

RIVER RAIN BOOK FIVE

KRISTEN

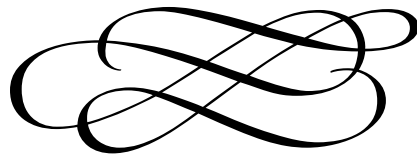
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ASHLEY

*Fighting  
the  
Pull*

# FIGHTING THE PULL

A RIVER RAIN NOVEL



KRISTEN ASHLEY



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Fighting the Pull

A River Rain Novel

By Kristen Ashley

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# BOOK DESCRIPTION

Fighting the Pull  
A River Rain Novel, Book 5  
By Kristen Ashley

From *New York Times* bestselling author Kristen Ashley comes the new book in her River Rain Series, *Fighting the Pull*.

Hale Wheeler inherited billions from his father. He's decided to take those resources and change the world for the better. He's married to his mission, so he doesn't have time for love.

There's more lurking behind this decision. He hasn't faced the tragic loss of his father, or the bitterness of his parents' divorce. He doesn't intend to follow in his father's footsteps, breaking a woman's heart in a way it will never mend. So he vows he'll never marry.

But Hale is intrigued when he meets Elsa Cohen, the ambitious celebrity news journalist who has been reporting on his famous family. He warns her off, but she makes him a deal. She'll pull back in exchange for an exclusive interview.

Elsa Cohen is married to her career, but she wants love, marriage, children. She also wants the impossibly handsome, fiercely loyal, tenderhearted Hale Wheeler.

They go head-to-head, both denying why there are fireworks every time they meet. But once they understand their undeniable attraction, Elsa can't help but fall for the dynamic do-gooder.

As for Hale, he knows he needs to fight the pull of the beautiful, bold, loving Elsa Cohen, because breaking her would crush him.

# ABOUT KRISTEN ASHLEY

Kristen Ashley is the *New York Times* bestselling author of over eighty romance novels including the *Rock Chick*, *Colorado Mountain*, *Dream Man*, *Chaos*, *Unfinished Heroes*, *The 'Burg*, *Magdalene*, *Fantasyland*, *The Three*, *Ghost and Reincarnation*, *Moonlight and Motor Oil*, *Dream Team*, *River Rain* and *Honey* series along with several standalone novels. She's a hybrid author, publishing titles both independently and traditionally, her books have been translated in fourteen languages and she's sold over five million books.

Kristen's novel, *Law Man*, won the *RT Book Reviews* Reviewer's Choice Award for best Romantic Suspense. Her independently published title *Hold On* was nominated for *RT Book Reviews* best Independent Contemporary Romance and her traditionally published title *Breathe* was nominated for best Contemporary Romance. Kristen's titles *Motorcycle Man*, *The Will*, *Ride Steady* (which won the Reader's Choice award from *Romance Reviews*) and *The Hookup* all made the final rounds for Goodreads Choice Awards in the Romance category.

Kristen, born in Gary and raised in Brownsburg, Indiana, was a fourth-generation graduate of Purdue University. Since, she has lived in Denver, the West Country of England, and now she resides in Phoenix. She worked as a charity executive for eighteen years prior to beginning her independent publishing career. She currently writes full-time.

Although romance is her genre, the prevailing themes running through all of Kristen's novels are friendship, family and a strong sisterhood. To this end, and as a way to thank her readers for their support, Kristen has created the Rock Chick Nation, a series of programs that are designed to give back to her readers and promote a strong female community.



The mission of the Rock Chick Nation is to live your best life, be true to your true self, recognize your beauty and take your sister's back whether they're friends and family or if they're thousands of miles away and you don't know who they are. The programs of the RC Nation include: Rock Chick Rendezvous, weekends Kristen organizes full of parties and get-togethers to bring the sisterhood together; Rock Chick Recharges, evenings Kristen arranges for women who have been nominated to receive a special night; and Rock Chick Rewards, an ongoing program that raises funds for nonprofit women's organizations Kristen's readers nominate. Kristen's Rock Chick Rewards have donated over \$180,000 to charity and this number continues to rise.

You can read more about Kristen, her titles and the Rock Chick Nation at [KristenAshley.net](http://KristenAshley.net).

# ALSO BY KRISTEN ASHLEY

## **Rock Chick Series:**

*Rock Chick*

*Rock Chick Rescue*

*Rock Chick Redemption*

*Rock Chick Renegade*

*Rock Chick Revenge*

*Rock Chick Reckoning*

*Rock Chick Regret*

*Rock Chick Revolution*

*Rock Chick Reawakening*

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## **The 'Burg Series:**

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*At Peace*

*Golden Trail*

*Games of the Heart*

*The Promise*

*Hold On*

## **The Chaos Series:**

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*Fire Inside*

*Ride Steady*

*Walk Through Fire*

*A Christmas to Remember*

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*Wild Like the Wind*

*Free*

*Wild Fire*

*Wild Wind*

**The Colorado Mountain Series:**

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*Sweet Dreams*

*Lady Luck*

*Breathe*

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**Dream Team Series:**

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*Dream Spinner*

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*Wildest Dreams*

*The Golden Dynasty*

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*Broken Dove*

*Midnight Soul*

*Gossamer in the Darkness*

**The Honey Series:**

*The Deep End*

*The Farthest Edge*

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**The Magdalene Series:**

*The Will*

*Soaring*

*The Time in Between*

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*The Hookup*

*The Slow Burn*

**The River Rain Series:**

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*Chasing Serenity*

*Taking the Leap*

*Making the Match*

*Fighting the Pull*

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*With Everything I Am*

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*Lacybourne Manor*

*Penmort Castle*

*Fairytale Come Alive*

*Lucky Stars*

**The Rising Series:**

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*The Plan Commences*

*The Dawn of the End*

*The Rising*

**Mathilda, SuperWitch:**

*Mathilda's Book of Shadows*

*Mathilda The Rise of the Dark Lord*

**Other Titles by Kristen Ashley:**

*Heaven and Hell*

*Play It Safe*

*Three Wishes*

*Complicated*

*Loose Ends*

*Fast Lane*

[CLICK HERE TO ORDER TITLES by KRISTEN ASHLEY](#)

# AUTHOR'S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I'd like to thank my niece, Karen Wynne, for helping me navigate Brooklyn and Manhattan so Elsa's love and knowledge of the city could be felt in her story.

Up next, thank you to Jillian Stein for helping me to show the father/daughter love with their culture shining through in Elsa's conversations with David.

I am honored to work on these books with my readers, the River Rain Team, and I need to shout out to all of them who show their enthusiastic support not only through reading my books, but through the process of me writing.

I try to take note of those who offered pieces to the story directly so I can give credit where it's due, so I'll do that here.

Shout out to Amber Lee Recchia for giving us the cream dress that Nora wore to the Blazing the Trail gala. Competition was fierce for this one when the votes were being cast, but I think it proved how well my readers know these characters that this dress was chosen.

Tanja Bøg Sørensen offered up the dress Elsa wore to Chloe's wedding, and Momo Staub gave us the exquisite gown Chloe wore to marry Judge.

By the way, you can see all of these on my River Rain Pinterest page.

Pam Belkevitz gave "Heath" as a name, Maicie Tallent "Rocco", Terri Malon "Hudson" and Doreena Hodges named Elsa's agent "Audrey."

I fictionally stole Laura Weyer's cat Frosty, and Brianna Hook's cat Cheddar to give to Hale and Elsa. My loving snuggles go to those adorable pookies.

And last, Solette De Klerk picked Judge and Chloe's wedding dance

song. It was so very Judge, and what he'd give to Chloe, it made me weep while I listened to it over and over as I wrote that scene.

And not knowing how beautifully it fit not only for Elsa and Hale, but also for Hale and Corey, Jan Wigren gave us "Love You Till the End" by The Pogues. While writing that, I didn't weep. I sobbed.

I'll end with my forever gratitude to my editor, Liz Berry, and the rest of the awesome team at Blue Box Press (the best boutique in the business!), MJ Rose, Jillian Stein, Kim Guidroz, Stacey Tardif and Asha Hossain.

And one final special mention to the other member of my two-man band, Donna Perry.

Love you till the end.

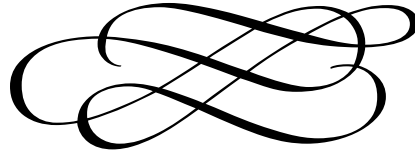
# DEDICATION

To my River Rain Team.

Hale, Elsa and I thank you for having our backs during the telling of this  
story...  
and beyond.



# PROLOGUE



## FAMILIAR FEELING

*Corey*

*T* hen...

It was not a good idea to roll up to his son's baseball game in a chauffeur-driven town car.

However, it was either that or miss another one of Hale's games.

No, that was incorrect.

It was either that or miss the entire season, since this was the championship, and until then, Corey hadn't been to a single game.

But weather had been atrocious in Minneapolis, where he'd been that morning. Their takeoff had been delayed for over three hours.

One of his assistants had made all the plans, and Corey should have had plenty of time to get home, get changed and drive to the field in one of his personal vehicles, all of which were high-performance, and thus expensive. But they weren't chauffeur-driven town cars.

Regretfully, after their late takeoff, that became impossible.

But he couldn't miss another game. Sam would be livid, and Corey would have to put up with her attitude.

And his son Hale would be...

Corey didn't finish that thought as he stood beside the bleachers in his ten-thousand-dollar bespoke suit trying to figure out what was happening on the field.

He'd never been into sports. However, since Hale played baseball, if Corey had more time, he'd look up the rules and regs, even read up on the history and watch a few games.

Although he didn't know much about baseball, he could see his son's natural ability. His focus. The ease with which he maneuvered his body, even at fifteen years old.

Watching him, Corey had a funny taste in his mouth because Hale reminded him of...

He didn't finish that thought either.

Nevertheless, Corey was a busy man. He didn't have time for much of anything, but work. If he had time, he'd have been at more than one of Hale's games and would have learned by being there, not reading a book about the history of baseball.

He stood where he was, not-so-easily ignoring the attention he got from both sides of the bleachers.

Yes, Corey was wearing a suit that no doubt cost months of their mortgages.

Yes, Corey was in a suit, rather than wearing something far more casual, like everyone else.

Yes, his chauffeur was also his bodyguard, and the man was not only sticking close to his charge, but also being obvious about it.

Yes, Corey was more famous than many in that town, and considering it was Los Angeles, that was no small feat.

And yes, he was by far richer than *any* in that town, and that was no small feat either.

What made the attention not so easy to ignore wasn't about any of that. Normally, he would have no issue with it. He was used to it. And in these instances, he could share it. Genny and Tom were in the bleachers watching Hale. As were their kids, Chloe, Matt and Sasha.

Or, as Corey understood it, but Sam did not, Hale's real family were watching Hale play baseball.

Now, *they* never missed a game.

Genny—or America's Sweetheart, Imogen Swan—wasn't richer than Corey, but she was far more famous. Tom, partly by association, was as well, considering he wasn't only Genny's husband, but many said he was one of the greatest tennis players ever to play the game.

And Corey could feel their censure, particularly Tom's.

Tom was a busy man too, but he'd cut off his own arm before he'd miss something important to his wife or one of his children. In fact, if the situation came up (and it had), Tom would fly from Australia to LA just to walk Genny down a red carpet, then fly right back in order to continue commentating the matches, which was what he did now that he'd retired.

Tom would find a way...and did.

Genny, the highest paid actor in Hollywood, would find a way...and did.

Corey showed up in the seventh inning, and he might not know much about baseball, but he knew there were only nine innings.

However, it wasn't only Genny and Tom being disappointed in him that was difficult to ignore.

It was his ex-wife Sam's seething fury that Corey could feel all the way to where he was standing.

She was there, and probably had been since before the game began, so she could get a seat where Hale could see she was present, and his father wasn't.

And she'd taken all that time Corey hadn't shown not to cheer her son on, but to feed her fury at her son's father. So now, she wasn't even paying attention to the game. She was glaring at Corey.

He had to admit, she had reason to be angry, and that reason wasn't (all) about him missing Hale's baseball games. He'd confessed he'd cheated on her (when he hadn't, but she didn't know that). He'd told her it was with Genny (when it wasn't). Considering he'd been in love with Genny since he was ten years old, it was a play to win Genny (it failed). He and Sam had only been married a short time, and she'd been pregnant with Hale when he'd done what he'd done.

So, yes. That was bad.

But for shit's sake, it had all gone down fifteen years ago.

She needed to get over it.

Hale wouldn't miss his mother's mood. And Hale wouldn't be taken in by his mother's show of support either.

Corey had no idea where his son got his athletic prowess, since it certainly wasn't from Corey or Sam, but he got his brains from his father.

It was the top of the ninth when Sasha skipped over to him and threw her arms around his legs, tipping her head back and shouting, "Hello, Uncle Corey!" like he was a baseball field away and not right there.

He put his hand on her shining, golden hair and replied, "Hello, Sasha."

“Hale got a home run in the third inning,” she shared. “Dad nearly had a *heart attack* he was so excited. Dad said it was a special one because there were a lot of people on the bases.”

Of course, Hale got a home run with “a lot of people on the bases.”

“And he’s stolen *three bases*. Dad says that’s *a whole bunch* for one game,” Sasha relayed.

“Excellent,” Corey murmured.

At this point, Chloe sauntered over, more naturally self-possessed than most adults Corey knew...and she was ten years old.

“Hey, Uncle Corey,” she greeted.

“Chloe.”

She got up on her toes and he bent to let her kiss his cheek.

Sasha, only six, kept hold of his leg while Chloe came to stand at his other side.

Sasha was there because she was a bright, sunny child who loved everyone, and it was probably doing her little soul irreparable harm to allow Corey to stand by himself at the side of the bleachers for a single moment longer.

Chloe was there because she knew her mother, father and Aunt Samantha were pissed at him, and she loved her Uncle Corey. The game would end soon, and she was either going to run interference, or simply with her little-kid presence make it difficult for anyone to confront him in an ugly manner.

If it was any other child her age, Corey would be more comfortable thinking she didn’t understand what she was doing. Something like that would be uncanny in a ten-year-old.

However, this was Chloe. She knew precisely what she was about at all times.

And she was there to fend off Samantha.

He loved Sasha.

He cherished Chloe.

Things happened on the field that meant the game was over surprisingly quickly, with Hale’s team winning, and Chloe, knowing Corey, instantly explained, “Hale’s team was the home team. They were leading so they don’t have to have an at bat.”

Ah.

There you go.

Sasha had lost interest in her Uncle Corey in order to dance to the chain

link fence, shout her excitement and yell Hale's name repeatedly.

Matt, Genny and Tom's middle child, didn't go to Corey. He went to Sasha. She was six, and her parents were right there, and Corey was close, but more importantly Corey's bodyguard was, and Matt wasn't but a little over a year older than her, but Matt was protective.

Like his father.

Even though Genny and Tom were standing, clapping and calling congratulations to Hale and the team, Sam left the bleachers in a hurry and made a beeline to Corey.

He felt Chloe's arm brush his side as she closed in on him. He looked down at her.

"You going to challenge her to a duel?" he quipped.

"If she's mean to you, yes," she replied in all seriousness.

Oh yes, he cherished this child.

He smiled at her.

She smiled back.

"Nice you could make it *for an inning*." Sam's snide voice captured his attention.

"Hey, Aunt Sam!" Chloe cried with fake excitement.

"Chloe," she said shortly, then turned her gaze back to Corey and opened her mouth.

His ex was not one to worry that a ten-year-old was standing there. When it came to her loathing of her ex-husband, and her need to express it, nothing stood in the way.

But Sam underestimated her opponent, and that opponent was not Corey.

Chloe took his hand, tugged and announced, "Mom and Dad are having pizza and ice cream for the team at our house. Come on. Those boys are gross and dirty, and they'll eat all the pepperoni if we don't get there first." While tugging him toward his town car, she then yelled, "Mom! Dad! I'm going with Uncle Corey."

He saw Genny nod, Tom's failed attempt to hide a scowl, and last, Sam's face get beet red that she'd been denied her opportunity to sink her claws into her ex-husband.

Allowing himself to be led, Corey looked beyond all of them to the field.

He caught Hale's eyes on him.

He lifted his chin to his boy.

It was a familiar feeling, but even so, it nevertheless decimated him as he

felt something die inside when Hale didn't acknowledge his father's attention.

He just turned and walked away.

Corey didn't know it in that moment, and it would take over a decade for him to figure out why, but that was the last baseball game Hale would ever play.

## *Hale*

*Now...*

"Are you going to open it?"

"No."

"Never?"

"Never."

"Ever?"

"Ever."

"Hale—"

"Chloe, leave it."

At her fiancé Judge's murmured demand, Chloe shut her mouth.

And Hale, not for the first time, wondered why he hadn't chucked the box his father left him after he'd committed suicide right in the trash.

Especially since every time Chloe set eyes on it, some version of this conversation would happen. And since Genny and Duncan had a place in LA, and Judge worked with Hale on the not-for-profit arm of Hale's business, his de facto sister and her fiancé were in LA a lot.

So they had this conversation often.

And still, he hadn't thrown that fucking box away.

"Do you want me to open it for you?" Chloe asked gently.

"Babe, *leave it*," Judge whispered, a thread of harshness in his words.

Chloe shut up again, not because she was a woman who let a man tell her what to do.

No, it was because she loved two men who both lost parents in ugly ways.

Judge and Hale shared something hideous. Chloe had no idea. She had two loving parents who thought the world of her, were always there for her, and who she knew to her bones she could count on.

Hale avoided her eyes.

Chloe was worried and she wasn't the kind of woman to hide her feelings, especially when she was feeling something for someone she loved.

And Chloe and her family were the only real family Hale had ever had, he loved her too, all of them, and he didn't want her to worry at all, but especially not for him.

He should just let her open the box.

But he couldn't.

He couldn't open it. He couldn't throw it away.

It was just there, in the living room of the house his father left to him, along with his company, his many other properties, and his billions. That box was now like a small art installation, it'd been sitting on that shelf for so long.

As far as he was concerned, it could stay there until Chloe's children inherited it, because Hale didn't intend on having any kids, nor did he intend to get married. He wasn't about to repeat the sins of his father. And he was going to leave Chloe the house when—sometime he hoped was a long time from now—he died, not only because Hale knew she loved that house, but because he knew his father would want her to have it.

She'd been Corey Szabo's favorite.

It wasn't obvious.

But to his son, it still totally was.

On that thought, abruptly, he stood.

Chloe started and her face grew a little pale.

Judge tensed.

"I have a flight to New York to catch," he announced.

Chloe looked at her watch, saying, "Yes, in two hours." She turned her gaze to him, and quickly went on, "We were going out to lunch. And by the by, you own the plane, *mon frère*. You can leave whenever you like."

"It'll be best if I—" Hale started.

"I won't mention the box again," she promised.

"Ever," Judge put in.

She pressed her lips together, not willing to go that far.

At that, Hale smiled.

Hale didn't have any favorites in the Pierce family. The sisters and brother Tom and Genny had given him, the parents they tried to be, they all held equal places in his heart.

In fact, they took up the whole of it.

"Right, then, let's go to lunch," he said. "But I should get to the airport sooner rather than later. I've got shit to do, and I don't want to be landing at midnight."

Chloe popped up instantly, not about to miss her shot at lunch with her big brother.

Judge followed more slowly.

They went out and had tacos.

On his way to the airport, Hale got out his phone and sent a text.

*As you know, since I told you days ago, I'm going to be in the city for a week. I arrive this evening. Can we finally set this fucking interview and be done with it?*

He did not receive a return text by the time he boarded his father's custom jet.

He still had not received one by the time they landed.

And now, this had been going on for too long.

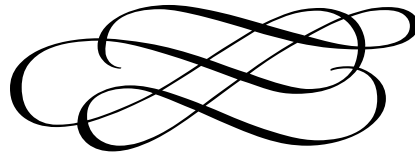
It was her that wanted this interview in the first place.

He'd made a promise.

And whether the woman liked it or not, he was going to keep it.



# CHAPTER 1



## UNDER HIS THUMB

*Elsa*

As I walked from my apartment to the studio, I had a million things on my mind, which wasn't good considering, in this neighborhood, you needed to keep your senses sharp.

But my mother had texted that morning, saying my brother and his wife were going to be in town, and she wanted a family dinner Saturday night.

I had no plans on Saturday, but I wanted to sit down and break bread with my family like I wanted someone to pluck my hair out with tweezers, one strand at a time.

I had a lot of hair.

That said, I wasn't sure how to get out of it.

As mentioned, I didn't have any plans that night, which would be strike one according to my family, since not only was I not dating, I wasn't seeing anyone. Or better, engaged. Or the best, giving up "that parasitic hobby" and spending my time dusting, making dinner and producing babies for my husband.

In other words, I was already losing before I even showed at dinner.

And using work as an excuse to get out of it...

Well, one could just say that I'd rather spend three hours fielding questions about how I'm "putting myself out there" than dealing with the response of sharing I was too busy with work to show.

In other words, strike two would be the fact I still was engaged in "that parasitic hobby." That being my "Elsa's Exchange, Celebrity News and

Interviews” channel.

Did it count for them I had over thirty million followers?

No.

Did it count for them that I was currently assessing three...I’ll repeat *three* seven-figure...and I’ll repeat again, *seven-figure* offers to stream on a major platform?

No.

Okay, to be fair, by “for them” I meant Mom, my brother Oskar and my sister Emilie. Dad got a kick out of my show. He didn’t say that often in front of Mom, but he found his ways to make it known to me.

But Mom’s censure made up for Dad’s acceptance.

Nugget of news: it always had.

Strike three would be...

Well, everything else about me.

Since the only real excuses I had were work, and that would be unacceptable, or I already had plans with girlfriends, which would also be unacceptable (for Mom, family trumped friends, even if my brother and I weren’t close, didn’t really get along and never did, ditto with my sister, and then some with my mother). Further, my girlfriends weren’t popular with Mom. They were too ambitious. Too independent. Too modern.

I mean, seriously, Mom was from one of the most progressive countries in the world, and she moved to one of the most liberal cities in the world.

And yet.

Thank God Dad found his ways to balance her out.

Though, how long that would last, I didn’t know. And that same thought had been rattling around in my head for ages.

Since I could remember, the strain in their marriage was like a fourth child. I’d ridden a wave of lowkey guilt also since I could remember, hoping they’d break up, and Dad would get custody of me and only me.

Not my momma’s-best-boy older brother, not my perfect-last-child sister.

Only me.

Alas, that had not happened.

Still, lowkey, one hung on to the hope.

The other million things on my mind started with those offers my agent was assessing and ended with my work mobile being clogged with texts and emails of celebrity sightings, scuttlebutt, and notices of pictures I needed to bid on.

So I had all of that to get through, and I needed to glamorize myself because we were taping a segment that morning. Something I intended to write before I left home but decided to stick to my guns and keep work and home life separate. So instead, I was going to get into it at my office at the studio.

It was seven in the morning. With what I had to get through, I'd be lucky to leave by seven that night.

At least now I had the money to hire an assistant, something I'd done.

I'd give her the phone to tackle the texts while I looked at the photos. It wouldn't be good for someone else to get juicy exclusives and only I could make decisions about what money was going to be spent.

The thing on my mind that I wasn't admitting was taking more headspace than it should was the fact that Hale had texted the day before.

Again.

Why he wasn't letting himself off the hook about this interview he never wanted in the first place, I did not know. And it wasn't going to be me who let him off the hook. Oh no. Not officially.

But I wasn't returning his texts, so unofficially, the guy should take a hint.

We'd made a deal almost a year before. The deal was, I'd kinda, sorta lay off his family, he'd give me an interview.

I couldn't totally lay off his family. They were the most celebrated celebrities in the world. Even the ones who hadn't sought that out, like Chloe Pierce and Judge Oakley.

But there were a great many different kinds of celebrity news, and it didn't seem like Hale Wheeler had cottoned on to the fact I wasn't a mudslinger.

Sure, I also wasn't an objective journalist. But I wasn't TMZ either.

Nugget of news: you could share gossip for a living and still be classy. I was proof of that (or I thought I was).

I had my key ready to put into the four locks on the door to the building where my studio was in Brooklyn, and with practiced ease, I was out of the New York autumn morning cold in no time.

I locked the door behind me and headed to the space in the sectioned off warehouse that I rented for my studio.

I had to unlock that door too (only three locks this time), and once inside, I practically ran into Chuck, my cameraman, who was for some reason right

there and crowding me.

My space was small, but this was weird.

I looked at his face, and...great.

We'd probably been burgled.

It wasn't like I had a ton of expensive equipment, but what I had was hard won. I had offers coming in, and they were healthier than I'd allowed myself to dream, but I hadn't signed on any dotted line. So, for the foreseeable future, ongoing operating costs, and any expansion, was on me.

I didn't have time to deal with police reports and insurance companies telling me how little they could actually replace seeing as some small line in their contract exempted them from doing what I paid them to do. Nor did I need to be shelling out to replace stuff.

"What's up?" I warily asked Chuck.

"Hale Wheeler is here," he whispered.

Oh no.

That was worse than being burgled.

My gaze flew beyond Chuck to my set which was a one-step dais on which sat a mint green velvet swivel chair with a glass-topped gold side table beside it. These were in front of a greenscreen backdrop we could make anything we wanted it to be. Though usually it was subtle pastel green and peach swirls against a soft white with the words "Elsa's Exchange" repeated throughout.

And damn it all to hell, there he was.

Tall, ridiculously handsome, athletically built Hale Wheeler, the richest man in the world.

"He was here when I got here," Chuck told me.

As he could be, since he'd bought the building.

He wanted to control what I said about his famous family.

I wanted the freedom to do my job.

These twains did not meet.

"I'll take care of it," I muttered to Chuck.

Even as I said that and moved around him, I felt Chuck shadowing me as I approached Hale Wheeler.

I couldn't think on Chuck.

With his presence filling up the space, I had no choice but to be all about Hale Wheeler.

I mean, really. How was his existence even fair?

He was gorgeous. He had great taste in clothes. He was fit. He was fiendishly loyal to his family. And he had enough money to end food insecurity around the globe, and he might, because he wasn't about being rich, he was about something else entirely.

All that and integrity too?

It was annoying.

"If it isn't the Extraordinary Mr. Wheeler. To what do I owe this honor?" I asked.

His pale green gaze flicked to Chuck before it came back to me.

"Your office. Alone. Now."

Four words. Each one of them uttered in a deep, rough growl.

For a moment, the only response I could focus on was what those words did to my nipples.

After I recovered from that, I noted he appeared ticked.

Although I'd been in the same place at the same time as him, I'd avoided him for reasons I refused to explore.

Nevertheless, I'd seen what could amount to hours of footage, not to mention thousands of photos of him going in and out of buildings, entering and alighting from cars, walking down sidewalks, attending events, and doing such things I normally blocked out, like surfing or eating dinner with a beautiful woman.

So much of all of this, it felt like I knew him.

Therefore, I could tell when he was angry.

Like, for instance, now.

I studied him.

I liked what I saw.

I stopped studying him.

"All right," I agreed, that infernal characteristic I would swear I'd been born with—curiosity—overriding good sense (as it had a wont to do, hence my occupation).

"I don't—" Chuck started.

I turned to him. "I'll be okay."

Chuck stared down at me for a beat. I knew he didn't like it, but he eventually jerked up his chin.

I led Hale to my office, which was tiny, windowless, and not all that attractive. Everything in it was secondhand.

I'd splurged on what sat on the dais, as well as my makeup table and

director's chair, both of which were out in the studio.

This space?

Well, even though I attempted to balance work and life (I failed daily, by the by), I did my best to shut down when I went home, so I tried not to work when I was at home. This meant I spent a lot of time in this studio, and the office.

Still, what my watchers saw was more important than what they couldn't see. So I didn't bother investing much in my office.

However, leading Hale to it, for the first time, I was embarrassed by it.

I entered, he came in after me, and I turned to him just in time to watch him shut the door in a way that was both controlled, and still furious.

When he turned his attention to me, I began, "I know I haven't been returning your tex—"

He cut me off by asking, "What the fuck is this shit, Elsa?"

I tried again. "I was just about to explain—"

"I bought the fucking building having no idea you could relocate to Syria and be safer going to work."

I shut my mouth in surprise.

Hale didn't.

"Jesus Christ, there's not even a security system in this fucking place."

Nugget of news: we'd spoken on the phone, exchanged texts, and as mentioned, I'd been in the same place as him. But we'd never officially met.

So much for *how do you do*.

"I—"

"I'm shutting it down until I can get some security measures installed."

I felt my eyes get huge and my heartrate spike.

"Coded doors. Outdoor cameras. Indoor cameras," he continued. "New windows with wire in them. Uniformed personnel conducting drive-bys and random checks. And it's fucking freezing in here and your guy out there said the heating is constantly on the fritz. I'll be seeing to that as well."

My eyes stayed huge, but this time, my breath went funny.

"I'll have my assistant inform you when you're safe to reenter the building," he finished.

It took some effort, but I found my voice. "Hale, you can't shut me down. This is where I do my work. If I don't have access to this space, I can't do my work."

"You can take a week."

What?

“I can’t take a week,” I snapped. “And furthermore, *you* can’t tell me I can take a week. You don’t know the first thing about my business. So allow me to educate you, celebrity news is a twenty-four seven thing. It never stops. You have to be on it all the time. I haven’t had a vacation in three years.”

“Now’s your shot.”

Was he crazy?

“Hale—”

“This isn’t up for discussion, Elsa,” he stated dismissively. “The world can live without your *on-dits* for a week.”

My *on-dits*?

“I take what I do seriously,” I informed him.

“I can tell. However, we both know what you do isn’t actually serious.”

Oh my God!

No. No, no, no.

I wasn’t going to take the bait and get into a discussion about my work with him.

I sidestepped that and retorted, “I’m not vacating this building for work that can be done while I’m using it and *paying rent* to use it.”

“First up then is changing the locks so you can’t access the building while the work is being done. I’ll reimburse you for a week’s rent.”

My eyes narrowed. “Is this your new ploy to shut me down?”

“No, it’s my ploy to make sure you can do your work without someone coming in and stealing all your shit and or doing something hideous to you if they show while you’re in here working.”

All right, the neighborhood wasn’t the greatest. It was in a borough of New York City, one of the biggest cities in the world. One could argue every part of NYC could be dicey.

But it wasn’t Syria, no matter what he said. Not even close.

“I’ve had this space for two years without incident.”

“You’ll have it for two more with less chance to court an incident.”

“I’m a native New Yorker, Mr. Wheeler, I know how to look after myself.”

“Did you miss the part where I said this isn’t up for discussion?” he asked.

Another nugget of news: He sure was pretty. And an absolute asshole.

One thing I knew was that I could not go dark when I had three huge

offers on the table.

I could find some temporary space, but that would be a pain in the ass. And it wasn't like I could tape my segments days in advance. Celebrity news waited for no woman. I couldn't be talking about Prince Harry when Harry Styles was up to something.

As I thought all of this, Hale watched me.

He then said, "If you're that bent out of shape about it, I'll relocate you at my expense while the work is being done."

If I was that bent out of shape?

"Thank you so much for that offer, which I will accept, considering it's the least you can do when you're shutting me out of space you're contractually obligated to allow me to use for the purposes I'm using it," I returned. "But allow me to register my complaint at terminology such as 'bent out of shape' about you feeling you can allow or disallow me to work at all."

Hale ignored that and declared, "And we're filming our interview on Saturday. Forward the questions you intend to ask me tomorrow so I can have a look at them."

On the one hand, I wanted to jump at this. It was the perfect excuse to get out of dinner with my family. Even Mom wouldn't turn her nose up at me missing dinner because I was interviewing Hale Wheeler at his father's penthouse apartment.

On the other hand, as big as this interview was going to be—and it was going to be huge, he might have his office make statements to the press, but he'd never sat down to an interview like the one I intended to capture—after this friendly tête-à-tête, I didn't want to be in his presence again for oh...I didn't know. Twenty years, at least.

"I'm booked on Saturday," I lied.

He studied me.

I held his stare and fought the need to cross my arms on my chest protectively.

Then he said, "We either do this shit on Saturday, or it doesn't happen at all. We made a deal. I don't renege on deals. You've ignored my communications or sidestepped making plans for an entire fucking *year*. If you can't do Saturday, I'll accept that as you renegeing on our deal."

Dammit, dammit, dammit.

I couldn't lose this interview.



An interview like this could add another zero to the negotiations I was currently in.

Seriously.

I should have done it months ago.

A year ago.

Dammit!

“Fine,” I bit off.

“Excellent,” he drawled.

“But the deal was, no pre-approved questions. Just pre-approval before broadcast,” I reminded him.

“I didn’t say I was going to approve them, I said I wanted to have a look at them.” He tilted his head toward the studio. “I take it it’s just going to be you and that guy out there?”

I hated it that he’d witnessed the wizard behind her curtain.

But he had. No sense dwelling on it.

I nodded. “Chuck will do the filming and set up the lighting. I also have an assistant who might be there. Her name is Zoey. Do you need me to arrange for hair and makeup for you?”

He stared at me like I was insane.

“Please tell me you’ve heard about the Kennedy-Nixon debate,” I said.

“I’m not running for office,” he replied. “I don’t want to do this at all. But we made a deal. And you kept up your end of it. So we’re doing this. And then you and me are done.”

Why his last words felt like a tiny, poison-tipped arrow penetrating my heart, I didn’t know (yes, I did, he was just that pretty...and he wanted to save the world, and had the means to do it, which was ludicrously attractive).

Even so, as evidenced by our conversation, he owned this building. He’d also purchased the building where my apartment was located. So, until he sold them, we’d never be *done* done.

I’d be under his thumb, always. Even when I signed one of those contracts, with his money and power, if he wanted to keep me under that thumb, he could.

“What time do you want us there on Saturday?” I asked.

I hoped he’d say five at night. The city lights I was certain he was afforded from his apartment would make an amazing backdrop for the segment.

It’d also be my get-out-of-dinner card.

“Nine,” he answered.

“At night?” I asked, my brain still taken up with hopeful thoughts.

“No, of course not. In the morning,” he replied.

“An evening interview would be a better visual and offer a cozier atmosphere for viewers,” I pointed out.

“I don’t want to get cozy with you, Elsa. I want to get this done so we can be done.”

I fought a flinch and managed not to point out he was about to embark on some expensive upgrades to the space I rented from him (and really, what was that about?), so it didn’t sound like he spoke truth.

“Right, we’ll be there at nine,” I agreed.

“You come in the front. The concierge will be expecting you. Your guy comes in the back. There’s a freight elevator there where he can load in the equipment. There’ll be someone waiting to assist him.”

And now he’s offering assistance.

I didn’t comment on that.

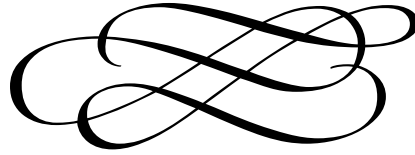
I nodded.

“I’ll be in touch about your alternate space. Get me those questions by five tonight.”

That was his parting shot, because after he said it, he turned, opened the door, walked through it and out of my studio.

So when I muttered my irate, “Bye, bye, bossman,” he wasn’t around to hear it.

# CHAPTER 2



## STEP ASIDE

*Elsa*

**M**y phone was off the hook pinging.

And it wasn't my work one. It was my personal one.

I was on the M, heading to an address Hale Wheeler's assistant, Brandi, sent me that was where we'd be relocating while they sorted out security and HVAC at the warehouse.

I supposed it should come as no surprise someone of Hale's stature could secure space in Manhattan in a little over twenty-four hours.

Even so, it was a surprise.

Now I was on my way there, considering Brandi had also told me my current accommodation would be closed starting Monday, and my friends, who knew I was interviewing Hale the next day, were deciding how I'd look when I did it.

*The red Prada.* That was Felicity.

*Too harsh. The flowy Zimmerman print. It's her brand.* That was Carole.

Then immediately more from Carole. *Hair up.*

*NO!* From Fliss. *Hair down! And I'm doing it so shut up about it.*

*Half and half.* Carole haggled.

*I'll consider it.* Fliss replied.

I let them duke it out, even though I wasn't wearing the Zimmerman. It was very much my brand, but it was far too flirty and girlie and feminine for a sit down with Hale Wheeler.

I was going to wear the structured Valentino. It had ruffles at the sleeves

and hem, and a bow belt, so the femininity of it fit my brand, but there was nothing flirty about it (okay, there was a *little* bit of flirt to it, but not like the Zimmerman).

And I was going to have a chignon at my nape, no matter how Fliss would argue against it. I was going to look put together and professional, not like I was out on a date.

The train arrived at my stop, and I hustled out and up to street level, where I then headed toward Rockefeller Center.

My phone kept going, in fact, both of them did, and I ignored them, walking the streets of Manhattan, feeling like I'd felt all my life when I was there.

This was where I was meant to be.

Make no mistake, I was a proud Brooklyn girl.

I was also an ambitious one.

I dressed the part in a camel, sleeveless, mock-turtleneck sweater dress, a brown statement belt cinching my waist, camel trench hanging from my shoulders (not with my arms in), and chocolate-brown suede high-heeled boots. Gold accents, not many (one didn't over-accessorize when they were riding the subway). Last, a slouchy, suede tote.

I had my Celine Triomphe sunglasses on my nose and the pep in my step that always seemed to happen when I hit Manhattan.

And I was determined to be in a good mood.

I had a number of reasons to be so.

I'd told my agent about the upcoming exclusive with Hale, and she was over the moon. Further, she confirmed my thoughts about how this would positively affect negotiations, and we both knew after I nailed Hale (in an interview that was...*ahem*), more opportunities would come.

And it might be a pain in the neck to get there, considering I could walk to my current studio from home, but it wouldn't stink to go into Manhattan every day to work, even if it was only for a week.

No, it wouldn't.

It'd be awesome.

I hadn't yet told Mom or Dad about the interview. I wanted to throw that tidbit out at dinner, when Oskar was bragging about some big case he was on, his wife Anoushka was manifestly avoiding carbs while explaining her complicated schedule of leaving their children to their nanny and going to yoga classes, and my sister was doing everything in worship save going down

on her surgeon boyfriend whose god complex made Kanye West look humble.

*Oh, by the way, I'd say, I just completed a one-on-one, exclusive interview with Hale Wheeler.*

I could see it now.

Dad would be proud.

Oskar would be derisive, but this would hide his fury that I'd managed to one-up him for once.

Anoushka would ask if I could introduce her to Hale.

Mom would inquire if Hale asked me out on a date.

Emilie would be green with envy.

A mixed bag.

I'd take it.

It was on this thought I was closing in on the address Brandi gave me, which was near 30 Rock, when a shiny black Escalade came to a stop and Hale exited the backseat.

He instantly caused a stir, partly because he was famous, mostly because he was glorious. Even if he didn't have piles of money, people would gawk, that was how gorgeous he was, how confident, how magnetic.

I stopped dead on the sidewalk.

"Watch it, lady," some man grouched as he sidestepped me. "Newsflash, the world doesn't revolve around you."

Ah, New York.

How I loved thee.

I got out of the way and Hale looked right at me, like I had a homing beacon.

He then came right to me.

I opened my mouth to say something flippant, but the words died when he took hold of my elbow, muttering, "Good. You're here. Let's get this done."

"Um..." I mumbled, pretty certain I would have remembered if Brandi told me Hale would be showing me the space personally.

Hale, using my elbow along with his natural charisma, guided me into the building, and to my alarm, I believed I saw not one, not two, but three people taking pictures of us with their phones as he did it.

"Hale—" I started.

But, as was becoming familiar, I was not able to finish.

This was because a woman with a helmet of teased hair and lips that had to have been recently injected, wearing a Chanel suit, fell on us the moment we made our entrance.

“Mr. Wheeler, right on time!” she said. She then looked at me and her eyes grew huge. “Oh my God. You’re Elsa Cohen.”

This had started happening about two years ago. At first, I was thrilled. Then, I was concerned, because it seemed weirdly unethical that someone who could be considered a minor celebrity was reporting on celebrity news.

Now, I was used to it. It didn’t happen often, and Lord knew, I couldn’t control it.

“Yes, I—”

Again, I didn’t finish.

“Oh my God!” she exclaimed. “Is this space for your show? I heard you’re talking to Netflix.”

I wasn’t talking to Netflix.

But she wasn’t far off.

“Can you please show us the suite?” Hale put in, still with his long fingers wrapped around my elbow. “Elsa and I are both in a time crunch.”

“Of course, of course. Let’s hit the elevator,” she replied.

Hand *still* on my elbow *inside* my trench, thus it was skin to skin, Hale led me to the elevator.

Fortunately, before I felt the need to pull away, he let me go.

But the heat of his hold remained.

I ignored that and took off my sunglasses. I then watched Hale’s thumbs fly over the keyboard on his phone. I gave into the urge, switched perspectives, and watched a muscle flex along his strong, stubbled jaw.

I felt a quiver somewhere private.

Yep, that was what you got when you had no willpower.

I forced my eyes to detach from that glory and dug in my tote to find my glasses case.

The elevator let us out on the twelfth floor, and the woman, who hadn’t introduced herself, turned right, then left, and opened the second door down the hall with a code.

She walked in, flipping on lights.

She then immediately went into her shpiel.

“Twenty-five-hundred square feet. Two windowed offices, a conference room and large storage. Kitchenette. Interior bathroom with shower.

Soundproofed studio through there,” she pointed at a naked, glassed-in space that was the size of my entire studio. “Production suite attached. And of course,” she lifted her hands out to her sides, “expansive reception area. All furnished.”

This was about two thousand square feet more than I needed, and the furnishing was not to my taste. It was modern and clean-lined, but utilitarian. The views were into the windows of the next building.

And it was altogether *fabulous*.

“Month to month lease, with the property-owner giving you thirty days to vacate if he finds a long-term lessee,” she stated.

Hale was looking at me, and when I caught his gaze, he asked, “Well?”

“Can we talk privately?” I asked.

“Of course, I’ll just—” the realtor began.

It was her turn to be interrupted as Hale reached to me, this time grabbing my hand, and he took me into the soundproofed studio.

The door closed behind us, he let go and faced me. “I don’t have a lot of time, Elsa. Will this work?”

“I thought I only needed it for a week.”

“I’m renting it for the month. Use it for a week, the entire month, I don’t care. I just need to know if it’ll work.”

Would it work?

Absolutely.

Splendidly.

*Magnificently.*

Would it make it incredibly hard to go back to our cramped, tiny space in a dodgy area of Brooklyn?

One hundred percent yes.

“Of course it’ll work.”

“Perfect,” he muttered, looked beyond me, thorough the windows, and jutted his chin up to the realtor.

She beamed.

I guessed for men like Hale, something like this could be just like that. I had no idea how much one month’s rent on this suite would cost, but I had a feeling my insides would shrivel if I found out.

“Hale, it’s unnecessary for Chuck and me to work in a facility like this,” I pointed out.

His attention came back to me and all thoughts of the price tag on this

suite flew out the window.

I hadn't realized how close we were standing, and dear God...

I'd never seen eyes that color green.

"I don't have hours to waste in finding something you can use. Brandi doesn't either. If this works, then the deal is done."

"You could just make the changes on the current property while Chuck and I are using it."

He sighed. It was huge, making his broad chest expand, and diverting my attention to his suit and shirt, which were amazing.

"I'm not having that discussion again, Elsa," he warned.

I lost interest in his fantastic clothing because he was infuriating. "My apologies for taxing *your* patience with something frustrating *you* are foisting on *me*."

"Apology accepted."

All of a sudden, I completely understood those cartoon characters that had steam shooting out of their ears.

"Two things before I go," he continued. "One, I need to postpone the interview until next week. Brandi will get with you to nail down the time."

I could actually feel my face draining of color on hearing that, mainly because I was depending on my bragging rights of interviewing him to get me through my family dinner. But also, because now that I knew it was going to happen, I was prepared for it.

"Two," he went on, lifting his cell and shaking it side to side, "I got your interview outline. You can strike out anything personal. I won't be answering those kinds of questions."

Hang on...

What?

"I...you...we..." I stammered. "Hale, this is a celebrity interview."

"I know what it is."

"Apparently, you don't," I returned. "Personal questions are the only questions that are asked during a celebrity interview."

"Then come up with something else."

"My watchers aren't interested in Corza's quarterly performance," I noted, referring to the tech company that made his father, and then Hale, billionaires.

"You're clever, Elsa. You'll find some fluff that will keep them entertained."



“Thank you for pointing out the obvious, for I *am* clever, but I can’t market the first-ever interview with Hale Wheeler, which people are going to flip about, and change plans to tune into, then broadcast us staring at each other for an hour.”

He sounded annoyed when he asked, “This is going to last an hour?”

“Hale!” I snapped. “It’s your first-ever interview. It’s hardly going to be fifteen minutes.”

“Talk to me about Trail Blazer,” he suggested, referring to the non-profit he’d started with Judge Oakley.

“I plan to,” I retorted, jerking my head toward his phone. “As you could see with the five questions I have about it.”

“Stretch that out.”

I shook my head. “People want to know about you. Your hopes and dreams. What you’re looking for in a woman. Who are you dating? Do you like LA, or New York, or some other place best? What do you read? What’s your favorite movie? What do you enjoy doing when you aren’t working? What was it like growing up with Imogen Swan and Tom Pierce as close family friends? What was it like growing up with Corey Szabo as your father?”

“You are absolutely not asking me about my father.”

With the way he said that, the look on his face, and the manner in which his father left this world, it went against every journalistic instinct I possessed—and considering the fact my first interview was conducted with my dad about his accounting business when I was seven, there were many—I immediately backed down.

“Okay, Szabo is off-limits.”

“Genny and Tom, too. And Mika. And Duncan. And Chloe, Judge, Matt and Sasha.”

Mika was Tom’s new partner.

Duncan was Genny’s new husband.

The fact that the rock-solid marriage of Tom Pierce and Imogen Swan fell apart and left those two to find new love was some of the biggest celebrity news that had happened in this millennia.

And people would want to know about all of it.

“Hale!” I exclaimed in frustration.

He made to move out of the space, murmuring, “You can sort it.”

I caught him by grabbing his biceps. He had a suit on, but I couldn’t miss

the steel under my fingers. It was so firm, and felt so surprisingly good, I was momentarily dazed by it.

And then I realized he'd stopped and was staring down at me.

"We need to work this out," I told him. "It doesn't have to be hard-hitting. You don't have to bare all. And you have final approval of the broadcast, so there won't be anything out there you're not happy with. But you have to give me something. If you don't, there's no point in doing it."

"And if I don't, you'll dig up whatever you can find and put it out there anyway."

That felt like a slap across the face. So much so, I took my hand from him and stepped away.

He was watching me closely as he remarked, "It's the business you're in."

"No, it isn't," I replied.

"So you didn't sit down with my mother and let her spout lies about Genny and Tom on your show?"

They weren't lies and we both knew it.

But I'd let him have that one.

"Your mother came to me."

"Because no one else would let her talk smack about Gen and Tom like you did."

Right.

That was it.

We were done.

"Forget it, Mr. Wheeler," I said icily. "You're off the hook. I'll go dark while you sort out my studio, so I don't need this place. And Brandi doesn't have to contact me to reschedule the interview. Our relationship, such as it is, has run its course as of now."

It was me who moved to leave then, and Hale who stopped me by standing in front of the door.

I looked up at him. "Please get out of my way."

"I saw the interview, Elsa, so you can't act wounded about what I said because I spoke the goddamned truth. That was personal business no one is entitled to, and you gave her the forum to put it out there."

"I had no idea what your mother was going to say, and if I'd known she was going to share what she did, I wouldn't have had her on."

"Right," he said disbelievingly.

“Right,” I repeated crisply. “Now, if I could be on my way.”

I tried to move by him, but even though he wasn’t a large man, he was tall, and far bigger than me, and still blocking the door.

I stopped moving, took in a breath through my nostrils, and let it out the same way, sounding like an irritated bull.

And I didn’t care.

Because I was a dozen shades more than irritated, and I did not mind he knew it.

He cocked his head to the side and noted softly, “You’re genuinely pissed.”

I didn’t respond.

“She blindsided you,” he whispered.

My mouth spoke before I gave it permission.

“Everyone knows what kind of man Tom Pierce is, and he’s not that man. Even if what she said was not a lie, you’re right, your family’s pain wasn’t anyone’s business. The camera was on her. If it was on me, you would have seen my reaction. We were live, it wasn’t taped. And that is not only the last live interview I’ve done in years, it’s the last one I’ll ever do. Not only because I don’t need that kind of legal headache, but because that kind of thing reflects *on me*. And whether you like what I do or not, Mr. Wheeler, I take it seriously. It’s important to me. It might not be crucial knowledge the world needs. But it’s absolutely in the public interest. And I’ve worked hard to create a program that gives the public what they’re interested in without being gimmicky or snide or defamatory or salacious. I have a point of view, and I have a personality, and both are part of my brand. But the woman you think I am is not the woman I actually am. And I want nothing to do with a man who thinks I’m that other kind of woman. Now, please, *step aside*.”

He didn’t step aside.

He said quietly, “I’ll have to watch it again.”

“That would be impossible because I’ve taken it down, and whether you believe me or not, I did that before Imogen Swan’s team descended on me. Now, I’ll ask one last time, *step aside*.”

“Tomorrow, nine. My place. We’re still on.”

“I think you missed the part where I don’t want the interview anymore, Mr. Wheeler.”

“Call me Mr. Wheeler one more time, baby.”

I went perfectly still.

His soft, sexy, warning tone, the hot, aggravated, even sexier look on his handsome face, the vibe emanating from him—everything about him made it feel we were both in suspended animation, standing inches apart, staring at each other.

He wasn't touching me.

But that didn't mean I wasn't in his clutches.

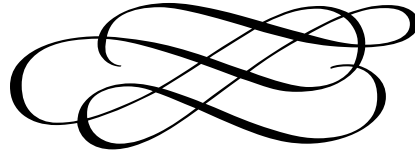
And I liked it there.

I was breathing heavily, I vaguely noticed it, but I couldn't stop.

"Tomorrow," he said. "My place. Nine. And I'm renting this space for you, and you're going to move your ass into it, because you won't want to find out what'll happen if you don't."

He was done with me then, I knew, because he walked out of the studio, the suite, and he took the real estate woman with him.

# CHAPTER 3



## OBSTACLE CLEARED

*Hale*

*T* hen...

He was sitting in one of the armchairs, and they were clipping the mic on his sweater.

But even if they were fawning all over him, and right up in his space, it was like there was no one there, even though their living room was filled with people and lights and cameras, and there were cords snaking all over the floor.

Hale knew how that felt. To be there and not to be there.

He stood in the shadows of the doorway that led to the cliff as the busyness happened all around him.

Some woman in headphones, carrying a clipboard and wearing an Oasis t-shirt caught sight of him and smiled.

She then turned to his father and called, “You have a good-looking boy, Mr. Szabo.”

His father’s head twitched, he looked up and around the room in what seemed like confusion.

“Sorry?” he asked.

“Your son,” the woman said.

“My son?”

Yeah.

He'd have to ask.

His dad started to look for him, but before he could find him, Hale ducked backwards out the door and disappeared.

*Now...*

It was six thirty in the morning, and Hale was slugging back a smoothie in preparation to hit the treadmill, when Elsa texted.

It would be a lot healthier for his peace of mind if he could ignore why he not only didn't hesitate to read the text, he didn't waste time in picking up his phone to do it.

But he wasn't that guy. He didn't fool himself about anything.

It came as a surprise, but he couldn't deny after being in her presence the last couple of days, he wanted her.

That was about her white-blond hair and ice blue eyes. It was about her flawless skin. Her ample ass and tits.

It was about the fact he'd tower over her if she wasn't in heels.

She couldn't be more than five foot five. Hale got off on domination in any form, at least sexually, and that was definitely part of it. If they were in a relationship, he'd have that kick every second he was with her, being physically overpowering for her, and she'd have it too.

But mostly it was just about Elsa.

Never in his life, looking like he did, and being Corey Szabo's son, had he met anyone, particularly a woman, who got up in his shit like she did.

It was no fun to dominate someone who kissed your ass.

Visualizing—as he had often—the many ways he'd make Elsa submit, he'd get instantly hard.

And hearing from her, he was enjoying that same sensation as he read her very formal text.

*My apologies for texting this early. However, I needed to be certain you're okay with my makeup artist coming with me. I've attached an NDA she's signed. It isn't as comprehensive as the one you've asked Chuck, Zoey and I to sign, but it should cover you and I both.*

*Her name is Felicity Jones, and she has quite a bit of experience working with celebrities (I've attached a link to her Instagram account), so she understands privacy issues.*

*If you have questions or concerns, please let me know. Regards, E.*

*Regards, E.*

Signing a fucking text at all, but doing it with “regards?”

Little brat.

Hale smiled as he typed back, *That's fine*, and he did that without looking at the NDA her makeup artist signed.

He had no business getting mixed up with Elsa Cohen.

But he was going to.

As she'd noted, she'd signed a ten-page NDA that covered everything outside what he'd approve to be released in her interview.

And he'd made certain his attorneys had included language that would go beyond what they were doing that day, his involvement in renting her new space, his involvement in owning her studio and apartment building, to encompass his involvement with her in any way at all.

He wasn't smiling when he thought about what he'd discovered after he'd left her place of business in Brooklyn.

After her interview with his mother, he'd made immediate moves to be in a position to put pressure on her if she caused his family any more trouble. However, he hadn't paid attention to what that meant.

He'd found that her apartment wasn't in as sketchy of an area as her studio, and, unsurprisingly for the city or anywhere near, it was a tiny one-bedroom.

However, this was surprising for who he thought she was because she didn't give that vibe at all, not on her show, not outside it. She was class from top to toe. The ice queen. Reporting on it, but above it all. She appreciated her viewers, and she showed it, but still, there was a sense she was removed from them, from everything.

Like her Disney namesake, in his head, the real Elsa was the princess in her ice castle somewhere no one could touch her.

Which made her even more attractive to Hale.

And it made him dislike with an intensity he wasn't entirely comfortable with, the fact her designer gear and immaculate set were illusions.

Anyone would think Elsa would go from her state-of-the-art studio to a brownstone or a co op with a doorman, not a tiny apartment in Bedstuy.

And Hale now had it in his head that the brownstone or co op was what she deserved.

Because she had hustle. She had grit. And the four and a half hours of her show he'd carved out time to watch since the day before showed him something he'd missed.

She had integrity.

She could be her generation's Oprah (after Oprah had seen the light), and it seemed clear to him that was the path she'd put herself on.

Earlier shows were about the dish, though it was never truly catty or cutting. She had her persona, which was definitely a façade, and she delivered the news in a manner that made you feel inside her inner sanctum. But in the end, it was just news.

And more often than not, there was a thread of positivity in her reports. Sometimes it was forced, but it was there. She didn't glory in people's foibles or failures, but if they were news, she reported them. Though in her signoff she urged her watchers to "keep it positive," and she injected that in her segments—doing, not just saying.

However, lately, she'd veered away from the gossip and more toward interviews. She had the status now to attract somewhat-heavy hitters. They were B-listers, but ones on the rise, not the other way around. And she handled these interviews well, as she'd asserted to him the day before. The broadcasts were slick, well-researched and expertly edited, and her personality was intact, but it wasn't about gotcha journalism or making her interviewees emotional so they had to fight tears or discomfort on camera.

It was highly likely this shift had been heralded by her nailing that interview with his mother.

But she hadn't gone down the route Samantha had opened for her.

She'd shut it off and done her own thing.

He didn't want to admit it, but it was there.

He was impressed.

That last obstacle cleared, he'd made the decision.

He was going there with her. He was sticking until she was out of his system.

Then, like he always did, he was going to move on.



It was after his run, his shower, and then he got dressed and did something with his hair so he didn't look like a beach bum on camera.

Elsa and her team would be there in fifteen minutes, and he was ready.

That was when the text came in from his friend, Jamie (he was actually more Tom's friend, but the whole family had claimed him, since he was also Judge's dad, not to mention a tremendous individual).

*I told you I didn't like it and Kateri likes it even less. She wants to look into it. And considering what it is, I'm not too proud to beg you to let her do it.*

Hale felt his mouth get tight.

The "it" Jamie was referring to was just a crackpot with a keyboard. He'd shared "it" with Jamie because he'd gotten a call from his head of security about it while he and Jamie were out having drinks the other night.

He should never have said anything. Jamie was a good guy. Jamie was also a dad. Naturally, he'd worry.

But if it would make Jamie feel better, he'd let him sic his investigator Kateri on it.

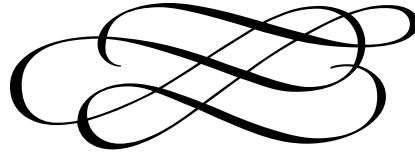
*Unleash her,* he texted.

Jamie's reply was *Wise*.

His friend was overreacting, but with the parents he'd had, one thing Hale was very aware of was the fact you treasured it when people cared about you. That care might sometimes be annoying. But it was care.

And the alternative was far worse.

# CHAPTER 4



## BUDDING LOVE

*Elsa*

Considering the splendor that had accosted us in the foyer, I shouldn't have been blown away by Hale Wheeler's penthouse.

But I was.

Fliss made a noise like she'd been punched in the gut when we walked in, which was how I felt.

In the last couple of years, I'd had to rely less on my lovely little ferrets who fed me gossip tidbits. This was because I now received invitations to everything that happened in this city and some of what happened in other cities, particularly LA.

Having millions of viewers helped a book launch or movie premiere or the introduction to a new perfume or makeup line. And if you wanted a mention, it would behoove you to have your PR person put a bug in my ear.

I'd carefully curated my contacts.

Now, with Zoey on board, simply having an assistant gave me the prestige to make bookings I'd never be able to make if it was me on the other end of the phone or email.

There were those who came to my little studio who got it. They knew what it was like to claw your way to where you wanted to be. They knew it looked like that when it started, but if it worked, it ended the opposite.

There were those who came in with nasty twists on their lips after they rolled up to be interviewed in a warehouse in Brooklyn.

But they then had the choice of Perrier, San Pellegrino or Fiji water, with

triple-filtered ice. Chilled Veuve and fresh pomegranate juice. Cîroc or Hendricks or Rémy Martin XO, if that was their jam. And always a spread of glistening fruit, gourmet cheeses, fresh French bread with European butter and cupcakes from Magnolia Bakery.

And then there would be Fliss, who had her own following that was far from small, who would be there to do their hair and makeup if they didn't bring their own stylists.

It might not be class without, but within, it absolutely was.

In other words, I hobnobbed with the rich and famous, went to events on both sides of the country that organizers had spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to make memorable, and sat down to interview people who thought they were better than me.

But I had never seen anything like Hale's apartment.

Three-sixty views. Open space. A fireplace. Expansive living room. Twelve-seater dining room table. Chef's kitchen. And a swirl of a staircase that took you up to a second floor.

It was mammoth. Modern, with warmth. Massive mushroom-colored sofas. Inviting cream bouclé chairs. Subtle area rugs. Interesting light installations. Warm throw rugs scattered. Full potted trees in corners.

And the view of the East River and beyond was phenomenal.

I got a better view when I heard Fliss say under her breath, "Whoa," and I shifted my attention to Hale, who was sauntering to where we were standing outside the elevator that opened right to his pad.

He wore faded jeans and a black turtleneck sweater. Simple white Adidas Superstars with black stripes on his feet. His dusty brown hair had some product in it to keep it off his forehead and tamed.

He looked edible.

I stepped forward, my hand out, my gaze again scanning the living room, where Chuck and Zoey were already setting up. "Hale, good morning."

I went back to him when he took my hand in a firm grip and murmured, "Morning, Elsa."

His gaze was on my dress.

I pulled my hand away.

When I did, his gaze zoomed up to my eyes and the crinkles by his came out in sharp relief.

It made him even more attractive, which was infuriating.

"I'd like to introduce you to Felicity Jones, the makeup artist I told you

about in my text,” I stated formally, turning and indicating Fliss at my side.

He appeared perplexed for a moment, as he would, considering my hair and makeup were fully done.

Nugget of news: I’d been unable to talk my friend down.

I’d told her and Carole about my run-ins with Hale Wheeler, and obviously this included what an ass he was, and Fliss demanded to accompany me for moral support.

I knew she knew this also came in the form of me seeming to have a posse, which would give me more cachet. I suspected this further had something to do with her possibly being able to do makeup for Hale.

When I told her that last was unlikely, she’d said, “Considering my calling, I can’t in good conscious allow him to appear before camera looking splotchy with gigantic pores.”

Even if I assured her he was neither splotchy nor did he have any issues with his pores, and indeed he was damnably tanned, healthy and perfect, she was adamant, and when Fliss was adamant about something, you let her do it.

She offered her hand to Hale as Chuck called out, “Elz, we’re thinking sofa. Come over here and have a look.”

I walked deeper into the space, noting the closer you got to, well...*everything*, the better it was.

Another nugget of news: this was what I wanted, *exactly* what I wanted. A roomy, fantastic apartment in Manhattan that was still homey and welcoming.

I tucked that thought away, and as I got closer, I also noted that Chuck had it set up so Hale and I were sitting on the same couch.

It was a deep-seated sectional that had an open-backed space in the middle that gave it interest. But Chuck had the four cameras set up, two at corners, two angled from the ends so they could get long shots of both of us—me facing Hale, Hale facing me—as we both sat on the same couch.

“Maybe Hale can be on the couch, and I can be in a chair,” I suggested.

Chuck sidled closer, and talking low, he said, “This is your first onsite interview. Always up to you, babe, but I think you should go in warm. A relaxed, informal chat between friends. This is going to make your mark. Where do you want to go from here? How do you want it to come off? What do you want to be your signature?”

It wasn’t like I hadn’t thought about this, it was just that, with my team, I wanted them to know I thought their input was important and they should

always feel free to give it. As such, I always made time to listen to what they had to say. Not to mention, we hadn't had the opportunity to scout the location, so we had to make this decision on the fly.

And Chuck was right, having this come off as a friendly chat would be what I preferred.

It was just that I personally didn't want to sit on the sofa with Hale, no matter how big it was, because, to put a fine point on it, I thought he was a dick.

Yes, in the last couple of days, I'd come to the difficult realization that I'd committed the absolute unprofessional. I'd avoided this interview with Hale because I had a crush on him.

Mm-hmm, *me* avoiding conducting a career defining interview because I had the hots for a guy.

Also, and fortunately, in the last couple of days, he'd cured me of that crush.

But I could no longer let personal get in the way of professional.

He wasn't the first dick I'd interviewed, and he wouldn't be the last.

I nodded to Chuck. "Carry on."

He smiled at me.

Zoey approached.

I was twenty-seven years old.

She was younger, twenty-two.

But she had it together. She also had *chutzpah*. She was born and bred in the Bronx. Nothing fazed her. Which made her perfect for her job.

Until now.

She appeared hesitant and star struck.

Fabulous.

"Head in the game," I said quietly.

She blinked and focused on me.

Then she asked, "You want me to go out for coffees or something?"

I nodded again. "Yes, thanks. And ask Mr. Wheeler, and everybody, what they want, please."

"Will do," she said and moved off.

At this point, Fliss called, "Hale says I can set up in the kitchen. I'm going to do some moisturizer and powder for him. Then I want you for touch ups."

That was Fliss for you, wandering around, performing miracles with her

mascara wand. The current one, within a couple of minutes, talking Hale into allowing her to prepare him to be filmed.

Hale was smirking at me as he followed Felicity and her big, wheelie case to his kitchen, and Zoey made her approach to them.

Pure professionalism and competency, I ignored his smirk and moved to the cameras Chuck had already set on tripods that he and Zoey would operate. I bent and looked through the lens.

As ever with Chuck, the angles were perfect.

Seriously, he should be at a network. His camerawork was stellar. His editing was sublime.

And he used to be.

But now he was an ex-con, and he'd become an ex-con because of what spiraled after he developed a dependency on oxycontin when he'd got a knee injury during a pickup game of basketball.

No production now would touch him.

Score for me. And with any luck, and a lot of work, I would take him places.

"Need you to sit so I can do light, Elz," Chuck told me.

I left the camera and went to the couch.

We were a lean operation. Set up was mostly done. By the time Felicity had put primer and tinted moisturizer on Hale, and set it with some powder, and I'd gone in for touchups, Zoey was back with coffees for all of us, and I had no choice but to stop avoiding him as I'd been doing and move to Hale.

"A moment before we get started," I requested.

He jutted out his chin and followed me to a corner.

I didn't bother with pleasantries, and instead launched right in.

"I'll go through the questions as outlined, but depending on the conversation, I might veer off slightly or ask follow-up questions. Though, this will only be on the topics that I noted on the outline. It'll be four cameras on two, so my responses will be authentic to the conversation. In other words, we won't need extra time here to film another reel. By Monday, we'll have cut a rough edit for you to look at so I know you're comfortable with the direction we're taking. We'll then send you the final for your approval. I'll give you a heads up before I start marketing it for air. Is that satisfactory?"

"Sure," he agreed.

"We can get started when you're ready."

"I like your dress."

I frowned. “Although I appreciate the compliment, approval of my wardrobe wasn’t part of our deal.”

“Just wanted you to know, considering I *really* like your dress.”

I tried and failed in not glaring at him.

He smirked again.

If he thought suddenly being a flirt would throw me off my game, he was wrong.

“Are you ready to get started?” I pushed.

“Let’s do it.”

We settled in, and as Chuck did one final check on everything, a premonitory thrill shuddered through me.

Because this was it.

This was my make it or break it moment.

If I nailed this, it was going to put me on the map. Legitimize me. It would be news, meaning not only the interview with Hale, but so would I in conducting it. It would probably double my followers (if not more). It would turn that seven-figure deal into eight. It would mean I could hire a researcher. It could mean I could be that long-term lessee for that space close to 30 Rock. I could move out that bland furniture and make it my own. Turn the conference room into a green room.

This interview with Hale meant the sky wasn’t my limit.

I was about to enter the stratosphere.

“Ready,” Chuck called.

I looked to Hale, surprised I did so suddenly feeling deep gratitude, because, whether he liked it or not, it was him who was going to make it all happen for me.

And my breath caught when I saw his pale green gaze was resting on me, open and warm, even so far as proud.

“You’re gonna do great,” he assured in a tone that was the same as his look.

I felt those words, words my mother would never say. I felt them hit hard. Burrow deep.

Change me.

It was too kind of a gesture to throw in his face, so I sent him a smile I knew had hints of nerves.

When he caught my smile, the warmth in his gaze intensified so much, I felt it circle my heart. An odd feeling I’d never experienced in my life.

And it felt amazing.  
I forced myself to look at Chuck, "Let's roll."  
Chuck called out the marker.  
I looked to the camera.  
And we rolled.

It was over, and I was not relieved.

I was not jubilant.

I was tripping, and the reason why was because Hale had been surprisingly friendly and forthcoming in the interview. Sure, he established boundaries early, and I skirted them to keep him comfortable and in the mood he was in, which, if I wasn't wrong about how warm and earnest he'd come off, was going to earn him the undying love of just about anyone with a pulse.

Yes. When he wanted to be, he was just that charming.

This would normally sound good, no, *great*...and it was. For the interview.

What had me tripping was because I'd poked around in his love life, and although I wasn't fond of the playful smile he'd had on his face when he looked right at me while he spoke, the bombshell he landed couldn't be missed.

This happened when he'd said, "I like women with initiative and intelligence and courage. I like women who know who they are and what they want, and they don't go in for any status quo. I like women who have scruples and believe in something. I like women who can stand up for themselves and what they think is right. And right now, I seem to be into blondes with light blue eyes. Though I enjoy companionship, that's all it'll be. I'll never get married."

He'd offered it, and I'd be shit at my job if I hadn't jumped on it.

So I did.

"You never intend to get married?" I asked.

"Nope," he answered.

"Is it an issue with the concept of marriage, perhaps religious, or the



government's involvement?"

"None of those. I'm just not the marrying type."

"So you simply wish to remain unattached," I surmised, though my inference was clear.

Unattached meant he would always be open to playing the field.

"No. I'm busy. I've always been busy. I'll always be busy. And the manner in which I'm busy isn't a typical kind of busy. My day starts at six, or earlier, and it could end at three in the morning because I need to be on a call to Tokyo. When you're never in one place for longer than a couple of weeks, and usually it's a lot less than that, it makes commitment difficult. And for me, that's not going to change. You can't force your partner to give up what they might want in their life to follow you around. You can't force your spouse, who went into it with you to belong in a partnership, to be the only one holding up their end of the deal because you've got your mind on a hundred different things, and she's only one of them. I have change I want to make, and that requires dedication. You can't marry a woman when you're already married to a mission. I'll not put a woman through that."

"You're only thirty, Hale," I noted. "That's a long time to stick with 'never.'"

There was steel in his tone when he replied, "Maybe so, Elsa, but I know who I am. I know what I want to do. And I know what I don't want. As such, I know my mind is not going to change. Not about this."

Another very handsome, very famous man made this same assertion: George Clooney. And then he'd found Amal.

I knew this. I knew I should remark on it.

I was too flustered by learning this about Hale to do it.

So not only had I blown that part of the interview, I had to take time to reflect on why I did. Why Hale asserting he was never going to commit to a woman threw me so off balance.

I was thinking these things while scrolling through some stills Zoey took of us for marketing purposes, doing this not seeing them, when Chuck announced, "We're packed. Headed out."

I looked to him. "We still on for tomorrow at ten?"

We had to put the interview together. We also had to move out of the space in Brooklyn to the one in Manhattan. This we would do starting at ten tomorrow.

"Yup," Chuck agreed.

“Drop the raw on the cloud. I’ll get to work on it this afternoon,” I told him.

“Gotcha,” he replied as he and Zoey disappeared around the glossy wood paneling at the main elevator to get to the back, which housed the much larger freight elevator.

“Want me to call a Lyft?” Fliss asked.

I nodded to her.

And then my world tilted on its axis.

It started when Hale leaned on the back of one of his sofas, arms crossed on his chest, legs stretched in front of him, and he inquired, “What time do you want me to pick you up tonight?”

“Ummmmmm...” Fliss hummed loudly...and weirdly.

“Sorry?” I asked Hale, confused.

“For dinner at your parents’,” he explained.

I stared at him.

Then I looked to Felicity.

She had straight, black hair that fell well past her shoulders, ragged bangs cut close to her hairline, an eyeliner wing that would force most makeup TikTokers to weep with envy, and not an inch of her skin, except her neck and face, was not tattooed.

And right now, telltale pink was staining her intentionally very-pale cheeks.

“While I was working on Hale, after he told me he was free, I kinda shared, you know, that it’d be super cool if he played your fake boyfriend tonight for that family dinner that Oskar is going to be at,” she confessed.

She knew about the dinner.

She knew I was dreading the dinner (as always).

She also knew that I intended to use that day’s interview as a tactic to get through the dinner relatively unscathed.

What I would never imagine was that she’d tell *Hale* about the dinner.

Although I was certain if I moved a single muscle my head might literally explode, and obviously, I didn’t want that to happen, I said tonelessly, “My fake boyfriend.”

“I mean, can you imagine Oskar’s face, Emilie’s, when you show up with Hale?” she asked.

I could imagine it.

And what I imagined would be *amazing*.

Even so.

“Let me get this straight,” I said evenly. “You told Hale Wheeler about my family dinner tonight?”

“Just how awesome it would be if he went with you,” one of my best friends, who was now a huge-ass traitor, replied. “You know, as a lark. But they wouldn’t know that, obviously.”

Had she had this planned all along? Was that why she was so adamant about coming?

Truth: only Fliss would take my assertions that some guy was a major asshole and turn that into a scheme to be invited in his presence so she could arrange for him to play my fake date so my brother, sister and mother wouldn’t be too hard on me.

She was punk. She was counterculture. She hadn’t met a rule she hadn’t been happy to find her own unique way to break. I loved all of that about her.

Usually.

Just learned truth: even when the stakes were high, *for me*, she was still happy to engage in this behavior.

But...*what the fuck?*

This wasn’t a club.

This was my business.

I was in that apartment in a professional capacity.

And so was she, *as a representative of me*.

I looked to Hale. “Thank you for your offer, but it’s unnecessary.”

“I’ve got nothing else on,” he shared.

“Again, thank you, but it’ll be fine,” I returned stiffly.

“Maybe, but from the shit Fliss said, it’d be a kick, don’t you think?”

Hale asked.

I turned again to Fliss. “From the shit you said?”

She opened her eyes really wide, pressed her lips very tight, and looked left to right without moving her head.

Why was I having this conversation in front of Hale when I could ream her in the Lyft? Then instigate a friend divorce. Immediately.

I returned my attention to him. “Again, thank you, but I’m good.” I tossed out a hand. “And thank you for this morning. It went well. I hope you agree.”

Hale pushed from the couch, his eyes on Fliss. “You go. I’ll have my car take Elsa home.”

Wait.

What?

Fliss was rolling her case toward the elevator. “Cool. Works for me.”

“Hang on,” I said.

Felicity had tagged the button when she remarked, “I think, you talk to Hale, you’ll see the merits of my idea.”

I moved to her, saying, “We can talk about it in the car.”

“I won’t be in your car, you’ll be in his car,” Fliss replied, and the elevator doors opened.

She entered.

I was going to follow her, but Hale circled me and cut me off.

“Hang on!” I snapped.

Fliss leaned to the side so I could see her around Hale’s body and gave me a finger wave. “Ta ta.”

The elevator doors closed.

I tipped my head back to glower at Hale.

“You have a bad habit of standing in my way,” I noted irritably.

“Elsa Cohen, YouTube personality, can take a break. It’s you and me now, babe.”

“There isn’t a you and me, Hale. There’s you, granting an interview to me, and me leaving after said interview was granted. Which is now.”

“It isn’t my place to talk ill of your family, I haven’t met them, but Fliss didn’t paint them in the greatest light. And like I said, I have nothing on, and she made it sound like you could use someone taking your back. I’m happy to be that person.”

“We’re not friends, Hale. And she had no business sharing any of that with you. In fact, I need to apologize for her behavior. It was incredibly unprofessional.”

“She was being real.”

“She doesn’t get to be real with *my* personal life.”

His brows rose. “You just sat on my couch and asked me dozens of questions about *my* personal life that you’re going to share with millions of people,” he reminded me.

*Tou-fucking-ché.*

I didn’t think I’d ever ground my teeth in my life, which was saying something, considering my mother (and brother, and sister).

But I was grinding them right then.

“It’s just dinner,” he pointed out. “Tell me she’s not right and you don’t

want to see the looks on their faces when we show and you tell them we're seeing each other, and on account of my situation, not to mention yours, we've been keeping it quiet."

"You just told the world you're never going to get married."

"I didn't say I'd come as your fake fiancé, just boyfriend."

"My mother only does fiancés or better," I lied.

Though that would be her preference, she'd take anything to prove I was cowing to her demands in a way that would bring her closer to grandchildren whose heads she could fill with crap.

And she'd definitely take Hale.

"Well then, it's good the interview will air *after* I spend a couple of hours pretending you're the love of my life," Hale returned.

There went my breath. *Poof!* Gone.

He watched me carefully before he asked, "Do you ever have any fun?"

I tried to remember the last time I had any fun.

As I was still trying to do that, Hale bit off, "Jesus. I'm picking you up tonight. We're doing this. I'm not taking no for an answer."

"You're not good at taking no for an answer, are you?" I sniped.

"Who is?" he asked.

Touché again, dammit.

It was me watching him carefully this time, before I said, "If we do this, there's nothing to it. No favor to be paid back later. No marker to be called. This is just you being a decent person and helping me get through a family dinner. Because Fliss didn't lie. They're a tough go."

He held up his hand, palm toward me. "No favor. No marker." He dropped his hand. "And just to say, I'm normally a decent guy so I got you."

We'd see about that.

I gave in. "Fine."

He smiled.

Damn.

"What time should I come get you?" he asked.

"I'm supposed to be there at six thirty, so...six forty-five?"

He started laughing. It looked good on him and sounded better.

But he shook his head. "No, sweetheart. You don't understand how this goes. We're gonna show at six thirty on the dot. The more time we have to rub their noses in our budding love, the better. Trust me."

His words gave me a shiver.

“So, again, what time?” he prompted.

“Six fifteen. They live close.”

“Great.”

“Great,” I parroted.

He meant his, I didn’t mean mine.

“It’s gonna be fantastic,” he promised.

I didn’t believe him for a second.

Don’t get me wrong, it was going to be magnificent, pitching up to my childhood home on the arm of Hale Wheeler.

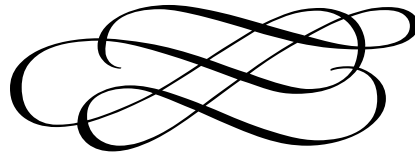
It was just that Hale Wheeler was proving to be a wildcard.

And I might be a risktaker.

But there were some risks every sane girl knew to avoid.

And if she was smart, a man like Hale always took the number one spot on that list.

# CHAPTER 5



## JUST THE RIGHT THING

*Elsa*

Hale's car took me home, whereupon I ran up the stairs, changed clothes, then ran down them and walked quickly to the studio.

While there, I downloaded Hale's interview from the cloud and watched it in its entirety, marking segments I wanted to cut to my reaction, a long shot, or where I wanted to look for some photo I owned of him or some member of his family that we could run over him speaking about them.

I then spent a good deal of time packing stuff to be ready for when Chuck, Zoey, Fliss and Carole showed the next morning to help move us to our new space. It was a lot to ask of them on a Sunday, and I didn't want them to have to fill boxes, just lug them.

I did all of this while fielding texts and emails from informers and drafting an outline of a report we'd film on Monday.

I lost track of time, which meant I had to race back to my place, take a quick shower and engage in the ubiquitous conundrum of trying to figure out what to wear that my mother would have the least comments about.

I hadn't come up with anything, was still engaged in that at the same time putting the finishing touches on my makeup—multitasking because Hale was going to be there in fifteen minutes—when I took the call I'd rejected ten times since she got in the elevator that morning.

"I'm only answering to give you the opportunity to share your profound and heartfelt apology for being unprofessional and a friend traitor," I said to Fliss after I took the call.

“Babe, you need to get laid.”

At her words, I stopped inspecting an off-the-shoulder sweater for snags.

“It’s a fake date,” I returned.

“And you need to get a life,” she went on like I hadn’t said anything.

“I have a life,” I retorted, found no snags on the front, so I turned the sweater over to scrutinize its back.

“Okay, listen to me,” Felicity urged. “While he was sitting for me, he couldn’t take his eyes off you. I constantly had to tell him to look at me, and in the end, just gave up and moved around him so he could watch you. And, girl, you were doing nothing but sitting so Chuck could check your lighting. It wasn’t like he didn’t want to miss witnessing you paint a masterpiece.”

I again ceased my sweater inspection to stand straight and blink at my bedroom while I tried to moderate my suddenly erratic heartbeat.

“What?” I asked.

She didn’t repeat herself.

She said, “I don’t know what all that was about when you told us he was an asshole, he seemed super cool to me. And I heard his interview. He’s not looking for anything serious. You’re deeply involved in your career, you’re not looking for anything serious. It’s perfect. But, E, you can’t work *all the time*. I’m not going to get into sex because I know it’s been a huge dry spell for you. But when even was the last time you went out on a date?”

“Men are not a priority right now.”

“You’ve made that abundantly clear. So I’ll ask you a different question. When was the last time you came out with me and C to have a drink? I mean, C is a stockbroker so she may be even more goal-oriented than you, and she carves out time to sit down with a sister, unwind and commune. You say you will, then Henry Cavill does something, and you’re off to the studio to film a segment.”

Lamentably, this was true.

“I think today proves that my dedication is garnering results,” I remarked.

“I can’t argue that, and this next is gonna be harsh, so beware, but you need to hear it. You could interview God herself, and your mother would still say the dress you wore while doing it was a bad color on you.”

As I sustained that blow (because, even more lamentably, that was true too), there was a knock on the door.

My gaze flew to my bedside clock, and I saw it was 6:02.

Was he serious?



“I can’t talk about this anymore. Hale’s here. And he’s early.”

“Niiiiice,” she drawled.

“There’s nothing nice about being early,” I snapped as, in my green kimono robe with black at the edges and purple cherry blossoms all over it, I headed to the door.

“Pal, you’ve been out of the game for too long. And evidence is suggesting he’s a master player.”

“How’s that?”

“How many ways do you want me to explain right now?”

“All of them,” I bit out.

“Okay. One, this says he wants to see you, not that he’s trying to pretend he’s too busy for you. Or, in his case, is actually too busy for you and isn’t that into you, so he’s not gonna bother to make a point to be there even on time, much less early. That’s huge. It says a lot, especially for him. A lot that I like, and you should too.”

I hated to admit it, but this made sense, and it felt good, which I hated to admit even more.

“Two,” she carried on, “he’s catching you probably not quite ready, which gives him an opportunity to see you in your natural element, without the full mask of makeup and armor of clothes you’ll don to either repel or impress him. In other words, he’s so interested, he’s angling for a shot at seeing the real you. Three, you’re probably wearing that kimono, which covers everything, but it’s still gorgeous and clingy, and he couldn’t know that was what he was going to get, still, he knows you, so he could guess he was going to get something like that when he showed before you’d be ready, and he wanted to see it. Shall I go on?”

“No, I’m at the door,” I replied, looking through my peephole to see it was indeed Hale and he’d changed clothes since that morning.

Now he was wearing what appeared to be a cashmere sweater in crocodile green that did incredible things for his eyes, a hickory-colored blazer over it. He had a scarf looped around his neck, which meant it was cold outside. I couldn’t see what was on the bottom.

But I could see he appeared displeased, though what could displease him when he was early, which displeased *me*, I couldn’t know.

However, I was about to find out.

“Have fun, thank me later,” Felicity said, and I heard the disconnect.

I was fuming when I opened the door.

“You’re early,” I pointed out the obvious.

He looked me top to toe to top again, then down to toe before he found my eyes.

“Your intercom doesn’t work,” he stated.

“It hasn’t worked for months,” I informed him.

“Your elevator doesn’t work either,” he continued.

“I don’t think that’s worked the entire time I’ve lived here.”

I moved out of the way because I had no choice, seeing as he moved in.

I closed the door behind him, noting the dark wash jeans and oxblood shoes were the perfect complement for the rest of his outfit. It was also the perfect outfit for a meet-the-parents: casual, but still dressy, like he could be himself, but he’d still made an effort.

Yes, Felicity was correct.

He was good at this.

And I was grateful he didn’t look around. I not only hadn’t had time to tidy, decorating my apartment had never been a priority. As such, it was a mishmash of things I liked that I picked up along the way.

Even so, regardless of the fact it was a happy accident, I personally thought it worked.

It was dark and eclectic.

Uncharacteristically of me, I’d become obsessed when I happened onto some removable wallpaper printed in light green leaves against a dark gray-green background. As such, it set me on the first (and only) nesting mission I’d ever experienced. I put the wallpaper on one wall. I then hadn’t bothered to ask the landlord (that being Hale, but I didn’t know it then), if I could paint the other walls that same gray-green. I just did it.

The sofa was small because the space was small. I had a cranberry-colored wing chair I found at a vintage store. My coffee table was an old trunk. The gallery wall above the sofa was an assortment of original art from local artists I’d bought off the walls of coffee shops or at street fairs. And every lamp I owned came from flea markets.

Hale didn’t take any of this in. He’d pulled out his phone, stabbed the screen with his finger, and was now putting it to his ear.

I knew I should go to my room and finish getting ready, but curious, I stood there and watched him.

“Yeah,” he said into the phone. “I just got to Elsa’s. I want you to contact the property management company I’m paying to look after this place and

tell them I want a representative at the office whenever you can fit them in my schedule for Monday. I don't give a fuck if it's nine at night. Since they're coming so I can fire them in person, with urgency, I need you to source another management company as well as a project manager that can assess repairs to the intercom system, the elevator and anything else in this wreck of a place that might need fixing. At the very least, I want the intercom and elevator fully functioning by the end of next week."

Short pause.

And then, "Yes. Thanks." He dropped his phone hand and scowled at me. "Why didn't you tell me this shit?"

"Sorry, somehow it slipped my mind I had a direct line to The Man."

"There's a brick sitting on the ground to block the front door from closing."

"That's because not only is the intercom on the fritz, it's touch and go if the code works to unlock the front door. Therefore, we just keep it open so we can actually get into the building. Obviously not optimal, but I'd rather be able to access my home, rather than standing outside of it calling everyone I know who lives inside to see if they'll come open the door for me. And my neighbors feel the same."

"Elsa, you don't live on a farm in the middle of nowhere in Nebraska," he stated.

"No kidding?" I asked with eyes wide in faux surprise. "Now, how did I miss that?"

He ignored me and declared, "You pay rent. When shit like this happens, you report it."

"Trust me, I have. Maria, my next-door neighbor, has. Yolanda, the chick who lives below me, has. Salim, the gent who lives on the first floor, definitely has. That company just sucks."

"And you've had my phone number for a year."

Again, was he serious?

"So this is my fault?" I demanded.

"You're not safe. No one in this building is safe."

"Excuse me, but I didn't think reporting on the functionality of our intercom would be something of interest to a man who manages the width and breadth of your vast empire. I can't say it crossed my mind, but if it did, my guess would be you'd tell me to report it to the management company."

"No," he refuted. "I would have done something about it."

“Consider me educated as to the new reporting structure.”

He continued to scowl at me a beat, unimpressed by my sarcasm, before he noted, “You live on the fourth floor. Without an elevator, do you lug groceries up three flights of stairs?”

Like I had time to cook.

I didn’t tell him that. I said, “Yes.”

“Christ,” he clipped.

“Are we going to talk about this for the next hour, or can I get dressed, seeing as I’m not ready because you came early?” I asked. “And just to say, I’m perfectly willing to talk about this for the next hour. My mother will harangue me for being so late, but it’ll be less time I’ll have to listen to her haranguing me about anything at all.”

This time, he didn’t scowl at me, he studied me.

And then his eyes roamed over me.

Finally, he said, “As much as it hurts to lose you in that robe, since it’s burned on my brain, and we have a family dinner to attend, you better change.”

I gave him a salute, saying, “Righty ho, bossman. I’ll be out in a jiffy.” Then, as I moved to the bedroom, I offered, “There’s filtered water in the fridge and an opened bottle of red on the counter, help yourself if you want.”

I closed the door behind me.

I finished with my mascara, did some highlighting, spritzed with setting spray, perfumed with Versace Dylan Blue and decided against jeans and for a satin skirt in a salmon color to complement the peach tones of the slouchy sweater. This meant I pulled on a pair of nude tights to keep things smooth and offer another layer of protection against the cold. I did a messy partial tuck of the sweater into the skirt, put on some wide gold hoops, an array of slender rings, a few bangles that competed in a way I liked with the long sleeves of the sweater and pulled on my Veronica Beard, chestnut suede, spike-heeled booties.

Grabbing my wrap, I headed out.

Hale was sitting in my cranberry chair, head bent to his phone, when I did.

He looked up at me, did another body scan, his lips quirked up, and his eyes found mine.

“You lied about the groceries.”

I felt my eyebrows snap together. “Did you snoop?”

“You told me to help myself. I went for water, and by the way, I filled up your LifeStraw.”

“I’m sure it comes as no surprise I don’t spend my weekends concocting gourmet meals in a miniscule galley kitchen,” I commented as I tossed my wide, wool wrap around my shoulders and snatched up my clutch, neglecting to tell him I barely knew how to cook at all, and didn’t want to know.

I lived in New York City. I could have anything I wanted from any area of the world at any time day or night.

So why bother?

He stood. “Which brings us to a crucial part of our evening, my crash course in all things Elsa Cohen.”

I froze, because...

Of course.

If he was going to be my fake boyfriend, important enough to spring on my family during a meal we were sharing because my brother was in town, he’d know about me.

Dammit.

“Okay, we’ll do it on the way,” I replied.

We headed out, I made sure the locks caught behind us, and I launched in as we walked down the stairs.

“Dad, his name is David, is third generation New Yorker. His grandparents escaped Hungary before Hitler offered them a different relocation package. He’s an accountant. He hates the Yankees, loves the Mets and could complain for an hour about designated hitters. And I think he realized way too late that he’d been blinded by my mother’s Scandinavian good looks, and he’d made a huge mistake.”

“Right,” Hale said quietly.

“Mom, her name is Inger, moved to New York from Norway when she was seventeen. She was a dancer and fancied herself a singer and actor too. She had dreams of being on Broadway. Though she made the line of the Rockettes, and kept that job for two years, that was as far as it went. My impression is, she hooked up with Dad so she could stop waitressing and busting her hump trying to land spots in chorus lines and constantly being rejected.”

By now, we were at the front door, and even though I caught Hale giving the brick an unhappy look, he didn’t do anything but hold the door open for me then exit behind me, putting his hand at the small of my back to guide me

to the sidewalk.

Through this, I kept talking.

“Then there’s Oskar. Older brother by three years. He’s an attorney at a big law firm in Boston. He’s married to Anoushka. They have two children, a boy and a girl. My brother does the man spread. My sister-in-law curates photos in hues of cream and pale pink of her perfect home and children. These she puts on Instagram to share what a stellar mother and homemaker she is. And this she does in between bouts of leaving them with their nanny so she can shop, lunch with her friends, and go on long girls’ weekends and yoga retreats.”

The lights flashed on a black Jeep Wrangler parked on the street six cars up from where we were, and I heard the beep.

But other than that, Hale had no response.

So I kept talking.

“Sister is Emilie,” I carried on. “Two years younger. She’s dating a surgeon who practices at Lenox Hill. His name is Scott. I’m uncertain he’ll expect the likes of you to throw rose petals at his feet, but he’ll be disgruntled when I don’t.”

Hale was grinning at my quip as he opened the passenger side door for me. He also held my elbow to steady me as I climbed up into his car.

This being a car I was trying not to let affect me considering it wasn’t a Look at How Much Money I Have car, but instead an American-made classic that would get him from here to there in style, but not in-your-face style.

And it affected me because this choice said a great deal about him, all of it, in my estimation, good.

When he’d angled in his side and slammed his door, before he turned the ignition, he looked at me and asked, “What’s your sister do? Is she a nurse?”

The thought of Emilie doing something for someone else almost made me laugh out loud.

I managed to restrain myself and shared, “I’m hazy about what my sister does for a living. What she’s in pursuit of, though, is a husband that will land her Charlotte’s lifestyle from *Sex and the City*. Though she won’t fall in love with a good-natured, loving, but balding Jewish boy with foul habits, but instead a handsome Jewish boy who loves his mother more than his wife, which will give her something to bitch about, since otherwise, he’ll be perfect. And as far as I can tell, most of her time goes into this endeavor.”

I let that sink in while he guided the Jeep into traffic.

Then I told him, "Turn left, two blocks up."

"Gotcha," he murmured.

"I'm not sure how it happened," I carried on, "considering my dad makes Bernie Sanders look conservative, but somewhere along the line, my mother adopted a traditional values approach to everything. I think it's because we're all moved out, and she spent a lot of time convincing Oskar he could do no wrong, Emilie she was the belle of every ball, and now she's dedicated to getting us all to settle down and give her grandchildren so she can instill unhealthy expectations into them. Be aware, Mom and Dad don't get along. This will come in a consummate passive-aggressive form of verbal and nonverbal disapproval of everything he does, and him ignoring it and pretending everything is just fine."

"Right," he said. Then noted, "So you're the middle child."

"If you're suggesting I suffer from the syndrome, you'd be absolutely correct. I learned to be independent early. I consider my friends my family, and my family are acquaintances to whom I'm socially bound to maintain an attachment, but I do my best to keep a distance. I was absolutely overshadowed by Oskar and neglected for Emilie. I'm definitely the outcast. This doesn't include my dad, who I think feels a camaraderie with me, because he doesn't fit in either."

"At least you have an ally," he murmured.

"Yes," I agreed. "The middle child thing also gives you insight into my chosen career. I'm aware I was starved for attention growing up, so in front of the camera is where I always wanted to be."

"Doing celebrity news?"

I shook my head even if he was watching the road. "I studied journalism at Syracuse. Internships while I was at school drove me to find my own groove."

"Not into paying dues by fetching coffee?" he teased.

"Not into getting hit on by on-air talent. The weatherman where I worked was not a good guy."

Hale had no response to that, but the atmosphere in the Jeep took a dive.

"They're not all like that," I assured him. "Not even close. And my decision was based on more. The Internet and social media have changed the game. Print is dying. People are moving from networks to streaming services. It's had a negative effect on reporting. News agencies are no longer about informing the public in an objective manner. They're about chasing viewers,

and viewers want to be entertained. And many viewers these days want to hear only what they want to hear, and not have their beliefs and values questioned by hearing impartial facts, but instead, they want to be validated. I wanted to inform people, but in order for them to want to watch me, I was aware I needed to find some way to entertain them. What I do isn't exactly a happy medium, but it isn't pandering either. I'm open about what I do and the purpose of my show." I pointed at the windshield. "You need to turn right at the next block."

"Do you wish you were reporting the actual news?" he asked.

"At first, it felt skeezy, what I did," I admitted. "I felt like I was only twenty-two, and I was already a sellout. Then another characteristic of being a middle child reared its head. I'm not ridiculously competitive, but it's there. I wanted to do it better than the others. I wanted to spin it a different way. I got into it and realized I liked it, and I could make it not skeezy. It isn't me with a bustling newsroom all around me, dedicated to digging up dirt on people. It isn't me hiding behind a keyboard talking trash. I'm front and center, dishing about famous people, and I don't pretend it's anything else. You're going to take another left at the next light."

Hale drove, then he took that left, but through this, he didn't say anything.

"You don't approve of what I do," I remarked.

"I lived my whole life with people like you talking about my dad, and Genny and Tom, and even me. It comes with the territory with what Genny and Tom wanted for their lives. I understood why people found my father fascinating. But, until recently, not me."

"I don't report on children," I assured him. "Even ones put forward by their parents, like Kris did with her younger girls before they were really old enough to be exposed to the public like that. There's plenty to say without adding that to the mix."

"There aren't many like you who have those kinds of hard limits."

"I know," I murmured. "Turn right up there and then park anywhere there's a spot," I instructed. "Mom and Dad live on that block."

We had to park a block up from their house, but even when Hale expertly backed into the space, he didn't turn off the Jeep or climb out.

He turned to me.

"That's all good to know, and I'm glad I know it. But what I need to know as your boyfriend is how you take your coffee. If you're a morning person. What you eat for breakfast. What's your favorite book. Shit like



that.”

“Splash of creamer, usually vanilla, but I won’t turn down white mocha. I’m an all-the-time person. I eat when I eat, and I usually do it poorly, because by the time I remember to eat, I’m starving. I don’t have time to read for pleasure, but when I do, it’s usually a thriller. Riley Sager is a current favorite. And I don’t have time to watch many movies, unless I’m invited to the premiere, though I usually leave before it’s over so I can film my report. But I managed to catch *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once*, and it was a wild ride, but it moved me tremendously. I have mommy issues, so it would. How about you?”

“Cream, two sugars, three, if I’m feeling the need for an extra jolt. I’m a morning person. One of the things I hate the most about the yoke Dad laid on me was that I don’t often have time to wind down in the evenings, which suits me better than being on the go all the time. I start the day with a smoothie and oatmeal, or yogurt, granola and fruit. I read as much as I can, anywhere I can. I recently finished *Stamped from the Beginning*, which was hard to take, but it’s important I gave it my time, and I think everyone should read it. And I was moved by *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once* too, because I also have mom issues, but I’ve had a crush on Michelle Yeoh since I was twelve and saw *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, which is my favorite movie of all time.”

“It’s a good one,” I whispered, and I was moved right then, because he was sharing with me not because he was being interviewed, but because he was spending his Saturday night doing something kind for me.

Not to mention, I liked all the things he had to say.

“Important note, I’m a protective boyfriend,” he announced. “So, if this isn’t just normal family dysfunction, and shit goes bad in there, I’m probably not going to let you sit through it.”

I was still whispering when I said, “Okay.”

His voice changed, it became softer, sweeter, when he said, “You look really pretty, baby. I like your outfit. It’s gorgeous on you.”

I didn’t remember the last time I cried. I wasn’t a crier. I never had been.

But I felt them coming then.

Because, I didn’t know, since my last real boyfriend was in high school, but I suspected those were the words any devoted boyfriend would say to his girlfriend right before she had to walk into a house where she never felt she belonged, where it had been made clear she never did anything right, and she

needed her man to say just the right thing so she could get through it.

I curbed the urge to shed tears, but they were in my tone when I said,  
“Thanks, Hale.”

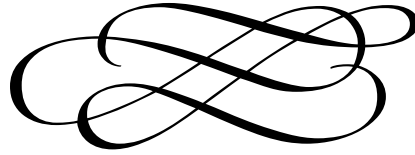
“Let’s go have fun.”

On that, he angled out of the car.

And I thought he was being optimistic, but I had no choice.

I hopped out too.

# CHAPTER 6



## CHEZ COHEN

### *Hale*

“**Y**ou should probably take more brussels sprouts, dear, instead of the potatoes. I’m not sure there’s enough green in your diet.”

“You should start keto, Elsa. Anoushka and I are on it, and it’s amazing. We’re fit and have active lifestyles, so it’d probably work wonders for you.”

“Elsa’s always been a little chubby. No matter what she tries, it probably will never change. Right, Scott? Some people are just prone to storing fat. You’re a doctor. You should know.”

“I’m an orthopedic surgeon, Em. Not a weight loss specialist.”

“Anoushka has a couple of keto cookbooks,” Oskar said, then, clearly not caring enough about his sister to know she had nothing but a jar of Grey Poupon mustard, a stick of butter and a water carafe in her fridge, magnanimously offered, “She can scan some of our favorite recipes and send them to you.”

Inger bookended these comments by saying, “Maybe I should go steam some broccoli. It wouldn’t take a minute.”

All right.

Fuck this shit.

He’d had enough.

And she’d taken more than enough.

So they were done.

“That’s it,” he said, tossing his napkin down and pushing back his chair.

“Hale,” Elsa said softly.

He turned to her. “We’re going.”

“Maybe we can talk in the other room,” she suggested.

“I warned you,” he returned.

She tucked her lips between her teeth.

It was the cutest thing he’d ever seen her do.

Strike that, it was the only cute thing he’d ever seen her do.

But serious as fuck.

This shit was not okay.

It had started out all right.

Her family’s reaction to him showing was classic. They were falling all over themselves, shocked as hell, but even so, they were welcoming.

Maybe they were a little too obvious with the shock, like Elsa couldn’t score any guy, much less him. But he’d come prepared for them being difficult, so he let it slide.

That said, David didn’t have the same reaction. He didn’t seem surprised Elsa showed with a man, not even Hale. In fact, he didn’t seem to give a shit Hale was there at all. The only thing he cared about at first was giving his daughter a tight hug. He then shook hands with Hale, clapped him on the arm, and welcomed him into his home.

In other words, Hale liked David immediately.

Inger was stunning, if her presence was a little overwhelming, and this had to do with her fawning in a mildly suffocating way over her son, her daughter-in-law, her grandchildren, her youngest’s boyfriend, and also Hale.

Although Oskar and Emilie had inherited their father’s dark hair and eyes, Elsa looked a great deal like her mother, only those two in the family having that ethereal Nordic beauty.

Though, somewhat sickeningly, Anoushka looked like she could be Elsa’s twin, except twenty pounds lighter.

Elsa was gorgeous, but Hale couldn’t imagine finding a woman who looked too much like Chloe or Sasha, even though both of them were gorgeous too. It’d be a total turn off.

When they arrived, Inger and Anoushka were settling Oskar and Anoushka’s very young children for bed, so that hid some of the absolutely diabolical bullshit this family served up to Elsa, and sometimes David.

But once the kids were down and another place setting was laid out, it began.

Inger had things to say about Elsa’s clothes, hair, weight, and even the

hue of her foundation, which Inger decided didn't match Elsa's skin tone (this was not true, he hadn't even noticed she was wearing any, for Christ's sake). She hid this behind motherly concern or advice, but they were digs, no way around it.

Oskar was a conceited asshole who probably spent his downtime trying to figure out how to suck his own dick. However, he'd never manage this feat considering how far up his own ass he was.

Emilie was catty and acted ten years younger than she was. Hale could see this, in a way, considering Scott paid more attention to Elsa's ass than he did his girlfriend, and Emilie didn't miss it.

And it was safe to say, Hale sure as fuck didn't.

David did his best to run interference, and along the road of drinks in the living room to gravitating to the dining room table, Hale'd had several nice conversations with the man. But this effort was doomed, considering how outnumbered they were, and just how ugly it could get.

"I-I...don't understand," Inger said. "Is something wrong?"

Elsa gave Hale a pleading look.

He clenched his teeth, picked up his napkin and pushed under the table again.

He then looked to Oskar. "Elsa doesn't need keto. Unless prescribed by a doctor, no one needs keto. The ketogenic diet is used as a last-ditch effort to manage extreme epilepsy that doesn't respond to drugs. In other words, it alters your brain chemistry. It's a fad diet that may have health benefits, but the research isn't there yet to prove it. And it's only recommended to be utilized for a short period of time to take off weight, rather than an ongoing way to consume daily calories. Which makes me wonder why you're on it because you've no need to take off weight. But more, Elsa doesn't need keto because," he turned his eyes to Emilie, "she has a fabulous figure. Perhaps you're unaware of the anti-body-shaming movement, but women are no longer expected to be ten pounds underweight to be considered attractive. They're encouraged to feel comfortable in their own skin, no matter what shape it takes. If you're thin and happy to be thin, great. If you're curvy, and happy being curvy, great. However, I don't remember Elsa bringing the topic of her body up for discussion."

He felt Elsa's hand land on his knee, then squeeze, so he shut up.

"We love her. We just want her to be healthy and happy," Oskar said.

He looked to Elsa. "Am I unaware of health concerns you have,

sweetheart?”

She was tucking her lips again, now with blue eyes dancing like she was trying not to laugh, all while she shook her head.

It was nice she found this funny, but he was unamused.

He looked back to Oskar. “Then this isn’t about that. It’s about what’s been happening since we arrived, finding ways to tear her down. And when I’m sitting next to her, I won’t have it. And if she comes home to me, and reports she got it when I wasn’t sitting next to her, I won’t have that either.”

Oskar opened his mouth.

“Son,” David said sternly.

Oskar looked to his father. “This man has sat at our table once, and you’re okay with him speaking this way to me and Emilie?”

“Yes, considering everything he’s said is right. You need to lay off your sister.”

“Dad!” Emilie cried.

“How about we move along from this, hmm?” Inger suggested.

“Kind of an overreaction, don’t you think?” Emilie mumbled under her breath to no one and everyone. “We were just talking about diets.”

They weren’t “just talking about diets,” so Hale had something to say, but he didn’t say it when Elsa gave his knee another squeeze and kicked the side of his foot as an exclamation point.

Instead, he leaned into her and ordered, “Eat as many potatoes as you want.”

When he moved away, she replied, “Aye, aye, bossman.”

Straight up.

He was really going to enjoy spanking her.

Finished passing around the food, they all ate in silence until Scott commented, “Well, this is awkward.”

“As it would be when Elsa drags in the high and mighty Hale Wheeler to tell us off for caring about her,” Oskar grouched.

“It’s like I don’t even speak,” David said to the ceiling.

“Oskar, darling, *drop it*,” Inger said to her son.

Oskar didn’t drop it.

He said to Hale, “You know, for your information, the anti-body-shaming thing is not doing any favors for obese people. It isn’t good for them to think it’s perfectly okay to carry around that much weight. It’s an epidemic. You can literally die from being too fat.”

“And you think making people who self-soothe through food ashamed is the way to fight that epidemic?” Hale shot back. “You think making them feel like they need to hide, like they’re not worthy, like they’re less, like they’re society’s pariahs is the way to go?”

“No,” Oskar snapped. “I simply think making them feel they should be proud of being fat isn’t the way to go.”

“The only blatantly discriminatory joke it’s perfectly safe for a comedian to tell is a fat joke. They’re the last segment of society who it’s considered socially acceptable to find contemptable, so it’s okay to openly poke fun at them. How do you think that makes people who struggle with their weight feel?” Hale asked.

“I would hope it would make them feel like they need to find some willpower and better their lives,” Oskar answered sharply.

“And do you think the vast majority of people who have these issues don’t wish to do something about them?” Hale pushed. “Do you honestly think it’s only a matter of willpower, and not a failure of our mental health system that leaves many without the capacity to acquire the tools to find healthier ways to live their lives?”

“Please, don’t let’s get into socialized medicine being the answer to society’s ills,” Oskar mock begged. “It’s a matter of eating less. Honestly, that’s all.”

Scott made a noise at this juncture, a noise of disagreement.

But the man didn’t wade in.

And Hale didn’t back down.

“You don’t have a weight problem, so exactly how would you know?” Hale inquired, deciding, considering how contentious this already was, against noting how much alcohol Oskar had put away that night.

“I just know making them think nothing is wrong is a poor answer to a big problem,” Oskar retorted.

“So filming them in gyms when they’re trying to do something about it, posting it and making fun of them on social media is all right with you,” Hale stated flatly. “Or any of the countless and constant messages society hammers into them to make them feel unwanted, less than and worthless, those are good strategies to battle this epidemic. Rather than saying beauty has nothing to do with a measurement and exercising a little acceptance in order to perhaps help them toward finding some self-esteem which could do something about how they perceive their place in this world. That being they

actually have one. And onward from that, could have beneficial effects on their mental well-being which in turn would have the same on their physical health.”

“Again, I’m simply saying it’s not helpful to make them think it’s okay being fat,” Oskar replied.

“And what I’m saying is, instead of relaying the pervasive message they’re not okay, sharing with them that they are might be a greater force for positive change,” Hale returned.

“The problem with that is, they’re *not* okay,” Oskar retorted.

Jesus Christ.

“Right then, since you aren’t suffering from it, and likely won’t, considering how obviously important it is to you to keep fit, what’s it matter to you? How exactly is it your business?” Hale inquired.

“I have a daughter. When she grows up, I don’t want her to think it’s okay to be fat,” Oskar returned. “She sees her aunt a success or people like that Black singer, she’ll get unhealthy ideas.”

“That Black singer?” Elsa had taken her hand from his knee in order to eat, but at the tone of her voice when she said those three words, Hale searched under the table until he found it and then he gave it a squeeze.

“The one that plays the flute,” Oskar said.

“You mean Lizzo,” Elsa informed him. “She has a name. It’s Lizzo.”

Jesus.

No shade on Lizzo, the woman was beautiful, but Elsa wasn’t close to Lizzo’s size.

But by putting them in the same sentence, Oskar’s intentions were clear.

“You would know, since you know all the celebrities.” That came from Emilie, again under her breath but still loud enough for everyone to hear.

“I have yet to meet Lizzo,” Elsa stated. “And although not everyone likes the same thing, so not everyone is going to like her music, that doesn’t negate the fact she’s an accomplished musician, singer and songwriter. She’s about self-expression and positivity. She’s about saying it straight and keeping it real. She’s about making unseen people seen. The fact she’s about all of that and many people boil her down to her size, and then politicize it, is tragic. However, it isn’t a surprise. A woman with a point of view, that point of view being trying to introduce other women to their inherent power, a message that other women gravitate to, has always been a threat. A Black woman, that threat escalates. So the status quo will do anything to reduce her to something



about which they can manipulate opinion in order to dilute her message, and her power.”

“Are you calling me a racist now?” Oskar demanded.

“No, I’m suggesting you’re a misogynist,” Elsa returned smoothly.

A flush rushed up Oskar’s neck.

“Elsa, I believe I requested we move on from this discussion,” Inger snapped.

“I’m sorry, Mom, but one more thing,” Elsa said.

“Elsa!” Inger bit off.

But Elsa looked again to Oskar. “Hale isn’t high and mighty. And he’s done nothing to indicate he feels like he’s better than anyone at this table. You insulted his girlfriend. He didn’t like it and let you know. You didn’t like that, so you started acting like an ass. Now, *I’m* upset you’re taking shots at Hale. So I’ll ask you to refrain from doing it.”

Oskar said nothing to Elsa. He looked at his mother.

“I don’t think Anoushka and I are going to be bringing the kids for many visits if this is what we’ll be treated to when we come home.”

“Oh, darling, don’t say that!” Inger exclaimed, openly panicked.

“I find it interesting you chose arguing as a profession, and you’re seemingly unable to rise to the challenge when someone is besting you,” David put in, aiming this his son’s way.

“David, stay out of it,” Inger ordered.

Elsa leaned into Hale and shared, “I forgot to tell you, Dad wasn’t a fan of Oskar going to law school. He thinks our justice system is broken.”

Hale turned to her. “It is.”

Although she kept her lips tightly pressed together, it didn’t hide her smile.

“You haven’t hidden you despise my calling, Dad,” Oskar said.

“What calling is that, son?” David inquired.

“The law.”

“You don’t practice law. You practice the art of racking up billable hours.” David returned.

“Correction,” Elsa whispered in his ear. “It wasn’t law school so much as the fact Oskar went into it to make money and not help people.”

“I’m catching that,” Hale whispered in return.

“David, we have company at this table. Scott and Hale don’t need to be present for this conversation,” Inger noted.

“And it’s a moot point, since I’m hardly going to give up the fast track to named partner in order to do pro bono cases for immigrants or whatever it is you think would be worthwhile for me to do,” Oskar said.

“Oh great,” Emilie mumbled, heralding this was what it sounded like it was going to be.

The beginning of a well-worn argument.

“Of course you won’t use the education *I* paid for to do something to help people who need it,” David remarked.

“My clients need my services just as much as poor people do. That’s reverse discrimination, Father,” Oskar declared.

“Thank God the kindly, well-off Jews who took in your great-grandparents as they fled the Nazis didn’t have your views on immigrants,” David retorted.

“We all can’t be Hale here.” Oskar flung a hand over the table in Hale’s direction. “Mother Theresa in the form of a surfer dude, giving away his father’s hard-earned billions. Though, nobody is talking about how he’s got more money now than his father left him because that’s what happens. Lots of money makes lots *more* money. He comes off as the millennial savior, holier than thou, vaccinating Africans and freeing Tibet and all that shit, but still, he could buy and sell entire countries.”

Hale had gone still.

But not Elsa.

Now her napkin was on the table, and she was out of her seat.

“Come on, honey, we’re leaving,” she stated, pulling on his arm.

“Elsa, sit down,” Inger commanded.

But Hale was up.

“Yes, yes. I was out of line, goading Oskar like that. You have my apologies.” David turned to his son. “Oskar, I’m sorry. We won’t discuss it any further.”

“No, I’m sorry. But we’re going.” Elsa had a hold on his hand and was tugging it.

Everyone was out of their seats, but only David followed them from the dining room into the living room.

Elsa stopped Hale at the front door and got close.

“I’ll be right back, okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, baby,” he murmured. “I’ll get your wrap.”

“Stay right here, I’ll grab it.”

She squeezed his hand and stormed, not to where her wrap was on the arm of a chair, but back to the dining room.

“Tensions are high, Hale. Not to do with you. But I let it leak out at dinner. I can’t tell you how sorry I am,” David said.

He nodded.

It was then, from a distance, barely discernible, but he heard Elsa’s furious voice saying “...his father. Fuck you. *Fuck you*, Oskar. What the fuck is the matter with you?” A pause then, “No, Mom. It’s done. We’re done. And we’re leaving.”

He saw her hurry back into the room, snatch up her wrap with agitated movements, grab her bag and his scarf and come to him.

She took his hand, this time her grip like a vise, and she turned to her dad.

“Another stellar evening at Chez Cohen,” she remarked irritably.

“I’ll call soon,” David said, looking and sounding forlorn. “We need to talk, honey.”

She studied him a moment before she nodded, got up on her toes and kissed her dad’s cheek.

She then looked to Hale and said, “Let’s go.”

“Again, I’m so sorry, Hale,” David said, standing in the doorway they’d walked out.

Hale noted Inger wasn’t at his side, nor were any of the others.

“It was nice to meet you, David.”

“I hope to see you again, and soon. We’ll make it better next time,” David promised.

Hale lifted his chin and that was all he had the chance to do, Elsa was charging down the front steps of their brownstone, dragging him behind her.

The sharp, staccato clip of her heels on the sidewalk was all that accompanied their swift walk to his Jeep.

He silently helped her in, rounded the hood and got in beside her.

“Obviously,” she said to the windshield, “I have nothing to feed you back at my place, and we both took approximately three bites of food, so we’re going to have to figure out something else because I’m pissed, but I’m still starving. I missed lunch. There’s an Indian place around the corner, if you like Indian.”

“Love it.”

She turned to him. “We can walk there. It’s only a few blocks. Do you want to walk?”

“I’m not wearing spike heels.”

She rolled her eyes. “Please. I grew up in that house back there. I could walk two miles in these shoes and probably have.”

With that, she was out of the Jeep.

Hale got out too, met her on the sidewalk, and it was Elsa again who took his hand and led him to the corner, around it, down two blocks and onto a road with businesses on it.

She was in a mood, and he wasn’t about to say anything, because somewhere along the line she forgot he was playing her fake boyfriend, and now she was acting like they were together, had dinner go to shit at her parents’ house, and they were on to Plan B.

Which absolutely worked for him.

In another two blocks, they arrived at the Indian place, which was packed, but it was a relief the lady that seated them at the only available table, a cramped two-top in the back, didn’t seem to know who either of them were.

Elsa glared at her menu, declaring, “I’m eating so many damned carbs, I’ll only be done when I explode.”

He busted out laughing.

When he was down to chuckles, he noticed now she looked relieved.

And she didn’t hesitate to tell him why.

“It wasn’t okay for Oskar to bring up your dad.”

“He died a while ago, babe,” he reminded her.

“I know, just...” she trailed off and turned her attention back to the menu, though it was clear she did this as an evasive maneuver to release herself from his gaze.

So he reached out and grabbed her hand.

She looked back to him.

“I can’t say I don’t have issues around my dad. But I’m okay,” he assured.

“You went...very still, Hale. When Oskar mentioned him.”

“It was the hard-earned billions thing, Elsa. Like, me giving away the money Dad worked to make is a bad thing. First, Dad knew better than anybody what I’d do with it. So him giving it to me was his way of saying he was down with that. Second, it obviously doesn’t occur to Oskar what Dad had to do to make that money. The same thing I sense Oskar is doing to his wife, who’s already checked out of her family, because her husband has. She makes a show of it for social media, but it sounds like she lives her life like a

single woman. Because, undoubtedly, Oskar works so much, for all intents and purposes, she is.”

“I hadn’t thought of it like that.”

He shrugged, and let her hand go, because the waiter was there.

He ordered a Bira white ale, she ordered a glass of white wine. Then, since she hadn’t had lunch, he ordered pappadums and onion bhaji while they decided on their entrees.

“Again, I’m okay,” he repeated.

“If you say so,” she murmured to her menu, then set it down. “I want to be more adventurous, but I love it so much, I just can’t. So I’m getting chicken tikka masala, garlic naan and pilau rice.”

He put his menu down. “Paneer biryani.”

She tipped her head to the side. “Are you veggie?”

“Not entirely, but I limit meat. For environmental reasons. Though, as you can tell, I could do better with that since I’m not limiting cheese.”

She smiled.

Yeah, she was gorgeous. Especially like this. Guard down. In her element in a restaurant close to where she grew up. Wearing a fantastic outfit. Color in her cheeks from a brisk walk and residual high emotion.

Being just Elsa.

“Is it always that bad?” he asked.

“No, that rocked high on the Cohen Family Dinner Richter Scale. I shouldn’t be surprised. Oskar feels threatened by anyone who’s more successful than him. He’s been edgier, which makes him act more of a dick, since Elsa’s Exchange started taking off. Adding you to the mix was a step too far. The world’s richest, most handsome, most benevolent guy was sure to set him off. I should have seen it coming.”

“Most handsome?” he teased.

“Like you don’t see yourself in the mirror,” she fired back.

The waiter returned with their drinks, and they ordered.

Elsa sat back with her wine, perfectly comfortable in the cramped, noisy space.

That was attractive too, the city girl in her, where she seemed part of a bustling place, in fact a part of anywhere she was, from the warehouse to her apartment to his penthouse to the suite in Manhattan.

Like she belonged there, no matter how many “theres” there were.

“Have you traveled much?” he asked.

“In summer, when we were kids, we’d go to the Poconos. Sometimes down to Florida. Dad felt the urge and took us on a trip to the old country when I was fourteen. Budapest is an incredibly beautiful city. I had a semester in England during college. I did the requisite spring break thing in Mexico once. And recently, I’ve needed to go to LA quite often, and I’ve gone.”

“And?” he asked.

She wrinkled her nose.

He laughed. “What is it with New Yorkers and LA?”

“You can’t get any more real and in-your-face than New York. You can’t get any more fruity and fake than LA.”

“I resent that remark,” he joked.

She shot him a small smile. “I always think of the water scene in *LA Story* when I think of LA. New Yorkers would drink water straight from the Hudson just to prove we can. Don’t get me wrong. The weather in LA is great. I love the ocean. Rodeo Drive is fun. Not near as fun as Fifth Avenue, but fun. It’s fascinating. There’s something dreamy about it. I could actually see myself living there for a while, if I knew it wouldn’t be forever. Fruit is good for you, and there’s beauty in make believe, so when I say fake, I don’t mean it in a bad way. It’s just that the electricity of the city isn’t there. You almost feel compelled to order a margarita, put your feet up and relax. Here, you never relax. You vibe and jive and hustle and hurry.”

“That definitely sounds more you,” he said softly.

“Yes,” she agreed.

Their pappadums arrived, and Hale found he was incredibly hungry too.

They both dove in.

“I take it you prefer LA,” she noted.

He thought about it.

Images of his mother and father and feeling invisible or miserable juxtaposed over memories of Tom and Genny, Chloe, Matt and Sasha.

“I have mixed feelings,” he said.

“Mm?” she prompted

“I like the vibe and the hustle and the hurry. I like that I can get lost, like being in here, with you,” he said, indicating the restaurant with the jerk of his chin. “But there’s something about the sound of the waves on the sand. It’s just...home.”

“I see that.”

“And that would be Genny and Tom’s old home. Mom lived in the hills, close to Pasadena. Dad’s house...” He let that trail. “Home was always Genny and Tom’s place in Malibu.”

“I don’t know LA very well, but that isn’t exactly close to Pasadena, is it?”

“No, but Dad lived close to them. He wasn’t good with being too far away from Genny. She was his touchstone.”

She took a beat before she said, “We don’t have to talk about this if you don’t want to.”

“Do I seem uncomfortable to you?”

She didn’t answer, and he sensed it wasn’t because their onion bhaji arrived.

“Do I?” he pressed after the waiter left.

“I don’t know you very well either, Hale. You seem pretty adjusted. It’s kind of annoying.”

He grinned at her.

She carried on, “But I get the impression there are some underlying issues you haven’t dealt with.”

At that, he laughed, loud and long. So much, some of the patrons turned to look.

If they recognized him or Elsa, they didn’t show it. This was off the beaten track. Not a destination for tourists. They were around true locals, who couldn’t give that first fuck the richest man in the world and his gorgeous, social-media-famous date were in their midst.

Yes, New York had its advantages.

“Yeah, sweetheart,” he confirmed when he got his shit together. “There are issues I haven’t dealt with.”

He was surprised she had a dazzled look on her face that she didn’t try to hide as she said, “Okay.”

“Eat, while I play amateur psychologist,” he ordered.

“Fantastic,” she muttered, but he could tell she was joking.

“Your mother is jealous as fuck of you,” he told her.

She had onion bhaji in her mouth, so she chewed and swallowed before she said, “Ah, the don’t feel bad someone is treating you like shit, they’re just jealous excuse.”

He nodded. “In this instance, I think it’s true. You look like her. You’re of her. But you’re already more successful than she’s ever been, or at least in

her estimation. Sadly, she doesn't see maintaining a decades-long marriage to a good-looking, solid guy and creating three beautiful children as the accomplishments they are. I sense you've always been driven, even as a child, and she always knew there was a possibility you'd outshine her. And you do."

"It's annoying that this diagnosis both holds merit and is complimentary so I can't refute it."

He smiled at her and went after his own onion bhaji.

"And your take on Oskar and Emilie?" she prompted.

"Emilie is spoiled and was never allowed to grow up," Hale said. "She also suffers from pretty-girl syndrome, erroneously operating under the assumption her good looks will get her everything she wants. This might be the case, at her age. But she's going to run into some ugly truths when society deems her unworthy after she hits thirty-five. And she isn't going to be prepared to face those, since she hasn't put any effort into being more than what genetics gave her at birth."

"Agreed," Elsa replied.

"But I'll never in my life understand a man like Oskar. He's a chauvinist and a bigot. He obviously didn't get that from his dad, and he's educated, so he has no excuse not to be more enlightened. For his part, I think he has much deeper issues he's grappling with that my amateur analysis can't decipher."

"Pity," she said.

"Or maybe some men are just born assholes," Hale went on.

That made Elsa laugh, genuinely, no-holds-barred, and Hale found the dichotomy of it sounding both cultured and abandoned fascinating.

When she sobered, she really sobered, because it was heartfelt when she said, "Thank you, Hale, for taking my back tonight. I've never had anyone but Dad do that, and none of them respect him, so it never really had an effect. I know I wasn't appreciative of your offer to do it, but please know now how much I appreciate you being with me tonight."

"My pleasure, sweetheart."

She dipped her gaze as she took a sip of her wine, and the gesture was conspicuously shy.

It was also so not her, but he liked it so much, he felt it in his chest and his dick.

"Don't eat too much," she told him, putting her wine back on the table.



“There’s a bakery a block up that has the best lobster tails you’ll ever eat, and they stay open until two in the morning, putting out fresh all day.”

Another advantage of New York.

“That’s a plan,” he agreed.

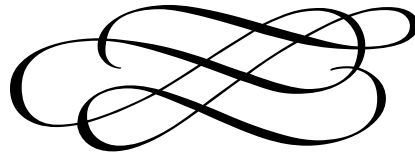
She smiled at him, and there was something shy about that too.

And it was confirmed.

He liked that ambitious, together, focused Elsa Cohen got shy around guys she was attracted to.

He liked it a fuckuva lot.

# CHAPTER 7



## ALL ELSA COHEN ALL THE TIME

*Elsa*

**M**y alarm sounded, my eyes opened, I turned and stared at it, confused for a moment because I was groggier than normal, and the numbers didn't make sense.

And then I remembered my studio was in Manhattan now, so I was waking up an hour earlier. That was why the clock said it was 4:30, not 5:30.

I needed to get up.

I did not get up.

It was Wednesday after my Saturday night with Hale.

He was leaving town today, I knew, since he told me after I sent him the final cut of our interview yesterday, and he'd approved it.

But I hadn't seen him since he walked me up to my apartment after he drove us to Pebble Beach, where we sat in the cold, ate our lobster tails and talked until after midnight.

At the time, I wasn't paying attention. I was in a haze of all the wonder that was him.

I was in the haze of finding myself in the best date I'd ever had in my life.

This was because he was charming and interesting and funny and open and honest. His awesome browbeating of Oskar on the subject of body-shaming I wished I had on tape.

And he was gentlemanly and affectionate, wrapping his arm around my shoulders on the bench where we sat, tucking me to the warmth of his side, doing this in a casual way that felt familiar, even if I'd obviously never had

that with him before.

Doing it also in a protective way that felt tender, because my satin skirt and wrap didn't entirely keep out the chill but being cozied up to Hale did.

And last, doing it in a possessive way that I never in my life thought I'd get off on. But belonging to Hale on that bench on that beach with the Brooklyn Bridge and the Manhattan skyline spread out before us, well...

Not to put too fine a point on it, it was the most precious and promising moment I'd ever experienced.

Though, it was after he walked me up the three flights of stairs to my apartment, then followed me in and waited until I turned on my lights, that was what occupied my mind that morning. And the morning before, the one before that, and so on, as well as far too much of the whole of my days (and nights).

I'd thanked him again for the evening, particularly going to my parents' house for dinner, and that was when he got close.

He captured my chin between his thumb and the side of his index finger.

And he'd murmured, "Stop thanking me, baby, it was my honor."

After that, he let my chin go only so he could run his fingers along my jaw, cup it, his head descending slowly, giving me the opportunity to indicate I wasn't all right with what was about to happen.

An opportunity I didn't take.

So he kissed me.

It was surprising because it was not invasive, aggressive, or claiming, like him shoving his tongue in my mouth when I wasn't ready for it.

Oh no.

His firm lips pressed hard against mine, his hand gentle at my jaw, the smell of him— outdoorsy pine mingled with an amber musk that was so subtle, I only smelled it when I was that close to him, which made me feel like he'd let me in on a thrilling secret.

It lasted mere seconds.

I didn't even get to taste him.

And it was the best kiss I'd ever had.

When it was over, which was far too soon, he stayed so close, it was like I felt his words as well as heard them when he said, "I want to see you again."

And after that kiss, that entire night, what could I do?

I did the only thing I could.

I said, "Okay."

He touched his lips to mine, his eyes smiling, and that was when he left.

This move was so smooth, I hadn't realized how exceptional of a play it was until after I was in bed and my vibrator and I'd had a session.

But it was a play, though I didn't know it at the time.

It was, considering he said he wanted to see me again, and in the days since, he was in town, and although he responded relatively swiftly to texts and didn't make me wait for feedback after I sent the rough cut of the interview to him, ditto with the final, I didn't see him again. And he didn't ask to see me.

Now he was leaving.

I wasn't a game player, mostly because I wasn't in the game.

This didn't mean I didn't want a husband and children. I did. Very much. Both.

I liked men's company. I liked their attention. I'd had good sex, so I liked sex.

But there was more.

It was about having a partner in life. It was about having someone who would go out and get you chicken soup and Nyquil when you were sick. Someone you could complain about a shitty day to. Someone who counted on you to be there to listen when they had one. Someone who was always there so you could both go out and take in a movie, then dissect it over some Thai or Chinese or a slice before you went home and made love.

It was also about creating something that was of the both of you, loving them and doing the best you could by them before you turned them loose on the world.

And I didn't fool myself.

It was about the need to find a guy like my dad. A man who deserved love, even adoration, and giving that to him his whole life in a way he'd never doubt it, not from the minute I gave him that gift, all the way to the moment he died.

I did want all of that, even though, still not fooling myself, I knew finding the right man would be difficult because I would expect him to make the same number of sacrifices I'd make to build our life and our family.

It wasn't going to be a given I'd drop everything and rush to school if one of our kids got sick. It wasn't going to be expected that I'd make sure the fridge was full and food was on the table, or the clothes were clean and put away.

Still, to this day, these things were so embedded in our society, women unwittingly fell into patterns I had no interest in and had no intention of following.

So, yes. I was aware my search would be long and arduous and might come to nothing in the end.

But still, I wanted someone to share my life with.

It was just that now wasn't the time to start that search.

Sure, if he crossed my path, I wasn't going to waste an opportunity.

But Hale was not that man. Not only because he clearly played games, but because I was sitting across from him on the couch when he said he didn't want the same thing.

He'd be a fantastic diversion in the meantime, for certain.

But I wasn't going to be jerked around just because he could, all his attention devoted to me, a kiss that was a flagrant promise, and then nothing but necessary communication for days after.

Fuck that noise.

On that thought, I threw the covers aside, and the blast of cold that hit me was a better wakeup call than the alarm.

I made some coffee, hit the bathroom, did my getting-ready thing and headed out.

Zoey was already in her office when I arrived. Something else I liked about her. She was all over it all the time.

I called out a greeting and she was in the doorway to my office before I had my coat off.

"Need your approval to launch the Hale Wheeler blast," she said, setting her laptop on my desk and turning it to face me. "Has he signed off?"

"Yep," I confirmed as I sat and pulled her laptop close to me, seeing the preview of my homepage was up, as well as the tab for the Meta Business Suite.

"Geraldine sent in some pictures she took last night of Jamie Oakley and Nora Ellington. She's offering us an exclusive. I recommend we buy them. They look gorgeous and there's a lot of scuttlebutt around them. They've been seen together so much, it has to be getting serious."

I noted Zoey had some pictures minimized just as she went on talking.

"And it fits, because Hale was with them last night."

That felt like a punch landing, but I hid it as I casually asked, "What were they doing?"

I wanted it to be some kind of event, one where it wasn't appropriate for us to be seen together since we'd had one date (and it was a date, even if it started out fake, it didn't end that way). Obviously, we were nowhere near making it official by appearing together at an event.

"Out to dinner," Zoey answered.

Just out to dinner with some friends, when he could have been out to dinner on his last night in the city with me.

Mm-hmm.

Fuck that noise.

"Website's a go, publish," I said, after scanning it. "But give me half an hour. I want to text Hale to confirm we're on the schedule we gave him. If I don't hear from him, I'll assume he hasn't changed his mind."

"Gotcha," she replied.

Then I went to Meta, checked the copy, the graphic, which was of the two of us on each side of his sofa, clipped so we looked like we were facing off, with my branded font across it saying, "Hale Wheeler: Elsa's Exclusive Interview."

I said, "Again, half an hour, then FB, IG are a go. You do a TikTok?"

"I emailed it to you."

I nodded, taking in a breath before I maximized the photos.

They were of Jamie and Nora, standing on the sidewalk, looking glamorous, as usual. Even if the couple were the focus of the picture, Hale was with them, and it appeared they were chatting, ignoring the photographers that surrounded them, of which there were several.

I was about to look away when I saw it.

I peered closer.

Almost out of shot, you could see Hale was holding someone's hand. That person was not in the photo, but she was reflected in the windows of the restaurant behind her.

She was blurry, but there was no denying it was Blake Sharp, socialite and sister to Alexandra Sharp, who was paired up with John Hendrix, Judge Oakley's best friend.

I clicked to the other photo Geraldine was offering, and the side of Blake's body and her hair were in it, but she was ducking her face like she didn't want to be photographed (which was the new normal for Blake, and it was understandable, after the mayhem that happened at her defunct wedding).

And she and Hale were still holding hands.

This was a close bunch, all who were in the circle of Imogen Swan and Tom Pierce, regardless that those two were now very divorced and had moved on to new partners. That group spent a good deal of time together and rallied around each other often.

But this wasn't just friends having dinner.

You didn't hold hands with friends.

And this wasn't the first time I'd seen those two together. I'd seen the same, with my own eyes, at Mika Stowe's book launch event.

Hale Wheeler.

Total.

Goddamn.

Player.

"Buy them," I decided, my voice sounding tight. "I'll write copy now so we can post them within the hour. Hale looks good. It'll be a nice follow-up to the interview announcement."

"You got it," Zoey said, swiping up her laptop and heading out.

I texted Hale about the announcement going out, and I knew it wasn't only because the words were terse and informative that I got no reply. The man was busy, he made that clear in his interview. Too busy for women in his life.

I was stewing (while reminding myself I had no right to stew, it had been one date, and it started out fake, it was just that I was unaware it had ended the same way) while writing copy around Jamie and Nora, and what might be happening with them.

I was going to give Hale holding Blake Sharp's hand a pass. It wasn't the right thing to do in my line of business. But it was the right thing to do for my peace of mind.

I was also trying to decide if I should use the morsel I'd received from a ferret as the obvious segue it seemed to be.

It was about Gordon Fuller, an ex-co-star of Imogen Swan's, going into rehab (again). Zoey had since obtained two sources to confirm, so it was good to release.

However, even if it was content, it wasn't where I wanted to go with my brand.

I was distancing myself from this kind of thing. It was gossip, not news. There was no meat to it.

The real story was that Gordon Fuller had been handsome and talented when he was cast in a compelling storyline as the younger love interest of the middle-aged titular character in the beloved show *Rita's Way*. But the idea of an appealing, vital, older woman attracting the attention of a younger man so repelled viewers, they wrote him off the show.

For reasons only the fates of Hollywood understood, this derailed his entire career, which more than likely played a part in Fuller's ongoing problems with addiction.

And now, Teddy Mankowitz, the showrunner for *Rita's Way*, had a new program, starring Imogen Swan, which was dedicated to exploring the full, including sexual, lives of mature women.

He'd caved in *Rita's Way*, then capitalized on that same thing in *The Next Life*.

Now, *that* was a story.

And I was going to run with it.

I made this decision just as the door to the suite opened.

I looked up and watched Hale stroll in.

His eyes found me behind the desk, and he smiled like he hadn't told me he wanted to see me again, and three days had elapsed since he said that, and I not only hadn't seen him, but he had been out with another woman in between.

He jerked up his chin to Zoey then walked right into my office, and yes, it was a temporary office, but it was mine.

Though he was paying for it.

"Hale," I greeted.

"Babe," he replied.

*Babe?*

Oh my God.

I wanted to kill him.

He came around the desk (yes, right around the desk), bent down and kissed my cheek (yes! *kissed my cheek!*).

He then rested his ass against the edge, still on my side, examined my face, and asked, "Christ, what did I do now?"

"Not a thing," I lied breezily. "Did you get my text?"

He nodded. "Checked out your website and socials. Looks like people are excited."

I hadn't looked yet. I found you could descend into comments in



unhealthy ways. My need for attention craved that kind of thing, and it could get obsessive (and had). So I let Zoey deal with reading and engaging, and I allowed myself minimal scanning after a post had plenty of time to run its course.

“Unsurprising,” I replied.

“I have news,” he announced.

“That would be?” I asked when he didn’t immediately share.

“In poking around, my people discovered the warehouse isn’t up to code. It’s not just the heat, it’s the electric. They’re also worried about asbestos. It’s going to need a full going over, and they say the electric and HVAC alone are going to take a minimum of six weeks, and we can’t put in the security until the electric is done. I signed on for three more months here, but it might take longer. So you can settle in.”

I had no issue with that. I loved it here. And if this interview put me where I hoped to be, I’d already decided to overhaul my budget and ascertain if we could stay here.

“You could have texted me that,” I shared.

He shook his head. “We’re scheduled to take off in a couple of hours, and since I don’t have plans to be back in the city for a few weeks, I thought I’d take this opportunity to have some time with you before I go. Can you nip out with me to grab a coffee?”

“No.”

At my short answer, his eyes narrowed. “Are you actually busy, or did you lie about being pissed at me about something?”

I sure as hell wasn’t going to admit that the crush he’d cured me of came back, and then some, with how awesome he was facing off against Oskar and sharing honestly about himself over dinner and closed-mouth kissing better than other men could French. And then he lowkey ghosts me and takes another woman out to dinner, which obliterated the crush yet again.

I wasn’t going to tell him it didn’t feel great to be at the whim of when he ran hot, and then thought it was okay to leave me out in the cold.

No, I sure as hell wasn’t going to share any of that.

“I’m not pissed at you about anything. I just need to prepare because I’m filming a segment this afternoon. And word of warning, I’ll be talking about your friends Jamie and Nora. And I’m also going to be digging into why Teddy Mankowitz caved on a younger man/older woman storyline on *Rita’s Way*, but now, with the resurgence of feminism, he’s using Imogen Swan,

who was his ingénue on that show, to exploit that very same concept.”

His face grew wary. “People love Genny’s new show. It’s insanely popular.”

“It’s still women’s stories as written by a man.”

“*Rita’s Way* was thirty years ago.”

“They did a lot of groundbreaking storylines on that show but capitulated at the idea of making a middle-aged woman not only sexual, but sexually attractive to a younger man. We learn lessons from exploring the past, Hale.”

He stared at me intently as he noted in a low voice, “I see I have Elsa Cohen back, and she’s keeping my Elsa under wraps.”

*His Elsa?*

He’d been in the same damned city as me (essentially) for three days, and he hadn’t so much as texted to say, *Sorry, things are crazy, but I’m thinking about you.*

His Elsa, my ass.

The goddamned nerve.

“There’s only one me, Hale,” I informed him coolly. “If you like the idea of splitting me into personalities you find palatable, and those you don’t, that’s on you. But I’m all Elsa Cohen all the time, and proud of it.”

“I see,” he said in a soft, flat voice.

“I’m glad,” I replied in an icy one.

He abruptly stood. “More news, Ms. Cohen. I’ve hired a new management company for the apartment building, and not only will the security system and elevator be replaced, a total refurbishment of common areas will be taking place. And we’re relocating the tenant in the first-floor apartment that’s closest to the lobby. That’ll be repurposed into a studio where an onsite super can live, with a secure room for mailboxes where packages can be left. Apparently, there was a great deal of theft due to the door always being open, so most people were forced either to rent post office boxes, or have friends or family accept packages for them.”

With his “Ms. Cohen,” I was seeing why he didn’t like me calling him Mr. Wheeler.

But I wasn’t going to get into that.

Nor was I going to share my gratitude, since I had to have my packages mailed to Mom and Dad’s for this exact reason.

Instead, I remarked frostily, “I assume we can look forward to rent increases too.”

“No,” he clipped. “With current rents, my investment in that building will pay for itself in twenty-four months. I don’t need to gouge my tenants simply because I’m offering basic amenities and clean corridors. And you even asking that question states how clearly you don’t know me.”

“We had a fake date, Hale. I’d hardly claim to know you.”

“A fake date?” he whispered in a way even I, who saw a photo of him holding hands with another woman just the night before, felt tighten around my heart.

Indeed, we had a single date (that, okay, wasn’t fake) and a kiss, and he’d made no promises of exclusivity.

Even so...

Was he for real?

He thought he could walk into my office after holding hands with another woman not twenty-four hours before, and think I’d fall over myself to have coffee with him before he jets out of my life for some other port he probably has some other woman (or women) in?

I felt my safest bet was keeping my mouth shut.

This I did.

“I guess you got what you wanted,” he said in that same awful voice, and at his tone and his words, I couldn’t stop my flinch. “Take care of yourself.”

“You as well,” I replied blandly.

He stared at me a second, as if giving me the chance to stop him.

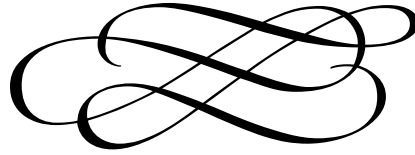
I remained silent.

Then he walked out of my office.

The way he did it, without looking back, I knew he’d also just walked out of my life.

And that hurt, way more than it should.

# CHAPTER 8



## ELSA COHEN HAS ARRIVED

*Elsa*

*T*wo days later...

I walked into the office and the first thing I saw was Zoey beaming.

The second thing I saw was an extraordinary bouquet of pink sweetheart roses, pink carnations and pale-yellow floribunda roses sitting on the corner of my desk.

The Hale interview was dropping that evening at six o'clock eastern time.

And I hadn't been wrong, except that no one had yet seen it, and still, it was going to be even bigger than I expected.

Excitement was at a fever pitch. My agent was turning down requests left and right for an advanced look at the interview. New offers were being hinted, including adding me to the cast of prominent women's chat shows and even giving me slots on network morning programs. And needless to say, she was sharing that the numbers of the current offers that we were negotiating needed to be reconsidered, and no one was balking.

I figured the flowers were from my dad (and mom). Communication had been strained since Hale and I left their house. I hadn't heard word one from my brother, but I hadn't really connected with Mom and/or Dad because I'd been busy with the move, work and promoting this interview.

I hit my office and picked up the note that came with the flowers which was resting at the base of the vase on my desk.

“I’m sorry, I looked. I probably shouldn’t have. They were just so gorgeous, I had to know who sent them,” Zoey, who’d come to stand in the door of my office, said.

I glanced over my shoulder at her. She was still beaming.

I opened up the card.

It read,

You’re going to knock them dead.

-Hale

A shiver swept over my skin.

Oh God.

“He’s pure class,” Zoey noted in as dreamy a tone as a girl from the Bronx could utter.

“Hmm,” I replied.

“I gotta run out and get stuff for tonight. I’ll see you in a couple of hours,” she went on.

“See you.”

She took off.

I shrugged off my coat, sat behind my desk, thought on it, and came to the conclusion that, if he could be the bigger person, I could meet him there.

And if this was a peace offering, well...

We’d see.

So I texted, *Thanks for the flowers. They’re gorgeous.*

It would take hours.

In fact, it was after we dropped the show and views and likes were skyrocketing, as were follows. It was when me and Chuck and his wife Karen and Zoey and her boyfriend Pug and Carole and Felicity and my downstairs neighbor Yolanda (who was also a good friend) and a dozen other people who I loved, including Mom and Dad (and also Emilie and Scott) were milling about the spent streamers, drinking champagne and eating shrimp cocktail and baked camembert that Hale texted back.

*Thank Brandi.*

That was it. That was the entirety of his text.

The flowers weren’t from Hale, they were from his assistant.

“Go to hell,” I whispered to my phone.

Then I poured myself more champagne and downed half the glass to clear

the shitty taste out of my mouth.

*Three weeks later...*

The day I signed a contract to produce and conduct eight episodes of a talk show on a massively popular streaming service...

Which was the day I signed Luna Bevin to talk frankly about her ordeal of being a survivor of sexual assault at the hands of Andrew Winston...

Which was further the day I signed on to do a weekly ten-minute celebrity interview for a network morning program, this interview to be filmed in my current suite, which that day I'd also signed a year lease to keep in order to conduct those interviews, along with producing continued Elsa's Exchanges.

This was the day when Geraldine sent more photos of Hale and Blake Sharp.

They'd been taken the afternoon before. They were walking in Central Park. He was wearing a light gray turtleneck, a camelhair overcoat, jeans, sneakers and a navy slouchy beanie. She was wearing silvery-white cashmere joggers, a matching sweater, and a long, black, ribbed, oversize duster with a pair of stylish, low-heeled booties. A white beret was on her head.

They were walking close together, heads bowed, both of them looking at something on Hale's phone that he was holding up in front of them.

He was in the city.

This was the best day of my life, and the man who helped me get there was in town, looking gorgeous and hanging out with a raven-haired beauty who was not me.

I wished I could say that as the days wore on, and our fake-not-fake date faded deeper into the past, the promise of our time on the bench and that kiss unfulfilled hurt less.

But it didn't.

*Seven weeks later...*

It happened.

It surprised me when it happened, and why, but I couldn't stop it from happening.

I'd walked into my apartment building, the door opening because the new security system scanned my face to let me in.

Nugget of news: this was one of three ways we could get into the new, double-paned, heavy-duty security door. We could also enter a code or use a key.

I then went to our new mail room, being admitted again due to face recognition (though, I still had all three ways to access that space). The new super hadn't been installed yet. His or her studio wasn't finished. But the mail room was large, clean, organized and in use.

As was the foyer.

The refurbishment of that area came in the form of sleek tile, sleeker lighting and potted plants in glossy planters. There were also two modern chairs sitting side by side with a slender table between them, all of which seemed unnecessary, but proved awesome when you wanted somewhere to set something you were carrying. Or there was no reason someone meeting you needed to take the time to come up to your apartment, they could wait for you and do it in warm comfort.

I got in the new elevator with its bright light that screamed safety and mix of brushed stainless steel and wood interior that let me out on my floor that was a continuation of the sleek vestibule with new lighting that was subdued and attractive and also now had a smart carpet runner that did amazing things to cut down on noise.

When I let myself into my apartment and dumped my tote, I also dumped my ass in my cranberry chair, where Hale had sat, and I stared at my area rug.

I had deals. I had a new staff member, Melissa, who did research. I'd bought a four-person work pod so Chuck, Zoey and Mel had their own space, and there was one to grow on, and that growth would happen soon, since I was hiring a booker. We'd begun to turn the conference room into a green

room. And I'd picked office furniture for myself, and a fabulous couch, end tables, lamps and an area rug for the reception space which I was scared to commit to, because they were pricey, but I was ready to hit go on it because Hale Wheeler and Luna Bevin weren't the only interviews I'd done that tore the lid off my followers. A number that was now at over seventy million.

In a few short months, I was living the dream.

All because of one man.

One man who came into, swept through, then walked out of my life in the expanse of less a week.

So yes.

It happened, and I couldn't stop it.

I sat in my cranberry chair and wept.

*Two weeks later...*

"This has to be a mistake," I muttered to myself, staring down at the heavy, embossed cardstock in my hand that formally invited me, as a guest, to the first annual Blazing the Trail event in aid of the programs of the non-profit organization, Trail Blazer.

*Hale's non-profit organization.*

It was a new charity event for the NYC calendar as hosted by Imogen Swan, Mika Stowe and Nora Ellington.

It wasn't that I hadn't heard of the event, I had. And the old Elsa would be outside it, hoping to get a quick interview or comment from someone or multiple someones as they walked in.

I didn't need to do that anymore, but Zoey and Chuck were slated to be there to take video and stills.

I woke my laptop, went to Chrome, tapped in the search, then clicked on the event's website.

The lowest ticket price was five hundred dollars. The highest ticket price was one of two tables up for offer that cost half a million dollars.

The event was sold out.

I picked up the phone and called the number on the invitation.



“Trail Blazer, this is Krista, may I help you?”

“Yes, this is Elsa Cohen. I just received an invitation to your event in New York.”

“Yes?”

“I’m not sure I understand. I’ve checked your website. The event is sold out.”

“You’re comped. Press.”

I sat silent.

“Do you have any other questions?” she asked.

“Was it Hale Wheeler who put me on the press list?”

“No, it was Rix. Do you want to talk to him?”

“Rix?”

“Yes. You’re at his table.”

Rix. John Hendrix.

Hale hadn’t wanted me to come.

A man I’d never met, but once did a favor for, did.

“Are you RSVPing in the affirmative?” she asked.

*No!* My mind screamed.

“Yes,” I answered.

“Great. I might see you there. Take care.”

And then she disconnected.

*Six weeks later...*

“I still think the green,” Carole said.

“Hell no, it has to be the black, and I’m not saying that because I’ve done her hair and makeup to work with that dress and the car is going to be here in ten minutes so we don’t have time for a switch up,” Fliss returned.

I stood in my tiny bedroom staring at myself in the full-length mirror Fliss had set up.

The dress was risky.

Sheer black with sparkles all over it, it had a high neck, shoulder pads, long sleeves and a generous skirt that fell in beautiful folds straight to the

floor with a small train at the back

The risky part about it was that the bodice was lined, the sleeves weren't...and neither was the skirt. You could see my high-waisted black underwear. The denier level of the sheer was high, but you could still see through it.

Add to that a side slit that came all the way up to my waistline and a saucy, slender silver chain belt that had loops cascading down one side.

My hair was back in a dimensional braid ending in a messy bun at my nape with wispy tendrils falling at the sides of my face.

My makeup was smokey AF with a bright red lip.

And the kicker were the red Loubi Vega crystal-embellished Louboutin sandals that cost nearly as much as the couch I hit go on that now sat in my reception area at the office.

"This is a revenge dress," Carole stated, lounging on my bed next to the green sequined gown she wanted me to wear. "She dated him once. It says too much."

"It says just enough, and that boils down to two words. Fuck. And *you*," Fliss replied.

Needless to say, Fliss had not only been disappointed I didn't get laid, she'd been disappointed that Hale proved himself the bad kind of player, not the other way around.

"It's going to be this dress," I decided, pulling the skirt back to expose my legs, and it did, every inch of them, and letting it fall back to its graceful folds.

"This gig is already competing with The Met Gala. Everyone who's anyone on two coasts is going to be at that event tonight, and that dress also says *Elsa Cohen has arrived*," Fliss declared.

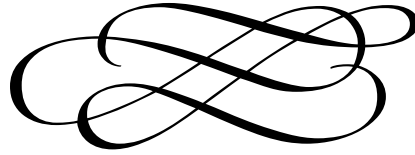
She was right.

It said precisely that.

And those words were true.

And tonight, I was going to fucking *own them*.

# CHAPTER 9



## MEN DRANK WHISKY

*Hale*

*T* hen...

“This is total bullshit, Corey, and you know it.”

“I didn’t make any promises. In fact, if you weren’t blinded by what you thought you could wring out of me, you’d remember I expressly told you I’m not in a place to get serious.”

“Sorry, I must have missed that, since your face was buried in my pussy so often, you didn’t have much time to speak.”

“It rarely comes as free and easy as yours, Tania. I was enjoying the experience. I see now it might have been easy, but it wasn’t free.”

“Oh my God! I can’t believe you’d say something that fucked up!”

“I’ve always been honest with you. That wasn’t fucked up. It was honesty.”

“Fuck you, Corey Szabo!”

“I think we’re done with that, no? That’s the reason for your tantrum? Or is it really all down to that tennis bracelet you hinted you wanted, and now that I see I have to pay for the use of your cunt, I’m not interested?”

“*Go to hell!*”

Hale was out on the balcony.

It was a stormy night. He could hear the waves crashing on the shore at the base of the cliff where his father’s house sat. He could also hear every

word said between his father and his latest girlfriend in the living room.

It reminded him of what he overheard Marilyn say to his dad when she came out to visit that summer.

“You can’t run through women like water, buddy boy. Remember, every woman is a different version of a cat. Some are affectionate. Some are aloof. Some are wild. Some are divas. Some are combinations of those. But all of us have claws.”

Marilyn was Genny’s mom and the only real grandma Hale had ever had. He’d never met his dad’s parents (and his dad never talked about them, so Hale was super young when he quit asking). And his mom’s parents didn’t come visit very often (then again, his mom didn’t make it very fun when they did so he wasn’t surprised they stayed away).

But Marilyn was Marilyn, funny and crazy and loving and smart, so much of all of that, he didn’t need another grandma. Every time he was around Marilyn, she made him feel like he had the best grandma in the world. Better, kinda, was how much she was so open about how much she loved Hale’s dad. Hale didn’t think Corey had anybody who loved him that much and was so obvious about it.

Not even Hale.

He wasn’t supposed to be awake. It was a school night. He was supposed to be in bed hours ago.

But tomorrow, he had to go back to his mom’s. He never slept great the night before he had to go back to his mom. And he never slept great *at* his mom’s.

He heard the front door slam, and hiding, tucked around the corner, peeking inside the house, he watched his father go to the drinks cabinet and pour himself a whisky.

This meant that scene was worse than Hale thought, considering his dad didn’t normally drink.

Then again, that scene was really bad.

It also made Hale’s situation worse, since there was no way he could get in and get back to his bedroom without being seen with his dad hanging in the living room. And who knew how long it would take to drink a glass of whisky.

It got worse when Corey came out onto the balcony.

Still in his tuxedo (Corey and Tania had been to some big event that night, after which, obviously, his dad had broken up with her), not even

taking off the jacket (then again, Corey was perfectly comfortable in suits, and he would be, he wore them all the time), he went right to the railing, stared at the ocean and took a sip of his drink.

He then said, "Come here, Hale."

Shit!

But...yeah.

Some way, somehow, his father always knew all.

Hale moved from where he was hiding to the railing, not close, but not far from his dad.

"Can't sleep?" Corey asked the ocean.

"No," Hale answered.

"Mm," Corey hummed into his glass and took another sip.

He then turned Hale's way and leaned sideways into the railing.

"You sleep like the dead the first couple of nights you're with me after being with your mom."

Hale shrugged, though, that was true. But he was kinda surprised his dad noticed.

"Do you not sleep well when you're with her?"

Okay.

Now he knew where this was going.

And man, he didn't want to get into it.

"I—" he started.

"You don't have to say it," Corey said so softly, the crash of the waves nearly took his words away before Hale could hear them. But Hale knew he knew. He barely slept at all when he was with her. "Do you need me to do something about that?" Corey asked.

Something funny was happening inside Hale's chest.

"Like what?"

"A young man needs his sleep," Corey declared. "More, he doesn't need to experience the crippling anxiety that's making him not sleep."

"She would..." Hale didn't finish that.

But his father knew.

He knew he did when Corey said, "Lose her mind and make us both pay if I tried to take you from her."

Hale didn't nod or say anything.

Still, Corey sighed, took another sip of his drink, then turned again to face the railing, bending to rest his forearms to it and looking out to sea.

“I did her wrong, Hale. You’re old enough now to hear that,” his dad admitted. “Though, considering it was over twelve years ago, it’s fair to say she’s milking it for all it’s worth.”

Studying his father closely, Hale turned to the railing and adopted the same pose, even though he wasn’t near as tall as his dad.

“I’m sorry you heard what just transpired between Tania and I,” Corey continued.

And that freaked Hale, mostly because his dad was apologizing, when Hale probably wouldn’t have heard it if he was where he was supposed to be.

Then again, he rarely got in trouble when he was with his father.

He was always in trouble one way or another when he was with his mom.

“Women can be…” His father took a sip. “It’s important to communicate very clearly with women.” He turned his head to Hale. “Do you understand me?”

Hale nodded. “Yeah, Dad.”

Corey twisted at the waist so he was leaning only on one forearm and facing Hale again.

Again, Hale mimicked him.

“There are many different kinds of people in the world, Hale. Don’t listen to the nonsense about stereotypes. Don’t fall into the trap of thinking women are all like your mother. Or like Tania. Because there are some who are like Genny.”

“Right,” Hale whispered.

After he said that, for a long time, his dad just looked at him. And it lasted so long, Hale started feeling weird.

Eventually, Corey spoke. “If I had one wish for you, it would be that you find someone like Genny. A woman who loves you and only you. I don’t mean she doesn’t love her friends, or the children you’ll have. I mean romantic love. I also don’t mean a woman who makes you her world, but instead, one that, you being in her world, completes it. Am I making sense?”

Not exactly.

“Yeah.”

“Good. Because that last part is important. You cannot be everything to a woman. It’s too heavy of a load to carry.”

“Like you were to Mom,” he guessed.

Hale felt warm inside when his father’s face registered pride that he’d guessed right.

“Exactly.”

“I don’t sleep good there,” Hale admitted quietly.

Now he saw his father’s face get tight, and even though he knew his dad was mad, that made him feel even warmer. Because his dad was mad for him.

“Right then, Hale. This is a lesson on the path to the man you’re going to be. I need you to think about this and tell me with honesty what you need. You’re growing up, and as you grow up and for your whole life, you’re going to have to make decisions. Daily. Everything from what you’re going to wear to what food you’re going to eat to fuel your body to things that will affect other people’s lives. People you don’t know, and people you know and care about. It’s late. You don’t have to make a decision now. I want you to try to get some sleep. You can tell me when you’re ready. When you’ve thought it over and feel you’ve made the right decision. But I need to know if you need me to handle things for you. And if you do, I swear to you, son, I will.”

Hale didn’t have to think on it.

“She’d never forgive me.”

It was then, it happened.

His father reached out, hesitated, and Hale held his breath. It felt like Corey’s hand was suspended in mid-air for years before he finally rested the side of it on Hale’s shoulder and curled his fingers around Hale’s neck.

That felt better than...than...*anything*.

“I don’t know how,” Corey whispered, “there wasn’t much good for us to give, but what there was, you got it.”

To hide he was going to cry like a wuss, he looked to the sea.

His father took his hand from Hale, and he missed it immediately, like it was everything he had, given and taken away in seconds.

“Promise me, you’ll find a Genny?” Corey asked.

“Yeah, Dad.”

“Good.” His father moved and Hale looked to him to see him lifting his glass Hale’s way. “You want a whisky?”

Hale’s heart skipped a beat.

Men drank whisky. Not boys.

“For real?” he asked.

“It might help you sleep,” Corey murmured.

He tried not to sound as excited as he was when he said, “Yeah.”

His dad quirked a smile at him, left him on the balcony and went in to pour Hale his own glass.

He felt important. He felt great. And he didn't care that when Corey gave him the glass, there was barely more than a couple of sips in it. He also didn't care that when he took his first sip, he nearly gagged, it tasted so gross.

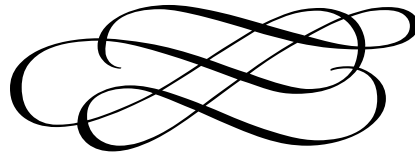
He stood, holding his glass between his hands, just like his dad, his forearms on the railing, just like his dad's were, sipping whisky and watching the sea, like two men with a lot on their minds winding down so they could sleep.

It was one of the best moments of his life.

And it always would be.



# CHAPTER 10



## LIPSTICK

*Hale*

*N*ow...

“Don’t be nervous.”

Ned’s words caught Hale’s attention and he turned from looking out the window of the limousine that was taking them to the event, to his side, where Blake was sitting, looking stunning, and scared as shit.

“Darling, you can’t hibernate for the rest of your life,” Ned Sharp, Blake’s father, who was sitting across from them, went on. “You need to re-enter society, re-enter *life*.”

“The last time I was *a thing*, it was me going viral acting like an imbecile standing at an altar wearing a wedding gown,” Blake said to her dad.

“You weren’t acting like an imbecile,” Ned retorted sternly. “You were acting like a strong, determined woman who wasn’t going to let an ass of a man jack her around.”

“People all over the globe made fun of that for months, Dad. They still do,” Blake noted.

“Who cares?” Ned asked. “You don’t know these people.”

“Says the man who isn’t the star of a million different memes,” she mumbled.

Hale entered the conversation. “You’re too close to it. Those memes don’t make you look bad.” He smiled at her. “You’re a feminist icon.”

“Who got duped by my fiancé, who had sex with *one of my friends days before our wedding* and by the way, he’d already had sex with *most of my friends*, videotaping it and putting it on a website, for God’s sakes.”

“And how does that reflect on you?” Ned inquired.

Blake bugged her eyes out at him.

Hale took her hand and she turned again to him. “You look stunning. Head up, shoulders straight, because you’re not the butt of a joke, honey. You’re an inspiration for every woman who had her trust broken, showing them the way to take back their power.”

“Dramatically,” Ned put in. “And I’ll add, very expensively.”

That made Blake crack a smile and Hale chuckle, because, as she’d mentioned, Blake had dumped her fiancé at the church on her wedding day, and because she had, Ned still had to pay for the whole thing. And considering Blake was Blake, that didn’t come cheap.

Hale hadn’t known her then, though he’d seen the video (yeah, it was that famous). He’d met her since through mutual acquaintances, and they’d become friends.

They had because she’d seemed lost and vulnerable, and since most of her friends had betrayed her, she needed some.

And he liked her. There was something cool about being a part of someone’s life as she realized she’d lost her way and was trying to find the way back. It was like watching a hibernating tree blossom.

That said, what made it interesting was that Blake had thorns.

She was not his type, he was not hers, and that helped make their friendship work.

But that night, she was reappearing in a world she used to inhabit but had avoided for a very long time.

He got her nerves.

But once they were through the step and repeat, he hoped she’d settle into it, and it’d begin to feel like what it was. A welcome back to the life she should be living.

“You *do* look stunning, my dear,” Ned said.

Blake took in a big breath.

“And it’s an open bar,” Hale reminded her.

That did it.

She shot a radiant smile his way.

Within ten minutes, they were crawling behind a line of limousines and

town cars in Midtown waiting for their turn to arrive at the red carpet outside Gotham Hall.

Eventually, they did. The car door opened, and Ned alighted first, then Hale, which meant that Blake came out to the wall of sound that accompanied Hale's appearance.

As he always did, he ignored it as ushers guided them to the front of a line of waiting socialites and celebrities (one of the rare benefits of being Hale Wheeler) to the step and repeat that had the long red carpet, the velvet rope, and the Blazing the Trail/Trail Blazer logoed backdrop.

Ned and Hale sandwiched Blake in her red satin, halter neck dress that had an open back and a wide slit and some gathering at the hip. A dress that suited her perfectly, being stylish and also racy.

However, it was only Hale who held her hand.

It took until the third stop, when a photographer shouted, "Blake! Are you and Hale an item?" And she shouted back, "No. But he's the best friend a girl could have!" that she indicated she'd relaxed into it.

But hearing her words, he gave her hand a squeeze.

Another indication she'd be okay was she gave that group of paparazzi a sultry side tilt of her head and a smile before they stepped to the next.

And finally, thank fuck, they were through that ridiculous quagmire and had made it inside.

"I need a drink," Ned announced.

"Hundred percent," Hale agreed.

But Blake turned to him, got up on her toes, touched her cheek to his and whispered, "You're the greatest." She moved away and did the same to her dad, saying, "You're the greatest too, Dad."

Then she rushed off in the direction of where Alex was standing with Chloe and Mika.

Ned and Hale headed to the bar.

They'd barely taken their place in the short line when Nora descended on them, and both men did a double take when they saw her in a cream column of a gown with some sheerness, a subtly plunging neckline, and such exquisite beading, even Hale was impressed.

It suited her perfectly, managing to be stately and feminine and edgy and sophisticated, all at once.

Seeing her like that, it was far from the first time he wondered why Jamie hadn't woken up to the beauty he had in his hands and done something about

it (a subject he'd never broached with his friend, because it wasn't his business, also because the last woman in Jamie's life he'd worshiped, and he'd had to watch as she died a slow, painful death).

Jamie and Nora had been platonic companions now for over a year. And not only was Nora gorgeous, she was a goddamned hoot, and the only person Hale knew who was more pathologically loyal than Nora was Chloe.

They got more cheek brushes, and then she declared, "If you both don't push bidding on silent auction items into the stratosphere, I'll never forgive you. The bid sheets are in the lounge. There's a family and friends rest station in the Oak Room, both your names are on the list for entry. Ta-ra."

With that, she strutted away.

"I think we have our orders," Ned said then tipped his head to the side to ask what Hale wanted, since Ned had made it to the bar

"Gin and tonic, with lemon and lime."

They got their drinks and did their duty at the silent auction, putting starting bids on items that hadn't had any bids yet, with Hale noting Jamie, Duncan and Tom had clearly gotten the same instruction, because their names were already on many of the sheets.

Once they accomplished their mission, Hale eventually gravitated away from Ned, touched base with Judge and Chloe, Sasha and Matt, and he was standing, chatting with Tom and Mika, when he saw her.

And when he did, he went perfectly still.

"Hale?" Tom called.

Hale didn't move as he watched Elsa greet Rix and Alex wearing a dress that was totally her, at the same time it was oddly not, but what it definitely had was the ability to make the crotch of his trousers suddenly too tight and his head want to explode.

"I'll just..." Mika murmured.

"Yes, honey," Tom murmured back, then again, more sharply this time, "*Hale.*"

Hale's body jolted, he tore his eyes off Elsa and looked to Tom.

"You okay?" Tom asked.

He sucked back the dregs of his G&T and forced out, "Fine."

Tom looked to Elsa, then back to Hale, and he asked, "Is there something I don't know?"

"Yeah. After the interview, Elsa and I went on a date. It was a great date. Then she did everything but say it straight that she was using me to get more

followers and career-defining deals. Deals she signed within weeks of that interview airing. And I knew that because she was all business after I left her in her apartment. I don't know what she was playing at with the date, though she was using me for that too, since her family is a disaster, she's the target of their dysfunction, and she needed someone to run interference. Her friend set it up, but she didn't work too hard at pretending she wasn't down with the plan."

"You seem surprised when she hasn't really hidden her ambition," Tom noted cautiously.

"You didn't sit on Pebble Beach with her for three hours staring at the lights of Manhattan and talking about how overrated Quentin Tarantino is, how the Supreme Court should have term limits, arguing whether surfing and hiking or living the city life walking everywhere was better exercise, and everything else you can think of to get to know someone who's gorgeous, smart as fuck, interesting as hell, and surprisingly funny."

"Right," Tom said quietly.

"I'm getting another drink. You need one?" Hale asked.

"Hale—"

He knew that fatherly tone. He loved that tone. He loved Tom. He could talk to him about anything. And did.

But...

"Now's not the time, Tommy," he said.

"Okay. Mika and I are in New York for a while. Come over for dinner before you leave."

"Will do."

Tom's expression changed. "I mean it, Hale. Don't blow me off. We have more to talk about than a promising date turning sour."

For a moment, Hale was concerned Jamie had told Tom about the emails.

That was something he didn't want Tom to know. Not only because they'd stopped coming, but because Tom would worry. He'd tell Genny. Genny would worry more. Genny might then tell Chloe, and Chloe would lose her mind and leave no stone unturned in finding whoever was sending that shit and then going about neutralizing them.

It happened a lot, keyboard warriors doing and saying shit they shouldn't. It wasn't that big of a deal.

And again, the particular emails that raised alarms had stopped coming.

"You're busier than ever, son. Running yourself ragged," Tom remarked.

“I’m concerned. But we’ll talk. Not now, at dinner.”

“I’m fine,” Hale assured.

“I don’t agree,” Tom returned.

“Okay, we’ll talk about it,” Hale gave in. Then asked with unhidden disquiet, “Have I been blowing you off?”

“You’ve canceled the last three times we’ve had plans. I haven’t spent any quality time with you in months. And Christmas doesn’t count, because I had to share you with everyone else, but I’ll note you were only in Prescott for two days during the holiday.”

Tom lifted a hand and curled it around the side of Hale’s neck in a gesture that was beloved, and familiar.

Because Tom had done it before.

Often.

And someone else had too.

Once.

“You’re my boy, Hale,” Tom told him. “I don’t allow any of my children to be disconnected for this long.”

Even though he knew those words were true because Tom had proved it time and again, Hale had to clear his throat before he replied, “Promise. I’ll be at your and Mika’s table before I have to leave town.”

Tom gave him a squeeze, murmured, “Good,” and let him go. Then he said, “And yes to the drink. Could you get Mika one too? She’s on champagne.”

“Got it.”

Tom moved to find Mika.

Hale’s eyes moved to find Elsa.

And he saw her cozied up to top-ranking tennis player, Dougal Baldwin, with Baldwin’s arm extended (the one he didn’t have wrapped around Elsa), taking a selfie of the two of them.

The arm came down, but the other one didn’t leave her waist as he turned to Elsa and handed her the phone, but neither of them moved away. Dougal was up in her space, smiling, and it was clearly flirtatious.

Fucking hell.

Hale headed straight to the bar.

The next two hours were excruciating, and not only because he hated events like this. He didn’t like the restriction of a tuxedo. He didn’t like pressing the flesh. He didn’t like being openly available for anyone to get a

piece of him, be it someone who wanted to bend his ear about some business shit, or a woman who wanted to hit her knees and suck his cock for bragging rights or whatever she'd do with the experience.

And that night, he didn't like watching Elsa work the room with expertise, Dougal, who happened to be her dinner partner, at her side most of the time.

It was after dinner and the live auction, when the silent auction was closing, and before Justice Lonesome and Stella Gunn were going to entertain them with an acoustic set.

This was a massive coup Mika scored, because Stella was front woman of the Blue Moon Gypsies, and Justice was a solo artist, and although they'd toured and performed together in the past, they'd never done an acoustic set like this.

People were milling about, dessert dishes were being cleared by staff, the bartenders were busy setting up guests with their next round, and even though he didn't want to miss Justice and Stella, Hale was wondering if anyone would notice if he took off.

This was when it happened.

His mood was foul because he wanted out of there, and he still had hours left to endure.

And he wanted to get away from Elsa, who appeared to be having the time of her life, but hadn't bothered in all her schmoozing to get anywhere near him.

Genny and Duncan were talking to Teddy Mankowitz, Elsa had managed to lose Baldwin, and she was making her approach to Genny's group.

Therefore, his hackles raised after hours of watching her flirt with Baldwin, he approached too.

Elsa started when he wrapped his arm around her belly from the side, dipping his chin to the grouping. "Genny, Bowie," he greeted the only true mom he had, and as one of the chosen few allowed to do so, he used her husband's nickname. He then turned to Mankowitz. "Teddy. I need to steal Elsa."

Before any of them could say a word, he ignored Genny's startled look, Duncan's knowing look, and Teddy's confused one, and he stole her, pulling her away with his arm around her middle, then letting her go only to clasp her hand and drag her out of the ballroom toward the Oak Room.

She came with him, likely so she wouldn't cause a scene.

The attendant with a list outside the Oak Room nodded to them as he dragged her in. He was thrilled to find it was empty. He closed the door behind them, pulled her in further, and around, so he was between her and the exit.

Pure Elsa, she faced off first.

“Kindly explain yourself,” she demanded.

“You can push your agenda with Mankowitz some other time. Tonight is not the night.”

“I was simply introducing myself.”

“Of course you were,” he derided.

“And I don’t have to explain myself to you,” she added.

“Tonight is about helping kids, not your career.”

Her torso jerked like he’d struck her.

Hale ignored that and kept at her.

“And on the subject you wanted to broach with Mankowitz, Dougal Baldwin is too young for you.”

Her head twitched. “Sorry?”

“And he’s a player. He fucks everything that moves.”

“I’m not...are you...are you honestly giving me shit about Dougal Baldwin?”

“It was just a date, a fake date, in your estimation, but you couldn’t have missed it meant something to me. So at least pretend you have a heart in your chest and maybe not outrageously flirt with some other guy when I’m in the fucking room.”

Her big blue eyes got bigger before she asked, “Are you insane?”

“Not in the slightest.”

“You ghosted me.”

“I fucking did not. But it was all business with you after that night. I knew my place, you made that clear.”

Now her very red, very full, very sexy lips parted in shock.

Then she snapped, “You have an interesting take, because it wasn’t all business with me, it was all business *with you*.”

He shook his head once, testily. “Oh fuck no, sweetheart. That isn’t the way it happened. You didn’t say, ‘hey, I had a great time last night, come over tonight, I’ll get in some takeout.’ You said, ‘have a look at this rough cut and let me know your thoughts as soon as you’re able.’”

“I needed you to have a look at the cut.”



“Obviously.”

“You didn’t say ‘great night’ either, Hale.”

“You set the scene, but I sure as fuck tested the waters, taking time I didn’t have to show at your office and ask you for coffee. And that’s when you were sure to put me in my place, weren’t you, Elsa?”

“No, *you* put yourself there, because, Hale, *I report celebrity news*. And I’d just seen pictures of you holding hands with Blake Sharp after you had dinner with her the night before.”

“So?”

Her cheeks were pink and getting pinker, and now her perfectly shaped brows hit her hairline. “So?”

“We’re friends. If you’d asked, you’d know. We’ve been friends a long time. Everyone knows that.”

“No, you tell everyone that and everyone suspects it’s something more. Do you know how many famous people say they’re ‘just friends’ with someone, and the next thing you know, they’ve secretly gotten married on some island somewhere?” Now her eyes narrowed. “Wait. Are you inferring I used you for that interview and then threw you away?”

“I’m not inferring it, that’s what happened.”

“Oh my God,” she bit out.

“Months have passed, Elsa.”

“Indeed they have, and when you arrived this evening, I was in line behind you, and by the way, you walked right by me without even glancing at me.”

That was when Hale’s body jolted, he was so shocked he hadn’t noticed her, especially in that dress.

She kept ranting.

“But I saw you holding hands with Blake during the step and repeat *just hours ago*. You came here with her *as your date*, and now you drag me in here like you’re pissed your side chick isn’t behaving when we had *one date*. One date that meant something to *me too*. And it was *you* who didn’t have the time to follow up, you went out with *another woman*, and now *I’m* supposed to get in line because you don’t like that some other guy shows interest in me? Like you own me?”

“Tell me you didn’t say that,” he growled.

“I said it,” she shot back.

They stared at each other, and Hale realized they were both breathing

heavily.

Christ, she smelled good.

And she looked amazing.

Further, the meaning behind all the words they'd just hurled at each other suddenly shot through him like a javelin.

Just like he knew when it turned, what was happening between them, when he'd figured it out, she did too.

At first, she looked panicked.

And then she looked the opposite.

But she started backing up, not paying attention to the long tail of the skirt on her dress.

She tripped and Hale darted an arm around her, lifted her off her feet, and then carried her until her back was to the wall.

He pinned her there with his body.

"Hale," she said unsteadily.

"You were jealous," he said gruffly.

Her eyes landed on his mouth.

Fuck.

She'd been jealous.

Goddamn it.

Yeah.

He kissed her.

And this time, it wasn't a tease.

Fuck no.

He didn't want her mind consumed with what a real kiss from him could be.

He wanted her to have thorough knowledge of precisely that.

She wanted it too. He knew it when he felt her little tongue touch his lips, and he opened, but not to allow her entry.

He invaded her mouth with his own tongue.

Instantly, she had her hands in his hair, her body melted into his, she tipped her head so he had better access, and gave it up. All of it. And she did it moaning down his throat to share how much she liked doing it.

And he liked having it.

So he gave her more.

He had her pressed to the wall, she'd fisted her hand in his hair, he'd snaked his hand inside the slit of her skirt and was tracing the line at the

bottom edge of the ass of her panties when the door opened.

He broke the kiss and looked over his shoulder to tell whoever it was to beat it, when he saw Sasha frozen and staring at him. Running into her from behind was Chloe.

*Fuck.*

“Sash, get a move on,” Chloe ordered.

Sasha turned stiltedly, and that was when Chloe saw them, and her eyes went huge.

She opened her mouth, but before Chloe could say a word, Sasha put both hands on Chloe’s chest, pushed her out and the door closed behind them.

He turned back to Elsa.

Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes were sultry, her lips were bruised, but he was surprised to see her shocking red lipstick was still perfect.

The whole package was magnificent.

“How’s that going to go?” she asked in a husky voice he felt in his still-hard cock.

She’d seen his sisters.

“Not great,” he told her honestly. “I don’t know for sure, but I don’t think you’re Chloe’s favorite person. So that can go really badly considering she’s fiercely protective and entirely unable to keep her opinion to herself.”

“Understood,” she mumbled to his bow tie. She then lifted wounded eyes to his. “You said you wanted to see me again. Three days passed, and you didn’t see me.”

“Shit,” he groaned, dropping his forehead to hers. “I fucked up.”

“Apparently, I did too. I fell into an age-old trap, waiting for the guy to make the move.”

Grudgingly, because he liked it where it was, he took his hand from her ass to wrap his arm around her so he could use his other hand to cup her jaw.

“Probably not easy to put yourself in that vulnerable place with Hale Wheeler,” he noted self-deprecatingly.

“No,” she whispered. “I still should have asserted myself.”

A memory from long ago, when he was twelve, surfaced then.

*It’s important to communicate very clearly with women. Do you understand me?*

He held all the power in their relationship, like his father did in all of his.

So it was on Hale to be clear and follow up.

“I fucked up, baby. And I’m sorry. We had a great date and I absolutely

wanted to see you again. I can't say everyone I've met has been trustworthy, and this has happened my whole life, but it's been particularly prevalent since my dad died. I let that leak into what was going on with us, I didn't communicate, because I didn't want to be in that vulnerable place either. And I blew it."

"You weren't alone, Hale. I acted like a bitch."

"We know where we stand now, yeah?"

Her eyes moved down to their bodies to indicate the fact they were standing with him pressed against her, she had both her hands wrapped around his neck, and she was making no move to break their clinch, neither was he, so she couldn't miss she knew where they stood.

She smirked.

He chuckled.

Then she spoke.

"I've already talked to Mankowitz, and Imogen Swan, Gordon Fuller and Maggie Mae. They're all just as keen to discuss what went down on *Rita's Way* and how things have changed as I am. Mankowitz's people called me back within an hour when I approached him about it. It seems everyone involved in the show was stunned, hurt and angry that the viewers reacted the way they did. Mankowitz never recovered. He said it was the death knell for *Rita's Way*, even if they limped along for a while. He wanted to do something like *The Next Life* since it happened. In fact, it's his response to what he refers to as 'that utter bullshit.' It's also one of the reasons it was essential that Imogen play the lead in *The Next Life*. He wrote it for her. As a progression. A subtle way to show she was incredibly popular then because she was so fresh and pretty and talented, and she hasn't lost any of that as time has gone by, and in fact, has only gotten better."

She moved a hand to fiddle with the lapel on his tuxedo and continued speaking.

"I just hadn't met him face to face yet, nor Imogen for that matter, and I wanted to introduce myself."

"I jumped to conclusions. I'm sorry about that too."

She lifted her gaze to him again. "That's okay. But it might be good you don't rush to judgment that everything I'm about is bad. I can't say my ambitions didn't lead me astray in the past, but I've worked hard to course correct."

He nodded and shared, "I'm not dating Blake. We're truly just friends."

She isn't my type, I'm not hers. We'd never go there."

That was when she nodded.

"But, since we're laying it out there, I gotta mention that some of your Exchanges back then about her weren't real awesome, baby," he said low.

"I sense she's done some course correction too, Hale, but she was a mean girl. She wasn't just known for it, she carefully crafted that persona. She was rich and spoiled and entitled and got up to some unreasonably stupid shit that only someone rich and entitled could get away with. And she crowed about it. I don't think what happened to her with her ex was her comeuppance, but it was rather glorious to see how she took something really bad and was smart enough and strong enough to read the message and turn her life around."

"You exposed her body, Elsa. That was far from cool."

She blinked up at him, openly bemused. "She sold me that picture herself."

He stared down at her.

"Is she claiming she didn't?" she asked.

"I don't know. I just heard Alex talking about it once, and saying Blake was really upset about it."

"Perhaps she was upset about what I said when I broadcast it, thinking maybe I'd say something else, because she did look beautiful that night. But that doesn't negate the fact that she sold me about twenty pictures from that party, and she didn't sell them cheap. It wasn't the first time she approached me with photos. Though it was the last. And all of them from that night were of her, and the one I showed wasn't the only one that exposed her breast in that dress. She couldn't have missed it. She has a great figure, I thought she wanted to flaunt it. Many women do." She appeared horrified when she finished, "I'd never violate anyone like that without their consent."

"Okay, sweetheart, I don't know anything about it. Blake has never spoken of it. I just knew it happened and Alex wasn't a fan."

"Okay," she muttered.

"And she isn't my date tonight. I came with her for moral support. Her father is her date. She wasn't even at my table at dinner."

"I wondered about that."

He grinned. "So you noticed?"

She rolled her eyes.

She noticed.

His grin got bigger.

She frowned at his grin, which only made it even bigger.

She took her attention from his mouth and looked into his eyes.

“So, how long are you in town?”

He was scheduled to leave the next day.

He right then decided to stay the week. His assistants would be pissed at him, but not only did he have a wrong to right with Elsa, he’d made Tom a promise.

And straight up, he was tired of being on a fucking plane and sleeping in hotel suites. It was good to sleep in a bed that was familiar and wake up where he knew the view.

“I leave next Sunday,” he told her.

“The one after tomorrow?”

He nodded.

“You wanna come over for some takeout? My landlord did some pretty rad things with my building. You should see.”

Hale smiled again.

This time, she smiled back.

So obviously, he had no choice.

He kissed her.

When he let her come up for air, he rubbed his thumb along her lower lip and whispered, “Your lipstick doesn’t move.”

“It’s stain. It’s designed to stay there all night.”

“So I don’t have red all over my mouth?”

Hazily, still reacting to his kiss, which meant Hale reacted to that, she shook her head.

“I want to walk out there with you on my arm.”

She suddenly appeared alarmed. “Hale, that’s a lot.”

“People know we know each other, baby. Your interview got over three hundred million views.” He dipped his head closer. “And I want you on my arm.”

“Okay,” she said breathlessly.

“Okay,” he replied. “By the way, congratulations on all the awesome shit that went down with you since I last saw you. I’m happy for you. You deserve it. And you should know, Brandi ordered those flowers, but I asked her to. I did it before we had our thing, but it was my idea. And I’d be entirely remiss if I didn’t mention how insanely gorgeous you look in that dress.”

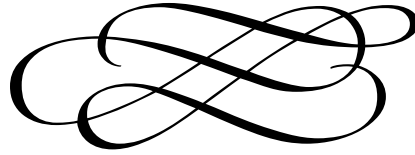
It was then he watched, profoundly fascinated, as her eyes grew bright, and her lips beamed a glamorous smile his way.

And then her hands were back in his hair, hauling his head down.

So that time, it was Elsa who kissed him.

Hale didn't mind.

# CHAPTER 11



## RIDE IT OUT

*Them*

*H* er...

I woke up the next morning after the gala when my phone rang—actually rang—with a call.

Concerned, because it was Sunday, and my clock said it was just after six in the morning, I reached to take it off the charging pad, and I saw the call was from Hale.

I smiled to myself and put the phone to my ear while pulling the covers over my head so I could be in a cocoon of nothing but Hale.

“Hey,” I answered.

“I wake you?”

God, he had a great voice. Deep and smooth.

“Yes. But don’t worry about it.”

“Takeout at yours tonight?”

“Definitely. I’ll get it in. What do you want? And just to say, you’re spoiled for choice, so you could pick about anything, and I can find a great place to order it.”

“We’ll decide when I get there, and I’ll pop out and pick it up.”

“We’ll go together.”

“Sounds good. What time do you want me there?”

“Does five work?”



“Yup. Can’t wait. Now go back to sleep.”

That wasn’t going to happen.

“What are you going to do?” I asked.

“Go out for a run.”

I made a gag face he couldn’t see.

“I saw that,” he said into my pause.

I laughed softly.

“See you later, baby,” he said quietly.

“Later, Hale.”

I hung up and fought hugging my phone to my chest.

But I had a busy day, so I didn’t.

Instead, I threw off the covers and got out of bed.

I did coffee, shower and hair, got dressed and headed out. I grabbed a bagel on the way and ate it on the train. After the train spit me out, I hurried to the office, experiencing the only lament I had about our new space, it being more than the ten-minute walk away. I loved my new space, but a short day to do some quick work like I needed to do that day, it was kind of a hassle (but only kind of).

I was almost at the door when I noticed her.

I wouldn’t normally. It was likely I shared space with hundreds of people every day and didn’t look a single one in the eye.

But there was something about her that sent a slithery feeling down my spine, and it wasn’t just that she was doing nothing but standing there, outside the doors to my office building, and staring at me.

One could say I was far more recognizable than I had been a few months before, and that was probably what she was about, even if it looked like she was waiting there, not like she’d just happened to notice me.

I was going to have to get used to that kind of thing, but even so, the vibe she gave, I didn’t waste time hustling into the building, through the security kiosk and up the elevator to my suite.

When I arrived, I saw Zoey at her desk.

I went right to the doorway to her office.

“You’re pure gold in human form,” I announced.

She smiled at me and proved my words true. “I sifted through the pictures and clips and picked the best with about a dozen alternates you could look at. I also drafted copy to go with them. And I sorted your fashion list with my faves at the top. I’ve emailed them to you.”

I nodded and hit my office.

I was scrolling through Zoey's work when my phone chimed with a text. It was from Carole, and it had a photo, so I picked it up and opened it.

It was our group text, her, me and Fliss, and the photo was of Hale and I standing together. He'd jerked me close as a joke, so I'd put a hand to his chest to steady myself and tipped my head back to smile up at him, and he was smiling down at me.

Carole's text read, *Thurston Remington the Fifth announces his engagement to Sunny Sinclair...*

I laughed out loud, because it looked exactly like a high society engagement photo.

I sent three ROTFL emojis and got back to work, only to be interrupted by Felicity's text of, *We'll be wanting the story behind THAT, pilgrim. Soon.*

Straightening out the misunderstanding with Hale, having plans with him that evening, being personally invited to one of the biggest nights on the social calendar, all of this put in stark relief that this was New York, New York, and I was a girl who was making it there.

I had great friends.

I'd met a great guy who was into me.

And I had a job I loved, and I was killing it.

It was time to rejoice in that.

*Cocktails tomorrow night.*

Fliss immediately sent, *You're on.*

And on its heels came Carole's, *I'm there.*

I got back to work, noticed I only had to make a few tweaks to the copy Zoey drafted, the stills and clips she'd picked were spot on, both indication I needed to consider giving Zoey a raise and maybe a promotion. There was a vast open space in reception that was designed to hold a desk. I had money to hire a receptionist, who could also be my assistant, and Zoey could take over website and socials, which would free up a massive amount of my time.

On this thought, I gave her the go-ahead to publish. I spent a few minutes cherry-picking stills and clips I'd use for the stream I was going to film. I then wrote the copy. After that, I moved to the elaborate makeup station I'd set up against the wall to the side of my desk and did my makeup.

All set, I went to the storage closet. A quarter of the space housed office supplies. The rest of it was shelves of shoes, accessories, and two rolling clothing rails. I had a vast selection these days, and I hadn't bought them all

off TheRealReal or in bargain basement sales where I'd had to have tears mended and makeup smudges dry cleaned off them. A handful of designers now sent me fabulous items, and they were brand new.

I sorted through it all and picked an outfit.

I put it on, headed out, and Zoey and I filmed the Elsa's Exchange about the Blazing the Trail gala.

She took off when we were done. I edited the piece, posted it, went through some emails, bought some photos, got a jump start on work for the next week, changed back to my street clothes, and headed out.

All of this took just over four hours.

Automatically, I looked for the woman who gave me the creeps when I left the building, and I was relieved to see she wasn't there.

On the way home, I stopped at my bodega to grab some staples, just in case we needed snacks, then hit the liquor store so I'd have a better selection of wine and beer to choose from than I could find at the bodega.

I lugged all this home, not for the first time grateful for a working elevator, and had put it away when another text came in.

This from Fliss, and it had the photo I'd posted on the Elsa's Exchange socials.

Hale had my phone, and he'd lifted it high so you could see part of his long arm. He was looking amazing, smiling directly at it, appearing genuinely happy, while I was tucked to his chest, giving my phone my signature blowing of a kiss.

*I like this one a lot better,* Fliss said.

Seriously.

I did too.

I sent three heart emojis then texted, *Full story tomorrow night.*

*Can't wait!* Carole replied.

I got down to business stripping my bed and then taking a load of laundry down to our newly secured laundry room in the basement that also had new machines. A miracle happened when I found a machine empty on a Sunday. I put the load in and headed back upstairs.

While dusting, I got another text, this one from my dad.

*Looks like you had fun last night. And you looked beautiful. I'm very proud of you.*

My heart was still warming when, also from Dad, another text came in.

*Can you spare your old man some time this week?*

*Sure, Dad, I replied. I have plans Monday night, but any other night, you name it.*

*Tuesday?*

I got a bad feeling from that. It smacked of him wanting to see me with some urgency.

*I have time now, I lied. You want me to call?*

*No. Tuesday is good. And I didn't want to ask, because you hadn't mentioned him, but it was good to see you with Hale.*

Another indication that I was seriously neglecting important parts of my life. I'd done the requisite family time during Chanukah (Dad) and Christmas (Mom), a double deal we'd had all our lives which had seemed fun as a kid, but was too much as an adult, specifically since all of the children were brought up in the Jewish faith.

Not that I wanted to dis Mom. I could do Christmas dinner and buy her a present.

But I was Jewish.

Now it was March, and I'd been mostly MIA for two months.

*He's in town this week, I told dad, a lame, and true, yet untrue excuse as to why Hale had disappeared since the dinner.*

Then again, Hale being my boyfriend in the first place was a big fat lie that, at the time, I didn't think would be a thing with my family (I could just tell them we broke up). But now, it might be.

*Then we'll push our dinner to next week so you two have time together,* Dad offered.

*No, I want to see you.*

*I'd invite you to bring Hale, but I want some time together, just my girl and me.*

That didn't make me feel any better about all of this.

*Tell me when and where and I'll be there.*

*I'll have a think about somewhere special and let you know. Love you, Elsa.*

*Love you too, Dad.*

When that exchange was over, I fretted about it, but I didn't have time to descend into it. I had to run down and switch out my clothes.

And for the next hour I finished dusting, mopped the kitchen floor, wiped down the counters, tidied everything away, vacuumed, cleaned the bathroom, put clean sheets on the bed and finished one load of laundry, half finished a

second, and started a third.

I did this because I rarely had time to do it and I wasn't a slob. I liked my place clean and tidy. But I usually had to break it up, dust one day, mop the floor three days later. It was almost like a treat to have it all done at once.

But also, Hale was spending time with me there. He'd seen it a mess. And I wanted him to know I'd made an effort.

In this time, I also got three more texts from the girls. They were all fashion ratings TikToks from the gala that I was mentioned in.

Although this blew my mind, and was a little terrifying, I got two eight out of tens, and one nine.

Not a bad showing.

By the time I had the third load of laundry upstairs, which meant clean towels, I had to jump in the shower while thinking about what to wear.

During the shower, I got rid of the studio makeup. After, I put on something much lighter and more subdued, and decided on a pair of mid-wash jeans, a light blue cardigan unbuttoned low enough to give you ideas, but not too low to be tacky. I folded and wrapped a fabulous Prada scarf around my neck. I spritzed with Jimmy Choo "I Want" perfume, put my Bony Levy pavé diamond "E" stud in one ear, the Bony Levy ball stud with chain and cuff in the other, slid on some midi-rings and then I was done.

I'd lit some candles that smelled good, just enough lamps to give the place a romantic atmosphere (even though it wasn't dark yet, it would be and I didn't want to be wandering around, switching on lights) and was pouring myself a much-needed glass of chilled white when the intercom went.

I moved to the new screen by my door and saw Hale flashing a peace sign at the camera.

I grinned to myself and buzzed him in.

I was standing in the open doorway when he got off the elevator carrying a plant.

I wanted to rush him.

I stood my ground.

He stopped in front of me.

"I asked the guy at the plant store, and apparently, it's impossible to kill this," he said by way of greeting.

"Are plants the new flowers?"

"Flowers die. You'll have a memory of this date forever if you take care of this plant."

It was a little frightening how much that worked for me.

Without another word, I took the plant and walked into the living room.

I set it on top of a stack of books I had on a table under the window and turned to see he'd entered and shut the door.

And then I jumped him.

Kissing me, he backed us to the couch, and sat while pulling me to straddle his lap.

We went at it a long time, it was equally as sublime as having him pin me against the wall (it was the lap straddle), but he stopped it by wrapping his hand under my jaw and pushing me away an inch.

This was a move that made my vaginal walls clench, because it was unusual, it was dominant and commanding, but it was also still gentle. A heady combination that made me even more upset he stopped us kissing.

"You smell good," he said in a throaty voice.

"So do you," I replied in a husky one.

"You look good," he told me.

"So do you."

"What have you eaten today?"

"A bagel."

He shook his head and gave me a troubled smile. "I need to hire you a personal chef."

"I'm still recovering from facial recognition to get into my building. Give a girl a chance to catch her breath."

On that, he squeezed my ass, since both his hands were there (nugget of news: this did not help a girl catch her breath), and he said, "Your couch isn't big enough for a Labrador to take a nap. I'm not having our first time include me performing feats of contortion." I laughed at that, and he spoke through it, "I need to feed you."

Sadly, since I was starving, and wanted wine, I had to agree. "Yeah."

"Got any takeout menus?"

I had a drawer of them.

I didn't move.

I cupped his jaw in both hands and warned, "This may freak you. It's not meant to freak you. I just need you to know I missed you. It was one date, but it was the best date I ever had. I really wanted more, and it was a little scary how much it hurt when I thought you'd walked out of my life, and I'd never see you again. No pressure, and this isn't meant to sound stalkery and weird.

I'm just being real."

He sat immobile, staring up at me for so long, I started to panic, because I realized that wasn't too much. It was way too much.

I'd learn it wasn't when I landed on my back on the couch, his chest landed on mine as he twisted over me, and he took my mouth again.

When he lifted his head, he whispered, "I'm glad we're on the same page."

"Yeah," I pushed out.

He smiled and said, "I'll get the menus. Where are they?"

"In the drawer in the kitchen where normal people would store cooking utensils or spices or whatever you use to prepare food."

At that he laughed, gave me a peck on the lips, pulled us both up but set me on my ass in the couch, then he went to my kitchen.

He came back with an inch thick stack of menus and my wine.

I sipped and watched him sift through them, taking in the stubble on his jaw, the messy hotness of his hair, the way his long fingers moved, feeling my mouth bruised and the wet at the gusset of my panties.

I did this making myself a promise at the same time making a plan.

I was going to hire a new assistant/receptionist.

I was going to promote Zoey.

And I was going to pay more attention to other important things in life. Dad. Fliss. Carole.

Hale.

My life would still be about work, but it'd also be about more.

It was time.

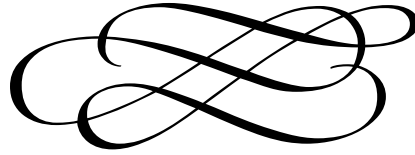
And I was Elsa Cohen.

Which meant, when a golden opportunity presented itself, I wasn't about to miss it.

I was going to grab on with both hands.

And ride it out.

# CHAPTER 12



## YOU'RE HIM

*Them*

*H*im...

Hale woke the morning after his date with Elsa when his phone rang.

His clock said it was just after five in the morning. He reached to take it off the charging pad, and saw the call was from Elsa.

He smiled to himself and put the phone to his ear while rolling to his back.

“Hey, baby,” he answered.

“Did I wake you?”

Fuck, she sounded good first thing in the morning.

“Yeah, but it’s okay.”

“I’m sorry. I thought you said you were a morning person.”

“Not after getting home at two in the morning from a great night with a beautiful woman who knows where to find perfect Peking duck and lets me steal second base on our second date.”

He heard her soft laughter.

“What are you doing up this early?” he asked.

“I’m always up this early.”

Of course she was.

“Making your mark,” he murmured.

“Absolutely,” she confirmed. “I’ll let you go back to sleep. I just wanted



you to know I enjoyed last night.”

In other words, she was as committed as he was to no more miscommunication between them, either way.

“Me too,” he replied.

And he had. So much so, it was hard to leave, and she made it plain it was hard to let him go. But he didn’t want to rush them.

Nope.

He wanted to take his time with Elsa Cohen.

So he left.

But not without making plans to see her again.

He reminded her of that plan, “Text me after your dinner with your dad tomorrow. I’ll head over.”

“Will do.”

“I’ll touch base with you again tonight, sweetheart.”

“Looking forward to it. Have a good day, Hale. And enjoy your time with your family tonight.”

“I will. And you have a good day too, baby.”

After they hung up, he snoozed for an hour before he got up. He made himself a smoothie and some oatmeal, put on some running pants and a long-sleeved half zip, a pair of running shoes, grabbed his phone, stuck his ear buds in, and headed out.

He ignored the photographers that were waiting for him outside his building, and in a few blocks, as usual, he’d outrun them anyway.

He returned, went to the gym that was housed in an upstairs room in his apartment. There, he did some sit ups, pushups, pull-ups, burpees, went to the machine and worked his back, shoulders and chest. Back downstairs to mix some protein powder and grab some water. He took it back upstairs to his bedroom where he showered, got dressed, texted his driver, and headed into his father’s office.

He then endured four hours of Zoom meetings he should have been attending in person, but his change of plans meant he was sitting at a computer, not in a conference room.

He didn’t have a preference of one or the other.

He hated them both equally.

He then had lunch with the executive director of an urban greenspace non-profit who was courting a big donation, then back to the office for another two hours of Zoom meetings. After that, he had a sit down with all

three of his assistants to polish the finishing touches on his week's reschedule, and discuss the next week, and the month beyond. That took two hours as well.

Another two hours of returning emails, texts, and then he was back in the car with his driver and headed to Mika and Tom's place.

He walked up the steps to their brownstone, more than ready for the only good part of his day to commence (outside the brief phone call with Elsa).

Cadence, Mika's daughter, opened the door.

"Day made," he said in greeting.

She shot him a brilliant smile before she fell into his arms.

He gave her a tight hug as he shuffled them in and kicked the door closed.

"You're here now and couldn't make the gala?" he asked her.

She tipped her head back. "I had some reshoots to do. The movie is almost finished, those were what was holding us back in editing. I didn't want to delay. And I didn't think you'd miss me."

She was making a documentary with her mom about mothers and daughters.

He was looking forward to seeing it.

"We missed you," he refuted.

Still holding onto him, she gave him a grin along with a shrug.

He heard voices in the living room and knew he was in for it even before Cadence broke their hug and whispered conspiratorially, "Chloe and Judge are here. So is Jamie. And Rix and Alex. Heads up, I think they mean to ambush you, though not Judge, Rix and Alex. And Chloe and Jamie seem to have different reasons for whatever they're up to."

Fabulous.

"Thanks for the warning," he replied.

His arm around her shoulders, hers around his waist, they walked into the living room.

When they entered, it wasn't the first time he thought Mika's pad was the shit.

Stuffed full of the life she'd lived, there wasn't an inch of it that wasn't interesting, and quite a few of those inches were taken up by her own art.

She was talented, had a point of view she'd never been hesitant in sharing, and even after sustaining a tragic loss when Cadence's dad, the drummer of the alt-rock band The Pissed-off Hippies, Rollo Merriman, died, she hadn't let life pass her by.

Hale had always felt captivated and impressed by how interesting she was, as was her life, as depicted by her space.

But this time, entering that living room, he felt a strange pang.

Like something was missing.

Elsa decorated like that, although considering she was twenty years Mika's junior, her space wasn't as full nor as big.

But she'd told him last night about how she found her art. Where she'd scored the vintage Fitz and Floyd pinstriped plates and the mismatched wineglasses she had. How her throw pillows were made custom by a neighbor who came into her pad and decided what she needed, then handpicked the antique silk scarves she made them from. Even Elsa's sofa came from her dad's best friend's den, a man she called "Uncle Adam," and she'd always loved it. So when that room was repurposed, he'd given it to her.

Everything she owned had a story.

Everything had meaning.

Hale had never been a "things" kind of guy.

But he was realizing now he'd also never really had a home.

He owned his dad's properties, and there were many. He used them often, particularly the house in LA and the apartment in New York. He'd asked Brandi to hire interior designers to redo the penthouse so it was more Hale, more comfortable, warmer, more inviting, not his dad, where the space had been crisp and modern and designed to impress.

He hadn't touched the house in LA.

He'd approved of their design schemes for the penthouse, but that was all he'd put in it.

He was thirty years old, had buckets of money, but he hadn't bought that first painting that was something he saw that moved him, so he had to own it.

Chloe, as she would, kicked it off.

"You've got some 'splainin' to do, big brother."

Mika temporarily saved him by getting up and giving him a hug before she asked, "Beer?"

"That'd be great," he answered.

"I'll get it," Cadence said, and ran to the hallway to go up the stairs to their kitchen.

Tom came in for a hug and a hearty slap on the back next.

This went all around, and he was settled into an armchair with the beer

Cadence brought him, everyone else settled around him, when Chloe prompted, “Well?”

“I’m dating Elsa Cohen.”

“I would hope so, *mon frère*, considering Sash and I caught you with your hand in her pants. The question is, *why?*” Chloe demanded.

Everyone was watching him with differing expressions of expectancy, meaning they all wanted an explanation.

And considering their various levels of fame, and that Elsa had reported openly and copiously about all of them, they deserved it.

“Obviously, I like her, and equally obviously, I’m attracted to her.”

“She’s a parasite,” Chloe declared.

Hale’s back got up.

“Honey,” Tom warned.

“I’m using Hale’s word for her,” Chloe defended. “That’s what he called her when she pulled that shit with Sam.”

He didn’t remember the words he used, he just remembered how outrageously pissed he’d been at the time, so he didn’t doubt he’d used them. But the bulk of that had not been aimed at Elsa. It had been at his mother.

In turn, he used Elsa’s words. “She’s course corrected.”

“She showed Blake’s breast on one of her episodes,” Chloe countered.

Hale glanced at Alex and carefully shared, “Blake sold her that picture herself.” He gave that a second then said, “And it wasn’t the first time.”

Rix’s eyes widened in shock just as Alex muttered on a heavy sigh, “This is a surprise, but it isn’t a big one.”

“She’s course corrected too,” Hale pointed out.

Alex nodded, but then again, she knew more than everyone Blake had changed.

“She might have gone legit, for lack of a better word,” Chloe said. “But she’s still about gossip.”

“Did you see the coverage she gave Blazing the Trail?” Hale asked.

“Just because she covered a charity event, that she was invited to attend gratis, I will add, doesn’t make her a decent person,” Chloe scoffed.

“She had a webpage dedicated to the clothes people wore. It wasn’t a best dressed list. It wasn’t a worst dressed list. It was just a webpage full of pictures of people with short, snappy, but positive comments on every one of them, and not a single designer’s name was mentioned, so she wasn’t pimping for sponsorship or any other reason. She also wasn’t putting anyone

down or elevating anyone else. You've lived it your whole life, Chloe. People are interested in the rich and famous. When I noticed she didn't qualify her fashion list, I did a search. She doesn't have a worst dressed list on her entire site. It might be subtle. People might miss it. But what does that say about her?"

Chloe didn't have a response to that.

Hale pressed his advantage.

"She doesn't have a TV in her living room. But she does have stacks of books. She doesn't cook, but she didn't chill out at home while I went out and got our food. She came with me. It's safe to say I've got money, she still argued with me about who would buy dinner. Yesterday, she somehow managed to post full coverage of the gala, and still had time to clean her whole apartment before I showed. We never run out of shit to talk about. She doesn't simper and preen to get my attention. She is who she is, and you take her as she is, or you don't get her at all. And I've never, not once, not in my entire life, met a woman like that. They're all out to impress, for one reason or another. And it's goddamned refreshing that on my side of things, I neither intimidate nor impress her just because I'm Hale Wheeler, Corey Szabo's son and worth a shit ton of money."

"Okay, so she might have some pros," Chloe allowed.

"She reached out to me after Alex and I got back from Blake's non-wedding," Rix put in and everyone looked to him. "Peri had approached her to tell her side of the story."

"Oh my God," Chloe whispered irately.

Considering Peri was Rix's ex-fiancée, and she'd dumped him after he'd lost both of his legs fighting a fire, irate was an appropriate response.

"Elsa had put a fair amount of effort into the interview," Rix continued. "Including talking to one of my buds in the department as well as a friend of mine who's relocated to Florida since my accident. She sent me the clip and left it up to me whether she would air it. It eviscerated Peri, by the way. It wasn't vicious. But Peri opened the door, being Peri, and Elsa walked through. I killed the story. Elsa didn't make a peep. She just didn't air it."

"Do you still have it?" Chloe asked curiously.

Rix dug out his phone.

But Hale was feeling less annoyed at Chloe's sweet, but aggravating, protective streak, and he was feeling something else, and it was all about Elsa.

“Is this why you invited her to the gala?” Hale asked.

After handing his phone over to Chloe, Rix nodded at Hale. “She didn’t ask for it, she’s never approached me again. But I figured one good turn deserved another. She sat at our table, and I’ll admit, I didn’t have high expectations, regardless of what she did with the Peri interview. But I liked her. She sat next to Alex, and it was like she cottoned on to how Al is. They talked a lot, she kept Alex company, but she also took over as hostess of the table, keeping conversation flowing, so Al didn’t have to do that. And I gotta say, we both appreciated it.”

Alex wasn’t shy, but she was an introvert. She didn’t like big gatherings and was extremely uncomfortable mingling.

And Elsa was sharp as a tack. He wasn’t surprised she’d tagged this about Alex.

Though he was surprised, and pleased, she did something about it, because Rix was a gregarious guy, but he was no host of a table that cost the people sitting at it collectively nine thousand dollars for the privilege of sitting there.

Judge and Chloe were huddled over Rix’s phone, with Cadence having gotten up to lean over the back of the sofa they were on to watch it, and you could hear the sound playing.

But it was Tom’s attention that caught Hale’s.

“I don’t have to say, I want you happy and it’s nice to know you’re seeing someone you like,” Tom said. “But just be careful with her.”

“She’s signed a comprehensive NDA,” Hale informed him.

Tom seemed relieved.

Hale wasn’t.

Because he now lived a life where every woman he dated had to sign the same thing. He couldn’t have them in his home, or his presence, or taking his dick, and gabbing about it.

The clip was obviously done, because Chloe was handing back the phone while bitching, “Damn, now I think I have to like her. At least a little bit.”

“It was a solid thing to do,” Rix said, now offering his phone to Tom, who had his hand stretched out for it.

Hale looked to Jamie to see his reaction to all of this, but he didn’t seem to have one.

Maybe Cadence was wrong that Jamie was there to ambush Hale. He always went out of his way to spend time with his son, who lived in Arizona,

and since Judge was there, it wasn't a surprise Jamie was as well.

"Okay, maybe I have an attitude because she outshined me with her dress," Chloe said. "It was amazing. Perfect for her."

"No she didn't, sweetheart," Judge murmured.

She shot a smile to her fiancé.

Hale kept his mouth shut, because Chloe looked beautiful Saturday night, but Elsa outshone everyone.

He took a sip of his beer and waited while Tom, with Mika pressed up to him, watched the interview and when they were done, Mika, looking mildly pissed, noted, "Perhaps an unpopular opinion, but as an objective observer who wasn't around when all of that was happening, I think you should have let her air the interview. That woman seems like she deserved it."

"No purpose to that, Mika," Rix said, holding out his cell to Hale as an invitation to watch the interview.

"I'll watch it later," Hale said.

Rix nodded and pocketed the phone.

"I agree with Mika," Chloe declared.

"Of course you do," Tom said on a smile.

At this juncture, Mika pushed up from the sofa she shared with Tom. "I need to get upstairs. Since our group has expanded, we're having make-your-own-nachos night. I need to check the queso."

"Jesus, that sounds perfect," Hale replied.

Mika smiled at him and gave his shoulder a squeeze as she walked by him. Cadence followed her mother, and Chloe headed up too.

That was when it happened.

It started with Jamie saying, "Prepare to be pissed at me."

Hale braced.

"But I thought you'd told Tom about the emails," Jamie finished.

Goddammit.

"They're not a big deal. It happens all the time, and they've stopped," Hale instantly assured Tom.

"Actually, your security team sent one they received on Sunday to Kateri. She shared it with me," Jamie said, now pulling out his phone, engaging it and handing it to Hale.

It had an email on it from a familiar address, *halewheelerisgodstan1@gmail.com*.

And Hale felt blood rush to his head when he saw the message of, *Not*

*her, not anyone, not ANYONE, but NOT HER!* then clicked on the attachment and saw the selfie he took of him and Elsa, with angry digital red markings scratching out her face.

“Kateri says, whoever this is logs into Gmail all over the city, including Manhattan, Queens, Harlem and Brooklyn,” Jamie explained. “And it’s always untraceable at internet cafés or in libraries where she, or he, has given a false name and sometimes ID. They have different descriptions of the person who is short, tall, young, old, man and woman, even Caucasian and Asian. Though this is probably because time has elapsed, and people have no real memory of who used their internet on any given day. On tracing every email, including this one, Kateri has hit a brick wall.”

“CCTV?” Tom asked.

Jamie shook his head. “She, or he, picks carefully. Places without cameras, or they know where the cameras are and they’re wearing bulky coats and hats and keeping their back to it. But some of the footage from where the older emails were sent is just gone because not many places have the capacity to store footage for that long.”

He hadn’t taken it seriously before.

Staring at Elsa’s face obliterated with those angry swirls of red, he was taking it seriously.

“So what do we do now?” he asked, handing Jamie back his phone.

“Report it to the police,” Jamie told him. “Kateri’s resources are better than theirs, and she has more time to take it seriously. But you need a complaint on file, just in case.”

“Then what?” Hale pressed.

“Then you keep your security poised, because the minute another email comes in, it needs to be traced and someone sent out to where the IP address is located in hopes of catching them in the act or at the very least getting a decent description of them,” Jamie said.

“Which brings us to topic one of why I wanted you here tonight,” Tom butted in. “You need more security.”

This again.

He already had enough intruding in his life, he didn’t need some guy following him around everywhere.

“Tom—” Hale started.

“No. Hell no, son. It isn’t just whoever this person is. You can’t go for a jog without fifteen photos surfacing of you running down the sidewalk. There



are people out there who are not right. Your father never went anywhere without a bodyguard.”

“I’m not my dad,” Hale said tightly.

“I know you’re not,” Tom returned. “But you aren’t immune to the anger people have about anything they can dream up. He made more money than any one person should own, and you’re finding good ways to use it. You’d think no one would have an issue with that. But I’m a father. I worry. I look at the shit people say about you, and it makes my skin crawl. There are all-right crazies who think you’re the devil incarnate. They’re pissed about your position on the environment. They’re pissed you give money to pro-choice organizations. They’re pissed you give money to justice initiatives. They’re just pissed they’re not you. And a lot of those assholes have guns.”

Hale had no response because all of it was true.

“Kateri tells me your team feels the same way,” Jamie added. “You’ve got ex-Delta Force who used to look after your dad pinned in a room vetting email and watching monitors. If you didn’t pay them so much, they’d leave. And they still might. These are not men to sit in a room.”

Hale glanced at Rix, who was studiously looking at his knees.

He then moved his gaze to Judge, who immediately said, “It terrifies Chloe.”

“*Fuck*,” Hale bit.

“And Genny, Sasha, Matt, Mika, Cadence, Duncan, Sully, Gage, Dru, Nora,” Tom put in. “It’s as simple as giving a team you already have who know what they’re doing the go to do what they do best.”

Shit.

“I’ll sit down with them tomorrow,” Hale promised.

Tom stared at him hard for a beat, then ascertaining Hale would be good on his promise, he nodded.

“What’s topic two?” Hale asked, even if he didn’t want to.

Tom didn’t delay. “You work too hard. You need to ease up or learn how to delegate.”

“Tom—” Hale tried, and failed, again to intervene in what Tom was trying to push.

“I know you feel like Corey gave you the power to save the world, but he didn’t. The world has to have some part in saving itself. In the time since we lost your dad, which hasn’t been long, every single arm of his business, of any business he owned majority shares in, and any organization he held sway

in at all, you've forced them to rewrite hiring, diversity, equality and harassment policies and demanded gender and race neutral remuneration. This has cost them millions, because they had no choice but to bow to your demands or be exposed for having shit policies in the first place."

Tom barely took a breath before he went on.

"You've then forced them to go green and establish strategies to be carbon neutral within a decade. You then significantly cut or even eliminated executive bonuses, which has lost you a lot of talent, I'll add."

"Not one company has suffered from that. We've replaced them with fresh talent who have a vision of the future. Not everyone with a head for business is a greedy fuck," Hale got in.

"Maybe so. But it's pissing off your shareholders."

"They have the means to get rid of me."

"And court that public relations disaster?" Tom demanded. "Ousting the man who's leveling the playing field? Another thing that pisses off the alt-right, you're the human equivalent of woke, and even though the vast majority of them don't even know what woke means, they hate you for it."

"If you think I haven't played that trump for all it's worth and will continue to do so until I have no cards left, you're crazy."

"What I think is that you've done a lot of good work in a short period of time, so you can take a break. But you don't. You buy up things like Core Point, a massive multi-national athletic company, then dive in to make it a social for-profit. This is a corporation with six headquarters on six continents and nearly eighty thousand employees, every one of them felt you rattle their cages, and you're going for a run without a bodyguard."

"Core Point stumbled after their bullshit was exposed, but we're poised to distribute ten billion in profits from last year to charities and social investment organizations."

"I'm not saying what you're doing is wrong, son," Tom noted. "Far from it. I admire you and what you're trying to do. I'm proud as hell of you. I'm saying you're thirty and you should enjoy your life and *live it*. And working is not living."

"You watched Elsa's interview," Hale deduced.

"Of course I did. You know that," Tom replied.

"And you heard me say I don't intend to get married and have a family, and that tweaked you."

Tom drew breath into his nose.

It tweaked him.

Tom then said, “I was concerned before I heard you say that in your interview.”

“What I wasn’t going to tell Elsa’s millions of viewers is that it isn’t entirely about that.”

“It’s about what your dad did to Sam, to you, and you don’t want to repeat your father’s sins.”

Hale kept his gaze steady on Tom because he didn’t want to get into this. Ever.

But definitely not with an audience.

“Everyone here cares about you,” Tom pointed out after reading his mind.

“That doesn’t mean you aren’t ganging up on me,” Hale retorted.

“I’m gonna go help with the nachos,” Judge declared, folding out of the couch.

“Me too,” Rix said, following.

“I’m not moving because Tom needs someone to back him up on this,” Jamie said when they heard the men’s treads on the stairs. “He’s speaking truth, it’s from the heart, it’s from fatherly concern, but it’s still truth. And Hale, you need to listen.”

“I’ve never wanted kids,” Hale semi-lied.

And it was semi because he never really thought about it, but when he did, he thought of life with his mother, life with his father, and thought better of it.

“You don’t have to have kids. But you do have to have a life,” Tom stated.

“I’m happy.” Another semi lie.

Or maybe that was a full one.

“And now you’re attempting to bullshit me, and I’m not going to buy it, Hale. Come on, I know you,” Tom chided. “This is not what you want for your life.”

“I’m not sure we’ve ever had that conversation, Tom,” Hale said coolly.

That was when Tom lowered the boom.

“You’re him. He’s made you him. A different version of him. But you’re still him.”

Jamie shifted in his seat, because he knew how heavy that blow was, but he didn’t say anything to alleviate it.

“My father was a brilliant man,” Hale said low. “It might not have been

his intention, but he's given me the means to make a real difference."

"You can make a difference and not country hop, getting three hours of sleep here, four there, none there, and not find someone to share your life with," Tom shot back.

Hale was done.

To communicate this, he said, "You're heard. I'll think about it."

"Hale—"

"We're done talking about it," he stated firmly. Then, when Tom didn't appear ready to let it go, he threatened, "We can either be done, and I can stay, or we can be done by me going home."

"This is all from love," Tom said quietly.

"I know. I'd be a lot more pissed if it wasn't. And I'd have walked out of this house ten minutes ago. I get here and Chloe gets up in my shit about who I'm dating, then you get up in my shit that I don't have a life. I'm not ten, Tom. I'm a man. I make the decisions about my life and how I spend my time. I appreciate your love and concern, I've listened to what you had to say, and now I'm asking you to back the fuck off."

Tom gave in by inclining his head.

"Okay," Mika said, and Hale started, then twisted to see her leaning in the doorway to the living room. "I know I can count on you men to leave this here and bring nothing but family vibes up to my dining room. Grub's up."

And with that, she disappeared.

All of the men got up, and Jamie came to Hale, clasped his biceps and said, "You're a good man, Hale. I'm glad you took the time to listen."

He then walked up the stairs.

Tom got closer. "We good?"

"Sure," Hale pushed out.

"I love you like I made you. And I can't know. I've learned some surprising things about your father since we lost him. But my guess is, he saw the light at the end. It's tragic he didn't allow himself to share that with all those who loved him. And maybe I'm wrong. Maybe it's what I said, and he did mean to make you into his image by giving you all he had. But I don't think I am wrong. I think he'd be distraught that you've thrown all that is you at this and didn't learn what he finally did. I think he'd be even more upset to know you don't intend to share your life with someone. I think he'd be more than upset about that. I think it would fuck him up, Hale."

With that, Tom caught him on both sides of the neck, gave him a squeeze

and a shake, let him go and left Hale alone in the room.  
But he did it after he'd lowered another boom.  
Leaving Hale wrecked.

He didn't know her very well.

So he vacillated about whether or not to call her and lay his shit on her, or just call her because he'd promised he would to say goodnight.

In the end, he laid his shit on her.

And he knew why.

It was a test.

It was a test of how she'd handle one miniscule part of the ginormous mindfuck that was his head, his life, his history.

Yeah, it was a test.

So when he got home, after he made himself a G&T, he threw himself on the couch where she sat when she interviewed him, and he called her.

"Hey, how'd dinner go?" she answered his call.

"I caved to having a bodyguard follow me around everywhere. I can confirm Chloe isn't your biggest fan, but I think I made some headway with that, with the help of Rix. And Tom pissed me off by telling me I was turning into my father."

Her voice was high and freaked when she asked, "You don't have a bodyguard?"

Hale made no response.

She carried on, sounding no less freaked. "Hale, promise me you'll carry through with that. I can't believe you don't have a bodyguard."

"You've been with me several times, Elsa, and I've never had one."

"I thought they followed at a discreet distance."

"No."

"Ohmigod," she breathed, now not freaked, sounding openly rattled.

"I'm talking to my team tomorrow," he assured.

"Thank God."

Hale again was quiet.

"Now, why on earth would Tom say you're turning into your father?"

“He doesn’t like how busy I am.”

It was her turn to be silent.

“You agree,” he guessed.

“I never met your father, I can’t agree or disagree. But I do know you’re busy.”

“You’re busy too,” he pointed out.

“Yes, but I love my job. I love my life.” A loaded pause and then, “Do you?”

The baton passed to Hale, and he again said nothing.

“Do you, Hale?” she pressed gently.

“I have money managers, several of them. And I can confirm what your brother said. I’ve given away billions, and I’m worth more now than what my father gave to me.”

“Okay,” she replied slowly.

“I want my legacy to be different than his.”

Her silence now held meaning, he could sense it, he just didn’t know what it was.

“What are you thinking?” he asked.

“You don’t talk much about him,” she said, handling him with obvious care. “So I can’t know. But I wonder if you want your legacy to be different, or if you work so hard so you can make his different.”

Christ.

*Christ.*

Hale threw back some of his drink.

“Do I hear ice clinking?” she inquired.

“Yes,” he grunted.

“Was that out of line? What I said.”

“No. Though, how sharp you are has always been a turn on. Now I’m seeing the pitfalls.”

“Honey,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry, I threw a lot of heavy at you.”

“Sounds like you had a heavy night and needed to unload some of it. I don’t mind holding on to it.”

Test passed.

Flying colors.

“Let’s move out of the heavy anyway,” he suggested.

“If you like.”

“How was drinks with the girls?”

“A blast. You have a nickname. Thurston Remington the Fifth.”

A startled laugh came out of him. “What?”

“Carole made it up. It pertains to one of the photos of us sold to the *Post* or wherever. It seems very formal.”

“I haven’t seen that one.”

“Hang on.”

His phone dinged, and he looked at the photo on the text she sent.

Then he busted out laughing.

“Christ, I totally look like a Thurston.”

He heard her laughter too. “I know, right?”

“You look like the snow bunny I picked up in Geilo.”

She laughed harder then said, “I’m Sunny Sinclair.”

He chuckled. “Perfect. So you had a good time.”

“I haven’t been out with them for a while. I’ve been so focused on Elsa’s Exchange, I let some important relationships slide. I’ve decided to restructure some things so I’ll have more time for them, and Dad, and, well...you, if this works with us.”

*If this works with us.*

Shit.

Communication.

The key was communication.

“Tom got up in my shit about being too busy, Elsa. And I need to think about that. But even if I make some changes too, those aren’t going to happen overnight.”

“Hale, you don’t even consider New York home. But it’s mine. I get it. I’m making changes, but I’m not expecting, nor am I ready for anything intense right now.”

He felt tension he didn’t now he was holding leave him when he muttered, “Good.”

“We’re getting to know each other,” she said. “And it’s great. Let’s just be in that. Yes?”

“Absolutely, baby. Yes.”

“You still want to come over tomorrow? You’re an early bird, and it might be late.”

“You want to change plans and come here after your dinner with your dad? Bring a bag. Stay at mine. It’s closer to your office.”

“That’s making some assumptions, Mr. Wheeler.” Fortunately, this was said as a droll tease, not like she was ticked.

“This apartment has four bedrooms.”

“Right.”

“Though, I’ll be angling for you to stay in mine.”

“Consider me warned.”

“That said, sweetheart, no pressure.”

“Okay. I’ll pack a bag. But don’t think it’s about how charming you are. I want to see your view at night.”

“Upstaged by a view.”

He heard her soft laugh, then she blindsided him. “Tom just loves you, you know. You can tell how much. Even in pictures. It’s a father’s prerogative to be worried. I suspect that’s what my dinner tomorrow night is going to be about. Things are happening fast for me. Dad probably wants to take my pulse.”

“I’m not annoyed about his intentions, I’m just…” Hale gave that a moment’s thought and admitted, “I don’t know what I am.”

“You don’t have to figure it out tonight.”

He took a sip of his drink, thanking fuck that was true.

“I’m gonna let you go, baby. You’re an early bird too.”

“I won’t call first thing.”

“I didn’t mind.”

“Okay then, maybe I will.”

“Whatever you want. Sleep well and see you tomorrow.”

“You too. ’Night, Hale.”

“’Night, Elsa.”

They disconnected and Hale twisted, lifting his legs to the couch and stretching out so he could look over the back of it, to the view.

And fuck him, he’d never really noticed it. He did, but that place was always about it being his father’s. That took all his headspace whenever he was there.

But it didn’t look anything like it did when his dad was alive.

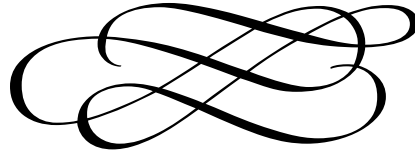
And the view was incredible.

So Hale took his time finishing his drink, and he enjoyed it.

Then he put the glass in the sink, turned out the lights and went to bed.



# CHAPTER 13



## EXTREME HONESTY

*Elsa*

I was ten minutes late when I rushed through the busy restaurant to where my dad was sitting at a two-top.

He had his back to me, because if he was facing me coming in from the front, I wouldn't get the better seat.

Pure Dad.

When I arrived at our table, I put both hands to his shoulders from behind and felt him jump as I bent in to kiss his cheek.

I then rounded him, threw myself in the chair opposite, and gushed, "I'm sorry I'm late. I had an unexpected meeting with the network, and it ran long. They got wind I was doing the Mankowitz interview, and they want it. Like, want it for a prime-time slot."

"That's fantastic," Dad said on a smile. "And no worries, honey. I got your text."

It wasn't just fantastic.

It was phenomenal.

And the money they were offering was too, and that was before my agent Audrey got hold of them. She told me she was sure she'd get a lot more, and with recent experience of her negotiating prowess, I believed her.

"I don't know," I said, draping my tote on the back of my seat, then shrugging off my coat, and since I'd been carrying it, absentmindedly setting my phone by my place setting rather than tucking it into my bag. "It'll be amazing for the Exchange."

“How’s the money?” Dad asked.  
I grinned at him. “Off the hook.”  
His eyes twinkled at me, and the server showed.  
I saw Dad had his old fashioned already, so I asked, “Do you have a good Sauvignon Blanc?”  
“Willing to trust me?” she asked in return.  
I nodded.  
“I got you,” she promised then took off.  
I picked up the menu sitting in front of me just as my phone illuminated.  
It was a text from Hale.  
I bit my lip in order to resist the urge to snatch it up and read it.  
Suffice it to say, a chill Sunday night sharing Chinese and stories and kisses, especially Hale’s kisses, I thought was the best way on the planet to spend a Sunday night.  
This was no crush anymore. Not even close.  
I was really into the guy.  
“Get it,” Dad urged, and I looked to him to see his eyes were on my screen. He turned them to me. “I’ll be fine.”  
“It’s rude, and I’m already late.”  
“You aren’t going to text him through dinner, are you?” he teased.  
I shook my head and picked up my phone to read Hale’s text.  
*I’ll send my car for you in an hour. He’ll be waiting outside the restaurant. No rush, he’ll just be there when you’re ready.*  
God, he was so sweet.  
I texted back, *I have to run to my place to pack a bag.*  
*He’ll take you there too. His name is Paul. It’ll be a black Escalade.*  
*OK. Thanks. I’ve just sat down with Dad. See you in a bit. And then I added three kissy-face emojis.*  
*Tell him I said hello.*  
I sent a thumbs up, a red heart and the red lips emojis.  
“Hale says hello,” I told Dad as I set my phone down.  
“When you see him again, tell him hello back.” Weighty pause then,  
“And we’ll talk about him later.”  
Great. Dad wanted to talk about Hale.  
“Now, catch me up on you,” he ordered.  
I launched in and this took us through me getting my wine (it was a good call to trust the server, delicious), and us ordering our meals and getting our

appetizers.

“So I’m going to need to crunch some numbers with you,” I said to finish, considering Dad helped me with my budgeting, and even if he was a CPA, he did all my bookkeeping, not to mention, prepared my tax returns. “I want to hire another assistant and promote Zoey.”

“Elsa, honey, you have a lot of money,” Dad said slowly. “And you’re going to have A-list talent coming into your offices. I’ve already advised you need to invest in atmosphere. You need to invest in staff. This isn’t a shoestring operation anymore. You can’t make money without spending it. And you’re in a business where appearance is important. Put a good foot forward, including with appropriate staffing.”

I nodded.

“And if you have good staff, and yes, Zoey is exceptional, they need to know you appreciate them and not just you saying thank you,” Dad went on.

“Yes. You’re right.”

“Not to mention, every good leader knows when to delegate.”

He was correct yet again.

“So I approve of this plan, not that you need my approval,” he concluded.

I always needed my dad’s approval, and I loved that I could go to him and get his expertise and advice.

He went on, “But we’ll set up a meeting and go over everything so you understand it and are comfortable with it. Okay?”

I nodded. “Thanks.” I then shot him a huge smile and said, with feeling, “You’re the best, Dad.”

His expression changed completely.

Seeing it, I felt a tear start to form in my heart, and he blurted, “Your mother has left me for your Uncle Adam. They’ve been carrying on an affair for twenty years. We’re getting a divorce. And your brother is representing her.”

I sat motionless, staring at him.

And then my heart tore into two at the same time my head exploded.

I snatched my phone off the table, rose from my chair and dashed out of the restaurant.

On the sidewalk, I called my brother.

“Hey, Elsa,” he answered.

“You *miserable piece of human garbage*,” I hissed. “I cannot *believe* you.”

“Hang on—”

“You should keep out of it. I can’t even imagine how your head works that you’re not. Instead, you’re representing your mother while she’s divorcing *your father*.”

I felt Dad get close as Oskar started, “She needs—”

“What about what Dad needs, Oskar? Hmm? What about Dad?”

“He’s obtained excellent counsel.”

“You’re his son,” I reminded him.

“This doesn’t have to be acrimonious,” he rebuked.

Was he serious?

“*She cheated on him for twenty years with his best friend!*” I shouted.

“Elsa,” Dad whispered, crowding me and rubbing my back.

“That’s it,” I snapped into the phone. “We were never close, but if you do this to Dad, we’re done. I never want to see you again.”

“Listen—” Oskar tried.

I didn’t listen.

I hung up on him.

“Come inside. Sit down,” Dad urged.

“God, he’s *such a piece of work*,” I bit out.

“Come inside.”

I looked at him. “No. I have another call to make.”

“I’m asking you not to call your mother in this state,” Dad said in Dad Voice. “Come inside.”

We went inside.

What could I say? He’d used Dad Voice.

I’d barely sat down when Dad was hailing the server.

“Another glass of wine for my daughter,” he ordered.

“You betcha,” she replied, clearly not having missed the drama I just enacted, and she was off.

Speaking of wine, after I dropped my vibrating phone in my tote, I picked up mine and took a huge slug.

Then I took a breath and got myself together.

After I accomplished that, I apologized. “I’m sorry. This isn’t about me. It’s about you. God, Dad. I’m just...” I swallowed. “So, so sorry.”

“I have something uncomfortable to tell you,” Dad admitted.

Something uncomfortable?

Like, more uncomfortable than my mom has been cheating on him with

*Uncle Adam* for most of my life?

Fabulous.

“Okay,” I replied.

“It’ll be hard to hear.”

Damn.

“Okay,” I repeated.

“I’m relieved,” he declared.

Even though, at the heart of it, this wasn’t a shock, still...I stared at him in shock.

“I’ve thought a long time, and when I say that, Elsa, I mean for months, about whether or not to share that with you. I hate the idea of you thinking there was no love in your parents’ marriage. But now that it’s at an end, I hope knowing that I’m actually grateful to have the opportunity to move on might help you.”

“Is there someone else for you?”

“No. I’ve always been faithful to your mother. But I’ll admit, at times, it’s been difficult.”

I bet it had.

“Did you know about her and Uncle Adam?”

He shook his head. “Aunt Naomi found out about the affair and kicked him out a couple of days before Oskar and Anoushka came for that visit when you brought Hale to the house. Naomi told me. Your mother and I were talking, trying to decide if we should remain together, trying to see if there was still something there, or if we should split.”

Ah, so this was why the atmosphere was particularly caustic that night.

Dad continued, “I think now it was mostly she was hedging her bets, seeing if Adam wanted her, because she didn’t re-enter the workforce when you kids were old enough to look out for yourselves, so she got herself in a situation where she needs to rely on a partner. I’m not saying that to badmouth her. Although I encouraged her to go back to work and was concerned when she didn’t because she didn’t seem to have anything else in her life but you kids, it’s her life and her decision. I’ll give her a settlement that’ll keep her comfortable, though she’ll probably have to find some other income, or manage that settlement carefully, if she wants to continue with her current spending habits.”

I sucked back another glug of wine, finishing it off, because the server was there with my next.

I handed her the spent glass, nabbed the new one and took a glug of that too.

“Is this upsetting you?” he asked. “Unduly?” he went on, since the question he asked was already answered with my recent actions.

“No. You know Mom and I have never really bonded. But yes, that lengthy of a betrayal is hard to wrap my head around. Not to mention, I loved Uncle Adam and I’m shocked and hurt he would do this to you. To us.”

“Oddly, that’s the part that’s hardest to take. Losing my best friend.”

I could imagine.

“I take it Adam wants her,” I noted.

He nodded.

“Motherfucker,” I said under my breath, feeling for Aunt Naomi too, because she was a sweet lady, and no woman deserved that. Then I drank more wine.

“Elsa,” Dad rebuked. “You’re a lady.”

“I’m a modern woman, Dad, and we call them like we see them.”

He took in a very deep breath and let it out slowly.

“I’m sorry, honey,” he said. “The truth is, I haven’t even liked your mother for a long time. Our paths diverged somewhere along the line, but whenever that was, it was quite some time ago. So long ago, I don’t entirely remember what brought us together in the first place. I know that sounds harsh, and it has to be hard to hear—”

“Dad, it’s not news. This may sound harsh and be hard to hear too, but you tried to hide it, and you weren’t very good at it.”

He nodded morosely. “I’m sorry about that too, *bubbeleh*. But she’s been unhappy too. So really, as much of a shock as this is, it’s a good thing.”

“It’s not a shock either, Dad. I’ve been wondering when you’d split up since forever.”

His expression made it clear he didn’t like that.

The server showed with our entrees.

I wasn’t hungry.

“Eat,” Dad encouraged, picking up his cutlery. “You don’t remember to eat. It worries me.”

I wasn’t as excited about it as when I ordered it, but I picked up my fork and knife to eat it.

“So, she’s moved in with Adam?” I inquired.

“Yes, now that he’s settled. They’re in a walkup in Bushwick.”

“Awesome for her,” I muttered sarcastically and took a bite of my chicken parm.

“She’s nervous about speaking to you,” Dad said.

Still with the sarcasm, I asked, “Really? I wonder why.”

“Elsa, she’s your mother. The only one you’ll ever have.”

“Since we’re bandying around extreme honesty tonight, Dad, she hasn’t been a very good one. And her cheating on my beloved father for twenty years doesn’t help.”

“She had talent and ambition, and it never worked out for her. And then she sees you, who is the spitting image of her, captain of the debate team and president of the student body, making a name for yourself within a year of graduating college, and she has a blind eye to how much work you put into all that. She just sees that everything you touch turns to gold.”

“I’m not competition with her for a spot on the chorus line, Dad. I’m her daughter.”

“That’s fair,” he murmured. “Even so, I urge you to cut her some slack.”

I put some chicken in my mouth and chewed angrily.

“All I wanted was to keep my father and grandfather’s firm thriving,” he said. “To find a beautiful woman and make beautiful babies and buy a condo in Palm Beach. She wanted more, and I don’t blame her. I also don’t blame her that the bitterness crept in. It’s natural.”

I wasn’t going to get into that.

I was thinking about his firm, which was medium sized, but he’d kept true to his goal. It had always thrived. We didn’t need for anything, or want for much, growing up.

However, Dad had put three kids through college, one through grad school, and I knew he had hefty accounts set aside for Emilie and my weddings. Further, Dad was no stranger to charitable giving. Or political. And he had a big heart and strong ideals, so he could be generous.

“This settlement you intend to give her, is it going to be comfortable for you?” I asked.

He put his fork and knife down and picked up the glass of wine he ordered to have with dinner.

He didn’t answer until he took a sip and put it back.

“I’ll have to delay my retirement for a few years.”

My fucking mother.

“How many?” I pushed suspiciously.

“Honey, I don’t work construction. I sit at a desk. It won’t be hard for me to work until I’m seventy. Seventy-five even. And I enjoy what I do. My clients certainly will be pleased I intend to tack a few years onto my tenure. And it’ll give me a chance to give changeover plenty of time, then take a back seat and just do the work and let your cousin take over management. He’s very new now, but by then, which, mind you, is years away, I’ll have had the opportunity to be certain it’s in good hands.”

Dad had two younger sisters. He’d been beside himself when my cousin Noah had expressed interest in joining the family firm when he was in high school. Noah had since passed his CPA exams and had started working for Dad a couple of years ago.

“She kept our home. She took care of you kids,” Dad continued. “I’m not about to let her walk away with nothing.”

*She also cheated on you and made your life miserable with her bitterness.*

“It’s not my business,” I mumbled.

He reached across the table, so I put my knife down and took his hand.

“I love how much you love me. I love having your support. It means everything to me, Elsa.”

“I love you with my whole heart, Dad.”

“Well, I hope you have some space there for your mom.” He gave it a meaningful pause. “And your brother.”

I frowned. “I’ll do my best not to be too confrontational with Mom.” That was weak, but it was all I had in that moment. “But you’re going to have to let the me and Oskar thing go. If he represents her, we’re done. I mean...Dad, how can you ask that? It’s not cool what he’s doing...to you.”

“He’s my son.”

Why was my father such a good guy?

*Why?*

“And he’s your only brother,” he continued.

“He won’t be, if he goes through with representing her.”

“You have a niece and nephew.”

“I’m sure they won’t return the birthday and Chanukah presents I send.”

“Elsa—”

“Dad, he’s never been nice to me. He’s never been brotherly. You and Aunt Deborah and Aunt Ruth get together, and you act like teenagers, laughing and telling stories about growing up. You should see Hale’s face when he talks about Chloe and Sasha and Matt. He just *exudes* love for them.



He thinks the world of them. I don't have that." I squeezed his hand. "And that's okay. It's not your fault. You tried. I could see it. Feel it. But it just wasn't there. Some families aren't close. And it isn't a good thing to try to force it. I don't mean to hurt you when I say, he's no loss. In fact, I understand what you mean. If I don't have to try with Oskar anymore, it'll be a relief."

I saw his pain at that, wished I hadn't said what I said, but he wiped it clear when he gave my hand a return squeeze, let me go, and changed the subject.

"Perhaps now we should talk about Hale."

Ugh.

"Okay, since we're coming clean tonight, you should know, Hale agreed to be my fake date the night we came to dinner," I confessed.

Dad's chin ticked into his neck.

"I know. It was Fliss's idea. It was a lark. He offered to run interference, and I took him up on it, I'll admit, mostly because it'd get under Oskar's skin."

"So...what? You're just friends?"

"No. The fake date became a real date. Stuff then got weird. We sorted it out. And we're dating. For real now."

"I guess I understand," he said like he didn't at all.

"We're good," I said softly, and watched my dad's focus intensify on my face. "I like him a lot."

"I can tell," he replied in my tone.

"Did you like him?"

"He takes no shit, and he doesn't sit back and let you take it either. And that was when you were fake."

I shot him an apologetic smile.

"I'd worry about this fame and the attention that brings," Dad continued. "But you're catching up to him in that regard."

At that, I grinned.

"I'm lucky. I've never had to tell my girl to be smart," he said. "She always is. But please guard your heart, *shayna punim*, because I can't always be there to do it for you."

Oh my God.

I totally loved my dad.

I swallowed my emotion, but my voice still held it when I said, "I love

you to pieces, Dad.”

“I’m glad, because that’s how I feel about you.” Then he winked mischievously, looking more *Dad* than he had since I sat down. “And I won’t tell your mother, sister and brother about the fake date. I was at brunch with your sister when she scrolled through the pictures on your website of the gala and saw the one of you and Hale. And obviously I don’t play favorites...”

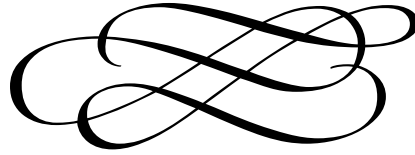
“Obviously,” I drawled.

“But I found her reaction amusing.”

For the first time since I got there, I laughed.

And my heart still hurt, my mind was still reeling, but I sure was glad when he laughed too.

# CHAPTER 14



## ALL THE TIME. CONSTANT.

*Hale*

*T* hen...

“Tell him to go fuck himself,” his mother said into the phone, and Hale knew she was talking to one of his dad’s attorneys. “That’s my time this year and I’m not allowing Hale to go to Thailand with him. Tell him, not a fucking chance.”

On that, she hung up.

Hale sat at the kitchen table, struggling with the variety of emotions he was feeling.

The first part was about the fact his dad had mentioned he was going to Thailand, and Hale had asked to go with him. For once, Corey hadn’t hesitated. He’d looked him in the eye and said, “I’d like that.”

Hale wasn’t close to his dad. He’d given up on that forever ago (and the official date on that was when Corey had barely made it to Hale’s championship baseball game, a hugely important game for Hale, and Corey showed up in the final innings—that day he was done with his dad, and he was done with baseball because it reminded him he was done with his dad).

But he was excited about the idea of going to Thailand.

So, it might be stupid, but it felt good when his dad had said, “I’d like that.”

The second part was, he wanted to go so he could surf. It’d be freaking

amazing to surf in Thailand.

Third, he was sixteen years old, practically a man, and his mother didn't ask him what he wanted. She just saw an opportunity to deny his father something he wanted, and she jumped at the chance, not giving that first shit what Hale would like to do.

At least that was something his dad gave him. Corey started to treat him like a man when he was twelve.

But she'd pulled this crap just last month, when Marilyn and Robert were in town, and they wanted to see him.

Genny's parents were the only grandparents he'd had, since his mom was so twisted, even her folks didn't like being around her much. But it had been his mom's time with him, and when he asked if he could go with his dad to Genny and Tom's to spend a Saturday with Marilyn and Robert, she'd said no.

She knew he loved them and would want to see them when they were in town. She knew they loved him like he was their own grandchild.

So that had hurt.

A lot.

Which meant, last, he was so fed up with this crap, he couldn't even.

"Mom, I asked Dad if I could go with him," he shared.

She was banging around with utensils and pots, loudly, like she cooked. She didn't do much but work, spend the massive wad of cash his father gave her every month, go out with her girlfriends and bitch about men, and watch TV. He'd started cooking when he was around ten, and the only reason he knew how was because Genny taught him.

"You should have asked me," she returned. "I get you for spring break this year."

"All right," he retorted. "What are we gonna do then?"

She turned squinty eyes at him. "Are you talking back to me?"

"No," he lied. "I asked you a question." And that was the truth.

"I haven't decided yet."

She'd had him...he didn't know how many spring breaks.

They never did dick.

"I wanna surf in Thailand, Mom."

"Well, lucky for you, your father has more money than God, so you'll get your chance. Just not this spring break."

"If we don't have anything planned—"

“Don’t talk back to me!” she shrieked.

Hale fell silent.

He always did when she got like this.

“Christ, I have to put up with his shit *and* yours?” she demanded.

Yours?

*Yours?*

Meaning *his*?

That was it.

He’d had enough.

He stood. “During spring break, I’m gonna sit around here doing diddly squat, except when I take off myself to go to beaches I’ve been to a hundred times, to surf by myself, when all my friends are going to Mexico or Aspen or *somewhere* because their parents give a shit about them.”

“Don’t you cuss at me, Hale,” she snapped.

It wasn’t lost on him that she didn’t get ticked about him saying she didn’t give a shit about him.

“I’m not him. I didn’t do...whatever it is he did to you. I’m me. Your son. And I’m sick and tired of you treating me like I did something to you when I *didn’t*.”

“You’re cruising straight to being grounded for spring break, Hale, if you don’t shut your mouth right now.”

“I don’t really care. You’re not gonna make an effort. So what do I care? There won’t be anything to do or anybody to do it with anyway.”

She threw an arm toward the vast picture windows that showed a view of the sprawl of LA. “You have an entire city to do cool things in.”

“Yeah, but I want to do cool things with my dad. That’s your beef. That’s your problem. That’s your damage. It’s *always* your damage.”

“Your father is a piece of shit.”

“And have a look at this fun discussion, Mom, and tell me what my mother is?”

She gasped.

He stormed off.

He was grounded that spring break.

But it didn’t matter.

There was nothing to do and no one around to do it with anyway.

Now...

The front desk called to tell him his guest had arrived and was heading up in the elevator.

So Hale was walking that way when the doors opened and Elsa came out wearing a sweater dress that did things to his dick, a coat over it, boots with four-inch heels that he also felt in his dick, and carrying a bag in her hand, the promise of which did even more things to his dick.

Yeah, his mind was one-track. But it had been a while since he'd gotten some, she was sexy as fuck and their makeout sessions on Sunday were just enough for the time, but not near enough for how much he wanted her and how long it was turning out he'd had to wait to have her.

"Hey," he greeted, and her gaze came to him.

He felt his step falter when he saw the expression on her face.

"Hey," she said tonelessly.

When he arrived at her, she tilted her head back perfunctorily for him to touch his lips to hers.

This he did then took her bag from her hand.

She wandered in, her tote still hanging off her shoulder, her coat still on, and then she stopped and stared at the view.

"It's better than I imagined," she said in that weird voice.

He dropped her bag by the couch and asked, "Everything okay?"

She turned to him and shared, "I need to buy a new couch."

And then she lost it.

Dropping her head and covering her face with her hands, he heard her wracking sob, and it rocked so deep, he felt it too.

Swiftly, he went to her, pulled her purse off her arm, tossed it on the sofa, then guided her there. He gently tugged her down on it, going with her and tucking her close as he stroked her hair with one hand and held her tight with the other arm, urging, "Get it out."

He had no idea what she needed to get out, he just knew it was big.

Suddenly, she tore from his arms and stood, snapping, "Christ, *I hate my brother.*"

Right.

That might explain a few things.

“What happened?” Hale asked warily.

She started pacing. “I don’t know where to start. The fact my dad and mom have split up and they’re getting a divorce. Or she’s already moved out and into her lover’s house. That lover being my *Uncle Adam*, Dad’s best friend, a man I’ve known my whole life. Or the part where they’ve been carrying on an affair for nearly as long as I’ve been alive. Oh!” she exclaimed, narrowing her eyes on his face, which he knew held shock because he wasn’t hiding it. “That’s not even the best part, Hale. Guess who’s representing her?”

He didn’t have to guess with how she started this.

Still, he couldn’t believe it when she all but shouted, “Oskar!”

“Come here, sit down with me,” he ordered.

She didn’t. She tore her hand through her hair and continued pacing.

“Incidentally, I threw a drama at the restaurant and stormed out when I learned this, called Oskar, and tore into him. Dad had to use a tone he hadn’t used on me since I was seventeen to get me to calm down, go back in and sit down.”

He didn’t blame her for having that reaction.

She carried on sharing.

“At dinner, Dad and I got to a good place. It was hard on him, telling me all that. It was hard on me, hearing it. But we got to a good place. That’s us. We always get to a good place. Then, on the way here, I saw I had a dozen text messages from Oskar telling me to phone him. Telling me I needed to hear Mom’s side of the story. Telling me not to jump to conclusions. Telling me never to call him and shout at him or hang up on him again. And I knew in the meantime he got on the phone with Mom, because she called, *twice*, and texted to say she wanted some time with me. And if that wasn’t enough, Emilie called and left a voicemail to tell me to keep my nose out of it and let Mom and Dad deal. Good advice, except she shouldn’t be giving it to me, she should be giving it to *our brother*.”

“Agreed,” Hale said.

“And yes,” she carried on like he didn’t speak, “so you don’t have to do the mental arithmetic to get there, this means all of them knew before me. I’m sure because Mom told Emilie and Oskar and left Dad to tell me.”

“Does that upset you?”

“I don’t really give a shit,” she clipped. “Except Dad’s asked me to try to understand Mom’s point of view, which I promised to do, knowing it’s impossible. Twenty years, Hale. With his *best friend*.”

“That’s fucked up,” Hale concurred.

“But Oskar, if he does this, we’re done. I told Dad that, and it pained him, so I’m going to have to fake it as best as I can so, as Dad goes through this, he doesn’t worry about the state of Oskar and me. But mark my words, if my brother represents our mother in our parents’ divorce, he’s dead to me.”

“I’m with you, baby, one hundred percent. That shit is jacked.”

She stared at him a beat then plopped into an armchair. “God, I can’t believe I cried in front of you.”

“Uh, did you hear all the shit you just laid on me?” he reminded her.

“Is my mascara a mess?”

“Yes.”

“Ugh!” She pushed out of the armchair and headed to the powder room. “I’ll be back.”

“You want a drink?” he called after her.

“You have any wine?”

“White or red?”

“Alcoholic.”

He smiled to himself as he headed to the side of his island that had a crisscross in it where he, or more to the point, his housekeeper stored his wine.

He picked a Syrah, opened it and grabbed the aerator.

He was pouring when she returned, throwing her coat on the back of the couch on the way, and hiked her ass on a stool opposite where he was.

He finished with one glass, and she asked, “Is that mine?”

“Yes.”

“More.”

He beat back a chuckle and poured her more.

The island was wide, but he had long arms, and when he was done, he slid her glass across the marble.

She took hold of it and collapsed into her elbow on the counter, the side of her head in her hand, fingers in her hair, and tipped her head back along with the glass when she took a sip.

Christ, he dug Cute Elsa.

He rounded the counter and sat on the stool beside her.



“You gonna be okay?” he asked.

“Yes,” she answered, putting the glass back and twisting it side to side as she lifted her eyes to his. “It isn’t a surprise. There’s never been any love lost. And I mean those words like they sounded. I don’t think they’ve ever been in love. I didn’t press my father about it tonight, because tonight was hard on him, and because it’s not my business. He doesn’t like the idea that we understand they’re both happy to be moving on from each other. He wanted a happy, loving family. As fragile as the illusion always was, it’s been shattered, and so is he. At least about that.”

“Completely understandable.”

“I can’t get past the betrayal. Hers and Oskar’s.”

Hale said nothing, but what he thought was, her brother doing what he intended to do was all kinds of fucked up.

She studied him before she said, “I’m not going to ask, but I know you know.”

“I’ll confirm, hesitantly, that you should have a conversation with your mom, because there’s one thing your brother is correct about. There are two sides to every story.”

That made her take another sip.

Hale kept talking.

“Tom and I are close. We have man to mans and we can, not only because I’m older than Matt, but because we have what we have, and Matt and Tom have something different. They’re building on what they have, and I’m glad for them both. But I understand what Tom did. I understood before. I was plugged into that family, and how I was meant I was hyper-alert to all kinds of shit. So I noticed Genny pulling away from him, even before Tom did, I’d guess.”

Creases formed between her brows. “How you were meant you were hyper-alert?”

“It’s how kids get when their parents hate each other. When everything is up in the air all the time. When you can’t gauge how any situation will go, *any* situation. All the time. Constant. You learn to read the room. Expressions. Vibes. Body language. Chloe, Matt and Sasha didn’t have to do that. Which made it worse for them. Tom and Genny’s breakup blindsided them. I knew it was coming months before it came. It gutted me, but it didn’t come as a surprise.”

Elsa said nothing.

“It’s not mine to give you, about Tom and Genny,” Hale warned. “But I’ll take this opportunity to thank you for uncovering what you did and burying it then giving me the heads up so I could make it stay buried.”

He was referring to the woman Tom had had a brief relationship with, the prelude to the end of his marriage to Genny.

“It isn’t my business to know more about them. But even if we’re new, I hope it’s my business to understand how you seem to have been on guard your entire life.”

Hale felt his neck get tight.

Elsa didn’t miss it.

“Yes,” she said softly. “You let that slip in order to explain something else to me, but it’s not mine to prod unless you’re willing to share.”

“I think we should focus on you,” he evaded.

“Okay,” she said readily.

“But, babe, my last name is Wheeler.”

She reached out and laid her hand on his forearm that was resting on the counter. “I’d always wondered about that.”

“As you know, it’s Mom’s maiden name. She hated my dad so much, it started before I was born. They got a divorce when she was pregnant with me, and she denied him something at the very least he had half rights to give to me. And that was when it began. Before I was even born. So…”

He let that trail.

Her fingers tightened on his arm.

“Okay, that’s enough on that for tonight,” she said gently.

“I hate to look a gift horse in the mouth, but you’re a shockingly bad gossip monger,” he joked.

“I know.” She fake pouted. “My skills are failing me.”

He leaned in to give her a quick kiss.

When he leaned back, he again got serious.

“I’m sorry all that shit is happening with your family.”

She did a quick shrug, let his forearm go and took another sip of her wine.

“You want a tour of the whole apartment?” he offered.

She shot him the side eye. “Is it ending in your bedroom?”

“Yes, but although I had grand schemes of sliding into home tonight, and I’d like to invite you to sleep beside me if you want, after the night you had, I’m not going to make any moves.”

“Disappointing,” she pouted that word into her wineglass.

“You’re open to make any moves you like.”

She set smiling eyes on him.

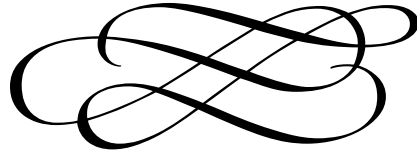
Then she slid off the stool, hooked arms with him to pull him off his, and taking their wineglasses with them she led him to the staircase.

“All right then, Mr. Wheeler, dazzle me with your lair.”

He set about doing that, and as he did it, he found he had new eyes about the space himself. Because she was dazzled, almost girlish with it, and it made it so fun, it was the first time he was proud to show the place off.

Though, he suspected, that feeling mostly had to do with being glad, after the night she had, she could come to him, and being in his space made her happy.

# CHAPTER 15



## SIXTH SENSE WAS ELSA

*Hale*

**T**he next morning, Hale heard her phone alarm then felt her shift, her hair sliding along the skin of his chest.

He then felt her lips touch him there before she moved away.

He caught her wrist, tugged her back, and rolled so he was covering her.

He didn't do anything else, just settled in.

Elsa did something.

Her hands roaming him, her lips gliding along his neck, she got to his ear and asked, "You going back to sleep?"

"Yup," he muttered.

Though, with her touch, his dick wasn't.

She nipped his ear with her teeth, and he felt that there, as well as elsewhere, before she inquired, "With me trapped under you?"

"Yup," he repeated.

She laughed softly in his ear.

His cock stirred even more.

She ran her lips down his jaw.

He ran his hand down her spine.

These actions started something Hale had never experienced before. Just touch, smell, pressing, some rubbing, no kissing, but all gentle, all in silence, and a great deal of it.

So much, he knew when she was ready, like his sixth sense was Elsa. So he wrapped his hand around her ponytail, tugged her head back gently, all

while using his other hand to trace the edge of the waistband of her panties.

He made it to the front and dove in.

Warm. Wet. Gorgeous.

She gasped and rocked against his fingers.

Even better.

He watched through the shadows as he made her come. It didn't take long. But it was magnificent.

He let her shove her face in his neck when it was over, then he wrapped both arms around her and held her closer.

Perfect start to the day, perfect start to their exploration of each other, and they hadn't even kissed.

"Now you can leave me in my bed," he allowed.

She tipped her head back so her lips were under his chin. "No. Now you."

"I'm good, baby."

"Sorry?"

He angled his head so they were face to face in the shadows.

"Don't get me wrong. I want to let you make me come for you. But that kind of thing between us isn't tit for tat. Just because you get one doesn't mean you owe me one."

Her silence held the weight of surprise.

She broke it to note, "You're hard."

He chuckled. "It's not an affliction, sweetheart. It'll go away on its own."

She ran a hand down his side. "It can also go away another way."

"Baby—"

She kissed his throat, then, "Shh, Hale."

Right, she was determined, so he wasn't about to stop her.

She pushed him on his back, kissed down his chest, pulled down his sleep joggers and his cock sprang free.

He gritted his teeth as she took hold.

Then she licked the tip.

That made him growl, thinking it heralded her taking it slow, therefore, he settled in.

It didn't herald Elsa taking it slow.

Right after the lick, she swallowed him whole.

At that, he groaned.

She then commenced giving him the best head he'd had, by far.

In fact, it didn't feel like a sex act or a moment of intimacy, it felt like an

act of worship. It was so hot, he had to push up to sitting with his back against the headboard, taking her with him, so he had a better vantage point to watch her work him.

When he was almost there, he hauled her up, his balls tightening at hearing her mew of protest. He draped her on him and wrapped his hand around hers at the base of his cock, and both of them pumped the results of her blowjob all over his stomach.

And all over was *all over*.

Fuck. He'd never come that hard or that much.

Jesus.

Brilliant.

He kept her hand under his as they milked him dry, then he brought it to his lips and kissed the back of it.

"I could have finished you off with my mouth," she whispered.

Nice to know where she stood on that.

However.

"I'll let you have that another time."

She snuggled into him. "Okay."

He gave them space to revel in their first time sleeping beside each other, waking and touching and sharing intimacy, Elsa draped down his side, her head on his shoulder, Hale holding their hands at his chest, the city lights twinkling through the windows.

And he gave himself that time to feel her close, smell her hair, enjoy the aftereffects of what she just gave him.

More importantly, to feel not alone for once. To have someone right there who he cared about.

Then he let her go to pull his joggers over his dick before he yanked her out of bed.

She emitted a surprised cry that made him smile as he led them to his bathroom.

"You're not going to take the world by storm lazing in bed after sucking your man's cock," he mock-admonished.

He let her go after he switched on the lights in the bathroom. She blinked, as did he, but got used to it and immediately started glaring up at him.

She might be glaring at him, but he had Cute Elsa now. Wearing a pale pink silk nightie that had spaghetti straps and delicate cream lace at the top, her hair back in a ponytail, her face clean of makeup, residual sleep and a

recent orgasm making her eyes lazy, her lips pinker than normal and swollen from sucking him off.

He bent in, gave those lips a closed-mouth kiss, then moved to grab a washcloth to clean his cum off his stomach.

Last night, when he'd carried her bag up, she'd trailed him and put her cosmetics bags by the basin he didn't use. Now she dug through one to get her toothpaste and toothbrush.

He closed the door on the toilet, did his business, came out, washed his hands, splashed water on his face, wiped it off then went to her.

He got behind her where she was brushing her teeth, kissed her shoulder and said, "I'll go make coffee."

She spit quickly and replied, "You don't have to get up with me, Hale. It's early. You can go back to bed."

"Yeah. And I can make you coffee. Which is what I'm gonna do. Take a shower, help yourself to whatever you need. Coffee will be ready when you are."

Before she could say anything else, he left the bathroom.

"Travel or regular mug?" he asked as she walked down the stairs wearing all black, except the white Nikes with leopard print swoops on her feet.

She was carrying her bag.

He frowned at the bag.

"I'm sorry, honey, but travel," she answered. "Our extracurriculars have put me off schedule so I need to scoot."

"Leave the bag," he ordered.

"What?" she asked as she made the kitchen.

"Leave the bag. I'm here the rest of the week. And I'm cooking for you tonight."

She looked at him under her lashes. "Are you now?"

"Yup."

She laughed silently, her shoulders shaking with it.

But she also dropped her bag.

He prepared her coffee then started to wrap the bagel he made for her in a

paper towel.

“You made me a bagel too?”

“Sesame. Medium whipped cream cheese. Hope that’s cool.”

“That’s my favorite.”

“I guessed right then.”

She was watching him with a funny look on her face when he came around the island and gave her the mug and bagel.

He then cupped her jaw and ran his thumb along her cheekbone.

“You all right?” he asked quietly.

“I’m great,” she answered.

“I mean after what you learned last night.

As answer to that, she put her hands out to her sides and did a faceplant in his chest.

Yeah. He could have guessed that answer.

He wrapped both arms around her shoulders.

“The orgasm helped,” she told his chest.

He smiled. “I’m glad.”

She tipped her head back to look at him. “Alas, I think there’s no cure to my family drama but time.”

“Alas,” he teased.

She rolled her eyes.

That was when Hale kissed her properly for the first time that morning.

When he was finished, she breathed, “Okay, that helped too.”

“Go forth. Take the world by storm.”

“Aye, aye, bossman.”

They’d broken the seal, so she’d soon learn what kind of boss he was.

He just hoped she was into it.

She got up on her toes to kiss his jaw, he liked the feel of that, both her lips and the fact she had to get up on her toes to do it. Then he walked her to the elevators and tagged the button for her.

“Time tonight?” she asked.

“What time’s good for you?”

“If I’m staying here again, I have to go back to my place to get some more things. So, maybe six thirty, seven?”

He nodded. “Text when you’re ready to roll. I’ll have Paul pick you up at the office and take you to your place, then he can bring you here. Anything you don’t like to eat?”



“I’m not a fan of squash, or eggplant.”

“Me either.”

The elevator doors opened while she said, “Perfect.”

He held the door open while he gave her another kiss.

Then she got in the elevator and saluted him with the travel mug he’d filled for her as they started to close.

His last view was Elsa taking a bite of the bagel.

Something about that made him feel warmth in his chest.

He buried that feeling, went to his kitchen and started to make his morning smoothie.

The text from Elsa came at 10:30.

*Lunch plans today?*

He had them.

But now he was going to cancel them.

*No.*

*My treat. But warning, first, you’re looking at a couch with me.*

Oh yeah. She had to get rid of her fucking couch. Immediately.

*What time?*

*1:00?*

*Tell me where and I’ll be there.*

*New Life Furniture in Chelsea. I’ll text their deets.*

*See you there.*

After sending that, he left his desk to go tell Kayla, his assistant who dealt with his schedule (as well as travel plans, and a dozen other things), that she had to juggle his lunch.

With his bodyguard for that day, Hudson, stopping just inside the door, Hale met Elsa inside the store, which had a showroom full of refurbished furniture

and upcycled items.

He liked that was her pick in order to reuse something that shouldn't be thrown away, and also because it was a local business. But he knew she shopped upcycled and bought local already from what she told him about the things at her place.

She was standing in front of a sofa that was covered in creamy pink bouclé, a line of buttons along the low back, and interesting arms with wood accents. He was no furniture expert, but he could see it was a mid-century design, and possibly Danish.

In other words, it was kickass.

But it wouldn't be very comfortable.

"Hey," he greeted when he got to her.

She stopped looking at the sofa to turn to him. When she saw him, she smiled brightly and tipped her head back, inviting his kiss, a gesture that struck him was growing familiar in a way he liked.

He accepted the invitation (something else he liked), and when he was lifting his head, she tossed a hand toward the couch. "I saw this on their website. It intrigued me. What do you think?"

"It's fantastic, but I can't fuck you on it."

Her head twitched then she busted out laughing.

She then grabbed his arm with both hands and leaned into his side. "How tall are you? Six two? Six three?"

"Three."

"My apartment won't hold a couch that long, Hale."

He pointed. "The wood on the arms will make them hard to relax against."

"You can rest a pillow on them."

"True. But it still won't be comfortable."

"Can I help you guys?"

A female associate had come up to them. She was Black, had natural hair that was a soft halo that grew out several inches in every direction and looked amazing. She was wearing a skintight, cropped turtleneck, a pair of baggy overalls, and you could see smooth brown flesh at her sides. And she had great earrings.

"Hey, yeah," he replied. "Do you do the refurbishment on these pieces?"

Her chin ticked to the side and her brows drew down.

At her reaction, he thought maybe she belatedly recognized him, but she

said, "Thanks for asking it like that."

"Sorry?"

"Usually, people ask who does the refurbishment, not if I do it. No shade on the patriarchy," she lied on that last. "But a woman can reupholster a sofa. And I do. I own this place with my man and his brother, but only me and my man do the work."

"This piece is great," he told her.

She smiled. "Thanks."

"But do you have something that's as cool as this but more comfortable?"

"Fuck furniture?" she asked with a quirk to her lips.

Hale stood silent.

Elsa laughed softly.

"I heard you earlier," the associate shared.

"Right," he muttered, a sensation of alarm unfurling across the back of his neck. "Sorry."

She smiled. "Baby, if you think it's not a compliment that my furniture gives a good-lookin' man ideas, you're very wrong. So how about you follow me."

She didn't take them to another part of the store. She took them out the back to the alley, along it and to the back door to the next property, where they went in.

Through this, his bodyguard trailed them.

Elsa noted him and gave him a contented smile, not hiding she was relieved he was there. The associate noted him too and didn't say a word.

"This is our workspace," she unnecessarily explained about the big space filled with items in progress, tools and a lot of sawdust.

They snaked through it and stopped at another midcentury piece. This one was boxy, with padded arms and thick, comfortable-looking cushions covered in velvet the color of a dandelion.

It wasn't long enough for him, but he could get creative with a couch like this.

"Now this is fuck furniture," the woman said.

"I love it," Elsa told her. "But it's not finished."

And it wasn't. One of the cushions didn't have a cover and the piece didn't have any legs.

"Close, though, I can put some temporary legs on so you can give it a go."

“How long will it take to get done?” Elsa asked.

“Couple of days.”

That alarm Hale was feeling spread as Elsa shared openly, “Well, you see, my current couch was given to me by my Uncle Adam, who I just found out has been having an affair with my mother for twenty years. So it’s kinda important it goes.”

The woman’s eyes got big. “Whoa, sis. I hear you. But if you can hang tight, I’ll get on this and I can take that one off your hands, do a refurb if it needs it, or just sell it. Depending on what shape it’s in, in trade, I can either deliver this for free, or take a couple hundred dollars off it. We charge a hundred bucks for delivery. Promise I’ll do my usual fabulous job, but I’ll fast track it. Got a picture of your couch?”

Elsa dug out her phone.

While she was doing that, the woman turned to him.

“I’m Gemma,” she introduced. She then addressed the alarm he was feeling. “And I’m obviously not going to sell this to Elsa’s Exchange because...” She flicked a hand Elsa’s way.

Elsa looked up, her pale skin getting paler, belatedly realizing what had happened.

“Or anyone else,” Gemma went on. “That’s not my bag, promise. It also wouldn’t win me return customers, so, just sayin’.”

“Thanks,” he replied.

“This is my current couch.” Elsa held out her phone.

“Nice,” Gemma remarked. “We can probably do a trade discount. I’ll have to see the piece to be certain. I obviously won’t tell anyone it was once owned by a cheating sonuvabitch. Bad juju. No one would buy it. Can you give me until Friday? We’ll schedule the switch out then. It’ll give me a deadline. Light a fire.”

“Friday will work. But I also want to get that orange media center. Is that one of yours too?” Elsa asked.

“Anything that’s bright and bold is me. Anything that’s earthy and mellow is Jady’s. So, yeah.”

“I love it and have to have it.”

“Then it’s yours.”

Hale and Hudson helped Gemma put some temporary legs on the sofa so they could try it out, and it felt as comfortable as it looked. She then showed Elsa what she was thinking for permanent legs, and Elsa agreed they’d work

for her. After that, Gemma walked them back to the store. Elsa made her purchases. Set up a delivery time. And while doing that, they met Jady.

With that done, when they got out of the store, Hale belatedly introduced Hudson to Elsa. He was cordial, but they were out on the sidewalk, so he didn't have a lot of attention to pay to the introduction.

Incidentally, Hale's team had assigned two bodyguards to him, Hudson and a man named Rocco. They were both younger members of the team, Hudson ex-special-forces army, Rocco ex-secret service, and neither of them had acted as bodyguard to his dad.

For some reason, Hale had found this last a plus.

Elsa walked them to Chelsea Market and bought him (and Hudson) a hotdog at Dickson's Farmstand Meats.

They took them to go and ate them in his car, Hudson in the front seat with Paul driving them to her office so he could drop her off.

It was Elsa who brought it up.

"If Gemma wasn't so cool, I could have blown it back there, couldn't I?"

"It was me. I didn't watch my mouth to start."

"I didn't need to offer up recent family news, though."

He hated to say it, but it had to be said.

"It isn't about being with me, baby. It's your new life. You're going to have to get used to it. Being aware all the time about where you are and what you say and who can hear it. Because they're listening."

"I know that. I was in that business. I made money off of it, Hale. It isn't my main focus now, but I still do."

It wasn't an admission because he already knew it.

She was feeling him out: would this get in their way in the future?

"Greg Kinnear started on Talk Soup, and he's been nominated for an Oscar. Harrison Ford was working as a carpenter at a studio when George Lucas saw him and asked him to read for Han Solo. You have an origin story where you wanted something, and you went for it. No one got hurt in the process."

She grimaced and he knew why.

Because that might not be entirely true.

"Don't regret your past because you're with me. I'd hate that," he said firmly.

"It's a little chickens come home to roost, though. You know?"

He felt for her because it was.

“Yeah, I know.”

He pulled her to him for a kiss on her neck, then he let her go and broached another subject that needed to be broached, but he didn't want to do it.

“You contact your mom and brother?”

That grimace was bigger before she nodded. “Mom. Yes. I told her I needed some time, but we'd talk. Maybe next week. She told me she loves me, and she'll see me when I'm ready. Oskar, yes too. I told him to stop bombarding me with texts. I'm not okay with what he's doing, and he needed to lay off. It didn't matter what he said, he wasn't going to change my mind. And that had the result of him bombarding me with more texts, explaining how I was wrong.”

“What's he say?”

“How Mom can't afford an attorney at this juncture, and Naomi cleaned Adam out, so he's not in the position to help her, so Oskar is stepping in. Which is unnecessary since Dad already intends to lay a healthy settlement on her. But I didn't tell Oskar that.”

“Good.”

“I'm ignoring him, so he's stopped. For now.”

“Okay.”

They'd double-parked outside her building, but she didn't get out. She gave him a long look.

And then she asked, “Are you careful all the time when you're out in public?”

“In a way. It's kinda all I've known, because of Dad. So it's just a part of how I've always lived. It isn't as obtrusive as you think. Women guard against things as a matter of course in their lives because there are dangers they face daily. It's like that. Like walking with your key between your fingers. You'll get used to it.”

She nodded, but she didn't look happy.

But that unhappiness wasn't about this being part of her future. It was about it being a part of Hale's life for the length of it. How he knew that, he didn't know. Perhaps it was because there was something tender in her look, and as he had with other things about her that day, he felt her look in his chest too.

“I have to get back to work and I just had onions, so sadly, no kiss,” she said. “But thanks for meeting me.”

“Thanks for the hotdog.”

She didn't want to kiss him, but that didn't mean she didn't come in for a hug.

Then she grabbed his hotdog detritus, along with hers, and got out of the car.

Paul waited until she was inside, and Hale watched her walk in.

But as he did, he felt a shift, and he didn't feel that warmth.

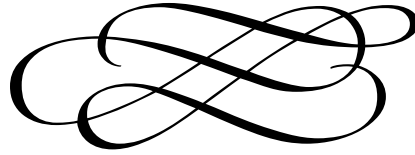
The unease was crawling along his neck, and now, his chest felt tight.

He didn't understand it and hadn't gotten control over it by the time they drove away.

But he also didn't have time to reflect on it. He had an afternoon of Zoom calls in front of him.

And he had to figure out what to cook for dinner.

# CHAPTER 16



## SPICY BOLOGNESE

*Elsa*

**L**ike the night before, Hale met me as I got off the elevator.

I tipped my head for his kiss.

He gave it to me then took my case, and I followed him inside.

My bag was a mid-size wheelie this time, with far more stuff in it. He hadn't explicitly invited me to stay the week, but if that was on the cards, I was jumping at it.

It wasn't about being at his place shaving half an hour off my commute in the morning. Though that worked for me.

It wasn't about his place being top to bottom amazing. Though that was a definite bonus.

No.

Seriously, if this was what having a man in your life was like, I'd been missing out.

However, I had a feeling it wasn't just "a man."

It was Hale.

Allow me to state my case...

Having your dad tell you super-shitty news that rocks your world, then having someone hold you while you cried, listen to you while you bitched and support your take on the situation.

Going to bed, and having a warm body to cuddle up to.

Waking up and getting an orgasm you desperately needed, but didn't have to give yourself.



Getting that orgasm from someone with deft fingers that boded good tidings of future joy.

Having someone make you coffee and a bagel before you headed out to face the day.

Having someone to stand in line, get a hotdog, then eat it with you.

Having someone who told you how attractive he thought you were by the way he kissed you.

And how often he did it.

Not to mention by the way he looked at you, and him simply telling you.

And having someone who met you at the door (or elevator) when you came home for the night.

Fliss was chronically monogamous. This meant she always had a boyfriend. Often, they didn't last long, but she went from breaking up with someone to meeting someone to being exclusive faster than the blink of an eye. She said it was her superpower.

As one could guess from the fact they often didn't last long, none of her boyfriends were anywhere near as great as Hale seemed to be.

Which could be why they didn't last.

On the other hand, Carole had been with the same boyfriend from when they were sophomores in college to when they broke up last year. She'd been devastated. She'd thought there was a ring in her future (and she'd thought that for the last five years). Eventually, she couldn't wait anymore, so she'd ended it.

But Fliss and I had never been his biggest fans. He was too *Dude!* for either of us (and, frankly, Carole too, but it wasn't until after it was over that she confessed to things that bothered her). He was the kind of guy who still told "that's what she said" jokes and called breasts "knockers". Fliss and I had both been secretly relieved when Carole had figured it out and scraped him off.

So obviously, not even in the same league as Hale.

I honestly didn't know how to handle how well he and I got on now that we were no longer fighting. I kept waiting for him to do something annoying or engage in some behavior that raised a red flag.

I mean, at the last minute, he came out to lunch to look at a couch with me. I wasn't sure even my dad would do that.

And truly, going to him the night before, having him be all...*Hale*, listening and supporting and giving me space when I needed it, stroking my

hair when I needed that, and dropping it when I needed to move on.

I was getting sucked into how fabulous he was.

I was also getting sucked into other things about him.

Primarily, how shitty it seemed his life had been and how deeply I wanted to do something about it. Not something normal, like being a decent person to him and helping him to make good memories that would outweigh the bad. Or being a sounding board so he could get it out and heal. Though I wanted to do all that too.

No, something like finding magic that would erase his past and give him better.

This desire had gone so far, during that day, my mind wandered to fantasies of a good witch visiting (who was a doppelgänger to me, obviously, and didn't wear tulle, equally obviously, but instead, vintage Halston), who would give me a magic wand that would allow me to travel back in time and right all the wrongs done to Hale.

I wasn't usually that type of girl.

It wasn't like I wasn't a dreamer. I was. But my dreams were goals. They were realistic. Doable.

Not fantastical.

That said, even if the Good Witch Other Me came to visit in real life, I wouldn't know what wrongs to right.

Since we'd met and this started happening between us, it was all about me.

It wasn't that he shut it down. He shared. But he wasn't all that forthcoming. And I found myself protecting him in that, because it was the only thing he allowed me to have to keep him safe.

And this didn't even get into the fact that he clearly wasn't happy in the present.

I sensed he didn't like his job, or how busy it was, or who he had to deal with, or some or all of that.

But he didn't share about that either.

So it was past and present being what seemed like absolute shit for Hale.

And yet, he was a magnificent individual. Just a good, *good* man.

I hurt for him, because it might be deep down, but I knew he hurt.

I just didn't know what to do about it.

He wheeled my bag to the foot of the stairs, then headed toward the kitchen, asking, "Wine or cocktail?"

I looked at the island, where there was a red open, and he was already drinking it.

“Wine,” I answered, flipping off my nude pumps and shrugging off my winter white trench.

I had a basic white tee and skinny jeans on under it. This was outfit number three of the day: commuter black jumpsuit and cardie to start, an Escada pantsuit for a segment I filmed, my current outfit for going out with Hale at lunch and being at home with him now.

“God. It smells amazing,” I said, following him to the kitchen. “What is that?”

“Spaghetti Bolognese,” Hale answered, pouring my wine. “It’s simmering. I got started on it later than I expected. We have an hour before it’ll be done. And the bread is still proofing. That’s almost ready to go into the oven, though.”

I ignored the glass of wine he slid my way in order to stare at him.

“Wait,” I started. “You mean, you got some storge-bought bread dough and now it’s almost ready to go into the oven, or you came home and made bread? From scratch?”

“I came home and made bread from scratch,” he told me. “The Bolognese is scratch too. I hope you like spice. I put some pepper in it. I’d normally also make the pasta, but I didn’t have time.”

I took up my wine but didn’t drink it. I walked around the island to the stove and lifted the lid off the cream enameled Le Creuset Dutch oven.

A gust of pure goodness drifted up to me. And it looked as good as it smelled.

I put the lid back on and turned to Hale. “Are you from this planet? I mean, for real. I signed an NDA. I can’t tell anyone if you’re from an alien species made of hot guys who are good with their hands, don’t freak out when a woman bursts into tears and know how to cook.”

He smiled and I had to mind my wine when he swung an arm around my waist and hauled me to his front.

“I’m not an alien,” he said, still smiling. “Are you of a secret society of females who always have the perfect outfit, are who they are and put that right out there all the time, and sound like an angel when they come, but suck cock like a witch?”

“Oh dear,” I fake-fretted. “The Themyscira sisterhood is going to be really mad at me. You weren’t supposed to figure it out. At least you didn’t

find my bracelets and golden lasso.”

He busted out laughing, and I was so happy I made him do it, it was a little concerning.

He was wearing an olive-green sweater over a white tee and faded jeans.

I ran a finger along the collar of his sweater (cashmere, nice, he always had the perfect outfit too) and waited for him to stop laughing before I asked, “How did your day go?”

“It was just a day,” he answered, dipped in, touched his mouth to mine and let me go.

There.

Sharing.

But not forthcoming.

I decided it was time to dig a little deeper.

“What’d you do?”

He was opening a drawer in the island, inside of which it looked like a loaf of Focaccia was rising.

“Zoom meetings. More Zoom meetings. Went to lunch with you. Back to the office to close down there, came here, started the bread and then had more Zoom meetings.”

“Is that a normal day?”

“Considering the things I’m trying to do, I prefer the meetings to be face to face, because people find me intimidating due to me being Corey Szabo’s son. They can’t nod their heads and agree and then do whatever the fuck they want when I’m onsite for a while, and they know I’m coming back.”

I knew the things he was trying to do. I’d heard of angry executives leaving in a tiff because he increased their salaries, but axed their much larger bonuses. I’d heard about the hits he demanded they take to their bottom lines so all salaries were commiserate, no matter your gender or color, and benefit packages were significantly enhanced, including mandatory maternity and paternity leave, onsite childcare and education opportunities.

It just never occurred to me how much work would have to go into changing rooted corporate culture like that.

He shot me a grin, closed the proving drawer, and went to the oven. “Though, making the bread isn’t normal.”

“Where’d you learn to cook like this?”

“Genny.”

“Imogen Swan makes bread from scratch?”

He shook his head but said, “She’s a really good cook. Mostly, she taught me how, and I got the bug. If I cook, it’s all from scratch. I don’t see the point of opening a can of clam chowder when I can make it and it’s a hundred times better.”

“It takes a lot more time, though.”

“Yeah,” he muttered. “Which means I don’t get to cook often. So thanks, babe, this has been awesome.”

“My pleasure, in more ways than one.”

He winked at me.

It was sweet.

But considering the fact I’d just learned he didn’t get to engage in something he enjoyed very often, I was oh-so not done with my getting-to-know-you time with Hale.

So I kept at it.

“Before you lost your dad, did you cook a lot?”

“Yup,” he answered, having turned on the oven and checked the sauce, he went to his wineglass, grabbed it and took a sip. Then he leaned against the island, facing me. “Taught the kids how to cook at the camp. And I wasn’t stingy with the process.”

Right.

Before he inherited his father’s empire, he used to run a camp for troubled kids. We’d spoken of this briefly during my interview with him, but he’d steered that to talking more about Trail Blazer, and not about his time at that camp.

“Do you miss the camp?”

“Every day,” he said cheerfully, his tone not matching his answer, which set more alarm bells ringing inside my head. “I’d rather be hiking or pitching a tent or building a fire or one on one with a kid who has a lot of shit to get out and I’m the first person he’s met who’s willing to take it from him.”

I wasn’t surprised in the slightest that was how Hale would prefer to spend his days.

“Do you ever go back there?”

He shook his head. “Rarely. It’s part of Trail Blazer now and there’s a good man at the helm. His name is Frank Rossi. I don’t want to step on his toes. I’m out for good, he doesn’t need to think I’m looking over his shoulder.”

“Are you? Out for good, I mean?”

He nodded. “You run that joint, you live there. You live it with the kids. You don’t have your driver drive you to your mansion in the Pacific Palisades at night, drink martinis with actresses, then come back the next day.”

“So maybe you can segue into working more with Trail Blazer. It’s bigger. Its reach is going to be massive. That seems to fit both things that are now you.”

“That’s Judge’s baby.” He angled his head to the side, his eyes narrowing. “What’s with the interrogation?”

“It’s not an interrogation,” I replied. “I just realized that it’s been all about me so I thought it might be a nice change for it to be about you.”

“Exciting things are happening for you. And dramatic things are happening to you that you don’t want to happen, but you don’t have a choice. So it’s natural it’s been about you. My life is boring.”

Boring?

“You’re the chairman of the biggest company in the world,” I remarked.

“If people knew how mundane the day-to-day of that is, they’d be surprised.”

“Can you step away?”

His brows knit. “And let them fall back to past practices? I promise you, I could handpick someone to replace me, and they’d figure out how to corrupt him or her in about a month.”

“So it has to be you,” I said softly.

He seemed to distance himself from me, even if he didn’t move.

I understood why when he asked, “Do you have an issue with what I do?”

“I have an issue with the fact you don’t enjoy doing it.”

“Christ, you sound like Tom.”

Even if his tone was impatient, I didn’t take offense, since Tom loved him and would want to look after him, and I might not love him, but I liked him a great deal.

And I wanted to look after him.

“We can drop it,” I offered, even if not only didn’t I want to offer, I didn’t want to drop it.

But there was me, falling into a new pattern of backing off at the first indication it was getting too deep for him.

Maybe at this early juncture between us, that was the right thing to do.

It just didn’t feel like it.

“That’d be good,” he muttered, sucking back some wine then going to the oven to check the temperature.

He then went to the proving drawer and took out the bread.

I watched as he oiled it, dimpled it and salted it. He also sprinkled it with rosemary and minced garlic.

I was salivating, and it wasn’t even baking yet.

He slid the pan in the oven then went to the sink to wash his hands.

By this time, I was on a stool.

And by this time, I’d realized his mood had changed. He hadn’t instigated a different conversation topic. He wasn’t even looking at me.

So I found my mouth saying, “I’m sorry I seemed pushy. I’m just trying to get to know you.”

He put a pan he’d filled with water on the stove and looked me dead in the eye. “Right. So it’d be good you did that without it coming off as a tell-all interview. All of life isn’t an episode of Elsa’s Exchange.”

Struck by his words, I said nothing.

He salted the water like he hadn’t just been a dick to me.

I’d dated. I’d hooked up. I’d even had a couple of men who’d stuck around for a while, though that “while” didn’t last very long.

But I was realizing right then that I had no experience in how to deal with this kind of situation. Frankly, since he’d been a jerk, my first thought was, I wanted to leave.

Hale started on a salad, put the spaghetti on, indeed finished off dinner while asking about my day. Asking after Fliss. Asking if I’d touched base with my dad.

I’d answered his questions shortly, with detachment, to the point where, by the time he served up and sat beside me, we ate in silence.

It registered vaguely, how restaurant-quality delicious his food was, but in a sense, I didn’t really taste it.

He’d gone to the trouble, though, so I was going to eat it.

After that, I thought the safest bet for the both of us was me getting my stuff and leaving.

He wasn’t ready to bare all. I understood. We’d been texting banter for a year, fighting our attraction for months, and only just decided to give this a go. If I was pushing too hard too fast, okay.

But there were ways to communicate that without lowkey lashing out.

We were halfway through the food when Hale muttered to his bowl of

spaghetti, “So glad I put all that effort into this.”

“It’s delicious,” I forced out.

He made no reply.

I ate two more bites in excruciating silence and then announced, “You know, I think we went at this too much, too fast. Maybe I should sleep at my place tonight.”

“Running away, I see.”

Again, he said this to his food, which annoyed the hell out of me.

“I’m not running away. But I’m certain you haven’t missed there isn’t a good vibe happening right now.”

He finally looked at me. “Because you came home, got up in my shit, and I asked you to back off. And you’re ticked because I did.”

“No, I didn’t get up in your shit. And no again, I’m not ticked because you asked me to back off. I’m ticked because of *how* you asked me to do it. I like you. I’m curious about you. You aren’t very forthcoming, so I was trying to get to know you. We were having a *conversation*, Hale. And you didn’t shut it down in the nicest way.”

“It doesn’t take a licensed therapist to know I have trust issues, Elsa, and why, and to understand I need to establish boundaries, and from there, cut me some slack.”

“I have been, Hale. I give in every time you pull away.”

“Not with a lot of grace, as this conversation proves.”

All right, enough.

I slid off my stool, saying, “Thank you for dinner, it was delicious. I’d help you clean up, but I’m sure you have someone to deal with those tasks for you, so I’ll just go.”

I was moving to my bag, but he got in my way.

“We’re talking this through,” he declared.

“No, I’m leaving,” I retorted.

“You can’t run away every time we have a disagreement.”

“I can every time you act like a dick.”

“So now you’re threatening me?”

“Not at all, because there’s only so many times I’ll let you be a dick to me.”

“That’s a definite threat, babe.”

“Take it as you like, *babe*. Now please, get out of my way.”

He didn’t get out of my way.



I didn't ask him again nor did I do anything gauche like try to dodge him to get to my luggage.

I didn't do either of these because I was trying to deal with all I was feeling.

I wasn't just mad, I was hurt.

And I was scared, because that hurt *hurt*.

I didn't want to walk away.

But I didn't think I'd done what he said I'd done. I didn't like the feelings that came up when we fought. And I didn't need this after having an extremely difficult night the night before. But I did need him to learn to trust me and open up to me.

Nugget of news: a red flag was waving about Hale, and all of a sudden, I realized two things. One, it had been waving all along, and I hadn't noticed it. And two, I was more into him than I was admitting, because finally seeing it gutted me.

I broke eye contact, because, dammit, I was going to cry again.

What was happening to me?

"Baby," he whispered.

He'd seen my emotion and he didn't like it.

And *God*, why was he so awesome even when he was being a dick?

I didn't move as he got close and cupped my jaw in his hands, but he didn't make me look at him as he said, "Please, don't leave."

And sweet. He could be sweet *and* awesome after being a dick.

Ugh.

I beat back the tears and lifted my gaze to his.

He immediately touched his lips to mine.

God, I loved when he did that.

"You just need to give me some space around that shit," he said gently. "I'm not used to letting people in."

I wanted to say something flippant, because *obviously*, but I kept my mouth shut.

"And, Elsa, I need you not to give up on me so easily," he pushed.

Well.

Damn.

That struck so true, it rocked me so much, I had to lift a hand and wrap it around his forearm.

The instant I touched him, a charge coursed through me, and I knew the

same happened to him, because things between us changed.

Charged.

*Boom!*

I saw it in his eyes, I felt it between my legs.

And suddenly, we were kissing.

No touching of mouths. No teasing.

Tongues and pressure and need. It was surprising. It was consuming. It was a little frightening.

Because it was everything.

Hale broke it as abruptly as it started.

And my legs went weak when he ordered, "Get upstairs."

Something about that was so much of a turn on, everything flew out of my head but Hale, the tingling of my lips from his kiss, and the knowledge that I was about to get myself some, and I wanted it so badly, it felt like hunger.

I didn't reply, I didn't hesitate, and I didn't dally. I also didn't run. But without a word, I turned and hurried up the stairs.

I was waiting for him at the foot of his bed, my stomach having dropped, my vagina convulsing, and when he sauntered in, I wanted to rush him, but for some reason, I didn't. Watching him take his time walking to me, the look on his face that was a visible definition of the intensity of our kiss, I needed to take it all in, memorize it.

Feel it.

He stopped in front of me, and I shivered as he slid his hand up the back of my neck into my hair, murmuring, "I've wanted to fuck you since the first time I called you."

Oh God.

He'd been very annoying during that call.

But I'd wanted the same.

"Hale," I breathed, beginning to get freaked about how big the feelings were that I was feeling.

"It's not gonna be slow, baby, and it's not gonna be gentle. When I'm done with you, you're going to feel so thoroughly fucked, you'll never forget that feeling for the rest of your life."

*Oh God.*

I whimpered in anticipation.

Hale didn't make me wait.

He fisted his hand in my hair, and sensation snaked down my spine and exploded between my legs when he tugged my head back, and his mouth crashed down on mine all as he leaned into me, and we both fell to the bed.

He was right, it wasn't slow.

But it was going to be one-sided.

I knew this when he pulled off my tee, I tried to go for his sweater, and he said, "Mm-mm, sweetheart. I let you play this morning. This time, you're all mine."

This caused another whimper. And another one came when Hale tugged off my jeans with my panties.

Then I gasped because his mouth was between my legs.

In fact, he'd scooped up my ass in both hands and was feeding himself from me.

It was forceful, insistent, God, *amazing*. I'd never experienced someone going down on me with such prowess, such craving, such *need*.

I tried to round him with my legs, but he pushed them open, wide and high, with his hands behind my knees, murmuring against my flesh. "No, stay open for me."

My pussy wept wet at his words and deeds, and he went back down on me.

It was too much, too big, I couldn't take any more.

And just when I had that thought, Hale got up on his knees. I watched him pull his sweater and T-shirt off, and yank his jeans down.

I would have been awed by the sleek, lean, muscled contours of his chest and abs, but I instantly got distracted as his cock jumped out proudly, thick and hard and beautifully veined.

God, I knew how that felt in my mouth, how it tasted.

But now, I needed it inside me.

"Hale," I begged.

He fell to a hand in the bed beside me, reached to the nightstand and came back with a condom.

I fought squirming as I watched him roll it on one-handed, then he cupped my sex, kneading my clit as his eyes scanned my face.

"Ready for me, baby?" he asked.

He had to feel I was.

"Yes," I pushed out.

His gaze roamed over my body. "Do you know how beautiful you are?"

I loved he thought that, but what his fingers were doing was killing me.

“*Hale.*” It was a plea.

He slid one long finger deep inside.

My eyes rolled back and my back rose off the bed.

“Look at me, Elsa.”

I settled, nearly panting, and tried to focus on him.

He slid his finger out, then fell forward, undulating his hips, and he was inside, filling me.

Yes. Oh yes.

Definitely panting now.

“Wrap me up. You’re gonna need to hold on,” he advised.

Oh yes.

I did as told.

Then he fucked me.

Seriously *fucked me.*

I thought I’d had some good sex, but I’d never been taken like that by a man.

And if you’d described it, I probably would have told you I didn’t want it.

But I’d have been *so very wrong.*

Claimed and owned, dominated and adulated.

He rubbed my nipple over my bra, and I didn’t really feel it, because it was all about Hale’s eyes on mine and his cock driving inside. He moved his fingers to my clit and that felt amazing, but it was now about the fact he was kissing me, possessing my mouth as he was my pussy.

It felt like I was on the edge of my climax forever, so when I crashed over, I came apart, moaning against his tongue, bucking up into his thrusts.

He groaned down my throat, took his hand from between my legs, then captured both my wrists and pulled them over my head. He clamped one hand around them, pinned them to the bed and angled slightly up so he could watch as he kept fucking me.

Pinned and unable to do anything but be fucked, my pussy rippled around his cock.

“Honey,” I whispered, my voice husky.

“Christ, the things I jacked off thinking about doing to you.”

I started panting again.

“Like this,” he went on.

I lifted my hips to meet every thrust because it had started building again

for me.

“I’m gonna do it all to you, Elsa,” he promised.

God, I hoped so.

“Yes,” I breathed.

“Did you touch yourself, thinking about me?”

“Yes,” I admitted.

“You’re a good baby,” he murmured.

My pussy clenched his driving cock.

“That’s it, milk me,” he encouraged.

I did, fighting his hands at my wrists because seeing his beautiful face dark with sex, his sleek chest and boxed abs, watching the grace of his body move as he filled me and retreated, I needed to touch him.

“Stay still while I fuck you,” he ordered.

I tried, I couldn’t, I was going to come again.

“Let go,” he grunted.

I cried out as the second orgasm swept through me, magnified by hearing his take him, feeling his already forceful thrusts intensify as he pumped his climax into my pussy.

He collapsed on me, some of his weight held up by the arm that was still pinning down my hands. His breaths were rough and welcome against the skin of my neck, mine had to be the same against his shoulder.

And there was something I liked about how he didn’t let me go. How he kept me pinned down. How we were both finished, but him doing that made our brilliant session linger.

I felt his lips slide up my neck as he finally let go of my wrists, but only so he could link his fingers through mine on one of my hands.

In my ear, he asked, “Okay?”

“More than,” I answered.

He moved his head, gave me a slow, deep kiss, ended it and pointed out the obvious, “I get intense during sex.”

“I noticed.”

His lips quirked and he remarked, “Seemed to work for you.”

These just weren’t after-sex questions. There was something more here than checking in and curiosity.

But considering how intense he actually got, I could understand why that would be.

“It very much worked for me.”

His fingers tightened and some of the languid, post-sex look went out of his face, so I braced.

“Don’t give up on me.”

I closed my eyes and squeezed his hand.

I opened them when he continued, “And I’m asking you to try to stop walking away or retreating emotionally when you run into one of the fences I’ve got up.”

I hated that he was right about the fact I did that, just as much as I hated the fact I did it.

But I did.

He used his free hand to rub his knuckles lightly along my cheekbone and his voice lowered when he carried on.

“I know it’s gonna require patience, Elsa. Maybe that’s asking too much, but I hope to fuck not. We both have a tendency to get our backs up and act on it. I like you. I like this. And I need you to work with me on it, because I’m going to fly out Monday, and then it’s going to be long distance, so it’s going to get harder. If we want to see if this is gonna work, we can’t fall down now.”

He was very right.

Still.

“I didn’t have the greatest night last night, Hale,” I reminded him.

He winced.

I loved it that he felt that...and showed it.

Still.

“Yes,” I said gently. “Maybe my temper flared too quickly because of that, but if you ask me to give you space to share when you’re ready, I need you to give me some too while I deal with the crap that’s happening with my family.”

“That didn’t slip my mind, but when I got pissed, it also did. And that wasn’t cool. My reaction to you wanting to get to know me better wasn’t cool either. I’m sorry, baby.”

Okay, so he’d been a dick.

We’d had words.

We’d worked that all out and then made up... spectacularly.

And you had to give it to a man who had it in him to apologize.

It was time to lead us out of this heavy.

“Well, considering I just had two fantastic orgasms, you’re forgiven,” I

teased.

He smirked before he kissed me again.

Then he let my hand go and slid down my body, kissing my chest, my midriff, my belly and the inside of my right thigh before he was off the bed.

I turned to my side and curled up to watch as he hiked his jeans over his ass, noticing belatedly he went commando, the opened V of the fly now a frame for the brown curls at his crotch.

My legs moved restlessly, because that was an amazing view.

He didn't bother zipping and said, "Gonna get rid of this condom. Be back."

He took off to the bathroom.

I scooted around on the bed and reached for my panties, extricating them from my jeans.

I was pulling them on when he got back.

He grasped me under my arms, entering the bed on his knee, hauling me with him until we ended up in a cuddle in the middle of his massive bed, the city lights illuminating our cozy scene.

"Although we've worked it out, upon reflection, I'm wondering if perhaps we shouldn't try to stop fighting," I suggested. "Interesting things seem to happen when we realize we're not at cross purposes."

"In other words, you still feel me fucking you, and you like it."

"In other words, yes."

He started chuckling and pulled me closer, tucking my head under his chin.

And that was when he made it all worth it.

But he did this by shredding me.

"My dad hated that I worked at Camp Trail Blazer. He couldn't believe he was who he was, he'd accomplished all he did, and he made a son who was what he called a camp counselor. We butted heads about it. The last time I talked to him before he killed himself, I told him, if he didn't like the man I'd turned out to be, he was welcome to absent himself from my life. And then I walked out. Those words were the last he heard from me. And they were the last I'll ever get to say to him. I have to live with that for the rest of my life, Elsa. And it guts me."

Well...

*Shit.*

I pushed into him, holding on tightly, whispering, "Honey."

Because, what else could I say?

“So I have to do what I have to do with his legacy, okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed swiftly, even if I didn’t totally agree.

He needed to get beyond that, and he couldn’t forfeit his happiness to make up for a heated conversation with his father he couldn’t even begin to imagine would be his last.

But for now, I would leave it alone.

“Okay,” he murmured.

I held him in my arms and tried to put myself in his headspace. But for obvious reasons, my brain wouldn’t allow me to think of losing my dad at all, and definitely not that way.

So I just held him until I thought the time was ripe for us to move on from the intensity of the night into something else.

I signaled this by asking, “Did you happen to have time to make dessert?”

I felt his body shaking with humor when he answered, “No.”

“Well, obviously it was a good call to come home early and fit making that bread in between Zoom meetings, but can I suggest next time you do it even earlier and make, say, an apple pie?”

With that, he started laughing even as he rolled us so we were close to his nightstand.

He picked up the phone there and hit a button.

“Yes, Jim. Could you handle sending someone out to get a slice of apple pie, a walnut brownie and some vanilla ice cream from Bubby’s?” Pause then, “Thanks.”

He hung up the phone.

“Easy as that?” I asked.

“The concierge here is full service.”

“You’re hard work, Hale Wheeler, but from-scratch bread, spicy Bolognese, two orgasms and apple pie from Bubby’s, I’m thinking you might be worth it.”

His hands started moving on my skin. “Before our dessert gets here, we might have time for me to prove how worth it I’m gonna be.”

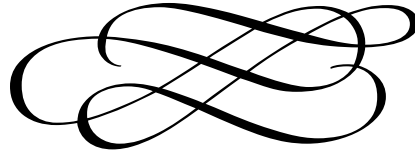
“You better hurry. We won’t want that ice cream to melt.”

He shot me a smile that made something else melt.

And he hurried.



# CHAPTER 17



## NEW YORK

### *Them*

*H* er...

The next morning, the alarm on my phone sounded.

We were spooning, so first, I had to find the willpower to do it, and second, I had to push through Hale's hold to reach out and stop it in order to leave the luxury of the curve of his long body and start the day.

It was asking a lot of a girl, but I managed it.

I was going to turn and give him a quick kiss before I left him in bed, but his arm suddenly tightened, I found myself tucked to his front again, and I stilled when his hand cupped my sex.

Oh yes.

"Panties off," he said in a sleepy, gruff growl that made me shiver. "I want you on my face."

And one could say I wanted to be on his face...badly.

Right then, I'd start the day a wee bit later.

Like the night before, I didn't hesitate. My movements were clumsy because I was still sleepy too, also trembling at his command, but I did as told.

He'd positioned for me so when I swung a leg over his head, he was ready.

And he went at me. So rough and hungry, it was like the night before

didn't happen and he hadn't tasted pussy in decades.

He ate me so thoroughly, I thought he'd make me come with his mouth, but he didn't.

When I was *this close*, he slid me down him, pushed up to resting against his headboard, and ordered, "Get a condom."

I reached for it, he took it from me, put it on, then grasped my hips, shifting them, until he impaled me.

Full of Hale, my eyes closed, and my head fell back.

"Look at me while you ride me," he ordered.

I righted my head and opened my eyes, seeing both of his arms were up over his head, his fingers curled over the top of the upholstered panels that ran along the wall behind his bed and acted as a headboard.

God, *God*, he was beautiful.

I watched him as I rode him, and it seemed less that his hands were above his head, giving me a show, and more that I was on display for him.

I liked it. I was getting off on it. I was getting off on being that for him, how he showed how much he enjoyed it.

"Take off your nightie," he demanded.

I did as told.

"Faster, baby, I wanna watch those pretty tits bounce."

Oh God.

I went faster.

"Faster," he commanded. "Show me how hard you can fuck me."

*God*.

I went even faster.

"That's it, baby, fuck yeah," he groaned, his gaze devouring me. "Show off for me, Elsa, pull your hair up at the back, keep your hands there."

Why was this so hot?

I did what he asked, performing for him.

"Hale, I'm going to come, handsome," I warned him.

"Do it," he grunted.

I did, arching into it, my hands dropping back so I could hold onto his thighs as I ground into him and came.

I hadn't yet recovered when I found myself on my back. I opened my eyes and saw Hale straddling my hips. The condom was gone, and he was handling himself, eyes on my body. Finally, he gritted his teeth, a muscle jumping up his jaw, and I got to watch as he came all over me.

Glorious.

I trembled before him.

I trembled more when he watched with fascination as he rubbed his cum up my belly, cupping my breasts and massaging them.

“Hale,” I whispered.

His gaze went from my breasts to my face.

My vagina convulsed. Because I knew. I knew he wasn’t done with me even before he flipped me over, cupped my pubis, pulled me up to my knees, and then dove his hand between them, rubbing my clit until, genuflected before him, I came for him again.

I was gasping and shuddering still as he pulled me up in front of him and wrapped his arms around me, holding me close to his body, his mouth working my neck.

I’d just recovered from my climax, but was still riding that buzz, when he said, “Good morning.”

At first, I just blinked.

Then I burst out laughing.

I was in my office later that morning when Zoey showed at the door.

I didn’t like the look on her face when she did.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

She walked in and sat in the chair opposite me.

“We got another freaky email from that weird chick...or dude,” she said.

I was no stranger to getting all variety of feedback and communication from people.

But recently, there’d been a spate from halewheelerisgodstan1@gmail.com, so not only were the messages weird, the email address didn’t thrill me.

Hale and I weren’t official. Those pictures of us from the gala were everywhere, but it wasn’t like anyone knew we were dating yet.

Even so, since the gala, every day, I’d been getting emails from that account.

The thing that made these seem more, though, was that the first day we

started getting them, there were over a hundred of them, all of them saying the same three words: *He's not yours.*

Totally obsessive. Totally bizarre. Totally disturbing.

"Just delete it," I said.

"I think we should, I don't know, report it," Zoey replied. "Or find some cyber security firm who can..."

She trailed off, because like me, she didn't know what anyone could do about it.

"This comes with the territory, Zoey," I reminded her.

"I know, but there's something different about these emails. They give me the bona fide creeps."

"Yes, and when we put out that interview with Luna Bevin, half the incels across the globe wrote in to tell us what a wronged man Andrew Winston was, any bitch could cry rape, and how people like Luna were emasculating the male gender. I interviewed Hale and then was photographed with him, and both probably triggered this person. They'll move on."

"No, they won't, because you're seeing him, and that's bound to come out," she returned, then she suggested, "Maybe you should tell Hale."

He probably got this same thing, a thousand-fold. He didn't need me to add one of my crazies to his list. Then again, with that email address, he probably got email from her, or him, already. And he had way more resources to do something about it if something could be done.

"We'll just keep an eye on it for now. File it in the red flags file, okay?"

She didn't look like she liked it, but she nodded.

I went back to work.

Hale was walking toward me when I got off his elevator that night.

I smiled at him.

He smiled at me.

When he arrived, I tipped my head back.

And he kissed me.

*Him...*

“This is so perfect, it’s like it was made for this space,” Elsa declared, standing back, looking at her new dandelion couch sitting in its place.

She was right.

And the orange media center worked great too. Both of them changed the entire vibe of her pad, which had already been awesome, but now it seemed more...her.

Daring.

Bold.

Alive.

The new furniture was in, the old sofa was out, and Elsa had invited Gemma and Jadyne to hang for a glass of wine before they left, and they’d accepted.

“Where did you get these toss pillows?” Gemma asked, fingering the fabric on one.

“My neighbor makes them custom from old scarves or embroidery,” Elsa told her.

“I need you to get me in touch with her. We need to sell those in the shop,” Gemma decreed.

Elsa smiled. “I’ll talk to her. Maybe we can all meet for a coffee, do an intro.”

“Perfect,” Gemma replied.

“Speaking of,” Jadyne put in. “You two probably already have plans, but we’re having a get together tomorrow. No reason outside Gem likes to cook for people. It’d be cool to have you two at our table.”

He knew from Elsa’s glance she liked this couple, as did he, and she wanted to go.

“We’ll be there,” Hale said.

Jadyne looked surprised, but through it, he smiled.

Elsa didn’t look surprised, but he liked her smile better.

Although their store was in Chelsea, Jady and Gemma's home wasn't far from Elsa's, the bottom floor of a brownstone that had been broken up into apartments.

Unsurprisingly, it was filled with fantastic furniture.

And you could tell Gemma liked to entertain. Their dining room table was massive, the food on it was delicious and plentiful, and the bodies sitting around it were many.

"Regentrification for us doesn't mean the same thing," Jady was saying on the topic they were discussing. "It means get the fuck out. And our people have been here for over a century. This is home."

They were talking about their neighborhood in Brooklyn being regentrified.

"I get that," Hale said.

"We heard about your building," Gemma put in.

Hale looked to her to see she was addressing Elsa.

"Renovation without rent increases?" Gemma continued. "How'd that happen?"

Elsa, a quick learner, didn't even glance in his direction.

So Hale put it out there. "I own the building, saw the state it was in, and ordered the upgrades."

Everyone at the table stared at him.

"White savior," one of Jady and Gemma's friends, a man named Braelin said under his breath.

"Brother, whose table you sittin' at?" Jady asked Braelin irritably, which was unsurprising.

Gemma and Jady had been outgoing and friendly, from shop to delivery to Elsa and Hale being in their home. And it was clear Jady wasn't a fan of someone making their guest uncomfortable. Not to mention, although most of the table was occupied by Black and brown faces, Elsa and Hale weren't the only white people there.

"Maybe," Hale said to Braelin to show him and Jady he took no offense. "And I see where that comes from."

"Would you do that to real estate you own where your girlfriend doesn't

live?” Braelin asked.

“She wasn’t my girlfriend when I did it,” Hale told him.

He felt Elsa’s gaze and turned her way, immediately understanding the way she was staring at him.

He’d intimated she was his girlfriend.

It wasn’t time to get into that now.

That said, they might just be starting out, but he was ready. If he took a moment to think on it, he’d been ready since their first date at Chez Cohen.

She was smart and stylish and ambitious and a fantastic lay. They got on beautifully, until they didn’t, but he even liked fighting with her. He respected that she stood her ground and didn’t let him get away with any of his shit.

It was more, he knew, but he wasn’t going to go there.

It was about that moment when she came home and tipped her head back to get his kiss.

Yeah, he couldn’t go there.

But now, he needed to have that conversation with her. Especially since he was leaving town soon.

She wasn’t a woman to go on the prowl for a man because she needed company all the time.

But he had her, he liked what they had, and he wanted more. Also, they were having sex, she was phenomenal in bed, not to mention, a natural sub. He wanted them both tested so he could have her ungloved.

In other words, he needed it official they were exclusive, so they could enjoy all the benefits of exclusivity.

He smiled at her, saw her face go soft reading what was behind that smile, and he turned back to Braelin.

“You can fight the power, and you can enlighten it,” Hale said carefully. “There’s no way I can be fully enlightened, but I’m not entirely in the dark, and I have the capacity to do something. So I do. Is that bad?”

“Of course not. All allies are welcome,” Gabrielle, another friend of Jadyn and Gemma’s chimed in.

“Right, let’s move on before we pitch to Hale he has to invest more in Brooklyn, renovate but not relocate,” Jadyn said.

“If you have a proposal on how that can happen, I’d be open to looking at it,” Hale offered.

He felt Elsa’s hand land on his thigh and squeeze.

Jadyn was staring at him intently. “Are you serious?”

Hale shrugged. “Creating a program of low interest or no interest loans so people can do needed upgrading, stabilizing or increasing their property value without forced buyouts.” He shook his head. “I don’t know. Real estate and urban renewal isn’t something I know much about. But I’m willing to learn.”

“Can we put you in touch with someone?” Gemma asked.

“Absolutely,” Hale answered, to another weird squeeze of his thigh by Elsa.

Gemma smiled. “Fabulous.”

“No offense, man,” Braelin said. “You just get tired of the shit.”

“No offense taken,” Hale assured him. “Seriously. The conversations need to be had and you shouldn’t shy away just because someone might get offended. But the bottom line is, they shouldn’t. It’s truth. I’m telling you something you already know when I say we all have to face it, or nothing will get done.”

Braelin jutted up his chin to Hale.

Hale dipped his back and then scooped up some more mashed potatoes and gravy to shove into his mouth, making a mental note to ask Gemma for her gravy recipe, because it was the best he’d ever had.

They were in his Escalade on the way home, Rocco following in one of the company Tahoes, when Elsa broached it.

“I hesitate to point this out, but you’re a busy man, and you just offered to wade into the Brooklyn regentrification issue, which you might not know is a thing.”

“I know it’s a thing.”

She said no more.

“You don’t think I should get involved?”

“Not for me to say.”

He took in a breath, and then he said, “Sweetheart, we may have had words the other day, but that doesn’t mean I’m not willing to listen to your opinions about pretty much anything.”

“Okay then. Traditionally Black neighborhoods are being taken over,



Hale. This is a very big deal to people who are finding themselves forced out of spaces that have been theirs for decades. You don't live in Brooklyn, or New York."

"I'm in New York a lot of the time."

"What I'm saying is, you can't save everybody. You can't become aware of an injustice, throw a bunch of money at it, and time you don't have. This is meaningful to them. It's their home they're losing. Part of their identity. And for you, it's a cause."

"I don't understand how that's bad."

"It's not, exactly." He heard her blow out a breath. "I'm just concerned you're already stretched too thin. And without hesitation, you jump into something else."

"I care," he said softly.

"I know, honey," she replied in the same tone and leaned over to kiss his cheek. She sat back and mumbled, "I love that about you."

He loved she did.

He loved she put that out there.

But even so, the way she said it made it clear she still worried.

He ignored that.

He'd be fine.

And eventually, she'd see he was.

Then she'd let it go.

He fucked her totally vanilla that night, missionary, and after he made her come then did the same himself, he whispered in her ear, "Wanna be my girlfriend?"

Her arm and legs convulsed around him.

He lifted his head and looked down at her, so he got to see the soft, happy expression on her face when she answered.

"Yes."

The next evening, he was sitting in the corner of his couch where he'd been when she interviewed him, ignoring his laptop for once and reading a book.

She was sitting in her corner, knees bent, feet to the cushion, phone in hand, laptop on the couch by her feet, notebook against her thigh, empire building.

He knew this when she announced, "The Mankowitz interview is set. It's going to take place in LA in three weeks." She lifted her gaze from her phone to him. "Any chance you'll be there then?"

"There is now."

She shot him a radiant smile and went back to her phone.

He was smiling too as he went back to his book.

About ten minutes later, he was reaching for his glass to take a sip of wine when he heard her quiet gasp.

He looked to her. "What?"

She dropped her phone hand to her lap, an expression he couldn't read on her face. "Did you warn Nora about Paloma Friedrichsen?"

Paloma Friedrichsen was Tom's ex. The woman he had between Genny and Mika. An ex-supermodel, she was now famous for being famous along with famous for dating men who were far more famous than she.

She'd been angry Tom ended things with her when he met Mika, and she was the kind of woman to act on that anger. Months ago—it might actually have been a year ago now—Elsa had warned him Paloma was up to some shit. She'd advised he sic Nora on her. And it was good advice. Nora might be old money and utter class, but she kept her claws honed for when they were needed.

He'd done the heads up and hadn't thought of it since. In fact, he hadn't heard a word about Paloma since.

"Yes. Why?" he asked.

"Because she's dating AJ Oakley."

That alarm banded across the back of his neck.

She wasn't AJ's type. He was in his eighties, she was in her forties or fifties, but he usually went for arm candy in their twenties.

This was an unholy alliance.

And a long time for her to hold a grudge.  
He ignored his wine and grabbed his phone in order to call Jamie.  
Because Paloma could be a nuisance.  
But AJ Oakley, Jamie's dad, was a piece of shit.  
And if AJ had the opportunity to prove what a shit individual he was, he never hesitated to take it. There was no love lost, and Jamie had humiliated his father during his and Hale's takeover of Core Point Athletics.  
So Hale didn't think this was a coincidence.  
But he knew Jamie needed to know about it.

Early Monday morning, he stopped fucking Elsa's face, pulled out, and ordered, "Come here."

She got up to her knees in front of him, and he kissed her deep while he leaned forward, setting her on her back.

Then he buried himself in her hot tight before he returned to his knees, pulling her hips up as he went. He held her steady and watched her take him. That blond hair all over his comforter, those big blue eyes hazy with need, but still locked on him.

"You're unbelievably fucking beautiful," he murmured, his voice thick.

"You are too," she replied, her voice husky.

"Arms over your head," he ordered, then, after she did it, said, "There's a good girl."

At his words, her cunt clenched his cock, and she whimpered.

Totally his.

All that beauty, *all his*.

On this thought, Hale started to fuck her harder, did this until she came, and he kept doing it until he did.

He left her in bed to get rid of the condom and was unsurprised she stayed there and cuddled close when he returned.

She needed to get to work.

He needed to get to the airport.

Neither of them moved.

She was the one who broached it.

“Okay, I was prepared for this, but I’m going on record to declare it still sucks.”

He held her closer and agreed, “Yeah.”

She sighed against his skin.

For long moments, they remained just how they were, to the point Hale wondered if he’d be able to let her go.

It was Elsa who found the strength.

She kissed his jaw, then said, “We can do it. Three weeks, and then I’ll see you in L.A.”

He didn’t loosen his grip as he repeated, “Yeah.”

She smiled at him, lifting her hand to his face then smoothing it back into his hair. “I mean, seriously. With you gone, I’m really going to miss Paul.”

Fuck.

This woman.

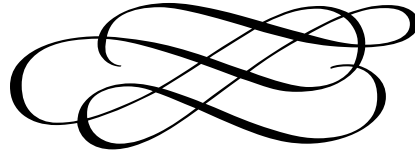
That was what he needed, they both needed, to break the spell.

For now.

So Hale clutched her close as he busted out laughing.

And then it was Hale who found the strength to pull them both out of bed.

# CHAPTER 18



## THE IN BETWEEN

*Them*

*H*er...

I was pacing my living room, waiting for my phone to ring.

It was the Saturday after Hale left. He was in Sydney. We had a phone date that day.

It would be the first time I'd spoken to him. There had been lots of texts, a few voicemails, but since he went from New York to Tokyo, Tokyo to Sydney, and the time zones weren't conducive to it, we hadn't talked.

I missed him.

A lot.

Once we got over that first hurdle of dinner at his place Wednesday night, things had been great. Sex in the morning. Work. Coming home to him. Deciding on something to eat. Sex at night. Going to sleep beside him. Repeat.

I'd been right at the beginning. Red flags were few. He had his boundaries, but I had to learn to tough it out when I ran up against one.

And I was going to do it because he was worth it. Affectionate and communicative and open-minded and unbelievably hot in bed.

And I didn't care what it said about me, I loved how he made me feel beautiful.

No, *extraordinary*.

He made me feel extraordinary. The way he looked at me, touched me, fucked me.

Met me at the elevator the minute I walked out when I came home to him at night.

Maybe it was a lifetime of feeling like the outsider in my family, starved for it all my life, now having Hale's attention, his affection, his total and complete focus when we were intimate.

But in truth, it was all of that, and all of it coming from a man like Hale.

I liked being Hale Wheeler's girlfriend because it meant he was all mine.

For now.

(But I refused to think about the "for now" part, I was too happy now, so happy, I didn't mind I was being foolish in deciding I'd worry about that later.)

We even had our first "couple friends," Gemma and Jady, who were really lovely.

I'd followed that up by introducing Gemma to my neighbor who made the pillows, Khadija. Khadija had to leave, but after she did, Gemma and I got another coffee and stayed an extra hour just to gab.

We got on great, like we'd known each other for years, and since I'd already promoted Zoey and had put out an ad to get a new assistant, turning a new leaf to build a life along with my career, an awesome woman like Gemma coming into that life seemed like a sign I'd made the right choice.

That being the sign after the beacon that was Hale.

So yes, I missed Hale and I was anxious to hear his voice. But there was another reason I was pacing. However, I couldn't let myself think about it until Hale was on the other end of the phone.

On that thought, mercifully, it vibrated in my hand.

I took the call. "Hey, handsome."

"Hey, sweetheart. How's things?"

*Don't jump in and bury him with it, Elsa, ask about him, give it some time,* my mind advised.

"They're things," I pushed out. "How are things with you?"

"What's going on?"

God. I had to get better at holding it together. I said a few words, and he still heard it.

"I sat down with Mom for dinner last night."

"Shit. Why didn't you tell me?"

“I don’t know,” I replied. “Maybe I was in denial it had to happen until it happened.”

“I take it it didn’t go well,” he surmised.

No.

It hadn’t gone well.

I launched in. “At first, she was nervous. I actually felt bad for her.”

“Okay,” he prompted, when that was all I said.

“And then she...”

*God!*

I threw myself on my new couch, thankful that Hale had a practical as well as aesthetic way of looking at things, because it was so comfy and I needed comfy right then, not to mention a physical reminder of Hale.

“She didn’t try to explain anything or rationalize anything. Instead, she was surprised I was angry at her for cheating on my father.”

He sounded a mixture of pissed and perplexed when he asked, “How’s that go?”

“She told me I couldn’t miss that she and Dad didn’t get along to the point they disagreed on vital things. I told her she was right, I didn’t miss it. So she asked why I didn’t understand, because of that, the reasons she strayed. And I told her that I might understand, if it was a thing that got out of hand because she was unhappy and unexpectedly ran into someone who made her happy. What I didn’t understand was how it went on for twenty years. Her response to that was cagey. I pressed, and she informed me this wasn’t one of my interviews. I was her child, and she didn’t owe me an explanation.”

“Fuck,” Hale muttered somewhat forcefully, and I knew part of what was behind that.

“It isn’t the same,” I assured him. “You have boundaries because of a life you led that wasn’t your choice, and something tragic that happened with the way you lost your dad. We worked that out. You hit me with the Elsa’s Exchange thing to guard your boundaries. Mom’s using it as a way to hide she really has no excuse for what she did. I mean, am I wrong? If she was unhappy, and Adam was unhappy, and they found happiness together, shouldn’t they have just come clean and done this decades ago?”

“Yes.”

“Hale, he has an eighteen-year-old son with Naomi. This means he had a child with his wife years into an affair with his best friend’s wife.”

“Jesus. This just gets more and more fucked up.”

“So I’m not out of line to think I deserve an explanation? Dad does? We all do?”

“No. You’re not out of line.”

Okay.

Good.

“Now, get this,” I went on. “She told me Adam cares a great deal about me, he’s upset that he might lose me, so she ordered me to come over and have dinner with them one night this week.”

“Fuck,” Hale repeated.

“That was part of my initial response to her demand, but there was another word after it. I didn’t say it out loud to Mom, but I did decline, which really pissed her off.”

“If you don’t feel like going, don’t go.”

“That’s what I told her. I wasn’t there yet, and I warned her I might not ever get there. She said I was being selfish, this wasn’t about me. How did I think *she* felt about all that was going on? And um...this is where I might have stepped out of line.”

“What’d you say?”

“I said it was rich she was calling me selfish when she certainly landed on her feet, living off one man then moving in with another to live off him.”

I heard him let out an “*oof*” and, gently, he said, “Yeah, baby. Just a little over the line.”

“Ugh,” I grunted.

“You’re allowed to have emotion around this,” he reminded me. “It’s bizarre she doesn’t seem to realize you would.”

“She doesn’t seem to realize it.”

“Have you heard from Oskar or Emilie?”

“Emilie is freezing me out, which I am completely okay with. Oskar has been blowing up my texts since I left dinner with Mom last night.”

“He needs to back the fuck off,” Hale growled.

“I’ve blocked him,” I shared. “Just for a while. I can’t deal with him right now.”

“Good call. How’s your dad?”

“He seems great. I’m going home to have dinner with him on Wednesday.”

“Is he cooking?”



“Yes.”

“Fortunate, since it seems your culinary skills begin and end with being able to toast a bagel,” he teased.

I was relieved to have something to smile about.

“I have other skills you seem to enjoy,” I noted.

“Yeah, you do,” he agreed, his voice silky and warm, coating me all over. It sounded good.

But the real thing was so much better.

“No pressure, no weirdness,” I started softly, “just want you to know, I miss you.”

Hale kept it light.

And hot.

Which both worked for me and was a disappointment.

“I’m sensing where this is coming in our conversation is that what you miss is my cock.”

“I miss him too. He’s very pretty.”

I listened, and loved doing it, as Hale chuckled.

Okay, so I made him laugh, I could let it slide how he blew it off when I told him I missed him.

Then he said, “I miss you too, sweetheart.”

When he said that, I let out a mental breath I didn’t know I was holding, and it felt really good to do it.

We moved on to talk about a variety of things, including his schedule, which was taking him to Bangalore next, then Brussels, before he had to be back in LA for a variety of meetings at Corza’s headquarters there.

“Are you going to be able to wedge any fun in anywhere?” I asked cautiously.

“I have a high school friend who lives in Bruges. I’ve never had the time to visit him when I was in Belgium, but I got in touch with him and I’m going to take a day to head over there. He’s going to show me around. And he promises, outside the scenery, it won’t be anything like the movie.”

I laughed, hoping it didn’t sound as relieved as I felt that at least he was going to spend one day in the twenty-one he’d be away from me doing something fun.

“Send pictures. I hear it’s amazing.”

“Me too. I’m looking forward to it.”

“I’m glad.”

We talked more and made another phone date for the next Saturday before we hung up.

I was mildly disappointed there was no phone sex, but by the end, he'd sounded distracted, so I let him go.

It stung.

But he had a busy life.

I had a busy life.

And I'd talk to him in a week, not to mention hear from him in between.

I'd be okay.

We'd be okay.

And in two weeks, I'd be in LA.

And I'd have the real thing.

*Him...*

He'd indulged himself and not turned on his phone when they landed in Brussels.

Now he was in his hotel suite, and all he wanted was a G&T, some room service, and bed before he had to be up and out to help do the legwork for Trail Blazer on a local initiative.

There was an organization based in Brussels that helped young people whose family resources wouldn't normally allow them the opportunity to learn European history through tours that visited historically significant places all over the continent.

Rix was landing in the morning because it was Rix who had found this organization, which was struggling, since their expenses were so high. They'd already cut back on services and were in danger of having to close their doors.

Rix wanted to save it by putting it under the Trail Blazer umbrella.

So they were both going to listen to a pitch the next afternoon.

Core Point's European headquarters were in Brussels, so Hale was killing two birds with one stone.

Using the fully stocked bar in his suite, he made his G&T, called down

his order for room service, texted Rocco he'd ordered it (protocol, he'd learned, Rocco was traveling with him and he didn't let anything in Hale's room until he'd inspected it).

Then, solely because he knew Elsa had probably connected with him, and he wanted to return that for her, he turned on his phone.

The usual onslaught of texts, voicemails and emails downloaded.

But there were only two that caught his eye.

The texts from Elsa.

And a voicemail from his mother.

He was surprised to hear from Sam. Their relationship had always been rocky, but it was mostly non-existent after she pulled that shit on the Elsa Exchange.

He decided to get the worst out of the way and listened to Sam's voicemail.

"I hear two things," she said, her tone even on voicemail snide. "My son is coming home soon, and I didn't know about it, per usual. And he's dating someone, and I didn't know about that either. If you could manage to carve out some time to visit your mother, Hale, it'd be appreciated. I mean, really, isn't it time we moved beyond you being angry with me?"

He deleted that voicemail even as he reflected on her question, because it had now been years since she sat down with Elsa to skewer his dead father and throw Tom under the bus along with him.

It wasn't right what she did. It wasn't nice. She and his dad had been over for nearly three decades by then, so her holding that grudge also meant she had no excuse to do any of it. And Tom and Genny certainly didn't deserve it.

But he wanted to be the bigger man.

He should forgive.

Then again, her tone didn't sound remorseful. It was its normal pugnacious.

Hale sucked back some of his drink, put the glass on the bar, his fingers still wrapped around it, and then he went still as a memory assailed him.

His hand around his glass.

Back home with his dad the summer between his junior and senior years of college.

They were accidentally sharing a meal because Corey came home unexpectedly, Hale was grilling a steak and making Hasselback potatoes, and

it would be rude if he didn't cook for his father too.

They were out on his dad's balcony. It was after dinner. Hale was having a beer he'd poured into a glass. And he'd also been lulled into an uncommon moment of camaraderie between them, because somehow he'd found himself sharing how he would soon be breaking up with his girlfriend of six months not only because she'd gotten too clingy, but because, when he asked her to back off, clingy had turned bitchy.

Even though he knew it had to end, he obviously liked her, since he'd been with her so long.

But he didn't know how to end it without being a dick.

"Don't get caught in that trap, Hale," Corey had told him. "This girl, you don't owe her anything. You didn't make promises. You didn't put a ring on her finger. You didn't share decades of your life with her only to cut her loose when you were done. You told her you want time to devote to your studies, to spend with your friends with her not around. She refused to grant you these standard concessions. You aren't asking the impossible."

"I know, Dad. I also know, since she seems to think that's asking too much, and she's obviously more into me than I am her, me breaking it off isn't going to go well. And that pisses me off. But I'll have to live with how I act, and I want to be the bigger man."

It was then, Corey looked him straight in the eye and said, "That bigger man shit is overrated. You look out for number one. I'm not saying you have carte blanche to shit on everyone just because you can. You're not going to act like an ass. I know my son. You'll do your best to let her down easy. But it isn't up to you to bend over backwards to make something that's hard on you easy on her. The reason you're ending it is her behavior, not yours. So in this instance, why is it on you to be the bigger man?"

It had made sense then.

And in regard to his mother, it made sense now.

Brandi sent Sam birthday and Christmas presents, Mother's Day flowers. She'd also mailed notes of thanks he'd handwritten for what his mother sent him.

But since they had the blowout confrontation after she sat down with Elsa years ago, he hadn't seen her.

She had never been a good mother.

Was it on him to be the bigger man?

This was something he had to think about, maybe talk to Tom about,

perhaps mention to Elsa, though she had her own mom issues she was dealing with, so maybe not.

And on that thought, he went to her text, thinking it'd be like her others, which were often TikToks she found cute or hilarious (and so did he), or pictures she took of New York in spring (she seriously loved that city)—a flowering tree in bloom, newly planted window boxes—or selfies of her out with Fliss and her other friend Carole.

There were also quick notes of nothing news he liked to hear anyway, like she was home, having a glass of wine and thinking about him.

Or he'd get Cute Elsa filming a short video of herself pondering the idea of adopting a cat, or asking him, since she had a media center now, if she should buy a TV for her living room or maybe move the one she had, which was in the bedroom, to the other room.

“But I like watching TV in bed,” she'd pouted at the screen, a poorly disguised tease.

When he saw that, he told Brandi to arrange for the new super of her building to install a TV in her living room as a gift from him while she was in LA.

In other words, he always looked forward to her texts.

In fact, they were the highlight of his day.

Nope, that wasn't exactly right.

They were the only light in his days.

This time, there were three. And they lit him up, but not like they normally did.

The first said, *Nugget of news: Mom AND OSKAR are suing Dad as part of the divorce settlement to get Dad's brownstone.*

The second said, *Another nugget of news: Dad grew up there. It was my grandparents' house. It was also my great-grandparents'. FYI: My great-grandad's parents came over from Hungary to escape the Nazis.*

The last one said, *Final nugget of news: I...just...can't.*

He instantly hit her name at the top of the screen then hit call.

She answered in two rings.

“Hey,” she said tersely.

“You okay?”

“I. Am. *Livid.*”

“Breathe, baby, and talk to me.”

“Dad is...he's beside himself, Hale. He offered her a two-million-dollar

settlement to start. He's confessed this to me, and I use the word "confessed" considering he knows how I feel about Mom's shenanigans, and that's most of his retirement. He also told me he was willing to settle at two point five, which would nearly wipe him out."

"I don't know his finances, but that seems more than fair."

"I agree. However, she, or Oskar, or both of them said no to that, demanded five million and the house. Even if Dad gave her my and Emilie's wedding funds, he obviously doesn't have anywhere near five million dollars."

"Has Oskar seen his financials?"

"He had to cough them up, so, yes."

"Then I don't understand."

"Right, because I didn't tell you she's not actually angling for that five and the house. She's angling for maintenance for the rest of her natural born days, *and the house*. Dad wants to put a line under it. She wants her hooks in him for alimony until the day he dies, *and* his childhood home. Apparently, this place in Bushwick is not a lifestyle to which she wants to become accustomed. And Adam's nest egg also had to be given over considering he fucked over his own wife, so Mom is feeling financially vulnerable. However, there's an alternate scenario, that being it seems the family has split between Mom, Oskar and Emilie, and Dad and me, and I don't have five million dollars either...yet. But I'm flush, and I could help him out. So this might mean they're going after me."

Hale felt it boiling up inside him. It was a familiar feeling. It happened on specific occasions.

Those being anytime someone he cared about was getting jacked around.

"Do you think that's true?" he forced between his teeth.

"Honestly? I don't want to. But it's something Oskar would do. Multitasking. He's jealous of my success and he's pissed I'm not getting in line when it comes to Mom so he wants to punish me through Dad. And it's obvious he simply wants to punish Dad, for whatever reasons he has."

Hale didn't have to ask if Oskar was that fiendish, he'd met the guy, and he was a certifiable dick.

"What's David's attorney say about all of this?" Hale asked.

"He says the house isn't in her name, she didn't put any money into it, the history is compelling, and she isn't coming into the negotiations very strong, considering the adultery, and the fact she was able, but didn't contribute to

the household, even after us kids were capable of taking care of ourselves. Topping that, Dad also isn't fighting the divorce or trying to screw her. But if they push it and it goes before a judge, it's at the whims of the judge and anything could happen."

"Anything" was not going to happen.

"Okay, baby, try not to worry about it."

"That's hard, Hale."

"I know, Elsa. I'm sorry this is happening to you, to David. It's dicked up."

"It is." He heard her take in a sharp breath, and then she said, "God, I love it that you called, but I have to go. I might have an in on interviewing a few women up in Misted Pines, Washington. Do you remember that whole sex scandal thing that happened there?"

"Yeah."

"Well, some of the women there have formed a kind of coven-like deal. Or at least the locals are calling it that. Their twist to the story is interesting, and I want it. I have a phone meeting with one of them in ten minutes. Are you in Brussels?"

"Yeah, room service is coming up, then I'm gonna crash."

"Okay, I'll keep you in the know and I'll talk to you in a couple of days. Again, I love it that you called, honey. Thanks for listening."

"Always, sweetheart. Seriously, just shake it off. Things have a way of working out."

"I hope so. Eat well, sleep well, and speak soon. I'm blowing you a kiss."

"Got it. Later, babe."

"Bye, Hale."

They'd barely disconnected before he was on the phone with Brandi.

"Get me Oskar Cohen immediately. He's an attorney based in Boston," Hale ordered.

"You got it."

Rocco had approved his room service and Hale was eating it accompanied by an amazing Bordeaux when his phone rang.

It was Brandi.

"Got him," she said. "Connecting in three...two..."

He heard the click and then called, "Oskar."

"Let me guess what this is about," Oskar sneered.

"Right, so we can dive right in then. You and Inger take the two million,

you leave the house out of it. I'll give you two days to save face before you cave on that."

"Fuck you, Hale."

Annoying response, but expected.

"If you don't, in a week, I'll own your firm, and you'll be out of a job. I'll then own your bank and foreclose on your mortgage. I will also have leaked the fact that Elsa Cohen's mother carried on an affair with her father's best friend for twenty years, and was now trying to take his family home, the one that sheltered the child of Jews who escaped the Holocaust. She won't be able to show her face in Brooklyn, or anywhere, for a good long while. I will also hire a team of attorneys to represent your dad who will mire you so deep in motions and continuances and whatever the fuck games you all play to fuck with each other, you won't be able to breathe. And your mother's divorce will be in limbo for as long as they can possibly manage it, but you'll still lose in the end, and they'll humiliate you professionally in the process. You've got two doors to pick from, Oskar. Choose. Now."

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me," Oskar whispered.

"Wait, I forgot. Take this as indication you never, *never* fuck with Elsa or David again. Never, Oskar. I can't stress that enough."

"Are you two...getting married or something?"

Hale felt that tightness in his neck, but he ignored it.

"I didn't call to discuss my relationship with your sister. I called, essentially, to remind you that you have your father's blood in your veins too, and this is absolute bullshit, what you're trying to do. You got daddy issues, grow a pair and work it out with him, man to man."

Oskar recovered and came out swinging.

"You work out your issues with your dad?"

"No, I didn't," Hale answered readily. "And he blew his brains out before I had the chance. Learn from that, Oskar. I don't suspect your dad is that way, but I never dreamed my dad was either. We weren't close, but I'd give everything I have, and you know that's a fuckuva lot, to have that chance. I also know he'd give everything too, because in the end, he did. I have nothing from him, except everything, yet not one dollar of that is worth more than having him back."

Oskar was silent for several loaded beats before he broke it.

"I'll talk to Mom," he bit off.

"That talk better go well," Hale warned. "In two days, if I don't hear



relief in Elsa's voice, it's on."

With that, he hung up.

He buried that call, his memories of Corey, his thoughts on his dad, thoughts he'd never shared with anyone, not even Tom, thoughts he didn't even allow himself to dwell on.

Doing this, he finished his food, his wine, and then he took a shower and went to bed in another room that was not his, in another city that was not home.

Two days later, he had his phone date with Elsa, who was ecstatic.

Because her dad got word that her mother had caved. The settlement had been decided at two million, and the papers were being drawn up.

Hale was glad.

Hale opened the door to his dad's place in LA, the home he'd spent half his time growing up in, and he dropped his leather bag at the bottom of the stairs.

He then went to the balcony, stepped out on it, heard gulls crying immediately, and drew in two lungs full of Pacific sea air.

The sound of the waves drifting up and wetting the sand hit him.

He then wrapped his fingers around the edge of the railing, because it struck him then, hard, right in the solar plexus, so that air in his lungs felt trapped.

He was home.

This was home.

Not LA.

This house.

This was home.

*His father's house was home.*

He turned and looked inside.

He hadn't changed a thing because of Genny, Chloe and Sash. They seemed to find comfort there. They seemed to get something out of being in Corey's space with the pictures of themselves sitting in frames all over it.

On that thought, he walked in, not burying anything for once by going to the kitchen to check that Kayla had informed his Cali housekeeper he was coming home, so his bed would be made with fresh sheets, the house cleaned, the fridge and cupboards filled.

Instead, he walked through the vast open plan living room and kitchen with its floating stairs in the middle to one of the rooms that led off it.

His dad's study.

He opened the door, stood in the doorway and stared inside, his throat feeling strange, his breaths coming shallow.

Since it happened, had he even walked in here?

The vibrant Hockney mounted on the wall behind his father's desk took his attention.

Hale had had it cleaned. The cleaning had cost a fortune. The painting was worth far more.

It wasn't just the fact it had to be expertly done that it'd cost so much. It was because they'd had to clean off blood, brains, bits of skull.

His father's mind, one of the most celebrated since Einstein, Turing, Gates, splashed all over a priceless piece of art.

The bullet had gone through his father's head, and miraculously lodged in the 3D, rhombus chevron walnut paneling above the painting, all of that paneling another work of art that made up the entire wall.

The bullet had been dug out. The panel had been replaced by the woodworking specialist who'd built the wall, so you couldn't see it was ever there.

Hale walked into the room, his head all over the place, but it felt light because he wasn't getting enough air.

He looked to the wall of windows, saw the ocean beyond, and took in a deep breath.

Then he sat in the chair behind the desk.

That chair had also been cleaned.

On the desk, framed, were pictures of Genny, Duncan and his dad when they were kids, and another of Genny and Duncan, when they'd been a couple before they broke up and Genny met Tom.

His father had broken them up.

His father had loved Genny all his life. Since he was a boy. And he broke her heart and betrayed his best friend in hopes, if she was free, he could make her his.

This didn't work.

Those two were together now because his dad had maneuvered that beyond the grave.

They were back together, and his dad was dead.

Hale closed his eyes, took in another breath, opened his eyes and then opened the drawer to his left.

The double frame was folded closed inside.

Yes, he'd been in there. He'd put that frame there.

But he hadn't been in since.

He pulled the frame out.

It had been cleaned too. They'd found it on the floor at the side of his father's dead body.

Hale opened the frame and saw what he'd seen when they'd sent that female cop to return it to him.

A picture of Corey standing and smiling at a camera that, probably, Genny had been behind.

Tucked in his arm was Hale, asleep on his father's chest.

He'd been an infant.

On the other side was Corey squatting in the sand on a sunny day, Hale in a wetsuit beside him, his hair dripping. They were both smiling wide, Corey had his arm around Hale's waist, he had his arm around his dad's shoulders, a shortboard was stuck in the sand next to Hale.

His first surfboard.

He'd been eight. He'd asked for surfing lessons. His dad had given them to him. But he didn't drop him off and then pick him up. Always during Hale's lessons, he'd stayed to watch.

It was the second lesson, but the first time he got up on the board, rode his first wave.

Hale had been euphoric, high from a ride that caused an instant addiction Hale still nursed when he had the time. His dad had been openly proud.

He'd hugged him when he dragged his board up on the beach. Got all wet, didn't care. Went right in for the hug.

It was one of the few times his father touched him.

The instructor had taken that picture.

The cop told him Corey was holding that frame when he shot himself. Hale suspected she thought that would make him feel better.

It made him feel, but what he felt was not better.

Hale closed the frame and put it on the desk in front of him,

He then dug out his phone as he turned his head toward the sea.

He hit what he needed on the screen and put the phone to his ear, eyes to the endless blue.

“Hey, son,” Tom answered.

“Tommy, I need to talk.”

“Where are you?”

“L.A.”

“I’m still in New York.”

*Breathe.*

He breathed.

Then he spoke. “Elsa’s coming out to do an interview. I’ll go back with her. When I get there, we’ll sit down.”

“We can talk now, Hale,” Tom offered.

“No. Face to face.”

“Is everything okay?”

His dad held that frame in his hand when he’d taken his own life.

Hale had forgotten one picture existed, and he’d never seen the other one.

But Corey was holding Hale in his hand when he’d died.

He was holding *them* in his hand when he’d taken his own life.

“No,” he answered Tom.

“Talk to me, Hale.”

“Face to face.”

“Whatever you need.”

And that was Tom.

Whatever he needed.

“I love you, Tommy. You know that, yeah?”

“Okay, now you’re concerning me.”

“I’m fine.” *Breathe.* “I’m in Dad’s study.”

It was part groan when Tom said, “Son.”

“I just need to work some things out, but I want to do it with you.”

“I’m here when you’re ready.”

And that was Tom too.

“Thanks.”

“If things keep going with Elsa, Mika and I will want her at our table,” Tom warned.

“We’ll set that up.”

“I love you too, Hale.”

“I know.”

Christ, he did.

The one constant in his life: Tom and Genny’s love.

*And your dad.*

*He was always there when it mattered.*

*Look at those pictures.*

He shook his head sharply to clear it.

“You get ready earlier, I’m a phone call way,” Tom said. “You want it face to face, I can be on a plane. You hear me?”

“Yeah, Tom.”

“Genny and Bowie are headed to LA for that same interview,” Tom reminded him.

“Yeah.”

“So, if you need her, she’d be there too.”

“It has to be you. It has to be a dad.”

“Okay, then it’ll be me.”

“I’m gonna take a walk on the beach, clear my head.”

“Go. Mika is motioning to me, she sends her love.”

“Give mine back.”

“Will do. Take care, Hale. Text me when you get back from your walk. I want to know you’re okay.”

“You take care too, Tommy. And I’ll text.”

They disconnected and Hale didn’t waste time.

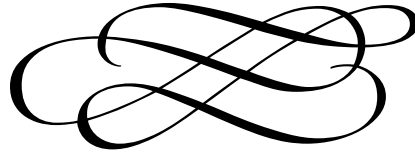
He went to the only place he ever felt safe and free.

He hit the beach.

And he didn’t allow himself to think about the fact that he called Elsa when he was out there.

Just because he needed to hear her voice.

# CHAPTER 19



## REUNION

*Elsa*

As we taxied, I saw Hale standing beside a convertible Jeep outside a hangar on the tarmac, the soft top gone.

This meant, the minute the plane came to a stop, I unbuckled my seatbelt and was out of my seat on Hale's unbelievably luxurious personal jet (he'd sent it to fetch us), leaving Chuck and Zoey, Fliss and Carole where they were (Carole had decided to use this opportunity to have an LA getaway, which was a poorly disguised excuse to horn in on something that would give her the opportunity to meet and spend time with Hale).

I had my tote over my shoulder and was practically hopping foot to foot, waiting for the attendant to open the door and push out the steps.

I was then down them and Hale was sauntering to me, his long-legged, loose-hipped gait, in that moment, the sexiest, most beloved thing I'd ever seen.

He walked.

But I ran.

In order to brace, he stopped several strides before I hit him. Our bodies crashed together, his arms wrapping around me, my hands grabbing his head to pull it down to me.

But it was Hale who kissed me.

Three weeks of him gone, of separation, of lust and need and affection we'd been denied were in that kiss, so my mouth felt deliciously abused, my lips delightfully bruised, when he lifted his head.

“Hey, baby,” he whispered.

I smiled so big, I thought it would break my face.

I watched his expression gentle before he bent and touched his lips to mine.

He had sunglasses on, they tipped over my head, he then gave me a squeeze and tucked me to his side.

“Chuck,” he greeted, offering a hand.

“Hale, man. Good to see you.” Chuck shook.

“Hey, Zoey,” Hale went on, taking her hand as well.

“Hey, Hale. God, it’s sunny out here,” she replied.

“Never been to LA?” Hale asked.

She shook her head. “Nope.”

“Get used to that,” Hale advised, then his sunglasses went to Fliss. “Felicity.”

She came in for a cheek touch.

“Yo, Hale,” she said, stepping back. “Looking good, as usual.”

Hale smiled at her then focused on Carole. “Finally, I get to meet Carole. Welcome to LA.”

She came in for a cheek touch too, then, “Nice to meet you, Hale.”

“You too,” he replied. “And I’m looking forward to tomorrow night, but I hope you’re not pissed I’m gonna steal her.” He gave me a gentle shake and tipped his head to the two shiny black Escalades that were also on the tarmac. “They’re here to take you to the Marmont. I’ve made reservations for you tonight at The Brown Derby. My treat. They’ll take you there and back to the hotel so you can enjoy yourselves.”

“Awesome,” Zoey breathed, staring at the Escalades.

“If you didn’t steal her, after that kiss, we’d be risking having to come up with bail for indecency charges,” Fliss said. “You two, go. Fuck like bunnies. We’ll see you at dinner tomorrow.”

I sighed. “Ever professional, my Fliss.”

“We’re not at work now,” Fliss pointed out.

I swung an arm to Chuck and Zoey. “My staff are right there.”

“If you didn’t jump him, I would. Pug would lose his shit, but...” Zoey trailed off on a shrug.

“Go. Have your reunion. We’ll catch up with you tomorrow,” Carole bid, pushing Felicity toward the Escalades

Pleasantries done, Hale nodded to the person who was loading my

luggage into the back of his Jeep.

We climbed in.

I dug my sunglasses out of my bag and put them on.

And with the sun on our faces and the wind in our hair, Hale drove us home.

“Oh my God,” I gasped. “*Oh my God,*” I cried.

I did this as I wandered through Hale’s house, marveling at how perfectly LA it seemed. A mix of art deco and mid-century with a clean, fresh, modern energy that miraculously had a laidback feel. This was accomplished almost entirely in neutral tones, mostly white.

And then there was the view, nothing but the ocean. You could hear the gulls cry and the waves crashing on the beach from the inside.

Heading to the balcony, I turned and walked backwards, asking Hale, “How do you ever leave?”

I didn’t wait for his answer, I turned again, hit the doors to the balcony, unlocked them, opened them, and was blasted by sea air.

I was a city girl through and through.

But honestly, was there anything better than that?

I stepped out to the railing and looked up and down the beach, which was surprisingly unpopulated. There were a couple of people walking their dogs. A woman jogging. Someone down the way sitting under an umbrella, reading a book.

It was tranquil.

It was amazing.

I felt his attention from behind me and turned.

He was resting a shoulder against the door to the balcony, sunglasses gone, gaze on me, and I saw I had LA Hale.

I drank him in. His jeans way more faded, specifically (and enticingly) around the crotch. On top, what appeared to be a faded, vintage, brown OP T-shirt that clung to his pecs and was loose at his stomach. He had more color to his skin, which probably meant his daily runs were on the beach. His hair was mussed from the Jeep ride, and it was longer.



“I love how excited you are, baby,” he said softly. “But I need that sweet ass upstairs, stripped down to panties and bra, waiting for me in my bed.”

I stood still, feeling my panties get damp.

“Now, Elsa,” he ordered. “First room to the left.”

I moved to him, and he didn’t shift so I could get by him unless I squeezed.

He caught me around the middle as I did that, his hand right under my breast, his thumb reaching out to stroke me on the underside.

My legs started trembling.

“We’re good, right?” he asked.

I knew what he was asking. We’d talked about it before he left New York. He’d get tested, I would too. And I’d re-up my prescription of birth control pills and start them, something I’d done.

We’d shared our results, and we were both negative.

But it was sweet he was confirming I was ready.

“Yes, we’re good, honey.”

“Good,” he murmured, didn’t kiss me, just stroked the swell of my breast once more, then let me go.

I finished squeezing by him and hustled up the stairs.

I really wanted to take time to enjoy his bedroom, with his bed that had a high, block-patterned, cushioned white headboard. There was chrome and sleek crystal and parquet floors and amazing views of the ocean, which the bed faced.

But I didn’t really take it in as I flipped off my pumps, pulled off my jeans, my cardie, my tee, the scarf I had tied around my neck, tossed them all on a chair that was angled to the view, and I climbed into the center of his bed, curled my knees to my chest and held them there.

I was trembling with anticipation, so although he didn’t make me wait long, it felt like it took forever before he walked in.

He came to stand at the foot of the bed, where a taupe-cushioned bench with chrome legs was positioned.

“You touch yourself while I was gone?” he asked.

Oh God.

“Yes,” I answered hesitantly.

“I forgot to tell you not to do that,” he muttered.

I shivered.

“You think of me when you did it?” he asked.

“Yes,” I repeated.

“What’d you think about, baby?”

I licked my lips.

“I-I missed...I missed...” Why was I stammering? “I missed it all, honey. But I love sucking your cock.”

“All right then.”

It was an invitation, I knew. One I was going to accept.

I started to move.

“Hands and knees,” he demanded.

I bit my lip as another set of lips quivered, and I got on my hands and knees and crawled the short distance to him.

He put a knee to the bench to get closer to me, but other than that, he didn’t help, so I got to undo his jeans, pull them down his hips, and release his dick.

Yeah, I missed that.

I went for it.

“Did I say you could have it?” Hale asked.

*Oh God.*

This was...

It was *incendiary*.

I lifted my eyes to him.

It felt like every inch of my skin quivered as he slid his fingers along my cheek, his thumb along my bottom lip, then he pushed it inside my mouth.

I sucked it deeper.

I enjoyed watching his eyes flare before he pulled it out, ordered, “Open,” in a gruff voice, I did, and slowly, he slid his cock into my mouth.

Oh yes.

I missed that.

Holding me at the back of my head, he fucked me like that, gazing down at me the entire time, until I was whimpering.

He slid out, commanded, “Turn around, get in the middle of the bed.”

I did as told.

He followed me in, and I felt a wave of heat as he tugged my panties down to my knees, grasped my hips, then entered me.

My head flew back, and I dropped down to my forearms.

Okay. I missed that more.

“You missed my dick, fuck it,” Hale ordered.

I didn't hesitate, slamming back into his thrusts.

"Oh yeah, baby, you missed it," he grunted.

"Fuck me, Hale," I begged.

When I said that, he pulled out, rolled me to my back, yanked my panties completely off, moved up me, then gave me what I asked for, but in a different way.

He drove into my mouth.

I tasted me and him and moaned against his cock.

"Yeah," he groaned, fucking my face. "Hold on."

I grasped his ass, digging my nails in, and I took him and took him until he pulled out, hauled me up underneath him, lowered down to me and slammed inside again.

I exploded instantly.

It didn't take long for Hale to join me.

His weight fell on me, but he rolled us immediately to our sides, hiking my leg over his hip while he bent his leg between mine so he could remain inside.

I curled my arms around him and pressed close.

"You good?" he asked.

"Much better now," I answered, giving him a squeeze.

He chuckled, kissed the top of my head and pulled me closer.

"Was that one of your fantasies about me?" I asked.

"Yup," he answered.

"You have a good imagination," I remarked.

He chuckled again.

God, I loved that sound.

The feel of it was even better.

Sadly, he naturally slid out of me.

"You need a cleanup or are you good to keep my cum?" he inquired.

At his question, my brain hit pause.

Because there was something about it, an intimacy beyond the intimacy we'd just shared. A need to know for him. A thoughtful query for me. That he'd ask it, that we were there, having sex with no protection.

It was meaningful. It was huge. It was a "we're in a relationship" question and there was beauty to it that I found I instantaneously treasured.

It was us. It was our now. It was also our future.

So I answered the way I never thought I would (because leaking,

seriously, not fun), but when I did, my tone was subdued, moved, even reverent.

“I want to keep you with me for a while.”

His arms tightened, showing me that had meaning to him, then he pulled us up the bed, arranging the pillows so he was reclining on them, and I was reclining down his side with my head on his chest, my arm draped over his abs.

“We need to talk about something, properly,” he announced.

I tipped my head back to look up at him.

He was looking down on me. “You need some water first? Maybe a glass of wine?”

I could use both.

I didn’t say that.

I asked, “What do we have to talk about...properly?”

“Sex,” he answered.

“Okay,” I said when he spoke no further.

“You seem to get off on it, but it’s important for you to know, I’m into dominance.”

For a second, I just lay against him.

Then I started giggling, actually giggling, doing it pushing up him so we were face to face.

I got control of myself and teased, “You don’t say.”

He wasn’t finding it funny. “It’s a thing with me, baby.”

I was still grinning. “I’ve noticed that, Hale.”

“No,” he stated firmly. “I mean, if you’re up for it, I’m gonna wanna tie you up. Blindfold you. When we get there, meaning I know what you like and how far I can go, even gag you. We’re talking you need to be my good girl, and you’ll get your reward, or you can choose to be my bad girl, and you’ll get punished. We’ll have safe words, safe gestures, absolutely. And it isn’t a compulsion, it isn’t like I need the deeper play all the time, or even often. But I need dominance all the time.”

He was being serious about this, and I could see it put him in a vulnerable spot.

As for me, him talking about that stuff was turning me on again.

And it was clear he needed to know that.

So I sobered, sliding my hand up his chest to trace his collarbone, and I said, “I’m a virgin with all that stuff. The bondage stuff, I mean. Spanking

and...what does punishment entail?"

He nodded to confirm. "Yes, spanking. Maybe paddling. Light flogging. I'm not into the heavy shit, like whips."

I nodded. "So, when we try that, at the beginning, you'll go easy on me?"

His brows drew down. "That's it?"

"Sorry?"

"That's it? When we try it, go easy on you?"

I was confused. "Is that not how you do it?"

He pulled me fully onto his chest. "Yeah, sweetheart. We'll go as slow as you need. I'm just surprised at how easily you're taking this."

"It isn't lost on me I submit to you, Hale," I informed him, and watched his eyes flash.

Wow, he got off just on me admitting it.

And I got off on him getting off on that.

I wriggled closer to him.

He moved a hand to cup a cheek of my ass.

I read that and stopped wriggling.

That made his eyes flash too.

Wow again.

This was fun.

"I can't say it didn't surprise me," I went on. "I can say what also wasn't lost on me was that I submitted because you demanded it. It works. I..." I lifted my shoulders. "I don't have a ton of experience with sex. I'll admit, though, I've never been fully comfortable with it, except with you. I've learned with you I need to give over like that. I can get out of my head and let you take care of me. In turn, I get to take care of you. It works in a way I didn't get before, and I mean not getting what I needed before, also not understanding that I needed it."

"Fuck," he groaned. "Fuck," he groaned again.

Then I was on my back, bearing Hale's weight, and he was kissing me.

When he finished doing that, he returned us to our previous position, but this time I was straddling him, and he had both hands on my ass.

That was it, he wasn't taking it anywhere, so I laid my head on his shoulder and my weight against him.

Our silence lasted so long, I felt compelled to ask the question he asked me earlier.

"You okay?"

“I missed you.”

I began to lift my head.

He squeezed my ass and said, “Don’t move.”

I halted, then rested against him again.

“I’m pleased as fuck that conversation went the way it did. And I want you to know, I’ve never fucked a woman in this bed. This house. I’ve never even brought a woman here. Not since I was in high school.”

Oh God.

He was sharing, and I was learning Hale needed closeness when he shared, but he also needed to control it, like making me not look at him even if I was plastered against him, while he gave me something deep, something important.

And I loved when he shared with me, and now, what he was sharing.

So much, my eyes started stinging.

“It means a lot to me you’d listen to that, be willing to explore,” he went on.

“I wish I could say it was selfless, but I get something out of it too, handsome,” I reminded him.

His hands left my ass so he could wrap both arms around me.

“It means a lot to me,” he repeated. “Including that.”

I didn’t know what was in his head, but I sensed it was big and I sensed it wasn’t about the fact we suited in bed, since he already knew that, he’d just explained the depth of what that meant.

I also didn’t press. His vibe was telling me he’d shared what he intended to share, and now I needed to give him space with that.

I did it as long as I could, but I was leaking into his crotch, which might get on his sheets, so I told him something he had to feel.

“I’m leaking, Hale.”

“I know, sweetheart,” he murmured. “Stay still.”

He reached between us, rubbing me gently, rubbing himself.

The feel of it made me start to squirm.

“Never satisfied,” he muttered.

“It’s your fault,” I said into his neck.

“Mm,” he hummed, then slid a finger inside me.

I gasped and clenched it.

“Hungry little baby,” he mumbled.

“It’s been three weeks,” I whispered.

He finger fucked me. “What are you gonna do to earn it?”  
“What would you like?”  
He used his thumb to tweak my clit.  
My hips jerked, and I whimpered.  
Okay, learning...that was a reward.  
Nice.  
“Can you stay still?” he asked.  
No way.  
“I’ll try.”  
“You’ll need to stay still. Perfectly still.”  
Oh boy.  
My pussy clenched again.  
A noise sounded in his chest.  
“Be good,” he warned, still finger fucking me.  
“Okay,” I wheezed.  
I heard his chuckle.  
In the end, I tried, I really did.  
But I couldn’t pull it off.  
I had to be bad.  
So when Hale left me in bed to go get a cloth to clean himself from me  
(both the first and the next), my ass still stung.  
But the rest of me felt *great*.

It was after I sat wearing Hale’s OP shirt, no panties (at his decree), drinking wine and watching him cook (incidentally, dinner was smushed, seasoned, roasted brussels sprouts with a balsamic glaze, baked salmon and lemony quinoa).

That all happening after he’d given me a full tour of his fantastic beach house.

We were back up in his room.

Not true.

We were upstairs on his personal balcony. He had a bucket chair up there, tucked in a corner, big enough for two.

And he hadn't forgotten dessert this time. Lime yogurt cake with whipped cream and lime syrup.

It was insane.

My boyfriend, so sweet.

We'd had dessert up there, so our spent plates and forks were on the side table with the remains of a bottle of rosé in a marble chiller.

Glasses in hand, we were cuddled up and watching the sun set.

"Is there more to our earlier discussion I need to know?" I inquired.

"Good question," he answered. "Is there something specific you want to know?"

Indeed there was, but I wasn't going to ask. I hadn't been anyone's girlfriend since high school, but I knew not to talk about previous lovers.

He read my mind, and quietly, he said, "I've had women I didn't tell about it, and enjoyed sex with them without it being an issue, not going there with deeper play. And I've had women I've told who have been down with it, enjoyed it, but not like you. Never, actually. Never like you."

I felt a flutter in my belly.

"Never like me?"

"There are people who do it to shake up their sex lives. Then there are people who are naturally dominant, or naturally submissive, and it's an important part of their sex lives. You're a natural sub. It seemed obvious to me, but I worried it wasn't obvious to you, and you weren't plugged into that part of your nature, or I was reading it wrong because I wanted to. And I've learned through being with you, you can tell when you've met your complement. You're not trying to please me, even if you are. You're not using me for a new experience. We fit."

*We fit.*

"You learned this by being with me?"

"Yeah. I'm not into parties, clubs or swinging. Obvious reasons, I don't want to be recognized, but mostly, that just isn't my thing."

"That doesn't sound intriguing to me either."

He rubbed my arm where he had his hand wrapped around, using it to hold me close to him.

"Good," he said softly. "But I told you that so you know I've learned by reading. Watching porn. I haven't descended into that life, taken a partner for the sake of getting off on making someone submit to me. I'm not into hardcore. Pain or humiliation or marking or things like that. And if we get to



the place you want to explore, try new things, things I haven't done, tell me. I'll research them. We'll go there. But I have to share, those things I mentioned are dealbreakers for me."

"I'm with you, they don't sound fun."

"Right," he murmured. "You have any more questions about that?"

"No. Though, I want you to know, I'm sorry I laughed earlier. I wasn't making fun of you. It's just that your dominance, and me responding to it, has been prevalent since the start."

"I didn't take offense, sweetheart. I was relieved."

"Okay. Good," I whispered, giving him a snuggle.

"You might find hard limits too," he went on. "It's important you share them with me. No holding back. Okay?"

"Okay."

"You lowkey getting off on the fact you've got a bare ass and exposed pussy so when I fuck you later, you're gonna come hard for me?"

"Yes."

His chuckle was filled with manly satisfaction.

Okay, it wasn't lowkey how I got off on *that*.

He carried on, "Just to say, it might be play when we're home like that, me ordering no panties, but I'm also not into it leaking into life. Like me telling you what to wear or making you stop what you're doing during the day so you can obey a command I gave you."

I let a *shoo* noise out that was only half joking, and said, "That's a relief."

"So we're simpatico," he whispered.

I tipped back my head to look at him. "Seems like totally."

His face gentled, and he dipped down to touch his mouth to mine.

He didn't go far away when he asked, "You good being with me while your crew is at the Chateau?"

I nodded. "Wouldn't want to be anywhere else."

That got me another gentle look, before he watched me closely. "You nervous about Genny and Duncan coming over for dinner tomorrow?"

This was our plan.

Our first night, only him and me.

We were both working tomorrow. Hale, half day, so he could come home and cook for everybody.

Including Genny and Duncan.

"The mixing of your peeps and my peeps and spending time with a

woman you've known all your life and love dearly?" I asked. "Absolutely."

"She's really nice."

"I'm sensing that. But she might be forced to be polite because I'm with you and she doesn't like that, but you're a grown man, so she's going to keep it to herself."

"She'll give you a shot, Elsa. She's not like that. She doesn't hold grudges. And you're mine. That'll mean something to her. She'll have a mind to that."

"So what you're saying is, she's an exceptionally talented actress, so even if she doesn't like me being with you, I'll never know."

He smiled. "Not exactly. I mean she'll give you a chance, and when she gets to know you, she'll genuinely like you, because you're genuinely likeable."

I looked to the sunset and the sea.

Something odd in his tone made me look back to him when he spoke again.

"In fact, you remind me of her. Fiercely loyal. Openly ambitious. Understanding the important things in life. Always seeking balance of what fulfills you, and what those in your life need from you."

"She seems so cool," I said quietly, mindful of his change in mood, "that might be the nicest thing anyone's said to me."

"She is very cool," he muttered distractedly.

"You went somewhere," I noted cautiously. "Care to tell me where you are?"

He cleared his face, rubbed my arm again, and assured, "I'm right here with you, baby. I've got you back with me, where else would I be?"

He'd been somewhere.

But that wasn't for me.

I tamped down my disappointment and reached up to kiss him.

Thus commenced us making out in his bucket chair, and joy of joys, no need to muck about when he finally planted me on his cock and made me fuck him there.

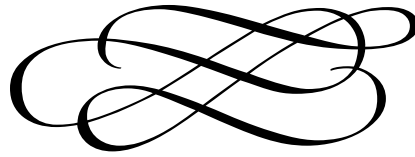
And after we finished, went inside, cleaned up, prepared for bed, then cuddled together in it with the sound of the waves crashing on the beach and the moon shining in the windows, all I could think was one thing.

I missed him.

I had him back.

It was the perfect reunion.  
But he was still withholding from me.

# CHAPTER 20



## MOMMING

*Elsa*

“Okay, consider yourself warned. I’m one hundred percent on a mission to steal him from you. I mean, homemade tortillas?” Carole announced, sitting at a stool, watching Hale flip a tortilla on a skillet, a tortilla that, yes, he’d just rolled out.

“I love you like a sister, but I’ll cut a bitch for my guy,” I retorted.

“I’ll bleed for fresh tortillas,” she returned.

“I’ll make you fresh tortillas whenever you want,” Hale offered.

“Don’t think I won’t take you up on that,” Carole threatened.

Hale saluted Carole with his tongs.

As this happened, I chanced a glance at the great Imogen Swan, who was absolutely Genny in that kitchen, flitting about, helping Hale with his fish tacos and vinegary coleslaw, macerated onions and lime crema, homemade salsa, avocado slices (etc.). But who was now expertly manning the frying pieces of fish at the same time sprucing up the rice with minced cilantro and fresh bits of jalapeño.

Hale thankfully did not make a flan for dessert.

But the man was going to serve fried ice cream.

And he’d made homemade ice cream.

If Carole thought she was going to steal him already, I figured her words would ring truer after the ice cream. I knew this and I’d never even had Hale’s homemade ice cream.

But, unlike Hale assured me the night before, although Genny was polite,

she was also standoffish.

To me.

To everyone else, she was lovely.

But she did not like me.

Nugget of news: Imogen Swan was totally momming me. I was not good enough for her boy until I proved I was, and that proof would come...never. Her boy was so special, he'd never meet the right girl.

Definitely not me.

It didn't help that I was enjoying my margarita, and except when Hale asked or I could dip in and grab something to clean or wipe down or put away to help keep things tidy, I didn't do anything.

Then again, she'd claimed the kitchen (and Hale, *not* incidentally) about a nanosecond after she was introduced to everyone.

Point made.

Immediately.

Duncan was keeping his distance from the cooking, if not my peeps.

He seemed like a really nice guy.

Now I looked to him and saw he was watching me. When we caught eyes, he tipped his head to the side. I must not have been hiding my chagrin, because he winked encouragingly at me.

Yes, Duncan Holloway was a nice guy.

It was just Genny who didn't like me.

This didn't bode well for the interview we were filming in two days.

I gave Duncan an awkward smile and sucked back more margarita.

"We need a west coast studio that I run," Chuck said from his place at the wall of windows that faced the ocean. "I might have to sell a kidney, and a lung, to afford beachfront property, but it wouldn't suck, having that as a view to look at every day. Karen would love it. She's getting fed up with the city."

My eyes raced to Hale to find his on me.

A west coast studio.

Chuck might just be talking, but this was not a bad idea.

"New York doesn't hurt for celebs for you to interview, but I ran into three just on the way to the pool today," Fliss said. "By the way, Malcolm Tavistock is super short. Like, *teeny*."

Genny snorted.

"Really?" I asked after the aging action star.

Fliss nodded. “And he wears Speedos.”

She gave a fake shudder.

I laughed.

“He’s definitely got a Napoleon complex, he—” Genny cut herself off.

There was an awkward beat, then under his breath, Hale said, “You can talk in front of Elsa.”

Genny made no reply, just took some fish out of the oil.

Hale’s face got tight.

But I realized one issue we were having.

Genny didn’t trust me to keep my mouth shut.

I understood that. I understood that better than Hale, obviously. And what I understood was this was a distrust I’d earned. It was far from outlandish she felt that way.

But I also realized we had another problem.

Carole and Felicity were exchanging annoyed glances, and Zoey was straight up glaring at Genny’s back.

Time to do something about that, and I needed Hale to help me.

I caught his eyes and jerked my head to where the margarita pitcher and fixins were laid out on the wet bar in the living room (that was my doing, I couldn’t fry fish, but I sure could mix up a batch of margaritas).

I then went there, and he followed me.

“It’s okay, I get it,” I whispered reassuringly when we stopped.

“You do? Well I don’t,” he said loudly.

I turned my head toward the kitchen to see Duncan had taken Hale’s place at the stove, but he did it not to cook tortillas, but to do with Genny what I was doing with Hale.

Genny’s face was as recalcitrant as Hale’s.

“You have to give her some time,” I hissed.

“I’m not fourteen with my girlfriend over, putting up with the dinner part, hoping I’d be able to cop a feel when my parents took a hike. You sleep beside me. I promised you she’d be cool, you’d be safe, and she’s breaking”—he jerked a thumb to his chest—“my promise.”

“You can’t promise someone is going to act like you want them to act.”

He turned his back to the kitchen and lowered his voice. “I can expect the only real mom I’ve known to think I have a brain in my head, and she doesn’t have to guard what she says around my girlfriend. That was disrespect to you, but it was also disrespect *to me*.”

He had a point there.

I got closer to him. “I haven’t exactly engendered her trust, Hale.”

“So she’s going to claim space that is now yours, freeze you out, treat you like that in front of me, your friends, while *we’re hosting?*”

Suddenly, I couldn’t speak.

I’d been in LA a day. I’d spent one night in his house.

And now his kitchen was “mine” and *we* were hosting?

Truth, I was his girlfriend. And flashing to a different scenario, I’d spent so much time with him at his apartment in New York, even if I didn’t cook, if Genny came over and claimed that kitchen, I’d be miffed. I might have only toasted a bagel for Hale there, but he’d cooked for me while I kept him company. Made my coffee. We did the dishes together.

He was right.

I was the woman in his life, so even though his space was his space, and Genny had been around a whole lot longer, in that pecking order, it was mine before it was Genny’s, and it didn’t matter if that space was on the east coast or the west coast or how much time I’d spent in it.

She was out of line.

Even so, I still got where she was coming from, and he needed to give both of us some breathing room to sort it out.

If I had a man in my life who I loved who lived the life Hale lived and had the trust issues he had, and I was Genny, I’d be overprotective too.

I opened my mouth, but sadly, Genny’s voice was rising, and we heard her say, “She can’t even *cook.*”

Carole, Felicity and Zoey’s eyes, all in varieties of the shape of *narrow*, shot to me.

Chuck muttered, “I’m just gonna go out on the balcony,” and then he slipped onto the balcony.

Hale looked ready to blow.

“Sorry,” a man’s voice came from the direction of the front door.

We all looked, and Hudson was standing there, attention to Hale, an alert but impassive expression on his face.

Now, both Fliss and Carole needed to look over Hudson (and Rocco).

I mean both of those guys...

Hudson got close to Hale and murmured. “There’s someone here. I’ve asked her to leave. She refuses to go. I need to know what you want me to do. It’s your mom.”

I felt my eyes get big right before I turned them to Hale, who didn't have big eyes.

If he looked ready to blow before, he was Mount Vesuvius now, and Samantha Wheeler was Pompeii.

Without a word, he made a move to the front door, but I caught his hand. He stopped and looked back at me.

"Take a breath, honey," I advised.

"Fuck that," he bit off, gently pulling from my hold, then stalking across his living room.

He didn't slam the door, only because Hudson was trailing him.

"What's going on?" Genny called.

I started toward the kitchen, saying, "His mom is here."

Cue Duncan catching Genny, but he was better than me, clamping an arm around her belly and pulling her close, saying, "Let Hale deal with it."

Genny looked to me. "I take it he didn't invite her."

I shook my head.

I wasn't close to her, but I could swear I heard her grinding her teeth.

Okay, now what to do?

Hale said I was hostess, I needed to hostess.

In order for us all to have something else to think about while whatever was going down went down outside, I decided to offer to refresh people's drinks.

I came up with this plan right when we heard shouted from the front, "*Ungrateful! You were an ungrateful piece of shit growing up! And you're an ungrateful piece of shit grown man! No surprise! Just like your father!*"

I could feel the deep freeze in the room.

And it included me.

While frozen, I thought...this wasn't mine.

Not really.

We were too new.

An altercation between Hale and his mother wasn't mine.

And it fucking was.

That was why I jerked out of my freeze, dashed to the door and through it.

"What the hell?" Samantha Wheeler asked when she saw me.

"Go inside," Hale ordered.

I ignored Hale, my total focus on his mother.



She was Genny's age and looked ten years older (in all fairness, Genny looked fifteen years younger than she was, but still).

I guessed that was what bitterness did to you.

"You need to leave," I told her.

"You think you can tell me what to do?" she demanded, then looked to her son. "Why does she think she can tell me what to do? Why is she even *here*?"

"Elsa, please, sweetheart, go inside," Hale said, then he looked over my head. "Bowie, get Genny inside too."

I didn't look behind me.

No, I had to focus because Samantha's face twisted in a nasty way and she spat at her son, "*Sweetheart*?"

"You need to go," I repeated.

Her attention locked on me. "Thanks, but since it was you who helped decimate my relationship with my son, I think I won't listen to you now. M'kay?"

"You approached me."

"You jumped on it."

"Of course I did. It was my job. But you hijacked it after you failed to inform me you had a hidden agenda."

"Like you cared," she scoffed. "Your follows went through the roof."

"You used me to hurt decent, innocent people who were grieving. And *you* didn't care you did. Like you don't care now Hale has company and you're causing a scene in his driveway."

"You don't get to judge me, Elsa Cohen," she snapped.

"Oh yes I do," I whispered sinisterly. "Because he's mine now." I slapped my chest and leaned into her as I took two steps her way. "*Mine*. And you don't shout at what's *mine*, calling him a piece of shit. So *you need to leave*."

"I have things to say to my son," she shot back.

"I heard some of those things," I returned. "And I'm telling you, you're not going to say any more of them."

She got closer to me, asking, "Who the fuck do you think you are?"

I was a Brooklyn girl, the stupid bitch.

So no hesitation, I got closer to her, not as close as I would have liked, because I felt Hale's arm curl around my ribs, but I didn't back down.

"I told you who I am. Go."

She looked up to Hale.

So I shrieked in her face, “Go!”

Her gaze darted to me. “You’re crazy.”

“Go,” I repeated.

“I—” she started.

I pushed through Hale’s arm. He tried to tag the waistband of my jeans, but I was advancing fast, Samantha Wheeler was retreating fast too, and I backed her right into her car.

“Get in and go,” I snarled.

“Fu—”

“You know,” I whispered. “*You know.* You know what you did to him. Somewhere deep down in that bitter, shriveled heart of yours, *you know.* You know you don’t belong here. *Go.*”

After I spoke, for a second, I thought her face would collapse, the huge emotion welling up in her eyes too much to bear.

It didn’t.

She slid out from in front of me and I ran into Hale, who was right behind me, as I tried to get out of her way as she opened her car door.

We moved back together and watched her get in, start up, do an easy circle in Hale’s massive forecourt, but it was only me who walked all the way to the end of Hale’s long drive behind her car.

When I arrived at the end, I stood there, like I could stop her with my super strength if she tried to drive back in.

She didn’t try.

She drove away.

I turned and ran into someone.

It was Genny this time.

I looked into her eyes.

“Hurry,” she said urgently. “See to him.”

I looked to the house.

Hudson and Duncan were there.

Hale was not.

I raced to the front door.

“Upstairs,” Carole said when I got inside, her face full of concern.

I sprinted up the stairs.

He was on the balcony off his room.

I went there.

Approaching cautiously, I put my hand to his back and came to a stop at

his side.

The wind combing through his hair, he was brooding at the sea.

“Hey,” I called.

“Give me a minute,” he said.

“All right. You want me to bring up your beer?”

“No. I’ll be down in a minute.”

I didn’t want to give him a minute, even if I knew, when Hale needed space, I didn’t push it.

But his mother had just called him a piece of shit.

Twice.

And he was so not that, it wasn’t funny.

He needed to know he was worth the time of someone who cared about him, and he needed to know that *now*.

So I didn’t have it in me to leave.

“I think everybody gets it if you need to take some time to unload on me,” I said to feel him out.

“About what?” he asked.

I started, surprised at his words.

But he wasn’t done.

“I mean, obviously, with such a loving mother, there’s nothing to unload. All good.”

Sarcasm.

“She’s gone now,” I reminded him.

“Is she?”

I looked over my shoulder, like Sam Wheeler was going to be lurking there (she wasn’t), then back to him.

“Yes, she is.”

“I think he wanted to be a good dad.”

My organs stopped functioning, such was my shock, because he was going to talk about his father.

“What?” I whispered.

He shook his head and looked back to the ocean, mumbling, “Nothing.”

I rubbed his back, Elsa Cohen, ace celebrity interviewer, at a loss to find the right question to ask to get her boyfriend to open up, to let go, to *unload*.

“Go on,” he urged. “I’ll be down in a minute.”

I tried another tack.

“Would you leave me if that happened to me?”

His jaw clenched, then he turned his head, looked down at me, and with a rueful smile, he said, “Not a chance.”

“Okay then,” I whispered.

He looked back to the sea.

I pressed to him, resting my cheek on his arm, and watched the waves crashing on the shore.

Eventually, he said, “The fish is probably already cold.”

“Worse things,” I replied.

“Yeah, but let’s go in and feed our people.”

If he was ready, I was ready.

I nodded.

He swung an arm out and I preceded him, but right when I was about to walk over the threshold, he succeeded in catching my waistband this time. He used it to haul me back, I hit his front, and then his lips were at the top of my hair.

I went perfectly still and listened.

“Genny and Duncan told me,” he said quietly. “His parents were a disaster. He never spoke of them. I don’t think he knew how to be one. How to be a dad. I think, even if they weren’t together, if she’d been a good mom, he could have taken direction. I think he was lost. I think he saw how natural it came to Tom, and how Tom had gravitated to me, and I think he let Tom have me, because he knew Tom would take care of me. I think he let Tom have me because he knew he couldn’t be what I needed.”

I was breathing shakily, listening to these words.

Listening to what could be excuses a son was making for a father who failed to be the dad he needed.

Or worse, what I suspected it actually was.

Listening to Hale figure out the staggering sacrifice Corey Szabo made so Hale could have the dad Corey wanted him to have.

The dad Corey couldn’t be.

“Okay, *neshama sheli*,” I said gently.

“She could have guided his way,” he said into my hair, touching me only at my waistband, but I felt his heat burning into my back like a brand.

And I tamped down my need to rush out, commandeer his Jeep, track down Sam Wheeler, and make her my Pompeii.

“Maybe,” I forced out tightly. “But you had Genny.”

“She didn’t give me Genny. She hated her. Dad gave me Genny too.”

That fucking *bitch*.

I said nothing.

He let my waistband go, but both his arms rounded me at my chest. He hugged me tight, and I heard him breathe in the scent of my hair.

And I hoped with everything I had he was getting something from me. Some sense of familiarity, or security, or strength, or whatever he needed to keep him going right now.

He held me, back to front, distant and right there, how he needed me to give this to him, and then I heard and felt him sigh.

“Let’s go downstairs,” he said.

He let me go, and I took his hand this time, so we walked side by side.

Genny’s attention shot right to Hale when we showed, and in that moment, I didn’t care she didn’t like me. I didn’t care if she never liked me.

I loved her for him.

I loved he had a mom who thought the woman he was seeing wasn’t good enough for him. I loved that he’d had her in his corner his whole life. I just loved her.

Then her gaze came to me.

I shook my head just once.

She looked pissed, and worried, then she nodded to me, also once.

“Duncan finished the tortillas, Hale. I think we’re ready,” Genny announced.

“I’ll refresh everyone’s drinks,” I offered.

“I’ll help Elsa,” Carole said.

“I’ll help get all this food on the table,” Zoey said.

“I’ll eat it when all that good grub gets in front of me,” Chuck said.

There were some laughs.

But no one really meant it.

I was sitting on a blanket on the beach.

Hale, Zoey and Carole were facing off against Fliss, Chuck and Duncan in a game of touch football in the swiftening dark.

Genny had been up in the house, having secluded herself in a room when

a call came in from Chloe (they were totally talking about me, I knew it).

And now she was down with us, I knew since she was settling on the blanket beside me.

“Who’s winning?” she asked.

“Duncan has some moves. But Chuck needs more cardio. And Fliss is a flake with the attention span of a gnat. They’re going down.”

“Mm,” she hummed then asked, “How are you?”

“Doing great.”

“Liar,” she accused quietly.

I looked to her.

Two could play the honesty game.

“I know I’m going to have to earn your trust. Hale’s upset about it, but I’m not. I get it. I like that you know he’s awesome and he only deserves someone as awesome as him. And I’ll put the work in, with you and with him, to prove I deserve him. I promise.”

“Honey, if you don’t think chasing Samantha Wheeler to her car then following her down the driveway trying to shoot laser beams out of your eyes, all to protect Hale, didn’t win my trust, you weren’t paying a lot of attention at dinner.”

She did seem to warm up a bit.

“It wasn’t my place,” I admitted. “I kinda overreacted. I don’t know what came over me.”

“I do. You’re falling in love with Hale.”

My heart skipped a beat.

She tapped my knee with hers. “Theme of the night. I overreacted to you. Acted like a total bitch. I’m sorry about that. It wasn’t cool.”

“Honestly, I get it,” I promised.

“I sense you do, Elsa. But I’m apologizing anyway. I’m protective of all my kids, but Hale...”

She trailed off, not because she didn’t want to share with me, but because she knew I knew.

“Yeah,” I confirmed I knew.

She looked to the waning sun on the beach and she said, “He reminded me of his dad tonight.”

I tried not to sound too eager when I asked, “How so?”

“I was Corey’s touchstone.” She looked again to me. “And you’re Hale’s.”

There went my heart again, along with my breath.

I knew I shouldn't, but I couldn't stop myself.

"It's like pulling teeth," I shared.

"Don't give up," she urged.

"Do you really think I'm his touchstone?"

"He tracks you with his eyes. Like now."

She kept looking at me.

I looked to the game.

Hale had eyes to me.

I waved.

He jerked up his chin then started to pay attention to the game.

Genny kept talking.

"When you speak, there's no one else in the room. He was wound up, I suspect he's still wound up, but the longer you acted like it was all okay, the more he settled in."

So I did. I did give him what he needed.

Now I felt settled.

I watched Zoey fall back with the ball, Hale took off like a rocket, Chuck tried to keep up with him, but failed, and Hale caught the ball Zoey sent zinging his way. Crossing the beach from covering Carole, Duncan tagged him right before Hale ran over the goal line they'd dug into the sand.

Chuck was bent double, hands to his knees, wheezing.

Fliss was at the water's edge, shouting, "Look! A crab!"

"She's so bad at this," I said.

Genny laughed softly.

"He's had it shit," I whispered to the sea. "If I let it, I get consumed with trying to figure out how to sweep it all away and make him happy."

"You can't sweep it away, Elsa. So just concentrate on making him happy."

Good advice.

I looked to her and nodded.

She reached out and squeezed my knee.

Then she rested back into her hands, like I was, and we watched people we cared about play a very lopsided game of football.

"The call was about you, yes," Genny said apropos of nothing. "But it was also about the wedding. We're all working hard to keep it a secret, but Chloe and Judge are getting married soon, and Chloe had some things she

needed to run by me.”

I closed my eyes, opened them, turned to her and smiled.

She moved to pat my hand this time.

“Touchdown!” Zoey shouted.

We returned our attention to the game.

We started with Hale ordering me to my knees at the side of the bed where I sucked his cock.

We ended with him bending me over the bed and fucking me.

Now we were in the bed, cuddled up, listening to the sounds of the sea.

As for me, I was sensing something was different with tonight’s sexual activities. He was usually seriously bossy, obviously, but tonight he was bossier. Rougher. Not in a bad way. I enjoyed it. Nor in a detached way, he was right there with me.

He still was working something out.

Controlling his environment, controlling me, after his control had been taken away from him.

Maybe?

That day, while Fliss and Carole cavorted in the pool, my crew and I toured the garden where the network had decided we were filming the interview. I’d left Chuck and Zoey behind to build camaraderie with the local team while I’d gone to lunch with Mankowitz, who at the time introduced me to Maggie Mae. I was meeting Fuller the next day. And we were filming the interview the day after.

Even so, I’d taken the opportunity to look up a few things, and I dived as deep as time allowed.

I didn’t have a handle on what made Hale like Hale, and what made me like me, sexually. I wasn’t a psychologist and I didn’t have all I needed, specifically about Hale, to totally understand it. Nor had I had the time to look into it thoroughly.

But it also wasn’t outlandish to think, in a lifetime where a lot of dysfunction spiraled around him, he’d seek order and control, even, or maybe especially, because that was when you were at your most vulnerable,



sexually.

As for me, having his undivided attention and devotion during sex, being responsible for so much in life, being so driven, but letting go during intimacy, having that additional release, made sense too.

Or maybe we were just born this way.

I broached it with Hale.

“So, I looked up a few things today,” I said to his throat.

“What’d you look up?”

I traced a finger along his throat. “Um...collars?”

His body stilled in my hold. And then he pressed me so close, I was having difficulty breathing.

Not exactly a surprise. One of the things I learned was that was a kind of claiming ritual between lovers who engaged in dominance and submission, and it was important.

Not to mention, during sex, a collar could come in handy.

“You interested in that?” he asked.

“I saw a gif where this guy pulled this girl up by her collar, her mouth right onto his cock. It was smooth as hell. It was also hot.”

“You’re into it,” he muttered, stroking the skin above my ass. “I’ll order some things for us.”

“Oo, exciting.”

“It will be.”

Cocky.

Hot.

I rubbed my face into his skin, smelling him, and sex, and the residual tang of salt air.

So very Hale.

Best smell in the world.

“You and Genny did the dishes, and it all seemed good,” he remarked.

“It was, honey. We got over the hump.”

He said nothing about that, likely because of why we did.

But he asked, “What does *neshama sheli* mean?”

“My soul,” I whispered.

“That’s beautiful,” he whispered back.

“It’s more like, you’re a part of my soul.”

He gathered me closer.

“Too much?” I asked.

“No, *neshama sheli*,” he answered. “Not too much.”

With that, I pressed my face into his skin.

Hale ordered, “Go to sleep, Elsa.”

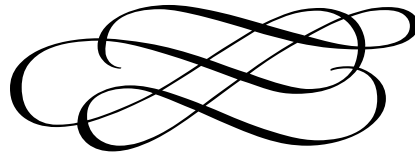
I didn’t, even if I forced myself to relax into his arms so he thought I did.

No, I didn’t because I couldn’t.

Not until I heard his breath even out and his body settle against mine.

Only then did I sleep.

# CHAPTER 21



## SMART AND SAVVY

*Elsa*

The morning after we filmed the interview, I was sitting on Hale's balcony, drinking coffee, when I saw him jog up the beach.

It was Saturday. We were all set to fly out Sunday afternoon, Hale coming with us. He'd informed me he was then spending a month in New York "at least."

I'd been ecstatic and didn't hide it. This had made Hale smile at me in a happy, mellow way that I'd never seen, but I'd love it immediately.

That was miracle one.

Miracle two was the fact that both of us were taking the entire weekend off. No work, at all. Fliss and Carole were going out shopping. Chuck and Zoey were going out sightseeing. We were all going to meet for dinner at the Dresden later.

But that day, I got to relax, just Hale and me.

He lifted a hand when he made the base of the steps up the cliff, his head angled back, looking at me.

I waved in return, thinking about sweaty Hale and smirking to myself, because he'd left me in bed for his run, he was a morning sex person, so I wondered what the next hour or two would bring.

On this happy thought, my phone vibrated on the table beside me, and I saw it was a text from Zoey.

I picked it up and read it.

*I don't want to mess up your day, but you should know. Click this*

*whenever you're ready.*

Me. Curiosity. I wasn't going to wait until I was ready for whatever I'd see.

I was going to make myself ready and look.

I clicked and it was a gossip website. A rival of mine...well, they used to be. I'd elevated. They'd descended into the mud.

IT MUST BE LOVE? the headline read.

Under that were pictures of Hale and me on the very beach in front of me, but farther down.

They were taken during our sunset walk last night, when I told him all about the interview, and he told me he was thinking about grooming this twenty-eight-year-old business wunderkind he'd put on the team to clean up Core Point Athletics.

His name was Javier Rojas. The child of immigrants from Chile, he'd graduated high school at sixteen, got his MBA from University of Chicago at twenty. He'd then gone right into turning around a failing record store chain, capitalizing on niche marketing and riding the wave of Gen Z's return to vinyl. And he did this alongside investing in a fledgling fashion label that had since become the next Off White.

Hale had personally recruited him for the Core Point effort.

"And I think he could be my guy," he'd said. "He's smart as fuck, so smart, it's scary. He doesn't take shit. He's young, but he doesn't get intimidated. And he gets off on being insanely busy. He could travel with me, then I could scale back, and send him in my stead."

I loved this idea, obviously, especially if Hale concentrated his efforts in LA and New York, and I got to a point I could open up a west coast studio. We could schedule our work around where one or the other would be.

I loved it more, because maybe that would free up time for Hale to do things Hale actually liked to do.

I didn't share that during our walk.

I just encouraged him where Javier Rojas was concerned, but mostly I listened.

And that's what the pictures made it look like. Hale's arm around my shoulders, my hand up, holding his there, my other arm around his waist. Our heads were bent together, and it looked as serious as it was, what we were talking about.

Though, there were several pictures of us kissing.

I guessed we were official.

Another text came in from Zoey.

*We're getting requests from everywhere to confirm or deny.*

I sighed.

Hale threw his sweaty body in the chair across from mine. He had a Hydro Flask in his hand.

“Good run?” I asked as he downed some water.

When he was done, he answered, “Fuckuva lot harder to run in sand. No clue how, but I always forget that.”

“I can imagine,” I mumbled, and that’s all I’d do. You’d catch me running on the sand (or anywhere) when you were chasing me with a chainsaw. “Have you been surfing while you’ve been home?”

He shook his head and took another gulp of water.

Then he looked at me. “Too busy.”

“Surfing is better in the morning, right?”

He nodded.

“You should go tomorrow.”

He grinned roguishly. “Rather be fucking you.”

“I’ll wait for you in bed.”

I saw that flare in his eyes but he shook his head. “It’s okay, baby.”

“You love doing it. We have the weekend off. Do it. I can go with you. I’d like to watch.”

“If you wanna watch, I’ll go.”

I frowned. “No, I want you to go because you want to go.”

He started to say something, his affect changing, I felt impatience leaking in, then he shook it off and said, “You can get up. Brush your teeth. Get some coffee. But then you wait for me in bed.”

That had me grinning. “Aye, aye, bossman. Now for the bad news.” I went back to the website on my phone and turned it his way. “We’ve been outed.”

He just glanced at the pictures before he said, “Not surprised. Actually, more surprised it took so long.”

I was pleased he wasn’t pissed.

“Zoey says I’m getting requests to make it official,” I shared.

“Never understood that shit,” he muttered. “How the fuck do they think it’s their business if it’s official or not, but more, do they not have fuckin’ eyes?”

I couldn't argue that.

He sighed. "I'm probably getting requests too. Do what you want. We're official, so you can say that. Or you can ignore it, which is what I'm going to do."

"Ignore it, it is," I decreed, texted that to Zoey, told her to have fun at Universal Studios, then put my phone down.

"Got a problem with sweat?" Hale asked after I did that.

"Before you, the answer was yes. Absolutely. Gross. Being with you and reading between the lines that you want to fuck me right now, the answer is hell no. Absolutely not."

He was smiling huge at the same time laughing.

Then he pushed out of his chair, offered me his hand, and said, "Then get up, baby. Time to fuck."

I took his hand, we went upstairs, and I learned what "time to fuck" meant.

That being, he gave me a break to get us some water, we showered together, we eventually shared some cheese and crackers and almonds and cuddles, but until it was time to get out of bed and get ready for dinner, that was all we did.

All day.

It was sublime.

Perfect.

But by the time we hit dinner, I was famished.

It was Tuesday, we were back in New York, I was in my office, and my phone rang.

It was Dad.

I grabbed the call immediately because it was my dad. Also because I hadn't talked to him in a while, and I wanted to check in. Further because I was back, so was Hale, and I wanted to see if he wanted to make some dinner plans with us.

"Hey, Dad."

"Hey, honey. How'd it go in LA?"

“Awesome. They were amazing. Very forthcoming. Very real. I think it’s going to have an impact.”

“My prime-time girl,” Dad said.

Yes, I sold the interview to the network. They were giving it a prime-time slot. They’d scheduled it and were already promoting it. I couldn’t refuse the offer for that kind of real estate on a network, but more, Audrey had negotiated a huge payday on it, so it would be crazy not to.

“That’s me,” I said to Dad.

“Proud of you. Listen,” he began, his tone having changed, or more accurately, I realized he sounded more tense than before, but he’d started this out tense. “I need to talk to you about something...I don’t know. I can’t say it’s bad. Just, I need to know.”

“Need to know what?”

“Did you set Hale on Oskar?”

Set Hale on Oskar?

What?

“Sorry?” I asked.

“Did you ask Hale to threaten Oskar to get your mother to back off about the house?”

I sat at my desk, unmoving.

“Elsa?” Dad called.

“Hale threatened Oskar?”

“Oskar is in town. I have more news, your mom and Adam aren’t going to make it. He’s asked her to move out. She asked me if maybe we can sort things out. I told her that wasn’t something I wanted, and reminded her it wasn’t something she wanted either. Oskar was here this past weekend, trying to help her find someplace to live. And he asked to have dinner with me before he went back to Boston. We had dinner last night. That’s when he told me Hale phoned him a couple of weeks ago and told him how things were going to go, and if they didn’t go that way, what would happen.”

This explained the quick about face. First, Mom was pushing, then all of a sudden, she was accepting the settlement.

Hale did that.

For Dad.

For me.

Slowly, oh so slowly, I smiled.

Then I said, “No, I didn’t know Hale did that. But I’m not upset he did.

Are you?"

"Well, since she's already signed the settlement papers, and there's no going back, no. I'm relieved it's done. And...well, even more news, there's a woman I've known for a long time. I've always wanted to...obviously, I couldn't do anything about it. It got to the point I could, I did, and we're dating. Nothing serious yet," he said that last quickly. "But we've been seeing each other a few weeks. So I'm looking forward to things finalizing with your mother. I don't feel I can...take things to certain places unless I'm legally free to do so and that chapter is closed. However, she is your mother, she was my wife, and Oskar is my son. He said Hale was tandemly vicious and matter of fact about it."

Oo, I wished I'd been there for that conversation.

"I complained to him," I shared. "I was upset. Apparently, he didn't like that."

"No. He didn't. He warned Oskar never to mess with you or me again."

God, I was actually feeling all melty.

"Sorry, Dad, but I think that's awesome."

"Okay, honey, I watched your interview with him, and it was excellent. You could see the chemistry you two had then. But I also watched him say he was never going to commit to a woman." A heavy pause I felt weighing on me before he said, "I know you're smart. You're savvy. But do you know what you're doing?"

What I'd done Sunday night was, after we landed, get in the car with Hale, Paul driving, and I'd greeted Paul like he was a close personal friend.

Because he was a part of my life.

Paul had driven us to my place, where I'd packed a huge bag and two not-so-huge ones, because, while Hale was in New York, I was staying at Hale's.

It wasn't an invitation.

It was a given.

Nugget of news: Hale had given me a TV. It had been installed while I was in LA. Although I thanked him for it, effusively, I didn't even turn it on.

Because I wanted to get home.

To Hale's.

Dad was right. I was smart. I was savvy. I hadn't forgotten Hale had said what he'd said.

What I'd done was choose to ignore it.

Maybe to the point I was in denial about it.



Damn.

Reading my silence, Dad's voice had gentled when he said, "All right, *bubbeleh*, you're young. You'll give your heart. You'll take hearts. You'll get your heart broken. You'll break hearts. It's part of life. Like I said, you're smart. I trust you know what you're doing."

Did I?

Dad kept talking.

"And this is why I wasn't exactly upset with Hale for contacting Oskar. Although I don't want one of my children to be threatened, Hale moving heaven and earth to sort something that was worrying my daughter is something I can get behind."

"I'll ask him not to threaten Oskar anymore, though," I offered.

"I don't think he'll have to," Dad shared. "Your brother and I had a kind of meeting of the minds last night. We're oil and water, but he's my son, I'm his dad, and somewhere along this journey for him, he's come to understand his old man has a place in his life. It was a definite olive branch last night, and I grabbed hold."

Of course he did.

"I'm glad for you, Dad."

"Might be good you feel that out," he suggested.

Ugh.

"We'll see," I evaded. "Now, you're dating?"

The tension was out of his voice, something I'd never heard but loved to hear was in it, when he said, "She's lovely. Perhaps you'll meet her someday. Soon."

"I'd love that."

"I know you're busy, and so am I. Is Hale back in town too?"

"Yes. I thought maybe we could have dinner sometime this week."

"Just text me when you two can do it. You're busier than I am. I'll make it happen."

"Okay, Dad. Love you."

"Love you too, *bubbeleh*. Speak soon."

He hung up.

I put my phone on my desk, but didn't get back to work, because that was a lot.

Dad and Oskar mending fences. Hale wading in to set him straight. Dad dating someone. Mom and Adam breaking up. Mom looking for somewhere

to live, even if she didn't have a job and the divorce wasn't final, so the settlement hadn't gone through.

And the reminder that Hale was not a commitment kind of guy.

What was I doing?

What was he doing?

What were we doing?

Was he working on the assumption that I knew, since I asked, and he told me, then I told three hundred million (plus) people?

Or was I his Amal?

One thing I couldn't deny, I wanted to be his Amal.

But it took George Clooney decades to find her.

So maybe not as smart and savvy after all.

Damn.

I stepped off the elevator that night, and Hale was walking to me.

I tipped my head for his kiss, and he gave it to me.

He jerked his chin up at Rocco, who the elevator doors were closing on, also who'd escorted me up, as well as escorted me from the car to the front door, then Hale asked me, "Were they assholes?"

"It wasn't too bad."

"Wine or cocktail?"

"Are you imbibing?"

"Having a beer. Got back later than I'd hoped, so I didn't cook. There's a place around the corner. Great Italian, fucking amazing pizza. Thought we'd walk there."

Since we were now unofficially official, so it didn't matter who saw us, why not?

Nugget of news: his question about assholes referred to all the paps who were now stationed outside his building and had just taken a million photos of me walking in, at the same time shouting questions at me. Thus, my need for an escort.

I'd seen one or two there before, but either they didn't put it together, or I wasn't big enough news, or they'd snapped shots and I'd just never seen

them. It hadn't been a problem.

Now, I could tell, considering Sunday night when we arrived it was an absolute onslaught, and it wasn't much less now, it was going to be a thing.

"Sounds good," I responded to Hale's plans for dinner.

"Glass of wine before we go?"

I nodded.

He headed to the end of the island that held his wine stash and pulled out a red.

I slid on a stool, "Dad called today."

"Hmm?" he prompted while getting the wine key.

"He's dating someone."

Hale's eyes came right to me, and I endured his close inspection.

He then requested verbal assurances. "You cool with that?"

"Tickled pink."

His lips tipped up, and he returned to the wine.

But Hale's eyes came right to me.

*Right to me.*

Assessing. Knowing that was news that could go either way for me and he wanted to look right at my face to see which way it swung.

"Mom and Adam broke up. She's looking for somewhere to live," I went on.

"Coulda called that," he said, reaching for the aerator. "It's all fun and games when it's behind someone's back, but when it's every day, the thrill is gone." He glanced at me. "You gonna call her?"

"I should. I haven't yet."

He nodded and turned to nab a glass.

"Oskar came into town, though, to try to help her find a new place."

"Yeah?"

"He and Dad had dinner. And apparently, my boyfriend threatened him."

He stopped pouring and looked at me.

"Fucker couldn't keep his mouth shut," he bitched.

"Hale—"

"Are you pissed?"

I smiled at him. "Not even a little bit. Mom signed the settlement offer. It's over. I'm not sure all the ins and outs of it, why it's not official yet, but for all intents and purposes, it's done. Without a lot of acrimony and heartache. So in the end, I owe you my undying gratitude."

His lips quirked. “Glad you look at it like that, sweetheart. It wasn’t that I was keeping it from you...”

I picked up his trail. “It was just that, when you threaten your girlfriend’s brother, it’s not easy to wedge that intel into a conversation,” I teased.

“Something like that,” he replied, his eyes smiling. “Mostly, you were upset, and I could do something about it, so I did. It worked out for your dad, and that was my goal, so I didn’t see any reason to upset you again by admitting I threatened your brother. I honestly didn’t think he’d tell anyone in order to save face at how easily he caved.”

I smirked my enjoyment of that knowledge.

Hale took that in, his lips again twitching.

Then he went back to pouring.

*So, my handsome, sweet, fucked-up, awesome man who I’m falling in love with, what’s going on here, between you and me?*

Easy to say, right?

Wrong!

He slid the wine across to me then I watched as he walked to the sofa, where his laptop and the messenger bag he used as a briefcase were resting, along with some files and papers.

He retrieved his beer and came back to me.

He touched his lips to mine when he arrived and asked, “Need something to take the edge off before we head out? I could probably throw together some bruschetta.”

Of course he could “throw together some bruschetta.”

“I can wait for dinner. Speaking of. Are you down with having dinner with Dad sometime this week?”

He leaned against the counter beside me. “Ditto on that, but answer to your question. Yes. Also, Tom and Mika have asked us over. You good to do that?”

Met his mom (both of them, actually).

Now his dad.

*What was happening here?*

I needed to ask. Just ask. I was me. I asked questions for a living.

And this was important, I needed to know. We both needed to be operating under the same idea of where we stood.

I didn’t ask.

I wanted to drink my glass of wine. Make plans with our parents. Walk to

the restaurant. Have great pizza. Come home. Have great sex. Sleep beside him.

What I didn't want to do was get his answer, which might mean the rest of that wouldn't happen.

Not tonight.

Not ever again.

"Hey," he called softly. "You okay?"

*Ask him now, Elsa! What is this? Where is it going? You're offering him your heart. Does he even want it?*

"I'm fine. It was just a lot...you know, with Mom and Adam and Dad and whoever he's dating and all that," I lied.

"Yeah," he said gently, moved in for another kiss, this time it went longer and he held my jaw through it. When he pulled away, he suggested, "We can order takeout. Stay in. I'll go get it. Or call Jim and have someone fetch it."

"No," I said quickly. "I wanna be out in the world. Take my mind off things."

"Whatever you need, sweetheart." His phone made a sound, vibrating on the coffee table where it was resting. "Be back."

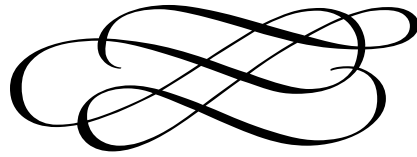
I sipped wine and watched him walk away, understanding something new and uncomfortable about myself.

I was a boss bitch who was willing to take risks and put myself out there to get something I wanted.

Except when it came to ascertaining if I was safe in giving my heart because, in return, I was receiving another's.

With that, it turned out, I was straight up chickenshit.

# CHAPTER 22



## LOVE IS MORE COMPLICATED

*Hale*

“Hale! Is Elsa Cohen living with you?”

“Is it serious?”

“Hale! Over here. Look over here!”

“Is she the one?”

Hale ignored all of this as he went from car to the front door of his building, Hudson and Rodrigo, their doorman, helping him push through the throng.

“Hale Wheeler!”

He had experience with this shit, but this was fucking madness.

So, at hearing a woman’s voice, which was unusual when it came to paparazzi, automatically he turned his head and saw her being jostled by the cameramen trying to jockey for position.

She wasn’t paparazzi, and she didn’t seem to mind, her eyes were glued to him.

He felt his neck tighten, but clipped at the two assholes who were pushing her out of the way like she wasn’t even there, “Mind yourselves, you might hurt her.”

Then he ducked into the door Jim was holding open.

It swung closed behind him, Rodrigo on the outside, guarding it, Jim heading back to the concierge desk, Hudson walking at his side to the elevators.

“The team had a meet today, Hale,” Hudson said. “We want to put

protection on Elsa.”

Hale tagged the elevator, his neck getting even tighter. “Have you received threats?”

“No. But Paul says this is happening outside her office too.” He angled his head to the front doors. “Not as bad as that, but it’s there.”

The elevator arrived and they both got in it. “Anything new with my number one fan?”

Hudson shook his head. “Nope. Not a word for weeks. But it’s been five days since you two have been out about your relationship, and this isn’t dying down. We can pull the detail if it’s deemed no longer necessary. But, right now, we’re looking at the safe side.”

For years, Hale chafed against having personal security.

Right then, he didn’t even think about it.

He said, “Do it.”

Hudson nodded.

The doors opened and he said to Hudson, “See you in a bit.”

“Yup,” Hudson replied.

He walked out.

The doors closed, and for the first time, Elsa was home before him.

He knew she would be. She wanted to get home, change and freshen up before they went to Tom and Mika’s that night.

Right now, she was wearing a cream dress with an A-line skirt that went almost to her ankles. It was sleeveless, and there were ruffles that ran from the sides of her waist over her shoulders. She had a black belt at her waist and high, spike heeled, black boots on her feet.

She looked feminine and edgy. Like she gave a shit about meeting important people in his life, but she knew who she was and wasn’t out to impress, expecting she just would.

Instead of that tightness leaving his neck at the sight of her, it seemed to get tighter.

He didn’t have time to dwell on that.

She was on the phone, coming his way, and she looked ticked.

She wrapped her fingers around his neck, got up on her toes, and he tipped his head down so she could touch her mouth to his lips.

She then dropped down, gave him a one-minute finger, mouthed, “Sorry,” then turned and walked back into the apartment.

He followed her, dumping his bag on a chair.

She came to a stop looking out the window.

And she finally spoke.

“Okay, right. Like I told you when I answered, I don’t have a lot of time. Hale’s home now, and we have plans for the night. I have to go.”

From her tone he was guessing...her mom or Oskar.

He went to lean on the back of the couch, not close to her, not far, and he listened.

She listened too.

Then she said, “Yes, we had dinner with Dad last night, that doesn’t mean —” Pause and, “Mom, no. And I can’t talk about his now because—” Pause then, “I can’t because I live there.”

Oh shit.

“No,” she said slowly, with strained patience. “Hale lives in Manhattan. I live in Brooklyn. Yes, I stay with him when he’s in the city, but that doesn’t mean my apartment is free. It means I’m staying with him when he’s in the city, and I’ll be back in my apartment when he’s not.”

She looked over her shoulder at him and bugged out her eyes in a gesture of frustration.

So Elsa could be cute when she was angry.

He shot her an understanding smile.

She turned back to the window. “Okay. Again. I. Can’t. *Talkaboutthisnow*. I understand you’re in a bind, but I have a one-bedroom apartment that’s tiny. Even if you slept on the couch when I was there, we’d be living on top of each other. And that doesn’t even get into the fact my apartment is so small, you couldn’t even sleep on my couch because it isn’t big enough.” Pause then, “The fact I’m hardly ever home is beside the point.”

Another short pause before she lost it.

“Mom! I said no!”

Hale crossed his arms on his chest.

“I’m sorry I shouted at you,” she went on. “I understand you’re anxious about this. I’ll call you tomorrow. We’ll see if we can figure something out. But that’s my home, Mom. If you were on the street, which you aren’t, it’d be a different story. Adam is giving you time. We’ll figure something out.”

She looked at him again and he could tell how much she didn’t want to say her next before she said it.

“I’ll call Oskar and get in touch with Emilie. We’ll sort this out.” Another pause and, “Promise. Talk to you later. Stay positive. There’s a solution,



we'll find it." One final pause, and, "Yes. Love you too. Bye."

She hung up and turned fully to him.

"C'mere, Elz," he murmured.

She went there, he opened his legs, she walked right between them and collapsed against him.

He put his arms around her.

He gave it a few beats, and then he offered, "You want me to find someplace for your mom to live until the settlement goes through?"

"This isn't your deal. It isn't even my deal. But it isn't yours. So, no. We'll figure it out," she told his neck.

He gave her a little shake. "Baby, I'm loaded. And I own a residential building in Brooklyn. I can see if an apartment in your place is open or coming up for rent."

She leaned back on that, her hands on his chest. "Oh, please God, Hale. Don't put her in my building."

His lips tipped up. "Right. Then second option, you let her stay at yours, and you stay here, even when I'm not here."

She blinked and her head jerked.

"Sorry?"

"It'd be good this place was used when I'm not around. I feel guilty, owning something like this and it sits empty so much. It has to be maintained. The utilities paid." He gave her another little shake. "You could see it as doing me a favor."

"You want me to...move in?"

"Sure. Temporarily. Until your mom gets on her feet."

"I'm not sure I'm...are we...? I mean, is that something...? We're...is that...?"

His eyes narrowed because she was never, not ever, one to have trouble finding her words.

"Spit it out, Elsa," he ordered. "You know you can be straight with me."

"I'm just wondering...if we..." When she saw his frown at her continued stammering, she said quickly, "We're still very new. That seems like a lot when we're so new."

"Did you unpack five days ago, knowing you'd be here with me for a month?"

"Yes."

"So does it really matter at the end of that month, you stay here while I'm

gone, bring your clothes here so your mom can use your place, and when I'm away, you sleep in my bed, when I'm here, you sleep beside me in that bed, and when your mom gets her shit sorted, you move back? I mean, babe, I'm not sure I understand the hesitation. She's in a jam. This is a solution that's no skin off anyone's nose. Except you have to bring your things over here temporarily."

"Temporarily," she murmured.

"Yeah," he confirmed. "I think it's best she have a deadline. We can find out when the settlement is going through, which shouldn't take long. She goes into your place knowing she has three months, maybe four, your call, and at the end of that, she has to be out."

"It seems to be taking advantage of you, Hale."

"Not if I offer."

"Can I pay you rent?"

"Now you're pissing me off," he whispered.

She pressed her lips together.

That tightness was back with a vengeance when he asked, "Is there another reason you're hesitating?"

She studied his face, intently, and for a long time, before she said softly, "No. It's just an incredibly thoughtful, magnanimous gesture. I'm thrown. But this means we can all stop worrying about Mom, and she can stop worrying too and use that headspace to figure her shit out. We'd all be really grateful for that."

"Right, so you can call her tomorrow. Set her mind at ease."

"Okay."

"Kiss me," he ordered. "That one at the elevator was bullshit."

Finally, she smiled, melted into him and kissed him.

When she pulled away, he mumbled, "Better."

"We'll be late if we don't go soon," she reminded him.

He nodded. "Need to hit the bathroom. Can you text Paul we're coming down?"

She nodded.

He touched his lips to hers, set her away, then walked to the powder room.

It was after dinner.

The men and the women had separated.

And Hale smiled as he listened to Elsa and Mika cackling.

Actually cackling.

He should have known they'd get along from the get go. They were cut from the same cloth. Talented women who knew their worth and what they wanted and didn't settle for less of either.

The women were in the front part of Tom and Mika's long living room, sitting on a couch together, having started on martinis, graduated to wine during dinner, now they were back on martinis.

Elsa was absolutely drunk.

Sex was going to be fantastic that night.

Or better than the usual fantastic, whatever you called that.

"Hale."

He turned to look at Tom, who was sitting in a wing chair catty corner to where Hale was in the corner of a couch in the back part of the living room, which felt like a cozy alcove considering the expanse of the rest of the room.

The men were on bourbon.

"Yeah?"

"Son, you called me not too long ago," Tom reminded Hale. "And you were in a state. You seem better. But you said you wanted to talk."

Hale knew this was coming.

Even so, he wasn't prepared to deal with it.

He had called. He'd wanted to talk.

Now he wasn't so sure.

"Are you going to be in the city for a while?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Can we set something up later?"

Tom nodded. "We can. But for my peace of mind, I'd like to understand where your head is at."

He owed him that, so he gave it to him.

"I got home from Europe. I was jetlagged. Vulnerable. I went into Dad's study. No clue why I did. I normally avoid it, for obvious reasons. And it

messed me up. But I called you. Then I called Elz. I got my head together. I can't say it's all good, because Dad killed himself in there. I can say it's never going to get better, because Dad killed himself in there."

Watching him closely, Tom noted, "Gen told me your mother showed."

He drew in a big breath and said, "Yeah. It was unpleasant."

Tom let that go and hit something even stickier.

"Did you open the box your father gave you?"

Hale looked down at his bourbon then threw it back.

"Hale," Tom pushed.

He looked to Tom. "No. I'm thinking of letting Chloe open it."

"He didn't leave it to Chloe. He left it to you," Tom stated. "Gen and I talked about it. We want you to open it. With us there. And Duncan."

"Tom—"

"Think about it. It might be closure."

"And it might be a mindfuck," Hale retorted. "We *are* talking Corey Szabo. He was a master at mindfucks."

"It certainly worked out for Duncan and Genny," Tom noted.

Hale was pleased as fuck Tom was happy and whole again, living with Mika, adding her and Cadence to their family, enjoying his life, building their lives together.

But what worked for Duncan and Genny was the box his father sent to them after he offed himself, which made it impossible for Tom ever to get Genny back.

Hale'd grown to love Duncan. He was a good man. It was whacked, but they were all family. Even Tom and Duncan had become good friends. Tight.

But in Hale's mind, that was a testimony to who Tom and Genny were, what they instilled in their kids, how they'd navigated their divorce, both of them moving on, that the family just grew in numbers and in love.

But Hale wasn't over his father fucking that for Tom.

"That didn't work particularly well for you," he reminded Tom.

"At the time, no. You're right. But if it hadn't happened, I wouldn't have Mika. And Cadence."

"Dad didn't know Mika would come into your life."

"Maybe not, but she *did* come into my life, Hale. Genny said something to me when we had the last conversation we'd have at the farthest edge of who we once were. She told me Duncan was her first and last. But I was the love of her life. She was the love of mine, and I've never shared this with

anybody, Hale, but in the way I could, I fell in love with Mika when I was with Genny. It was faraway love that could never be because I was deeply in love with my wife. I still fell for her. So I'd been in love with her a long time, and now, she'll be my last. Life is complicated, love is more complicated. And I think Corey knew that just as well as anybody. So I think he knew in a manner I'd never lose what I had with Genny, at the same time he knew I'd be okay. I'd find what I needed. And he was right."

"I think maybe you give him too much credit."

"I worry you don't give him enough."

*I worry about that too.*

Hale didn't admit that aloud.

He lifted his glass. "I need another, do you need one?"

"I take the hint, Hale. I'm just going to say, you need to decide, first, what part your mother is going to play in your life. I don't condone her coming to your home and acting like she did. I don't condone a lot of things she gets up to. But as a parent, I feel her pain that you've iced her out, and she's in limbo, not knowing if that's forever, or if she has a chance."

Hale's mouth tightened.

Tom kept talking.

"Second, you need to open that box and face what's inside. I'll stand down because it's clear you want me to, but I won't do it until I share that your call concerned me greatly. I think it's indication you haven't quite faced his loss. You need to do that and find the way that works for you to live with it. Your father would never win any father-of-the-year awards, but he was still your father. At the very least, you owe him the respect to see what's in a box which is his last message to you. But for me, I need you to open it so I can support you through whatever you find in it, and then help you get past it, past your dad's death, and on with your life without anything hanging over your head."

He should tell him about the frame.

He should tell him about some of the memories that had been surfacing.

He should tell him he blamed his mother for her bullshit on Elsa's show, but more about her bullshit all his life.

He should tell Tom about all of that.

He didn't.

He prompted, "Do you want another?"

"Sure," Tom said on a sigh.

He got up and went to Mika's drinks cabinet, calling to the women, "You guys need freshening up?"

Mika lifted a cocktail shaker out of a bowl of ice. "We're good, honey."

He nodded to her, returned Elsa's smile, poured bourbon for him and Tom, then moved back to his seat.

He handed over Tom's glass then he sat and took a sip of his own.

"I must admit," Tom started. "I was uncertain. But I really like her."

Hale took in another breath.

"Which reminds me," Tom continued. "Chloe said Brandi RSVP'ed just one for you, but now she needs to know if you're bringing Elsa to the wedding."

He felt like someone punched him in the gut.

"Hale?" Tom called again.

"They're getting married in Arizona," he forced out. "I need to ask if she can get away."

"Chloe is going to need final numbers soon. You should get on that. This is happening in less than six weeks."

Hale nodded.

"Cadence says it's a frenzy. The press are all over you," Tom noted.

"They're stirred up. They'll settle down."

"I'm glad to see you have protection."

"Elsa will have it starting tomorrow."

"That bad?"

"My team recommended it, at least for a while. See if it dies down."

"It won't, you know."

He knew.

He took another sip.

"She thinks the world of you."

When Tom said that, Hale's eyes shot to him.

"That was what won me over," Tom said musingly into his glass. "Head over heels for you. I have bruises on my shin, Mika kicked me under the table so much, doing it every time Elsa gazed at you when you were talking, like pearls of wisdom were dropping out of your mouth, bouncing all over the room."

Tom chuckled.

Hale twisted his head this way and that to relieve the tension in his neck and his gaze moved to Elsa.

She was smiling at Mika, turned totally toward the other woman in the couch, her attention riveted to her.

Her face was animated.

She was tipsy, relaxed, and happy.

She looked beautiful.

“Glad you found someone like that, son,” Tom was saying. “She’s not impressed with who you are, she’s just into *you*. You could be a builder or a bricklayer, if you were the essence of the man that is you, she’d want you. I love that for you. I was worried. I’m not anymore.”

Hale cleared his throat and took another sip.

Then he asked, “Heard from Matt?”

Tom took that hint too and launched in about his son.

Hale listened with half an ear, and he was interested in learning about Matt’s internship at a large animal vet hospital outside Prescott, Arizona.

But mostly, what was on his mind was a repeat times two.

*She thinks the world of you.*

And...

*Head over heels for you.*

And it repeated those as he struggled with the dichotomy of how they made him feel perfectly content.

And utterly terrified.

He fucked her hard, twisting her nipple, and watching as she came, even harder, crying out at first, than gasping, whimpering, her pussy rippling around his driving cock, her back arched into her orgasm.

Her eyes opened, her fingers still clutching the silk scarf that was tied around her wrists, looped through a hook in the wall behind the mattress. Something he’d ordered installed there during the redecoration.

He stopped tormenting her nipple and curled his fingers under her jaw.

“Like that, baby?”

She didn’t have to answer, but she did, forcing out a breathy, “Yes, Hale.”

“Where do you want my cum, on you or in you?”

“Wherever you want to put it.”

“Good answer,” he murmured, pulled out, swung her leg around in front of him, turning her to her stomach.

He got between her legs again, found her cunt with his cock, powered in, and fucked her into the mattress, pulling out at the last second to come on her beautiful, round ass.

When he was done, he dropped to her to recover while kissing the skin of her shoulder and working her neck, smelling her hair, her perfume, her cunt, their sex.

He closed his eyes and drank it all in.

Then he whispered, “Don’t move,” into her ear.

“Kay, honey,” she mumbled.

He got up, went to the bathroom, wet a cloth, cleaned where he’d got his cum on himself, rinsed the cloth, then went out and cleaned her up.

He returned after taking the towel back to the bathroom and stretched out beside her, hand to her ass, finger tracing a mindless pattern.

She turned her head, whipping her hair the other way, and her eyes found him.

“Okay, the tied-up thing...*fabulous*.”

He smiled at her.

“How long am I going to stay tied?”

“As long as I want.”

She moved her legs restlessly.

“Greedy baby,” he muttered appreciatively.

She rolled her eyes.

He swatted her ass.

She bit her lip.

He felt his cock pulse.

Jesus.

He’d just come.

Without thinking, he slid his hand up into her hair.

“Wanna go to Chloe and Judge’s wedding with me?” he asked.

The instant he did, he felt something weird happening to his throat.

As for Elsa, her eyes went wide, then they went warm.

“Seriously?” she whispered.

“Yeah.” His word was gruff.

“When is it?”



“In about six weeks. In Arizona. I can stop here on my way back from that board meeting in Munich. We’ll fly there together.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

He nodded. “I’ll get Kayla to get you the details. This is Chloe. There’s a dress code.”

She smiled.

He bent and kissed her shoulder.

Then he reached and tugged the end of the scarf, releasing one of her wrists.

She pushed up to her elbows, then to a hip, freeing her other wrist from the scarf and tossing it over him to the nightstand.

She then snuggled into him.

“That was really fun,” she told him something he knew.

“I’m glad you liked it, sweetheart.”

“You done with me for tonight?”

He nodded. “I’m a little tired.”

“Poor baby. I just got to lay there. You did all the work.”

“Don’t take what I said as a complaint.”

She laughed softly, kissed him the same way, then rolled off the bed.

He knew she was going to put on a nightie. She didn’t like to sleep in the nude.

Now, no panties, that was a different story. She’d put them on if he didn’t say anything. She’d sleep without if he ordered her to.

The length of one of his walls was a massive walk-in closet that lay behind some ridged, opaque-gold sliding panels of glass.

She slid the glass open, and he watched as she pulled a nightgown out of a drawer and tugged it on.

When she reached for panties, he called, “Nope.”

She looked his way.

Smirked.

Then walked his way and bent in for another kiss before she headed to the bathroom.

When he lost sight of her, he fell to his back and stared at the ceiling.

When he heard the water go on and he knew she was brushing her teeth, he asked the ceiling, “What are you doing?”

The ceiling had no answer.

But Hale knew two things.

He needed to figure it out and either lean into it.

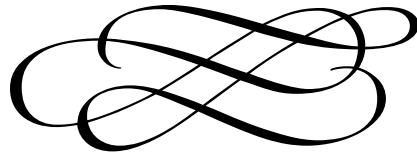
Or put a stop to it.

And feeling the burn of just thinking about putting a stop to it, he knew that was what he had to do.

Eventually.

Soon.

# CHAPTER 23



## TRAINING YOU CAN'T COMPREHEND

*Hale*

“So, Javi, are you in?” Hale asked the man sitting across from him in his office.

Javi ran it down. “Right, a hundred fifty K more a year. Additional stock options. Additional week leave. A raise that comes with a promotion that means I’ll get to see the world on your dime.”

Hale cut in and warned, “That kind of travel isn’t all it seems cracked up to be.”

Javier Rojas smiled at him. “I promise, Hale. When I get fed up with it in three or four years, I’ll let you know.”

Hale smiled back, ignoring the weird feeling in the pit of his stomach.

He knew what it was.

Once Javi was up to speed, Hale’s excuses would dwindle.

He’d have to deal with his mom.

He’d have to deal with that box.

He’d have to deal with Elsa.

Yup.

Time to put that shit out of his mind.

“Are you saying yes?” he pressed Javi, just as there was a knock on the door.

“I don’t want you to think I’m indecisive. But I have a life plan, Hale, and part of it wasn’t working for someone else for very long. You’re asking for a five-year commitment. I absolutely see the merits of being the second top

man at Corza Holdings. But I'm asking you to let me sleep on it."

"Take a week. It's a big decision." Another knock came at the door, this one more demanding, and Hale tagged it this time, because one of his assistants would knock, and if he didn't answer, they knew, if it was urgent or they needed something critical to get on with their work, they could open the door and interrupt him. "So take the time."

"Thanks, man."

"Thanks for considering it," Hale replied, then called loudly, "Yes?"

The door opened and Rocco walked just inside, followed by Heath, head of security.

"Sorry to interrupt, it's important," Rocco said.

"I'll take off. Let you know as soon as I decide," Javi said, standing and moving to the door.

"Thanks, Javi. Later."

Rocco waited at the door and closed it behind Javi while Heath walked to the desk.

He then put his phone on it and told Hale. "It's Chuck. Elsa's producer."

Hale didn't like this one fucking bit.

He stared at Heath's unhappy face while he greeted, "Hey, Chuck."

"Okay, well, shit," Chuck replied. "But I guess I'm not surprised."

"About what?"

"About your team taking this as seriously as Zoey and I have been taking it."

Hale liked that even less. "Taking what?"

"The death threats and creepy gifts Elsa has been getting."

Hale's stomach dropped and it felt like his muscles atrophied, so he had to force his mouth to move.

"What are you talking about?"

Chuck now sounded cagey. "So she didn't call you?"

"No," Hale bit off. "So you tell me."

"If she didn't tell you—"

"You tweaked about this?" Hale demanded.

"Fuck yeah."

"So *tell me*," Hale ordered.

"Elsa's been getting a lot of messages from the same email address. When pictures started coming out of you guys in Cali, of her going into your place, they got nasty. And the gifts started. Zoey and I have been keeping the

gifts from Elsa because she keeps blowing this shit off. But also because they're all kinds of fucked up. We asked and building security have been accepting delivery for us. They call Zo or me when something comes in. We go down, check it out, take pictures, and Zoey's reported it to the police. They come and collect the stuff, or take their own pictures, and a statement from Zoey and me."

"What are these gifts?"

"Couple bouquets of dead flowers. An elaborate picture frame with a picture of you two in it, but Elsa's image has been cut up. Still there, but cut up, like hand shredded with scissors. And the reason I told Hudson, who's on Elsa today, and he told me to call it in to your people is, she got a dead cat today."

Hale's blood ran cold.

A dead cat.

Last weekend, they went to a shelter. Elsa loved animals, always wanted a pet. Her mom wasn't an animal person, so she'd never had one, and Elsa's life wasn't conducive to her taking care of one after she left home.

Until now.

She'd picked two, a ginger kitten and the white, deaf male cat with one blue eye and one gold who had adopted the lone kitten when it was brought to the shelter. The staff said they couldn't separate them now, so Elsa said she'd take both.

So her.

When she was in, she was all in.

A kitten and a deaf cat?

They were waiting for her application to be approved, but since that wouldn't be an issue, they were set to pick them up the next day.

He sounded strangled when he said, "Tell me about the cat."

"Police say it was killed by a car, but some creeper picked it up, boxed it up and had it delivered to Elsa."

"What color was it?"

"It was a tiger cat. Looked young. Fucked up *and* sad."

"You still have the cat?"

"Nope, cops took that for sure."

Hale said to Heath, "Get Kateri down there."

Heath nodded to Hale, turned and pointed to Rocco.

Rocco left the room.

“What?” Chuck asked through this.

“Nothing. Does Elsa know about the cat?”

“Yeah, since the cops are taking this seriously now. They spoke to her.”

“When was this?”

Silence from Chuck.

“When was this, Chuck?” Hale demanded.

“This morning. Around nine o’clock.”

There was a buzzing in his head.

Fucking hell.

It was nearly four in the afternoon.

“Thanks, Chuck,” he said through his teeth. “You might wanna take off. Take Zoey and the rest with you. I’m going to be there in fifteen minutes.”

“I bet,” Chuck mumbled, then more distinctly. “Gotcha and later.”

Heath picked up his phone and disconnected.

Hale got out his phone, asking Heath, “You on this?”

“Yup, but thought you’d want to know.”

Hale nodded and shared, “She adopted two cats this weekend.”

“I know,” Heath, still not looking at all happy, replied.

Hale engaged his phone, and getting up from behind his desk, he called Paul.

“I’m headed down now,” he told Paul when he answered.

“I’ll be at the front.”

When he finished his call, Heath said, “I get you want to get to her. But Chuck told us something else you need to know.”

Terrific.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“The email Elsa’s getting intimidating comms from is the same one we flagged. Your number one stan.”

God fucking dammit.

Hale scowled at him, then, keeping a firm hold on his need to lose his shit, he skirted his desk, and walked out of his office.

Kayla called, “Hale, I’ve got—”

“Sorry, Kayla. Not now. I’m out for the rest of the day.”

He hit the elevator, met Rocco in the lobby, then they hit the car, and since both his and Elsa’s offices were in midtown, he was there in ten minutes.

He was pleased there were only a couple paps snapping shots of him

outside Elsa's office. But even though they'd been back from Cali for a week and a half, his place was still covered in them.

He went in and up.

Hudson was standing outside Elsa's office door. He gave Hale the universal male, "Dude, brace" look.

Rocco stayed outside with Hudson.

Hale went inside.

Chuck, Zoey, Melissa, Trevor, Elsa's booker, and Elsa's new assistant, Amy, were gone, so there was no one in her suite except Elsa, wearing a pale blue dress that skimmed her figure from shoulders to below her knees, patent nude pumps, and a glare.

She looked ludicrously fuckable, which for once didn't help Hale's mood.

She was leaning a shoulder against the doorjamb of her office, her arms crossed on her midriff.

He waited until the door closed behind him before he said in a soft warning tone, "Do not be pissed at me."

"I can handle my own shit," she returned.

"According to Chuck, you've been blowing it off."

"It comes with the territory. I didn't think she'd send a dead animal by courier."

Hale pulled in a sharp breath through his nose.

"I cannot *believe* Chuck told you," she griped.

Hale counted to three, but that was as far as he got before he thundered, "*Why the fuck didn't you tell me?*"

"Calm down, Hale," she demanded.

"Fuck that, Elsa. The bitch sent you a dead cat."

"I was going to tell you when I got home."

"You got a dead cat couriered to you, baby," he said caustically. "Your man considers that appropriate news to interrupt his day and share, oh, I don't know, *the minute you found out someone sent you a dead cat.*"

She opened her mouth.

But oh no.

He wasn't done.

"It's been fucking *hours*, the police have come and gone, and you've been blowing off a credible threat to the point your staff, in order to protect you, have had to act behind your back. I mean, for fuck's sake, babe. You're smarter than that."

“Well, if I’d known I was getting death threats, I probably would have reported it or figured out what you’re supposed to do with something like this. I’ll have words with Zoey and Chuck about their overprotectiveness later. But thanks for giving *my* staff the heads up you were coming over here so they’d leave the job *I’m* paying them for so they wouldn’t witness”—she tossed a hand his way—“this.”

Keeping his eyes on her, he twisted at the waist and jabbed a finger toward the door. “You know those two guys out there?”

“Yes,” she hissed.

“They have training you can’t comprehend. I’ve read their resumes and I don’t comprehend it. I know very little about the skills they need to hone to do their job well. What I do know is, they operate very differently when they protect someone who needs security because they generally live under threat, and one who is living under a credible threat. They did not have the information to do their jobs well, and in this instance, considering that means keeping you safe, do not fucking stand there, giving me attitude, because I’m pissed as all fuck you didn’t see to your own safety.”

“Says the man who only recently allowed himself to have a bodyguard.”

“We’re not talking about me, Elsa.”

“We weren’t, but considering you’re being a hypocrite, we are now.”

“I haven’t had a dead cat delivered to me.”

“Hudson says I’m receiving email from the same address, so maybe just a matter of time.”

“She wants me, she doesn’t want you to have me. The first is creepy, the second, obviously, is fucked right the fuck up. If she’s capable of doing that, Elz, what else would she do?”

She had no reply to that.

“Right,” he gritted.

They went into stare down.

She, the impatient New Yorker, lost.

“You’re mad at me because you’re worried about me. It’s being handled. Get over it.”

“I want all your email vetted by my security team.”

Her eyes went huge.

“This isn’t up for discussion, Elsa. You wanna know what people like us do? We have trained professionals that vet our email so when some crazy person escalates, and shares that with us, something can be done about it.



This person escalated, *not* communicating to me. She, or he, or whoever they are, stopped sending messages to me because their focus turned to *you*. You're doing weekly interviews on a big network. You have a huge prime-time special coming out in a couple of weeks. You're gearing up to film your big series that will be streamed into hundreds of millions of homes. Congratulations. You made it. But sorry to say, nothing comes for free. And I don't mean earning what you've got. I mean putting up with people being really fucking pissed they aren't you, and willing to do something fucked in the head about it."

"You're right," she said quietly, and he noted her expression had changed as well as her tone. He read remorse, and something else he didn't know what it was. "Until I can find a service, I'll be happy to use your team."

He blew out a breath.

"I'm fine, honey." She was still using that quiet voice.

He was glad he got through.

He still wasn't over it.

She pushed away from the door, came to him, and fit herself to his front, her arms around him.

That was when he got over it.

He put his arms around her and dropped his face into her hair.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked.

She let him go long enough to hold her arms out to her sides, indication of him storming in and getting up in her shit.

Yeah. He could see that. He wouldn't want to tell her either, if someone did something to him that was that whacked.

She then wrapped her arms around him again, and said, "Also, I think denial. I didn't see what she sent, but we adopted Frosty and Cheddar this weekend, and it hit even closer to home. If I could pretend it wasn't a big deal, I wouldn't have to deal with the fact it absolutely is."

And yeah. He got through.

Thank Christ.

"We're on it now," he assured.

"Okay."

He pulled slightly away, and she looked up at him.

"You good to go home? Paul's here. If you're good, might as well go."

"I could take off. Let me close down and grab my stuff."

He bent and touched his mouth to hers then let her go.

She went to her office.

He went to the door and opened it. Rocco and Hudson filed in.

But it was Rocco who informed him, “We heard everything. Impossible not to. Just so you know, you were right about how we need to do our work. And we’ll get on that.”

Hale nodded to Rocco then texted Paul they were coming down.

Elsa came out, wearing her white trench coat and carrying her purse, her laptop bag over her shoulder.

And he paid a lot of attention as they walked from building to car.

The only threats he felt were the photographers taking pictures of them.

But she could be out there.

She probably *was* out there.

And he didn’t like it.

## ***Heath***

He had his orders.

So he made the call.

A man with an accent answered.

“Yes?”

“Mr. Vaughan?”

“Yes, Heath,” Rhys Vaughan, Corey Szabo’s man, replied.

“Mr. Szabo told me, if we have a situation, I need to phone you.”

“And?”

“We have a situation.”

No hesitation before, “Tomorrow. First thing. Seven o’clock. In your office. Briefing.”

“Yes, sir.”

Rhys Vaughan hung up.

Heath returned his attention to compiling everything they had on halewheelerisgodstan1 so he could give it to Vaughan in the morning.

## *Hale*

His eyes opened.

He saw dark and felt Elsa.

His eyes adjusted to the city lights illuminating the room and saw she'd moved away from him in sleep.

Unconsciously, and urgently, he reached for her and pulled her into his arms, his body, and he did this tightly.

His heart was racing, his skin felt cold.

She stirred, her hand gliding up his chest to curl around his shoulder.

"Hale?" she asked sleepily.

He said nothing.

He just shoved his face in her hair and drank her in.

"I'm okay, honey," she whispered, pressing closer.

He drew in a long breath.

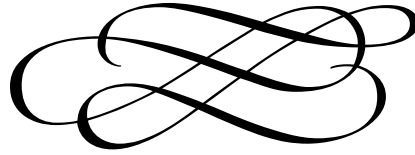
"I'm okay," she repeated. "I'm right here. I'm fine."

He held her close. She let him.

He didn't know it, but with her safe in his arms, he fell asleep first.

It would take a lot longer for Elsa, and that wasn't (only) about the dead cat.

# CHAPTER 24



## BABY GATES

*Hale*

**H**ale was in his corner of the couch.

Elsa wasn't in hers.

He had his legs stretched out, ankles crossed, resting on the coffee table.

She had her head to his thigh, and Frosty, his eyes closed, snoozing on her chest while she stroked him.

It was safe to say they'd learned, a mature cat surrendered to a shelter, when he was claimed by his forever mom, he didn't mess about with sharing his gratitude. Frosty had settled right in.

Elsa was scrolling her phone.

Hale was looking over a marketing strategy they were going to roll out for Core Point.

It was then they heard the tiny *thump*.

Elsa started and turned her head.

When she moved, Frosty opened his eyes.

Hale carefully got up, lifting her head to allow himself to do so, and putting some pillows under it as he got up to investigate.

Frosty jumped off Elsa and came with him.

He hadn't gotten to where the thump sounded before Cheddar zoomed across the floor in front of him, nearly tripping him.

The kitten went from rug to hardwood, lost purchase, and started skidding, then sliding, and finally whirling in circles, he ran into the wall with another tiny *thump*.

“My baby!” Elsa cried, jumping off the couch.

She got nowhere near him.

Cheddar was up and zooming back across the room.

“I think he’s okay,” Hale drawled.

Cheddar then zoomed to him, took a flying leap, and landed on Hale’s jeans at his knee, his little kitten claws digging in.

He started to climb, faltered, Hale caught him, lifted him to his chest and walked back to the couch.

He felt the ginger furball struggling for release. Since he was barely bigger than Hale’s hand, though, Hale had the advantage.

He settled back in on the couch.

Elsa settled back on his thigh.

Frosty jumped on the coffee table, sat and blinked slowly at them.

Hale let Cheddar go and he climbed up Hale’s chest, around his neck, then he lay on Hale’s shoulder.

This lasted all of ten seconds before he took another flying leap, bounced off the arm of the couch, and fell to his side on the floor.

Through this, Elsa gasped in alarm...twice.

Cheddar jumped up and zoomed away.

“Oh my fucking God, that cat is going to kill me. Heart attack at age twenty-seven,” she grouched.

“Hang tight, baby. We’re getting the lay of the land. It seems like there are three scheduled zoomie sessions a night before he crashes tucked into Frosty. We’re on number three. We’re almost there.”

“Ugh.” She collapsed against him again.

Frosty’s head turned as he watched Cheddar zoom around. Like any being living with a disability, they’d noticed Frosty had developed extreme acuity in other senses, mostly vision.

Within another five minutes, Frosty jumped down. A minute longer, he was stretched out on the carpet below Elsa and Cheddar was wheeling around his belly area before he curled up in that location and promptly passed out.

“See?” Hale asked Elsa, who was peering over the couch at the cats.

“I love them so much, my bubbies, my precious pookies, my darling babies,” she cooed.

Hale smiled to himself.

He could hear purring.

She settled back in with her phone.

Hale returned to his marketing strategy.

“*Chag Pesach sameach*,” Hale said to Elsa’s Aunt Deborah when she opened the door of her house to them.

“Oh my goodness,” Deborah replied, touching both hands to her chest excitedly. “Look at you, what a catch!” She turned and called into the house, “Elsa and Hale are here!”

People crowded the doorway.

Fortunately, David was one of them. He waded through, pulling them inside.

“*Chag Pesach sameach*,” he repeated to David.

David’s head jerked when he did, then his eyes moved from Hale to Elsa and back to Hale. When they rested on Hale, he saw they were warm.

“Thank you, Hale.” David clapped him on the shoulder. “Welcome to our Seder.”

Hale nodded.

With Elsa holding his hand, David led him deeper into his sister’s home so he could attend their family’s Passover Seder.

He was into it for the first five pairs of heels Elsa tried on.

He was *so* over it now.

This meant Hale was lounged in the chair in Bergdorf’s shoe department, surrounded by stacks of opened boxes and shoes, trying not to fall asleep by attempting to understand what got him in this predicament in the first place.

He’d just wanted Elsa to meet Blake. Therefore, he’d arranged brunch.

And somehow, after said brunch, his ass had landed here, an unwilling participant in the female bonding ritual.

Not to be mistaken, he was glad they were getting along.

But...

Jesus Christ.

“I don’t know,” Blake was saying, turning a foot this way and that while standing in front of a mirror.

“I know what you mean,” Elsa replied. “I’m not sure they’re you.”

She was standing close to Blake, wearing a pair of white pumps with a block heel and what looked like the links of a gold horse bit on the toe that he’d had to stop himself from laughing at, until Elsa put them on her feet.

Blake lifted a foot and pulled off the shoe she had on, left the other one on, which meant she limped to the chair before she plopped into it and tossed the shoe into its box. “Okay, so far, it’s the Louboutins and the Gianvito Rossis for me, and the Gucci and Prada for you.”

Elsa stood in front of the mirror and did the twisting foot thing. “I’m not sure about the Guccis. I’m not into block heels.”

“But...they’re so chic!” Blake exclaimed.

Elsa looked to him. “What do you think, honey?”

“I think I want someone to kill me,” he replied.

For a second, Elsa just stared.

Then both women burst out laughing.

The sales associate approached, juggling five more shoeboxes in his hands.

Hale groaned audibly.

Both women busted a gut laughing again.

Right, so, he wanted them to get along.

Goal attained.

He just didn’t know how much it would hurt.

But they were having the time of their lives.

So he shut up, settled in and let them get on with it.

It would take a while—after more shoes, going somewhere for what Blake called “nibbles and cocktails” and finally heading home—when Elsa redonned the red stilettos with the thin ankle strap she bought that day, before she straddled him on the couch.

And he got his reward.

“Okay, but honestly, those last few scenes were worth it,” Fliss was saying. “I left the theater bouncing on my feet, still laughing.”

“I’ll give you that,” Gemma said. “I just wish I didn’t have to sit through two hours of boring to get to it.”

“I didn’t think that scene where Brad Pitt was walking though the compound was boring,” Blake put in. “I was on the edge of my seat.”

“Totally,” Carole agreed. “And DiCaprio’s monologue, I couldn’t tell you what it was about right now. Still, while I was watching it, I was riveted.”

They were talking about *Once Upon a Time...in Hollywood*.

Their friends, at his dining room table, eating food he cooked.

Hale was at the head. Elsa the foot. Carole, Felicity, Blake, Gemma and Jadyn sitting down the sides.

The kitchen was spotless because Elsa might not cook, but she was a fantastic kitchen assistant. She could mince and chop, which helped, but mostly she wiped things down, rinsed stuff and put it in the dishwasher, and put ingredients away when he was done with them.

And she laid a mean table.

She’d come home that week twice with bags of stuff, and earlier, set the table with his dinnerware, but added a table runner she’d bought. Along that she’d laid slender, stemmed glass pieces that held tea lights, and she put five bigger glass vases, all in different shapes, one that sat on a small plinth, in the middle that she filled with water, and they held cream-colored floating candles. Last, she’d gone out that morning and got cream roses she’d clipped to the bud and set in little, ribbed shot glasses randomly down the center of the table, interspersed with those same shot glasses filled with more tea lights.

It was simple, but elegant and beautiful.

It was Elsa.

Now the table was covered in food. There were three empty wine bottles and cocktail glasses had been abandoned around the living room for when they sat down to dinner and wine.

Elsa had some classic jazz playing low on the sound system.

It looked like a reality TV episode of the young and gorgeous.

With the vibe, good people in his space, Elsa obviously happy and in her element, he didn’t hate it.

“Anyone seen *Nope*?” Jadyn asked.

“Oh my God,” Fliss exclaimed. “I wanna be Keke Palmer when I grow



up.”

“Huge crush on Daniel Kaluuya. *Huge*,” Carole announced.

Elsa caught his eyes and smiled, her blue ones sparkling with happiness, before she shoved some of his short ribs into her mouth.

Oh yeah, he didn’t hate it.

“I vowed years ago never to watch the Oscars, but I renewed my vows after *Nope* was dissed. Fuck that,” Felicity declared.

“Word,” Gemma agreed.

Hale took a sip of his wine.

Then he scooped up some ribs with mashed potatoes and gravy.

The gravy was Gemma’s recipe.

“I don’t know what the problem is,” he heard Elsa say into the phone as he walked from the bathroom across the bedroom to the closet, where she was.

She was in her underwear: panties and a strapless bra. Her hair was in curlers. Her makeup was done. She was wearing false eyelashes. She looked glamorous, sexy and adorable, all at once. This meant Hale wanted to make her hold onto the built-in set of drawers where she was filling an evening bag, pull down her panties and fuck her right there.

He didn’t do that because he’d finished fucking her on the couch an hour before which meant they were running late.

She looked to him and watched him pull up his trousers.

Her eyes moved from his crotch to his face.

“Who?” he mouthed.

“Emilie,” she mouthed back.

Fabulous.

She left her evening bag where it was and wandered out of the closet, toward the bathroom, saying into her phone, “She’s living at my place, I’m paying the rent, the utilities, the cable bill, and Dad’s giving her an allowance until the papers are signed.”

This was recent news, something they didn’t know, because Inger nor David had shared it.

David had been giving Elsa’s mother an allowance since she left, even

when she'd been living with Adam.

Hale had told Elsa she could have a break on the rent for when her mother was there.

She wouldn't hear of it.

Now they both knew Inger could afford to pay that rent, and she hadn't offered.

"I can't help but think, since this drama is becoming an ongoing thing, that Mom is playing us," she continued.

She'd be right about that.

He could get the woman was freaked that she made a move toward happiness and fulfillment, and it didn't work out like she'd hoped. So now she had no money of her own, no job, and was living in her daughter's apartment.

But it had been some time since all this went down. Time for her to find a job. Time for her to get her shit together.

Instead, she seemed to dump it on her kids.

He wondered what she was up to this time.

He had this thought as he shrugged on his dress shirt.

That was when it hit him.

The large closet had three walls fitted with railings, shelves and drawers. There was a big built-in safe hidden behind a section of railings. There was a long bench down the middle to sit on when you put your shoes on, or as Elsa used it, to throw her clothes over and dump her handbags on. There were jewelry drawers and a free-standing full-length mirror that was a statement piece, angled in a corner.

He had clothes he left there, like he had the same in LA. The amount of which had never taken up even a quarter of the closet.

They'd moved most of Elsa's clothes, shoes and accessories over so her mother had space to move her stuff in and Elsa had her things at Hale's. Her belongings didn't take over the rest of the closet, but she was definitely a presence.

And now it looked like people actually lived there.

He could even smell her, a mingling of her many perfumes.

No. A mingling of her many perfumes, her natural scent, with his cologne and his scent.

It was Saturday night. They'd been in New York for five weeks.

It was the longest stretch he'd spent in one place since he inherited his

father's holdings.

He looked at Elsa's things displayed in his closet, smelling her entwined with him.

In the last five weeks, he'd cooked more than he had in years. He'd fucked way more. He'd managed to find the time to read two entire books. Jadyn had called him when a friend of his pulled a hamstring, and he'd asked Hale to jump in as a replacement on their team for a league basketball game. Hale had said yes. Elsa had come with him, and she and Gemma sat together, watching and cheering their men on.

Hale hadn't played a team sport since he was fifteen. He didn't want to say it was a blast, because that would mean he'd have to admit he missed it.

But it had been a blast, and he was kind of bummed Jadyn's friend was fit to play the next game.

In that time, Javier Rojas also said yes, and he was going with Hale to Munich.

Hale had cats. They were officially Elsa's. They were absolutely both of theirs. Or at least Cheddar was his, and Frosty was hers, but since Cheddar was Frosty's, the circle was complete.

Hale had a girlfriend.

No, he had a partner.

He had a life.

He had a life with Elsa.

He came out of his thoughts as she walked back in, some of her hair still up in curlers, some of it down.

She was no longer on the phone.

He started to button his shirt.

"Do I wanna know what that was about?" he asked.

"No," she answered, spritzing with perfume.

"Tell me anyway," he ordered.

She moved to a section of the closet that had a rail, pulled out a long blue dress, lots of sequins, one shoulder bared, cutaway back, and she hung it on a valet rail.

"Emilie and Scott are moving in together. She has two roommates where she is now, they're getting another one. But Scott's place is too small, so they're looking for something bigger. That means his old place on the Upper East Side will be open. Mom wants it."

Christ, that woman.

“Does he rent or own?”

“He rents.”

“Can she afford it?” he asked.

“No.”

As she spoke, she was stepping into her gown. She pulled it up her shoulder then came to him, lifted her arm and angled her side his way.

“Zip, please.”

He finished tucking in his shirt and zipped her.

“And your sister was calling you about this because...” he prompted warily, because he could guess, and what he’d guess would piss him off.

“She wants to know if I’ll subsidize it for Mom. Me and Oskar, she asked him too. You will note the absence of Emilie contributing to that.”

That was what he would guess.

“Elsa,” he said low.

She waved at him in a dismissive gesture and went to go look at herself in the mirror. “I know. I know. I’m not going to. But I think that means it’s going to be me who has to have a talk with Mom about her expectations and her age and how she isn’t exactly ninety years old and infirm and has outlived her retirement so she needs to rely on her children to take care of her.”

“Maybe let her figure that out on her own,” Hale suggested.

She turned to him. “Actually, I’m going to sit down with her and suggest she move to Boston. Oskar was always her favorite anyway. It’s cheaper to live there, not super cheap, but not Manhattan expensive. She’ll be closer to her grandkids. And maybe he’ll be able to help her find a job somewhere. Or she can be their nanny or something.”

“I think that’s a good idea.”

She nodded, and in a rustle of sequins, she walked out of the closet and back to the bathroom.

He grabbed his suit jacket and tie and tossed the jacket on his bed on his way to the bathroom.

She was seated at the vanity there that had never been used. But now it had her makeup and skincare and hair stuff scattered all over it.

She was finishing her hair.

“You okay about this?” he asked.

“She’s my mom. We’re not close, but she’s my mom. I want her settled.” She stopped fiddling with her hair and turned on the little bench to face him.

“She also isn’t like this. I mean, I don’t think she is. She’s never had to be before, so maybe I’m wrong. She’s not needy or grasping. She can be passive aggressive and manipulative, but not about things like this. I think she’s freaking out. I think she’s fifty-four years old and has to start a new life, and that’s daunting. I’d find it daunting, wouldn’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“So I have to dig down and find some patience and help her find her way.”

“You’re a good daughter,” he said softly.

She gave him a gentle smile and turned back to the mirror.

He went to the basin and used the mirror there to put on his tie.

He was adjusting the knot when Elsa came up behind him and curved her arms around him.

“Just have to put on my shoes and jewelry and I’m ready,” she said.

“Okay, baby,” he replied.

She gave him a squeeze and walked away.

He located his phone and texted Paul and Hudson they were almost ready.

He then went to the closet, put on his own shoes, back to the bedroom, shrugged on his jacket, sorted his cuffs, then to his nightstand for his wallet and phone.

Elsa joined him and they walked down the stairs together.

At the top and bottom of the staircase, he’d had baby gates erected. Cheddar wasn’t big enough to attempt the stairs. Not yet. At night when they went to bed, they brought the cats up and pinned them in with the upper gate. Now they were downstairs, corralled by the lower gate.

This didn’t mean Cheddar couldn’t get into trouble. He could and did.

But in the time they had him, they kitten-safed the house so now the breakable stuff was out of reach.

Thinking this thought, Hale felt a tightness he had become accustomed to ignoring of late line the right side of his neck while he secured the lower gate when he and Elsa got through it.

Elsa cooed at both the cats and bent to stroke Frosty, while Hale walked carefully because Cheddar was attacking his shoes as he moved.

They both engaged in the usual efforts to keep both cats off the elevator when they got into it, but finally the doors closed successfully on them, and they went down.

Through the lobby.

They met Hudson at the door who walked them to the car through vastly smaller numbers of clicking paps.

They got in the back of the car, Hudson got in the front, and they were off to attend a charity event Nora was involved with.

When Paul had glided them into traffic, he turned to Elsa.

“You look beautiful tonight, baby.”

She leaned into him and kissed him with her very red lips.

She pulled away and said, “You too, handsome.”

She smiled at him, lifted a hand to his jaw, swept her thumb across it, then sat back in her seat and looked out her window.

Hale looked out his.

Another night with his girl.

He wasn't looking forward to the event.

But he was looking forward to being home with her when it was over.

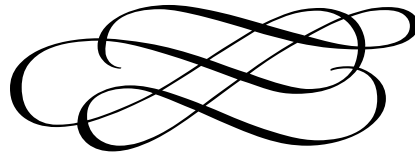
He searched for and found her hand, her fingers curling instantly around his when he did, and he did this having no idea that would be the last night they'd have together.

And it wouldn't be because he was leaving town, then later, coming back to her.

It would be because he would leave, and not come back.

Not to her.

# CHAPTER 25



## THAT GUY

*Elsa*

“It is in times like these where I lament my heroic endeavors of curating a select group of skilled aestheticians, nail artists, hair stylists and sales associates, and instead, should have committed my intelligence and vast resources to gathering favors owed to me by an elite assassin or two,” Nora drawled.

I caught Blake’s gaze and gave her an Eek! face.

She gave me one back.

Somehow, although Nora was on the event committee, tickets had been purchased by, or more likely for, AJ Oakley and his date, Paloma Friedrichsen.

This was making the night uncomfortable, considering AJ was Jamie’s dad, and they hated each other, and Paloma was Tom’s ex, and he might not hate her, but she hated him, and she hated Nora more.

So our table, which included Blake Sharp, her dad, Ned, Nora, Jamie, Tom and Mika and Mika’s PA, Teddy and his husband Faunus were getting bombarded by dirty looks coming from Paloma, and weird looks sent our way from AJ.

Making this worse, Nora’s ex-husband, Roland Castellini, was there, and he did not bring a plus one. Though at least with him, Nora knew he would be in attendance. But he was sending searching glances Nora’s way, which she was blithely ignoring, but Jamie was not.

I leaned into Hale and whispered, “And I thought this night would be

boring.”

He turned his head and grinned down at me.

*God, I love you*, I thought.

I didn't say it. I wanted to, but I didn't.

We had to have the conversation. I knew we did. I wanted him to know, and I wanted to know if I was reading all the signals he was sending correctly.

But now we had smooth. We had easy. It was good, no...great.

He seemed happy. Even so far as riding a baseline of content.

And I certainly was...both. And part of that was because he was.

But I didn't tell him I loved him. Not yet. It wasn't the right time. He was leaving to go to Munich soon, a short trip, a couple of days, then he was coming right back to New York, where he'd collect me, and we'd head to Arizona for Chloe's wedding.

Though he couldn't miss that was how I felt because I wasn't hiding it.

Instead, I grinned back and then returned my attention to my dinner.

I didn't have the opportunity to get too involved with my chicken, because suddenly, Jamie stood, throwing his napkin down and announcing, "I'll be right back."

"Jamie," Nora said urgently, reaching out to him.

He glanced at her, shook his head tersely and left her behind as he prowled to an exit at the side of the ballroom.

The one AJ was already using.

Blake gave me big eyes, I returned them, but looked to Mika when she said, "Let him do what he has to do."

Nora was half out of her seat.

"I do not have posting bail scratched onto tonight's schedule," she returned worriedly.

Tom stood. "I'll go."

Hale stood too. "I'll go with you."

They nodded to each other and followed Jamie's footsteps.

"Please sit down, Nora," Ned murmured, reaching for her hand. "There's nothing you can do."

"Well, hello."

Everyone turned to see that somehow, Paloma had sidled up, unnoticed.

Perfect bitch move, sliding in the instant the men left, leaving her prey vulnerable.



“Oh boy,” Blake muttered.

Nora lamented not knowing any assassins, in that moment, I lamented giving up (mostly) on sharing juicy gossip with the world.

Because all of this was *juicy*.

“Mika,” she greeted coldly. “Nora,” she sniped. “Ned,” she purred.

“Paloma, darling,” Nora cried with mock-joy. “What a delight! I was hoping we’d have a chance to say hello. I wanted to tell you how very lovely you look tonight. No one does off the rack quite like you, dear. It’s startling how well you pull it off.”

*Ouch.*

Blake’s foot kicked mine under the table.

I pressed my lips together.

“Nora—” Paloma started snidely.

“Don’t,” Mika said simply.

Paloma blinked and looked at Mika.

Mika spared her only a glance before she reached to her champagne, looked to me, and dismissing Paloma like she wasn’t even there, said, “Have I told you how fantastic I thought that Mankowitz interview was?”

“Thanks, Mika,” I replied.

“It was awesome,” Blake chimed in. “It made me go back and watch those episodes of *Rita’s Way* again. The ones with Gordon Fuller. And it really was too bad they didn’t get to explore that storyline. It was promising.”

“Sometimes, even though it’s hard to see it, but sometimes it happens where we get a win. In other words, we move on, and there’s forward progression. The popularity of *The Next Life* is proof of that,” Mika said.

“Indeed,” Ned put in. “I don’t have time to watch too much television, but I watch that show. And I can tell you, it’s also nice for men who don’t find women young enough to be their daughters attractive to have representation in the media.”

“I always knew I liked you,” Nora told him.

As Mika intended, considering the fact we were carrying on a conversation without her, Paloma had no choice but to drift away.

“You all right?” Mika asked Nora quietly after she’d gone.

“Are you?” Nora asked in return.

Mika didn’t get the chance to answer.

“Nora, can I have a word?”

Another sneak attack, this one from Roland.

I wasn't a twenty-something woman who was into older men, but I couldn't help but notice he, like Tom, Jamie and Ned, was very handsome in a way where I could be.

"No, you can't," Jamie said, sliding into his chair beside Nora. He then, without even looking at Roland, ordered, "Slither along, snake."

Roland's face got tight.

Hale took his seat beside me.

"Everything okay?" I whispered.

He nodded in a way I didn't think he was very committed to, doing this while he put his napkin on his lap, but his attention was focused on Roland.

"Really, Roland, we're not finished eating," Nora said.

"Later then," Roland pushed.

"No," Jamie denied, his tone steel, even pugilistic.

Nora glanced at him with open puzzlement, and I was puzzled too, because he was being very possessive for a man who considered Nora his friend and companion, not making her his lover, when it was clear to anyone around them (or at least those who were female) she wanted that.

Nora looked up at Roland. "We really don't have much to say to one another."

"I—" Roland began.

It was then Ned entered the fray and stood.

"Roland, please," he said sharply. "Manners."

Roland glowered at Ned, then he moved that to Jamie, then he stormed off.

I noticed we had most of the ballroom's attention now when Hale leaned my way. "Is it more fun being in on it than it is reporting on it?"

I looked at him. "Absolutely."

He winked at me and went back to his food.

Mika and Tom were whispering to each other.

Jamie was sawing into his roast beef like he had to kill it before eating it.

Nora seemed self-conscious, which was not her at all.

Ned and Faunus tried to rescue the dinner repartee, and although their efforts were valiant, they didn't quite succeed.

So by the time dinner was over, and Nora had to flit off to do event duties, Tom, Jamie and Ned headed straight to the bar.

Hale leaned back in his chair, his arm around the back of mine.

"I need to pop to the bathroom and freshen up. There's dancing after this,

yes?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Hale answered. “Some ballroom dance show and then they’re opening it up to everyone else with a band.”

“When are we leaving?”

“When they open it up to everyone with the band.”

I laughed softly, went in for a kiss on his jaw, then said, “I’ll be back.”

“Kay, baby,” he muttered.

I shot Blake a smile as she slid into my seat to keep Hale company while I was gone, and me and my evening bag headed to the ladies.

Of course, the two women’s bathrooms on the ballroom level had lines out the door because everyone was doing the same as me, and in a patriarchal archetype, the men who designed these spaces didn’t cater to the differing needs of women from men, so this kind of thing happened pretty much everywhere.

I took the stairs to an upper level, where there were conference rooms and such, and found the bathrooms there were thankfully empty.

I used the facilities and was leaving the stall to wash my hands and check my makeup.

And the minute I pulled the stall door toward me, I saw her standing right there.

I went perfectly still.

Because I recognized her.

Shorter than me. Light brown hair. Pale skin. Dark brown eyes. Around my age, but probably a bit older.

She’d be pretty, if the fact she was unhinged wasn’t an aura that pulsed from her.

She was the woman, months ago, who was standing outside my offices that Sunday morning after the Blazing the Trail gala.

I knew then she was also Hale Wheeler’s number one fan.

I lifted my hand her way and started, “Okay, I—”

That was all I got out.

She whispered, “He’s mine.”

Then her hands came from behind her, and she slashed at me with a knife.

I felt the blade cut through the flesh of my hand, and I screamed bloody murder, the noise ricocheting around the bathroom fueled by adrenaline and filled with fear and pain.

Instantly, my mind flooded with thoughts, trying to decide on retreat, and

closing the door on her, or advance, pushing her away and running.

I was wearing four-inch heels, she was not, and there were gaps at the bottom of the stalls she could get under.

I could kick her if she tried that.

All this flew through my head in less than a second as she pulled her hand with the knife back in preparation to deliver another, deadlier strike.

I took that opportunity and reached out, pushed her at her chest, getting my arm slashed in the process. I felt the pain. The blood swell and ooze over. But she fell back.

And I stepped back, slammed the door and locked it.

Then I fumbled with my purse to get out my phone.

My hand hurt like crazy. My arm.

But...

911, or Hale?

Hale would be faster.

But she had a knife.

Then I wondered what I was doing.

Noise.

Always make noise.

I screamed again, this time words, "She has a knife! In here! She has a knife!"

She banged on the stall door twice, then I saw her down below, trying to crawl underneath.

She led with the knife, so I stomped on her arm.

And suddenly, she disappeared, like she was pulled from the other way.

Someone heard me scream.

Thank God.

"Call 911," a man's voice ordered through what sounded like a struggle.

Oh, thank *God*.

Someone heard me scream.

I was getting blood everywhere, all over my dress, the floor, my bag, my phone, but I managed to get it out and call emergency.

I told them where I was, what was happening, who I was, and then I heard Hudson say, "Open the door, Elsa. You're safe."

I opened the door.

He took one look at me and muttered, "Jesus." He then took my phone, which was still connected to emergency, put it to his ear and said, "Send an

ambulance. She's been cut."

After that, he threw my phone in the sink and led me out of the stall.

"I'm sorry, I didn't tell you I was coming up here. I should have told you I was coming up here," I babbled to him.

"It's okay. Don't worry. It's okay," he said, drawing me toward the door, his fingers wrapped around my wrist, multitasking, taking in the cuts to my hand and arm.

I looked over my shoulder and saw a tall, dark, aggressively handsome man I'd never seen before standing over the woman. The bloody knife was on the floor. It looked like she'd been bound in some way, her hands behind her back, her ass to the floor.

She was glaring at me with such hate, my stomach bottomed out.

Hudson led me out and next door to the men's room where he took me to the basin.

I was glad he didn't try to see to this with her close. I needed to be away from her. I needed space and doors and people between us.

Still, I started shaking.

"Okay, you're safe, Elsa. Breathe. Stick with me," Hudson said. "Fucking *fuck*," he bit off as he ran a gentle stream of water over my hand, then, "It's good. The cops are on their way. I need you to keep it tight just for a little while. Okay?"

"Okay," I said unsteadily.

"We knew it was her. Vaughan followed her here," he shared. "We didn't know she had a knife. She lost us when she got here. It was a fuckup," he admitted.

"It's okay."

"Not sure Hale is gonna think of it that way," he mumbled.

No. Hale wasn't going to think of it that way.

He'd pulled out some paper towels, dropping the first few to the counter, the rest he was using to put pressure on both cuts.

"You need to sit down?" he asked.

I totally did.

I nodded.

"Hold those," he ordered.

I held the towels, and he put his hands to my waist and lifted me on the counter.

Then he went back to the towels.

“Rest back. Deep breathe,” he instructed. “Paramedics will be here soon. These don’t look too bad. But you’ll need stitches.”

“Okay,” I said, and it sounded choked.

Hudson looked at me. “You’re not breathing.”

I concentrated on breathing.

The door opened and Hale was there.

His eyes took me in and all the oxygen on the planet vanished for an unnaturally long second before he whispered, “The fuck?”

“Hey, honey,” I called.

He strode in, his long legs bringing him to me in the flash of an eye.

He put his hands where Hudson’s were and warned low, “You need to be away from me.”

“Understood,” Hudson grunted, then he disappeared.

“I’m okay,” I told him.

He lifted the paper towel on my arm to look at my cut.

“She had a knife,” I explained.

He looked at me.

At his enraged expression, I decided to shut up.

I then watched him close his eyes, so tightly, they were scrunched, lines emanating out the sides, his forehead creasing.

The way he did that, the agony behind it, I decided not to stay quiet.

“I’m fine. They caught her. She’s next door.”

He opened his eyes. “Okay, baby. Shh. Just relax.”

The door opened, I looked that way and Tom was there.

He was at Hale’s side in a flash (he had long legs too). Only then did I notice a hotel staff member was with him. She stared at me with wide eyes.

“You need to let me take over,” Tom said to Hale.

Hale didn’t move.

Tom took the first aid kit the woman was carrying and ordered, “Hale, son, I need you to let me see to Elsa.”

Oh.

Right.

I forgot.

Tom wasn’t only a retired tennis star, he was a doctor.

No underachievers in this crowd.

Hale moved.

Tom carefully removed the towels and inspected my cuts.

“Deep, not too deep, nothing vital hit.” He looked at me and gave me a reassuring doctor smile. “You’ll need to be stitched up, but it’s not too bad. I’m going to bind them now and we’ll get you to a hospital to have them taken care of.”

I nodded.

“You feeling light-headed? Nauseous?” he asked.

“Just shaky,” I told him.

“Good girl. You’ll be all right. Hang in there. Let’s get you sorted,” Tom replied.

Tom got to work.

Hale watched him for a few beats with an expression on his face I got, because his girlfriend was sitting by the basin in a men’s room, blood all over her gown, and he looked livid.

He looked something else too.

I got that something else, but I also didn’t.

It was terror-stricken.

“Hale, honey, I’m okay,” I repeated.

Tom turned his head to Hale, Hale flicked his gaze to mine.

Then he turned on his foot and stalked out.

My phone was ringing.

I opened my eyes, rolled in bed and saw Hale wasn’t beside me.

I also felt a ping of pain in my hand and arm.

I reached to my nightstand to see the call was from Dad.

He and Mom had shown at the emergency room last night. Hale had called Dad. Dad had called Mom.

It was unnecessary, to my way of thinking. But not theirs. They hung with me and rode with us back to Hale’s when the hospital released me.

Twenty-eight stitches in my hand, seventeen on my arm.

She really got my hand, from webbing all the way across to the apple.

I didn’t know when or even if my parents left, since the hospital gave me painkillers, Hale made me take them, and the last thing I remembered was lounging on the couch, tucked tight to Hale, while he talked to Mom and

Dad.

Clearly, he'd carried me to bed.

But where was he?

I took the call, "Hey, Dad."

"How's my beautiful girl this morning?"

"I'm good."

"Did I wake you?"

"Sorry, little groggy," I amended my earlier answer. "But good."

"Oh, honey. Sorry I woke you. I just wanted to check in. See if you were okay with your mom and I coming over this afternoon. A little visit. See how you're doing."

In other words, even though Hale had plenty of guestrooms in his place, they left.

I looked to Hale's bedside device, unsurprisingly a smart home unit designed by Corza.

It was nearly nine thirty.

"I think that'll be okay, but I need to ask Hale. Can I call you back?"

"Of course. But you're good?"

"I'm fine, Dad. Honest. I'll call soon."

"Okay, *shayna punim*. Love you."

"Love you too."

We hung up, and I threw the covers aside and got out of bed.

Since she got my right hand, bathroom business wasn't easy. But I managed it and washing my hand and brushing my teeth, though flossing would have to take a break. I had a Waterpik, but I'd do that later. And I wasn't sure how I was going to wash my face, which needed it, since I still had my makeup on from the night before. I left that too.

I was keen to find Hale.

When we'd gotten home, Mom had helped me out of my bloody gown, cleaned me up and put me in a lounge outfit.

Somewhere along the line, Hale had put me in a nightgown.

I found my robe, shrugged it on, then walked out of his room to the stairs.

The baby gate was open at the top, closed at the bottom.

That meant the cats were downstairs with Hale.

I saw Hale on the couch with coffee, Frosty and his laptop.

His eyes came to me as I started down the stairs.

He put the laptop aside, got up, and Frosty jumped down to come say hi



to me.

Cheddar didn't bother moving. He was stretched out on the floor on his back, his fat baby kitten belly on display, not a care in the world.

I navigated the baby gate and Hale asked, "Coffee?"

I nodded, all of a sudden feeling funny.

I understood why when he went to the kitchen.

Not me.

He didn't come to me.

I followed him and stood at the island as he made my coffee.

Frosty brushed against my ankle, and I leaned down to give him some scratches.

By the time I straightened, Hale was sliding my coffee across the island to me.

But he remained on the other side.

"Her name is Marcia Dabrowski," he announced matter-of-factly.

I hooked the mug with my left index finger, but I didn't lift it to my mouth.

Because...why was he on the other side of the island?

"The man who subdued her is named Rhys Vaughan. He's my father's."

My body jolted in surprise at his strange words.

"He's...your father's?" I asked.

Hale nodded.

"What does that mean?"

"That means he worked for my dad. That means he still works for my dad. Which means, when the situation with Dabrowski became unsafe, orders my father left before his death meant the head of my security activated this Vaughan guy."

Whoa.

That was huge news. Absolutely huge.

For Hale.

Hale kept talking.

"Within weeks, he did what my team, Jamie's investigator and the police couldn't do. He found Marcia Dabrowski. As you know, after the cat incident, she went dark. We now know, because she told the police, she did because she was watching you and saw them show at your office. At this point, she backed off and regrouped. Vaughan stayed on her. She didn't make him last night, but she saw Hudson, so she managed to shake him. Vaughan

told Hudson he'd lost her, and they knew she was planning something, so he recruited Hudson and they went in search of her. They thought you and I would be safe in a ballroom filled with eight hundred people. Sadly, you left that area to go to a space that was unoccupied. Fortunately, they were searching the conference floor and you scream loudly."

He was finished with this part of his story, I could tell, since he stopped talking.

So I said, "Okay."

"She's now incarcerated," he continued, still speaking by rote, like he was reading a report. "I had a call from the police to share some preliminary findings of the search of her apartment. She's been fixated on me for a while. You as well, starting after the Blazing the Trail gala. I wasn't her first, though. She had other objects of fascination. Meticulously organized filing cabinets full of them. Regrettably, for some reason, she stayed on me rather than jumping to some other guy before she totally lost her mind. This might have something to do with the fact I saw her downstairs, once, and photographers were jostling her. I told them to be careful of her. I didn't think about it again, but she told the police that story, and they shared she took that as proof of what she'd already convinced herself, that she and I were connected."

Since it seemed he was finished with this part of his story as well, I shared, "I saw her too. Outside my offices. Also only once. The day after the Blazing the Trail gala."

He didn't look happy about that, but since he didn't look happy at all, it wasn't much of a change.

But he did start talking again.

"Obviously, I had a few things to say to Heath and Hudson about how they should have told me she was on the premises so I could have kept you close. And why Vaughan was called in at all without me being informed. But apparently, Hudson and Vaughan notified hotel *and* event security, some of whom were recruited to help in the search, others who were supposed to keep an eye on both of us. They weren't up for the job, but it doesn't matter. I wasn't paying them to protect you. My team fucked up. I get that their main concern was finding her, and they thought they'd enlisted assistance, and even the time it took to send a text or make a call would be time spent in better pursuits, like ascertaining where this nutjob was. But Hudson should have contacted me."

He probably should have, but he was human. There was no reason for me

to leave an area that was clogged with people.

Except the one I had.

But he couldn't know I'd do that.

"I should have told you I had to go upstairs," I said. "Or I should have told Hudson."

"You're not getting paid to keep yourself safe."

I didn't like his affect. His tone. His distance. He seemed pissed, which was understandable, but there was something else happening here.

Something worse than getting slashed by a stalker.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"No."

"I'm fine," I assured quietly.

"I can't do this," he declared.

"Do what?" I asked.

"This. Us. I've been meaning to end it with you for weeks. I should have done that when I first had the thought. It would have saved you having to go through last night."

I didn't move, not quite sure I heard him correctly.

"Now that you're awake," he went on, "I'm gonna get my shit and go. We made a deal you could stay here while your mom gets on her feet. I'm honoring that deal. You can stay as long as you need. Just inform Brandi when you're able to go back to Brooklyn."

Wait.

Was he...?

Was he *breaking up with me*?

My voice was trembling when I admitted, "I'm not sure I'm following."

"We're done, Elz," he stated, like he was telling me it was raining. "It was great. You're great. We had some good times. But I have shit I have to do. I can't be taking care of cats or responsible for women getting slashed by my stalkers—"

"Hale—"

He shook his head. "No, Elsa. You knew it wasn't going to be a thing when we started. We both knew. Last night just motivated me to stop fucking around because I like you."

"If you like me, then I don't understa—"

"It isn't going to go anywhere. I'm not that guy."

"You're not that guy," I whispered.

He stared at me.

“You’ve known for weeks you wanted to end it and you’re doing it,”—I lifted my bandaged hand and arm—“now?”

He flinched. “Not good timing, sweetheart, but—”

Oh, fuck no.

“Don’t call me sweetheart. And I’m not staying here.”

“We made a deal.”

I leaned into the island and shrieked, “*Fuck our deal!*”

Hale closed his mouth.

“You’re right,” I snapped. “I knew. I knew from the beginning. In fact, for weeks, all the signals you were giving me, not, incidentally, signals that you wanted to end it, quite the opposite, but I knew, if I was smart, I’d be sure I was reading them right. I’d ask you. Ask you what was happening between us. I didn’t. My mistake. Because obviously, I wasn’t reading your signals right.”

“I really did enjoy—” he started.

And fuck no to that too.

“Fuck the words of platitude, Hale. But here are some words of advice. The next woman, be sure to keep her in tune with where you’re at so she doesn’t fuck up royally and fall in love with you.”

On that, I ignored the way his handsome face froze, left my coffee where it was, whirled and stormed to the stairs.

He caught my good wrist before I got there.

I stopped, twisted it free, and took a step away from him.

“Don’t touch me,” I bit.

“Take a breath, sweetheart. Calm down. I fucked up. I shouldn’t have done this now.”

I shook my head. “No. Nope. Now’s the perfect time. I already regret how *totally fucking stupid* I’ve been. If you’d tacked more time on that, it’d make it worse, not better.”

“I need to know you—”

I threw up both hands, feeling far more than a ping of pain in my injured one, but since managing other pain I was experiencing took precedence, I ignored that too. “I don’t care what you need. *I* need to get the fuck out of here.”

“I can’t let you go when you’re agitated like this.”

“*Are you fucking insane?*” I shouted. “You just broke my heart!”

And unfortunately, my voice broke on that last part.

He took a step toward me, his face...

His face...

I couldn't let myself process the look on his face.

"Baby," he whispered.

I couldn't process that either.

I started toward the stairs again. "Fuck you, Hale."

He caught me again.

I yanked away and screeched, "*Fuck you!*"

We stood, staring at each other.

Then I said, "It would be really nice if you could give me some space to collect some of my stuff and go. I'll arrange to come back and get the rest when you're not around."

"I want you to stay here."

"I'm not staying here."

He drew in breath and then he said, "I get you need to leave right now. Come back when I'm gone. I'll be gone in two hours."

"I'm not fucking staying here, Hale."

"Right," he said quietly. "Then let me call Paul to take you home."

I shook my head. "No Paul. No you. No on your place. I'll call a Lyft."

"I'd feel better if you let me call Paul."

"What aren't you getting about this?" I snapped. "You ended it. We're *done*. Let me get on with us being *done*."

He crossed his arms on his chest. "I'm not leaving until you allow me to call Paul to take you home."

"Fine," I spat.

He nodded.

I opened the baby gate, closed it behind me and warned, "Don't follow me."

He didn't follow me.

I got dressed. I packed a bag. I called my dad.

Then I gathered everything I had before I walked back downstairs.

A wasted effort.

Paul was hanging out by the elevators.

Hale was gone.

I asked Paul to help me crate the cats. He helped (and while he did, I didn't allow myself to process the look on his face either), and he carried the

crates while I shouldered my bag.

God bless him, he'd parked at the loading dock so there were no paparazzi to see my shameful exit.

We loaded up, I got in the back with my cats, and I was pretty damned proud of myself I held it together through Manhattan, over the bridge, to Dad's.

Dad helped us get the cats in.

He called our neighbor to ask if she'd do the huge favor of running out to get some litter and trays.

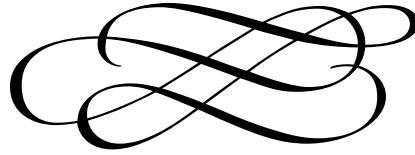
He then made me coffee and sat down beside me at the kitchen table while I drank it.

I did this stoically.

It was when Frosty jumped into my lap that I lost it.

And with Frosty sticking close, and Dad's arms going tight around me, I cried like a baby.

# CHAPTER 26



## NEVER DIE

*Hale*

*T* hree days later...

They were shit at an intervention.

He knew they were there before he let himself in. Even though there was a four-car garage with only his Jeep in one, they hadn't bothered to hide their vehicles.

It seemed like they'd lit every light in the house, so he could easily see Duncan standing at the windows, turning his way from watching the ocean, Genny sitting on a couch, a glass of rosé in her hand, staring at Hale as he walked in, Tom sitting in a chair, holding a highball of bourbon, swiveling his chair around to face Hale when he arrived.

Looking at them, he knew this was Tom's idea, Genny was all in, and Duncan didn't agree, but he was there all the same.

The box his dad left him was sitting on the coffee table.

Next to it was the double frame from the study, opened and pointed his way.

He stopped, dropped his bag, and before anyone said anything, he decreed, "We're not doing this."

"You broke up with her after she received forty-five stitches because of your stalker," Tom retorted.

His neck was already so tight, he thought his head would snap off, but it

didn't matter.

That was a blow to the sternum.

And it made the vision of Elsa surface. The vision of her wearing her beautiful, blue, sequined dress, pain and fear in her eyes, blood all over her, sitting on a men's room basin.

As he had hundreds of fucking times since he saw her that way, he forced that vision down.

He then took an uneven breath to get his wind back, and repeated, "We're not doing this."

"I get it," Tom said. "I saw her in that bathroom with blood all over her. If I were you, that would gut me too. It would make me ask questions about how safe the ones I love are with me. It might make me do something totally, fucking stupid in an effort to keep them safe. So I get it."

Hale knew when Tom got this way, when Genny did, he had no choice but to ride it out.

This was why he crossed his arms on his chest and settled in.

"However, once I had those thoughts," Tom continued like Hale knew he would, "I'd look at the woman I loved, the woman who loved me, and I'd make note to rip my security a new one, and then I'd look after my woman."

Hale turned his attention to Duncan. "Any chance you can get those two out of here?"

"I don't agree about the box," Duncan replied. "I think it should be your choice when you open it. I do agree with you getting your ass reamed about dumping Elsa. What were you thinking?"

Hale clenched his teeth.

"Sit down, Hale," Genny ordered.

"Nope," he denied. "Say what you gotta say and go."

She tipped her head to the coffee table. "Where did that frame come from?"

She wanted to know?

"Dad was holding it when he shot himself."

Her shoulders went up, her chest caved in, she looked to the side and down, and he saw the tears fill her eyes.

She loved his dad. He'd been a supreme dick to her, done the unforgiveable.

And she still loved his dad.

Hale felt like shit he put it out there like that, but they'd ambushed him,



what did she expect?

“Open the box, Hale,” Tom ordered.

“You wanna open it so fucking bad, open it,” Hale offered.

Tom stood. “Who am I listening to? Who am I looking at? This is not my son.”

“You’re right,” Hale bit. “I’m not. You’re looking at Corey Szabo’s son, so don’t act fucking surprised.”

Tom didn’t miss a beat.

“Then I’ll repeat, who am I listening to? Who am I looking at? Because I always had your father’s respect, Gen always had your father’s love, so he’d be pissed as shit to see you standing there, speaking to us like this,” Tom spat. “Open the fucking box.”

“Why?” Hale demanded to know.

“Because you’re clearly intent on fucking up your life. You had the woman you needed, maybe the only one on this entire planet who fit you perfectly. She was right by your side, right in your bed, deep in your life, and you threw her away. Blake called her. She told Blake. Blake told us. You did it the morning after she got cut.”

So, that meant Blake was out.

That stung. He liked her. She’d been a good friend.

Until...

“And what does the box have to do with it?” he asked.

“I’m not going to sit back and allow you to waste your life like your father did,” Tom answered.

“I’m not suicidal. I broke up with my girlfriend. It happens.”

“We saw the interview, Hale,” Genny said.

“Well, Elsa was the one who conducted the interview, Genny, so it isn’t like she wasn’t in the know,” he pointed out.

“You can know, and your heart will still hope,” Genny returned. “But her heart didn’t hope. It was well beyond that. She’d given it to you. That’s what happens when you find the person who it belongs to.”

She had.

She’d fallen in love with him.

Jesus God, this shit had to fucking end.

Hale shook his head. “That’s not on me.”

But it was.

He felt it.

Every day. Every minute. Every fucking second since he left his apartment, left her behind, he felt it weighing on him.

Suffocating him.

Burying him.

He hadn't taken a full breath since he'd lost sight of her after she climbed the stairs.

Genny put the wineglass down and stood, looking at Tom. "This was a mistake, Tom."

"No, it isn't. Don't give in to his shit," Tom retorted.

That was when Genny opened him up.

Made him bleed.

"This isn't my Hale. I don't know this man. I don't want to know this man. So I'll wait until my Hale comes back so I don't have to have memories of whoever this man is."

He couldn't take it anymore.

"Fine," he clipped. "Fuck it," he went on, prowling to the box.

He ripped off the tape, opened it.

When he looked in, he saw nothing but a ring box sitting on a piece of paper and what looked like an X-Ray image sleeve.

He pulled out the ring box, finding the piece of paper was attached.

He turned it over, and scrawled on it in his father's hand, it said, *Last*.

Seeing his dad's handwriting, saliva filled his mouth, but he swallowed it down and looked back in the box.

A piece of paper was taped to that too.

It said, *First*.

And he was right. It was an X-Ray sleeve.

On the edge it said, *Corey J. Szabo*.

His father wrote those notes.

His father packed this box.

His father put this together himself.

For Hale.

It took every ounce of courage he had to set the ring box aside, reach in and pull that sleeve out.

When he did, he found it was heavier than expected.

Thick.

He shook out the images, but more came out.

A folder.

A medical folder.

On the top was taped another note from his dad.

This one read, *Not an excuse, an explanation.*

He opened the folder, and he was in such a scattered headspace, trying to detach from what was happening, being pissed it was happening, trying to keep a lock on the feelings he'd been feeling since he ended things with Elsa, at first, he didn't know what he was looking at.

And then dates on the medical notes stood out.

That was when some of the words he was reading registered on his brain.

He staggered back and fell into a chair, now staring at the words jumping out at him, penetrating his eyes like poisoned darts.

"What is it, Tom?" Genny asked quietly.

"Jesus Christ," Tom said from above him.

Hale read through some of the notes.

Not all the same doctor, they weren't so stupid they took him to the same doctor. Though, quite a few of them weren't doctor notes, but hospital notes.

But they were all about the same patient.

His dad.

Somehow, his dad got hold of these and collated them.

Maybe so no one would get their hands on them.

Maybe for this.

For now.

To tell his son way too late how criminally and pathologically abused his father had been at the hands of his parents.

Now he knew why he'd never met his paternal grandparents.

"Hale, let me have that," Tom said quietly.

Feeling what he read burned in his brain, and he hadn't even been through half of it, Hale handed it over, his eyes falling on the ring box.

He reached for it and opened it.

When he did, a slip of folded paper fell out.

But in it was a set of rings he'd seen before. Sparkling. Brilliant. Like they'd just been cleaned. Three of them. Engagement, wedding, and a diamond-encrusted anniversary band.

They were beautiful.

They were beloved.

They were Marilyn Swan's wedding rings.

Genny's mother.

The only other woman who Corey Szabo loved.  
The only real mother he ever had.  
The only real grandmother Hale ever had.  
Woodenly, he reached to the floor to nab the slip of paper.  
He folded it open.  
And he read it.  
It was also written in his father's hand.

Hale,  
Marilyn gave me these to give to you.  
Holding on to them for you was the greatest honor of my life.  
Find the right one and give them to her.  
Please don't let what I did end who I am.  
I promise you, love like I have for you will never die.  
Dad

Fuck.

He'd signed it, *Dad*.

*Love like I have for you will never die.*

The box and note fell to the floor as Hale's head dropped to his knees, he wrapped his arms over the top and his shoulders heaved with the first sob.

Things happened around him. He felt Tom rubbing his back. He heard Genny's gasp, then her tears.

But it was Duncan who pulled him out of the chair and into his arms.

Duncan held him close and grunted, "I know, man. It's fucked up how you can be so fucking pissed at him and still get it. Still love him."

At his words, Hale groaned, and his body bucked in Duncan's hold, but Duncan held fast.

Genny horned in and Tom did too.

And then there were more.

Chloe was there. Matt. Sasha. All of them joining the huddle around Hale.

Of course, Genny and Tom wouldn't make him do this without them close.

Chloe was getting married that weekend.

But of course they were all there.

All holding him. All there when he needed them.

His family.  
The precious gift his dad gave him.

### ***Corey***

*Then...*

“I can’t take these, Marilyn.”

“Yes, you can.”

“I have no use for them. And it’s far too soon for you to be giving them away.”

“I’m not giving them to *you*, silly. I’m giving them to you to keep safe until Hale needs them.”

It wasn’t entirely a foreign feeling, so he knew exactly what it was.

Corey felt shame.

“I don’t think he’ll want anything from me,” he said quietly.

“Oh, buddy boy.” She shook her head. “You’ve got one of the greatest minds of our time, but still, you sure do miss a whole load of important things.”

She then wrapped his fingers around the rings she’d worn ever since he’d known her. Rings that she’d placed in his palm. After that, she kissed his cheek and walked away.

It was the gathering after her husband’s funeral.

Within a year, she too would be gone.

### ***Hale***

*Now...*

“Vaughan?”

“Hale.”

“Where is she?”

“Right now?”

“Yes.”

“She’s staying with her father.”

“Right.” Pause and, “You know you and me are gonna have to talk.”

“I know.”

“Okay.” Another pause and, “Thanks for the info.”

“Hale?”

“Yeah?”

“You already know, but I’ll say it anyway. He’d love her. He’d love her for her. But he’d also love her for you.”

Hale rolled his neck.

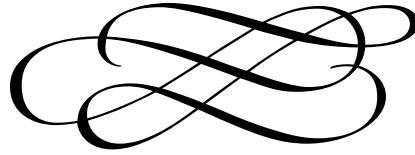
Then, “Right.”

He hung up on Vaughan and called Paul.

Paul probably hadn’t even gotten around the block. He’d dropped Hale off at his apartment in New York barely five minutes ago.

But now, they were going to Brooklyn.

# CHAPTER 27



## TRIGGERED

*Hale*

The worst possible person opened the door to David Cohen's Brooklyn brownstone.

Oskar.

"You've got some fucking nerve," Oskar stated on seeing him, stepping out on the stoop aggressively, forcing Hale down a few steps as he did, and closing the door behind him.

"I'd like to speak to Elsa," Hale said, making himself do it calmly.

"No shit?" Oskar asked. "Now, do you seriously think I'm going to let you anywhere near my sister?"

"I can understand you being angry—"

"You can?" Oskar sneered. "You got my sister slashed then you broke her heart after you led her on for fucking *months*, Wheeler. I don't think you understand *shit*."

It was good to know, when it came to the crunch, Oskar had his sister's back.

Even if it was frustrating as fuck right now.

"I'm asking you, Oskar, please let me speak to Elsa."

As he was saying this, the door opened, and David walked out.

Another blow, seeing the angry and disappointed look on David's face.

He came to stand beside his son.

"Hale, you shouldn't be here," he said.

"I'm sorry, David, but I need to speak to Elsa. And I'm hoping what I

have to say are things she wants to hear.”

“Then call her,” David returned. “If she takes your call, you can try to convince her. This isn’t the way to go about it.”

“I hurt her, I can’t go any longer without doing something to fix that,” Hale explained.

“You did the deed, it isn’t your choice how it gets fixed, Hale,” David replied.

He held David’s gaze and repeated, “David, I hurt her, *and I need to fix that.*”

David and Hale stared at each other while David grappled with his decision.

During this, the door opened again.

Hale heard a gasp, and noted Inger there, her eyes narrowing on him.

But his attention focused on who was with her.

Elsa.

On sight of her, his lungs hollowed out.

She had shadows under her eyes, looked like she hadn’t slept in months, but she wasn’t gazing at him with hurt or fury.

Nope.

All he saw was indifference.

Fuck.

“Go inside, Elsa,” Oskar ordered.

She was Elsa. She didn’t go inside.

She came to stand between her dad and Oskar.

“I think you should go,” she said to Hale.

“I’d like the chance to talk to you.”

“I believe you’ve said all there is to say.”

“I’m in love with you.”

Inger gasped again. David made a low noise. Oskar growled.

Elsa stared at Hale with her lips parted in shock.

“My dad never touched me,” Hale declared. “Not true. Twice. I remember twice. Once when he hugged me after I got up on my board the first time. And the other was when he was giving me advice on women. I remember everything about that moment because I was twelve and he was treating me like a man, sharing manly advice, and I loved that. I loved sharing time with my dad when he was like that. It didn’t happen often. I know now it didn’t because it was an outfit that didn’t fit. He felt



uncomfortable trying to wear it. Like an imposter. But mostly I remember that moment because he touched me. Even though Tom and Genny were always affectionate, touching, hugging, any way they could share they loved you, Dad wasn't like that, and I didn't really understand how much I missed it. I needed it. Its absence was a way of life, but I still needed it. I also didn't understand why he didn't do it."

He took in a breath.

No one on those steps moved, but he had everyone's attention.

Especially Elsa's.

"Dad had twenty-two broken bones between the ages of two and sixteen."

David made a sound like he'd been punched.

Inger whispered, "Oh my Lord."

Oskar grunted, "Fucking hell."

He barely noticed all of this.

He was focused on the tears filling Elsa's eyes.

"He'd also had nine concussions," Hale carried on. "Or at least there were nine that were diagnosed by medical personnel. Before he died, he packed a box specifically for me. You know we had issues in our relationship when he was alive. I thought he was playing mind games with me. I didn't open it. Tom and Genny were so pissed I did what I did to you, knowing I was hung up on my issues about my dad, they made me open it. His medical records were inside." He took in another breath and let it out, finishing, "In other words, I know now why he didn't touch me."

"Hale—" Elsa started shakily.

"I have more, please, sweetheart, let me get it out," he requested quietly.

She nodded.

"He hurt my mom. They were separated before I was born and divorced long before I could form coherent thought. You know what he did to her. Everyone does. She hated him for it, and by association, I think she hated me. I didn't want to do that to a woman, Elsa. I didn't want to hurt her so badly, she'd live her life mired in that pain, not able to get out. I forgot."

When he didn't say anything else, she asked, "You forgot what?"

"The conversation when I was twelve. Dad giving me advice on women. He told me not to find a woman whose life revolved around me. He told me to find a Genny. I forgot what he said, but I did what he told me to do. I found a Genny."

Inger emitted a subdued sob.

David said, “Come on, Oskar. Inside. Let’s give them some room.”

Again, Hale barely noticed this.

Because, as her family vacated the stoop, Elsa moved to sit on the top step.

He heard the door close as he sat down beside her, near, but not touching her.

She was staring at the street, the tears still shining in her eyes, but they didn’t fall down her cheeks.

He was staring at her.

“I hate I hurt you. I fucking *hate* how I hurt you, baby,” he said vehemently. “But I saw you in that bathroom, bloody and pale and looking terrified, trying to be brave, and it was my shit that put you there—”

“It wasn’t your shit, Hale,” she said to the street.

“No, but it felt like it.”

“Yeah,” she murmured.

“I spent this morning with Tom, Genny and Duncan, talking to my dad’s neurologist in LA.”

She turned to him.

Seeing her face, so close, God, he needed to touch her, kiss her, hold her, *absorb her*.

He couldn’t live without those blue eyes.

How could he think he could live without those eyes?

Fuck.

He needed those things like breath in that moment, but he didn’t move.

He just spoke.

“Dad had CTE.”

Her body jerked in surprise.

Hale nodded and continued explaining, “He was experiencing some memory loss. Periods of confusion. Depression. The concussions he’d suffered from his parents’ abuse caused irreparable damage to his brain. And his neurologist said he was exhibiting early signs of Parkinson’s.”

It was then she reached out, put her hand on his forearm and tracked it to his hand. She pulled it to his thigh and linked her fingers through his.

Okay, shit.

Thank Christ.

*Thank Christ.*

Hale curled his fingers into her hand and kept going.

“I thought he gave me his medical records so I’d understand why he never learned how to be a parent. I think he did, but at first, I only saw the early history, not the more recent. While I was dealing emotionally with what Dad left me in that box, Tom read the whole thing and called Dad’s neurologist to set an appointment so we could talk. This means, since Dad didn’t do anything half-assed, it was also to share with all of us what led to him killing himself.”

“Oh, Hale,” she whispered, falling into his side and putting her head on his shoulder.

When she did that, his relief was so immense, it didn’t feel emotional, it felt corporeal, like a gaping open wound healed itself in a heartbeat.

He smelled her hair, so he turned his head and pressed his nose there.

There she was.

Once he had her all around, he lifted his head and continued.

“Genny is determined to believe that the CTE led to Dad’s suicide. The doctor confirmed suicidality is a symptom, and he shared he was very concerned about the levels of Dad’s depression. It was becoming unmanageable by his estimation. But he can’t say that’s why Dad did what he did in the end.”

“Okay,” she said gently. “What do you think?”

“I think Dad had a huge ego. He was one of the smartest people on the planet, he knew it, was proud of it, and Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy is progressive. There was going to be more memory loss, maybe aggression, and definitely early onset dementia. And this was on top of having a movement disorder like Parkinson’s.” He felt his lips tip up in a humorless smile. “He wouldn’t want to be remembered like that.”

“And he wouldn’t want the people he loved to have to endure that,” she said softly.

Hale’s throat closed so forcefully, there was pain.

Because, yes.

Corey Szabo wouldn’t want that.

He forced a swallow and shared, “It would be dishonest not to consider that it could also be about him not being able to live with the things he’d done. He’d done some really shitty things, sweetheart. And I know with the effort he put into making amends, he didn’t forget them.”

She bumped their hands on his thigh and agreed with a quiet, “Yes.”

“We’ll never know,” Hale continued. “What we do know is, essentially,

his parents killed him.”

When he said that, she moaned, pulled their hands to her chest and turned into him.

He wrapped his other arm around her and gathered her closer.

Okay, right.

Now he felt even better.

“I need to know if my mother knew this,” he told her. “I need to know if she knew he was so out of his element as a father, he was drowning in it, and she not only didn’t pick up the slack, she shoved his head under.”

She pulled her head out of his chest and looked up at him.

Yeah.

There was his girl.

“Are you going to talk to her?” she asked.

“Only if you’ll get on my plane tomorrow and come with me. After that, we’ll go to Chloe’s wedding.”

The tears came back.

He wanted to do something about them, but he had to make sure she got it.

“I love you, Elsa. So fucking much, I couldn’t admit how much I felt for you because it terrified me. And then I didn’t protect you. It triggered me, baby. I felt like a loaded gun in our relationship. Any second, I’d do something like my dad did to my mom, and I’d obliterate you. I walked into that bathroom and there you were, covered in blood, fighting for your life while I was shooting the shit with Blake in a ballroom.”

She lifted her bandaged hand to smooth his hair and he flinched when he saw it.

That didn’t stop her.

“It wasn’t your fault,” she stated.

“I know, but do you get why that would trigger me?”

“Yes, yes, totally. Now that you’ve explained it, yes.”

“I have no idea what kind of woman my mom was before Dad did what he did to her. Genny said she was sweet and funny and smart. But I didn’t get any of that. I got the bitter and twisted. He didn’t know how to love me. She simply refused to do it.”

Her face got hard.

“Don’t blame her,” Hale said quickly.

“Uh...sorry, my prerogative,” she snapped.

He almost smiled.

Fuck, for the first time in days, he almost smiled. For good reasons.

He didn't.

He said, "Let's give her the opportunity to explain herself."

She looked to the street and rested her head on his chest again, muttering, "Whatever."

That made his lips curve, it wasn't a full-blown smile, but it felt good.

"Will you come with me?" he asked.

"Yes," she said immediately.

He sucked in breath through his nose.

Then he asked, "Do you forgive me?"

"Yes," she said, again immediately.

Okay, fuck.

*Fuck.*

"You heard the part where I said I love you?" he asked.

"Yes, which is good, since I love you too, and I've learned it seriously sucks when that's one-sided."

Even though it felt shit he put her through that, a chuckle erupted from him. She looked up at him and smiled.

Thank Christ.

He wanted to kiss her.

But he couldn't yet.

He'd held back, and she'd suffered for it.

She had to have it all.

"Right then," he began, "We're gonna wait because I don't want to steal Chloe's thunder. But Dad left me something else in that box."

Her brows knit.

"I never met my paternal grandparents," he kept sharing. "I told you I knew Dad didn't have a great relationship with them. Now I know why. Mom's parents lived back in Chicago. They were in my life, but not much. Too far away. I loved them, they loved me, but I got the sense they were disappointed in Mom for being how she was, I think, looking back on it, particularly how she was with me."

"*Quelle surprise,*" she muttered sarcastically.

He fought a grin and kept talking.

"My real grandparents were Robert and Marilyn Swan, Genny's folks. They were around all the time. I honestly don't know if I've ever met anyone

more loving than them, particularly Marilyn. She doted...” He shook his head, his lips twitching just thinking about Marilyn. “Actually, she doted on everyone. She was a real character too. And she absolutely adored my dad.”

Hale watched her face get soft. “I’m glad he had that.”

“Me too,” Hale replied.

He then took their hands and lifted them to his lips, twisted them, so he’d touch her ring finger there.

After he did that, he shared, “Marilyn gave him her wedding rings to give to me. It’s Chloe’s time to be the belle of the ball. Then I’ll give you a part of what Dad wanted you to have. You’ll get the other parts later.”

The tears were back, but this time they competed with love and wonder in her eyes.

It was so beautiful, he memorized that look instantly.

“Hale,” she whispered.

“I’ll say the words then, baby,” he vowed. “It’s just that I fell down on communicating, even after we promised we’d do better. So I’m not going to fall down again. And now you know where I’m at.”

She sniffed, controlling her emotion, and said a shaky, “Yes. I know where you’re at.”

“Now you wanna tell me why Oskar and your mom are here?”

Her expression registered surprise at the subject change, and then it brightened.

When Hale saw that, he took in yet another breath.

And finally, it came easy again.

“Well, you know, the drama at Chez Cohen doesn’t die down for long,” she declared.

“Shit,” he mumbled.

“So, the thing with me brought Mom and Dad together and made them realize they’d lived decades together peacefully, they shared history and kids, and they might not love each other or agree on everything, but they’ve been friends for ages. They rekindled that, and Mom has been worried about me, so she’s been over a lot, fussing on me.”

“Is this good?” he asked.

“Yes. For me. For Dad. Mom. Oskar. Not so good for Emilie.”

Ah.

“I’ve noticed her absence.”

“Well, I hesitate to hark back to that night, but do you remember that

phone call about Scott's apartment?"

"Yes," he said slowly, after they worked things out, not sure he was prepared to hear more because he was feeling good right now because Elsa was good. He didn't want to get pissed.

Elsa gave it anyway.

"Okay, so, Mom has been to Scott's pad, and she definitely noted she liked it. But she didn't say she wanted to live there. In fact, she's feeling this new singledom, this new space to find herself. She likes my apartment. She says she feels bohemian, more herself than she has for years. She's got a job at a law practice as a receptionist. Oskar called in a favor and some friend of his from law school hired her. She loves it. She gets to organize things, and she gets to dress in cute work outfits. It doesn't pay the moon and stars, but she'll have a nest egg when the settlement goes through, so she doesn't need that. Just a little extra to make life better."

"That's great, but..." he prompted because he knew there was more.

"But...Scott would need to jump his lease to move in with Emilie, which incurs a fine. He doesn't want to pay the fine, so he wants to postpone them moving in together or she has to move in with him where he is now. Since he was on a two-year lease, that would mean she had to wait thirteen months or wedge herself into Scott's space. That didn't line up with Emilie's vision of her life as a surgeon's live-in girlfriend, so behind Mom's back, she tried to sort it so Mom would take over Scott's lease with Scott's landlords none the wiser, with Oskar and me paying for it."

"And everyone getting together to take care of you, this all came out," Hale deduced.

"Yes," she confirmed. "Mom was insulted. Oskar was pissed. Dad was disappointed. And Scott was angry. Plans for them to move in together are on hold. Plans for them to remain together might be on hold too."

He winced for Emilie, but said, "Can't say she doesn't deserve that."

"I can't either. Not sure a man would want to jump in with a woman who shows her manipulative side so clearly."

"Yup." He squeezed her hand and asked, "And Oskar's big brother act?"

The expression on her face after he asked that was inscrutable.

Then she explained it.

"He dropped everything and got on the train that Sunday after I'd been hurt. When he arrived, and saw how hurt I actually was...*don't*," she stressed when she saw him react to that. "We're past that. Yes?"

“Yeah,” he grunted.

“Anyway, he stuck around, and there’s drama afoot with Oskar too, of course. And I didn’t save the best for last, because this is messed up, but it’s the biggest.”

“What’s that?”

“He’s moving back to New York, and Anoushka isn’t coming with him because she’s been keeping in shape not so much with a lot of yoga classes, but instead, fucking her yoga instructor.”

“Holy shit,” Hale muttered.

She shot him a big-eyes look while fighting a smile. “Now, don’t take this as humor. I’m trying not to laugh because hysterical laughter is a better reaction than jumping on the train and telling my soon-to-be, ex-sister-in-law what a piece of garbage I think she is. Anyway, Oskar is taking this opportunity of being here to interview at firms. Fortunately, he’s a shark with a good track record so there are several who are eager to recruit him. He’s going back this weekend to get started on closing down his life there. He’s going to move in with dad while he gets settled with the kids here. He’s tried to recruit Mom as his nanny, and could pay her more than she’s getting, but she’s loving her job so much, she said no. Thus, some things are up in the air for Oskar, but he’s coming back. That’s a definite.”

“How do you feel about that?”

“I think his response to me being hurt and my response to finding out his wife betrayed him made us both look at each other differently. We’re grownups. We were acting like children. We’re acting more like grownups now.”

“Glad for you, baby,” he murmured.

“Me too,” she replied.

“How are the cats?”

There was something about that question that got to her.

So much, she pushed up and dropped her forehead to his.

“They miss you,” she said huskily, and he was sure that wasn’t totally about the cats, so he felt those words everywhere, but most specifically in his chest. “Come in and see them.”

“I want you back at my place after we get home from Chloe’s thing.”

“Okay.”

“Official, Elz. Moved in. That’ll be home. For both of us.”

“Okay, Hale.”



“I’m sorry I hurt you.”

“You said that already.” When he opened his mouth to say more, she put the fingers of her bandaged hand to it. “It was awful. It hurt. I’m not going to pretend it didn’t. But it was the path you had to take to lead you back to me. And I’m glad you took it. I’m glad you opened that box from your dad. I’m glad you’re talking about him, openly and honestly, to me, and for yourself. I’m glad Genny and Tom were there with you. It needed to happen. And as it seems is the way with us, for us to get over an obstacle that rears up in our relationship, we need to have a blowout. And we sure did that.”

He carefully wrapped his fingers around her wrist and pulled her hand away. “Shutting down like that on you wasn’t okay. I lost your trust. I lost your dad’s trust.”

“It’s been four days, Hale, not four years. You haven’t lost anything.”

“Baby—”

The tears returned, this time, so strong, she couldn’t hold them back, and he watched from close as they spilled over.

“Don’t you get it? I’d do it again and again, Hale. I’d do it because, in the end, it meant you got your dad back.”

He grunted at receiving the force of that velvet blow, right before he kissed her.

Four days and a fuckload of emotion and even more love went into that kiss, so he wasn’t surprised when a passerby shouted, “*Oof*, daddy, take your momma inside. It ain’t triple X Thursday in Williamsburg.”

This meant, when they broke the kiss, they were both laughing.

“Come inside. I need to pack my things,” she invited. “But I left the dress I bought for Chloe’s wedding at your place, so we have to go back there before we leave.”

“We’re staying there tonight. We’re leaving first thing in the morning.”

She didn’t hide how happy that made her.

He didn’t hide how her happiness made him happy.

They got up and held hands as she guided him inside.

Cheddar came running to inspect what was happening at the front door, saw Hale, and didn’t stop. When he made it to Hale, he started clawing his way up Hale’s jeans.

Hale bent, pulled him off and lifted him up to his chest, where Cheddar rubbed his shirt and throat with his ear.

Frosty came out too, saw Hale, trotted right to him, so he stooped to

scoop up his other boy as well.

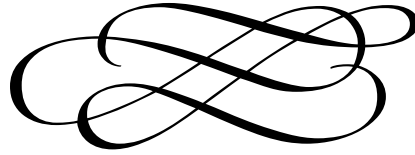
Frosty started purring.

“Daddy’s home,” Elsa murmured, taking them in with a look of supreme contentment on her face.

Oh yeah.

Daddy was home.

# CHAPTER 28



## STUFFED LION

*Corey*

*T* hen...

“Daddy, Daddy! Look!” Hale shouted from his seat in the kiddie ride that was going around and around.

Corey stood there in abject terror, even if he’d strapped his son in himself. Even if he’d watched that ride go around for five turns before he gave into Hale begging to get on it. Even if it wasn’t going very fast. Even if he’d crouched for two of those full rides so he could inspect the mechanism that worked it to see that it seemed clean and well-oiled and functioning properly.

All the kids were holding on.

Hale had his hands in the air, and he was laughing and shouting.

He needed to teach his son to be more careful.

He needed to teach his son to hold on.

The ride stopped, and before Corey could get there, Hale unclipped himself and was hustling to Corey on his four-year-old feet, arms pumping with excitement.

Another kid was doing the same, but he swerved unexpectedly, and knocked Hale on his ass.

Corey vaulted over the fence that marked space so the kids could exit without being injected right into the crowd and squatted next to Hale, but he

was looking at the kid who knocked him over.

“*Watch it!*” he shouted.

The kid’s face folded in on itself.

“Jesus, man, cool it. They’re just kids,” some asshole chimed in.

“Yes,” Corey agreed, picking up Hale and planting his boy on his hip.

“And as a kid, he needs to learn coordination and spatial awareness.”

The man blinked at him.

Corey prowled away.

“Are we leebing?’ Hale asked.

“Yes,” Corey said brusquely.

This fair was a mistake.

There were dangers everywhere.

Including thoughtless little kids who couldn’t control their bodies.

“But I want co’den canny.”

When his son said that, Corey did an about face and found a vendor who sold cotton candy.

Hale was upstairs, in bed and sleeping, and Corey needed to call Genny.

Now that they were safe at home, he was seeing how he overreacted to everything at the fair (though he still felt he was correct about that child—he might just be a kid, but we couldn’t all go around bumping into each other and knocking people on their asses).

Genny would calm him down.

And in the end, he thought it went well.

After they got cotton candy, Hale had wanted to play some game where he lifted up ducks that were floating in a stream of filthy water to look at the bottom of them and see if he won a prize (they’d gone direct to a bathroom and washed their hands after that fiasco).

This took quite some time, and two hundred dollars in tickets, because Hale wanted the massive stuffed lion on display.

And by God, right now, that stuffed lion was up in Hale’s room.

So in the end, all in all, they had a good night at the fair and Hale had his toy so he didn’t mind when they left.

It still rattled Corey.

He was about to reach for the phone when it rang.

He had caller ID, and at first, panic shot through him at seeing who was calling.

This was quickly replaced with fury.

He hit the button on the phone and took the call.

“I believe I asked you to stop calling me,” he said into it.

“Well, Mr. High and Mighty, I believe I told you I don’t give a shit,” his father replied. “And I’m done with this horseshit. Your mother and I are coming to California next week. She wants to meet her grandson. And after four years, I think you need to stop being a pantywaist crybaby and let her. It’s unnatural to keep a grandchild from his grandmother.”

“I’m assuming, considering your IQ is four points above Forrest Gump’s, and you live life like you’re still on recess in elementary school, that you think name calling will get you what you want.”

“Christ, you’re such a pussy,” his dad mumbled.

“All right, Dad,” Corey began. “I’m making quite a bit of money now.”

“No shit? You were on the cover of *Time* magazine, for shit’s sake.”

Corey went on like he didn’t speak.

“And I’ve hired someone who has successfully collected the originals of all my medical records.”

His father had nothing to say to that.

Not a surprise.

“So, allow me to explain how this is going to go. You and my mother are never going to see my son. You are never going to speak to him. You are never going to touch him. He is not going to be a part of your life. I’m not either. When I hang up this phone, you do not exist for us. If I hear from you again, *Time* or *Sixty Minutes* or Barbara Walters or someone is going to have an exclusive about how I elevated myself from my upbringing by two abusive hillbillies who knocked the crap out of their son from the time he was a toddler. I might even hire a ghostwriter to write a tell-all book. However it comes about, the world will know what monsters you are.”

His father didn’t speak.

Corey did.

“I have to admit, I’d like to do this anyway, considering how deeply you deserve everyone to know you’re trash. But I need to protect my son, so I’ll use this ace to keep him safe. Now, did you understand all those words?”

“That would devastate your mother. She—”

“Do you honestly think I give a fuck?” Corey cut him off to inquire. “You were worse, but she wasn’t much better.”

His father fell silent.

“I need to hear the words,” Corey prompted. “Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” his dad bit off.

“Fantastic. Goodbye then, Dad,” Corey said, then he turned off the portable phone.

He didn’t call Genny.

He put the phone back on charge and walked up the stairs.

The stuffed lion was so huge, with it and Hale in the same bed, there wasn’t room for anything else. His son’s bedroom was illuminated by a nightlight that projected stars all over the ceiling and walls, something Corey saw and decided Hale had to have because he wanted his son to understand the sky was the limit. Always.

He stood by his boy’s bed, gazing down at him. Hale looked innocent and so young, with that thick hank of brown hair that was the exact same color as Corey’s.

He reached out to smooth back a lock that had fallen on Hale’s forehead, but seeing his adult hand moving toward his child’s face, something made him pull away.

It was all right.

He would never.

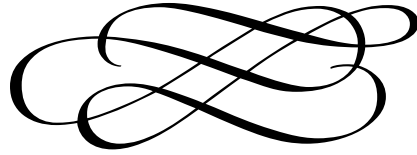
Not ever.

But...just in case.

He pulled up the covers instead. Adjusted the lion so it was closer.

And with his son safe and sleeping after having fun at the fair, Corey left the room and went back downstairs.

# CHAPTER 29



## BIRTHDAY CAKE

*Hale*

*N*ow...

His mother chose a Greek place in Pasadena for them to meet.

He remembered that place. It was her favorite. He knew this because, if she had him on his birthday, that was where they went.

Hale liked Greek, but he'd always buried he had issues with a candle in a piece of baklava acting as his cake. One of his favorite things was a white birthday cake with tons of frosting. Birthday cake was his favorite flavor of ice cream, he liked it so much.

He didn't have to worry, when Genny got her hands on him, she always had a birthday cake ready for him.

And if his dad had him for his birthday, it would be on the counter in the kitchen when he got home from school. Always extravagant. Generous swirls of frosting. Tons of sprinkles.

Sure, their housekeeper ordered it, went out and got it and put it there, but he knew his dad made it happen.

He knew because Hale had confessed to him about the baklava.

"You okay?" Elsa asked into this memory.

He stretched his neck on either side and said, "I had a lot of birthdays here."

"There isn't an underlying vibe of remembered joy in the way you said

that,” she pointed out, watching him closely.

“For future reference, I really like birthday cake. White cake. Lots of frosting. And unleash the sprinkles.”

He watched her mouth thin as what he didn’t say sunk in.

“If I was with Dad, he always made sure I had that kind of cake.” He adjusted his menu that was lying in front of him. “It’s uncomfortable having memories surface of how he cared, which means I didn’t notice it before, and he had to know I didn’t notice.”

“I don’t know how to respond to that, honey,” she replied.

“You don’t have to respond.”

“Okay, but at this juncture, I feel I need to make note that if you were a shit son, he wouldn’t have given you the empire he built. But more, he wouldn’t have given you what was in that box.”

This was true.

“Yeah,” he murmured, and went in to touch his lips to hers.

Samantha Wheeler walked in not long after that, and he saw she wasn’t happy to start.

Her eyes fell on Hale, with Elsa sitting next to him on one side of a four-top, and she became less happy.

Hale stood when she arrived, she handed out perfunctory greetings, and he was pleased when her gaze moved to Elsa’s injured hand as she sat down, and then she asked, “I heard about the incident. Are you all right?”

“Yes, thank you,” Elsa replied.

Sam looked to him. “You? Are you all right?”

It had happened five days ago. It had also been all over the news.

And his mother had his phone number.

“The woman was caught. It’s over,” Hale said by way of answer.

His mother watched him a moment then she settled in, placing her purse on the chair beside her and smiling brightly as the server came to take their drink orders.

When he left, she looked directly at Hale, and her smile died.

“Right, Hale, I’m here. What’s this about?”

*Hi, Mom, nice to see you too.*

*Yes, Mom, thanks for asking. Elsa is here because it’s serious. We want you to know, we’re in love and moving in together.*

*I know, Mom, our last conversation didn’t go well, and I agree, we need to figure it out.*



His imaginary conversational gambits must have gone on for a while because Elsa's hand landed on his thigh, and she squeezed.

"Dad left me something before he died."

"Something more than four hundred billion dollars?" she mumbled, fidgeting with her silverware.

He clenched his teeth and turned his head toward Elsa.

She was looking at him and gave his thigh another squeeze.

He got his shit tight and looked back to his mom.

"Yes, something more than that," he said curtly. "Through what he gave me, I learned his parents abused him."

Her gaze wandered over his shoulder.

She knew.

"Did you know about that?" he asked to confirm. "Did Dad talk about it?"

Her gaze wandered back to him. "Your father and I weren't together very long."

"That isn't an answer to my question."

"My apologies," she said snappishly. "Yes. He mentioned his parents could get physical."

"Did he share how bad it was? Because it was bad, Mom."

Her brows drew down. "Is this you giving your father some kind of twisted excuse for what he did to me? That it's okay to shit on your wife because your parents abused you? Because," she flicked a hand Elsa's way, "I can see this seems serious between you two, so you should know, it's not. It's not okay to treat people like shit because someone treated you like shit."

"I'm not trying to excuse what Dad did to you. I wasn't even alive when Dad did what he did to you. I had nothing to do with that."

"So what is this?" she demanded.

"A son trying to understand his parents' dynamics. I'm getting a lock on Dad's—"

She interrupted him to push out a puff of dismissive air before she said, "Will the wonders of Corey Szabo ever cease? He's managing to heal his relationship with his son from beyond the grave. Why am I surprised?"

That was when he felt Elsa's nails in his thigh so he put his hand over hers.

But that didn't stop her from speaking.

"Two things I find interesting. The first, your son shared with you the

significant trauma of learning his father was tragically abused nearly all of his childhood, and your first thought was to make that about you. The second, advising him how to behave with the woman in his life after his parents treated him like shit.”

Sam shot daggers out of her eyes at Elsa then demanded of Hale, “Is this what this lunch is about?”

“It is now,” Elsa retorted.

He squeezed her hand.

She pulled both her lips between her teeth.

“You’re my mother and it came clear far too late that I didn’t take the time to iron things out with my dad. Tom advised me—”

His mom interrupted him again. “Oh, now it’s Tom.”

Hale fell silent, a feeling gnawing at his gut he didn’t like.

“Go on, finish,” Sam urged.

“Are you going to interrupt me?” he asked.

“Once bitten, twice shy,” was her odd response.

“What does that mean?”

“When someone messes you about, you’re careful not to let anyone else do it. I think you’re mistaking me looking after myself, protecting myself, as something different. As some kind of attack on your father. Or your fathers, since you’re defensive about Tom too.”

“And right now you’re protecting yourself from whom?” Hale inquired.

“Sorry?” she asked.

“Dad isn’t here. Tom isn’t here. So who are you protecting yourself against right now, Mom?”

Her chin went back into her neck.

“I’ll finish what I was going to say earlier,” he allowed. “Tom advised we have a conversation about our relationship, that being if we want one. And my take from this is, you don’t want one with me. You feel you need to protect yourself from me—”

“That’s not what I said,” Sam snapped.

“Yes, it is,” Elsa put in.

She sent another glare Elsa’s way before she asked of Hale, “If this is a deep mother son chat, what’s she doing here?”

“Honestly?”

“I asked, didn’t I?”

“I felt the need to have Elsa here to protect me from you.”

Her head moved like she'd been slapped.

"I like Greek food, Mom, and I like this restaurant. But it's not my favorite and I love birthday cake, so it wasn't a treat and didn't make me feel special that you had them bring out a slice of baklava with a candle in it. We went somewhere you wanted to go, and I ate what you liked on my birthday."

"Oh, for God's sakes," she groused. "Do I now have to sit here and listen to all the ways I was a shit mother?"

"We actually don't have enough time to do that. We need to be in Arizona by this evening."

She stared at him, her face slack.

And yeah, that was over the line.

Hale reeled it in.

"I think maybe we need to come to terms with the fact we don't get along," Hale decided. "If you need anything, I want you to know, all you have to do is reach out to me, I'll be there. But I think we'd both be happier if we weren't trying to navigate who we're supposed to be to each other."

With that, he pulled out his wallet to get some cash to pay for the drinks they wouldn't drink, and his mother's lunch, if she stayed to order.

Sam reached a hand toward him on the table and said, "Don't do that."

"I don't think you're enjoying this, and I'm not enjoying this, so I think we should cut our losses here."

"Is this meant to be enjoyed?" she asked as the server showed and set down their drinks.

"Are you ready to order?" the server inquired.

"We'll start with the saganaki and fried calamari," Hale ordered his mother's favorites to make a point.

The server read the vibe and replied, "I'll get those started and come back for the entrees."

He took off.

"You have to understand, Hale," Sam began, "my husband told me he slept with his best friend so I'd divorce him only for me to find out years later that he actually didn't. He told me that, which was just how badly he wanted me to divorce him. But she was my friend too, so I went those years thinking she ate at my table and pretended to like me when she slept with my husband. And she was never gone from my life, because she was deeply involved in yours."

"That was thirty years ago, Mom."

“I found out he lied only three years ago, Hale.”

“You certainly went for the gusto to make him pay for what he did to you, committing to it for decades, and using me to do it too,” Hale retorted.

She lifted both hands up in a don't shoot gesture, pressing them his way. “Okay, okay. I leaned too far into that.”

Hale didn't know how to respond.

Elsa waded in.

“Perhaps you two should share what you want from your relationship.” She didn't hesitate to turn it right to his mother. “Samantha, you start.”

Sam looked apprehensive before she noted to Hale, “You're my son.”

Hale didn't know how to respond to that either.

“I think he needs more,” Elsa remarked drily.

“I love you,” she whispered. “Of course I love you. Do you doubt that?”

When Hale shifted uneasily in his chair, Elsa spoke again.

“Hale's not going to say it because it'll make him sound like a selfish brat. So I'll say it. A kid doesn't *need* birthday cake for his birthday. He also doesn't *need* his mom to take him to his favorite restaurant or make his favorite meal for his birthday. What he *needs* is his mom to know what will make the day special, and then she bends over backward to do that as best as she possibly can.”

She grimaced her understanding of what Elsa said, and then her expression turned pleading when she shifted her attention to Hale.

“I loved your dad like Genny loved Duncan. And after Corey broke them up, like Genny loved Tom. And all that time, Corey loved Genny.”

“I don't think you get that what you have with me has nothing to do with that, Mom. *Nothing*, Hale retorted. “I shouldn't be made to pay for my father's mistakes. That's fucked up. But that's what I felt has been happening all my life. You hated him, and you didn't like me all that much because I was his.”

“And that's what made you pull away and made me think you hated me,” she deduced.

“Well, yeah, Mom,” he stated the obvious.

“It made me feel unlovable, him picking Genny over me. Divorcing me, but she was always a part of his life. It destroyed my confidence.”

“So as a power play, you made everything about you,” Hale surmised.

Again with the reaching of a hand across the table toward him. “I didn't know I was doing it.”

“I want to believe that, but you’re a grown woman. You can’t possibly think, when your son’s father just blew his brains out, your first response should be to reach out to a gossip show to talk trash about him and expose his secrets.”

She ducked her head, giving the side eye to Elsa.

“If you give her shit about doing her job again...” Hale let his threat trail.

“How did you two get together anyway?” Sam asked.

“You see, I’d tell my mom that. What I don’t think you’re comprehending is that I don’t feel safe telling my mother that,” Hale replied.

Her shoulders shot straight.

“Okay, Hale, bottom line, I want a relationship with you. That’s what I want. I want to know about the woman in your life. I want to know if you’re in LA or New York or Barcelona or wherever you might be. I want to sit down to a lunch with you where there’s no hostility, I’m not forced on my back foot or to put up a defense or to explain my behavior. I don’t want to feel like I have to compete with Genny for mother of the year every time I’m with you. I don’t want to hear how great Tom is, or how Chloe is setting the fashion world on fire or Matt’s saving lives or Sasha is excelling at whatever Sasha flits to next. I can’t compete with The Perfect Family. I am who I am, that’s all I can be. I want my son to be a son who cares about his mother. That’s what I want.”

“And I need my mother to understand that’s my family,” he fired back. “You hate my father, but he gave them to me and they’re not in a competition with you. With them, it isn’t effort. There’s no hard work required. They love and they care, and they do it naturally. There’s no shame if you don’t find motherhood natural. But you can’t sit here and tell me to excise crucial parts of my life when I’m with you. That would be like me marrying Elsa, you not liking her, and you refusing to have anything to do with her, but expecting me to be a part of your life. You and Dad married young. Now I’m wondering if you got stuck back there. Because, serious as fuck, I know this is going to sound like an insult, but I’m just saying it as I see it, and it seems like you never grew up. Now, I’m grown, and you want me to be the adult for both of us, and I gotta say, Mom, I don’t have the energy. I’m not going to pretend people I love aren’t part of my life. And I cannot fucking believe you’d ask me to do that when we’re trying to figure out if we can have a healthy, supportive relationship.”

“Right, so you missed the accept me for who I am part,” she bit out.

“No, I didn’t,” he returned. “What I don’t accept is that we are simply who we are. I don’t care how old you get. Shit can happen, and it can wound you, it can disable you, but still, you can learn and heal and do better. I have a friend who lost both his legs, and he runs trails. You don’t have to be number one mom. You just have to do better.”

“And will you do better?” she shot back.

He rolled his hand at her in a sock-it-to-me gesture. “Tell me, as your son, what can I do better?”

His mother glared at him.

Elsa snorted.

His mother glared at Elsa.

“Well, he *is* pretty damned perfect,” Elsa said. “It’s incredibly annoying. Especially when you’re arguing and he’s always right. I think you feel me on this.”

Sam kept up the glare, but Hale felt it in his heart when her face cracked.

“It’s exasperating,” she muttered.

“So maybe how he can do better is to fall down on something every once in a while,” Elsa suggested. “Throw us a bone. We had this big blowup recently, and he even apologized perfectly. I forgave him in about ten seconds. And he’d been a serious asshole. But look at me now.” She threw her hand in front of her to indicate her sitting right there next to Hale. “By the way, that was yesterday, and I dropped everything to be here with him now.”

“I’m not perfect,” he stated.

“Oh my God, Hale,” Elsa moaned. “You’re gorgeous and you dress great and you’re thoughtful and you cook amazing food, and you don’t forget to tell your woman she looks beautiful before you go out to an event, and you want to save the world and twist yourself into knots to do it. It gives a girl a complex.”

He felt his brow furrow. “You have a complex?”

She pressed into his arm with her front. “No, honey, I’m teasing. Though, you are kinda perfect.” She looked to his mom. “But I lied. He isn’t always right in an argument. But he is too often for my liking.”

His mother’s lips were twitching, but then her expression shifted, and it tore at Hale when she focused on him.

“Sometimes, when you know you’ve gone too far, you can’t backpedal,” she admitted. “You just have to keep going and hope eventually you’ll get back on the right track.”

“Stop pedaling, Mom,” he ordered. “I’m right here. You don’t have to work so hard to get somewhere when where you want to be is right here.”

She fell back in her chair and lifted her napkin to her face like she was dabbing something, but instead, she was hiding her emotion.

Hale gave her time.

Then he said, “Elsa and I met when I called her to warn her off talking about Tom and Mika on her show. She was a little brat. Totally not afraid of me. I was intrigued. That’s how it started.”

His mom lifted her gaze to him as he spoke, and he saw wet sparkling in her eyes.

“She’s still a brat a lot of the time, but I guess I like strong women who don’t let anyone shit on them. You might have something to do with that,” he concluded.

“Just...I’ll be right back,” Sam said quickly, clumsily getting up and hustling toward the bathroom.

He saw Elsa’s neck twisted, watching her go, then she turned back to him and said, “Okay, I think we might be getting somewhere.”

“I love you,” he whispered. “You’re pretty perfect too.”

She smiled and cupped his cheek. “I know. I’m awesome.”

He cupped her jaw in return, but he didn’t speak. He used it to pull her to him.

It was a racier kiss than he’d intended. They weren’t alone in that restaurant, and it wasn’t lost on him when they arrived, they’d garnered attention.

But fuck it.

Sometimes, you couldn’t worry about what the world thought. You needed to focus on what was important.

His mom came back, and although she tried, you could tell she’d been crying.

“Right, Mom,” Hale said quietly. “Let’s start again. Hey, Elsa and me are here to have lunch with you. Then we have to go to Arizona for Chloe’s wedding this weekend. We’re heading back to New York after that, because Elsa is moving in. I’m training a talented man to help me do the things I want to do with what Dad gave me. This, I hope, will free my time so I can have some to do the things I like and be with people I care about. It’d be cool if you came out to New York sometime. There’s plenty of room at the penthouse.”

Sam sniffled.

Licked her lips.

Then she replied, "I'm glad you're going to slow down a little bit, Hale. I've been really worried about you."

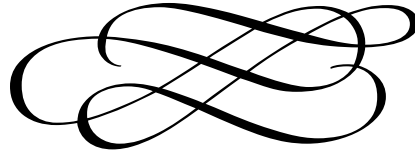
That was when Hale reached across the table to his mom.

He'd left her hanging.

But she met him halfway.



# EPILOGUE



## LOVE YOU TILL THE END

*Elsa*

“These are healing nicely.”

The father of the bride, dressed in his tux, was upstairs in Hale’s and my room at Duncan and Genny’s house in Prescott, Arizona, examining my cuts and re-bandaging them.

Where he was not was down with the milling crowd who were drinking champagne and cocktails and eating hors d’oeuvres from the multitude of trays held by servers who were floating around, all this happening in Genny and Duncan’s massive backyard.

And by massive, I meant it butted up against a National Forest, so it was nature *for miles*.

And this included a lake.

They had their own *lake*.

I waited until Tom expertly finished with the tape before I spoke.

“Tom?”

He lifted his gaze to my eyes.

“It’s okay to be a wreck,” I told him quietly. “I already know my father is going to be a disaster. For a bride, it’s an important part of the day for the dad to get *verklempt*.” I leaned closer to him conspiratorially. “But I’m going to let you in on a secret, and you can’t tell anyone. Especially our men. We don’t actually want you to let us go.”

Tom’s head ticked, and then I found myself in a hug so tight, I had to make do with a few wheezy breaths before he let me go.

“Apologies,” he muttered, looking surprisingly cute, considering the great Tom Pierce was embarrassed. “It’s an emotional day.”

“No apologies necessary,” I replied.

Tom wrapped his hand around my upper arm and squeezed. “I’m so glad Hale worked it out with you, sweetheart. And I’m so glad you’re here with us today.”

“Not more than me.”

He smiled.

Now there was the devilishly handsome Tom Pierce.

“I can go down and nick a bottle of champagne so we can hide up here and have some refreshments until you have to do the dreaded deed,” I offered.

His smile got bigger, but he shook his head, and made me a return offer I couldn’t refuse.

He held his bent arm out to me and asked, “May I have the honor?”

I hooked my arm in his. “Absolutely.”

I grabbed my bag on the way and Tom walked me down the stairs, through Duncan and Genny’s huge entryway and into the great room at the back of the house.

This was the family-only/backstage wedding area. There was a help-yourself bar fashioned on the edge of the island for Chloe and Judge’s nearest and dearest to get out of the crush, make themselves a drink, and have some quiet time if they wanted. The rest of the kitchen had been taken over by catering staff, with extra tables erected for prep and layout, and the rest of the vast living space currently was empty.

Tom took me to the back doors which were opened by a security guard who was standing outside, keeping people out of the house and keeping an eye on the goings on.

“We’re getting close, I’m going to go check on the bride,” Tom murmured.

Before he took off, I grabbed his hand and bid, “Good luck.”

He gave me a squeeze, shot me another smile, said, “I can’t go before I mention that you look beautiful, Elsa.”

With that, he walked back into the house.

Like father, like son.

A waiter came by, and I nabbed a glass of champagne from his tray.

Then I settled back and took in the area.

The wedding colors were cream and a delicate, pale mauve. Even the chairs set out in front of the flower-festooned altar by the lake had mauve frames with circular backs with interesting swirls built in and cream covered seats.

Temporary decking beyond what was already out there had been erected so there was plenty of room to stand and chat without sinking into dirt. There were also some tables and chairs set up where folks could sit, and high tops where they could stand or set down their drinks. I spied two bars already operating, and from what I could tell by the booze stock behind them, they'd make pretty much anything you wanted. But I knew they were featuring the day's signature drink: a pink lady.

There was even more decking where the ceremony would take place. Leading to it was a walkway replete with mauve planters erupting with poofs of cream and mauve flowers lining the length.

Another walkway led farther afield, where a massive, gossamer mauve overhang was beautifully draped and swagged over where the reception was to be held. It, too, was heavily decorated in flowers (as were the round tables set up under it).

And even though the sun was shining, you could see the charm and romance of the expertly placed fairy lights and lighting features that had already been lit to decorate the reception space and all around the trees that lined the clearing.

There weren't that many people invited, I'd been surprised to learn. Just two hundred and fifty. Partly because Chloe and Judge wanted it kept a secret, and the more people invited, the less likely that would be. But also, because they wanted it intimate and didn't want to feel like they were hosting a state dinner. They wanted to be able to really share their day with the people who were closest to their hearts.

I knew this because Chloe told me herself last night at the rehearsal dinner.

I wandered to the edge of the decking in my high-heeled, blue sandals, grateful I got the dress right: not casual, not formal, not evening—something five steps up from casual, but one step down from formal that was just perfect.

It was a striking pattern of navy and lapis flowers and fronds printed on a cream background with a crisscross bodice that led into a halter neck which left a demure cutaway between my breasts. It sported a statement tie belt in

the same fabric and tiers of feminine, flirty ruffles making up the long skirt.

My shoulders were bare, and it was May in the mountains, so it was a little chilly. But those mountains were in Arizona, so it wasn't uncomfortable, and I saw the cleverly disguised heating implements that they'd be firing up when the sun went down.

I sipped champagne and looked around, noting many famous faces, including Teddy Mankowitz, celebrated actress Fiona Remington, and sought-after stylist to the stars, Wyn Gastineau with her extortionately handsome husband, the award-winning architect, Remy.

It wasn't a workday for me, but that didn't mean I could turn my mind off about it, and I was going to introduce myself to Wyn. She'd be an amazing interview, considering how she'd put her career on pause to raise their kids, then went back, and now was slaying it, arguably the top in her field.

However, one of those famous faces wasn't Hale's, because he was a groomsman, so he was somewhere with Judge.

Taking it all in, I tried to imagine what the budget was for this shindig. Just the flowers had to cost more than what Dad and Mom had socked away for me. A lot more.

One of the official photographers came up to me and requested, "Photo, please."

I tucked my bag under my arm and blew the camera a kiss.

The photographer smiled when the snap was taken, and then she wandered away.

I didn't really know anyone, but I didn't mind. I could people watch forever. It was my superpower.

But eventually, the dulcet tones of some tinkly chimes sounded, alerting the crowd it was close to time for the festivities to begin, so folks started gravitating toward the mauve seats by the lake. I took the final sip of champagne, set the glass aside and headed that way.

Duncan's ridiculously good-looking sons, Sullivan and Gage, were acting as ushers, and Gage was at the top of the aisle when I arrived.

"I think I'm Chloe's side," I noted, taking hold of his arm.

"I know where you go," he replied.

"I hope you don't have allergies," I quipped as we walked down the aisle that had a planter bursting with flowers at the end of each row, not to mention, the altar had eight plinths, four on each side, each topped with massive urns sporting huge bouquets.

And then there was the square arch that was so thick with flowers, it was a miracle of construction.

“Coco went loco. She also went local. The florist is one of my bud’s moms. She said she can retire now and buy the boat she always wanted,” Gage joked in return.

I was laughing as he walked me right up to the very front, and motioned to a chair four seats from the aisle.

I looked anxiously at him. “Gage, I don’t—”

“Coco’s decree, and hear me now, thank me later, you don’t go against Coco.”

I nodded dazedly at him and sat, my hands trembling a little bit because of what my placement said.

It wasn’t about the people sitting there watching me being seated in the family section.

It wasn’t that I didn’t know who I was to Hale (I totally did).

It was the indication of acceptance from Hale’s family.

It was nerve-wracking, but still, it felt great.

Not long later, Tom and Mika showed, and with a peck on her lips and a smile at me before he left her, Mika sat next to me.

“How are things in the inner sanctum?” I whispered.

“Chaotic.” She shrugged. “This is Chloe. Out here, smooth, tranquil and perfect, in there, drama.”

This confused me. “Is something going wrong?”

“She’s marrying the love of her life. It’s the happiest you’ll ever be, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t overwhelming.”

I bet that was the truth.

As if on cue, the men started lining up at the altar, and my gaze went there.

Rix was Judge’s best man, and he led the pack. After Rix came Matt, then Duncan, Hale, Sullivan, and finally, Gage.

Once Hale settled in his place, his eyes found me, and we exchanged looks, but of course, Hale being Hale, his included mouthing the word, “Beautiful.”

I blew him a kiss.

Jamie then came down the aisle with Nora, and they sat at the front on the other side.

Judge walked down next, and he escorted Genny.

And...wow, she looked gorgeous, but he looked *amazing*.

He looked like how I felt inside.

Happy and in love.

And hella nervous.

Judge gave Genny a hug, moved to Mika and bent to give Mika one. He smiled distractedly at me (I took no offense), and then he walked across the aisle.

Jamie stood, and father and son hugged for a long time before they let go. Judge then bent to kiss Nora's cheek, and after that, he took his place at the altar.

The men were all wearing charcoal gray, three-piece tuxedos, except Judge, who was in a startlingly cool tux which was so deep green it was nearly black, the buttons on the jacket, vest and the lapels a coordinating satin.

Trust Chloe Pierce to pick an interesting, stylish tux for her man.

I made a mental note of how well this worked.

Finally, the wedding procession began, and with the accompaniment of two violinists at either end of the plinths of flowers playing a beautiful song I didn't know, Chloe's friend Tiffany started the parade of bridesmaids, she was followed by Cadence, then Dru (Judge's sister), then Alex, then Mi-Young (Chloe's best friend), and finally Sasha.

They were all in shades of mauve, starting dark, and in a human ombré effect, Sasha's dress was the color of the flowers.

Suddenly, the two violinists were joined by a full orchestra that was sounding from behind us, and we all stood and turned as Bach's "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" began to play.

When I looked toward the house, I noticed that not only had the orchestra set up, a full choir was now there, and the minute they started singing, Chloe and Tom appeared at the far side of the house.

I nearly started laughing, because, drama, indeed.

No wonder it took forever for this wedding to happen.

It was drama, class and pure beauty.

All of a sudden, I wasn't fighting laughter because I'd started fighting tears.

Tom was visibly doing the same, as was Chloe, who was so laser focused on Judge, I hoped Tom was in a state to guide both their way or this perfection was going to kick off with the bride taking a header off the

decking.

She was wearing a startlingly magnificent gown made of tiny, appliquéd white flowers that were dense at bodice, upper arms and hips, but then they faded out with only a few dancing against layers of the nude tulle that made up her column skirt. There was an overskirt draping down the back and sides with the same appliqué. It flared out at the bottom in a modest train.

But the dress was so exquisite, it didn't need the drama of a long train. The lower sleeves were see-through tulle with more bits of appliqué. And the neckline was wide and plunging, daring yet somehow innocent, showcasing her elegant throat and collarbone and exposing the curves at the sides of her breasts and her skin down to her midriff.

Her hair was parted in the middle and arranged in an extravagant chignon at the base of her neck, a white veil tucked into the top of it floating down and trailing slightly beyond the train of her gown.

She wore only pearl studs at her ears, but she didn't need any other jewelry. The dress and the effusive froth of her all-white bouquet did all the work.

I heard Genny's quiet sob and tore my gaze from Chloe and Tom to see Mika had moved to her and they were holding hands.

They timed it perfectly (as they would, I was there the night before when they practiced repeatedly, but Chloe had used another song, obviously wanting to surprise Judge with the extravagance of this moment). So she and Tom arrived at the altar in time for the artists to still be performing when Tom gave her a tight hug and kiss on her cheek then took a step away.

The music faded to Genny rising and moving to the aisle to stand with Tom, and Jamie doing the same.

The pastor asked us all to sit, and after we did, she called, "Who gives this woman to be wed to this man?"

"I do," Genny answered.

"I do," Tom said after she spoke.

"And who gives this man to be wed to this woman?" the pastor asked.

"I do," Jamie said.

Oh my God!

This was all so perfect, I was going to lose it.

"Thank you. You can be seated."

Jamie moved back to his chair and Tom led Genny to hers, then sat between her and Mika.

I looked to Hale to see his eyes were on me, and I mouthed, “We are so totally doing that.”

I watched his chest shake with his laughter.

But he then had to turn away from me and pay attention to what was going on.

Chloe had handed her bouquet to Sasha, she’d taken hold of Judge.

And the ceremony that sealed their love was about to begin.

“So, does Tom have to go back to tennis to pay for this?” I asked.

“No, but Genny had to sign on for another season of *The Next Life* to swing it,” Hale answered.

I giggled, because that day was a day for giggling, for certain.

Night had fallen.

We were sitting in pretty mauve chairs at a round table under the ethereal overhang that twinkled with the fairy lights. The table had been cleared of dishes and the dinner tablecloth swept away, a clean one replacing it, the sumptuous floral centerpiece and tealights dancing in crystal holders returned to their rightful places.

Dinner was done, and Hale had his arm stretched along the back of my chair. I was leaning into his side, head on his shoulder, hand on his thigh.

“Warning, this is so magnificent, I’m hiring Chloe as my wedding planner,” I informed him.

Hale shifted in a way I lifted my head and turned to him.

He was looking down at me, and his expression was not lighthearted.

“I’ll build you a glass platform in the middle of the ocean if that’s where you want to marry me.”

He meant that, my amazing man.

I stopped leaning into Hale’s side so I could press my front to his, and I curled my fingers at the side of his neck. “I’d be happy, just you and me and Cheddar and Frosty in front of the view from the windows in your living room.”

“*Our* living room.”

Yes, *our*.



I slid my hand up to his cheek and he dipped down to kiss me.

He lifted and turned his head when he sensed something going on, and we both watched as Judge led Chloe to the dance floor.

The overskirt was gone, Chloe's dress was now a stunning column. Her veil had also been removed, and a few white, sweetheart roses had been tucked in at one side of her chignon.

Judge pulled her into his arms, she rested her hands on his chest, and he'd already started them swaying before we heard the strings that introduced Peter Gabriel's "The Book of Love."

When Chloe recognized it, her face turned pink and scrunched a little to fight back the tears, but she lost the fight and shoved her face in Judge's neck.

I had to grab Hale's hand and hold it tight as we watched the couple do nothing but sway, her face in his neck, his lips to her ear, and I saw his mouth move as he sang the words along with Peter to his new wife.

It was on a sway I noticed her right hand slide up closer to Judge's shoulder, and she was wearing a beautiful, sparkling set of wedding rings there.

I turned so my mouth was at Hale's ear. "Are those rings her Mom's from her Dad?"

Hale looked to me. "No. They're something borrowed."

"From Mika?" I guessed.

"No, from me, and eventually, you."

Oh my God.

My throat closed, the wet came, and I had no chance to stop it.

It spilled down my cheeks.

"Judge picked this song," he told me. "Chloe got to plan everything else, but Judge put his foot down that he picked this song, and Chloe didn't get to know what it was, until right now."

"Okay," I whispered through my tears.

"We're dancing to The Pogues' 'Love You Till the End.'"

Oh God.

He was killing me.

"Okay," I repeated, my voice choked.

"Love you, baby," he whispered.

"Thank you."

He let out a little laugh and asked, "What?"

“Thank you...for loving me.”

His expression changed, his arms closed around me, and he kissed me.

Chloe and Judge’s dance was pure beauty. Tom and Chloe’s dance was incredibly sweet.

It was when Judge danced with Dru that things got interesting.

Because, before the song was over, he stopped, led Dru to a table where Nora was sitting, let Dru go and offered his hand to Nora. And it was clear Dru knew this was going to happen, but Nora did not.

Nora Ellington, of the Manhattan Ellingtons, old money, big money, and total class, blushed a pretty pink and took his hand.

Judge led her to the dance floor to finish out the mother/son dance.

My gaze flew to Jamie who was staring at his son dancing with his platonic companion, making a massive statement that not one soul under that tent missed. I saw that Jamie had a look on his face I couldn’t read, and I tried. *Hard*.

“Are you dying right now?” Hale whispered on a tease in my ear.

I couldn’t report this to anyone, not a soul outside people at this wedding, so I was already dead.

“You think Jamie will take the hint?” I asked.

“We can only hope.”

I loved it that he said that because that was what I thought.

The next song, Hale led me to the dance floor.

And we started to practice for our big show.

*Two weeks later...*

I walked into the office, and it was early. Zoey was the only one there.

She saw me and immediately hopped up and made her way toward me.

I knew why.

There was a massive stuffed lion sitting on my desk. It was a little ratty, definitely old, and from what I could see from where I stood, well loved.

And it freaked me out because I’d never seen it before, and I had no idea why it was sitting on my desk.

I stopped where I was when I saw it and asked, “What the hell is that?”

“Okay, this guy came. You just missed him. He was hot. When I say that I mean, he was *hawt*. I honestly think I passed out for a second standing, listening to him talk, he was that hot. He also had an accent, which made him hotter.”

“Zo, cut to the chase,” I ordered.

“He says you’ll know. He told me to take a picture of him, which was *not* a hardship, and that you were to give that lion to Hale, and you’d know. Look.” She was holding up her phone.

I felt a shiver when, on her phone, I saw a picture of the man who subdued Marcia Dabrowski and maybe saved my life.

Rhys Vaughan.

Rhys Vaughan had been here.

Hale had told me more than once he’d been trying to get hold of the man, but Vaughan wasn’t answering. It was beginning to tick him off.

But the man had been here.

“He said to give this to you too,” Zoey said.

She was now handing me a cream envelope that, when I took it, I realized was made of expensive cardstock.

I wandered to my office, tossed my laptop bag and purse in a chair and opened the envelope.

Sprawled on the card inside, it said,

The lion is from his father.

He’d want you to give it to him.

Hale will know.

Tell him I’ll talk to him when the time is right.

But now, there’s more work to be done.

-R

I looked at that lion and I knew it had been Hale’s favorite.

And Corey Szabo had kept something that had been important to his son, because in being so, it was important to Corey.

I was curious as all hell what work there was to be done, but that wasn’t for now.

Corey Szabo continuing to find ways to reach out to the ones he loved to share that love was all I could think of now.

I licked my lips and cautiously stepped toward the lion. I reached out and touched it.

“You’re an evil genius,” I whispered to a man who would never hear my voice. “But he needs this, so thank you.”

I set the lion somewhere safe, until Paul took me home later that night.

It was the first time Hale faltered in coming to kiss me when I got off the elevator. And when he made it to me, he didn’t dip his head for my kiss.

He held me and the lion in his arms for a long, long time.

He then told me the story cobbled together from bits and pieces of his memories of when he was very young when his father took him to a fair.

Our bedroom was an awesome, sophisticated, classy study of golds and browns and taupes and bronzes.

So when Hale laid that lion on the built-in unit that ran the length of the room and acted as a way to hide tech equipment and tuck clothing that was out of season, but also as a surface to put kickass décor...

It fit in perfectly.

*Three months later...*

*“Hello, my wonderful watchers.”*

As usual, I was looking right into the camera.

*“We’re here today for my final show of this season of Elsa’s Exchange Exclusive Interviews. Imogen Swan and Hale Wheeler are here with me. And to discuss how our topic today affects athletes, Tom Pierce and Sampson Cooper are also here. We’ll be talking about something important, but tragic. Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy, or CTE, and suicide.”*

The camera tightened on me.

*“Now, my watchers, I know you know that my family is with me for this episode, specifically my boyfriend is here to share something very difficult about the father he lost. I thank you for tuning in, but Hale and I first want you to know that if you’ve lost someone to suicide, you’re not alone, or if you find yourself in dark places too often, feeling there’s no way out, there’s help. And that’s why, at the bottom of the screen throughout this episode, we have*

*phone numbers you can call if you've experienced the suicide of a loved one and need support, or if you need someone to listen."*

I took in a visible breath.

*"Let's get started."*

Then I swiveled in my chair toward my guests.

An hour later, cuddled up to Hale on our couch in New York, I hit pause on the remote and turned to my man.

"You okay?"

My phone buzzed.

So did his.

"Yeah," he grunted, reaching to his phone.

"Hale," I called, reaching to his arm to waylay him.

"It's Genny," he told me. "Probably checking in now that the episode has dropped."

"I'm trying to check in too," I pointed out.

He gave his full attention to me.

"We talked about this, baby. Half of me thinks I betrayed his trust by telling people what happened to him. Half of me knows it's important, and if we can get one person to visit a neurologist because they're experiencing symptoms, or one parent to reconsider enrolling their son in full-contact football, or one teacher or nurse to report it when a parent is abusing their child, or one person who's rethinking the world would be better off without them, it'll be worth it. And if I try real hard, I can talk myself into thinking Dad would agree."

He bent to me, pressed his forehead hard against mine, then sat back.

"Now, I need to talk to Genny, let her know I'm okay, and see how she's doing," he finished.

"Okay, handsome," I muttered.

He engaged his phone.

I reached to mine.

There were tons of texts, including one from Fliss that said, *That was so good. You both did so well. Give Hale a hug from me.*

And one from Carole that said, *I know it was hard, but so incredibly important. You're doing good work, babe. Love to Hale.*

And one from Dad that said, *I'm so proud of you. Bring Hale over tomorrow. I'm grilling. And I wouldn't say no to him making his coleslaw.*

There were two from Mom.

The first one said, *You looked beautiful. So well done. My heart to Hale.*

The second one said, *Please consider a nude lip next time. The pink was a little too much.*

I sighed at that one, then let it go and moved on to the text from Oskar that said, *Fantastic. I know it was hard. But you both made the right choice.* He ended it with a heart.

Further one from Gemma that said, *Tough to watch, but important. You both should be proud. Big hugs to you and see you next week.*

And one from Zoey that said, *Shit is blowing up, sister! It's the biggest reaction yet. Much, much love to Hale. He was great!*

I ignored the rest, put my phone hand to my leg, and listened to him reassuring Genny he was okay.

My phone vibrated in my hand. I lifted it and turned it to face me.

It was a text from Samantha.

I opened it and it read, *Very proud of you both. I can't get through to Hale to tell him myself. Let him know I'd love to hear from him when he's ready.*

Nugget of news: I'd become their go-between. Not because Hale blew off his mother, just that she wanted attention when she wanted attention, and she used every avenue at her disposal to get it. This mildly annoyed Hale, but I assured him I didn't mind. I was a dab hand at motherly manipulation.

Bottom line, both our mothers were who they were, and some things would never change.

But even so, they were both doing better.

As I was reading that, another one came in from Samantha.

*I'm glad he found you. Thank you for taking care of him.*

See?

Doing better.

I let it out a long sigh and texted back, *Thank you, Sam. I'll tell him to call.* And I added three smileys with hearts around the face.

Hale ended his call with Genny.

"Your mom wants to talk to you," I said quietly.

“Right,” he replied. “Just gonna hit up Tom and I’ll call her.”

“I’ll get us more wine.”

“Thanks, babe.”

Frosty followed me to the kitchen.

Cheddar remained asleep in an armchair.

I grabbed the bottle of wine.

“That’s it?” I asked.

“That’s it,” Hale answered, staring at the piece on the wall.

It was one of Mika’s. We were at the opening of her show that was a complement to the documentary film she and her daughter were releasing, the premiere was happening the next night.

The piece he was staring at depicted three sets of women’s hands working a bowl of beads. The beads were such vibrant colors, they were practically popping out of the bowl. The hands were of varying ages, from wrinkled and spotted, to those of a girl who was probably an adolescent.

It was a remarkable picture, denoting feminine bonds and skill and wisdom passed down through the generations.

“You’re just going to give them money?” I pushed at the conversation Hale and I were having.

We were talking about the neighborhood conservation effort in Brooklyn. He’d been to a couple meetings, one that was earlier that night, and he’d surprised me by sharing he was donating to the cause, and bowing out.

He looked down at me. “They know what they’re doing far more than I do, and they’re doing it. They just need investment. I’m investing.”

Well, I couldn’t argue that.

And I was relieved he wasn’t diving into another project. With Javi swiftly coming up to speed, now, Hale cooked for us nearly every night. He read instead of worked after dinner. Sometimes, we went to movies. And he’d joined Jadyn’s basketball team.

“What do you think of this?” he asked, indicating the photo.

I turned again to the photo. “I think it’s awesome.”

“I’m going to buy it for the living room,” he told me.

“I love that,” I replied.

He suddenly looked uncertain, which wasn’t a look I saw him wear very often (or, *ever*).

“Do you think it’ll work?” he asked.

“Does it matter?” I asked in return. “It’s kickass. Mika took it. And you love it. That’s all art needs to be to make it work.”

“I’ve never bought something like this,” he admitted.

I blinked up at him in surprise. “Really?”

He gave me a crooked smile. “I’ve been kinda busy, baby. It’s only recently I’ve had reason to start nesting.”

I liked that so much, I pressed into his side, and informed him, “Then this is the perfect piece to start.”

He dipped his head and kissed me.

Decision made.

Mika tried to give it to us. Hale refused.

He hung it himself on the wall by the elevator.

It went beautifully there.

“Oh Lord.” Chloe rolled her eyes.

“It’s true,” Sully said.

“Totes had a crush on you,” Gage admitted casually. “I mean, you’re gorgeous, no offense, Judge.”

“None taken,” Judge muttered through a grin.

“And I was nineteen when I met you and you weren’t my stepsister then, so...obvs,” Gage went on. “I’m over it now,” he promised Judge.

“That’s good,” Judge said on a chuckle.

“Happy birthday to you...” I started the song, and everyone crushed around our dining room table turned to look at me as I brought in the cake. Then they joined in.

And the crush was a *crush*. So crushed, even though we had a dining room table that seated twelve, all of the stools from around the island had been pulled over and some people still had to stand.

Fliss and Carole. Gemma and Jady. Mom (alone) and Dad (with his



girlfriend, Kristine). Oskar (the kids were with Anoushka, who had also moved to New York, something she had to do, or she wouldn't see her children since Oskar set out to eviscerate her, and she stupidly gave him the ammunition to do that) and Emilie (alone, Scott totally dumped her, sad for her, but not a surprise). Mika, Tom and Cadence. Judge and Chloe. Sasha. Jamie, Nora and Dru. Blake. Ned. Gage and Sullivan (these last two because Sully was being headhunted by a local firm, so he was in NYC for an interview, and Gage took that opportunity to visit since Chloe, Judge and Sasha were coming out for Hale's birthday).

Matt was still neck deep in his vet internship and couldn't get the time off and Genny and Duncan were in LA because she was shooting. Hale had FaceTimed them earlier.

Also there was Samantha.

Good news: Tom was an adult. He didn't like Hale's mom, he wasn't pretending he did, but he wasn't being impolite either. He just avoided her.

Bad news: Chloe was an adult, but she was less capable of hiding her cold shoulder.

More good news: Samantha was acting mature and not reacting.

Last good news: There were enough people around, it wasn't a thing.

So we could all just enjoy Hale's birthday.

I set the cake in front of Hale, the thirty-one sparklers lighting up his beautiful eyes.

"Well, there you go, my Extraordinary Mr. Wheeler, happy birthday!" I cried when the song was done.

Everyone clapped.

I leaned in to kiss his cheek, then in his ear, I explained about the cake I got from Milk Bar Bakery, "The sides are naked, but the frosting layers are an inch deep, there are three of them, and there are tons of sprinkles, so I thought it'd work."

He turned his head. "It's perfect."

I went in for a touch of the lips.

When I moved back, he asked, "But how do I blow out the candles?"

I slowly looked to the cake, mumbling, "Well...shit."

He busted out laughing and pulled me into his lap.

We waited for the sparklers to go out before Samantha dashed back to the kitchen and got the birthday cake ice cream.

"Love you, bro," Gage said to Sully, then confessed, "But I'm totally here

for Hale's annual birthday cake on birthday cake celebration."

"I already knew that," Sully replied.

Everyone laughed.

Carole lifted her glass. "To Thurston Remington the Fifth."

Other glasses went up, including Fliss shouting, "To Thurston!"

And at that, everyone laughed again.

But Hale laughed the hardest.

And that made me happy.

I was sitting under an umbrella, and I still had to shade my phone from the sun to watch the video Chuck sent.

Even though it was still difficult to see, I saw what I needed and texted, *Tell them we're interested and I'll be in touch to set up a time to view it myself ASAP.*

I wasn't with Chuck, looking at studio space for our West Coast operations, because I was where I needed to be.

I put my phone down and looked to the ocean.

Hale was popping to his feet on his surfboard, preparing to catch a wave.

He caught it. Now, with experience with this, I knew he always did.

He rode it in while my heart palpitated a little bit (because he was damned sexy, riding that board). He naturally fell off when the swell died, but instead of mounting it again and paddling back out, he stood, tucked it under his arm and jogged out of the surf.

Cue more heart palpitations and me resisting the urge to film him (done that already, *loads*).

We'd been there two hours. It was only eight thirty, but for surfing, it was getting late. I thought he was done.

He wasn't done.

He walked up to what appeared to be a dad and son duo, the dad was in an electric wheelchair, the son, who might be maybe nine, ten years old, was watching Hale approach. They'd been there a while and I'd noticed them looking up and down the beach, like they were waiting for someone. Someone who didn't show.

The boy had a kid's wetsuit on and a battered surfboard that was probably rented.

Surfing lessons, gone awry.

Hale spoke with them for a bit, lots of nodding happening, and eventually, the boy started dancing excitedly. I could see, even if I wasn't close, the kid was ecstatic, and the dad was in shock.

Hale looked to me.

I blew him a kiss.

He jerked up his chin.

Then he stood with the kid on the beach for the next half hour, showing him on dry land what he'd need to do out in the blue.

After that, they paddled out together.

During this time, I'd grabbed my book (that would be, after watching Hale with that kid—he was a natural with kids, so it was safe to say my heart palpitated a little more).

I had things to do and people to talk to, but obviously, this morning's surf session was going to be longer than usual.

So, when it was all said and done, this was the only place I truly needed to be.

And this was the only thing I truly needed to be doing.

After I set it where it would always sit, I adjusted the plant that Hale gave me all those months ago so the leaves worked with the double photo frame on one corner of the desk.

I then looked to him.

He hadn't entered the room, his father's study. He was leaning in the door jamb, watching me.

"Okay?" I asked.

"It's perfect there, baby," he said softly.

It didn't surprise me he thought that, since it was Hale who suggested I put it there.

I didn't move from where I was standing at his dad's desk when I carefully suggested, "Maybe we should renovate this room."

“No,” Hale said quickly, but not harshly. He then explained, “He designed this room. He picked this room to be with me and Duncan and Genny. He—”

His voice had gotten thick, so I interrupted him, “Okay, we won’t change a thing.”

He cleared his throat before he asked, “Do you think it’s weird that I want it just like it was before he died?”

It was my turn to be quick when I said, “No.”

“I didn’t see it after he…” I watched Hale swallow. “It’d been cleaned up by the time I saw it. It’s just him.” He shrugged. “It’s him.”

“And you need him close to you,” I surmised gently.

“Yeah,” he grunted.

Finally, I walked to my guy. I got close and put my hand on his chest.

“Can we move some of the other pictures in here? Matt and Sasha. Tom. Marilyn and Robert. Frame one of Chloe and Judge’s wedding pictures. Duncan and Genny’s. A photo of Mika and Cadence with Tom. Put them on his desk.”

I barely finished my suggestion before I was in his arms and crushed to his body.

Into my hair, he said, “Dad would like that.”

Yes.

I’d never meet Corey Szabo, but I knew one thing to be true.

Yes, he would like that.

Hale wouldn’t move any of the photos that were already in the house. They’d been put where they were by his dad, so they stayed in their places, untouched.

However, within two days, Hale had made his selections from photos on his phone and ones sent to him from his family. We’d had them printed out. Then we went out to buy frames.

And it was Hale who went into the study to arrange them while I stood close.

They all sat on Corey’s desk, facing his chair.

Everyone he loved.

Who loved him in return.

Including me.

## **Corey**

*Then...*

“Wake up, little guy.”

Corey watched his son turn, stretch, rub his eyes with his fists, and blink at his father through the stars illuminating his room.

“Come on,” Corey urged, helping him get out of bed.

“Wherz we goin’, Daddy?” Hale asked sleepily.

“I want to show you something.”

“Okay,” Hale mumbled.

Corey held his hand and helped him navigate his new room, the hall, the stairs, then being very careful with him, more stairs as they walked down the cliff face.

He didn’t pick him up because his boy liked to get places on his own and being carried “was for babies.” So Corey kept a firm grip while not quashing the fierce independence his son displayed from practically birth.

Oh no, Corey took pains not to do that. He wanted his son to forge his own path.

Always.

It was night. The ocean was calm, the waves soothing as they wet the shore.

He led Hale out in the sand then turned him to look up at their new house.

“See that?” he asked, still holding Hale’s hand and using his other to point up at the house.

Hale tipped his head way back and blinked at the big house on the cliff.

“Our new houz?”

“Our new house.” Corey crouched, pulling Hale to his side with an arm around his little body. “And one day, a long time from today, it’s going to be yours. I’m going to leave it to you.”

He knew he messed that up because Hale’s little head jerked to face him and he asked with alarm, “Where you goin’, Daddy?”

“Nowhere, son. Nowhere. Never,” Corey assured hurriedly. “I’ll always

be there for you. I just want you to know,”—he pointed up again—“that’s yours. All I have is yours. All I do is for you. You’re going to live here a very long time, Hale, and you’re going to do it safe and happy.”

Hale looked confused, but said, “Okay.”

Okay.

Safe.

And happy.

Safe.

That was what he’d give his son.

Safe.

Corey allowed himself to lean in and kiss his son’s head then muttered, “You’ll get it one day.”

“Can weez go swimmin’?” Hale asked.

“Tomorrow, when the sun is out. That’s why I got this house on the beach for us. So you can go play in the ocean whenever you want.”

Hale grinned a big grin.

“You want to sit and listen to the waves for a while?” Corey asked.

“Yeah!”

Suddenly, Corey was overcome with crippling worry, because now his son seemed excited, and if he was overexcited, he wouldn’t get back to sleep. And kids needed their sleep. He’d read a lot of books on this subject, and that was in all of them.

He was kicking himself—and vowing not to do foolish things like this ever again—when his son, sitting in his lap, within a few minutes, fell fast asleep tucked to his father’s chest.

Corey sat for a bit, listening to the waves, holding his boy in the warmth of his arms, before he carefully got to his feet and kept him close as he walked up the steps, into the house, and then, finally, he tucked his son back in his bed among the stars.

***Hale***

*Now...*

“Wake up, baby.”

Hale watched as she turned, stretched, ran a hand over her eyes, and then blinked at him through the moonlight.

“Come on,” he urged, guiding her out of the bed.

“Hale, it’s two in the morning, where are we going?” she asked.

“Just come on.”

She looked at him quizzically but kept hold of his hand as he helped her navigate the dark room, the stairs, then more stairs as they walked down the cliff face.

He heard her gasp when she saw the circle of glass globes planted in the sand, the flames of the candles inside them dancing in the darkness.

He guided her into the middle of the circle, pulled his phone out of his joggers, and hit go.

The Bluetooth speaker sitting in the sand started playing “Love You Till the End.”

He went back to his joggers and pulled out the ring.

“Time to make it official,” he murmured, sliding Marilyn’s diamond on her left finger.

She didn’t look at the ring.

She was gazing up at him, love shining in her eyes.

“Since it’s gonna be our turn soon, we’ve gotta keep practicing,” he said, drawing her into his arms.

His fiancée came willingly.

The song serenaded them. Elsa rounded his neck with her arms and rested her cheek on his chest, their bodies pressed together, swaying in the candlelight.

And under a sprawling home built on a cliff, Hale and Elsa danced in the sand under the stars.

***The End***

*The River Rain Series will continue...*

If you’re in the US and you’re in distress, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 988 or 1-800-273-8255. Or if you’re in another country, I urge you, please find a local resource that can offer support. These

agencies also provide resources for loved ones.

There is hope and recovery.  
If you feel lost, it is my great wish that you find both.

For more information on Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy, or CTE, visit the Concussion Legacy Foundation at [concussionlegacy.org](http://concussionlegacy.org). If you're seeking guidance about CTE, use CLF's helpline form at [concussionlegacy.org/helpline](http://concussionlegacy.org/helpline).



# BOOK CLUB/REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. This book is a study of masculine love. Corey's for his son. Tom's for a man he considers his son. Jamie also provides support and guidance to Hale. And David keeps himself open to his son's love even if they don't agree on many things. How did you feel about these men and their relationships?
2. There is a thread in all the River Rain books about the fallout of divorce among adult children. In this story, we see Samantha weaponizing her son in her dislike of her ex-husband, and how that affected Hale when he was younger, and older. Have you seen this before? Has it happened to you? How did you react when Samantha denied her son the spring break he wanted just to punish Corey?
3. It's said all of us have different families, even those within the same family. Parents treat their children differently, siblings treat each other differently. Elsa and her siblings fall among classic categories, including Elsa being aware she has middle child syndrome. Where do you fall along the sibling line? Do you feel you experience traits stemming from the upbringing of being the oldest/older child, middle child or youngest child?
4. The books in this series that involve Corey Szabo take a deep dive into the after-effects of suicide. Were you surprised to read Corey's diagnosis? Did that answer some questions for you? Or do you feel as Hale does, that there are still multiple possibilities of why Corey took his own life, and that you'll never truly know?

5. Elsa and Hale both have issues with their mothers, although they're very different. At the end of this book, both of them make peace with their mothers, even if the troubling behavior doesn't completely go away. Did you think this was the right thing for these characters to do? How would you have handled these situations?

6. Hale and Oskar have an in-depth discussion about the body positivity movement. What were your thoughts on this discussion?

7. What do you think Paloma and AJ are up to?

8. What do you think is going on between Nora and Jamie?

9. Which was your favorite home of Hale's, New York or LA?

# LEARN MORE ABOUT KRISTEN ASHLEY'S RIVER RAIN SERIES

## **After the Climb: A River Rain Novel, Book 1**

Click [here](#) to purchase.

They were the Three Amigos: Duncan Holloway, Imogen Swan and Corey Szabo. Two young boys with difficult lives at home banding together with a cool girl who didn't mind mucking through the mud on their hikes.

They grew up to be Duncan Holloway, activist, CEO and face of the popular River Rain outdoor stores, Imogen Swan, award-winning actress and America's sweetheart, and Corey Szabo, ruthless tech billionaire.

Rich and very famous, they would learn the devastating knowledge of how the selfish acts of one would affect all their lives.

And the lives of those they loved.

Start the River Rain series with *After the Climb*, the story of Duncan and Imogen navigating their way back to each other, decades after a fierce betrayal.

And introduce yourself to their families, who will have their stories told when River Rain continues.

**[Click here to read an excerpt of After the Climb.](#)**

## **Chasing Serenity: A River Rain Novel, Book 2**

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From a very young age, Chloe Pierce was trained to look after the ones she loved.

And she was trained by the best.

But when the man who looked after her was no longer there, Chloe is cast adrift—just as the very foundation of her life crumbled to pieces.

Then she runs into tall, lanky, unpretentious Judge Oakley, her exact opposite. She shops. He hikes. She drinks pink ladies. He drinks beer. She's a city girl. He's a mountain guy.

Obviously, this means they have a blowout fight upon meeting. Their second encounter doesn't go a lot better.

Judge is loving the challenge. Chloe is everything he doesn't want in a woman, but he can't stop finding ways to spend time with her. He knows she's dealing with loss and change.

He just doesn't know how deep that goes. Or how ingrained it is for Chloe to care for those who have a place in her heart, how hard it will be to trust anyone to look after her...

And how much harder it is when it's his turn.

[Click here to read an excerpt of Chasing Serenity.](#)

## **Taking the Leap: A River Rain Novel, Book 3**

Click [here](#) to purchase.

Alexandra Sharp has been crushing on her co-worker, John "Rix" Hendrix for years. He's her perfect man, she knows it.

She's just not his perfect woman, and she knows that too.

Then Rix gives Alex a hint that maybe there's a spark between them that, if she takes the leap, she might be able to fan into a flame. This leads to a crash and burn, and that's all shy Alex needs to catch the hint never to take

the risk again.

However, with undeniable timing, Rix's ex, who broke his heart, and Alex's family, who spent her lifetime breaking hers, rear their heads, gearing up to offer more drama. With the help of some matchmaking friends, Rix and Alex decide to face the onslaught together...

As a fake couple.

[Click here to read an excerpt of Taking the Leap.](#)

### **Making the Match, A River Rain Novel, Book 4**

Click [here](#) to purchase.

Decades ago, tennis superstar Tom Pierce and "It Girl" Mika Stowe met at a party.

Mika fell in love. Tom was already in love with his wife. As badly as Tom wanted Mika as a friend, Mika knew it would hurt too much to be attracted to this amazing man and never be able to have him.

They parted ways for what they thought would be forever, only to reconnect just once, when unspeakable tragedy darkens Mika's life.

Years later, the impossible happens.

A time comes when they're both unattached.

But now Tom has made a terrible mistake. A mistake so damaging to the ones he loves, he feels he'll never be redeemed.

Mika has never forgotten how far and how fast she fell when she met him, but Tom's transgression is holding her distant from reaching out.

There are matchmakers in their midst, however.

And when the plot has been unleashed to make that match, Tom and Mika are thrown into an international intrigue that pits them against a Goliath of the sports industry.

Now they face a massive battle at the same time they're navigating friendship, attraction, love, family, grief, redemption, two very different lives lived on two opposite sides of a continent and a box full of kittens.

[Click here to read an excerpt of Making the Match.](#)

# AFTER THE CLIMB

## EXCERPT

Corey

*Forty-four years ago...*

He stood beside Duncan and watched her go.

And as he watched her flounce away, all mad because Duncan was being a jerk, he knew he could watch her forever.

But she was walking away. They didn't have forever. He knew that because, even though she was way down the creek before she made that turn into the woods, it seemed like it was all of a sudden that she was gone.

That was when he looked to his side and up, at Duncan.

Yeah, up.

Because Duncan was taller than him.

It wasn't just being tall.

Duncan was a lot more "ers" than him.

And when Corey's eyes got to Duncan's head, he saw his best friend was still staring at the spot where she last was, like she was still there.

And Dun's face was all weird.

Corey knew that weird.

He *felt* that weird.

Deep in his chest.

Like it'd been there all his life, even if he'd never felt it before.

It was a good weird.

Corey didn't get it, but maybe it was the best weird ever.

No.

Duncan couldn't feel that same thing.

Not for *her*.

*Not for her.*

"Why'd you have to do that?" Corey grumbled.

Dun didn't even look at him when he replied, "I don't know. I don't know."

He didn't have to say it twice.

Why did he say it twice?

And why did he keep watching that place where she'd gone?

"She's just a girl," Corey muttered.

That was when Duncan finally looked at him.

And he knew.

They both knew.

Imogen wasn't *just a girl*.

And she never would be.

**Click [here](#) to purchase *After the Climb*.**

Click [here](#) to learn more about *The River Rain Series*.



# CHASING SERENITY

## EXCERPT

Corey

*Fifteen years ago...*

Genny was doing something in the kitchen with a summer salad. Tom was off with Matt at their club, playing tennis, destined, from a recent call from Tom, to be home soon in order to eat the dinner Genny was preparing. Sasha was doing cartwheels on the beach.

And Chloe was on the terrace, arms crossed on her chest, ostensibly keeping an eye on her little sister, but mostly glaring at the sun glinting off the sea.

To Corey's mind, when it came to Tom and Genny's children, he thought Matt was okay. Too much like his father, a man who Corey put up with, but Corey had no patience for anyone, especially men, who got everything easy in life, like Tom Pierce had.

Life was not easy.

You suffered for what you earned.

Worked for it.

Cheated for it.

Stole for it.

Whatever you had to do to *get it*.

Tom, his looks, his talent on the tennis courts, his easygoing manner, sly smile, and inability to put up with any shit, it all fell in his lap.

Including Genny.

Sweet, beautiful, talented Genny. One, if not *the* most beloved actress in America.

Sasha, Genny's youngest, Corey simply did not understand. Although she had some of Genny's features, including her sunshiny blonde hair, she was not like either her mother or her father.

Or anyone Corey knew.

But Chloe, the eldest...

If she didn't so look like Tom, she could be Corey's child.

Smart as fuck.

Shrewd as hell.

Chloe Pierce calculated any situation she was in within seconds, deciphering what outcome would serve her purposes the best, and then she set about doing that.

And she was ten.

Corey adored her.

So now, seeing her seething about something, he went out to the terrace, and he did this not only because, as Genny's nearly life-long friend, Corey was there, as he often was, for dinner with the family, and Genny was busy with cooking, so he was bored.

He did it because he was interested in whatever was occupying Chloe Pierce's mind.

As he approached, Chloe sent him a ten-year-old's version of a look that said *fuck off*.

And he adored her more.

There were fair few people on that earth who had the courage to send him looks like that, considering he'd amassed the wealth, and thus the power, to buy and sell practically anyone.

Corey ignored the look and moved to the lounge chair next to where she sat at the end of hers, close to the sheet of clear glass set into the railing of a terrace of a house that rested above the cliffs of Malibu.

He sat on his chair's end too.

"Spill," he ordered.

"I don't wanna talk, Uncle Corey."

"*Want to*," he corrected, and heard her instantly suck her teeth in annoyance at the criticism.

Corey fought smiling.

"I'll repeat, spill," Corey pressed.

She didn't.  
Corey waited.  
She still didn't.  
Corey continued to wait.  
Chloe was no fool.

**Click [here](#) to purchase Chasing Serenity.**

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# TAKING THE LEAP

## EXCERPT

*Alex*

It was happening.

He was flirting with me.

John “Rix” Hendrix, the coolest guy I’d ever met, the most interesting person I’d ever known, the most handsome man I’d ever seen, was flirting...

With...

*Me.*

And I was somehow managing to flirt back (kind of).

Okay, I might be relying on something from Moscow to do so (that something being their mules), but it was happening.

And I knew I wasn’t making more of it than I should.

I knew that because Chloe and Judge were with us. We were out having drinks, celebrating the official beginning of our new Trail Blazer program (that day, Judge, Rix and I had signed on to new job titles with new responsibilities and new salaries with the expanded program—I got a promotion and a fifteen percent raise!—definitely worth sitting down to drinks with the man who terrified me most on this earth).

Chloe was giving Rix and me smug looks, but mostly me, and once, she’d even winked at me.

As an aside: Chloe Pierce, my boss Judge’s girlfriend, was the coolest, most interesting, most gorgeous woman I’d ever met.

And even though (fortunately, so far, though maybe not now?) Rix had missed it, but although she hadn’t said anything, I knew Chloe knew I was crushing on Rix...*big time.*

And I had been.  
Crushing on Rix.  
*Big time.*  
She was happy for me.  
I was happy for me!  
Because Rix was *flirting with me.*  
Me!

And the reason why this was crazy was not only because he was cool and interesting and handsome, and as yet, such a man had never shown any interest in me (no, the men who had shown interest in me lacked one or more of those qualities).

It was because I was, well...

Me.

First off, I was shy around cute guys (okay, I was just plain shy, but it got a lot worse around guys, and off-the-charts worse around cute ones).

Not to mention, I knew how to put on mascara, I just wasn't a big fan of wearing it (so, unless it was a super special occasion, or I was with my family, I didn't).

I had a little house up in the mountains (TBH, it was more like a big shack), but I was rarely in it because there were a lot better places to be (and my house was awesome, I just had a ton of interests and not a lot of them happened in my house).

I knew how to cook in a kitchen, but I cooked way better over a campfire (and in a hot coal pit).

There were Star Trek nerds, I was just a star nerd (that being, lying under them at night in the middle of nowhere and staring at them until I fell asleep).

I would rather snowshoe into a forest in the dead of winter, set up a tent and spend a couple of days in nature, reading by a headlamp at night cozied up in a one-woman sleeping bag in a one-person tent than sit by a fireside during a snowstorm with a mug of hot cocoa (though, that was nice too).

Many women didn't get me.

Men didn't either, and it was actually more men who didn't get me than it was women because I wasn't stereotypically womanly. Most women got there were lots of different kinds of women. Most men (in my experience) weren't that broad minded.

No, actually, it was more my family who didn't get me than anyone else.

My family didn't get me at all.

Which wasn't really surprising, seeing as I didn't get them either.  
"Sexy as fuck," Rix was saying.  
I came out of my musings to focus on his words.  
Words he was aiming at me (me!).

**Click [here](#) to purchase *Taking the Leap*.**

*Click [here](#) to learn more about *The River Rain Series*.*

# MAKING THE MATCH

## EXCERPT

*Corey*

*Decades ago...*

He didn't think he'd gain entry.

But when he knocked, the door opened, and one of the groomsmen looked at him, then glanced over his shoulder, he heard the familiar deep voice call, "Let him in."

Corey entered and saw immediately that the groom had prepared for Corey's visit.

As, of course, he would.

He was not stupid.

Corey knew he'd prepared because, with a nod and a look, but not a word, all the groomsmen filed out.

Corey did not see joyous-wedding-day expressions on their faces when each man caught his eye as he left the room.

That wasn't about them having any apprehension about what was to happen that day or the woman their friend was about to tie the rest of his life to.

It was because they all detested Corey and perhaps knew why he was there.

Or they thought they did.

His face void of expression, Corey met every eye.

He was used to this, especially with the male gender. Men never knew

what to do when another man was in their orbit who was smarter than them in a way they'd never equal him— and worse for them, richer just the same.

Especially ones with huge egos like these men had.

And on that thought, the door closed behind the last and Corey turned to Tom Pierce.

“I know,” Tom started. “If I hurt her—”

“I will have her.”

Tom's mouth snapped shut and his eyes, annoyingly always filled with wit and intelligence, turned shrewd.

Another annoying thing about Tom Pierce?

Not only was he the most talented tennis player on the planet—a player who turned that wit and intelligence against opponents so that he not only prevailed through physical prowess, he outthought them.

(As an aside, this was, to Corey's way of thinking, worse than someone humiliating you after serving an ace, then doing it again, and again, and then again, something Pierce did often—his serve was, as one of his rivals put it, like trying to return a bullet.)

He was also one of the most handsome men on the planet.

He was not built like a tennis player. He was built like a football player, his tall body packed with power. This being what made his serve so terrifying, not to mention his return.

Dark hair.

Dark eyes.

Classic looks, square jaw, strong chin, high cheekbones.

The first time Corey heard his name was overhearing office talk. Someone's assistant was talking about “that tennis guy, Pierce,” who “looks like JFK, Jr., but more handsome.”

When Corey saw a photo of him, he noted she was not wrong.

When Genny phoned him and said, “Corey, I think I've met the man I'm going to marry,” and that man was Tom Pierce, Corey's heart cracked in two.

Last, when Corey had met Tom, he knew what Genny knew.

She would never truly be his.

But Pierce would always be hers.

And he'd be happy with that.

As to the matter at hand...

“You would not be the first to break her, or the best,” Corey jibed.

Pierce, damn the man, didn't give him anything. Not a sneer, a flinch, or



even an eye twitch, his ability to hold his own against Corey was something else he didn't like about the guy.

Corey carried on, "I put her together before, I'll put her together again."

At that, Pierce spoke.

"Let's not pretend that's what you're angling for."

"And what am I angling for?" Corey pushed.

It was a mistake.

His first for so long, he didn't realize it, not then.

"You hope this will crash and burn, like she and Holloway crashed and burned, because you hope she'll eventually give up on men she actually wants and settle for one she doesn't want, but he wants her."

Truly.

Corey hated this man.

**Click [here](#) to purchase Making the Match.**

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## **GOSSAMER IN THE DARKNESS:**

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Their engagement was set when they were children. Loren Copeland, the rich and handsome Marquess of Remington, would marry Maxine Dawes, the stunning daughter of the Count of Derryman. It's a power match. The perfect alliance for each house.

However, the Count has been keeping secret a childhood injury that means Maxine can never marry. He's done this as he searches for a miracle so this marriage can take place. He needs the influence such an alliance would give him, and he'll stop at nothing to have it.

The time has come. There could be no more excuses. No more delays. The marriage has to happen, or the contract will be broken.

When all seems lost, the Count finds his miracle: There's a parallel universe where his daughter has a twin. He must find her, bring her to his world and force her to make the Marquess fall in love with her.

And this, he does.

## **WILD WIND: A Chaos Novella**

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When he was sixteen years old, Jagger Black laid eyes on the girl who was his. At a cemetery. During her mother's funeral.

For years, their lives cross, they feel the pull of their connection, but then they go their separate ways.

But when Jagger sees that girl chasing someone down the street, he doesn't think twice before he wades right in. And when he gets a full-on dose of the woman she's become, he knows he finally has to decide if he's all in or if it's time to cut her loose.

She's ready to be cut loose.

But Jagger is all in.

### **DREAM BITES COOKBOOK:**

#### **Cooking with the Commandos**

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From *New York Times* bestseller Kristen Ashley and *USA Today* bestseller Suzanne M. Johnson...

See what's cooking!

You're invited to Denver and into the kitchens of Hawk Delgado's commandos: Daniel "Mag" Magnusson, Boone Sadler, Axl Pantera and Augustus "Auggie" Hero as they share with you some of the goodness they whip up for their women.

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So strap in for a trip to Denver, a few short stories, some reminiscing and

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Welcome to Dream Bites, Cooking with the Commandos!

### **WILD FIRE: A Chaos Novella**

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**“You know you can’t keep a good brother down.”**

The Chaos Motorcycle Club has won its war. But not every brother rode into the sunset with his woman on the back of his bike.

Chaos returns with the story of Dutch Black, a man whose father was the moral compass of the Club, until he was murdered. And the man who raised Dutch protected the Club at all costs. That combination is the man Dutch is intent on becoming.

It’s also the man that Dutch is going to go all out to give to his woman.

### **QUIET MAN: A Dream Man Novella**

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Charlotte “Lottie” McAlister is in the zone. She’s ready to take on the next chapter of her life, and since she doesn’t have a man, she’ll do what she’s done all along. She’ll take care of business on her own. Even if that business means starting a family.

The problem is, Lottie has a stalker. The really bad kind. The kind that

means she needs a bodyguard.

Enter Mo Morrison.

Enormous. Scary.

Quiet.

Mo doesn't say much, and Lottie's used to getting attention. And she wants Mo's attention. Badly.

But Mo has a strict rule. If he's guarding your body, that's all he's doing with it.

However, the longer Mo has to keep Lottie safe, the faster he falls for the beautiful blonde who has it so together, she might even be able to tackle the demons he's got in his head that just won't die.

But in the end, Lottie and Mo don't only have to find some way to keep hands off until the threat is over, they have to negotiate the overprotective Hot Bunch, Lottie's crazy stepdad, Tex, Mo's crew of frat-boy commandos, not to mention his nutty sisters.

All before Lottie finally gets her Dream Man.

And Mo can lay claim to his Dream Girl.

## **ROUGH RIDE: A Chaos Novella**

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Rosalie Holloway put it all on the line for the Chaos Motorcycle Club.

Informing to Chaos on their rival club—her man's club, Bounty—Rosalie knows the stakes. And she pays them when her man, who she was hoping to scare straight, finds out she's betrayed him and he delivers her to his brothers to mete out their form of justice.

But really, Rosie has long been denying that, as she drifted away from her Bounty, she's been falling in love with Everett "Snapper" Kavanagh, a Chaos brother. Snap is the biker-boy-next door with the snowy blue eyes, quiet confidence and sweet disposition who was supposed to keep her safe...and fell down on that job.

For Snapper, it's always been Rosalie, from the first time he saw her at the Chaos Compound. He's just been waiting for a clear shot. But he didn't

want to get it after his Rosie was left bleeding, beat down and broken by Bounty on a cement warehouse floor.

With Rosalie a casualty of an ongoing war, Snapper has to guide her to trust him, take a shot with him, build a them...

And fold his woman firmly in the family that is Chaos.

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