me. Is there anything else I need to know?”

I shook my head.

“I’m going to go up to the guest room to shower.”

My heart plummeted.

“I’m not leaving Mayhem.” That helped. “But I need a minute. Do you understand?”

“I do.”

“Good.” He rose and then paused to cup my face. He seemed to be searching me for something, except I didn’t know what. Then, without a word, he picked up his beer bottle and left the library.

Eyes closed, I fought back the tears that wanted to spill. I told him. That was the important part. He had to know because lying wasn’t an option.

Not with everything in front of us.

Not with everyone else who was against us.

CHAPTER
NINETEEN



MILO

Leaving the library, I headed up the stairs. Opening the door to her bedroom, I took a deep breath of the room itself. Her scent was everywhere, and it settled me, even as the thoughts ricocheting in my head pissed me off.

It was like her revelation about sex with Ezra was the cue ball and it slammed into the rack. Everything else scattered, but instead of slowing, they were still colliding with each other. The cracks echoed in my brain and I fisted my temper to keep everything even.

Telling me had cost Mayhem. She'd peeled back a piece of herself and hadn't shied away or tried to pretend it wasn't happening. Even better, she didn't try to downplay it. Her reality wasn't mine...

Hadn't been mine.

The last few weeks?

Right.

I grabbed some clean sweatpants and headed for the guest room. I could have used her shower, I could have stayed in her room. But she might need it and I needed that minute.

In the guest room, I closed the door and headed into the bathroom. It wasn't until I was in there that I drained the bottle of beer and set it down. Then I gripped the marble-topped counter, bowed my head, and swallowed the fury burning a path up from my gut.

The night of the auction, Ezra had been all over her. His attraction was right there. I didn't know if she saw it, but I did. Just like I saw Reed's. He played it cooler, but he was no less invested. The last thing they wanted was me in her life.

Too. Fucking. Bad.

The last thing I wanted was for her to be hurt. They could hurt her. She said Ezra hadn't—then she told me about his

choice of phrases before he left. If I hadn't already been ready to break his jaw, that would have done it.

What he said *had* hurt her. The fact it had—well, that was what I needed to think about. Stripping out of the golf gear, I eyed it briefly as I folded them. The shirt and the pants were a lot more comfortable than I'd been willing to admit.

The day at the “club” to “golf” had been more fun than I expected too. It didn't hurt that Mayhem's grandfather was a funny old coot. Sharp as a tack, though, you'd have to be a fool to miss the way he tested me.

I might not have all the fine manners or breeding or whatever it is they were looking for, but I stuck with direct. I wasn't going anywhere. As long as he and I understood that, he could test away.

I wasn't going anywhere.

That thought played on repeat as I turned the water on to ice cold and then stepped under it. The ice blast was enough to make my balls want to crawl back up inside my body, but I braced my hand against the tile and let it clear away the cobwebs.

Clear out the noise and cool off my temper. I needed that cooler. Mayhem needed me cooler. When I decided to deal with Ezra fucking Graham, I would be doing it with a cool head and a set of calculated choices.

When the first shiver hit, I warmed up the water and turned into the spray again. Mayhem had sex with Ezra. More than once.

After she left Braxton Harbor. On an island.

I filed that last piece away for later. The where didn't matter for then. Fuck, the where didn't matter now. It mattered that...

Fuck. I slammed the water off and dragged a towel over to dry. It was sketchy, I just needed the water droplets gone, then another pass over my hair. After, I dragged on the sweatpants and stalked back to her room.

The door was open, just like I'd left it and she wasn't in the shower. Back down the stairs I went and all the way to the library where Mayhem sat, still in her golf outfit that was hot as fuck, arms folded, and head down—lost in her own thoughts.

Traces of sadness lingered in her expression. Sadness and loneliness. She'd ripped open a part of herself to give me the truth and I'd only asked if he'd forced her or hurt her. I'd never asked...

I cleared my throat. "Mayhem?"

She glanced up, the surprise and relief were more than a little humbling. "You're back..."

"Yeah, I said I would be." It wasn't a chastisement, but I liked to keep my word.

"I mean—you needed time, that wasn't very much time."

"Depends," I said as I walked into the room. I moved around to where she was seated. Her drink was barely touched. She hadn't moved since I'd left.

"On?" She tracked my path until I lifted her right out of the chair then turned and took her place as I set her in my lap. Fresh surprise filled her expression.

"How you are."

"How—how I am?" She shook her head. "I don't—"

"Mayhem," I said firmly. "I didn't ask you if *you* were all right. I didn't ask how you were. You did something pretty fucking brave and I could see how uncomfortable you were so I walked out."

"You needed to think." She shook her head. "How I am isn't important."

"First of all, bullshit. Second of all, *you* are important, period. Me needing to think doesn't trump how you're doing."

"Milo—" Fuck, it sounded weird when she said my name. "I was scared I hurt you."

Scared.

Pressing my lips to her temple, I considered my response. She'd been honest with me. I owed it to be honest with her.

"You didn't hurt me," I said quietly and when she pulled back to look at me, I pressed a finger to her lips. She kissed my finger gently then gripped it and I smiled. "You didn't. Do I like that you fucked him?" I squinted at her. "You're way too smart for me to even pretend that I do. Do I hate it? Yeah, a little bit."

She threaded her fingers with mine and I glanced down to where her palm was pressed tightly to mine. My hands dwarfed hers. As strong and capable and in command as she was, and fuck me was she, she was still fragile. Still—

I needed to keep her safe.

I wanted to be with her.

"Did I know he wanted you before this? Yeah, I did. I could see it. I saw it in Braxton Harbor when he and Adam parked themselves outside my room to protect me. They didn't do that for me, they did it for you."

Her lashes dipped and I caught the glimmer of tears on them.

"I only need to know two things right now though."

She swallowed. "What are they?"

"How are you? You said he didn't hurt you, but I think you're hurt. So I need to know—talk to me. Please?" Was I more comfortable throwing a fist these days? Yes. But Mayhem didn't need me to beat anyone up. Not yet.

What she needed was comfort and trust. She trusted me enough to tell me. I needed to trust her enough to listen.

"I'm—confused, I guess is the best word. It's a dramatically uncomfortable feeling too." She made a face. "Confusion and doubt, are weaknesses that others can exploit. There's—there's a lot going on. Deals. Blackmail. Corruption. Maybe worse. No, definitely worse."

She licked her lips.

“All my life, Grandfather has been teaching me how to arm myself against the world. To be strong and capable. To assess before I made a decision and to resist being impulsive.”

“Not bad things to know.”

“No,” she said slowly. “But with Ezra, I was impulsive and knew it wasn’t the right move. Only at the same time...”

“You struggled because you weren’t sure it was the wrong move.” I could see that if I looked at it sideways and squinted.

“Yes. Something scared him... I’ve been thinking about it. When he showed up here, he was drunk—he always drinks—so he was a little drunk yet also hyper-aware. Something had worried him enough that he came straight to me. And this *after* he sent that bodyguard back.”

“You think he knows about a new threat to you.” A threat he wasn’t warning anyone about? That was definitely a reason to punch.

“I think he might believe there’s one. Ezra’s—he’s hard to define. But he’s very passionate and over the top. The only person I know he trusts with everything is Adam. They’ve been in each other’s back pockets forever. It used to annoy me that what Adam knew, Ezra knew—and vice versa. If you got one, you got both.”

Her nose made the cutest crinkling.

“But the last couple of years, especially since Adam had to play dead, things have changed, and Ezra’s... I’m worried about him. I think he genuinely wants me safe and at the same time, he was at that auction to take the painting I was trying to get for Grandfather. So whose side is he on? I don’t know. However I don’t think he’s my enemy, and...he hates you. Which I’m not terribly fond of.”

I had to smile at that. She sounded so exasperated. At the same time, there was a lost look in her eyes I disliked intensely.

“Telling you was a risk. I was scared it would hurt you and make you leave. Or that you would be furious and go after

him. I honestly didn't know how you would react. You're so—tempestuous, Pretty Boy.”

“Nice word.”

“It fits,” she said with a small smile. “But I also couldn't lie to you. With the party coming, Ezra will be there without a doubt. If he wanted to cause trouble—dropping that information on you in the middle of it would be the way to go.”

“True.” Of course, that beckoned a little further exploration. “If there was no party—would you have told me still?”

“I think so,” she said with a slow nod. “I don't want secrets between us. There are so many secrets and conspiracies in my life, so many behind closed doors. Grandfather did what he did today since I let it slip that I like you and he is worried.”

“He's a good man, and don't worry about him, I can handle your grandfather.” When I cupped her cheek, she leaned her face into my hand.

“Was that both questions?”

“No, just wanted to clarify what you said about the party.”

She nodded. “Second question?”

“Am I losing you, Mayhem?”

“No,” she said so fiercely, it relaxed the fist of tension that closed when she first dropped that bomb. “No, you're not losing me. Am... I going to lose you?”

“No,” I assured her, and the fact she sagged with so much relief gave me the answer I hadn't realized I needed. Coming back down here and just talking to her was the right call. “I might get mad, and I'm not promising I won't punch him in the face, but you're not losing me...I need you to do one thing for me though.”

“Anything.” Then she hesitated.

“It's okay, I won't take advantage.”

The genuine smile on her lips was its own reward.

“If you do decide you want to have sex with him again—give me a heads-up?”

“You mean, like just text you or something?” The absolute bafflement was worth a chuckle.

“No, I mean like talk to me if this is something you want to explore. I don’t—I don’t know about sharing you, Mayhem. I’m not the guys, and I still don’t totally get how they’re all okay with sharing Ivy, but it works for them.”

She licked her lips.

“If you need something like that, we might have to try and figure it out.” I pressed my lips to her forehead. “Whatever else we do, we’re in this together. I promised you I’d have your back, and I do—and I know you have mine.”

She’d proven it constantly, and this afternoon was no exception.

When she wrapped her arms around me, I gathered her close and held her tighter.

“Pretty Boy...”

“Hmmm?”

“If you decide you want to have sex with someone else... will you tell me first, too?”

That gave me a jolt. “I don’t want to have sex with anyone else.”

“Well, if you do though...”

I rolled my eyes. “I promise, you’ll be the first to know.”

She snorted. “Good.”

“Any reason in particular it’s good?” I had to lean back so I could study her face.

“Mrs. Waldemar seemed especially interested.”

I groaned, but her laughter was worth it. “Come on upstairs and into the shower with you. Then we’ll have a quiet night. I think we’ve earned it.”

I rose, carrying her, and she looped her arms around my neck. “Pretty Boy?”

“Hmm?” Then I narrowed my eyes as I paused before the steps.

“Thank you.” There was a lot of emotion shining in her eyes, along with tears. It was raw, and it hit like a sucker punch.

“You’re welcome,” I whispered against her forehead. “You’re always welcome, Mayhem.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY



LAINY

Wood arrived at Der Sonne promptly on time to collect us. I'd elected to drive out earlier in the day and get ready there. It also gave us time with Grandfather's valet Winston, who checked the fittings, fortunately—the seamstress had all of my measurements and I'd had fun taking all of Pretty Boy's. A part of me wished I'd been there when they laid out his, but I needed assistance getting into the dress, so we got ready separately.

Karagiani was going with us to the gala, there was no getting around it. I'd informed him he would need to at least be in a black tie and a mask if he was going. He'd agreed. For now, he was downstairs.

“Mr. Hardigan is ready, miss,” Collette said. She'd been one of the maids at the house for more than a decade. She always helped me get ready when I stayed here. “Mrs. Danvers said to let you know.”

The housekeeper.

“I hope she's not fussing at you.”

Collette laughed. “No more than the usual, I promise. She was disappointed when she learned you might not be staying for the whole weekend.”

“Well, that's still to be decided,” I said, pivoting to face her. The swish of the skirt was deeply satisfying. I could not have lived in an era when these types of dresses were considered everyday wear, but I did love dressing up.

Even if it was for the Reed Masquerade.

“Help me with the mask?” It was the last piece. We needed to arrive fully adorned and ready.

“Absolutely. If you don't mind me saying, you look like a million dollars.” Her smile was easy and affectionate. I lifted the mask to my face. The black and gold matched my dress perfectly. The gold ornamental peacock along the right side

framed my eye while the carved golden feathers extended above and below.

The mask hugged my face, covering my forehead to the top of my upper lip, barely revealing my jaw. My nose was tucked delicately behind it. The dramatic black and gold cosmetics enhanced the shape of my eyes behind the mask. The rest of my dress was done up in layers of satin with an overcoat of gold embossed on satin with the black underdress.

The corset created the illusion of a smaller waist while pushing my breasts up. The square neckline enhanced the look and a dusting of gold powder added to the sparkle. The three-quarter sleeves ended in lace that draped my soon-to-be gloved hands and then the skirt itself just whispered against the floor. The crinoline underskirt gave it a shape that added to the bell effect.

It was almost too much and at the same time, I enjoyed the effect. Costume parties could be fun. The whole point of Venetian Masquerades was a celebration of carnival when everyone came out to play and the masks gave us freedom and anonymity. Tonight, I craved both.

“Thank you,” I tugged my gloves on one at a time and then took the small purse we’d put together that I could wear over a wrist. “Thank you for helping me get ready.”

“My pleasure. Do you mind if I peek to see how Mr. Hardigan reacts?”

Laughter surged through me. “I don’t mind in the slightest.”

Collette clapped her hands together, the warmth in her smile wrapping around me like a hug. For a moment, my stomach bottomed out as Collette took the lead. She opened the door for me and I had my reaction under control by then. The past couple of days had been filled with tension, but Pretty Boy hadn’t left. Nor had he turned away from me.

We talked, and when he asked me about the ball and expectations, I told him everything. I had no idea how this would all work out, but we would figure it out together.

Tonight—tonight, we were going to be out there for everyone to see and there was definitely safety behind my mask.

But I had no illusions about Ezra and Adam both being present. The only question was whether Adam was aware of what happened. I knew he didn't know about the island, especially since he would have said or done something. The more recent interlude?

Shaking off those shadows, I moved to the stairs. With one hand lightly on the railing, I began my descent.

“Mayhem...” The soft exclamation in Pretty Boy's voice made me smile. I found him coming out of the front parlor, where he'd clearly been waiting. It was my first proper glimpse of his outfit. The 17th Century breeches in black looked a little poofy though the boots were a perfect compliment. I didn't think he'd go for the hose. Added to the ensemble was the black shirt with the black and gold jacket that fell to his knees. The black and gold mask of a fierce bird of prey added a predatory sharpness to him, even if all that was visible was his jaw and his eyes.

“You're looking nice yourself there, Pretty Boy.” He held my full attention as I descended the steps, and when he reached out with a gloved hand, I slid mine into his.

“I feel like a fool,” he murmured and I chuckled.

“You do not look like one. Not in the slightest.” Head tilted, I met his gaze. “Did everything fit?”

“It did, they did an amazing job and I have a feeling this costs more than everything I own combined.”

Snorting, I shook my head. “Not that much, I promise. And I am going to be the envy of them all tonight. Everyone will want to know who the dashing dark man in the raptor mask is, and how they can steal him away from me.” I picked off a piece of imaginary lint as he shook his head.

“Nothing can take me away from you, don't worry. I'll fight them every step of the way.”

“Good. Now—is Karagiani ready?”

“I am.” The droll voice came from behind Pretty Boy, and he turned, allowing me to see Karagiani dressed in black tie, with a cloak and a long, sharp beak of a plague doctor mask.

The high collar on his cloak hid all but his tie and there was absolutely nothing to betray his identity. Coupled with the mask and the unrelieved black would leave him completely shrouded in darkness. It was rather chilling how well it seemed to suit him.

“How do you plan to do this, this evening?” Mainly because I wanted to have some idea of what to expect. The gala usually has something close to six hundred in attendance. “I would prefer not to explain your presence to my sister.”

I didn’t give a damn about explaining him to anyone else. I wouldn’t bother. But Andrea tended to pick up on some things faster than I cared to admit. While he might blend in, there was something rather compelling about Karagiani in his outfit.

“I will do my best to blend in.” I could practically hear the smirk. “As long as Mr. Hardigan is at your side, I will allow some space. But should he be pulled away, I will move up to join you.”

Glancing up at Pretty Boy, I raised my brows, not that he could see them behind the mask. “Does that work for you?”

“It does.”

“Miss Lainey,” Branson said as he came out of the side hall. “Your car is ready, and Mr. Leopold asked that I extend his best wishes for the evening. If you are not staying the night, he has asked that you call him tomorrow.”

“And if I am staying the night?” Because I was curious.

Branson didn’t so much as twitch with a smile. “He would expect *you* at breakfast.”

So he wanted a briefing. Not surprising. “Please tell him thank you, and I will certainly call tomorrow if I’m not here for breakfast.”

“Very good.”

With that, it was time to go. The attendance time for the ball began about thirty minutes earlier. But arriving as much as an hour into the event wasn't unusual. It also meant more attendees, so we could blend in much easier.

Pretty Boy escorted me out to the car where Wood waited. He was working overtime this weekend. I'd have to make it up to him. His smile deepened to amused briefly before he opened the back door. "Do you want me to stay on site this evening, Miss? Or should I come back here and wait?"

The drive over wasn't that long. "Why don't you take a break for the first hour and then come back and wait? Do you have something to read?"

"I do," he said, nodding. "I can absolutely do that. Mrs. Danvers told me the cook had already put aside a meal for me."

"Excellent. Thank you."

I slid into the car carefully. We were taking a much larger limo than I normally favored, but I actually needed the room for the skirt. Pretty Boy waited until I was tucked in before he circled the car to climb in on that side. The front passenger door closed a beat before Wood's did. The privacy window was closed.

"You really do look like a dream, Mayhem." The soft words tugged at me and I glanced over at him. It was difficult to make out his eyes in the dark, but I didn't need to see them.

"Thank you," I whispered. "For all the times I've been to these types of events before, I've always favored the masquerade."

"Because it shields you," he said. Privacy window or no privacy window, neither of us were speaking very loudly. "It lets you just enjoy the event without having to guard your every expression."

Surprise unfurled within me. It probably shouldn't. Pretty Boy was full of surprises, and he read people, including me, sometimes too well. "The masks distort voices too, so you can't always judge by inflection. That was the point of

Carnival, you know. It was very repressive in those centuries, and for forty-seven days, everyone from the bread baker to the aristocrat to the paupers in the street could be someone else. You could escape reality and just—exist in this timeless bubble, free of responsibility and social judgment.”

“Is that what you want to do?” He took my left hand in his. “Escape from all of this?”

“Sometimes,” I admitted. “Sometimes I wish...I wish for selfish things. I was born into this world. I’ve witnessed the games, sometimes been drawn into them, and had to mind everywhere the lines were drawn.” Melancholy crept through me. My grandfather and my mother had been at war for as long as I could remember. I grew up in his household, with his staff and his oversight.

Mother was a part of my life but was never allowed to control it. Until Andrea was born, I didn’t see her as much. Though, I’d spent more time at the Reeds than I cared to admit, at least when I wasn’t at school. Time waiting for her. The time I got to spend with Adam—he’d been there when I learned how to ride. I’d half-forgotten that. Then I’d gotten lucky for a while, when I got to spend time with Emily. Mrs. Reed was one of the kindest women I’d ever met.

“Hey...” Pretty Boy squeezed my hand and pulled me back from the memories. “Where did you go?”

“The past,” I admitted. “Just remembering those days. Even then, when I was younger and home from boarding school, I loved the costume balls and the dress-up. When you’re a child, you’re not supposed to attend.”

“But you did anyway?”

I laughed. “When we get there, you’ll see the ballroom at Waltham Corners. It’s huge and done up in golden accents and rich paintings everywhere. A fine room, almost too fine. There are these little alcoves up at the top where you could sneak out and sit if you were quiet and still. Then you could watch everything.”

“So, you were sneaking around and getting into trouble from the beginning, weren’t you, Mayhem?”

“Maybe.” Adam had shown it to me. I’d been heartbroken at all the finery and not being able to watch. It was the first year he’d been allowed to attend. He snuck me up there along with some food and drinks. Then told me to stay quiet. I’d sat there all night, just—enjoying the music and the pageantry. No doubt there’d been scheming and gossip even then, but I’d been unaware of it.

I must have fallen asleep, because I woke when Adam carried me into the guest suite Mother and I were staying in for the night. She wasn’t there, but he’d tucked me in and told me to sleep and to remember—it was our secret.

One of my first secrets.

It was like that memory tore free from the past and came fluttering down to land fully formed. I had forgotten all about that.

“Tonight, I get to dance with you at a ball I used to watch from the rafters.” I’d get to dance and play—and hopefully, we would learn more about the games happening all around us.

“If there’s too much fancy dancing, that won’t be me.”

“Don’t worry, Pretty Boy. You still get most of my dance card and if you don’t know it, I can sit it out too.”

He chuckled, then lifted my gloved hand to kiss.

All too soon, we were heading down the long drive heading to Waltham Corners. We were hardly the only ones arriving this late, especially since we had to trail along with a host of other vehicles.

I steadied my heart by taking slower, deeper breaths. There was no time for our worries or our anxieties tonight. From the moment we stepped out of the car, we would be in the thick of it. Our every move analyzed even as they tried to figure out who we were, what we knew, and what we were doing.

Gossip, as always, was indeed king.

Amusement flickered through me again. I had to wonder if Julius King really understood that or not. Somehow... I had my doubts, but I couldn't eliminate it entirely.

Oh.

Maybe we could use *that* to our advantage.

I was still mulling that over when Wood pulled up to the front, and a footman opened my door.

Showtime.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE



ADAM

The annual gala was a non-optional event for me, though I'd missed the previous year. My father took it as a silent protest of his marriage to Melissa. I didn't really care about that. Melissa Benedict had been his mistress far longer than his wife. He treated her with a kind of casual disdain this evening. I doubted she was aware of it. If I were a betting man, he had a new mistress. Harper Reed was never one to deny himself.

I was half-tempted to see if I could figure out who it was, but only half. Frankly, I didn't care. Whatever he did to Melissa—she deserved it. He'd kept her for years, so many years, while presenting the face of a doting husband in public where my mother was concerned. In private, he barely saw her and she always excused his choices.

He was busy.

He had work.

The business pulled him away.

It was the life they'd chosen.

I tossed back the full measure of Scotch the bartender served me. The ballroom was already alive with a few hundred guests. More continued to stream in. The Masquerade was always the event of the season. Everyone vied for invitations, they wanted to curry favor, carry on their assignments, and be noticed.

Noticed at an event where anonymity was far more highly prized. Amongst the glitter and glam, guests mingled, drank, and sampled the decadent treats and hors d'oeuvres being served. Others were dancing, while still more slipped away to the corners. I didn't doubt that if I walked out to the garden, I'd find still more.

The maze would prove an attractive obstacle for those couples seeking to steal away for a little private time. The

grand ballroom was richly appointed and opulent. It was all that shiny gold, the facade that deterred others from seeing the shadowy underbelly. My phone vibrated and I pulled it from the inner pocket.

Lainey had arrived.

I considered my empty glass then pushed it back for the bartender to deal with. I needed to move to a better position to keep an eye on the door. I'd tracked where my father and uncles were. My aunt Sable was in attendance. Melissa held court near the front of the room with a dozen women practically tripping over themselves to see the bejeweled mask she'd arrived in, along with its tiara.

As I moved, I checked on Andrea. I'd escorted her in, her swan outfit absolutely stunning. The mask was perfect. It hid her features without leaving her blinded. The dress was gorgeous in its simplicity and Lainey had apparently made sure it wasn't too fashion-forward for our younger sister. My war against noticing puberty had arrived for her was a losing battle.

Now, I just had to make sure the boys left her alone. Though she had a boy she was currently chatting with, they weren't alone. The table around her was full of her friends. I'd made sure to invite four or five others her age to be her companions. Harder to be under the sway of one when you had a table to entertain you. They did seem to be entertained.

Her smile said as much.

One of the footmen had taken a post near to her table. While he appeared to be decorative, he was there to do a job. One job.

Protect Andrea.

Satisfied, I made my way toward the entrance where more guests trickled in. A single male stepped inside. Dressed head to toe in unrelieved black, he even sported a full cloak. The hooded cloak drew my attention. That, and his pause at the top of the steps as he surveyed the room. His mask was flat, black and silver which hugged his face and left only his eyes visible.

I had no idea what he searched for, although he seemed to find it as he began his descent. Habit had me tracking the unnerving figure until a new movement at the doors drew my attention.

I didn't have to be told it was her. She'd dressed in black and gold, her mask also done up perfectly to reflect the gold of a peacock. Her favorite bird—or they had been when she was younger. She loved the story of how the peacocks got their eyes. The gold brocade gown and the square neck emphasized her breasts. No one could miss those sweet, supple curves.

The man at her side was dressed in similar colors, though his jacket was far more refined than anything I could imagine Milo Hardigan owned. Emersyn could more than afford to provide for him, as could O'Connell, but he didn't seem the type. I had to admit, the outfit suited him, as did the black mask with its hints of gold in the shape of a bird of prey.

Lainey and he stood for a moment. I rather suspected it wasn't to survey the room as she leaned toward him to speak. Probably giving him a heads-up on what to expect. She was very protective of the man, and he of her.

Fuck, I hated him so much.

Even if I respected him—I hated him.

He offered Lainey his arm and she slid her hand onto his elbow. Together, they descended, looking every inch the couple. Three or four glasses of Scotch sounded good right now.

So did taking him outside and shooting him. Unfortunately, shooting him wasn't an option. Tactically, he was useful in the fight against Julius King.

After?

A man in a plague doctor's mask followed them down the steps. He was armed and walked with a kind of lethality to his actions. The bodyguard.

That reminded me, I needed to find out why the hell Ezra had sent the bodyguard to her again. He'd avoided my calls the last few days. I expected him to be here tonight—

somewhere. However, he seemed almost conspicuous in his absence. I didn't step forward to greet them as they drifted past.

Her attention was on Andrea, and I heard her soft laugh as she said, "We need to stop and check on her. I promised."

"That's fine. You can introduce me."

"Maybe, Pretty Boy... or maybe I'll keep you to myself."

Aggravation raked through me like hot coals being poured along my spine. The bitterness and burn were as uncomfortable as they were infuriating. Not letting them out of my sight, I drifted along, following.

At Andrea's table, there were exclamations of excitement as she rose to hug Lainey. The ease of affection between them soothed some of the more jagged edges of my temper. Though Lainey could quite well drive me mad with her passionate loyalty, I also respected it. There was nothing she wouldn't do for Andrea. Just as there was nothing she wouldn't do for her best friend.

Thankfully, her friend was as safe as we could all make her. She had a veritable gang around her to keep her safe. An actual one. That seemed to relax Lainey, allowing her to bring her attention back here to focus on things I'd rather she knew nothing about. They didn't linger long with Andrea or her friends. In fact, they moved toward the dance floor. It was a simple waltz, and they flowed together with the kind of familiarity bred by intimacy.

The bodyguard followed as far as the edge of the dance floor, then he took up a watchful post. His actions and posture made him stand out, even if a mask hid his features. The watchfulness put my teeth on edge.

Why had Ezra sent him?

Someone bumped into me and I shifted, finding the man in the black and silver face mask with the cloak standing there. He didn't say anything just moved on like it hadn't happened. I made sure I still had my phone, then returned my attention to

the dance floor. The music changed, the waltz giving way to a different dance.

Lainey and her escort moved to the edge of the dance floor and she was walking him through the steps. Dance lessons probably weren't high on the agenda where he grew up.

So sad for him.

The cloaked figure had made it to the edge of the dance floor, and the position he took threatened to block my view. Irritated, I weaved through the chattering throng to a new position. They were still at the edge and moving more easily. Lainey's smile was a punch to the gut.

The longer I watched them, the more aggravated I became. Honestly, I should walk away and leave them. It would be simpler and less distracting. At the same time, I couldn't take my eyes off her. They had three dances together and then the music changed to a minuet. Couples shifted, some leaving the dance floor as others drew back and prepared for the more formal dance.

My feet were moving before I fully processed my intentions. I approached them—her—and bowed slightly before I gestured to the dance floor. I said nothing. The mask hid my face. Rather than accept my hand, she looked at her escort and he kissed her gloved hand once before taking a step back.

He was a kinder man than I was. I didn't want her dancing with anyone else, but he was giving her the option. "One dance," she said, then turned to me. Even with her voice distorted by the mask, I'd know it anywhere. We moved to stand opposite each other as the ladies aligned themselves to one side and the men on the other.

The refrain picked up again and I bowed as she curtseyed. The movements were centuries old. The steps were careful, controlled. With our hands raised, we circled each other. The dance was more about the motion of touching, not actually touching in itself. We danced away from each other, changing partners, then back again. The weaving in and out was all about the push and the pull.

The predator and the prey.

She actually laughed at one point when she almost missed a step. It wasn't her fault. The man who'd partnered with her didn't quite have it. Then she was back to me and I held out my hand and she hovered hers over it as we tap-stepped to a new position. Then again.

When the song drew to a close, I bowed to her again and she curtseyed. Then we all applauded, including those who'd only been watching from the sidelines.

"You dance very well..."

The music changed back to a waltz and when I extended my hand.

"I said one dance."

I waited.

She sighed. Then she put her hand in mine, as delicate and ephemeral as a leaf floating down to land against the surface of a pond. The tension barely a ripple. There was something intoxicating about being this close. She rested one hand on my shoulder as I settled my free hand against her waist. The layers of satin and boning kept the contact from being too real yet in the same instance, there was an intimacy to this.

"Are you planning to not say a word to me?" Lainey asked as I began to lead us around in the waltz. "Really, Adam?"

Surprise flickered through me and she shook her head.

"You didn't think I would recognize your eyes?"

"I didn't know if you would or not," I admitted. I could have continued to play dumb, but that would have been rude when she called me out. Still... "I also didn't think you would dance with me if you knew."

"Being wrong must be difficult for you," she said, an element of challenge in her tone. "I know how much you like being right."

I snorted, then swirled us away from the path that would take us back toward her escort. He stood at the edge of the

dance floor, hands folded and waiting. Only I didn't think he missed a single step of our dance.

"If I asked you to leave with me—" I peered down at her, studying her eyes under the gleam of the lights. It was harder to make them out. The shadows hid her from me. "Would you do it?"

"Leave the party?"

"Yes."

"I can't."

"You can do anything," I reminded her. "You are not bound to being here." Not like I was. There was a singular freedom in her not being a Reed. The bitter irony in that wasn't lost on me.

"Perhaps," she said with a slight shrug. "Perhaps not. Either way, I'm not leaving. I came with Milo."

Rather than say something puckish, I kept my mouth shut.

"I plan to leave with him."

That put a dent in my resistance. "Do you know how much I wish you weren't with him?"

"No," she said, the music making it harder to hear her. "Although I already know how little you think of him."

"It's not him," I told her. "It's you—and your—" I bit off the words. "You deserve more. You deserve better. He's never going to be a part of this world. I hate that he's even touched you, and every step he takes deeper here... the worse it's going to get."

"Are you worried about him?" Genuine curiosity inhabited that question.

"Considering who his father is? Yes." That cost me nothing to admit. "I'm worried about you too."

"Thank you," she said and I frowned, not that she could see it. "Thank you for being concerned."

On the opposite side of the dance floor, I guided her off and through the crowd. Holding fast to her hand, I tugged her with me and when I pressed the latch for one of the secret doors, it opened and I hauled her through before I closed it.

The abrupt cessation to the music was jarring and I stared down at her.

“Adam?” Her question and uncertainty hung in the air. “What are you doing?”

“I haven’t decided yet.” The alcove was off a hall in the house, causing it to be quiet and dark. The guests weren’t supposed to be here, but I knew every inch of this house.

“I have to go back...”

“Not yet.” I tightened my grip on her hand. “Give me this moment.”

“You asked for a dance, I said one...and you took more.”

“I know. You let me.”

“Now you’re asking for a moment.”

“Yes. Give me this moment,” I said, lifting a hand to her jaw. While my gloves kept me from touching her skin, I could imagine how soft it was. “Give this to me, and I’ll let you go back to him.”

“I’m not a possession for you to control.”

No, she absolutely wasn’t. “You are mine, however.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO



LAINY

“Excuse me?” I couldn’t feign ignorance at his choice of words, only that I had to have misheard him. Or maybe misunderstood. The softness of his gloved fingers on my face though...

“You heard me.” Adam’s voice dipped into dark territory. The cool quiet of the dimly illuminated hall wrapped an intimate bubble around us that I didn’t trust.

“Then let me correct your mistaken notion.” I pulled my chin from his grasp and backed off a step. “I belong to no one.”

I never would.

“Lainey,” he said my name on a sigh. “You always have to be so willful.”

“If you mean independent...”

“Disobedient,” he corrected.

Asshole. “Self-reliant.”

“Incorrigible.”

“Daring.”

For every scolding remark, I retaliated.

“You make me crazy.”

I snorted. “You were crazy long before me. Mercurial. Intemperate. Backstabber.”

He gave a little jerk like the last word landed a slap, then he caught my arm and hauled me forward. “I have never betrayed you.”

Shaking my head, I stared up at him. It was impossible to make out his eyes in the darkness. Impossible to *see* him. It was an allegory for our relationship—dancing in and around the shadows.

Secrets.

Lies.

“Get in the car, Lainey. Stay in the car. Get away from Emersyn. It would be best if you kept your distance. Stay away from her family.”

He sighed. “I wasn’t wrong about Sharpe.”

That was the damnedest thing. A sigh of my own escaped. I don’t even know if he understood just how bad it was for Em, but he had called how dangerous her uncle was. He’d *never* liked him. “No, you weren’t.”

“Did you just agree with me that I was right?” The barest hint of a smirk had me rolling my eyes.

I shook my head. “How did you know? When I went to celebrate Em’s birthday with her?” He and Ezra had just shown up, my own personal boogeymen or self-appointed bossy bodyguards. Seriously, the insufferable pair had barely changed in all these years except...

Right, better to not think about the changes with Ezra.

“I paid people at the school to keep an eye on you.” The blunt revelation sent a shock through me. “They told me you’d left with your mother’s permission—and drivers had been arranged along with transport.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because someone should know where you are.” The pure arrogance irritated me.

“You want to control me.” Him. Ezra. My mother. I would argue my grandfather did to a point, but he kept arming me. Preparing me. When we disagreed, we argued, but he didn’t try to undermine me.

“I want to protect you.” He gave me the barest of shakes before releasing me. The raw honesty stunned me. “Why is that so difficult for you to understand?”

“Being that you’re a raging asshole more often than not? You didn’t used to be—” That was the most difficult part.

Tears burned in my eyes, although I refused to shed them even as emotion tried to clog my throat. No, I wasn't going to cry over Adam. I'd done that so much over the years. Not anymore. "You used to be my friend, and then one day—you just cut me out. Never a kind word. Every single syllable you delivered was a cutting comment. You interfered, you followed me, you compared me to my mother. You wanted me cut out of everything. When you're not around to do it, Ezra is more than happy to do the same."

"How am I trying to control you now?" Adam asked, head cocked, and I wished we could strip away these masks. I knew it was him from how he moved to how he focused on me. Didn't mean I didn't want to see his face.

"Where are we?" I motioned to the alcove.

"Maybe I wanted to be alone with you and lately, that's difficult because you're always with that damn—" He broke off, editing himself.

"You're always gone. You never say where. You played dead for how long? I didn't even know you were *missing* until Ezra freaked out at me for disappearing to help find Emersyn." He'd been beside himself. "Then he didn't even tell me anything as he hauled me to his island for a month."

"He what?" Adam snapped.

"You heard me. Maybe you two should talk more instead of telling me I need to go with you or stop doing what I'm doing." The longer this went on the more upset I grew. Upset and disappointed. I thought I'd gotten past the hero worship I'd had for Adam when I was younger. He literally could do no wrong, and then he'd turned on me.

Here I was, being pathetic about it.

"Lainey—"

I sliced my hand through the air. "I'm done. You had your dance or two and your private moment. Now I need to get back to my date." I glanced to the alcove. Was there a latch I could press that would open it again?

Nothing obvious jumped out at me. Fine, I knew Waltham Corners well enough, I'd make my own way back. I pivoted away from him and gripped the skirt to make sure it didn't trip me as I walked. I barely made it two steps before he gripped my arm and hauled me backwards.

Aggravated, I turned and slammed my free elbow into his gut. He grunted but didn't let me go. Instead, he whirled me around and pushed me against the wall. "I'm not done yet—"

The rest of the sentence cut off as Karagiani just appeared out of the shadows. His plague doctor mask offered a terrible visage as he hauled Adam backward. Pretty Boy was there, stepping between me and Adam, even as Karagiani jerked one of Adam's arms up behind his back. The grunt of pain didn't sound manufactured.

"Stop," I ordered. I moved up next to Pretty Boy.

"He tried to kidnap you," Karagiani said, his tone flat with dislike and irritation. Right.

"It definitely looked like that," I said. "Although he wanted to talk to me in private. Granted, he could have handled it better..." The last I directed at Adam before looking to Karagiani again. "Let him go, please. He didn't hurt me."

Not this time. No, this time, the possessive bastard just infuriated me.

Pretty Boy glanced at me and while the shadows did make reading eyes a challenge in the isolated hall, I could almost taste the question in the air.

"I'm really alright," I murmured. "It's Adam."

Some of the tension drained from his posture and he nodded. "I agree with Mayhem. Let him go."

Karagiani released Adam, though he was hardly gentle about it. Adam pivoted to face him and I could almost see the fury shimmering in the air off of him. "You put your hands on me again, and you'll regret it."

The threat held real menace. While the plague doctor mask hid Karagiani's expression, his posture exhibited no response.

“Touch the principal again, and you won’t be around to make anyone regret anything.”

Adam straightened, shoulders back and his head up even as he fixed his jacket. I didn’t have to see his face to know he was already plotting something. Karagiani had not made friends.

“Maybe we should all return to the gala,” I suggested. Pretty Boy held out his hand and I took it without hesitation. “There is certainly more to see and do.”

“Of course,” Karagiani said, motioning for us to precede him. He planned to put himself between us and Adam. I could have protested, but the crackling tension and the stiffness in their postures threatened a powder keg of a response.

I glanced from right to left. It took me a moment to pin down where we were precisely. Left. That was the way we needed to go. Milo was silent as we walked and I only stole one look back to see Karagiani standing off with Adam for another few brief moments before he followed.

The stroke of Milo’s thumb against my wrist alerted me to the hammer of my pulse and I glanced up at him. “Sorry,” I murmured. “I didn’t expect Adam to pull the disappearing act.”

“I guessed,” Milo said. Though his jaw was tight, he managed to not grind the words. “We waited, but after five minutes and you didn’t reappear, we came hunting.”

“Thank you.” We followed the bend in the hall that led back toward the entrance to the ballroom.

“Huh.” The grunt held an element of surprise and I glanced up at him.

“What?”

“Nothing, Mayhem.” He lifted my hand and pressed a kiss to the gloved knuckles. “How much longer before we can escape?”

The race of my heart had finally begun to settle. We’d also arrived near the top of the stairs again. The gala itself was in

full swing. The hum of conversation occasionally featuring the tinkling of glassware as toasts were offered and received. Cutlery against plates offered another lower sound to mingle with the music that dominated the hall.

The acoustics allowed for the music to carry and it appeared Harper and Mother spared no expense this year. There was a live orchestra, including a harp, which I normally would find beautiful. However, this just appeared ostentatious. They were showing off.

Or maybe Mother was.

I sighed as I scanned the room.

“Mayhem?” Milo had moved closer and there was no mistaking the worry coating his voice.

“Unfortunately, we need another hour or so.” I’d already located Andrea. “I need to see who else is here.”

Some masks had been removed by people at tables who were eating and cared less about being noticed. Others were still hidden behind their bejeweled—and in some cases—bedeviled faces.

“Do you mind?” It was only fair to ask. After everything with Ezra and my sudden disappearance, I’d rather not presume.

“Don’t mind at all.” He offered his arm, and I threaded mine with his before we descended the stairs. A man at the base watched. His black mask with silver filaments around the edges betrayed nothing of his face at all. The lights overhead caught on his eyes, though, making them seem to glow.

I inclined my head politely, and he mimed a bow that was almost as mocking as it was gentle. A smart-ass dressed in a suit. Nice.

Still, Milo and I drifted through the crowd. When a waiter passed with fresh glasses of wine—no, it was champagne, he acquired two for us and I let the sounds wash over me. I listened to snippets of conversation, searching for voices I recognized. Making out individuals in the general cacophony

was difficult but moving behind people allowed me to pick up bits and pieces.

“... darling, I am so glad you could come,” Mother said, the hint of warbling a sign she’d been drinking. “Truly glad.”

“I wouldn’t miss it, Melissa.” The man’s voice struck a chord. I knew it. “I was rather surprised by the invitation.”

“We both were,” the woman with him said and her voice wasn’t as familiar. “I know how difficult things have been for the two of you.”

“Children are supposed to leave the nest,” Mother said with a too-bright laugh. “No one ever said parents had to approve.”

The pair chuckled with her. “True,” the man said, and all at once his voice registered. Markham. Senator Markham. He pocketed a lot of Grandfather’s campaign money. “That is the burden of being parents, we want only the best for our children. You know how it is.”

“Of course, I do.” Mother laughed again and I managed to not roll my eyes. She knew how to send us to boarding school. She was very good at that.

Still, I let Milo guide us onward. I located Harper chatting with some other businessmen, none of whom I recognized. His brother was another group over. Hamilton. I hadn’t heard Jason yet. I kind of wished Fletcher was here. The one time he’d attended when I’d been here, we sat at a table and made up stories about all the other people in attendance.

He came up with the craziest tales.

I sipped the champagne and nodded when Milo gestured to the other side of the ballroom. We’d discussed part of why I wanted to be here. I did love the costumes and the festivities, but Andrea was a more significant part of my planning. Business, however, had to come first.

Anonymity allowed some people to mingle who may want to keep their association with the Reeds quiet. There was always a deal to be had and there were times when the masks revealed more about people than they realized.

A familiar voice tickled my ears and Milo stiffened next to me. Julius King was here and telling some joke that made those around him laugh. I scanned the masks and the outfits. Nothing stood out, except King seemed to be holding court on the opposite side of the ballroom from Harper and Mother.

Purposeful choice?

I was still turning that over when a man in a red and gold Casanova mask and equally lush and flamboyant dress and cloak stepped into our path. I scanned the face, then the eyes. A sigh escaped me.

With a faint smile, I gave him the barest of nods in acknowledgement before moving around him. When he would have stepped into our path again, Milo shoulder-checked him and then spun us.

“I want to talk to her...” Ezra said and I closed my eyes. The demand was right there, and any hope I had of avoiding a conflict vanished.

“I’m sorry, Mayhem,” Pretty Boy murmured and I didn’t have to ask for what. He was already turning, as his fist collided with Ezra’s jaw and sent him sprawling. The crash of him hitting others and drinks falling echoed through the room.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE



EZRA

The last place I wanted to be was the fucking Masquerade at the Waltham Corners. I didn't want to deal with the Reeds or anyone else. Hell, I didn't even know if Adam would fucking be here. Still, my father called to remind me that he expected me to make an appearance. King had left his messages as well. I didn't bother to listen to his. I just deleted them.

Then, when he asked me if I'd gotten his messages, I could tell him honestly—no, I hadn't. Fucking asshole. Why was I the one still trapped working for him when Adam had cut his ties and kept them cut and Liam cut his—yes, I was aware the king had ordered Liam to kill Adam. They faked his death.

Dicks.

They faked his death and Adam dropped off the face of the Earth, leaving me behind to mop up the mess. Then Lainey vanished on me. My stomach dropped at the thought of her. Then and now. I reached forward for a drink, then swore as I sat back. The car wasn't the typical limo and didn't come as well stocked. I should have just driven myself, but I didn't want there to be an excuse with a valet or anyone else holding my car.

"We're almost there, sir," the driver told me and I scowled out the window. "Did you want me to wait?"

"Yes," I told him. "Keep the car warm, and don't disappear. I don't plan to stay long."

"Yes, sir."

I'd picked up the phone a half-dozen times this week to call Lainey and to call Adam. I'd put it down every single time. Adam was too preoccupied with his new project and all his new secrets to have time for me. I'd woken up in his apartment to find him gone, with a note pinned to my chest that just said he wasn't sure he would be back before dinner.

If then.

I could have waited, but he hadn't even said where he was going. So I sent myself home. The hangover was not the best way to deal with my father, but at least it gave me another reason for a terrible mood. Then that fucking dinner.

The long drive was dark, but as the car crept around the bend, Waltham Corners appeared in all of its blazing glory. Lights burned along the perimeter. There were old-style torches and footmen everywhere. Some guests were still arriving. Look at that, I was fashionably late after all.

Checking my outfit, I smoothed down the lapels then picked up the Casanova mask to slip on. The red and gold with the white checkered pattern that filled portions of the disguise offset against the other, just distracted the eye. It left almost nothing of my face revealed.

The driver pulled up to the steps and a footman opened the door. They were done up in full Venetian dress circa 17th century. Over the top didn't cover it, but I slid out without a word and eyed the others on the steps leading up to the house. Amongst the footmen were the occasional guest. A couple out for a walk. Another pair having cigarettes. One man who was clearly not there for partying but definitely appeared armed and like he was watching for someone else.

From the foppish to the dangerous, the party brought them all out. Sucking in a deep breath, I promised myself a few drinks after I put on an appearance. I just had to be seen by a select few. Then I could leave. Maybe I could find some thighs to bury myself in between, but it would most likely be a bottle.

Or five.

My tastes had grown very select of late, and it was driving me insane. At the top of the stairs, another pair of footmen stood at the doors. I pulled out my invitation and presented it to one. I didn't wait for him to check his list or say anything. If he wanted a word, he could follow me.

The ballroom was located on one side of the house, and guests were able to enter directly via a foyer that opened to the

ballroom itself. While there were stairs leading up from outside, the steps inside were deep wine-red carpet and six deep. The ballroom, with its gold filigree accents and paintings everywhere, had an Italian flavor to it. But the replicas were just that—replicas.

Excellent work, but not the real thing.

The throng inside was impressive. While not quite wall-to-wall people, there were literally hundreds. The costumes ranged from the truly period classics to the more formal black tie and simple gown, but the masks? They were out in full force. Even the waiters sported them, though theirs were far simpler.

Snaking two glasses of champagne from a waiter as I passed him, I drained the first one and set it on another waiter's tray while I sampled the next. I barely tasted the golden bubbly as I studied the room. There were three levels to any party. The outer ring, where the most basic of guests would linger. These were the newcomers, the new blood, the ones who didn't quite know where they fit in.

The second ring would filter in closer to the band and the dance floor. Younger members of the families could be found here. The year's debutantes and their escorts. Wives tended to linger here, when they didn't want to be involved in the more business-oriented inner ring. The middle ring was social.

The inner? That was where the money flowed and the select few controlled everything. In this case, it would be where Harper Reed and his brothers would be holding court. It would also be where my father would be working, glad-handing his way into what deals he could navigate while stealing others away.

Now that we knew the king's identity, I had no illusions about where he would be either. The son of a bitch had been in the thick of it for years; we'd just never known it was him. Julius King, a man who hovered on the fringes of our world, a part of everything and yet seemingly drifting in and out. Everyone knew him, yet no one could pin him.

It stung to realize how much of our lives he'd been a front-row witness to while pulling our strings. I'd never been fond of being a puppet. I hated it now. Unfortunately, he wasn't the only one jerking me around.

I sipped the champagne to give myself something to do more than anything else. It was late enough that people were eating, drinking, flirting, dancing, and there—right down toward the center of it all, they were immersed in their private court.

Draining the second flute, I debated hitting the bar and then dismissed it. I didn't want to be here. I set the now-empty glass on a table and headed into the heart of it all. I ignored the dancing, studying the various groups as I circled. I picked out Harper Reed in no time. He wouldn't bother with the more period dress. The black tie and cloak, as was his white mask, were suitably dramatic. It had a hint of royalty to it.

I supposed it would have been too prosaic if he went for the devil with horns. Moving in a slow circuit, I tracked the various voices I heard and let them wash over me. My father was talking with another man that I didn't recognize. I made a point of drifting into Father's line of sight. He nodded to me, and I checked off that box.

That was one who'd seen me. The next was to find King. Let him see me. Maybe one of the Reeds. Jason, if I had my pick. Hamilton was an asshole to his own family, much less anyone else. Harper was worse. It didn't matter. King proved a little more elusive. I had no idea what mask and outfit he would have chosen. Damn masquerades pretty much making everything doubly hard.

Frustrating as fuck.

I almost ran into Hamilton. He had a small circle of three men chatting with him. Without saying a word, I motioned an apology and diverted away from them. King's voice drifted through the crowd, but I didn't catch where the snippet of conversation had come from.

A slow swivel only revealed dozens of "could-be's" yet none of the was. Then I caught his low laugh and pivoted.

There he was, fully dressed up in a fine overcoat and lace with a feathered hat like some French king.

The mask, twisted black and white in distorted fashion, actually made my eyes ache, but it suited his rather jaded personality and plotting habits. I made it two steps closer when a whiff of perfume, the barest hint of something sweet but musky, pulled me like a siren summoned a sailor from the ships.

Kotyonok.

She was here.

Guilt assailed me. Then need.

Our last meeting had... well, it hadn't gone how I'd hoped. Now she was here. The very last place she should be. No sooner did the familiar scent tease me than it drifted away. I set out after it, searching the figures around me. A pair moved together—trailed by a third man. The plague doctor mask revealed nothing, but the man ahead of him—the bird mask.

Hardigan.

It had to be. Only Lainey would show him off so proudly. The guilt gave way to envy, while regret segued into anger. She was showing him off and walking on his arm. The minute she turned her head and I caught sight of the gold and black mask with the peacock etched into it, I knew it was her.

The man following was my man. Good. Karagiani should be here. If she was venturing into this nest of vipers, better she have someone to take the hits for her. I cut ahead of them and stepped into their path.

The cloak was a flourish that I hadn't appreciated until it flared. I locked eyes with Lainey, except all she did was give me the barest of nods before going to move around me. No, I needed to talk to her, so I moved to intercept again. Then Hardigan checked me with a shoulder to knock me back a step. It was almost a smooth move. One I could appreciate because it looked like he'd just run into me.

“I want to talk to her...” Begging? Maybe. Demanding? Definitely. I needed to talk to her. I needed her to talk to me.

The bodyguard I sent glanced at me, but he didn't interrupt. Good.

Neither said a word though, or at least nothing that I heard. Then Hardigan turned and a distant part of my brain acknowledged that he was swinging a second too late to avoid the hit. His fist collided with my jaw. The sharp clack of my teeth slamming together rocked through me and the taste of blood filled my mouth.

I staggered backwards, the blow knocking me off-balance, and I couldn't catch myself before I fell into someone behind me. A startled oath went up as glass shattered and I hit the floor. The slam of my ass against the marble was enough to send another jolt through me.

Hardigan loomed over me as I scrambled upward. A woman let out a startled scream as he swung at me again. This time, I managed to avoid the blow by twisting. Unfortunately, the waiter I hit wasn't so lucky. His tray spilled glass everywhere and I snagged it. This time, when Hardigan struck at me, I managed to block his fist briefly. Then I struck him with the tray. The hit barely seemed to jostle him.

His next fist went into my gut and all the air whooshed out of me. It neatly sent all of the champagne I'd drunk out of me too. The need to puke was right there. I coughed, as he struck another fist into my side. Then a third one...

"Stop," Lainey said, and she was there, getting between us. Fuck no, I wasn't hiding behind her. Only she wasn't touching me, she had a hold of Hardigan's hand. "Please."

The music had stopped and the hum of conversation throughout the whole event had ceased. Frankly, it was silent except for her.

"He's not worth it," she said and those words cut deep. It would have been easier if she'd gouged out my side with a spoon.

Hardigan was barely panting. And as I straightened slowly, fighting for a breath, I locked eyes with him.

“Excuse me, gentlemen,” Adam said as he stepped between us. “If the two of you would come with me.”

“Adam—”

“You are more than welcome to join us, Lainey,” he said. “Although I think this is better dealt with elsewhere.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” she said and it scored another hit.

“Actually,” Hardigan stated, “I do.”

She turned her gaze up to him and it didn’t seem to matter that we were all on display. Everyone was watching us. Goddammit.

“Adam’s right,” I grunted. “Let’s take this elsewhere.”

I wasn’t sure I could walk upright, seeing as my side burned from those blows. The coppery flavor on my tongue didn’t help the waves of nausea either.

Hardigan turned from us as Adam pivoted to face the crowd. “Sorry folks, that was a fine bit of entertainment for the evening, but I’m sure you’d rather drink and dance and enjoy the music...” And with that, the band picked up again and conversation began to trickle.

Then Adam caught my arm in a bruising grip.

“I’m coming,” I told him.

“I’m just making sure you are.”

Aggravation spiked through me. The last thing I needed was his help. Adam half-hauled me with him as he strode through the crowd that parted for us. I wanted to look back to see if Lainey was following with Hardigan.

I wanted to talk to her. Not to them.

I hoped she’d come. Especially if we were all leaving, I didn’t want her left behind.

Even if this was the last conversation I wanted to have with her.

Or them.

I grabbed another glass of champagne and downed it. The alcohol stung in my mouth, and the flavor was tainted by the blood. It really needed to be a whiskey or three.

Up the stairs, we passed all the speculative gazes and the gossiping mouths. Those tongues would be wagging soon enough. We didn't have long at all before everyone knew.

Everyone that wasn't already here.

I wasn't sure who I was more angry with—they or myself.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR



LAINY

Awareness of the audience observing us lingered even as we left the ballroom. Adam strode down the hall ahead of us and he kept Ezra with him while Milo and I followed. I wanted to argue against the necessity of this conversation, but I didn't. Despite everything that happened, Milo asked very little. He didn't ask for apologies or for me to swear to never again have sex with Ezra.

He only asked that I speak to him about it first.

If he wanted to talk to Ezra, then I wouldn't intervene. I didn't expect whatever came next to be comfortable, but I wasn't leaving him to face off with Adam and Ezra alone. Flashbacks to my first encounter with Pretty Boy danced through my head. Then, he'd been watching over Em and me before we had a single idea of who he was. Ezra and Adam had also picked a fight with him.

He'd held his own.

I had no doubt he could now. While the three had worked together, a begrudging truce of the enemy of my enemies could be my ally. I didn't want to risk the danger all three posed to each other.

Not now.

Karagiani moved with us. I caught sight of him in the mirrors lining the hall Adam had turned down. We weren't heading toward the family side of the house. He was taking us to the older wing. They used it more for guests and storage. After the renovations, I'd often ventured over here to hide when I'd had to visit Mother and she was here.

Mother's suite had been here too. A place she could stay while Adam's mother still lived and had rooms in the other part of the house. Privacy could be found here—privacy for all the things the Reeds wanted to keep in the shadows.

I supposed this was appropriate. Adam opened two pocket doors, sliding them apart before he nodded Ezra inside. It was a quiet, dark library smelling of lemon polish and old books. He waited for Milo and me to step in but held up a hand to Karagiani.

“You can wait out here.”

The bodyguard paused, his head tilted. The masks we were all still sporting hid his reaction. “Room security?”

“More than adequate,” Adam informed him in a chill tone. He really didn’t like to be questioned.

“I’m with her,” Milo said. “So is he and your employer. We won’t let anything happen.”

The silence stretched for a moment, then Karagiani nodded. “Other access points to the hall?”

“The main house can access from that way—though the entrance is locked.” Adam gestured further up the hall, then pointed to the way we’d come. “The ballroom from that direction. If you want to ensure our privacy, guard that direction.”

With that, he stepped inside and slid the doors shut with a distinctive click.

Some of the tension bled out of me as the bodyguard vanished to the other side of the doors. I wasn’t used to someone hovering over my every single breath. Even when we’d been holed up at the Vandals’ clubhouse, I’d had more freedom. I understood security, but this was a bit much.

Turning, I found Ezra at the bar. Of course, he already had it open and was pouring himself a huge measure of whiskey before he stripped off his mask and took a drink. The red on his jaw was going to darken to a bruise. There was blood on his lips that he dabbed away and after he tossed back the whole glass, he poured another.

“Anyone else want something?”

Adam ripped off his own mask as he strode across the room to take the glass away from Ezra. “Not now, and you’re

cut off.”

“Excuse the fuck out of you,” Ezra snarled as he glared at Adam. “You want me to deal with the sewer rat, then you get to deal with me having a drink or three.”

“You’ve had plenty,” Adam informed him, his tone flat. I sighed, and it sounded almost abnormally loud in the quiet of the room. It pulled both Adam and Ezra out of their glaring contest to face us. “Do you want a drink, Lainey? Milo?”

I reached up behind my head to tug at the silk ties holding my mask in place. With care, I caught it with my free hand and eased it free. I didn’t want it to pull my hair. Milo cut a glance down at me and I shrugged. “I wouldn’t mind cold water, but I don’t think alcohol is going to help this situation.”

Ezra snorted. “There’s ice since someone already stocked it, and probably water in the fridge.” Despite the sarcastic tone, he checked the small fridge beneath the bar and came up with a few small waters—ideal for watering down a drink. It would do.

Pretty Boy stripped away his mask and set it next to mine on the table before intercepting Ezra to take the water bottles. The tension crackled in the room as Ezra glared at him. For his part, Milo remained almost expressionless. The only resistance I read off of him was in his posture. He was holding himself back from punching him again.

The burn of someone watching me slid over my skin and I flicked a look to where Adam studied me. He glanced at them, then at me again. I could almost hear the tumble and click of the wheels turning in his head. It took effort to keep my expression neutral, but I fought for it and when Adam tilted his head, I raised my eyebrows.

If he wanted to ask, then he needed to use his words. I wasn’t going to pretend I knew what he wanted. Not anymore. I’d been wrong far too often.

“Ezra,” Adam said abruptly, breaking the standoff between the pair. With a grunt, Ezra surrendered the water bottles to Milo and then glanced past him to me. As with Adam before

him, I didn't try to pretend to understand, nor did I give in to my own curiosity.

Neutrality was the best I could do right now. The temperature between these three flamed toward volatile on a good day. If they forced me to choose sides, I glanced at Milo as he crossed the room. Then I would stay with the one I came with—I didn't owe Ezra or Adam any explanations. Nor did Milo. He didn't entirely give Adam or Ezra his back. If anything, he moved so he could keep them in his periphery.

“Thank you,” I murmured as much to him as to Ezra as Milo unscrewed the top of the water bottle. They were glass bottles, and the coolness penetrated the gloves. I debated tugging those off, but for now, I left them as I took a long drink. Like me, Milo took a drink and glanced toward Adam and Ezra again. The pair weren't looking at us anymore; they were having some kind of violent disagreement with their eyes.

It was kind of fascinating, I supposed, for anyone who had never seen it before. They didn't just communicate, they could war with the way they looked at each other. I didn't have the key to fully interpreting the language the pair exchanged, but I didn't mistake it for anything else.

Adam was furious with Ezra, and Ezra didn't seem to give a damn.

“You wanted to talk,” I said when the three of them continued in the silent standoff. If we weren't going to say anything, maybe we should return to the party. As it was, our absence would already set off the gossips. That would have to be fine. I'd rather they debate what they thought was happening than actually understand what it was.

Of course, I would prefer to understand the differences. Then maybe we could all get past them. For a brief time there, the four of us had been allies.

Was it too much to hope we could be again?

“Actually,” Adam said, as if taking the opportunity I offered as he unscrewed the cap on his own water bottle. “I

wanted to find out what set off these two to act like they were brawling in some dive bar in Braxton Harbor rather than a ballroom during the event of the season with all of our parents in attendance.” The last might have been a dig at Milo or a reminder about who we were here.

Andrea had been out there, too.

That reality settled into my bones and I closed my eyes for a moment. Dammit. Milo stroked his knuckles down my arm. A gentle reminder I wasn’t alone.

“She didn’t see,” Adam said and I blinked to find him watching me again. There was a frankness in his gaze. “She and her friends were dancing on the far side. There were too many in the way. She didn’t see.”

“She probably heard though...”

Adam shrugged. “She won’t care. She’s too obsessed with her friends. The idea that two of the adults got into a scuffle won’t matter. Those who recognized them won’t be talking to her.” The fact he dismissed it so quickly was far more soothing than it had any right to be. Then again, Adam protected Andrea as fiercely as I did. “I promise,” he said. “She didn’t notice.”

“Thank you.”

He nodded.

“I didn’t know she was here,” Ezra admitted, the first hints of an actual apology creeping into his tone. “I wasn’t really paying attention to anyone else except for—well, except for you.” He fixed his wild green eyes on me. “I still want to talk to you.”

“I’m here,” I pointed out and tilted my head to glance up at Milo. “We both are.”

“Shall we start with why you hit him?” Adam asked, his gaze also going to Milo.

“He knows.” The flat answer almost made me smile. It didn’t lack passion or intonation, yet it was also matter-of-fact.

Surprise jerked through Ezra; if I hadn't been facing his direction, I might have missed it.

Rather than respond, though, Ezra turned back to the bar like he planned to pour himself another drink.

"That's fantastic. Care to illuminate it for the rest of us?" Adam wasn't looking at Milo though, his attention was on me. I glanced at my water bottle because, honestly, no, I didn't want to tell him. I'd rather assume he already knew. However, his eyes narrowed as he looked from me to Milo to Ezra and then back, suggested perhaps he didn't.

"Not particularly," Milo said, adopting an almost too reasonable tone. "I think it's time Graham figured out he doesn't get to make all the decisions or do all the harm."

Ezra pivoted at the last. "I'm the one who sent her a bodyguard. I'm not doing any harm."

"Depends on your point of view," Milo countered as he moved toward them. "Cruelty comes in all forms—particularly when you abuse the goodwill and caring she has for you."

"When have I ever abused you?" Ezra demanded, shooting me a look. "When?" He took one stride toward me, but Milo cut him off.

"Let's start with your island," Milo said and, honestly, if I didn't know how angry he was, I don't know that I would have heard it in his voice. "Then head to her apartment a few days ago."

Shock stamped across Ezra's face as he frowned first at me then at Milo. What was he surprised by? That I'd told Milo? Or that he might have done something wrong? He wasn't so drunk he was lashing out at the moment. If anything, a genuine concern seemed reflected in his eyes.

"What did you do to Lainey?" Adam's voice sliced through the room with icy intensity and Ezra jerked his gaze from us to Adam. "You may not want to answer them. But you will answer me."

"I don't owe you shit," Ezra said abruptly. "Answers or otherwise. You want to act like you're in charge, except you

actually need to be around to *be* in charge.” Belligerence filled his expression. “You took off. It was on *me* to protect her, and I’ve damn well done it. Here. There. Even when she hooked up with him, I had her back.”

“Then *why* are they saying you hurt her?” The temperature in the room dipped further, and Adam took a step forward.

“He is saying I hurt her.” Ezra looked at me. “Lainey isn’t saying anything.”

“Don’t do this,” I told him. The gleam in his eye was pure trouble. Ezra lived to play with fire. Maybe he wasn’t drunk right now, nevertheless he was angry.

“Don’t do, what? Drag us all into a private room to discuss who is warming your bed and who wants to be?” The last he threw at Adam. “Maybe not all of us are as reticent about pursuing who and what we want. Maybe you should have gotten off your ass a long time ago—and then he wouldn’t be here. But no—no, you had to do it *your way*. Well, we’re done with your way. Your way is why we’re all in this goddamn mess and why we have to live with Hardigan warming her bed.”

“You really don’t know how to quit when you’re ahead,” Milo said. “Lainey isn’t a possession to be bartered and traded.”

“No,” Ezra said, glaring at Milo. “She’s also not your personal whore to claim for a street gang. She’s a fucking lady and should be treated as such.”

“I’m not the one who left her in tears or told her it was a mistake after getting what I wanted—”

My stomach bottomed out as Adam went deathly still and his expression erased. Even his eyes went blank. Ezra took a step toward Milo but Adam slammed a hand against his chest, stepping in between them.

“Did you touch her?” Four words, every single one shivering with the ice coating them.

Ezra lifted his chin and, for a moment, I thought he’d deny it. However the guilt on his face vanished beneath the fury.

There was a wildness in his eyes that made me desperately hope none of them had actual weapons on them. Their fists were bad enough.

The silence stretched to the breaking point when a single clearing of the throat shattered it. I jerked around, heart hammering as a familiar masked figure stepped out from behind a set of shelves. “Sorry to interrupt, but I couldn’t quite hear his answer and I’m dying to know.”

He looked from me to Milo then to Ezra and Adam.

“Did you touch her, Graham?” Bodhi asked. “And more importantly, Lainey B, did you let him? Or do I need to make him bleed?”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE



BODHI

The arrival of the drama train had been moderately entertaining, until Lainey B's name came up more than once. Her voice had been a welcome distraction from my own thoughts. Then, I tracked what the four were discussing.

Or more clearly, *who* two of them were discussing while she stood right there. Violence scented the air. Violence and blood. Graham had a blood stain on the corner of his mouth and the sign of a bruise. Gloves on everyone present made it hard to determine who'd delivered the beatdown.

If I had to guess though, it was PPG's brother. Hardigan stared at Graham like he was ready to gut him and he wouldn't break a sweat doing it. A vein throbbed in Reed's forehead. It was the only sign of life in his frozen mask. Devastation took many different forms. He'd kept a close grip on Lainey B's leash, always stepping into the breach to keep others away.

It would seem she'd slipped free when he hadn't been paying attention. Good for her. Still—I focused on Lainey B even as I kept Graham in my line of sight. Color flushed her cheeks and her eyes gleamed but lacked the uncomfortable shimmer of tears. Their absence gave me time to determine what was going on. If they brought her to tears, I would deal out the same.

“Phillip,” she said, relief threading through the syllables of my name. I preferred Bodhi, but I wouldn't chastise her for not using it. “I didn't know you were in here.”

“No one did,” I assured her. The shock that cracked through Reed's fury dissolved back into anger again. His world was definitely taking a battering tonight. It was a problem when you played games with other lives. Sometimes you found your life being bartered about or, worse, overlooked entirely as the antes kept going up. “Do I need to make him bleed?”

No one else had bothered to answer me, so I would go to the one who mattered at the moment. I liked Lainey B. I always had. She'd been a kind child. A gracious teen. Now, she'd grown into a beautiful woman. She was also PPG's best friend. How cool was that? Small world didn't usually apply, but then our rarefied world was so tiny, it was practically inbred.

"No," she said softly on a sigh. "You don't. He didn't take anything from me."

I nodded slowly, but the jerk of surprise out of Graham wasn't lost on me. Had he expected her to give a different answer? Maybe he and I should have this conversation alone and he could tell me what he thought happened.

Perception was always worth exploring.

"Why are you in here, Cavendish?" Reed asked abruptly.

"Talking to Lainey B," I informed him, then reached up to strip off my mask. It was hot inside it anyway. I raked a hand through my hair. "Just like you three."

"Bodhi," Hardigan said.

"Milo," I responded. If we were going to be on first names, I appreciated his use of my preferred one.

"Didn't expect to see you here," Milo continued.

"That's half the fun," I admitted. "No one ever expects the Spanish Inquisition."

Lainey laughed, the sound so abrupt that it fell from her unfiltered. Her smile, the rare true one, lightened Reed's frown and relaxed Graham's guilt. For Milo though, he dipped his gaze to her and there was a genuine affection he didn't bother to shield.

"The family was invited," Reed said. "You've never come to a Masquerade before."

"You sound certain," I told him with a shrug. "Isn't the point to be anonymous?"

"Yes," Lainey said. "Apparently, we're all terrible at it."

“No,” Milo said, as he cut a look toward Graham. “You were doing fine. There are some who don’t know how to behave.”

“Considering you threw the first punch,” Reed countered. “I think you might want to reconsider that accusation.”

With a sigh, Lainey turned toward the others. “Maybe we should table this discussion for another time.”

“Don’t stop on my account,” I offered. “I’m a vault. You don’t want someone to know, I can keep it to myself. I can also kill anyone else who knows too—if you need it that private.”

“Does it cause you physical harm to be serious?” Reed asked me with a shake of his head.

“Who said I wasn’t being serious?” I was curious. “If Lainey B wants privacy, then I have no problem making sure her secrets stay that way.”

“Phillip,” she said as Reed made a face and stalked away from all of us like he needed to pace it off. “Or do you prefer if I use Bodhi?”

I shrugged. “You can call me whatever you want, Lainey B.” I didn’t like Phillip, but it was a name. It wasn’t so bad when she said it.

“Lainey,” Graham said as he took a step forward. Both Milo and Reed snapped their gazes to him, but he ignored them in favor of her. They were between him and her. That was fine. She could handle him. If not, I was right here.

“Ezra,” she said with a sigh. “This isn’t the time or the place. You want to talk, we can make an appointment. But—”

“But what?” he interrupted. I debated taking a seat, but I settled for leaning against the back of a little loveseat. It gave me an easy view and access. “Why can’t we talk now?”

“Because she doesn’t have to do a damn thing she doesn’t want to do,” Milo informed him. Good man.

“It must really burn you to know she wanted me.” That declaration had me raising my brows, but I wasn’t the one who

moved.

“Wanted you?” Reed said. Three syllables delivered in the softest voice. Oh, look at that, the lights turned on. His head reared back as he finally put all the puzzle pieces together. I’d figured it out from the way Milo kept his rage narrow and focused. Graham had been playing in Lainey B’s honey pot, which was not okay in Milo’s world. But he wasn’t angry at her, so it wasn’t the fact they had sex.

No.

It was something *else* Graham had done. That was the part I wanted to know. She said he didn’t take anything. However you didn’t have to take in order to inflict damage.

I inflicted plenty over the years and got very little out of it.

“Did Ezra touch you?” Reed asked in a voice populated with so much menace, I got a thrill. He was on the verge of murder. It was right there in his tone. If not murder, then a great deal of bloody mayhem. I could go for some mayhem.

“Mayhem,” Milo said in a low voice. I doubt it carried, though it entertained me that he echoed my own thoughts. Then he held out a hand to her. Interesting. Lainey took his hand and let him pull her to him. He moved her completely behind him.

So he read the obvious and present threat in the room.

Surprisingly, Graham clearly got it too, though he didn’t take the warning to heart. Or maybe it only served as a red flag to a bull. He jerked the silk tie at his throat loose as he faced Reed. “Yes, I fucking touched her. I kissed her, I tasted her, and I made her come. What do you fucking care?”

Lainey B dropped her chin and shook her head. I only got her profile, so the wound wasn’t totally visible. But the strike Graham lobbed at Reed drew blood from more than one target.

“She’s a woman, or have you managed to delude yourself this whole time? She gave herself to Hardigan... and when I asked for it, she—”

Whatever he'd been about to say, Reed didn't let him finish. He struck Graham almost blindly. A raw sound tore out of him like a wounded animal. Glass shattered and even as Graham staggered, Reed struck him again.

And again.

It was almost entertaining.

"Stop," Lainey ordered, and I half-considered pouting. Maybe she could let them go a few more strikes. Reed had a really vicious right hook. He had Graham by the shirt and was switching to a full-on jab. The repeated blows were going to end up cracking someone's cheekbone.

Couldn't happen to a nicer asshole.

"Stop," Lainey said again, and this time she started forward.

Fuck.

Milo must have had the same thought, 'cause he waded into the pair. He caught Reed and drove him back away from Graham and took a couple of blows for his trouble. When he smashed his fist into Reed, it was a beautiful thing. It knocked him right on his ass. Graham staggered forward, but I straightened to intercept. Lainey didn't need blood on her dress.

"Kotyonok," Graham said, blood bubbling on his lips. He stumbled and I caught him before he dropped on her. "Let go of me." He tried to pull away, but I just gave him a not-so-gentle shove into a chair. The guy was about to land on his face.

"Stay the fuck down," Milo ordered behind me. "The point of talking was not to beat his face in. I can do that myself."

"She's *mine*." The words sliced through the room and Graham shoved out of the chair, his eyes going wild. Well, one of them. The other was rapidly swelling shut.

"Yours," he scoffed, bloody spittle flying. "Everything is yours. Until you don't care anymore. Your secrets. Your

possession. Your plans. Did it occur to you that maybe we don't want to be? That we have our own goddamn feelings?"

He wavered on his feet, and then he turned toward Lainey again.

"I didn't hurt you." Only he didn't sound so confident. "Right?"

"Does it matter?" I didn't think it was possible to chill the temperature in the room further, but Lainey B surprised me. "This is about possession, not feelings. This is about control—not caring."

Hurt echoed under her tone and I shifted to glance at her. Her eyes remained dry, but I didn't think that was more than a facade. A mask she wore in place of the one she'd shed when they came in.

"You want to hurt Adam because you got *your* feelings hurt. You're lashing out because I'm not taking your side." She shook her head. "I don't want to do this now. I doubt I've ever wanted to do *this*." To be fair, she wasn't wading into the fight. A few punches could be cathartic. "Pretty Boy, if you still have something to discuss with the pair of them, I'll be in the hall with Karagiani. I won't go back to the party without you."

With that, she collected her mask and her gaze landed on me.

"Bodhi."

"Lainey B. You want company or for me to keep them from killing each other?" I don't even know why I made the offer. I'd rather go with her and let them kill each other. Hell, we could sit and watch then go back to the party. As it was, though, she didn't seem especially happy so I wanted to take that into consideration.

"Lainey—" Her name fell from both Reed and Graham's lips as they started toward her. Well, they attempted. Milo shoved Reed back, and I knocked Graham back into his chair. He was definitely not capable of fighting back right now.

"Five minutes, Mayhem," Milo said. "If you don't mind."

“Of course.” She lifted her mask to herself and I shifted now.

“Allow me?” I offered and she offered me her back, head turned slightly with the mask in place.

“Thank you.”

I nodded and carefully tied the silk laces so the mask stayed in place. The silence in the room throbbed with everything they weren't saying and all the bruises they'd already inflicted.

“I'll watch Milo's back.” I kept the words low so they wouldn't carry and she turned to me briefly, the mask absolutely offering her the shield she needed, cause now her eyes gleamed.

“Thank you.” The whispered words were raw, but I only nodded and shadowed her to the door so I could scan the hall. The bodyguard she mentioned was about twenty feet away.

As soon as she was out, I closed the doors and pivoted to face the room. The other three shifted to face each other, though it seemed Reed was far more focused on Graham than on Milo. Probably smart. He wasn't supplanting Milo, no matter what lies he told himself.

“Did you fuck her?” Reed asked, the tone shifting to far harsher than when she'd been in the room.

“Do you really care if I did?” Graham retorted in a weary voice, the words half-distorted by the swelling around his mouth.

“Yes, I fucking care.” Reed's anger turned venomous.

“I care less about that than I do that you told her it was a mistake and made her feel like shit.” Milo didn't pull the verbal punch. When Graham would have opened his mouth, Milo sliced his hand through the air. “I don't care about your excuses or what bullshit you want to tell yourself. I care about her. Don't go near her again if you plan to treat her that way.”

“Or what?” Graham legitimately had a death wish.

I could make that happen for him.

“Don’t treat her like she’s there for your convenience.” Milo took three steps toward him. “The only reason you’re still breathing—she cares. Hurt her again, and I will end you.”

Direct. To the point.

“If he doesn’t,” I supplied, reminding all three of them I was there. “I will.” Milo shifted his gaze to me. Was I serious? I raised my brows. I didn’t make promises I wouldn’t keep.

He nodded once.

Good chat.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX



LAINY

“You’re in a mood,” Lombardi said as I tightened my lamé in place. While dressing the fencing pants, to the plastron and jacket, I’d kept my own counsel. I spared him a brief look as I finished zipping and securing the lamé. The bodywire needed to be secured in the back. I’d done his, so he moved over to attach mine.

Next came the face mask and mask wire. I ensured it was appropriately attached before securing the mask into place. You’d think after the masquerade, I’d be sick and tired of masks of all types. I was, but I needed this today. Lombardi had made time for me when I called him. I’d told Pretty Boy I needed the workout and I’d be back later in the day.

He’d only asked me to promise him I was all right before I left. I couldn’t lie to him. The night before had been savage. I’d expected it to be uncomfortable—yet the confrontation between Adam and Ezra with Milo there had been so much more brutal and bloody.

Having Phillip there to witness it had only added to the barbarity of it all. The kind of mistakes I’d been making? They were the kind that could ruin a person. The hum of conversation in the gala continued after we returned. Pretty Boy and I lingered for less than an hour before I threw in the towel. I never saw Ezra, Adam, or Bodhi return to the party.

Maybe that was a good thing.

So no, I wasn’t okay. Milo had only asked me what he could do and I told him the truth. He was doing it. He trusted me still. He wasn’t leaving. He was my ally, my friend, and my lover.

“I need this spar,” I said after I pulled on my gloves. Like me, Lombardi had pulled on his gear. I’d chosen sabres for the day. He faced me as he held up his weapon.

“Then remember the rules. You leave the emotion out of the fight.”

“I don’t know that I can today.”

“If you are not thinking, you will not be winning.” While he wasn’t wrong, I wasn’t altogether sure I needed to “win” the matches so much as I needed to burn off the anger and the hurt. The tangled weave of emotion weighed me down even as it left me sick to my stomach.

“Understood.” I pulled the sabre from its sheath and performed a series of test swings to check the balance. While I had my own weapons, one should always verify the weapons were as expected. If someone swapped them out, or if I’d made a mistake, better to find out before the match began.

“Best two of three then?” Bless him. The man had been my fencing teacher for a decade. From the first time Grandfather walked me into his studio and told him to train me, Lombardi had been both mentor and guide. He never went easy on me, but he always made sure I understood everything from the rules to the handling of the weapons themselves before he let me hold a real one.

His drills had, as much as anything, left me in pain the next day from their ferocity. But he made me stronger, more determined, and far more capable. I won at least as many matches as I lost now. Sometimes, I won more.

“Two of three,” I agreed and forced myself to take deeper breaths to control the wild thrum of my pulse. I saluted him with my sabre and he with his. The gym where we sparred was empty. I never practiced with others around. Lombardi had other students, but Grandfather never wanted me working with them in case they learned who I was.

What others didn’t know I could do, they couldn’t defend against. Since fencing was as much about the physicality and the boldness as it was about strategy, I also accepted his reasoning behind it. He didn’t want anyone to be able to use my own moves against me.

So, it was down to Lombardi to spar with me. Amusingly enough, as well as my trainer knew me and I knew him, we could still surprise each other, and I was thrilled when our matches made scoring even a single point an accomplishment.

He came for me swiftly. I raised my sabre and parried his first three blows. His rapid swings put me on the defensive. The parry, circle, parry, strike maneuver allowed me to turn the tables and then he was the one giving ground.

The frustration began to bleed away as he came for me again. The first strike sounded a soft buzzer. The bodywire helped us keep score, not that I really cared. The first to fifteen won. Then we'd dive into our second match.

Parry, riposte, strike, parry. The score began to tally up and the noise faded even as the complicated web of conflicting emotions settled. Our scores were neck and neck, but I didn't rush him, nor did he force me to make a choice. Instead, we kept the match to a warm-up. The strike of blade to blade echoed in the air.

Every ring of metal sliding on metal helped to sand away the wild need to cry that had burned inside me since the confrontation bared our secrets to Adam and, consequently, of his presence, Bodhi. While I wasn't worried about Bodhi's opinion changing, I had no such assurances with Adam.

Not after his declaration that I was his. Where had that even—

A smack against my handguard nearly knocked the blade from me, though I recovered—barely.

“Focus,” Lombardi ordered and I resumed the engagement. He struck fifteen points a moment before I would have taken the match. We saluted and backed away. “Walk it off,” he said. “Catch your breath. Then again.”

I chuckled. “That was my plan.”

“Better,” he complimented me. “You're thinking.”

I was thinking. The fact I'd been choking earlier hadn't been lost on me. As my racing pulse steadied, I took position and brought the sabre up. When he called for the go, I was the one who put him on his back foot. We went back and forth, trading the lead, but I scored higher during this round.

While I might be panting, I was also grinning behind my mask. There was an exhilaration that flooded me when I let go

and concentrated on the battle to be waged. As much as I needed to let go, and Lombardi recognized it, I'd also caught the faint limp he sported as we engaged.

He wasn't at his best. I could slow my own pace to make the match more equal, or I could keep my eyes on the prize. His strategy could very well be to feign an injury to lull me into complacency. Ruthless might not be sportsmanlike, but in life, the spoils went to the victor—not to the fairest of players.

I took the second match, barely, because he had been feigning. Still, it was worth it. When I would have paused, to remove my gloves, Lombardi shook his head.

“You're well and truly warmed. I have advanced students coming in to drill. You could use some sharpening.”

I was already more than a little sweaty and tired. And while the idea of a new opponent I hadn't faced before was intriguing, I didn't care for being surprised. “You never allow anyone to join my training times.”

“Correct,” Lombardi told me as he removed his own mask. His face was flushed and sweaty, his hair plastered to his forehead. “You're tired now, which means you'll be more likely to make mistakes. You need a challenge. Mentally and physically. To protect your anonymity, say nothing.”

He gave it a pause as though allowing me the time to decline the offer. “How long have you been planning this?”

“Since the last time you messaged me in the middle of the night to tell me you needed a real fight.”

I rolled my eyes. I really didn't like being predictable.

“Then once,” I told him. “But if I don't care for them, we won't be doing this again.”

“Agreed.”

With that, he left me to walk it off and keep my muscles warm while I cooled down. Whomever he'd summoned must have been waiting for the message, because they stepped into the training room not ten minutes later, fully geared up.

So, we would both be anonymous.

Height and build suggested a male opponent.

Since Lombardi had been my only sparring partner, having someone larger and stronger than me wasn't anything new. Lombardi had accompanied them out and like me, the new opponent said nothing.

“Standard rules, avoid mask strikes.” That was not our standard rule, but I got it. “Keep all body targets to the torso. Maintain your distance. Two blade strikes require a back step.”

More new rules. I pursed my lips. Because to object, I'd have to say something. It was a cagey choice, but I could hardly fault him. He might be rethinking his decision, but I was ready for the freshness of the fight.

“After the first match, you may choose to do a second and potentially a third. Either of you can call it by lowering your sword. Understood?”

I saluted him and I wasn't alone.

“Well done,” he complimented us both. “Take position.”

I shifted my focus to my new opponent, and what buzzing thoughts still managed to haunt me silenced utterly. I didn't know this swordsman. I didn't know his tells or his style. I could play it two ways. The most obvious was to be safe and force him to come to me, while disguising my own abilities.

The second was far more fun. I went straight to engagement. To my delight, they didn't retreat but engaged swiftly. Two strikes of our blades flowing off each other as we backed off. Then again. The parry, riposte, parry demonstrated his training was at least as involved as my own. More, he'd trained with Lombardi because I recognized a couple of moves. Including the slide and slap against my hand guard that threatened to disarm me.

Laughter surged through me as I danced backwards. The motion required absolute focus, so I didn't trip while I kept his sword engaged, and then I was under his guard. I managed two points for the one I sacrificed to him. Then he retreated, forcing me to pursue. If the battle was going to be one of

endurance, he might very well win because I was already tired before we started.

As it was, we actually scored to fifteen at exactly the same moment and Lombardi applauded as we straightened to salute each other. The interior of my mask was humid and the sweat made me sticky. The headband kept it out of my eyes, but barely.

When my opponent lifted his blade to hold the salute, I recognized it for what it was. A challenge.

He wanted round two.

My mind wasn't a whirlpool of madness anymore. If anything, my thoughts came into sharp, almost painful focus. This was better than I could have hoped for as a result.

Yes, I would go one more round.

I met his salute with one of my own. Lombardi called for us to begin and everything faded away. The night before. The day. Lombardi. The room around us. Everything drifted off and we were swiftly attacking and retreating. I wanted to laugh because in some ways this was *fun* and in others, it was fulfilling.

I enjoyed it so much that I almost didn't mind losing, seeing as he scored his fifteenth point on me fair and square. Lombardi actually swore.

"I'll be damned, both of you," he said, mopping at his flushed face with a handkerchief. "I told you to obey the rules and to avoid the facial strikes."

"We did," a voice I would know anywhere said. "She's a fine opponent, Lombardi, and you were right. This is exactly what I needed."

I stared at my opponent as he stripped off his gloves and mask. Sweat slicked down his hair as he stared at me.

Adam.

How the *fuck* was he Adam?

"I need to meet this talented creature."

“Reed,” Lombardi warned. “I told you the rules, specifically.”

“Rules are meant to be broken,” Adam said. The angry splotch of darkness on his cheekbone and down his jaw was a vicious testament to the battle we’d waged the night before. “Don’t you agree?” The last he said to me and I shook my head.

No, I didn’t want to introduce myself.

Not when I’d just found a sense of peace.

I shook my head, backed up a step, and then pivoted to leave the training room. I barely made it a step.

“Dammit, Lainey,” Adam said with a sigh. “I know it’s you.”

If not for the slack-jawed look on Lombardi’s face, I might have been more irritated with the man. Of course, Adam knew it was me and Lombardi hadn’t known.

I sheathed my sabre, then stripped off my gloves before I reached up to remove the mask. “Lombardi,” I said. “Would you give us a moment?”

The old man sighed. “I didn’t know he—”

“It’s fine,” I told him. “Just let us talk—*privately*.”

“You have my word.” Then he was gone, the door leaving our training room closing with a distinct thud. It echoed through the room much like our blades had.

Alone, I stared at Adam and lifted my chin. “You wanted to speak to me.”

Leaving the gloves, helmet, and mask behind, he crossed to where I stood. My hands were full, but I didn’t retreat. This wasn’t a spar.

I really didn’t know what I expected him to say. The fact he said nothing at all, though, left me on my back foot.

“You are a magnificent fighter,” Adam said abruptly, then he clasped my face in his hands and his lips were on mine.

The ferociousness of the kiss robbed me of breath and left me staggered. He swept his tongue against my mouth and I opened to him. How long had I once dreamed of being kissed like this? Kissed by Adam? And suddenly, he was there, fulfilling every young teenage fantasy I'd ever had. And I froze.

No sooner did the kiss begin than it ended. He stared at me, his breath coming in the same rapid pants as mine.

“Hardigan may be in your bed. Ezra might have charmed his way there.” The warning at the end of the last sentence had my heart hammering again. “Make no mistake, though, you’re *mine*. You have been for longer than you know, and I will make my own place with you.”

I couldn't quite wrap my mind around that.

“Consider yourself warned and get used to the idea,” he whispered, stroking his thumb over my lower lip. “And if you ever need to spar, I’m at your disposal.” Another kiss, and then he released me to withdraw and gather his things. He strode out without another word.

No, that wasn't what I expected at all.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN



MILO

Mayhem wasn't herself. The confrontation with Ezra and Adam had bothered her far more than she wanted to admit. The fact it had upset her enough that she needed to walk out left me with my own guilt to chew on. Those two absolutely needed a firm beating. You didn't treat a woman the way they were treating her. Adam, with his possessive declarations, and Ezra?

That spoiled overbearing piece of shit needed his ass handed to him. I'd actually been fine with Adam beating his face in until Mayhem looked like she planned to get involved. The fact she chose to leave, though, told me more than anything else how much she'd been wounded.

While she wasn't lying about it, she did seem to try to downplay it. Then she admitted she wasn't okay and needed to work that out. The worst battles were the ones I wasn't even allowed to fight. As much as I wanted to wage this fight for her, Mayhem would not allow it. I almost wished she would ask me to get her out of here for a while.

Then I'd remember Jeff Hardigan, aka Julius King, still needed dealing with. Which meant I couldn't leave. Not without risking his reaching out to Ivy. So far, he'd kept his word and his distance. The guys would let me know if that changed. He'd also let Liam go, likely *for* Ivy. The question was, what did he want from her in exchange?

The only answer we'd all landed on was her money. She'd become the sole heir to all of the Sharpe financial fortunes. Liam's lawyers had buttoned up her wealth and secured it, but greed was a powerful motivator. You couldn't tell me that what Jeff—Julius, whatever the hell he wanted to call himself, had been up to didn't involve lining his pockets or amassing power.

Honestly, his recruitment of younger teens into his business and using them to dole out punishments and assassinations when they weren't obtaining business secrets

and more left a bad taste in my mouth. It was how he'd used Mickey back in the day. While he didn't seem to be in the drug trade any longer, I refused to dismiss it as a possibility. It wasn't what we saw him doing, it was what he was able to do through intermediaries.

There was a *lot* he could do. Ezra still worked for him. That element alone made me want him away from Mayhem. What had Liam said, that Mayhem might have been the leverage King used to keep them obedient. Much as he attempted to leverage Liam's twin brother.

Was she still being used as leverage? Amid the disagreement the night of the gala, I'd overlooked one key detail we still didn't have an answer for. Specifically, why had Ezra sent the bodyguard? Had my father threatened her again?

After she left, Ezra wasn't really talking more than enough to try and bait one of us into removing his head. I shouldn't have let him get to me. As it was, I didn't have many other options than either approaching him directly or switching gears and going straight to the source.

That had too many *other* risks. Like tipping our hand if he had threatened her. So far, Karagiani had proven he could blend in and vanish when she had events, but didn't slow down to protect her. He'd been right after her when Adam hauled her out of the party. When she left the apartment, with or without me, he went with her. The only place she steadfastly refused to allow him access was her apartment.

I couldn't disagree with her on that. This was where she lived and so far, the only other person I'd ever seen inside was Marlene. I presumed there was cleaning staff, but I doubted they were allowed in without Marlene's supervision.

All of these were why I'd reached out to Freddie and got Bodhi's number. The man was an enigma. Yet, he'd come through for Ivy and Freddie while they were in Pinetree. He'd reappeared later with information to help find Ivy's adopted mother. Then again, he'd helped when we'd gone after Bradley Sharpe. He'd gotten injured during that hunt, but it hadn't slowed him down.

I hadn't actually expected him to return my call so quickly, but he had and we arranged to meet at a deli a few blocks away from Mayhem's apartment. I walked, preferring to stretch my legs and get a feel for the area. For all that I'd been in the city for nearly three months, I didn't know it like I did Braxton Harbor. This city was a stranger. That was bad for war.

No bones about it; we were here to wage a war. I needed to be able to navigate my way around. The only way to learn was to do it. With that in mind, I paid attention to my surroundings as I walked. I tracked the people that lived on these blocks. There were apartment buildings like Mayhem's, but there were also everything from clothing to coffee shops and corner groceries.

It reminded me of Braxton Harbor in some ways, but it was almost brittle in how clean it was here compared to there. Yet, at the same time, there was that element of the familiar threat to be found on the streets—a more honest one. I got eyed by a couple of punks, but when I met them stare for stare, they let it go.

Predator to predator, they decided I wasn't worth the effort. While I appreciated the respect, I wouldn't mind a real fight at the moment. Maybe that was why Liam had enjoyed his fights so much. This world of theirs was suffocating in its intensity. How I ever thought this would be safer for Ivy, I couldn't imagine. Then again, she and Mayhem were two of the toughest women I'd ever met.

The walk didn't take as long as I might have liked, but it had helped to relax me. The deli's interior was every bit like the ones in Braxton Harbor. Sturdy tables, colorful chairs, and a staff that knew their product. I placed my order and then found a table near the back with good eye lines and a wall I could put behind me.

Bodhi didn't keep me waiting long. He drifted in about ten minutes after I did and placed his own order as my food was being delivered. The whole time he was at the register, he clocked the room and I nodded when he shifted his gaze to mine. He answered with a lift of his chin.

Five minutes later, he leaned back in the chair that was also next to a wall. It essentially had us sitting in a v formation, but I didn't care and neither did he, apparently. The sandwich was damn good. I took my time to eat while he waited for his food. He didn't seem to be in a particular hurry either.

Only after he'd finished did he take a long drink from the Coke bottle he'd picked from one of the fridges and then focus on me. "I'm gathering this isn't a social call."

I snorted lightly. "I'm not the type to host social occasions."

"You didn't seem to be doing too badly at the gala." He shrugged. "Word has it that you've been making quite a few appearances with Lainey B."

"Where she goes, so do I." Particularly when she was intent on helping me with my battles. I would not leave her to face hers on her own.

"Good." Leaning back, he scanned the room. We were pretty much alone back here. "What do you want?"

"You don't like Ezra." It wasn't a question. Bodhi didn't answer one way or the other, he just stared at me. That was fine. The lack of answer was, in its own way, an answer. "He sent a bodyguard to shadow Mayhem everywhere. She doesn't really like it, but she's tolerating it. Apparently, he's done it before."

"You looking to get rid of him?" His voice held that element of skepticism, like I was more than capable of dealing with the man if he was a problem. Bodhi wasn't wrong.

"Not currently. What I want to know is why he decided she needs this kind of close watch again. The last time, it had to do with Sharpe." Because no one wanted her used as a target to lure out Ivy. Or worse, to be punished in Ivy's place. The thought made my blood run cold even now. "I meant to ask him when we were in the library, but I let myself get distracted."

“Does Lainey B know?” Translation: did she know and seem to be keeping it from me?

I shook my head. “Not to my knowledge. She didn’t understand why Karagiani was back, but he was persistent and useful on many levels. At the same time...”

“If there’s a threat, it’s better to get rid of it than just sit around waiting for it to come for her.”

Definitely could see why Freddie and Bodhi got along. The guy understood the basics without needing me to draw a map. “Pretty much my thought. At this point, however, I doubt Ezra would tell me anything. He’d rather I just disappear.” Something he and Adam had in common. They were doomed to disappointment, however.

“What do you want me to do?” Bodhi asked.

“You have your own contacts and connections. I wanted to know if you’d heard anything or put out feelers to see if you could hear anything...”

“I could beat it out of Graham.” He mulled that idea over. “Wouldn’t be hard. The guy is a terrible fighter.”

I didn’t laugh, but one corner of my mouth kicked up. He’d said something similar the last time he’d delivered a beating.

“As much as I don’t like him—or trust him—I think he does want Mayhem safe. I’d rather he involved the rest of us if he knows something, but he clearly doesn’t trust any of us.”

“Not even Reed. That’s odd.” He tapped his chin. “I can find out. I’ll see what he knows. They don’t like me, but I don’t really care. If there’s a threat against Lainey B, I can deal with it. At least as long as I’m here...”

“Planning to leave?” It was none of my business, but I was also curious.

“Maybe.” Not a direct answer. “You?”

“Planning to leave?” I shook my head. “No.”

“Good. She likes you.”

I studied the other man. “You got that from the few minutes you were in the library?”

“No, from the fact she moved you into her apartment *and* introduced you to her grandfather.” The deadpan response did make me laugh.

“You have a point.”

“I know.” He shifted in his seat and then pulled out his wallet. From it, he slid out a card and placed it on the table. “That’s my answering service. If I don’t answer my cell phone, leave a message for me there. I check it wherever I am.”

I eyed the card.

“And don’t give the number to anyone else.”

I wanted to give him shit, but I refrained. “Thank you.”

“I haven’t done anything yet,” he said as he rose and I stood with him. While I didn’t fully understand the man, I got the directness. “Look after Lainey B.”

“I will.”

Without another word, the man pivoted and strode out of the deli. No hesitation marked his steps. I scratched at my jaw and then glanced down at the card again. I memorized the information on it. Not that there was much, then I shredded it before shoving it into the water glass remnants.

My phone vibrated as I left the deli and I pulled it out of my pocket. The message on the screen made me snort.

Adam Reed wanted to see me.

I guess I wasn’t the only one making sure I knew what everyone else was doing. That was fine. He could answer a few questions for me too.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-EIGHT



LAINY

“Smile before your face freezes like that,” Tally scolded me as she looped her arm through mine. I spared her a look. It wasn’t like we were being photographed. Instead, we were here for a charity fashion show and I’d never been so bored in my life. I wanted to be working on the corporate breakdown of the shell companies hiding King’s assets. That seemed a better use of my time.

Tally Marlowe squeezed me gently and I dredged up a smile for her. “Not sure any of these are to my taste.” It was the right thing to say because her eyes practically danced with amusement.

“I don’t think they are anyone’s taste,” she murmured in a voice too low to carry. “They really are hoping they can break the mold and set a new trend.” We shared a grimace that turned my forced smile real.

We’d been best friends since our very first day at Abberlay Hall. She’d made fast friends with me, the Benedict bastard, and nothing her family or anyone else said could change her mind. Damn, they had all tried. Only Tally and Emersyn had remained faithful friends, and poor Emersyn, her family had all but isolated her even when she was away at school.

For Tally, I could smile even if I found myself wishing Em was with us right now. In some ways, Tally had been my public best friend and Emersyn my secret one. Thankfully, neither begrudged me the other. Nor did I have to keep my relationship with Em a secret anymore.

Though, to be honest, if Em were here, she’d be enabling my desire to escape. Neither of us cared for these events. Her reasons held far more depth than my own. I was just *bored*.

“Better,” Tally said, claiming a glass of champagne from one of the dozens of trays being carried through the room. She handed one to me then took another for herself. The runway was one of three set up in the event room. The designers were

mostly new, with a few bigger names to garner interest and guarantee attendance.

Social situation, fine clothing, and a chance to get an early glimpse of the spring and summer collections? It was the perfect type of fundraiser to cater to the kind of clientele who would spend a lot of money to attend and spend more once inside.

“You are in a mood,” she commented before sipping the champagne. I gave myself a solid internal shake. Tally was hardly the first person to point it out. I needed to do better about covering my irritation.

“Just—nothing here interests me.” Which was absolutely true and if I leaned a little too hard on the bored socialite, well, it wouldn’t be the first time.

“I don’t know,” Tally argued, draping an arm around my shoulders. “I think that Wintergreen fellow might have more than a few nice ideas.” She used the hand holding her champagne glass to motion toward the runway that was simply overflowing in whites, off-whites, creams, and the palest of beige outfits. Granted, they were all light, airy, and offered more than a bit of lace.

Leaning into her, I tilted my head. “They look like negligees and old-world pajamas.” The lacy camisoles were delicate and pretty, but did he think those would really catch on?

“Exactly,” Tally said with a hint of laughter. “Think about going to one of the frumpier luncheons dressed in the cami with a pair of slacks or, even better—that skirt.”

I snorted. It was probably amongst the more inelegant of my reactions, but she giggled.

“Also, while we’re conspiring,” she continued in a much more hushed voice. “Why do you have the dishy bodyguard back? And are you going to take my advice and see if he has a little extra or if the only steel he carries is that gun?”

With a roll of my eyes, I leaned away to give her a look. “You’re incorrigible.”

“Absolutely, and he looks like the dark and dirty type, all quiet and fierce in public, but will downright rail you in the bedroom.”

I wasn't going to respond to that.

“Or the living room.” Unruffled, she continued, “Oh, in the back of a car or the front. How about against the hood?”

Real humor threaded through me. It was hard to stay irritated with Tally, and she damn well knew it. “That's more your speed than mine.”

“If that Hardigan fellow isn't really giving it to you hard and swift, you need to dump him. No one should look that fierce and not be able to pay up in bed.”

I almost choked on my champagne. “We're done discussing this.”

“You say potato,” she sing-songed, even though her smile was more affectionate. We moved through the room, navigating the crowds while drinking, chatting, and dissecting the various collections. The tinkling of glasses, laughter, and, beneath it all, modern music to provide a soundtrack for the event.

On the surface, it was almost a Bacchanalian revel. Yet it was merely a veneer for the circle of hell where they all sharpened their knives, plotted takeovers, affairs, and how they could beg, borrow, or steal what they wanted. Hence, why I needed to be here. The best deals were often cut where no one expected them to even be served.

“I say you're crazy, but luckily for you I love crazy.” Which was the absolute truth. Tally reminded me that life wasn't all business and darkness. She lived every day with the kind of impulsive zest I wish I could embrace. Not once had she ever let me down. Right now, I could try to pull apart the insanity of Ezra and Adam's mercurial, shifting moods and Adam's sudden declaration and she'd listen.

As much as I wanted to discuss it, I needed to figure out my own thoughts where they were concerned *first*. Karagiani continued to move in our wake. He'd dressed for the event,

blending in but didn't chat, drink, eat, or smile. So, he was noticeable. At least, in as much as he attracted curious glances.

"I'm going to Paris in a week," Tally said as we made our way to the far side of the Wintergreen stage. Up close, the clothes weren't much better, but they were definitely airy and light. I supposed that was something. The hum of continued conversations ebbed and flowed around us. "Come with me," she invited, linking her fingers with mine. "Seriously, just throw some stuff in an overnight bag. We'll pretend it's a slumber party and shop our way through Paris fashion. Springtime in Paris gets all the credit, but autumn's really pretty too."

I shook my head. If I were observing the rules of polite society, I would have laughed or at the very least, chuckled. We didn't need rules. And I couldn't admit the very real reason I couldn't go. Some tales didn't need to be shared and I'd prefer to keep Tally out of the line of fire. As one of my best friends, her safety meant far more to me than anything. I hadn't been able to protect Emersyn.

"I thought you had been planning to take Jameson? Rogerson? Dickerson..." I ticked off the names of the last three boyfriends who'd actually made it in her sphere long enough to earn the title of boyfriend. Not that any of them lasted much longer than that.

"Ugh, I'm done with boys. I'm marrying you and we're going to run away from our families after they disown us and we can live a Bohemian lifestyle on the coast of Malta with the untouchable trusts left by our grandparents."

Okay. Now I laughed. The pleased smirk on Tally's face promised that was exactly her intention. From her flawless cosmetics to her chocolate eyes and deep, dark brown hair—that she had streaked with blond so it looked as dramatic as she did—, she was the epitome of grace and elegance. Tally's grandmother came from Morocco, or so she used to tease us when we were kids, and she earned all of her best features from the most wonderful person in her family.

Having met her Nonny, I had only one quibble with that assessment. She was the second-best person after Tally herself.

“That’s a truly magnificent offer,” I promised her. “But alas—”

“So there *is* something between you and Milo?” The last she kept in a quiet voice, as though determined to not let it carry. The hopeful excitement in her eyes was genuine and filled me with warmth.

“Yes,” I admitted, pressing a finger to my lips. “Definitely something. And I’m not ready to label it or declare it beyond the fact that he is living with me and I trust him.”

“That’s huge,” Tally said.

“I know.” I did know. Grandfather even seemed to like him. That was even bigger. “That’s all I’m willing to comment on now.”

“Accepted,” Tally said. “So, no Paris?”

I grinned. “No Paris.”

She mock sighed. “I shall have to make the most of the city of lights without you.”

“I’m positive you can manage.”

Her laughter dried up almost too swiftly. “Maternal alert.”

“Run while you can.”

“I love you,” she reminded me. “But your mother...”

“Agreed.” I clasped her hand and then kissed her cheek as she kissed mine. “Talk soon.”

Tally beat a hasty retreat. I knew why she didn’t want to be around Melissa. It was almost for the same reason I’d rather avoid her. She and Tally’s mother were barely civil to her, and Melissa took great joy in trying to rake Tally over the coals for whatever perceived disagreement the two women were involved in.

“Elaine,” Melissa Benedict Reed enunciated my name like it was a foreign language course.

Who knew, maybe it was.

I pivoted to face her, polite smile firmly in place. “Melissa.”

Her eyes narrowed. She preferred that I refer to her as Mother. I preferred to be called Lainey. If she wanted to start with disrespect, I was more than content to follow suit.

“I thought I saw you speaking to Tally,” she said, not commenting on the name as she moved to stand next to me. Karagiani had drifted closer with Tally’s absence and I didn’t warn him away.

Facing the runway, I kept my mother in my periphery as I made a show of watching the parade of outfits.

“I’m impressed by the attendance,” I said rather than directly addressing her statement. “They have an excellent turnout.”

“It’s for Montague. He promised to unveil three new classics that are being added to his vaulted collection.” The designer thought a great deal of himself. Each year, he selected one or two designs from earlier years to be featured as a vaulted design. It would be available for one more season and then never again.

I had to wonder if the people who ate it up understood he probably got the idea from Disney. Not that I cared to ask, it just amused me.

“I had heard he was the second designer and would be closing out the afternoon.” Not that it mattered to me. I didn’t much like his designs. They were all about *dramatic* and over the top. My mother, on the other hand, *loved* him.

“You should come to dinner,” she informed me. “Andrea will be going back to school.”

The fall break was ending. “I’ll check my schedule.”

“Mrs. Reed,” a woman said and Melissa turned away. “It’s so good to see you.”

“Collette,” my mother greeted her and then they moved away. I blew out a breath. Relief that she wasn’t planning to

drag me into that conversation threaded through me.

I stole a look at my watch. The diamond band helped to disguise it as a bracelet, but as long as it felt like I'd been here, it hadn't been long enough.

“*Kotyonok.*”

The soft exhalation of the endearment invaded every one of my senses, creeping right past the barriers and defenses I'd erected to keep Melissa away. I wanted to close my eyes, but I didn't dare. Not reacting took every ounce of concentration and control. There were far too many witnesses here. Too many who had also been at the gala would have noticed that scene.

If we made another?

No, unacceptable.

“Ezra,” I said, summoning a smile. Shock hit me at the condition of his face. However, even a cursory glance showed me far more bruises than I would have expected. “How lovely to see you.”

His tousled hair looked more finger combed than anything else and the hint of stubble on his cheeks suggested he'd rolled right out of bed to come to the event. Then again, there was still bruising on his cheek and chin. The stubble probably helped to cover for it. His right eye was open, though it too was deeply bruised that the low lighting actually made it worse.

“What happened?” The question slipped out before I could stop it. Even as I asked, the memory of Adam punching him repeatedly surfaced and I grimaced. *Get it together Lainey*, I ordered myself. Get it together.

Lifting my chin, I focused on him again. He wore a button-down shirt and light jacket with no tie. The shirt was open at the collar and he looked more ready for a day in the Hamptons than here at a fashion show.

He searched my face, his expression not remotely banal or openly polite. If anything, intensity radiated off of him in waves. “We need to talk—just the two of us.”

“I think we’ve said enough lately.” Karagiani was right there, but he’d shifted so he had his back partially to us. While we were near a runway, we were also mostly alone. Or at least on our own island in the crowd.

“Please.”

One word. It threatened my resolve. “Ezra,” I said, meeting his gaze. “The last time you said that…”

“I know, we had sex and then I left.”

That was one way to put it.

“This—this isn’t about sex this time.”

I raised my eyebrows. “No?”

“No, I genuinely want to talk to you. I’d also prefer to do it without your sewer rat or Adam or that fucking Cavendish hovering over us.”

I shook my head. “You shouldn’t call them names.” Though granted, the only one he was derogatory about had been Pretty Boy. His tone, where Adam and Bodhi were concerned, wasn’t remotely friendly.

That—especially about Adam—bothered me.

“I just want to talk to you alone.”

“Promise to keep your hands to yourself?”

Surprise jerked across his expression. “Seriously?”

“Yes,” I answered. “You want to talk to me, then I will agree to talk to you—but *only* talk.”

I’d made a promise to Pretty Boy and I intended to keep it.

“Fine, I’ll keep my hands to myself.”

“Promise me.”

His lips compressed.

“I want your word, or I won’t go. And you can wait.”

For his word did actually mean something to him.

The struggle playing out in his eyes was real and fascinating. At any other time, I would have wanted to study it. Now? I just needed him to reach an answer.

“I promise.”

Draining the champagne, I nodded to him. “Where do you want to do this?”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-NINE



EZRA

Thankfully, the event center hosting the charity runway show was one I knew fairly well. Relief flooded me at her agreement to speak with me. As it was, I offered her an arm, but she merely gave me a firm look and I blew out a breath. I'd wanted to be a gentleman. Instead, I nodded toward the exit, leaving the hall. There were escalators out there, so we could go upstairs or take the elevators into the parking garage.

Actually, the parking garage meant we could go to the car, but I didn't think she'd agree to that, so once we left the sound of conversation, music, and whatever the fashion designers were showing off—most of it was terrible—I gestured to the escalators. While she didn't fold her arms and hunch her shoulders in reality, she had proverbially.

At the top of the escalator, Karagiani headed to the glass doors that opened onto the concourse. The harbor wasn't far from this event center, so we were looking out over the water. It was a leaden gray day, lacking sunshine and warmth. If anything, the weather was nearly as depressing as the silent treatment.

“Mitchum has an office here,” I said. “We're going to borrow it.” As I opened the door for her, it hit me that I knew the site managers. They would be out on the floor with an event this large, which meant I could lean on those relationships. A couple of businessmen in suits who I recognized in passing were standing at different spots on their phones taking calls.

One nodded to me, and the other just turned back to look at the water while he spoke. It was a good five-minute walk to Mitchum's office. I forgot how big this place was. Still, it gave me a chance to enjoy Lainey's graceful stride and how her hips swayed more from her heels than any conscious choice on her part.

An assistant had a desk in the outer part of Mitchum's offices. She rose as we stepped inside. "Mr. Graham," she murmured, surprised, then looked at Lainey and finally Karagiani before letting her gaze rest on me.

"Constance, we wanted to borrow Mitchum's office for a quick meeting. He won't mind but go ahead and call him if you need."

She made a face, then opened her top drawer and pulled out a set of keys. "I won't bother him. He did say you could use his office whenever you needed." We were here often enough for events the last few years. Adam and I had both needed a place to take private calls. Mitchum hated even being in his office, so it worked out.

"Thank you."

She smiled as she unlocked the door then turned on the light. "Can I get you anything?"

"Water is in his fridge," I assured her. He had alcohol in there too, but I'd be a decent guest for a change. "Karagiani will be staying out here as well." The last was more of an order than the beginning, but he merely gave me a look.

"After I sweep the office."

Right.

I stepped back and motioned for him to go ahead. Lainey said nothing as we went through all the steps and then I ushered her into the office and them out. Closing the door, I locked us inside and then pivoted to face her. She wasn't looking at me so much as prowling the office.

Folding her arms this time, she made it to the conversation area that seemed far too comfortable and based on the indents on the sofa, used more than the desk. The sofa was great for naps. It would probably be good for other things, but I tabled that thought firmly. She'd made me promise.

I would keep my word.

"Have a seat," I offered while I went to the fridge. I pulled out a glass bottle and reached for a pair of glasses from the

above shelf. When I glanced at her, she was staring out the window. His office, like the concourse, faced the water.

Swallowing another sigh, I filled both glasses with cold water then carried them over to the table in front of the sofa. Rather than sit on it, I took the chair opposite. She twisted slightly to study me and then the seating before walking over to take a seat. Crossing one leg over the other, she lifted her chin and met my gaze.

“Well,” she began. “You wanted to talk to me?”

I did. But for the first time since the farcical scene in the library, relief began to flood my veins. “You’re still willing to talk to me.”

“I’ve always been willing to talk to you,” she corrected and the little reprimand was deserved, I supposed. “You aren’t always willing to listen.”

I couldn’t say that was inaccurate. “You don’t always seem willing.” Yes, that probably came out far more complaining than I meant. As it was, my face was still sore. More, my pride was smarting. Lainey’s disappointment had cut deep. Adam’s fury had been far more brutal, though.

There was a real chance I’d lost both of them. I needed to try and fix it with her, even if Adam never forgave me. If she were on my side, she might be able to persuade him. He could rarely deny her anything.

No matter what lies he told me or himself.

She raised her eyebrows. “Did you ask me in here to argue or to talk?” The absolute patience inhabiting the spaces between those words made me want to kiss her. When she was rattled, the real her came out. Anger uncovered my passionate kotyonok too. It was delightful. At the moment though, she was all poise and self-control.

“Talk,” I said with a sigh, much to my chagrin. “You said some things the other day at the gala that I feel like we should address.” And as sore as my face was, I’d been reminded of the words with each pulse of blood flowing into my bruised jaw and eye.

“We said a lot of things,” she reminded me.

“I meant about the two of us.” Belligerence swelled up. I reached for the glass of water, wishing it was a whiskey. “You said I wasn’t worth it.”

Those words had festered, burning deeper into my bones and lingering there like a scar.

The sigh that escaped her this time wasn’t promising. “Ezra, I don’t think that conversation will go well for either of us.”

“Maybe, but the other night didn’t end well at all.”

“And whose fault is that?” She raised her eyebrows at me, daring me to dispute it. “You arrived at the Masquerade spoiling for a fight.”

Had I? Maybe. I shrugged. “Sometimes, it’s the only way to get a reaction. You’re too damn controlled.”

“So, you dig at me and the people around me to what end? You can’t even say Milo’s name.”

I made a face. “I don’t need to say his name.”

“Yes, you do. You act like he’s taken something from *you* personally.”

“He has you.”

“I am not a possession. I don’t know why you and Adam insist on treating me like I am, and I refuse to cater to it any longer. You have both had far too much to say about my life and for far too long.” She tapped her fingers against her knee. A twitch of impatience that she squared away almost as soon as I noticed it. “I wish you two could understand how impossible you’ve made my life at times.”

“I wish you understood how often we’ve had to do everything we could to keep you safe.” The words slipped out and I refused to regret them. I’d kept Adam’s secrets for so long they’d become my own. This might be the time we finally parted ways and I didn’t examine how much damage that thought inflicted.

“I might understand better if you involved me in my own protection. For example, Karagiani.”

I frowned. “What about him?”

“You just sent him back to look after me?”

“Yes.” I nodded once. After the auction and the king’s irritation with her getting the painting she’d wanted, he was paying too much attention to her again. Adam was still out, but I wasn’t. I hadn’t forgotten the very first time he’d reminded us how easily she could be gotten to or Adam’s reaction when we’d gotten the call.

“Why?”

“Because I need you safe.” Not just wanted, needed. I needed to know there was someone with her who would take a bullet for her. Who would intercept other avenues of attack. Who would keep people from taking her if it came down to that. She’d disappeared on me once, and those agonizing days between when she’d disappeared and I found her in the middle of Vandals business were permanently imprinted on me.

I didn’t know whether Adam was dead or alive, and there was my kotyonok surrounded by criminals, up to her neck, in a messy business that was closing its noose around them.

Then, King took an interest in Emersyn. My world had narrowed and then narrowed further still.

She was tied to far too many in King’s orbit.

“Need me safe from what?” Again, absolute patience filled her voice. I didn’t want to answer and maybe that was reflected in my expression because she leaned forward. “Ezra, I haven’t rejected his presence. I’ve allowed him to escort me. I’ve endured his attention and hovering, and even Milo agrees with the idea.”

“He does?” I frowned. What did he know that I didn’t?

“Don’t let it go to your head.” She picked what might be imaginary lint off her skirt, then uncrossed her legs to shift her position. “I understand wanting to offer protection. I’ve protected Emersyn for most of our lives, remember?”

Yes, I was very well aware. How often did that put her in the sights of madmen like fucking Sharpe and now King? No, I was too goddamn aware. Her relationship with Hardigan didn't improve the situation at all. Those were the threats we knew about.

"Don't just make decisions for me." She picked up the water glass. "Involve me in my own safety. I don't typically make foolish decisions."

"I don't know that I can agree with that assessment."

"Really?" Cool didn't entirely cover her tone. "When you took me to the island, you just put me on a plane but didn't tell me where we were going."

"And you were furious..."

"Until you said you needed to put me out of reach for a time so I wasn't leveraged against Adam or you... or Em."

It was the only way to keep her from getting any angrier. "I remember." The fight had gone out of her when I told her. She'd sagged onto the sofa on the plane and asked me a single question.

"So I'll ask you now what I asked you then."

I really wished she wouldn't.

"How bad?"

Maybe I shouldn't have opened us to this argument. "That isn't exactly what I wanted to discuss with you."

"No? You're avoiding what you want to ask me though, so while we're both here and you're not drunk—" She paused and eyed me.

"No," I agreed with her. "I'm not drunk. Not that I'm not wishing this water was whiskey." I drained the glass and then rose to get the bottle for a refill.

"Then talk to me," she continued. "Tell me what's going on that has you all up in knots and picking fights with Adam."

"I wasn't picking a fight with him." Frankly, I hadn't wanted to have that discussion with him at all. He had no idea

about Lainey and me, or he hadn't until the night of the gala. Now? "He isn't speaking to me."

"Well, you made a bit of a mess. We both did."

We— I pivoted to stare at her. "We?"

"Yes, we. You weren't alone in the living room or on the island. Don't be an ass." The corner of her mouth quirked upward. "Again."

I glanced at the bottle and then unscrewed the top. "I *was* an ass."

"I know."

A hint of amusement intertwined with resignation where she could have cheerfully crowed at me. "*Kotyonok*...why did you tell the—" I bit back the description and even if it gritted between my teeth, I used his name. "Why did you tell Milo?"

"Because he deserved the truth," she said, meeting my gaze as I returned to the chair and refilled her water before setting the bottle between us. "He didn't deserve to have you pick a fight with him, cutting at him with a comment."

"You think I would have used it to attack him?"

"I think you lash out when you're angry. Especially if you've been drinking. You always have."

I shifted my attention to the water in my glass and swirled it around. "Why do you put up with me?"

"Well," she mused, "you've always shoved yourself into my life whether I liked it or not."

That suggested she didn't like it.

"Sometimes, you're sweet."

I grimaced.

"Sometimes, you're a complete jackass."

I couldn't argue with that.

"Still, I've always known you wanted to protect me, even if I didn't like how you chose to do it." She raised her glass to me like she was toasting. "I've always liked that you cared."

The revelation cut me off at the knees.

“The island...”

“You were worried and angry and lashing out...then you were sweet and caring. You’re always passionate. It can give a person whiplash, but at the same time, I think I always know where I stand.” She moistened her lips and I wanted to kiss her. My attention fastened on her mouth.

The directness was so much her that I wanted to be equally frank. At the same time... “There is so much I wish I could say.” It was the closest to true honesty that I’d ventured. Closer than I really wanted to go. I shouldn’t...

“But you’re still keeping secrets.”

“Not all secrets are bad,” I said. “Not all secrets are mine to share.” Whether he trusted me or not, I wouldn’t betray Adam’s.

“No?” She pursed her lips. “Secrets are how you and Adam ended up being entangled with Julius King.”

I couldn’t comment on that. “I don’t want to discuss him.”

“You don’t want to discuss anything.” While she didn’t sigh, she did rise and I shot to my feet. “Ezra, I won’t play games with you. I won’t try to jerk you around or tell you what you want to hear.”

“Don’t go...” I held out a hand to her. “I need to talk to you.”

“That’s why I came here,” she said, touching the back of my hand as if to get me to lower it. I battled with the urge to catch her fingers.

I lost.

Wrapping my hand around hers, I circled the table and pulled her to me. She stiffened, but she also didn’t jerk away.

“Kotyonok, I need to know you’re still speaking to me and that I didn’t drive you away...” Desperately did I need to know this. We’d given up so much for her. Done things she

would probably hate us for—but I couldn't find an ounce of regret within me if it kept her safe.

A flush turned her cheeks pink and her eyes went bright. For all her poise and control, the flare of her nostrils and the sudden inhale were tells. She did still react to me.

“I need to know that I can kiss you again, maybe not today or tomorrow. That I can bury my face in your thighs and taste how sweet you are when you come. I never imagined how amazing you would be, and now... I never want to think I can't have you again.” I wasn't above begging, though hopefully, I wasn't there yet. “Even if the sewer rat—fuck—Milo is still in the picture.”

I didn't want to share with that bastard. I didn't want him around her. We might work for King, but he was related to him. There was a danger in that.

“He is very much in the picture, and I'm not ready to promise you anything.”

That wasn't a denial.

“Then—I haven't driven you away?”

Please say I haven't, Kotyonok. Please say it.

She closed her eyes for a long moment. Then, when she opened them again, she focused on me. “You haven't.”

My heart squeezed.

“But you do need to let me go.”

It took everything I had, but I released her and backed away.

“And I want to know why Karagiani is necessary again.”

Fuck.

“Please.”

Head tipped back, I forced my breathing to regulate. She was right.

I had to tell her.

CHAPTER
THIRTY



LAINY

The resistance in his expression seemed to melt away, only to be replaced by resignation. Whatever was going on, he didn't want to tell me. On some levels, I very much understood his dislike of the inevitable.

"You know Adam—" He paused there, then shook his head once. "Let me begin again. The night of the auction. Do you recall what I said to you?"

He'd said a lot of things, including the fact my mouth was the only one he wanted to fuck. A fact he made reality a few days later. "That my freedom came at a price and neither of us can count on Adam anymore."

This close, I couldn't miss the way his pupils dilated or the intensity flaming inside his wild green eyes. The hint of redness around his sclera looked more the result of a lack of sleep, or maybe too much alcohol. I also couldn't discount the mottled bruises messing up the side of his face.

I hated to see him hurting, but I needed to close off that sympathy. It wouldn't help either of us in this confrontation at the moment.

"Yes," he exhaled the word, deflating like someone let all the air out of him. When he moved to sit, I sat with him. Twisting sideways, I ended up resting my knee against his even as he held onto my hand. "Your freedom—from all of this bullshit."

"What bullshit?" Specifics helped.

"The Royals. King. The fight with the Vandals. The business takeovers..."

I raised my brows. "You and Adam kept me out of the Royals?" That was new. "Was I supposed to be recruited?"

Who else in our circle had been?

"Yes," he said slowly. "Adam made it a condition of his accepting his place. At the time... at the time, I thought it was

the right thing to do. I don't know what King leveraged initially. Adam didn't tell me. I only knew that Adam made it a condition once he would join. He would do the tasks and earn his spot—but *you* had to be kept out of it.”

“But not you?” That made me ache for Ezra if Adam has traded my freedom for his place but allowed Ezra to fall. At the same time, that didn't sound right.

“No, not me and not because of his choices. I can be annoyed with him, but the simple truth was—I made that bed. I chose to lie in it. We didn't know who he was then. He was a voice on the phone, a letter received, it could have all been absolute bullshit...”

I nodded, that would have been my thought. Like someone was playing a game with our lives. In essence, he was.

“So, the initial approach? Adam told him to get fucked. I can say that he did that, because I was standing right next to him when he took that call. Then you were in that car accident.”

I frowned.

“That was...”

“When you were seven.”

Seven years old. Mother had sent me back to Grandfather's after I spent one week of my six-week summer break with her. She had plans with Harper. The car had been broadsided. The driver was killed. I'd been trapped in the back for over an hour before the firemen had been able to peel me out of the car.

I gaped at Ezra. “You couldn't have been more than fifteen.”

“No, we weren't.” He shrugged. “We could have called it a coincidence, but it was less than twelve hours later. The panic that went through Adam...through me...We came home immediately, and we went straight to the hospital.”

I didn't remember them there. Granted, my memories were patchy, and it had—terrified me. There had been a firefighter;

he kept talking to me. Throughout the time it took them to get me out of the car, he talked. He let me wear his helmet and got a blanket through to me when they had to cut the side of the car open.

Sparks.

Metal screeching noises.

Soothing promises.

Then I woke up in the hospital to Grandfather's ashen face and utter relief.

"I didn't see you," I admitted. "Or maybe I just don't remember." I hadn't thought about that accident in a long time. Grandfather had taken me out every single day after I was released to ride in the car, with other drivers or him driving. Looking back, I got it. He didn't want me to be afraid. "A lot of that is—shadowy. Grandfather was with me a lot."

Mother hadn't shown up that I could recall. There had been a phone call, and Grandfather's fury had echoed down the hall even if I hadn't heard the actual words.

"You were still unconscious," Ezra admitted. "You were still, and pale, and you looked so small. Adam blamed himself."

I frowned.

"We both did...an hour after we left the hospital the king called and said he'd heard about the accident. It was terrible when things happened to the people we cared about..."

"He used me as leverage."

A single nod.

I didn't think it was possible to dislike the man more.

I was wrong.

"So Adam accepted his offer."

"So did I," Ezra admitted. "I didn't want Adam to have to do it alone, and he needed backup. I also didn't want anything

to happen to you. The plan was always to figure out who he was and eliminate him...”

“That didn’t really work out for you two, did it?”

How long had they worked for him? More than a decade. A headache nestled behind my eye.

“We did what we had to. He recruited a lot among those around us—the Royals. It was a tradition. Call it more of a secret society than a gang. But only those handpicked by the king were to be inducted. There’s always a test. A series of them, really.”

“Crimes.” It wasn’t a guess.

“It could be as simple as getting him information from one of the companies our families own or as complicated as killing someone.”

Killing someone.

I squeezed his hand, or maybe he was squeezing mine.

I didn’t ask. I didn’t have to, or maybe I didn’t want to—
“Then you’re too deep to leave.”

“That’s part of it,” Ezra admitted. “The other part is there’s always another task. He wanted Adam killed because he proposed to Emersyn.”

I hadn’t forgotten that tidbit. “To protect her from her family.”

“We know that now,” Ezra said, bitterness trickling in between the syllables. “Then, it seemed like a power play. The Sharpe fortune is considerable and she wasn’t a Royal. Adam appeared to be amassing a powerbase to take him on.”

I frowned. “Did he not recruit her because she was his kid?”

Ezra shrugged. “I don’t think that was the issue. He mentioned it to me once or twice, but she wasn’t active in our social circles. Or maybe it was because she was adopted. To be frank, there are some that could have been tapped but they

moved away. The Standish heir is one of them. The other is the Grayson heir. They weren't raised here..."

I sighed. Some families did pull away, whether through circumstance or choice. "So he didn't recruit Emersyn, and Adam kept him from recruiting me—you both did," I added the last amendment because Ezra had gone to protect Adam, who was protecting me. "What does this have to do with the new threat?"

"When we found out who he was," Ezra said, his gaze going distant, "I saw a way out. I thought it would be done, you know. Finished. We had his identity. We could kill him and free ourselves. Only he has a lot more control and reach than we knew..."

"And he's Milo and Emersyn's biological father."

"Yes." A single syllable. "That—it helps that neither seems particularly interested in him."

"Is he threatening me?" Because I didn't want to have to tell Milo that.

Ezra grimaced. "Not directly, though it's been suggested that Adam's absence has left a gap to be filled and he finds your dedication entertaining."

"A bodyguard wouldn't prevent blackmail. So far, his every move has been to curry favor with Emersyn and Milo. Although Milo doesn't trust him." That wasn't revealing a secret. Pretty Boy made no pretense of his disdain and dislike, not to mention distrust, where Julius King was concerned.

"He's not the only powerful man we know," Ezra said. "My father isn't pleased with your moves lately. Harper Reed is out there. Then there's Hamilton and Jason. The Adleys and the Cliftons. There's a power vacuum left by the Sharpes."

That, I was aware of.

"And you're a loose cannon," Ezra said with so much exasperation, it made me smile. "It's not funny, Kotyonok. It's dangerous. Keeping you safe for the last twelve years—that's been Adam's driving force..."

His driving force? Twelve years.

That was when their attitudes changed. They'd grown colder. More remote. Pushing me away even while trying to micromanage my every choice.

"I could slug you both," I muttered.

"Because we protected you?" He narrowed his eyes.

"Because you punished me while protecting me—" I shook my head. "Dammit, Ezra. You two have taken so many risks and you expect me to stand behind everyone and stay out of it."

"Yes," he said, squeezing my hand then catching my free one so he could hold them both. "I *need* you to be safe. You—I have no regrets for those choices." As intense about it as he sounded, I didn't think that was the whole truth. At the same time...

"What are you doing that has you so worried?" Because that was what it came down to, right? "Or should I ask what he has you doing that you're so worried?"

"Don't ask me." He stroked his thumbs over the backs of my hand. "I can't tell you. I won't. I sent Karagiani because he protected you before; he'll protect you now. If I can't be there and if something happens with—well, with anyone else. If we aren't there, he will be. You can't take risks with yourself."

I didn't snort because I read the fear in his eyes. Fear he was desperately trying to cover up again. "I'll keep him on, but he's not to report anything to you."

"He doesn't." Oh, he didn't like that. "He didn't the first time either." Absolutely disgruntled. "That's fine...your safety is worth my ignorance."

Rolling my eyes would be out of place, so I just returned the squeeze to his hands. "How can we help you?" Because, like him or not, Milo would want to be a part of this. He needed to be. His father had been his enemy longer than he'd been ours. "How can I help you?"

“Leave Hardigan? Go to Europe? Just—run away from all of this?” He made a face. “I’d invite you to my island again, even though you already told me no.”

Something had happened that night when he came to the apartment. Something that drove him to push me and then... “Ezra, if I thought it would truly help, I’d consider it.”

“Consider.” He scoffed and shook his head again. “You won’t run. It’s not in you to run away, no matter how much safer it might be. You are always putting yourself out there—disappearing on me and then showing up somewhere so much more dangerous.”

“I’m fine,” I reminded him. “Going to the Vandals was the right thing to do. They needed to know where Emersyn was and what her uncle was doing.” They needed to know so they could act.

“Then you met *him*.”

“Yes. I did.”

He stared at me for a long while. “I’m never going to like it.”

“No one is telling you that you have to.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

I laughed. Genuinely laughed at that. “Nothing with you has ever been easy.” When I tugged one of my hands from his, I reached up to cup his bruised face. “You make things so hard and so utterly impossible sometimes. You find a nerve and you stab at it until you draw blood.”

“I never want to hurt you.”

“I know.” I did. Because even in all of his cruelties and vicious behavior, he still wanted to protect me. “It doesn’t make what you do always okay, though.”

“No.” He sounded so glum. “I suppose not.”

“You suppose not?”

He shrugged. “I’m a terrible loser. I want you—fuck I want to kiss you right now. I want to peel you out of that outfit

and fuck you until we both feel better.”

No matter how hard I tried to compartmentalize them, the words affected me. “Ezra...”

“I promised,” he muttered, even as he leaned his damaged face into my hand and then sighed. “Doesn’t mean I don’t want more with you, *Kotyonok*. You and Adam...are the only two people I would choose over everything.”

He was breaking my heart. The loneliness rolled off him in waves. Leaning forward, I pressed my lips to his. It was a brief kiss. Just an offer of comfort, not passion. A touch, not a demand. A gift, not a prize. When I pulled back, he stared at me.

“Thank you for telling me,” I whispered. “I can fight better when I know what I’m fighting.”

“You’re going to tell him, aren’t you?”

“He needs to know too.”

His head dipped.

“I think you should tell Adam.”

He didn’t look up at that comment, if anything, his shoulders hunched.

“He’s angry right now, but then so am I—and so are you.” That got his attention. “Keeping secrets is what got us here. You may not like Pretty Boy, but I trust him. And more, I know I can trust him because we *aren’t* keeping secrets. Don’t keep secrets from us. You want to protect us, and I adore you for it, but we need to look after you too. We can’t if we don’t know what’s going on.”

While he didn’t respond, he did seem to be chewing on that. It was time to go, and when I rose, Ezra let go of my hand and cleaned up the water glasses. At the door, he paused and studied me.

“Did I really hurt you?” The question was out there for both of us. “If we’re not keeping secrets anymore—did I hurt you? At the apartment and on the island?”

“You said it was a *mistake*,” I reminded him. The sting was still there even if I told myself it wasn’t. “That I was a mistake.”

He frowned.

“Yes, that hurt. However, I accepted that you would hurt me occasionally a long time ago.”

His frown deepened, but he didn’t say anything. What could he say? Honestly, I was out of words. Finally, he opened the door to where Karagiani waited. Time to go home. I needed to sort this all out.

Him. Adam. Milo.

I had a lot to figure out. My phone vibrated as Karagiani walked with me away from the office. The message was from Phillip—Bohdi. He wanted to talk to me.

Now what?

CHAPTER
THIRTY-ONE



ADAM

The drive to Jamaica Estates took the better part of an hour. The first time I came to the Tudor-style house on the hill I'd been more surprised by the location than the house itself. That said, I waited for the gates at the base of the hill to open before I drove up. There was a call box, but someone was always watching their camera. At least as far as I could tell.

The house was—ordinary. The yellow paint had faded over the years, so it didn't offer as much sunshine. The trim was intact and wasn't peeled. Although, at the same time, it felt—old wasn't the right word. Neglected? Forgotten?

Something. Those words didn't quite fit either. I pulled into the circular drive and killed the engine. The front door opened to reveal a thick-necked man who stood easily somewhere around my height. I had no idea what his name was. He never said anything, and we hadn't been formally introduced. His presence clearly declared that he was there to protect Mrs. Waldemar, and I should remember that.

“Good morning,” I said by way of greeting as I closed the car and pocketed the key. He just stared at me, silent and imposing.

At the door, I paused and held my arms out at my sides. His pat down was quick, yet thorough. I didn't bother to try and bring a gun in. I left it secured in the car.

When he finished, I patted his arm once and passed him to head into the house. “Always good to chat.” The only answer he offered was to close the front door. It was early, so I headed down the hall toward the back of the house where the kitchen was located.

The smell of coffee and something sweeter wrapped around me, an invitation to come inside. “Good morning, Adam,” Margareta Waldemar greeted me as I entered the white, cheerful room with its marble counters and floors. The

thick green thatched rug on the floor beneath the cozy table in the half-round windows offered the first real splash of color. Well, besides all the plants that filled the windows.

“Good morning, Mrs. Waldemar,” I said.

She closed the oven with a thump before setting down a tray of fluffy croissants. That explained the sweet smell. “I thought I told you to call me Margareta.”

“You did.”

“But you don’t want to use my name?” There was something almost kindly and amused about her as she removed the oven glove. A mug of coffee awaited her. She wore casual clothes for her, a light sweater top over slacks. Her shoes were basic flats. She looked like someone’s middle-to-upper-class grandmother, cheerfully at work in her kitchen.

“I don’t know that we should pretend to be friends,” I said rather than dance around the issue. From our first meeting, she’d had the advantage of surprise. Between that and her gender as well as age, I genuinely didn’t know what to do about her. It was a mistake to think she was anything but capable of cold-blooded decisions, and then she’d tell me to have a cookie.

It was unsettling.

She chuckled. “Adam, darling, you’re going to have to get off that fence before it leaves a permanent indentation in your buttocks. Trust me, you cannot be on everyone’s side.”

“No,” I told her, folding one hand over the other as I stood there. “I only need to be on my side.”

“Only you’re not on your side, darling. Not at all. You sacrifice yourself for others, and even though you did it here, you’re still looking for the art of escape. What can you do to get out of this, or what will you be required to give up to do it?”

“So far, I haven’t objected to the assignments you’ve given me.”

She paused to consider me for a moment, then inclined her head with an almost grudging smile. “This is true. You have been quite the obedient young man. You’ve also been learning everything you can about our operation and how the business is run. I would say that you are one of the few who has a grasp on the extent of our operations.”

“You’re giving me far too much credit. I have an idea, not a full map, and despite that, I still don’t know where you came from or how you set up as strongly as you did without anyone noticing.”

“Don’t be silly,” she scolded, pouring a second cup of coffee. “One can hardly make an omelet without cracking a few eggs, as the saying goes. Just because you didn’t know, doesn’t mean others were unaware or we didn’t silence those who dug a little too close.”

Which relatively fit with what I’d surmised. Margareta Waldemar was a study in contradictions. Kind. Almost sweet in a way. But I’d also seen her pick up a gun and shoot a man in the head when it had been proven he betrayed her. Judging her only by her appearance would be a mistake.

“Come have your coffee and a croissant, dear, and we can discuss my next task for you.” She set croissants onto plates and I took the one she gestured to, as well as the coffee, and carried it over to the table. It was already set, and there was jam waiting, though I didn’t need it.

I waited for her to take her seat before I took mine and her smile was practically beaming.

“Your manners are impeccable.”

I laughed. “If my manners were that impeccable, you wouldn’t like me as much.”

“Oh, calling me out,” she said with a wink. “I like that.”

“I know.” I took a sip of the coffee.

“Yes, you figured that out during our first meeting when you made it clear that Liam O’Connell and his young lady were never to be touched again.”

I shrugged. “Your men made mistakes in taking them.”

“I disagree, but I see why you would think so.” She pulled apart one of the fresh from the oven croissants and it was perfectly baked. “That said, you trading yourself for them—well, let’s be honest, you traded yourself for her.”

And I’d do it again. Emersyn Sharpe had been used enough in her life. Losing her would have gutted Lainey. No, I had no regrets for my choices, except that it took me away from Lainey for far too long.

Not that I’d been able to see her while I’d been forced to play dead. At least traitors had a chance to reclaim their lives. Something I was determined to do.

“No disagreement, dear?” She studied me.

“No, I did trade myself for her.”

“You’ve never told me why.”

“It’s not something you need to know.” I lifted my coffee for a sip. The brew was perfect, but then I’d never been served anything while with this woman that wasn’t. “She was of no use to you, and I am.”

“She was useful for keeping Mr. O’Connell in line.” A solid argument. Though they had yet to learn they’d taken Liam’s twin brother, and I wasn’t going to be the one to enlighten them.

“Not for much longer,” I argued. “The threats against her escalated rather quickly and would make him homicidal. Your men are good.”

“But he’s better?” A challenge if I ever heard one.

“No,” I answered, keeping it simple. “I am.”

That earned me a genuine laugh. “Touché, touché, my dear. Very well, I have never cared for leveraging a person’s safety in order to gain another’s agreement.”

“Still, that doesn’t stop you from doing it.”

“No,” she said before taking a sip of her coffee. “Unfortunately,” she continued with a sigh. “This business

does not forgive those who are too forgiving or too soft. You have to be willing to crack those eggs, to destroy those who would oppose you, and to burn down the world if necessary. Hopefully, you only have to do it once—but you must still be willing to do it.”

“If once isn’t enough, to do it as many times as is necessary for your enemies to understand.” I understood the nature of that fight very well.

“Exactly.” Then she nodded to my croissant. “Not to your liking?”

I picked up the cloth napkin and laid it over my lap before pulling apart one of the two croissants. It was still steaming hot, but the scent made my mouth water. “I wasn’t particularly hungry before I arrived, but your cooking, as always, is too good to turn down.”

Her snort held just a hint of exasperation.

“I’m only telling you the truth,” I said. “I informed you before that I would not lie to you and if I didn’t want to answer a question, I just wouldn’t answer it.”

“Some men would be far more careful about how they phrased the words and the tone they used.”

“I’m sure some men would, and if you wanted them to do tasks for you, they’d probably piss themselves before, during, and after.” I took a bite, and it held the perfect amount of buttery goodness for the light and fluffy interior.

Laughing, Margareta shook her head as she lifted her coffee cup. A shuffle of steps from the hallway had her glancing up and I slanted a look to see who was joining us. The bodyguard who opened her door stood there, his silence spreading out to fill the room. She glanced at her watch and then sighed.

“Thank you for reminding me, Otto,” she said. “I would have let time get away with me. Can you get the car ready?”

He nodded, then left without a second glance at me. When I returned my attention to Margareta, I found her watching me. Sobriety had replaced the humor in her eyes.

“You know Milo Hardigan?”

Only practice kept me from betraying a reaction. I took a long drink of coffee before I answered, though. “I do.”

“Excellent. I want you to befriend him.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Why?”

“Does it matter?” The challenge was right there.

“It might. He’s not from any of the families in the area.”

“No, but he is developing ties with one of them.”
Goddammit. Her smile was almost angelic. “Yes, I have met Mr. Hardigan. I find him interesting.”

I narrowed my eyes.

“Don’t get jealous. I find you interesting as well. It’s why I kept you on even when you didn’t kill the king as I asked.”

“You changed your mind. If I had eliminated him immediately, you may not have had that opportunity.”

“You make a good point, however, that doesn’t change the fact you failed to complete a task. But I forgave you because I have other work for you.”

“Work like befriending Milo Hardigan.”

“Yes,” she said. “I think it should be a relatively direct matter. He’s currently living with your stepsister, is he not?”

In every conversation we’d ever had, she’d never brought up Lainey. I wasn’t a fan of her doing it now. “He is staying with her.” That was as close to that nugget as I was planning to venture. “What is he to you?”

“I don’t know yet, but I find myself fascinated. He’s not the usual type around here, is he?” She drained her coffee and then rose. “Finish your croissant, or I can pack it up for you to take with you. I do hate to rush you, dear, but I have an appointment.”

I stood as she did and tossed back my coffee. I’d more or less just pulled apart the croissant. “I’ll take it with me.” Better to show appreciation than insult her cooking.

“Oh, I’ll pack you a couple of extras then.” She hurried about the domestic scene, like a queen in charge of her own throne room. Fuck, maybe she was and this was how she kept her power shielded. “Don’t worry so much, Adam.”

She held out the bag to me.

“Excuse me?”

“You’re trying to figure out what I could possibly need from Milo Hardigan and how you can turn that to your advantage. You’re also wondering how quickly you can remove him if he’s intended to be your replacement.”

“Those thoughts hadn’t occurred to me.”

“But they would,” she said with a smile as she patted my arm and gestured toward the door. “Don’t think too hard about it. Just strike up a conversation, get to know the man, and then tell me what you learn.”

“Are you looking for something specific?”

She didn’t answer me until she opened the door. “Have a wonderful day, dear. We’ll chat soon.”

Then I was outside and she closed the door. It locked behind me and I glanced up at the house before turning to where my car waited for me.

The sun slipped out from the clouds and blazed brightly in the cool morning air. I dug out my sunglasses and slid them on before heading over to the car. What did she want with Milo Hardigan?

And how could I use it?

That part, she definitely got right.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-TWO



LAINY

“Why are we getting dressed up?” The fact he’d changed when I asked without much grumbling—granted, there was some, but not much—warmed me to my bones.

“A little bird told me it was your birthday.” I’d waited to drop this surprise on him until he’d already changed.

Milo twisted from the mirror to stare at me. “I’m going to kill him.”

I chuckled. “You’d have to know which little bird told me to do that, wouldn’t you?”

The way his dark brown eyes narrowed delighted me. The faint twist to his mouth promised retribution. I was okay with that. He could spank me on my birthday. It was still a few months away. Besides...

“It wasn’t a *him*.” He grunted, and all at once the reticence and rebellion drained from his expression.

“Nope,” I admitted and then crossed over to him to help smooth down his jacket. We’d skipped a tie tonight, and I’d chosen a cocktail dress that was longer in the back than in the front and paired real well with boots and a corset. The interest in his eyes as he watched me change had threatened to make us late. “Em messaged me a few days ago. She wanted to make sure I knew since she didn’t think you’d tell me.”

“You do realize she only knows because one of the guys told her.” There was the grumbling.

I grinned. “You do know that I don’t care, I’m just glad I know it’s your birthday so I can spoil you.”

He wrapped an arm around me and pulled me to him. “You already spoil me.”

“Not nearly enough,” I murmured. “You put up with a lot from me, and to be around me—”

Pressing a finger to my lips, he gave me a firm look. “There is no putting up with. I am where I want to be.”

If that didn’t make me want to swoon. I didn’t know what would. Kissing his finger, I lifted my hand to catch his. “Accepted. You’re where I want you to be too.”

That earned me a real grin.

“Tonight, I want to take you out to dinner, then go do something you’d enjoy.”

“We don’t need to go out anywhere for me to do something we’d both enjoy.” The sensual delivery made my thighs clench.

“I promise,” I told him. “You can have all of me and more when we get back...”

“More?” He raised his eyebrows. “I don’t need more if I have you, Mayhem.”

“Stop it,” I ordered, giving him a gentle smack. His deep chuckle threatened to undo me completely. “I planned tonight for you—with a little help from your friends.”

Now, I had his interest. “You’re not encouraging me to abandon my idea. If anything, I think I should just strip you down and have my favorite feast right here.”

I swore my heart did a little flip-flop at the suggestion. “You’re going to have fun,” I said. “I promise.”

Head back, he groaned. “If it were anyone else asking me to do this...”

Delight speared me, and I cradled his face in my hands. When he dipped his head to kiss me, I smiled against his lips. The fact that he deepened the contact pulled a groan from me with every tongue stroke. My pulse thundered in my ears.

“Are you sure I can’t persuade you to skip and stay in?”

“So tempting,” I murmured, then leaned back against his arm. “If you really don’t want to go out—we can stay in.” Maybe I shouldn’t cave, but the point was to take him out and let him have fun, not make him more miserable.

“It’s not that I don’t want to go out with you, Mayhem.”
He gave me a gentle squeeze.

“But?” I prompted.

He sighed.

“Talk to me.” I rubbed a slow circle against the center of his chest. If this made him uncomfortable, we were going with a different plan.

“I don’t want to risk you. We have to do a lot of going out for your social and business commitments. I respect the need for those, even if I think you are involved in an insane amount of charity organizations—”

I bit back a smile at the bafflement in his tone. The warmth weaving through the bewilderment made it far more affectionate.

“—but I don’t want you to put yourself in danger for me. Not after what you got Ezra to finally tell you.” The last came out gruffly. Telling him about the car accident had been dangerous. His protectiveness had already been ramped up, the desire he had to stand between me and the world had been such a source of friction in the beginning. I wasn’t sure if I was growing more used to it, or if he had relaxed some, or if it was because we were working together.

In all likelihood, it was some combination of all three. However, I’d been serious when I told Ezra that secrets didn’t work. I had to trust Milo with the information for the same reasons I’d needed it myself. We couldn’t defend against what we didn’t know.

“These are good arguments,” I told him as he pressed his lips to my forehead.

“But?” He mimicked my tone from earlier and I couldn’t suppress my smile anymore.

“But,” I said, picking up the thread. “I’ll be with you for one and Karagiani for two, and we’re not going to the usual places, so—I’m changing up the routine.”

That made his eyebrows raise. “I almost want to say yes just to see what you think is changing up the routine, Mayhem.”

“You’re going to say yes, anyway,” I told him, wrapping my arms around his neck.

“I am, huh?” The corner of his mouth kicked a little higher. “Do tell...”

I pushed up on my toes and he dipped his head so I could press my lips right to his ear. “You don’t like telling me no.”

He scoffed, a full-on choking laugh and a shake of his head.

“And,” I continued, grinning. “The fastest way to get me naked is to just give in because you know I don’t give up.”

“That’s the damn truth.” Still, he was laughing. I loved that he could. He still wore the scars of a lifetime of disappointments and other cruelties. He didn’t laugh nearly enough nor smile as much as I wanted to make it possible for him. “I’ll make you a deal...”

“This should be good,” I teased. “I’m listening.”

He slapped my ass once. The sting was more warmth transmitted through my clothes than any real pain, but it definitely didn’t make me smile any less. “You are asking for it.”

“And you’re looking forward to giving it to me. So stop your bitching and tell me what your deal is.”

Honestly, his sigh this time could be equal parts amusement and aggravation.

“You don’t leave my sight,” he said, ticking off his points. “If I decide we need to withdraw, we go, no arguments” Neither were unreasonable. “And absolutely *no one* sings me happy birthday.”

Surprise flashed through me and a giggle escaped. Of course, now that he brought it up, I kind of wished I’d planned it that way. Still... “I can agree to those terms, Pretty Boy.”

His eyes narrowed.

I huffed. “Now what?”

“You did that way too easily.”

“Did I?” I tilted my head. “Hmm... I wonder why that could be. Can we go now?”

“You are trouble,” he confessed, letting me go but taking my hand when I caught his.

“Yes,” I told him as I led him out of the bathroom. “And you love it.”

“I love something,” he muttered, but when I shot him a look, he simply grinned.

Forty-five minutes later, Wood delivered us to the front of Cabaret Royale. It was the perfect underground speakeasy located in Brooklyn. The front door didn’t look like much, the red canopy being the only clue to the luxurious debauchery and intrigue waiting just inside. The name wasn’t advertised, and there were no flashing lights, only a doorman and a password you had to know to get in. French speakeasies were timeless, and this one was my favorite.

Wood and Karagiani were the only two I informed of our destination—Wood so he could handle transportation and Karagiani so he could do his security checks. He’d signed off on it, which was good, seeing as I didn’t want to argue with him. But I would have, and I would have won.

“Good evening,” the doorman said at our approach. “What can I do for you two this evening?” Then his gaze flicked to Karagiani. “Three.”

“We’d like a majestic table, please.”

He grinned, doffing his hat. “Then you’ve come to the right place.” With that, he turned and opened the door. Milo gave me a look as I nodded back to the doorman before leading my pretty boy inside. Excitement flushed through me as I followed the long, dark hall to the other end. Karagiani was behind us and I was in the front. Another doorman waited for us around the corner.

“Welcome to the Cabaret Royale,” he said by way of greeting before throwing up the inner door to let us inside the red velvet room with its myriad of tables, 18th-century decorations, and the classic stage that occupied the center.

“Cabaret—it’s a burlesque show,” Milo said suddenly, genuine delight curving through the words and I had to fight the impulsive and juvenile urge to jump up and down and clap my hands. I’d surprised him. It was exactly what I’d wanted to do. Surprise and delight him. “I’m gonna kill Jasper,” he muttered, even as the smile on his lips decried any such threat.

“Good evening,” a woman in a festive saloon dress and glittered boobs welcomed us. While she wasn’t topless, she didn’t have anything all that hidden.

“Benedict,” I told her. “Table for two with a companion table.”

“Right this way...”

We followed her through the maze of tables. The layout allowed for privacy and display. The bar itself was crowded and most of the tables seemed full. I’d reserved a private table for us, this one up one level and set up like a theater box. We could observe and enjoy without being observed.

Karagiani checked the curtained-off area before he stepped out and nodded. “I’ll be down here.” There was another table set up where he could observe our curtains and still get to see the show. I gave him a little wave and then the hostess left us with the promise that our waitress would be with us in a moment.

I twisted to face Milo, and I barely even got to breathe a word before he kissed me. The press of his lips to mine held us suspended for a long moment, as he coaxed my lips apart with a soft stroke of his tongue. I opened to him easily, thrilled by the warmth invading me as he deepened the kiss.

It was the kind of kiss that made me want to climb him right here. I wasn’t sure how much privacy we genuinely had, but I was more than willing to test the boundaries. The

clearing of a throat had Pretty Boy lifting his head and I wanted to drown in him. He spared a glance past me.

“Two beers—cold, still in the bottle.” He rattled off the brand. “No glasses. One bottle of wine, a Riesling, also cold. One glass.”

“Absolutely, sir.”

He glanced down at me again. “Did I get the wine right?”

“You did. Someone has been doing their homework.”

“I pay attention.” He caressed my cheek then down to my neck before moving to pull out a chair for me. The theater box was large enough for a table of six, though it was just the two of us. Once I was seated, he took the chair next to mine. It put him in the corner and kept his back away from the curtains. The heavy velvet worked as a sound block.

Below us, the hum of conversation was punctuated by the tinkling of glasses and cutlery. There was a tinny piano playing a raucous French tune I half-remembered, but overall, it was—magical.

“Yes, you do,” I agreed as he settled a hand on my thigh. Leaning back, I studied him. “Do you really like it?”

“I haven’t even seen the show and already know I’m going to love it.” He shook his head, a wistful smile softening his whole expression. My stomach bottomed out and filled with the fluttering of a dozen butterflies at that expression.

Before I could ask him anything, the waitress returned with the wine and the beers. She poured my glass before setting his beers on the table. She popped the lid on the first, but he waved her off on the second.

“I’ll let you peruse the menu for the selections being offered this evening. But I need to get your order in shortly so it’s ready before the show starts. We try not to bring out food while they are performing.”

“That’s perfect,” I told her. “Just give us ten minutes.”

“Of course.”

When we were alone again, I looked at Milo and covered his hand with mine. “You okay?”

“I’m fine, Mayhem,” he said, his wistful smile turning warmer. “Better than fine. Just—reminded of something I’d forgotten.”

As much as I wanted to know, I didn’t press him. “What do you want to eat?”

“You.”

My face flamed, but at the same time... “That’s dessert, I was talking about dinner.”

“I’m talking about every meal of every day,” he told me, lifting my hand. “Mayhem...”

“You want me to soak my panties before we leave this show, don’t you?”

He chuckled, and it was so dark and sinful I was ready to throw in the towel on my own plans. “I want you to lose the panties before we leave the show.” He kissed my hand. “Don’t worry, I plan to help you with that.”

Shivers traced over my skin. “Anything you want, Pretty Boy.”

“Anything?” He grinned.

“Anything.”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-THREE



MILO

For as long as I could remember, my life had been a series of challenges. Those challenges ranged from making sure I could find something to eat in the kitchen when my mother, often strung out on drugs, was too out of it to fix dinner, to eventually ensuring my baby sister was fed. My life could be demarcated into two very clear periods—well, I supposed each section of my life could be.

There was before Ivy and after her. I could never regret her arrival, even if it had been one of the last straws for our deadbeat father who hadn't ever wanted another child. He'd gotten tired of our mother using his product when he wanted to sell it. Jeff Hardigan had been a dick. I didn't have the words for it when I was barely seven years old, but I did now.

He'd decided to walk out on Mom and on Ivy. He didn't want either of them. He ordered me to go with him and I refused. I wouldn't abandon them. I was not a selfish dick. They needed me. Mom needed me. Ivy needed me. Dad? He didn't need anyone—apparently—and he walked.

Clearly, he never forgot that rejection.

After he left, Mom fell into despair, she fell deeper into drugs, and one day—she just didn't wake up anymore. I did my best, but I couldn't wake her and there was only so much food for me and Ivy. A friend found us—a guy who would turn out to be one of the best people in my life. He went by the street name of Vandal.

I always called him Mickey. But Vandal rescued us from that house where Mom died and eventually, I ended up in the system with Ivy. In the system, I met a raggedy collection of orphans who were just like me. They'd either lost their parents, been abandoned, or worse, grown up in their own horror shows before they were rescued. There had been seven of us—not counting Vandal himself or Ivy.

The seven of us were determined to stick together, we had each other's backs. I let go of Ivy because I wanted her to have a better life and I thought she'd found it with the Sharpes.

I was wrong.

But even when I was in prison, another choice—one I'd made to protect them—my Vandals had looked after Ivy. They'd kept her safe.

So there was life before Ivy and after.

There was life before Vandal rescued us and after.

There was life before I went to prison and after.

Looking at Mayhem's shining face as the show unfolded on the stage and the women sang, danced, and moved—I was utterly captivated. There was life before Mayhem and this here? This was life after.

This birthday at a burlesque show, a half-formed wish I'd shared with my best friend when I'd been a horned-up teenager who wanted to experience some part of this deviant history with its erotic dancing, songs, and performances made real, was not something I could have imagined.

Not really.

The fact there was a damn aerialist out there, riding that diamond inside a hoop like she was fucking it and it was every bit as beautiful as it was erotic, wasn't lost on me. Not one single person out there performing was as fucking gorgeous as the woman sitting next to me.

Not a single one.

She got one of those fuckers to tell her a secret—though if I had to bet, it was Ivy who had gotten the secret out of them and then told her. She got a secret about a dream of mine, and she made it come true.

The corner of her mouth curved upward and she stole a glance up at me. Busted. So busted. When she leaned a little closer, I kissed her. The hints of wine on her lips added to the sweetness of her taste. We'd enjoyed a good meal, but it could have been burger and fries and I'd have adored it just as much.

I savored her because she was quietly yet steadily wrecking her way into my life and my soul. My mayhem.

Fuck, that name suited her. She shifted in the seat, a little wiggle of movement and I lifted my head as she settled something in my hand. The cloth teased my fingertips as I closed my fingers around it. Lifting my head, I glanced down at the scrap of lace panties in my hand and then over to her siren's smile as she took a sip of her wine.

"Mayhem—" Before I could finish the thought, the music hit a crescendo and the show ended on a stellar note. Still holding her panties, I rose with her to applaud and I really couldn't help dipping my gaze down to the length of her legs and the boots she was wearing.

Goddamn, she tempted me. The lights were coming up, but they were still comfortably dim so I stole another kiss before we sat again. She leaned into me and I let my hand skim along the edge of her skirt. It was shorter in the front. Movement flickered from the corner of my eye and I lifted my head as Karagiani glanced inside.

"Problem?" The guy had become something of a fixture these past few weeks. I wasn't a huge fan of him always being there, but I wouldn't argue against it because he would put himself between Mayhem and danger.

"There's someone here to see you."

Me? I frowned and glanced at Mayhem. She looked puzzled but only shook her head. I slid her panties into the pocket of my jacket as I stood. "Stay here?" I kept it a request, but she still frowned. "I won't be long."

Mayhem didn't like it, but she nodded once.

"Thank you." I brushed my knuckles to her cheek then moved to where Karagiani stood. Both of us blocked the whole opening and he pushed the curtain wider so I could see who it was that wanted to join us.

Frankly, I half-expected it to be Ezra. The man seemed to thrive on pushing in everywhere, whether he was welcome or not. Or Adam. Despite my misgivings where he was

concerned, his interest in Mayhem seemed a vital part of him. Hell, I would have taken Bodhi. As crazy as he was, he wouldn't have surprised me by showing up, no matter how unexpected.

The man standing there, Jeff Hardigan aka Julius King aka my deadbeat father, didn't even make the bottom of the shoe on my list. "What the fuck do you want?"

"To speak to that young lady right there." He nodded past me, his polite smile striking a match to my temper.

"I can pretty much guarantee she doesn't want to talk to you." While I shouldn't speak for Mayhem, I didn't doubt her disdain for him any more than I did my own dislike. He abandoned me. He abandoned Ivy. He'd used her friends and family.

And apparently, he'd tried to have her killed or at least endangered her enough she *could* have died when she was still a child. I'd wanted to find him the night she'd revealed to me what Ezra had told her.

Bastard had tried to kill Adam for even proposing to my sister and it didn't have a damn thing to do with Ivy also being his child. No, it had to do with her being a "Sharpe" and having Sharpe money. Selfish prick.

He was the same man who'd recruited one of my oldest friends in an effort to "kill" me. So yeah, I was not buying whatever he was selling. Especially not about Mayhem and not on today of all days.

"Son," he said and I curled my fingers into a fist. I could punch him. Except, I didn't think one hit would ever be enough. If I started slugging him, I may not stop until I painted the room with his blood.

As satisfying as that might be on a visceral level, I wanted to hurt him. Hurt him like he'd hurt Ivy. Hurt him like he'd hurt my friends.

Like he'd hurt my mom.

"I need to speak to Miss Benedict. She'll want to talk to me, whether you want to or not. I did you the courtesy of

letting you enjoy the show, now do me one and let me speak to her.”

Karagiani raised his brows. Did I want him to intervene? Yes, but I shook my head anyway.

Reeling my temper in, I glanced to where Lainey sat. She was watching us, though she hadn't tried to intervene. “Mr. King wants to speak to you.” I managed to say it without gritting my teeth.

“Now?” Her chin came up and I could have kissed her. That look dared him to mess with her. But it was literally the last thing I wanted him to do.

“Apparently he feels it's important.” I didn't bother to disguise my feelings on the subject.

“Five minutes,” she said, almost a question as if she wanted to confirm I agreed with her. I didn't. I didn't want him anywhere near her. But five minutes was as good a limit as any if we weren't just going with a solid “no.”

“Five minutes,” I concurred flatly as I faced King again. “We have plans.”

“I'm sure you do.” His smirk as he glanced at her just pissed me off all over again. “I'd definitely have plans with her as well.”

Telling myself to *not* punch him wasn't going to work. Karagiani nodded once then withdrew a step as I backed up to stand next to Mayhem's chair. King ignored both of us like we weren't a threat and moved to the other side of Mayhem and pulled out a chair to take a seat for himself.

“Miss Benedict, or do you prefer Lainey?” King greeted her like they were old friends and she shifted in her seat, crossing one leg over the other. All at once, it struck me that her panties were in my pocket and I settled a hand on her shoulder to let her know I was there.

“Miss Benedict is fine,” she informed him in a cool voice. She flicked a look up at me then down to the chair I'd occupied before. I didn't want to sit with him, However she wanted me in the conversation, not hovering above. I slid back

into my seat and she rested a hand on my thigh as I draped my arm behind her.

“Miss Benedict, I apologize for interrupting your evening, but I wanted to extend a courtesy to you since I saw you here with my son.”

I didn’t roll my eyes or snort. He glanced at me, his smirk growing before he focused on her again.

“That courtesy would be?”

“As you know, the Royals are composed of many families you are acquainted with—including your own.”

I went still. What was he doing?

“It’s been a tradition for a very long time—far longer than even my leadership dates.”

That was news to me, and despite the fact she didn’t twitch a muscle, Mayhem dug her fingers into my thigh. “And I care because?”

“Because your sister, Andrea Reed—she’s coming up on her fourteenth birthday very soon. That’s typically the age at which Royals are called up.”

“Are you serious?”

He chuckled, but it was a cold, almost empty sound. “Very serious. You see, Adam betrayed me. He was the Reed legacy, but he turned his back on the deal he made. Turned his back on the Royals. That means there is no longer a Reed heir serving—Andrea will have to do.”

“Absolutely not.” There wasn’t a single tremor to her voice nor her posture as she held his stare. “I’ll take her place ___”

“The hell you will,” I snapped before he could respond. “You are not doing a damn thing for him.”

“Andrea’s fourteen,” she argued and I understood that.

“You can’t trust him.” I cut my gaze back to him.

“You should speak to Adam before you make that call, or Ezra—my agreement with their service was I would never tap you, Miss Benedict. While Adam might be a backstabbing son of a bitch who doesn’t hold up his end of bargains, I won’t be...” He looked at me, and all I saw was him telling me to get my stuff all over again.

Get your stuff and let’s go.

I refused when I was seven.

I refused to leave my mother or my sister.

“So I’m afraid no matter how tempting an offer you make me, Miss Benedict—and I would love to *have* you. I’m afraid it’ll have to be Andrea.”

Her nails dug into my thigh and it all fell into place. Why today—why he had to just *share* this with her now.

“Or you could take me, and I’ll go in her place.” I slipped it out there and Mayhem jerked, her control faltering as she looked at me.

“Pretty Boy—”

“Shh,” I murmured, stroking her shoulder as I locked gazes with my father. “That’s what you want—isn’t it? Me?”

“Well, son,” he said as he leaned back in his chair. “I might be persuaded—still, you would have to prove your loyalty and I would need proof of it today.”

“Name it.”

“Perhaps we should take this conversation somewhere more private.”

Get your shit and let’s go.

Julius King locked gazes with me, ignoring Mayhem entirely. That was what he wanted. For me to get up and walk away from her.

Leave her.

Choose him.

“Give me one moment.” The words were out and King’s smile grew.

“Of course. I’ll be keeping count. One minute.” Then he rose, buttoning his jacket. “Miss Benedict.”

She went to stand, but I kept her there as he strode out of the box and Mayhem stared at me.

“Shh,” I said, pressing my finger to her lips before she could speak. I read every single objection in her eyes. “There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for my baby sister,” I whispered to her. “Nothing.”

Tears welled in her eyes.

“And I know damn well there’s nothing you won’t do for her either.” I stroked her face with my gaze, memorizing every bit of it. I pressed my lips to her forehead. “I’d do it for you too,” I said softly. “I will do this *for you*.”

“It means—”

“I know.” Then I kissed her, holding her lips prisoner for one last taste. It wouldn’t be the last, although it would have to hold me over for now.

“Milo—” She choked on my name and I stood.

“Thank you for the best birthday I’ve ever had.” Another touch to her cheek. “You stay safe.”

It was an order.

I pushed away from the table and strode out to where Karagiani stood. “Don’t let her out of your sight, and don’t let her follow.”

King waited for me just down the hall, his smirk in place as he glanced at his watch. I strode down the hall toward him and he clasped me on the shoulder. “Good boy,” he said. “You made the right choice for a change.”

I didn’t say a word as he led the way down the stairs. Nor did I dare look up to the box above where I left my heart.

There was before Mayhem, and then there was Mayhem.

This was my life.



The Royals will return in [Deceptive Truce](#)

AFTERWORD

Well, I mean... it could have been worse.

Probably not what you wanted to hear, but—I mean it could have been.

Still not buying that?

Right, to my corner I go. Before I go, though, keep in mind that the preorder for *Deceptive Truce* indicates it won't be out until next May. The release date was pushed out to give me breathing room but I plan to move it up as I finish the book.

You guys are the best!

xoxo

Heather

P.S. Yes, I am heading right back to my corner!

Reader group:

[facebook.com/groups/heatherspack](https://www.facebook.com/groups/heatherspack)

Spoiler group:

[facebook.com/groups/teammatatheather](https://www.facebook.com/groups/teammatatheather)

DECEPTIVE TRUCE

BAY RIDGE ROYALS BOOK 3

Life has been a series of exquisite disasters...

Do you ever lie to yourself? I do. Making friends has been the cruelest choice I ever inflicted upon myself. I like to say I don't regret it, and for the most part that's true.

I resent it.

I despise him because he left me behind, following another battle in this war we've been waging. I thought we were partners, best friends, allies, and that he would always have my back as I've fought to have his.

I hate her because she's perfection and everything he's ever wanted, untouchable, brilliant, and capable. Yet, I want her too. Need her. Still, she gave herself to someone else.

Telling myself one taste would have to be enough, even when I knew it never could be, is just another deception I sold myself on this trail of disaster.

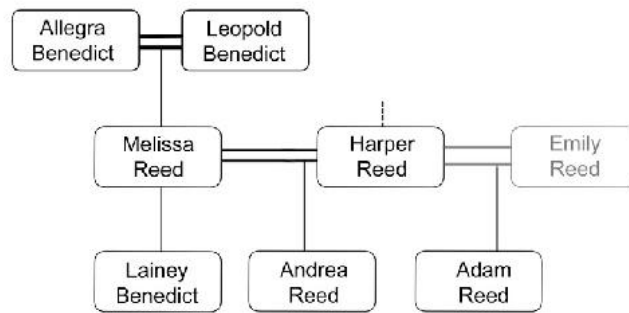
No matter what I do, I'm not enough for them, for my family, for this world we inhabit. Now—alliances are shifting, and our enemies are closing in.

I know the difference and I know I need to leave them to face it all on their own. That's the choice I should make. That's the choice I have to make.

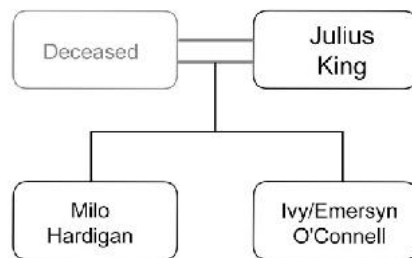
Or at least, that's the newest lie I tell myself.

[Order](#)

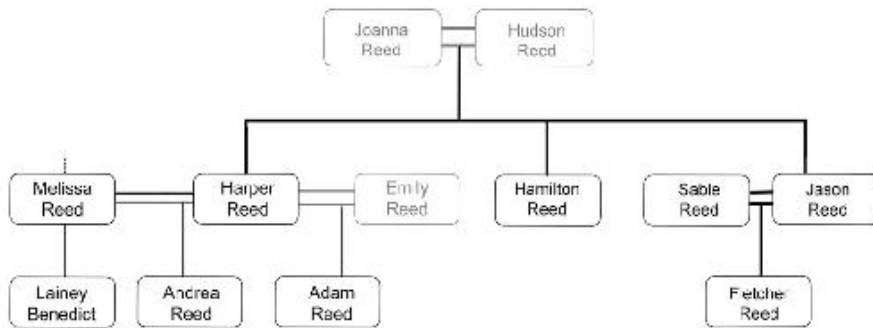
BENEDICT FAMILY



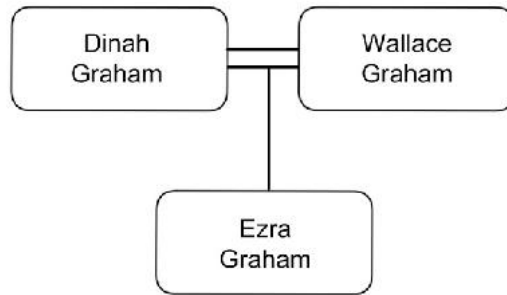
HARDIGAN FAMILY



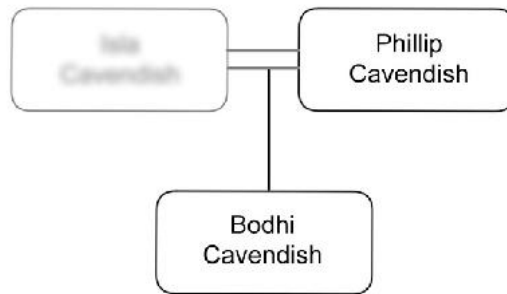
REED FAMILY



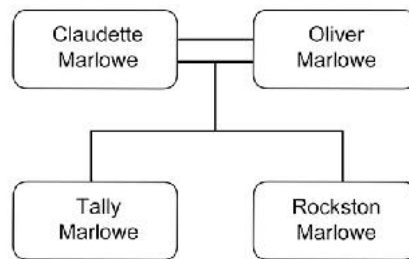
GRAHAM FAMILY



CAVENDISH FAMILY



MARLOWE FAMILY



ABOUT HEATHER LONG

I *love* books. Not just a little bit, but a lot. Books were my best friends when I was growing up. Books didn't care if I was new to a town or to a class. They were always there, my trustiest of companions. Until they turned on me and said I had to write them.

I can tell you that my own personal happily ever after included writing books. I've always said that an HEA is a work in progress. It's true in my marriage, my friendships, and in my career. I am constantly nurturing my muse as we dive into new tales, new tropes, new characters and more.

After seventeen years in Texas, we relocated to the Pacific Northwest in search of seasons, new experiences, and new geography. I can't wait to discover what life (and my muse) have in store for me.

Maybe writing was always my destiny and romance my fate. After all, my grandmother wasn't a fan of picture books and used to read me her Harlequin Romance novels.

Follow Heather & Sign up for her newsletter:

www.heatherlong.net

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82nd Street Vandals

Savage Vandal

Vicious Rebel

Ruthless Traitor

Dirty Devil

Shamelessly Loyal (Novella)

Brutal Fighter

Dangerous Renegade

Merciless Spy

Reckless Thief

Fierce Dancer

Bay Ridge Royals

Shamelessly Loyal (Novella)

Battle Lines

Blue Ivy Prep

Problem Child

Mad Boys

Party Crashers

Money Shot

Bravo Team Wolf

When Danger Bites

Bitten Under Fire

Cardinal Sins

Kill Song

First Chorus

High Note

Last Word

Chance Monroe

Earth Witches Aren't Easy

Plan Witch from Out of Town

Bad Witch Rising

Fevered Hearts

Marshal of Hel Dorado

Brave are the Lonely

Micah & Mrs. Miller

A Fistful of Dreams

Raising Kane

Wanted: Fevered or Alive

Wild and Fevered

The Quick & The Fevered

A Man Called Wyatt

Heart of the Nebula

Queenmaker

Deal Breaker

Throne Taker

Lone Star Leathernecks

Semper Fi Cowboy

As You Were, Cowboy

Shackled Souls

Succubus Chained

Succubus Unchained

Succubus Blessed

Shackled Souls (Omnibus)

Untouchable

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Wolves of Willow Bend

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Wolf Bite

Caged Wolf

Wolf Claim

Wolf Next Door

Rogue Wolf
Bayou Wolf
Untamed Wolf
Wolf with Benefits
River Wolf
Single Wicked Wolf
Desert Wolf
Snow Wolf
Wolf on Board
Holly Jolly Wolf
Shadow Wolf
His Moonstruck Wolf
Thunder Wolf
Ghost Wolf
Outlaw Wolves
Wolf Unleashed