

Her
Naughty
Billionaire

C.L. Cruz

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Contents

[1. Chapter 1](#)

[2. Chapter 2](#)

[3. Chapter 3](#)

[4. Chapter 4](#)

[5. Chapter 5](#)

[6. Chapter 6](#)

[7. Chapter 7](#)

[8. Chapter 8](#)

[9. Epilogue](#)

[10. Epilogue 2](#)

[Also By C.L. Cruz](#)

[About C.L. Cruz](#)

Chapter 1

Sophia

The Carter Manor is a sprawling estate, its impressive walls catching the last golden rays of the setting sun. Today, though, its majestic gardens are filled with people in somber tones, speaking in hushed voices, offering condolences. I make my way through my father's memorial, each step firm and determined. My black dress is more statement than mourning attire, its form-fitting design a testament to my refusal to be seen as a grieving, weakened heiress.

“Ah, Sophia,” Mrs. Harrington says as she sidles up to me, her heavy fur coat entirely inappropriate for the weather. Her voice is soft, but her eyes, calculating and curious, dart all over me, as if trying to gauge the extent of my devastation. “So tragic,” she continues, but it's obvious she's more interested in the latest gossip than offering genuine sympathy.

“Thank you,” I reply, touching my necklace out of habit. The locket—Dad's last gift to me—rests cold against my skin,

grounding me.

Yet, as I move on, the comforting memories of my father are tainted by the jarring reality of the financial statements I'd recently pored over. Since his unexpected death, the legacy he left behind is teetering on the brink of ruin, and it seems everyone knows it.

Whispers reach my ears, and I catch snippets of hushed conversations. "Such a shame," one woman tuts, a gleam in her eye that belies her words. Another man casts a lingering gaze on an old portrait, lips curled in pity and disdain.

The house may be the same, but its foundations feel shaken, and I can't help but wonder if everyone senses the cracks forming beneath us.

I see my mother near a garden window. She's in a black dress, looking as put-together as ever, but when I get closer, I can hear her trying to muffle her crying. The weight of the day is clearly hitting her hard.

"Mom," I murmur, wrapping an arm around her waist.

She leans into me, her tears staining my shoulder. "It's just so unreal, Sophia. One moment, he was here, laughing about some silly thing, and then... gone. Just like that." She shakes her head, a wisp of her silver hair falling over her eyes.

I tighten my grip around her. "I know. It's unfair."

She looks up at me, her mascara smeared. "Do you think we'll get through this? Not just today, but everything?"

"We have to," I reply. "We'll find a way. We always do."

She nods, sniffing and wiping her tears. “Your father would’ve been so proud of you, Sophia. The way you’ve handled everything, the strength you’ve shown.”

I bite back a response, thinking of how Dad always acted strong for everyone, like everything was fine. A part of me can’t help but feel betrayed. It’s frustrating that he didn’t let me in on what was really going on. Now, it’s like I’m stepping into his shoes, keeping up appearances just like he did.

“Let’s get through today first,” I finally say. “And remember, Mom, you’re not alone. You’ve got me.”

“And me,” chimes in a familiar voice nearby.

Turning, I find my best friend’s warm brown eyes fixed on us, her auburn hair falling in waves around her shoulders. She’s dressed in an understated black dress, always the master of elegance.

“Ava,” I exhale, the tension in my shoulders easing slightly.

She steps closer, offering my mother a tender hug. “Mrs. Carter, I’m so, so sorry.”

“Thank you, dear.” My mother’s voice breaks, but she manages a genuine smile for Ava.

Ava turns her attention back to me, squeezing my arm in silent support. “How are you holding up?”

“Barely,” I admit, the rawness in my voice belying my earlier composure. “It’s a lot.”

She nods, understanding without me having to say more.

A voice dripping with faux sympathy interrupts our moment. “Sophia, tragic about your father.”

I turn this time to face Gregory Danforth, a notorious social climber with a reputation for circling the vulnerable like a vulture. His slicked-back hair and too-tight suit scream desperation, a stark contrast to the genuine mourners.

“And speaking of tragedy, that vase in the east wing,” he motions vaguely with his hand, “from the Ming Dynasty, isn’t it? I heard it’s worth a fortune. Do you think, perhaps—”

“This isn’t an estate auction, Mr. Danforth,” I snap.

Ava jumps in, her voice icy. “Have some respect. It’s a memorial, not a marketplace.”

The man shrinks back, clearly not expecting the united front. He mutters something unintelligible, casting one last greedy glance toward the vase before scurrying away.

Breathing deeply, I mutter, “The audacity of some people.”

Ava shakes her head, her eyes darkening. “Don’t worry, Soph, I’ve got your back.”

“Thanks, Ava.” Then, in a quieter voice, I ask, “Do you think you could stay with Mom for a bit? I need a break.”

“Of course,” Ava agrees readily, looping her arm through my mother’s and turning her toward the kitchen.

Walking in from the garden, I head straight for the piano room. It’s familiar, always a quiet place for me in this vast house. As I close the door, the distant chatter becomes a

murmur. The room's simple lighting and the sight of the piano in the corner give me a sense of comfort.

The bench creaks slightly as I sit, my fingers hovering over the ivory keys. This piano has been an old friend—afternoons spent under the strict tutelage of Mrs. Langley, laughing duets with Dad, the nights alone on this bench, playing to a quiet house.

Taking a deep breath, I allow my fingers to glide across the keys, playing from memory. The tune is melancholic, a wistful piece. Each note rises and falls, echoing the highs and lows, the love and loss. The music envelops me, acting as a temporary shield against the reality awaiting beyond these walls.

For those fleeting moments, I'm not Sophia Carter, heiress to a crumbling legacy; I'm just a daughter missing her father.

As the final notes fade, the unexpected sound of applause pierces the cocoon I'd wrapped myself in. Jerking upright, I'm met with the piercing blue eyes of none other than Victor Thorn. Leaning nonchalantly against the wall, his tall, tailored silhouette seems out of place in this intimate setting.

“That was lovely, Ms. Carter.”

There's an ease in his voice, a familiarity that catches me off guard. Victor Thorn is the epitome of new money—ambitious, ruthless, and unapologetically crass. While my father made no secret of his disdain for the man, I'd always found myself sneaking glances his way during the few events we'd both attended, though our paths rarely crossed. I can't deny it; he's

devastatingly handsome, with a magnetic pull that's hard to resist.

But he's the antithesis of everything the Carters stand for. He's wild, unrefined. Not for me... or so I keep telling myself.

"Mr. Thorn, isn't it?" I stand and face him. "Can I help you with something?"

He takes a few strides into the room, and before I can move, he's leaning against the piano just a foot from me. "I believe you can, yes. It's concerning your father," he starts, watching me with those intense blue eyes, seeking a reaction.

A shiver races down my spine, but it's not solely from his words. It's from his proximity. Every part of me becomes acutely aware of Victor Thorn: the scent of his cologne, the slight rasp in his voice, the way the light shadows the chiseled line of his jaw.

"My father had many acquaintances. I wasn't aware you were one of them," I reply evenly, not knowing where he's going with this and not liking the feeling that I'm about to be caught by surprise.

He smiles, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes. "Oh, we were more than acquaintances, Ms. Carter. Your father owed me a significant sum of money."

I school my face to hide any trace of shock. But inside? Panic wrestles with disbelief. My father must have been truly desperate to do business with this man. "This is hardly the

time or place to discuss business, Mr. Thorn. I don't know how they do things in your circles—”

“I have no circles,” he interrupts me. “Only interests. And currently, you're at the center of one.” His gaze doesn't waver, holding mine with a challenging intensity.

I straighten up, pushing every ounce of Carter pride to the forefront. “Look, Mr. Thorn, whatever business you had with my father, I will handle it. We can discuss it at another time, not in the middle of his memorial.”

His smile is a dangerous curve, both enticing and intimidating. “I admire your spirit, Ms. Carter. But don't think for a second that his death will deter me from what's owed.”

The insolence of the man leaves me momentarily breathless. Swallowing hard, I try to regain my composure. “Give me a figure. Let's settle this now. I won't have the Carter name tarnished.”

Victor pauses for a moment, letting the weight of the situation hang in the air. He taps a rhythmical beat on the side of the piano with his fingers—a slow, methodical dance that seems to mirror the pace of my racing heart.

“The debt, Ms. Carter, is fifteen million dollars.”

The air in the room grows thin, and my vision blurs momentarily as the magnitude of that number sinks in. Fifteen million? What had my father done?

I cross my arms, attempting to put on a defiant front when all I really want is to crumple to the ground. “There must be some

mistake.”

“No mistake,” he replies coolly, that predatory gleam growing brighter in his eyes. “You asked for the figure. Now you have it.”

I’m trapped in a suffocating silence, thoughts whirling. We don’t have that kind of liquid cash. Carter Manor, the family businesses—all would be at risk. The legacy my ancestors built reduced to rubble.

Reading my turmoil with an unsettling precision, Victor continues, “But, as with most things in life, there’s always another way. A solution that can be mutually beneficial.”

“What are you suggesting?” I ask, both hopeful and hesitant.

He straightens up, towering over me. “Marry me.”

The words land like a ton of bricks, rendering me momentarily speechless.

“In exchange,” he continues, “the debt will be wiped clean. I’ll also ensure no other creditors darken your doorstep. You maintain the façade of the Carter legacy, and I...” he leans in, his lips brushing against my ear, his breath warm, “...get you.”

The room feels like it’s pulsing, shrinking and expanding in time with my heart. The idea is audacious. Scandalous. Yet, I can’t deny the appeal of his proposition—or the allure of the man himself.

“Why?” The word leaves my lips, not louder than a whisper, yet it fills the silence between us.

Victor's face remains unreadable, a mask of cool indifference. But as he speaks, a glimmer of something—desire? longing?—flickers across his eyes. “The Carter name still holds weight in this town, regardless of your father's financial missteps. It's a symbol of old money, class, and prestige.” He pauses, looking at me intently. “And having a Carter by my side would solidify my position in society. It's a game, and I intend to win.”

The thought of being reduced to a pawn in Victor's game of societal chess makes me recoil. But the walls of Carter Manor loom large in my mind, a testament to generations of pride, history, and resilience. Could I sacrifice my happiness to ensure its survival?

His gaze remains steady, watching my every move, every reaction, drinking in my turmoil. “I'll give you twenty-four hours to decide.”

“And if I say no?” I ask.

“Think about the alternative,” he continues, leaning in close. “The collection process can be quite unpleasant, especially in Larkspur's high society.” His tone drops, the threat barely concealed, sending a shiver of unease down my spine.

As he turns on his heel, making his way to the door, I'm left with a whirlwind of emotions. The ticking of the grandfather clock in the hall reverberates through the room, each second pressing down on me, reminding me of the impossible choice ahead.

Chapter 2

Victor

The conference room buzzes with intensity, and I thrive on it. Sitting at the head of the table, I watch and listen as the team hammers out the details, throwing out numbers and forecasts. Some are hesitant, others bold, but all know the stakes. Business is what I do best, and there's a certain satisfaction in navigating these challenges.

"Thorn," challenges a gray-haired executive from across the table, "your strategy might be too aggressive. The risk is unprecedented."

I lock eyes with him, my fingers drumming the table in thought. These men and women, most of them born with silver spoons, still find it difficult to trust a man who forged his own path.

A younger exec, Jeffrey Brown from the illustrious Boston Browns, proposes a safer approach. The room seems to sigh in relief, nodding in agreement, as if his lineage alone qualifies his opinion over mine.

With a deep breath, I lean forward, feeling the weight of my journey, from the streets where I learned my grit to this polished boardroom where every decision echoes with millions at stake. Yet, even with my demonstrated success, the battle for their genuine respect is ongoing.

“Your caution is commendable,” I acknowledge Jeffrey, “but fortune favors the brave. Remember, the greater the risk, the grander the reward.”

Whispers fill the room, but I drown them out with my own thoughts. If I could align myself with a name that commands instant respect, it would all be different.

Which is why, when Mr. Carter found himself on the brink of a financial abyss and came to me, I offered the loan not out of kindness but as a shrewd investment. A chance to have a titan like Carter in my pocket. His unexpected death could have upended everything, yet even in tragedy, opportunities arise.

Sophia Carter.

The heir to a dynasty, a defiant force in her own right, and now, a potential partner. She’s my ticket. The key to the validation I’ve been seeking. And nothing, absolutely nothing, will stand in my way.

The meeting concludes with a mixture of handshakes and mumbled agreements. I gather my papers and make my way out. As I head toward my private office, my receptionist, Claire, stands from her desk with an uneasy look.

“Mr. Thorn,” she starts, her voice laced with hesitation, “there’s someone here to see you. She’s quite insistent you’re expecting her, but there’s no scheduled appointment.”

I pause, trying to think who would have the audacity to show up unannounced. But then it dawns on me.

Without another word, I stride toward my office. The door is slightly ajar, and as I push it open, there she is—Sophia Carter. She stands by the window, her curvy silhouette beautifully framed by the cityscape behind her. She turns as I enter, her expression unreadable.

Dressed in a tailored business suit, she embodies every bit of the Carter legacy—elegant, powerful, and demanding respect. Yet, there’s an undeniable allure about her. A spark that sets her apart from every other socialite I’ve met.

“Well, Ms. Carter,” I begin, “to what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?”

She steps away from the window, her heels clicking softly against the polished floor. “Mr. Thorn,” she acknowledges with a nod. “I’ve been considering your proposal. Before I agree to anything, I believe we have some terms to discuss.”

A smirk tugs at my lips. “Straight to business then?”

She arches an eyebrow, a hint of amusement dancing in her eyes. “It isn’t a marriage proposition until you get on one knee,” she says, “so until then, we’re going to treat this as a business arrangement.”

I admire her boldness, her need to take control of the situation. “Very well, Ms. Carter. Business it is.”

With a nod, I gesture for her to follow me.

As I pass Claire, I catch her attention. “Cancel the rest of my appointments for the afternoon,” I instruct, ensuring that Sophia and I won’t be disturbed.

We make our way to one of the smaller, more private conference rooms reserved for intimate negotiations. I pull out a chair for her, and she takes the offered seat gracefully, crossing her legs and placing a sleek leather folder in front of her. I settle across from her and wait for her to begin.

Sophia’s voice, smooth but laden with steel, breaks the silence. “I propose we begin with a trial period.”

I lean back in my chair, scrutinizing her. “A trial period?”

She doesn’t waver. “All marriages have them. It would look suspicious if we didn’t.”

“So you mean an engagement,” I correct her with a smirk.

She gives a nonchalant shrug. “You can call it that if you wish.”

“Do I need to get you a ring?”

“Don’t trouble yourself. I can get my own,” she retorts, her tone suggesting she’s more than capable of buying something more stylish than whatever I might choose. “As for the time frame, I believe six months is sufficient.”

Six months? The audacity of the proposition takes me aback. “Six months is a long time. Especially for an arrangement as unique as ours. I’ll give you one month to get accustomed to the idea of marrying me before you walk down that aisle.”

Her eyes narrow slightly, clearly not used to her terms being challenged. “One month is hardly enough time to get acquainted.”

“We’re not here to get acquainted. We’re here to secure an alliance. One month, Ms. Carter,” I state firmly.

The tension in the room intensifies. The undercurrent of power dynamics, unsaid words, and suppressed desires all converge, creating palpable electricity.

Sophia’s chin lifts defiantly. “I won’t be strong-armed into this, Thorn.”

I stand, placing both hands flat on the table, leaning in just a fraction closer to her. “This isn’t about strong-arming. This is about what’s expedient for both of us. Let them call it a whirlwind romance. One month.”

She swallows, the first sign of vulnerability I’ve seen from her. But her voice, when she speaks next, doesn’t betray it. “Very well. One month. But there will be terms.”

I decide to humor her. “Such as?”

“One public appearance a week.”

“Two public outings a week,” I correct her. “Of my choosing.”

She narrows her eyes, assessing my insistence. “One public appearance a week that you get to choose.”

“That’s a start. But I insist on two. It’s necessary for the image we’re trying to project.”

She hesitates, the gears clearly turning in her mind. “Fine. But in exchange, I want full autonomy over my work with the Carter Family Foundation. You stay out of it entirely.”

I nod slowly. “I’ve no interest in your business dealings, Ms. Carter, as long as they don’t interfere with mine. However,” I add, raising a finger, “I do expect you to leverage your connections.”

She tilts her head slightly, taking a moment to process. “Certainly, as long as it is mutually beneficial.”

“Of course,” I answer with a smirk. “That’s the key to a long and happy marriage, isn’t it?”

The atmosphere grows thick, the stakes higher than ever. It’s more than just a business negotiation now; it’s a battle of wills.

“What are your expectations as far as our living arrangements?” she asks, trying to regain some semblance of control over the direction of this conversation.

“You’ll move into my penthouse. It’ll be easier to maintain appearances.”

Sophia’s posture stiffens. “On one condition: I get my own suite, and you don’t enter it without an invitation.”

“I don’t see that being an issue,” I answer with a shrug.

“Meaning?”

A slow smile spreads across my face, the underlying message crystal clear. “Because, Ms. Carter, I have every confidence that, sooner or later, you’ll want me there.”

For a fleeting moment, I see something akin to anticipation flash in her eyes. “We’ll see about that, Mr. Thorn.”

“Yes, we will.”

Sophia, clearly aiming to take the reins of the conversation, dives into the core issue. “Let’s talk about how the debt gets resolved. If I go through with this, how do you intend to handle the Carter debt?”

I lean forward, placing my elbows on the table, my gaze never leaving hers. “Each year you fulfill the agreement, I’ll deduct a million from the Carter debt. Over time, the entire debt will be resolved.”

She blinks, processing. “And if I fail to meet the terms or if our ‘engagement’ doesn’t last?”

“The remainder of the debt stands,” I respond coldly. “And if the Carters can’t pay up, I’ll collect in other ways. Even if it means liquidating every asset the Carters possess.”

The threat hangs heavy in the air. Sophia visibly pales but maintains her steely facade. “You wouldn’t dare tarnish the Carter legacy.”

“Don’t test me, Sophia,” I warn, my voice low and foreboding. “I respect the Carter name, but business is

business. You don't want to see the lengths I'll go to if I'm pushed."

She gulps, tension radiating from her. "Very well. I agree to the terms. But I want it in writing. Every detail, every condition."

I nod. "Of course. We'll draft a contract detailing the terms and conditions of our agreement. Should either of us fail in our obligations, the consequences will be clearly laid out."

"Good," she says, her voice firm but with an edge of uncertainty. The power dynamics are clear, and while she's holding her own, it's evident that I have the upper hand in this deal.

Which is just the way I like it.

She gracefully pushes her chair back, preparing to take her leave. "It seems we've reached an understanding," she notes, her tone calm despite the weight of our agreement.

I rise from my seat to hold the door open for her—a gentlemanly gesture with an underlying motive.

She approaches slowly, each step deliberate. As she moves past me, the closeness of our bodies is impossible to ignore. We're inches apart, and the pull between us is undeniable. I tilt my head slightly, and she instinctively mirrors the movement, drawn to the magnetic force between us.

Our lips are moments from meeting when I deliberately pull back just a fraction, leaving a charged space between us, thick

with anticipation and unfulfilled desires. It's a power play, a statement without words.

She draws in a sharp breath, her eyes darkening. "I'll have my belongings sent over today," she says as she slips past, putting space between us. "I'll see you at your home for dinner tonight."

"No," I say, unwilling to give her even that. "We're going out tonight. I feel like celebrating."

Chapter 3

Sophia

The hum of the city fades as I step through the entrance of “L’Esprit,” a sleek, modern restaurant known for its fusion cuisine. It’s upscale, but without that snobbish feel of exclusivity some places wear like a badge of honor—Victor’s choice, of course. Perfectly tailored to walk the line between opulence and accessibility.

Much like the man himself.

Victor and I had set clear rules—this was business. But when he’d nearly kissed me after our meeting, the lines between business and something far more dangerous began to blur.

I stand in the dimly lit entryway, catching a glimpse of my reflection in a bronze-accented mirror. The woman staring back at me looks confident, but there’s an undeniable edge of apprehension. I smooth down the fabric of my dress, feeling its silkiness under my fingertips.

The hostess leads me to our reserved table, the ambiance more intimate here. The subtle hum of conversations, the

clinking of glasses, it's the perfect backdrop. But as the minutes tick by, Victor's absence feels like a statement.

An assertion of power.

When he does walk in, the entire room seems to pivot toward him. His presence is commanding, yet he's consumed in a world of his own, deep in conversation on his phone. The murmur of his voice is too low to decipher, but the tone, authoritative and impatient, speaks volumes. Without so much as a nod in my direction, he continues his call, even as he takes his seat.

Rude? Definitely. But also so quintessentially Victor.

When he finally hangs up, his deep-set blue eyes lock onto mine.

"Apologies for the delay, Ms. Carter," he begins, voice dripping with a mix of sarcasm and genuine charm.

I lift an eyebrow, unwilling to let him have the upper hand. "Business before pleasure, Mr. Thorn?"

His smirk deepens. "Always."

Conversation is formal and sparse as we peruse the menu and make our selections. He picks a wine that I'm certain he selected solely based on the outrageous price. Regardless, when the sommelier brings it to our table for us to sample, it's delicious, and Victor directs him to leave the bottle.

"You know, 'L'Esprit' was one of the first upscale restaurants I ever dined in," Victor says, his voice hinting at

nostalgia. “Right after my first big deal. I wanted to experience what I’d been missing out on all those years.”

I tilt my head, curious. “And? Did it live up to your expectations?”

He looks at me, eyes sharp and assessing. “I felt out of place but not defeated. It only fueled me to work harder, to truly earn my spot.”

“That’s the difference between us,” I muse. “For me, places like this were a given. But sometimes, that gilded cage can be just as confining.”

Victor doesn’t immediately respond, just watches me like he’s trying to unravel a puzzle. “I’m sure it has its challenges,” he finally concedes. “But we both know the game and how to play it.”

Our meal arrives, a delicate fusion of flavors and cultures on a plate, and our discussion flows, touching upon our histories, our families, and the weight of expectations.

“The Carter Family Foundation,” he starts, bringing up a topic I hadn’t expected, “Tell me about it.”

I lean in, always eager to talk about the topic closest to my heart. “My father started it when he was my age, wanting to give back. We’ve done so much over the years—education, healthcare, community centers.”

A shadow crosses Victor’s face, barely there but noticeable. “I spent time in one of those centers you funded when I was a kid. It was a refuge when there weren’t many.”

I blink, surprised. “You...?”

He holds up a hand, cutting me off. “I always believed charity was just a tax write-off for the elite. A way to appease the masses.” His gaze flickers up, capturing mine. “But from what I know about the work of the Carter Foundation, your passion for it... it’s eye-opening.”

I chuckle softly. “Charity isn’t about appeasing anyone. It’s about making a difference. Perhaps you’ve been hanging around the wrong elite?”

His lips twitch in amusement. “Perhaps.”

We share a quiet laugh, and for a moment, the weight of our arrangement dissipates, replaced by genuine camaraderie. I find myself captivated by his stories—tales of boardroom battles, childhood memories from rough neighborhoods, and surprising anecdotes of his failed cooking experiments. I respond with my own tales: eccentric Carter family gatherings, the struggles of running a foundation, and my disastrous water skiing attempts.

As the wine warms my insides and the barriers start to lower, I even find myself teasing him. “So, the mighty Victor Thorn can make a decent omelet?” I feign shock.

He leans back in his chair with a confident air. “Of course. Growing up, it was a skill that came in handy. Now, it’s just a way to impress unsuspecting heiresses.”

I raise an eyebrow, smirking. “Well, color me impressed. But don’t think that gets you out of actually proving it one day.”

Victor points his fork at me, a red piece of steak speared on the end. “Challenge accepted, Carter.”

As the evening wears on, I find myself pleasantly surprised. Victor Thorn isn’t just a series of sharp edges and ruthless business tactics. He has layers that only reveal themselves if you pay close attention.

And I’m beginning to see them.

The atmosphere between us shifts, slightly electric. It’s in the little things: the way our gazes linger, the softening of Victor’s usually hard eyes, the unspoken understanding that, despite our vast differences, there’s common ground.

“You know,” I venture as we wait on dessert, “I had you pegged as just another tycoon hungry for more.”

He arches an eyebrow, clearly amused. “And now?”

“Now?” I pause, choosing my words. “I see someone who’s had to climb every rung of the ladder, making sacrifices and taking risks every step of the way. It’s admirable.”

His smile doesn’t quite reach his eyes, but it’s genuine. “I never expected to be worthy of admiration from a Carter.”

I shrug lightly. “With me, you should learn to expect the unexpected.”

Just then, a shadow falls across our table. I glance up to find the austere figure of Mr. Harold Whitmore, a pillar of old money and influence in the city. He’s impeccably dressed, as always, in a bespoke suit that probably costs more than most people’s monthly rent.

“Sophia,” Mr. Whitmore says, his tone cordial as his eyes slide briefly to Victor. “I didn’t expect to see you here, especially not with...”

“Victor Thorn,” Victor finishes smoothly, rising to shake Whitmore’s hand. “It’s good to see you again, Harold.”

Whitmore’s eyes narrow ever so slightly, clearly taken aback by Victor’s familiarity. “Yes. Mr. Thorn. I was just here celebrating my grandson’s birthday.”

“You don’t say,” Victor says, and I see a knowing sparkle in his eyes. That’s when I realize what this dinner is really about. It isn’t a celebration or a ploy to get to know me better. It’s business.

He set this whole thing up for this moment right here.

As if to prove me right, Victor continues, “While I have you, Harold, have you considered expanding your investments into the tech sector? I’ve got a venture that could use someone with your experience.”

Whitmore’s eyes dart between Victor and me, skepticism evident. “I’m traditionally more conservative with my investments.”

“I’m sure Sophia here will put in a good word for me,” Victor says. Then, leaning in close and dropping his voice to a whisper, he says, “You know we’re engaged? It’s still a secret, so don’t go spreading the news just yet.”

“Engaged?” Mr. Whitmore looks baffled, but I offer him my most charming smile, resigned to play my part.

“Perhaps we could discuss this further over dinner tomorrow night at our place?” I say, knowing how these men like to be wooed. “Victor has some truly innovative ideas that might align with your portfolio.”

The businessman’s demeanor softens, clearly flattered. “Well, if you’re vouching for him, Sophia, it can’t hurt to hear him out. Dinner sounds delightful.”

The conversation wraps up shortly after, with Whitmore giving a nod of acknowledgment and leaving us to our evening.

Once he’s out of earshot, I turn to Victor, my voice low and tinged with annoyance. “I didn’t realize tonight counted as one of our weekly outings.”

Victor meets my gaze, unapologetic. “I thought you understood our arrangement.”

And to think that I had started to let my guard down during dinner, even for a moment believing there was something more between us than just business. “I understand perfectly. But remember, this is a partnership, not a dictatorship. I expect to be let in on your little plans.”

Victor’s expression remains unreadable. “You have spirit, Sophia. I’ll give you that. But you might want to remember who holds the cards here.”

I laugh sardonically, raising my wine glass in a mockery of a toast. “Oh, don’t worry. I have a feeling you won’t ever let me forget that. Not for the rest of our lives.” And I drain my glass

in one gulp, liquid courage to get through the rest of the night with him.



My suite in Victor's penthouse is larger than most apartments in Larkspur, but it feels somehow claustrophobic. I'm sitting on my bed, surrounded by boxes filled with my things, but none of it brings me comfort.

After a brief phone call with my mom, where I reassure her that I'm just fine, I decide to venture to the kitchen for a glass of water or something stronger if I can find it.

The penthouse is draped in the soft glow of ambient lights, casting a subdued illumination that makes every corner seem alluring. The lush carpet muffles my footsteps as I make my way out of my suite. To the left, I see a corridor leading toward what I assume to be the main living area and kitchen. To the right, the hallway seems to stretch further into a more private section of the penthouse.

Curiosity getting the better of me, I choose the right, wondering just how sprawling Victor's domain is.

As I wander, I find myself drawn to a slightly ajar door emanating a soft light. My initial intention of finding the kitchen is momentarily forgotten. A closer look reveals it to be the entrance to another bedroom. I can glimpse the edge of a bed, opulent with its dark wood frame and luxurious linens. There's an air of masculinity in the décor, from the stark, minimalist furniture to the abstract art on the walls.

The more intriguing aspect, however, is Victor himself. I spot him moving about, clearly lost in thought. He's wearing only boxer briefs, exposing his lean, muscled torso and legs. He looks like some kind of ancient god carved from marble. The sight of him fills me with a strange mix of desire and apprehension.

He leans against his dresser, gripping the edge tight enough that I can see the veins bulging in his forearms. He looks like he's trying to maintain control... and losing.

Before I can turn away, I catch him slip one hand beneath the waistband of his boxers. His breathing becomes more labored, and a wave of heat courses through me as he frees his cock. Even in the shadows, I can tell that it's hard and big, certainly larger than any I've encountered before. He begins to stroke himself, his body barely shifting as his hand works up and down his shaft.

I want to run, but I can't make my feet move. I stand frozen as he stokes himself, seeming to grow larger in his hand. A warm, pulsing ache spreads between my legs. I squeeze them together, trying to bring some kind of relief, but it only makes me more aware of my wetness.

His moans become louder and he moves his hips in time with each stroke. His hand slips lower to rub his balls and then slides back up again as he quickens his thrusts.

And then, just when he's about to come, he calls out my name. "Sophia!" He throws his head back and groans as his

body quakes with pleasure. His cock shudders in his grasp as he comes, milky white spilling onto the carpet.

Somehow both mortified and incredibly turned on, I quickly turn and run back to my room, hurriedly shutting and locking the door behind me. Leaning against it, I try to catch my breath. My body hums with an electric awareness of him, a yearning for something I don't understand and can't explain.

My back pressed to the door, I slide one hand beneath my pajama bottoms. I'm already warm and wet. Without hesitation, I slip two fingers inside myself as I imagine it's Victor touching me instead. His strong body pressed against mine as he pushes into me harder and faster, my name spilling from his lips like a curse. My thumb circles my clit and my hips rock against my hand. Before long, a powerful orgasm ripples through me, taking away all thought but him.

I collapse breathlessly on my bed, even more confused now than I was at dinner. I want to hate Victor—I *should* hate Victor—but at the same time, I can't help but be intrigued. His arrogance clashes with moments of unexpected vulnerability, creating a wildfire of emotions inside me.

As the night deepens and sleep finally washes over me, I'm still grappling with the unsettling realization that I might be drawn to the very flames I should be avoiding.

Chapter 4

Victor

The crisp morning air bites at my skin as I make my way toward the Carter Family Foundation. Last night's dinner with Sophia refuses to fade, lingering at the back of my mind like an unshakable memory. I've always prided myself on keeping emotions at arm's length, but something about her—her fire, her authenticity—has breached my armor. It's unsettling, to say the least.

A man in my position can't afford vulnerabilities.

Which is why I'm here. It's strategic, a calculated move to understand more about the Carters, their ventures, and the weight of the legacy Sophia fights so passionately to uphold. The foundation stands as a testament to their name, their brand in society. I need to gauge its worth, its potential, and any hidden pitfalls.

But beneath that calculated exterior, there's also a nagging curiosity about the woman who's managed to unsettle me.

About what drives her, and what this foundation truly means to her.

As I push through the grand double doors, I half expect to be met with an ostentatious display of the Carter family's wealth. But what greets me instead stops me dead in my tracks.

The wide, marble-floored atrium buzzes with life. A group of young students, badges proudly displaying "CFF Scholarship Recipient," gather around a guide who animatedly discusses a particular program. Their eyes gleam with hope and ambition, a stark contrast to the deadened eyes I often encounter in my line of work.

To my left, a large black and white photograph catches my attention. It's of a man—Sophia's father, unmistakable with those familiar, sharp eyes. Beneath it, an engraved plaque bears the words: "Empowerment isn't a handout; it's a hand up. We rise by lifting others."

For a brief moment, I'm transported away from my world of ledgers, threats, and debts, to a place where one's wealth isn't just about accumulation, but elevation. I came prepared for a charade, but it seems there's more to the Carters, and Sophia, than meets the eye.

As I venture deeper into the building, my eyes catch a familiar silhouette through the glass panels of a conference room. It's Sophia. The pull is almost magnetic, drawing me toward her, even if I try to convince myself it's just curiosity.

Navigating through a maze of corridors, I find myself closer to that room, standing just outside, taking a discreet vantage

point. I lean against a column, hidden in its shadow, watching her intently. Sophia sits at the head of the table, surrounded by a team of advisors. Her raven-black hair, cascading like a waterfall down her back, captures the ambient light, making her the undeniable focal point of the room.

Every gesture, every word she utters oozes with conviction. This isn't the Sophia I dined with last night or the Sophia in mourning I first encountered. Here, she is a force. Every word is laced with passion, every gesture decisive.

She's not asking; she's leading.

I'm so engrossed in watching this side of her that I almost miss the moment her gaze sweeps the room and lands on me. There's a flicker of surprise in those emerald depths, quickly replaced by wariness. It's clear she hadn't expected to see me here, in her domain.

The weight of her gaze triggers something unfamiliar in my chest—a mix of admiration and... vulnerability? This sensation of being laid bare is disconcerting, even if it's just for a fleeting second before she breaks the connection.

I straighten, reminding myself of why I'm here, even as a voice in my head taunts that maybe I'm just looking for excuses to be near her.

As the meeting adjourns, she takes a moment to gather her belongings, each movement graceful yet deliberate. The fitted skirt suit she's chosen for the day emphasizes her hourglass silhouette, and I find myself momentarily captivated by the curve of her waist, the gentle swell of her hips. It's a

dangerous kind of allure, and I have to remind myself to refocus.

“What are you doing here?” she asks with a sharp edge to her tone.

“I wanted to see what the Carter Family Foundation is all about,” I reply. “I thought it might be enlightening.”

She contemplates me for a moment. “Fine,” she gives in. “Let me show you around.”

We begin our journey through the corridors. The vast expanse of the foundation is not just in its physical size but in the depth and breadth of its initiatives. Pictures of beneficiaries, letters of gratitude, and project outlines dot the walls. As we pass a spacious atrium, I notice a group of young students animatedly discussing something.

“That’s our newest batch,” Sophia says, her voice softening with pride. “Bright kids from underprivileged backgrounds. We’re funding their entire education.”

“Their entire education?” I raise an eyebrow, pushing a bit. “Isn’t it just creating a culture of dependency? What happens when the handouts stop?”

Sophia stops walking, turning to face me, her eyes flashing. “They’re not handouts. They’re opportunities. These kids have the potential, the drive, but lack the means. Do you know how hard it is to escape the cycle of poverty without support?”

I did. I had clawed my way out of that life with bloody fingers, with no one footing any bills for me, no benevolent

foundation throwing me a lifeline. The contrast between their shot at a better life and my own hardscrabble climb gnaws at me.

Instead of telling her any of that, I fold my arms across my chest, challenging her further. “But there’s a difference between support and doing everything for them.”

She nods, conceding the point slightly. “I agree. But our scholarships are more than just tuition. We provide mentorship, life skills training, internships. We don’t just throw money at them and hope for the best. We give them the tools to be self-reliant. All they need is that initial push.”

It’s hard not to admire her passion, the conviction in her voice. And though I’d never admit it out loud, part of me knows she’s right. “I suppose,” I relent, “everyone needs a chance.”

Sophia’s lips curl into a small smile, satisfied with the small victory. “Exactly. All we’re doing is leveling the playing field.”

She stops by a large photograph of a community project, an environmental initiative that transformed a neglected area into a thriving green space.

“This was one of my personal favorites,” she mentions, a trace of nostalgia in her voice. “It took months of planning and collaboration, but the result was worth every challenge.”

Every step we take, every achievement she highlights, peels back another layer, revealing the heart and soul of the

foundation—and of Sophia herself. She is deeply woven into its fabric.

As we approach the end of our tour, she halts in front of a photo of her with her father, both beaming, surrounded by children from one of their outreach programs. She takes a deep breath, looking up at the image, lost in thought.

“This is what we built. The legacy he left, the dreams he had. This is what’s at stake.”

The raw emotion in her voice tugs at something deep within me. Every story she shares serves only to magnify my respect for Sophia. It’s a respect I’m not used to, especially not for someone I once saw as a mere transaction. But as the weight of her dedication sinks in, I find myself gripped by unfamiliar emotions. Vulnerability. A longing to understand. And against all my instincts, a pull of attraction that I can’t quite shake off.

She’s showing me something—a world I never expected—and it’s unsettling. The more I admire her, the more I feel the loss of the familiar ground beneath my feet.

And for a man like me, control is everything.

As she speaks of a new green initiative the foundation is spearheading, I interrupt her abruptly. “I’ve been thinking about our arrangement,” I begin, the words hard and decisive.

She looks at me, her brow furrowing in confusion. “What about it?”

“I want to be more involved in the foundation,” I state firmly, looking straight into her eyes. “Perhaps even a seat on

the board.”

Sophia’s stride falters, and she stops, turning to face me fully. The surprise in her eyes is evident. “What? Why? That wasn’t part of our agreement.” She’s defensive, her walls coming up as quickly as mine have.

“Agreements change.”

“You think you can just step in here and stake a claim? This is my life’s work. My legacy,” Sophia says, her voice tight with emotion. Her eyes flash with anger, but there’s an underlying hurt that’s harder to place.

“I think you forget that I’m about to become part of this family,” I reply, the words holding a steely edge. “It makes sense for me to be involved, doesn’t it?”

She steps closer, her chin raised defiantly. “You can’t just intrude into my world and make demands. Especially not for some twisted power play.”

My heart pounds harder against my chest as I step toward her, our faces inches apart. “Maybe I’m exactly what this foundation needs,” I counter.

A hint of vulnerability flashes across her face before she masks it with a hardened expression. “Or maybe,” she murmurs, her voice low and steady, “you’re just scared of what you’re beginning to feel.”

The air around us is thick with tension, each heartbeat echoing the silent challenge. Without a conscious thought,

propelled by a magnetic force, I close the gap between us, capturing Sophia's mouth beneath mine.

The moment our lips touch, I'm overrun with a wave of desire that pulses through my veins. I wrap my arms around her waist, drawing her closer to me. She parts her lips ever so slightly, and when we kiss again, it's deeper than before.

Our tongues explore each other's mouths as our hands wander across each other's bodies, caressing every inch of skin we can find. I feel a passionate intensity in the way she clings to me, and it only fuels my own desire.

I slide my hand up her shirt and feel the warmth of her skin before brushing my fingertips along the side of her breast. She moans softly against my lips, and my cock twitches at the sound.

Suddenly, she pushes me away and steps back, wrapping her arms around herself as her eyes dart around the room. When they find me again, there's a resolve in them that wasn't there before.

"You may have a claim over the Carter debt," Sophia begins, her voice shaky, her face flushed, "but not over my body." She makes to leave, but I can't let her have the last word.

I want to tell her that she's wrong, but I bite it back and resort instead to being an asshole, which I know is much more in line with her expectations of me. "We have dinner with Whitmore tonight," I call out. With a sardonic smirk, I add, "I'll expect you to be at your best."

She stops in her tracks and turns to glare at me. “That’s two. After tonight, my obligation to you for the week is over,” she says icily.

I watch her go, her heels echoing sharply against the polished floors, a poignant reminder of the distance between us. As the silence envelops me, I can’t help but berate myself for losing control, for letting emotions cloud my judgment. Yet, beneath the self-reproach, there’s an unsettling realization.

Despite my best efforts, Sophia Carter is quickly becoming my most formidable adversary... and my most dangerous weakness.

Chapter 5

Sophia

The moment the penthouse door closes behind me, the weight of the day threatens to drag me down.

I pause to kick off my heels, wincing at the pain they've caused. Maybe that's a good thing—a distraction from thoughts of *him*. My hands grip the straps of my purse a little tighter, thinking about how he ambushed me. The presumption of him showing up, pushing his way into what I've built, making me vulnerable.

And then there was the kiss. I touch my lips, feeling the ghost of his against mine. It felt genuine, but with Victor, there's always another layer. One minute he's warm, drawing me in with those deep blue eyes, and the next he's cold, pushing me away. I want to believe there's more to him than the facade he shows the world, but can I trust him?

More importantly, can I trust myself with him?

My gaze drifts toward the main room, where soft lighting accentuates the lavish decor. And there he is with a glass of

wine in hand, conversing animatedly with Harold Whitmore, who sits relaxed in one of the plush chairs. The two men appear deep in conversation, the vast city skyline painting an ethereal scene behind them.

Victor's eyes find mine almost immediately, a smile curving his lips. It's not the predatory grin I've come to associate with our power plays but something gentler, catching me off guard. Before I can react, he's by my side, pressing a soft kiss to my cheek, the subtle scent of his cologne wrapping around me. He places a glass of wine in my hand.

"Darling, you're late," he says smoothly, guiding me toward the sitting area.

I glare sideways at Victor before turning a charming smile on Harold Whitmore. "Sorry to keep you waiting," I say with saccharine sweetness.

Harold rises, his voice rich with amusement. "Sophia, I'm so glad to see you again. I can't believe I forgot to offer you condolences on your father's death when I saw you yesterday."

"Thank you, Harold," I respond, my tone practiced. "We miss him very much."

Victor's touch lingers on my waist, and Harold chuckles softly. "Sophia, did you know your fiancé is quite the amateur astronomer? We've been discussing our favorite constellations."

A genuine laugh escapes my lips. "Astronomy? Really?" My eyes search Victor's for confirmation.

He shrugs, the corners of his eyes crinkling with a sheepish grin. “Everyone needs a hobby, right? Keeps the mind sharp.”

I shake my head, playing the part of the amused partner. “And here I thought you spent all your nights plotting your next business conquest.”

Harold laughs, raising his glass. “It seems there’s much more to Victor than meets the eye. But then, the same could be said for all of us, couldn’t it?”

A man wearing a chef’s coat steps through the double doors, clearing his throat lightly. “Dinner is served,” he announces.

“Excellent.” Victor stands, nodding toward the adjacent dining room. “Shall we?”

We all rise, glasses in hand. As I follow the two men, the amber glow from the contemporary chandeliers above illuminates the large mahogany table, perfectly set with pristine white plates, polished silverware, and crystal glasses.

Victor, playing the gracious host, gestures for Harold to take the seat at the head of the table while he takes the one opposite. I find my place to Victor’s right.

As we settle in, the server moves efficiently, laying out a beautifully plated appetizer.

Harold glances around appreciatively, raising his glass. “You have impeccable taste, Victor. This place, the food... it’s all very impressive.”

Victor smirks, a hint of mischief in his eyes. “Only the best for my guests. Especially when there’s potential for a fruitful

partnership.”

Harold nods, and as they delve into the specifics of their venture, I sip my wine. It’s rich and aromatic, the kind that lingers on the palate. As the discussion becomes more intricate, Victor’s subtle tactics become apparent. Every time Harold wavers or seems skeptical, Victor finds a way to weave my name or the prestige of the Carter family into the conversation.

I play my part, supporting Victor’s statements when required and offering insights when probed. Yet beneath the surface, a storm brews—a blend of resentment, attraction, and a desperate need for clarity.

The undercurrents between Victor and me are undeniable. His fingers often graze mine, his gaze lingers a second too long, and his voice lowers whenever he addresses me. Every interaction is layered with tension and an underlying magnetism that I can’t shake off. But is it all an act for Harold?

The conversation continues back and forth about profit margins, risk assessments, and future projections. The weight of each word, the strategic inflections, and the game of persuasion all play out before me. But as the evening progresses, the walls of the penthouse seem to close in, making it increasingly harder to breathe.

I need an escape, even if just for a moment.

Pushing back my chair, I offer a polite smile. “Excuse me for a moment, gentlemen. I could use some fresh air.”

Victor nods, his gaze lingering on me a fraction too long, but I don't wait for any remarks. The balcony's sliding doors beckon, and within moments, I'm greeted by the cool breeze of the evening.

The city sprawls out below, a tapestry of twinkling lights and distant sounds. The sky is painted in shades of indigo and deep purple, dotted with the first stars of the night. I lean against the railing, closing my eyes momentarily, letting the wind carry away some of the tension that's knotted inside.

Loyalty. Duty. Sacrifice. These words have defined my existence for as long as I can remember. I've been the dutiful daughter, always placing my family's needs and honor above my own. And that's what this was supposed to be. The beginning of this entire charade was clear—a business arrangement, nothing more.

But now, the lines blur. Is Victor Thorn just another obligation, another duty to fulfill? Or can he be the unexpected source of happiness I've been missing? Standing here, with the vast city below and a sky full of possibilities above, I wonder: Where does Victor fit in my story?

Is it possible for us to carve out a future together, or are we destined to be just another chapter of sacrifice in my life?

A soft rustling breaks my reverie, and I turn slightly, sensing a presence. It's Victor, his silhouette stark against the soft illumination from the penthouse.

“Where's Whitmore?” I ask.

“Making some calls,” he says. “I’m letting him use my office. So we can have some privacy.”

The implication hangs between us, making the night feel a tad warmer, the silence a little thicker.

“Privacy for what?” I tilt my head, attempting to keep my voice neutral, though my heart races erratically.

“To talk.” He takes a few steps closer, closing the gap between us. The glint in his eyes reflects more than just the city’s glow.

“Talk? Is that what you call it?” My attempt at humor comes out as a shaky whisper, a defense mechanism to mask the whirlwind of feelings threatening to surface.

He stops just inches away from me, his scent—sandalwood and something uniquely Victor—invading my senses. “You can call it whatever you want. But I thought we needed to clear the air.”

I pull my gaze from his, focusing on the shimmering lights of the city instead. “Clear the air about what? Your audacity at the foundation?”

His fingers lift my chin, forcing me to meet his gaze. “About whatever is happening between us. I’m not blind, Sophia. Nor are you.”

For a split second, vulnerability flashes in his eyes—a reminder of the outsider who fought for every inch of his success, the man beneath the polished entrepreneur. But it’s

gone as quickly as it came, replaced with that confident, predatory look I've come to recognize.

I take a deep breath. "You can't just play with people's lives."

"The foundation, the deal, the power plays—it's all part of the game. But this," he gestures between us, "this is something different." His thumb traces my jawline, causing an involuntary shiver. "You challenge me, push me in ways I hadn't anticipated. It's infuriating... and intoxicating."

"I won't be one of your conquests, Thorn," I retort, my voice wavering.

He chuckles darkly. "You think I see you as just another trophy? That would be far too simple. You, Sophia Carter, are a complication I hadn't accounted for."

He closes the gap between us, his lips capturing mine for a second time with a possessiveness that leaves no room for doubt. The world fades as raw desire takes over.

The kiss is fierce, intense—a mingling of frustration, longing, and pent-up desire. I surrender myself to it, to the intensity that thrums through my veins. Victor's lips move over mine, his hands tangling in my hair, his body pressing against mine. The balcony railing digs into my back, but I barely register the discomfort, lost in the sensations coursing through me.

This is madness. Insanity.

But in a way, it's also freedom. Freedom from the rules and expectations that have governed my life for so long. Freedom to explore this newfound desire.

Victor's hands traverse my body, exploring every curve. I'm dizzy with pleasure, unable to think beyond his touch.

He pulls away slowly, a smirk playing on his lips as he lifts me onto the wide ledge that encircles the balcony, pushing up my skirt so that his fingertips can explore the bare skin of my legs. We could get caught at any moment, but neither of us cares. His hands move possessively over my body, and I'm lost to the sensations of his touch—the danger only heightens the intensity of our embrace.

His fingers trace a path to the apex of my thighs. He pushes aside the fragile fabric of my panties and pauses, letting his fingers linger.

I could stop him now, clamp my legs together, push him away, say no. I could remind myself of our deal, our arrangement, and keep him at arm's length. I could keep playing the part of the dutiful heiress, sacrificing my emotions for the sake of the Carter name.

But that kiss shattered any semblance of detachment I'd clung to. It broke barriers I didn't even know existed. With Victor, the lines between love and hate, anger and desire, are so perilously thin. Every encounter with him feels like dancing on the edge of a blade.

So, instead of stopping him, I pull him closer. "What are you waiting for, Thorn?" I murmur.

He smirks, his fingers stroking my center teasingly. “For you to catch up, Carter.”

He pushes his fingers into my panties, a low groan escaping his lips as he feels how wet I am. I bite my lip to keep from moaning as he slides his fingers between my folds. He presses his thumb against my clit, sending waves of pleasure coursing through me. My lips part in a gasp, and he captures it with his mouth, pushing his tongue into my mouth as his fingers move rhythmically inside me.

My fingers dig into his shoulders as I gasp against his lips, the pleasure sending a rush of heat across my skin, my breath coming in shallow gasps. His mouth moves to my neck, his tongue licking the pulse point at my throat.

I’m writhing against his hand, the sensations overwhelming me. Every thought of stopping him has vanished from my mind. I never want this feeling to end.

My heart is pounding as his touch pushes me toward the edge. His lips find my ear, his tongue tracing a path as he whispers, “Come for me, Sophia.”

With that command, I lose it, my body spasming as an intense orgasm rocks me. My name falls from his lips in a guttural groan as my body bucks against him. And then I’m falling, tumbling into oblivion.

Reality slowly comes back into focus as my body recovers from the force of my release. Victor’s hand is still on my thigh, his lips tracing a path back up my neck and jaw. He finds my lips again, kissing me with a fervor that leaves me breathless.

Suddenly, the sliding sound of the balcony door interrupts the charged moment. Harold Whitmore appears, a faux look of surprise on his face as he observes our intimate position.

“Victor, I didn’t realize you two needed another... strategy session,” he quips, his eyes dancing with amusement. “Shall I give you another moment, or are you ready to finalize things?”

Victor pulls away, his gaze locked on mine for a split second longer. He releases a heavy sigh and runs a hand through his hair. “We were just taking a moment, Harold,” he responds, the edge in his voice making it clear he doesn’t appreciate being caught off guard.

Harold raises his brows playfully, clearly enjoying the discomfort he’s causing. “Of course. The lines between business and pleasure blur when one’s fiancée is involved.”

Victor’s curt nod in response doesn’t escape me. “We’ll be right in,” he says, gesturing for Harold to lead the way.

As they walk back into the penthouse, I’m left staring at the city lights, feeling a sudden chill in the air. The passion from moments ago is now replaced with the reality of our situation.

This may be a game to some, but the stakes are becoming all too real for me.

Chapter 6

Victor

Sunlight reflects off the cityscape, its dazzle muted by the tinted windows of my high-rise office at Thorn Enterprises. The papers sprawl across my desk, each one a testament to another conquest, another addition to my empire. But today, something else gnaws at my focus.

Claire steps in, her face betraying a trace of unease. She knows better than to disturb me without reason. “Sir, I think I’ve found what you’ve been looking for.”

I look up, my thoughts momentarily derailed. “The tickets?”

She nods. “Yes, but there’s a catch. They’re in the possession of Gregory Danforth.”

Danforth. The name sends a rush of memories through my mind—a deal gone sour, whispers of illicit transactions, secrets he’d rather stay buried.

A slow smile curves my lips. “Put him through.”

Claire hesitates for a heartbeat, then nods, dialing the number.

The moment Danforth's voice comes through, laced with a familiar arrogance, I cut to the chase. "I hear you have what I need."

"Thorn," he drawls, a note of amusement evident. "What could you possibly want with tickets to the Hopeful Futures Gala?"

"That's none of your concern. Name your price."

After a brief silence, Danforth throws down the gauntlet. "They're not for sale."

I pause, letting the silence stretch. "What if I told you that I know about your little venture in the Cayman Islands? The one that skirts just this side of legality?"

There's a sharp intake of breath on the other end. "You're bluffing."

"Am I?" I lean back in my chair, satisfaction coiling within. "Maybe the Financial Conduct Authority would be interested?"

There's a heavy pause. When Danforth finally speaks, the arrogance is gone, replaced by begrudging respect. "Fine. The tickets will be at your office by five."

"Good choice," I reply, hanging up.

I take a deep breath, the call with Danforth having taken less out of me than the one I'm about to make. Dialing the number

for the Carter Family Foundation, I wait for her voice, the one that manages to intrigue and infuriate me simultaneously.

“Sophia Carter speaking.”

The professionalism in her tone instantly sets me on edge. “Sophia,” I begin, attempting to keep my voice even. “I’ve arranged something special for this evening.”

“Victor?” she asks, momentarily taken aback.

“Who else would it be?”

Her sigh resonates through the phone. “Victor, we agreed on two public appearances per week. You can’t just demand more of my time.”

I roll my eyes, even though she can’t see it. “This isn’t for me. It’s for you.”

There’s a beat of silence. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

The words almost catch in my throat. Why am I doing this? It’s not like me to deviate from the plan. “It’s something I think you’ll appreciate. A cause close to your heart.”

Her suspicion is palpable. “And how do you know what’s close to my heart?”

“The Hopeful Futures Gala,” I say.

There’s a moment of stunned silence. I can almost hear the cogs turning in her head, processing the gravity of what I’ve just shared. While the Carter Family Foundation does have its outreach to underprivileged youth, Hopeful Futures supports a broader range of programs. Attending the gala would allow

her to network, possibly finding allies or partners for her foundation while reaffirming the Carter family's position in high society.

“How did you—”

“It doesn't matter,” I cut her off.

There's a long pause before she relents. “Alright. But only because I've wanted to attend this for so long.”

A surge of satisfaction flows through me. “Good. Be ready by eight o'clock.”

Ending the call, I lean back, pressing my fingers against my temples. I've managed to land tickets to one of the most exclusive events of the year, not for business, not for reputation, but for her. Why?

Her fire and defiance are drawing me in, making me rethink my strategies and act out of impulse rather than calculated moves. With Sophia Carter, the game is changing, and for the first time, I'm not in complete control. And the frightening part? I'm not sure I want to be.



The Larkspur Club's Grand Ballroom never looked so opulent. Gold and crystal shimmer everywhere, the sparkling chandeliers casting a warm glow on the marble floor, where couples dance to the soft strains of a live orchestra. There's an elegance in the air, a reverence for the cause it supports.

The massive double doors open, and as Sophia and I enter the ballroom, all conversation seems to dull into a whisper. Her arm linked with mine, she's a vision. The deep blue of her gown contrasts strikingly with her pale skin, and it hugs every curve, making it nearly impossible for me to look away.

I can't help but feel a twinge of pride. I might've wrangled the tickets in less than honorable ways, but bringing Sophia here feels like a win, not for the show of it, but for the light in her eyes, the softness of her smile.

The attendees, clad in their finest, eye us curiously. Among the glances, some show open admiration for Sophia, while others are more appraising, especially when their gaze shifts to me.

"Victor Thorn," I overhear one man whisper to his partner, "how did he get a ticket to this?"

Another voice, dripping with insinuation, says, "Heard he had to get his hands dirty to be here."

I stiffen momentarily, but Sophia's fingers gently squeeze my arm, a silent plea to ignore the naysayers. Taking a deep breath, I focus on her, guiding her toward our table.

She smiles, her eyes meeting mine, the connection unmistakable. "I'm here for the children, Victor, not them. And honestly? I'm glad you pulled whatever strings you did to get us here."

The acknowledgment, coming from Sophia, carries a weight that no deal or business conquest ever has. A soft chuckle

escapes my lips. “I would’ve done anything to see that look on your face.” And for the first time tonight, I realize I truly mean it. For her, I’d do it again.

As we move through the room, Edmund Carrington, previously dismissive, steps forward with a broad grin, offering his hand. “Victor! A surprise to see you here. And Sophia, always the shining star.”

His wife, Penelope Carrington, who’s never given me the time of day, sweeps close, her heady, rose-infused perfume enveloping me. “Mr. Thorn,” she purrs, touching my arm, “what a pleasant surprise. You and Sophia make a striking pair.”

While this newfound attention should feel like a victory, a niggling sense of annoyance bubbles beneath the surface. My plan is working, but I feel caught between the satisfaction of my plan’s success and the hollowness of its results. Is this what I truly wanted? Merely the shadow of respect and acceptance?

Stealing a glance at Sophia, her poised grace amidst the glittering crowd, I can’t help but wonder if perhaps the real prize isn’t in the admiration of these people but in the genuine connection building between the two of us.

Finally, a server approaches us, holding a tray with glasses of champagne. I take two, handing one to Sophia. Our fingers brush briefly, and there’s an unmistakable spark.

A steward, recognizing Sophia, steps forward. “Ms. Carter, your table is this way.”

We follow him, winding our way through the room. I can't help but notice the many eyes on us, some filled with intrigue, others with thinly veiled disapproval. Sophia, for her part, seems unaffected, maintaining her poise and elegance.

The steward stops at a table near the center of the room adorned with a centerpiece of blooming roses. The small gold placard reads, "Reserved for Carter & Guest."

"Your table, Ms. Carter." The steward pulls out a chair for Sophia.

"Thank you," she murmurs, gracefully taking her seat. I sit beside her, our chairs just inches apart.

For a moment, an awkward silence envelops us. The weight of our arrangement, the attention we've garnered, and the undeniable tension between us all combine to make the atmosphere thick. We both sip our champagne, the bubbles offering a brief respite.

Sophia leans back, studying me with an intensity that's both intriguing and unnerving.

"So," she finally says, her tone casual but her eyes betraying a hint of vulnerability, "you've maneuvered your way into the most coveted event of the year. Made quite the statement. What's next?"

I meet her direct gaze without faltering. "Tonight isn't about posturing," I state, my voice steady and assured. "It's about understanding the world you come from. And perhaps seeking something genuine amidst all this."

She smirks, her eyes narrowing slightly. “Are you saying you want a genuine connection with me, Thorn? Or is this just another strategy in your grand game?”

Meeting her gaze, I answer with unwavering assurance, “Perhaps it began as a strategy, but now, it’s becoming something more.” Our eyes remain locked, and in the midst of the surrounding chatter and clinks of luxury, an electric charge pulses between us.

The intensity of our gaze feels like a silent challenge. But after a few prolonged seconds, Sophia’s facade begins to crack slightly.

Drawing in a deep breath, she says, “Alright, let’s try it your way. One evening of genuine conversation.”

I can’t help the smirk that tugs at the corner of my lips. “That’s all I’m asking for.”

Her eyes narrow playfully, a challenge lurking within. “You better make it count then.”

Leaning back with a confident tilt to my head, I respond, “I always do.”

A server arrives with our meals, placing the roasted duck in front of me and the seafood risotto before Sophia. The scents mingle, momentarily filling the space between our banter.

Sophia glances at her plate, then back at me, her playful demeanor still present. “Let’s start simple. Tell me something real.”

I pause, considering her challenge. Taking a sip of wine, I meet her eyes, allowing a genuine memory to surface. “Alright. Growing up, I had a small, blue bicycle with a torn seat and rusty handlebars. Every weekend, I’d ride to the edge of the city just to watch the stars. In those moments, I felt... limitless.”

She seems momentarily taken aback, as if she hadn’t expected such a candid response. Then, with a glint of appreciation in her eyes, she says, “That’s beautiful. It’s a side of you I wouldn’t have guessed existed.”

I shrug, taking a bite of the duck. “Well, you wanted something real.”

“Is that where your love for astronomy began?”

I lean in conspiratorially. “Don’t tell Whitmore, but I can barely find the Big Dipper on a clear night.”

“I figured as much,” Sophia smirks, twirling her fork in the risotto. “Your turn. Ask away.”

“Tell me about a time you felt free.”

Her fingers absentmindedly play with the delicate silver locket at her throat, each movement drawing my attention to the graceful curve of her neck. “You know the piano at the manor? Sometimes, when everyone’s asleep late at night, I sneak downstairs and play wearing just my pajamas. No sheet music, no audience, just me and the keys.”

I raise an eyebrow, intrigued. “What would you play?”

A soft chuckle escapes her lips. “Anything and everything. Sometimes, it would be pieces I’d learned as a child; other times, I’d just... create. In those moments, there were no expectations, no Carter legacy looming over me. Just pure, unadulterated freedom.”

A memory flashes through my mind—the memorial for her father, where I’d caught a glimpse of Sophia seated at a piano, lost in her own world. The raw emotion in her eyes then, the way her fingers moved gracefully across the keys.

“I’d like to hear you play again,” I admit.

She raises an eyebrow, a hint of surprise evident. “You’ve heard me once already.”

“Yes, but that was a tribute to your father. Next time you play, I want it to be for me.”

We continue our conversation, every topic unveiling another layer of her personality, a depth that I’d sorely underestimated. From her passion for the foundation to the subtle challenges she faces navigating the society she was born into, Sophia surprises me at every turn.

Some time later, our plates are cleared, and couples start moving to the dance floor. I extend my hand to her. “Care to dance?”

She seems to consider it for a moment, her eyes darting to the dance floor and then back to me. “With you?” she teases.

“Who better to show you off than your fiance?”

Sophia laughs, placing her hand in mine. “Alright, Thorn, let’s see what you’ve got.”

Taking our first steps onto the dancefloor, everything but Sophia fades into the background. The feel of her hand, soft yet firm in mine, anchors me to the moment. The intoxicating blend of her perfume, a mix of jasmine and something wilder, hits me, pushing every thought to the back of my mind.

The orchestra delves into a waltz, the rhythm captivating and demanding. Our movements are perfectly synchronized, her fluid grace complementing my decisive steps. She fits against me like she’s made to be there, her every curve a testament to that.

With every turn, her warmth draws me in. Her breath, slightly uneven, fans against my neck, sending a shiver down my spine. The orchestra might dictate the rhythm around us, but the one between us, the push and pull, is all our own.

The music slows, the notes dripping with sensuality. Instinctively, my grip tightens, drawing her in. Her lashes cast shadows on her cheeks, and her lips, slightly parted, are a temptation I find hard to resist.

Just as our lips are about to seal the silent promise building between us, the song concludes, jolting us back to the present. We stand there for a heartbeat before Lord Farthington, a name synonymous with ancient money and entitled arrogance, saunters toward us, a smirk curling his thin lips.

“Thorn,” he greets, that one word dripping with condescension. “I must say, it’s surprising to see someone of

your background gracing such an event.”

Sophia’s grip on my arm tightens subtly, a silent plea to let the comment slide. But years of fighting for respect have honed my reactions, making it near impossible to let such slights go unchecked.

“Lord Farthington,” I reply, matching his tone with a dangerous edge. “I go where I please.”

Farthington’s eyes shift towards Sophia, the sly insinuation clear. “Of course, with the right company, even the hardest of doors swing open.”

Before I can rein in my temper, words fly out. “Speaking of doors, perhaps you’ve heard the bank’s about to close a few on the Carter estate. It’s rather generous of me, don’t you think, to extend a helping hand when others have turned their backs? Especially when the Carters are in such dire need.”

Sophia’s sharp intake of breath is almost drowned out by the music, but to me, it’s deafening. The raw hurt in her eyes is unmistakable, and I instantly realize the gravity of my blunder.

Sophia, her poise never faltering, coolly responds, “It was a pleasure, Lord Farthington.”

Then, without another word, she detaches herself from my arm, leaving me in the midst of the bustling crowd, grappling with the aftermath of my own impulsiveness. The room’s chatter continues, but for me, everything seems muted. I stand motionless, feeling an unfamiliar and unsettling weight in my chest.

How had I let my pride, my constant need to prove myself to these high society charlatans, cloud my judgment? The very thing I'd been fighting against my whole life—their judgment—had been the weapon I'd just wielded against someone who had done nothing but challenge and captivate me.

Years of clawing my way to the top, of battling snide remarks and haughty dismissals, had sharpened my instincts. But they'd also built walls, high and impenetrable. Walls I'd just inadvertently used against Sophia.

The realization that this isn't just about losing a beneficial partnership sinks in. It's about potentially losing a chance at something I hadn't even acknowledged I wanted. Something more than fleeting transactions and superficial respect.

I need to rectify this. The question now isn't about how, but whether I'd even be given the chance. Sophia, despite her grace and poise, also possesses a steely resolve. Would she even listen?

Maybe it's time for an uncharacteristic grand gesture. Or perhaps something simpler, more sincere. Either way, the game has changed.

And for the first time in my life, I'm not playing to win, but simply hoping not to lose.

Chapter 7

Sophia

The midday sun filters through the blinds, casting a warm, golden hue over my office. Walls lined with bookshelves, filled not just with business manuals but novels and memoirs, showcase the Carter legacy and my personal journey intertwined. A soft, plush rug cushions my feet, while the desk—a grand piece of mahogany inherited from generations past—occupies the room’s center.

But amidst this history, pieces of me punctuate the space—a candid photo from Ava’s beach birthday last summer, fresh roses in a crystal vase, grandma’s old tea set, and sketches of dream projects pinned to a corkboard. Here, in this fusion of past and present, I’ve always found solace, especially on days like today.

Biting into my sandwich, last night replays in my head, and the tight knot in my chest returns. The glitz of the gala, the sharp sting of Victor’s unexpected betrayal, and the whispers that felt like slashes. Rather than return to the echoing halls of

the manor and risk unsettling my mother with my distress or to the penthouse where a run-in with Victor was inevitable, I sought refuge in Ava's welcoming apartment.

The façade of strength and composure I'd put on for the world had crumbled the moment she opened her door. Wrapped in her embrace, the walls I'd built came crashing down, and the story poured out of me—the good, the bad, and the mortifying. She just listened, holding me tight as I rambled and raged.

Now, in the solitude of my office, with the weight of the previous night still heavy, my phone buzzes, interrupting my reverie. The display reads Ava's name, and I feel grateful. She's been my rock in the stormy sea that is my life right now.

Picking up, I answer, "Hey, Ava."

"Soph, how are you holding up today?" Her voice drips with concern, making me clutch the phone tighter.

"I've had better days," I admit, tracing the rim of Grandma's teacup with my finger.

"Remember what we talked about last night," she soothes, "You're stronger than one bad evening. Take a deep breath, drink some tea. Talk to me."

I pour hot water into the cup, watching the jasmine leaves unfurl. "I just can't shake it off, Ava. The feeling of betrayal, the weight of all those eyes on me... and Victor, God, what was he thinking?"

Ava lets out a soft sigh. “Sophia, think about it. You’ve seen him—the outsider trying to break into our elite world. Maybe, just maybe, it was a slip. An attempt to defend himself.”

I clutch the teacup, feeling the warmth seep into my palms. “It’s not just about what he did, Ava. It’s how I felt. I felt... exposed, vulnerable. I thought he was different.”

Ava’s voice softens further, “And maybe he still is. I never thought I would defend him, but even I can admit that you’ve shared moments. Moments that mean something. Not just business dinners but real, raw moments. Don’t let one misstep cloud all of that.”

I take a sip of the tea, its floral aroma comforting me. “It’s not just the misstep, Ava. It’s everything leading up to it. The way we are with each other—it’s confusing. I can’t figure out if I’m angrier with him for what he said or with myself for how deeply I felt the sting of it.”

Ava chuckles lightly, “That sounds like feelings. Real, complicated feelings.”

I lean back in my chair, letting Ava’s words wash over me. “You know, I’ve always been sure of everything in my life—my choices, my responsibilities. But with Victor... it’s all so complicated. Yet, deep down, I know there’s something undeniable between us. Something I can’t simply ignore.”

Ava’s voice softens, “So, what will you do about it?”

I exhale deeply, staring at the roses on my desk. “I don’t know yet. I need time to process, to figure out where we stand.

But one thing's for sure, I can't just dismiss what's blossoming between us."

Ava's laughter rings through the phone, light and teasing, "Blossoming, huh? Using floral references now, are we?"

I chuckle, "Oh, hush! You know what I mean."

"Of course, I do. And Soph," Ava's voice turns serious, "Just remember, love isn't about perfection or always making the right choices. It's about navigating the rough waters together. So, give it a chance."

I smile, her words bringing a sense of warmth and clarity. "Thanks, Ava. Always my voice of reason."

"Always," she affirms, "Now, take that leap of faith, okay?"

A deep breath, a nod, even though she can't see me, "Okay."

The moment of reflection is shattered by the sudden burst of the office door swinging open. A young boy from the music program, whose name I remember as Jamie, stands at the threshold. He's panting, his face flushed from running.

"Miss Carter!" he exclaims, his voice pitchy with excitement. "You have to come! Right now!"

I rise from my desk, startled. "Jamie? What happened? Is everything okay?"

He nods quickly, his mop of curly hair bouncing with the motion. "It's not bad, but you need to see it. In the music room. Hurry!" The gleam in his eyes is unmistakable, but it does little to temper my worry.

Quickly ending the call with Ava, I rush out of the office, Jamie's small hand gripping mine, pulling me along with an urgency I can't quite comprehend. The corridors blur as we dash toward the music room, my heart thudding.

The rapid pace of my heart slows as I enter the room, ready to confront whatever disaster awaits. Instead, I find Victor sitting at the piano, his fingers resting lightly on the keys, his posture a mix of uncertainty and determination. The kids are arranged around him, their eyes sparkling with mischief and anticipation.

One of the older boys, Timothy, with glasses perched on his nose, speaks up, "Miss Carter, we taught Mr. Thorn! He wanted it to be a surprise for you."

Victor chuckles softly, nodding in agreement. "Yes, and these young maestros," he gestures to the kids around him, "have been very patient instructors. Although I must admit, I'm no virtuoso."

I raise an eyebrow, intrigued. "So, what did they teach you?"

"A song that we thought was fitting given my passion for astronomy," Victor answers.

Then, with a deep breath, he starts to play the familiar notes of 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star'. It's not flawless, and there are a few hesitant pauses, but the effort and sincerity shine through every note.

As he continues, I'm drawn to the instrument, remembering countless hours I spent here during my own childhood.

“May I?” I ask, gesturing to the bench beside him.

Victor pauses, then shifts slightly, making room. “Please.”

I sit, our shoulders almost touching, and listen for a moment as he continues the simple melody. Then, softly, I begin to weave in a harmony. The notes intertwine, his steady and strong, mine dancing around them, enhancing and elevating. The children watch in silent awe as the tune transforms from a simple lullaby into something richer, layered with depth and emotion.

As our impromptu duet ends, I lean back, looking at the keys, then to Victor. In this shared moment, there’s an understanding, an unspoken acknowledgment of how two contrasting elements can come together to create something beautiful.

Victor’s blue eyes meet mine, and for a moment, the room, the children, everything else fades away. There’s just us and the realization of what we could be—together.

With a subtle gesture, I motion for him to follow me. He nods in understanding, pushing himself off the piano bench. The children, their eyes sharp and observant, exchange cheeky, knowing glances. Their innocent voices whisper and giggle amongst themselves, sensing the underlying tension and romance between us. Their playful teases about Victor going to “the principal’s office” bring a reluctant smile to my face.

Leading the way through the corridor, the muffled sounds of our footsteps against the polished floor break the quiet. As we reach my office door, I pause, taking a deep breath before

entering. And with a soft click, the door closes behind us, sealing us off from the world outside.

“So,” I start, “what was that about?”

Victor runs a hand through his tousled hair, looking a bit out of place amid the blend of Carter legacy and my world. “I wanted to find a way... a small gesture to start making amends.”

I lean against the edge of my desk, crossing my arms, “By learning ‘Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star’?”

He chuckles, a hint of sheepishness in his grin. “It seemed fitting. And it was the song Timothy insisted was within my skill range.”

I can’t help but smile. “Well, it was a start.”

There’s a pause, both of us searching for words. The distance from last night’s events feels both vast and minuscule in this enclosed space.

Victor’s stance is solid, the same unyielding posture I’ve come to recognize, but there’s a vulnerability in his gaze that’s new to me. “Sophia,” he begins, voice firm yet coated with an emotion I hadn’t heard before, “Last night... I messed up. Badly.”

I nod slowly, the memory fresh, the sting still present. “That’s one way to put it.”

“I know words aren’t enough, and that learning a childhood lullaby on the piano won’t fix things. But I wanted to show

you that I'm willing to step into your world, even if it's just a tiny step."

I tilt my head, regarding him curiously. "Why?"

He meets my gaze directly, those piercing blue eyes searching mine. "Because I'm drawn to you. Not just for the Carter name or the business alliance. I find myself wanting to know you, the real you. And I wanted to prove that I can be more than the ruthless businessman you've seen."

I laugh softly, "You think playing 'Twinkle, Twinkle' proves that?"

Victor smirks, that cocky grin returning. "It shows I'm willing to try, doesn't it? Besides, you can't tell me you weren't impressed with my impeccable musical skills."

I roll my eyes but can't suppress a smile. "You've made your point."

Stepping closer, Victor lowers his voice, the intensity palpable. "Sophia, I've navigated boardrooms and dealt with sharks in the business world. But with you, I'm navigating uncharted waters. I want to get this right. I want us to be more than just a deal."

The atmosphere thickens with unsaid words and raw emotions. "Victor, it's complicated," I whisper, "but I can't deny there's something between us."

His hand hesitates for a moment, then he reaches into his inner jacket pocket and pulls out a folded piece of paper. As he

unfolds it, I recognize the contract, the very agreement that had set everything in motion.

“About that debt,” he begins, his voice huskier, “I’ve been thinking.”

Before I can respond, he takes a deep breath and, in one swift motion, tears the contract in half, then in quarters, letting the pieces fall onto my desk.

“I don’t want this hanging over us,” he says, looking into my eyes, searching for a reaction. “I want to be with you, Sophia, for you, not because of your last name. You don’t owe me anything, but I hope you’ll choose to give us a chance, on your terms.”

Watching the torn pieces of the contract on my desk, my heart feels like it’s caught between racing and standing still. All this time, I’ve shouldered the weight of my family’s legacy, the weight of duty, the expectations, and the sacrifices that came with it. But in this instant, the weight seems a little lighter.

“Victor,” I whisper, still processing, “do you understand what you’ve done?”

He leans in, his blue eyes capturing mine with an intensity that sends shivers down my spine. “I think the better question is, do you?”

A rush of emotions floods me. My family’s honor, our legacy—it had always been a constant, something I was willing to sacrifice my personal happiness for. But Victor’s

bold and unexpected gesture makes me realize that maybe the two aren't mutually exclusive. Maybe there's a way to preserve my family's name while also pursuing my own happiness.

"I'm beginning to," I reply, my voice steadier than I feel. "I think it might be time to create my own legacy."

He reaches out, taking my hand. "Then let's create it together."

For the first time, I feel like I'm on the brink of a new beginning, where the lines between love and duty, past and future, blur into a future filled with endless possibilities.

Chapter 8

Victor

The remnants of the torn contract sit between us, but there's something else in the air, something charged and electric. I can't help but think about how crazy this whole thing is, and yet how right it feels.

Without another word, I pull her close, feeling the rapid beat of her heart against mine. "So, what's the next move, Miss Carter?"

She looks up, her gaze full of promise. "I thought you'd never ask."

With that, her lips find mine in a passionate kiss. Our tongues explore each other hungrily as my hands roam her curves, fisting the fabric of her dress to pull her closer to me. I'm vaguely aware that we're still in her office, but nothing else matters but this moment between us.

I pull away for a moment to catch my breath and take in the sight of her flushed face and shining eyes. She looks up at me, desire radiating from every inch of her body, and I ache to kiss

her again, but I can't deny myself the pleasure of taking my time to savor every part of her.

My fingertips trace soft patterns on her skin as I make my way down to explore her neck and shoulders, feeling how much she enjoys the sensation with little moans that escape from her lips.

She grabs my shirt, and I know what she wants, so I oblige her by pulling it over my head. She's tentative at first, her fingertips trailing over the smooth expanse of my chest.

"Victor," she whispers against my lips, "I want you."

My heart races at her words as I slip my fingers beneath her dress and cup her center to feel how wet she is for me. She gasps in pleasure as I rub slow circles around her clit through her panties.

"I want to make you come," I whisper, my mouth barely grazing her skin.

She nods eagerly, and I ease her onto the edge of her desk, pushing the fabric of her dress up and around her hips. She looks so gorgeous with her flushed cheeks and hair mussed from our passionate kisses. I can't resist trailing my lips down to her neck one last time before moving lower between her thighs.

With my fingers, I push her panties aside and spread her wide open to my gaze. She's wet and ready for me. I trail my tongue down her center and let my lips graze her clit. She groans in delight and tilts her hips farther for me to take her. I

lick her tiny nub, sucking gently on it before flicking it with the tip of my tongue.

“Victor,” she moans with a hoarse whisper.

Her hips buck against my face as I slip two of my fingers inside her tight warmth, moving them in and out as I continue to tease her clit with my mouth. She’s grinding against my fingers now, and she presses her hands against her mouth to muffle her desperate cries.

I wish I could hear her, but I can already tell she’s teetering on the edge. She’s so close to coming, and I love that I’m giving her that much pleasure.

Suddenly, she tenses up and throws her head back against the desk as she comes hard. Her hips rock against my hand as she lets out all of her pent-up desires. I watch her intently until she shudders and falls back against the desk, her chest heaving. She bites her bottom lip, and she looks absolutely perfect in that moment.

She’s beautiful, and she’s mine.

I stand up and she immediately reaches for my pants to unzip them. Her fingers are shaking, and I love that I can bring her to that point. She pushes my pants down my hips and I step out of them along with my boxers. She lets out a gasp as my erection springs free. Our eyes meet, and she slides off the desk and onto her knees.

I glance around, realizing we’re still in her office, but I’m too far gone to care. “Fuck it,” I say quietly, my cock

twitching at my words.

She gives a small laugh and pumps the tip against her lips. I tilt my head back and revel in the gentle feel of her mouth around me.

She teases the head with her tongue, swirling it around the ridge and sucking gently on the sensitive skin. My eyelids flutter closed as I enjoy each stroke of her tongue, each gentle squeeze of her lips. She moans against my cock, and the vibrations send shivers through my body.

“Damn,” I whisper.

She picks up the pace, bobbing her head up and down over me. I reach down to pull her hair around my fingers as I guide her to the pace I want.

She runs her tongue down my shaft and grips my ass with both hands, holding me close to her mouth. My eyes fall shut as the feeling overwhelms me and renders me speechless. I tilt my head back as she pushes me closer and closer to the edge. My heart is hammering in my chest, and I know I’m going to come soon.

But I don’t want to come in her mouth. I want to be inside of her tight, wet pussy.

“Not yet,” I tell her, pulling her to her feet.

She takes a step back and gives me a questioning look.

“I want to be inside of you,” I tell her simply.

She nods and I guide her to the edge of her desk again. I pull her panties off and toss them to the floor before spreading her legs wide for me. She reaches down, grabbing my cock to guide me to her entrance. She's already wet and ready, and I watch as I slip inside her in one smooth stroke.

She gasps as she's filled up for the first time, and I still myself inside of her to let her get used to my size. She grinds her hips against me and I bite back a groan.

"Fuck, you feel good," I growl.

Her hands curl into fists at her sides as she tries to hold back.

"You're so tight," I whisper. "I want to feel every inch of you."

"Victor, please," she begs.

I lean forward so that I'm braced against her shoulders and begin to thrust softly into her, moving slow and deep. Her hips rock to meet mine as we fight for control over our movements. She presses her lips together, moaning as I go deeper with each stroke, fingernails digging into my arms.

We're both so close, and I can't hold back any longer. I pick up the pace, the office filling with the erotic sound of slapping flesh. I wrap my hand around her throat and squeeze slightly as I pump into her, and she wraps her legs around my waist and holds on for dear life.

"Yes, Victor," she whispers, her voice a breathy moan.
"Yes."

I feel her start to come around my cock, and she arches her back and writhes against me. She's so gorgeous, and I can't stop myself from giving her what she wants.

I fuck her hard, slamming my cock into her as I tease her clit with my fingers. She whimpers as her muscles clamp down around me, and I swallow her screams of pleasure as I ride her through her orgasm, thrusting into her a few more times until I find my own release. I grip the edge of her desk tightly as I come inside of her.

She collapses against the desk as the last of my orgasm leaves me, and I follow after her, letting my weight crush her into the desk. Her chest is heaving as she tries to catch her breath, and I brush my lips against her hairline, kissing her neck gently.

When I lift myself off of her, she looks up at me through her eyelashes, and I can see her cheeks are red from being so thoroughly fucked.

She's absolutely perfect.

"Do you think," she starts, her voice hesitant, "that we've officially scandalized my ancestors?" She gestures vaguely around her office at the framed photos and antique furnishings.

I can't help but chuckle, imagining the stern-looking figures in those photos bearing witness to our activities. "Undoubtedly. I suspect your great-grandfather might never look at this desk the same way again."

She laughs, a melodic sound that makes my chest feel lighter. “You have a knack for making everything sound so irreverent.”

“I aim to please,” I quip, pulling her closer for a brief kiss. “But seriously, Sophia, where does this leave us?”

She presses a palm against my bare chest. “I think... it leaves us at the beginning of something new. Something unpredictable, definitely scandalous, but also... real.”

I nod, understanding her sentiment. This isn't just a fleeting moment. This is forever. “You know, amidst the Carter legacy and business dealings, I think we're carving out our own story.”

Sophia looks up, her gaze meeting mine, full of hope. “One wild, beautiful, naughty chapter at a time.”

And as the sun begins its descent, casting a golden hue over the office, I realize we're not just ending a chapter but embarking on an entirely new journey.

Epilogue

Sophia

I stand on the balcony of our penthouse, the cool evening breeze tousling my hair. Below, the city pulses with life, a million lights playing their own rhythm. But it's the sky above that captures my attention tonight, a canvas of twinkling stars. Ever since meeting Victor, the stars have taken on a new significance. They remind me of our shared journey—the bumpy start, the challenges we faced, and the undeniable connection that grew between us.

“I see I’ve turned you into a stargazer,” a familiar, teasing voice interrupts my thoughts. I turn to find Victor holding a small telescope.

I smirk, “Trying to impress me with your astronomical tools now?”

He grins, setting up the telescope. “Always, Ms. Carter. Here, take a look.”

I peer into the eyepiece, focusing on a brilliantly shining star.

“That’s Vega,” he informs me. “One of the brightest stars in our night sky.”

I lean back, looking at him, the stars reflected in his deep blue eyes. “You’ve come a long way from ‘Twinkle, Twinkle.’”

He chuckles, “With you by my side.”

A comfortable silence falls between us before Victor suddenly grows serious. “Do you remember telling me our arrangement was strictly business until I got down on one knee?”

I roll my eyes, laughing. “I say a lot of things, especially to keep you in line. You don’t expect me to remember everything, do you?”

Without a word, he reaches into his pocket, producing a small box. My heart stutters as he kneels, opening it to reveal a sparkling diamond ring.

“How about now?” he asks, smirking. “Sophia Carter, will you do the honor of making this insufferable billionaire the happiest man on earth?”

I pretend to consider, tapping my chin thoughtfully. “Well, when you put it that way... How can a girl resist?”

He rolls his eyes but looks hopeful. “Is that a yes?”

I pull him up, wrapping my arms around his neck. “Yes, Victor Thorn, that’s a yes.”

As we seal our engagement with a kiss, I can't help but feel the weight of the moment—the end of our old lives and the promising start of a new chapter. Sure, he's still a pain in my ass, but he's my pain. And as we stand there, under the vast canopy of stars, I know that together, we're ready to create our own legacy—one stubborn, passionate step at a time.

Epilogue 2

Victor

I sit at my desk, the sharp lines and modern aesthetics of my office momentarily broken by the rustic-looking brochure I'm thumbing through—pictures of a secluded mountain lodge retreat. A place meant for relaxation, rejuvenation, maybe even rediscovery. It feels like a good change of pace for the team, a place where we might connect and regroup.

As if summoned by my thoughts, Sophia breezes in, her green eyes sparkling with a mix of business and pleasure. “You know, since we started our joint project between your company and the Carter Family Foundation, it feels like I'm here more than at my own office.” She tosses me a playful smile.

Her presence, which once would have been an anomaly in this space, has grown familiar. And welcomed. “Can't say I'm complaining,” I quip back, showing her the brochure.

Considering the photos of the cabins nestled amidst towering pines and pristine lakes, she lets out an appreciative whistle.

“This looks like an amazing escape. A corporate retreat here might be exactly what Thorn Enterprises needs.”

Before I can respond, Claire, my ever-efficient receptionist, enters with a stack of documents. Her gaze, however, is drawn instantly to the brochure. Her eyes have a distant look as she says, “I’ve been feeling a bit out of sorts lately. A trip to the mountains sounds like a dream.”

I nod, seeing an opportunity for everyone to benefit. “It does seem like a good idea, but there’s a catch.” I hesitate, trying to gauge my own feelings. “The lodge is close to where my semi-estranged brother lives. He chose the solitude of the mountains over the city’s hustle years ago.”

Sophia raises an eyebrow, a teasing smile on her lips. “Trying to avoid a family reunion, Mr. Thorn?”

Claire chuckles, “Honestly, being around mountains, trees, and maybe a bit of adventure sounds perfect right now. And I promise not to drag any estranged brothers to our campfire.”

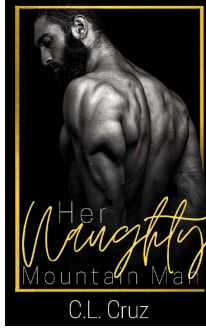
The corner of my mouth quirks up. “I appreciate that, Claire.”

With a decisive nod, Sophia says, “Well then, I say we go for it. It’ll be a great experience for the team, and maybe,” she winks at Claire, “an adventure or two for those seeking it.”



Will Claire find the adventure she’s looking for?

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Crafting tales that aren't just sweet, but irresistibly steamy, C.L. Cruz is the voice behind romances that celebrate strong, spirited curvy women and the heart-throbbing men who adore them. When the pen is down, you can find her sipping a Diet Coke on the sidelines of a kid's soccer game, dominating in Fortnite, or savoring the beach vibes. C.L. Cruz is here to remind you that every curve in life's journey can lead to a delightful love story. Dive in, and let her sweep you off your feet! 😊

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