

JUNE PATRICK

Monte Carlo Mistake



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ESCAPIST ROMANCE

BOOK TWO

JUNE PATRICK

FLORENCE & REYNOLDS

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Chapter One



I stepped into the impossibly posh St. Mark's Hotel on the coastline of glittering Monte Carlo in the tiny Principality of Monaco.

“Bonjour, Mademoiselle. Welcome back,” the sentry at the door, clad in a three-piece suit, greeted me, hustling to open the enormous glass doors with brass handles as thick as a light pole.

“Bonjour, Luis.”

I spared myself a glance in the foyer mirror—I was impeccable in my flowing silk shirt dress, cinched around my small waist with a signature Hermes belt. My go-to platform wedges in hand-tooled Italian leather—with just enough heel to give my petite frame a boost—clicked against the polished marble of the hotel entry. Well done today, Stella, I silently gave myself a little cheer. Some days, I needed a pep talk more than others.

I delayed removing my broad hat and oversized tortoiseshell sunglasses until I was well out of the sun's reach—for the sake of both vanity and drama. The people here expected a little something extra upon entry. I think people came to Monte Carlo to be entertained above all else. Give them something to gawk at, and you've earned your place. I passed through the main entry and removed my hat first, patting down my chestnut hair, which was tied into a slick chignon at the nape of my neck.

I subtly dabbed at the corners of my mouth with a monogrammed handkerchief, wiping away any rogue traces of my glossy coat of red lacquer.

“Bonjour, Mademoiselle! Welcome back to St. Mark’s,” the concierge said with a curt bow.

I removed my sunglasses and smiled sweetly at the wiry man—a man I had come to know quite well over the last year as I frequented St. Mark’s at Hugo’s side. St. Mark’s Hotel was one of those long-standing establishments that came to power during La Belle Époque, when the British aristocracy flocked to the brisk shorelines of the *Côte d’Azur*. Unlike so many places on the Riviera that now catered to the casual tourism of wealthy foreigners, St. Mark’s maintained strict standards. No one could enter looking less than chic. And it did not allow for looky-loos—tourists who wandered in solely to gawk at the priceless artwork, ornate frescoes or the swank clientele. But if one was dressed sharply enough and caught the concierge on a good day, one might be able to wander into the lounge for a glass of very overpriced champagne. As a frequent guest in the presidential suite, I, of course, did not have to worry about such protocol.

“Bonjour, Maurice!” I said, kissing the concierge on each cheek. “And how is your lovely wife?”

Maurice beamed. “You are always so kind as to inquire. She is very well, thank you. We will be heading on holiday soon! Finally taking her to Crete to see her ancestral home.”

“How wonderful,” I said. I took a small envelope of euro notes from my handbag and subtly slid it into Maurice’s hand. “You must buy her a nice meal on me.”

Maurice’s eyes twinkled.

“You are so generous, mademoiselle! Please, come this way. We have a bottle of Cristal chilling just for you in preparation for your arrival. I trust your week in the Alps was restful?”

“Oh yes. A much-needed break from the summer heat.”

I smiled and followed Maurice into the lounge, where he led me to a corner with an overstuffed authentic Edwardian sofa, finely stitched with red brocade. Within a moment, a tray had been brought out with pastel petit fours and a bucket of chilled Louis Roederer Cristal, along with a platinum-rimmed flute. Maurice personally popped the cork with such ease it slipped from the bottle silently. He filled my glass to the brim and set the bottle into an antique silver ice bucket.

I sipped indulgently but without letting my utter bliss show in my expression. Subtlety was the key with these stuffy, old-moneyed people. Looking too excited or eager for anything was a dead giveaway that you didn't belong. After allowing me a few moments to settle and sip, Maurice returned.

“And where is Monsieur Revere?” Maurice inquired.

I flicked my wrist in the air to show my lack of concern over Hugo's whereabouts, letting my Cartier tennis bracelet catch the sunlight beaming in through the blue velvet drapes. “He has a meeting at Hôtel de Ville in Nice, but will be here in time for dinner. Tell me you have the bouillabaisse tonight?”

Maurice bowed. “But of course! I will make sure the chef prepares it special for you.”

“Merci. But first, I really think I need a little trip to the spa. Is there anything available?”

“For you, always! Please, get settled, and I will have our spa manager come get you within the hour.”

After checking in to our suite, I made my way to the hotel's lavish spa, the click of my heels echoing on the polished marble floor. The faint scent of lavender hung in the air, mingling with the soft strains of instrumental music playing in the background. A friendly attendant welcomed me, guiding me toward the changing room.

“Bonjour, Madam. We have your room ready.”

Once I'd slipped into a plush white robe, I made my way to the relaxation salon. An attendant handed me a chilled glass of champagne, the bubbles popping and fizzing against the delicate glass. I took a moment to gaze out of the floor-to-

ceiling windows, soaking in the breathtaking view of the Mediterranean Sea.

I sunk into a sumptuous chaise longue. This world was a whirlwind of sparkle, opulence, private jets, exclusive parties, and stunning jewels. It was a lifestyle I could've only dreamed of growing up. A life I *did* dream of as I flipped through well-worn travel and lifestyle magazines at the library.

I'd been slowly climbing the ranks in the South of France and Monaco the last few years, but the past year with Hugo had really topped the cake.

Hugo had whisked me away to a private island in Greece for a weekend filled with sunbathing and snorkeling in crystal-clear waters. He'd taken me to the Cannes Film Festival, where I strutted the room in a breathtaking couture gown, rubbing shoulders with the film elite.

But beneath all the glitter and glamour, the reality was much less charming. Hugo's arrogance and indifference were beginning to tarnish the shine. His dismissive hand waves when I suggested something adventurous, the way he barely noticed me at dinner parties, his persistent flirtations with other women—it was really starting to wear on my patience.

Something niggled at the base of my spine. I gripped the champagne flute tightly, trying to mentally flick away the feeling. A feeling of something like longing. I wanted more out of this life. I knew that. But not yet. It wasn't time yet.

Just then, a woman in crisp white linen stepped through the door.

“Bonjour, Madam. Are you ready for your hot stone massage?”

I smiled and allowed her to guide me down the hall. I cast a final glance at the sun setting over the sea.

The hot stones soon worked their magic, and the worries slipped away.

I'd handle Hugo in time. But for now, it was time to enjoy the luxury and privilege that his world afforded me. Life was short, and I wanted to savor every moment.

* * *

Nico watched the woman as she charmed every man, woman, and armchair in St. Mark's. It seemed nothing was impervious to her smile. He'd seen her before—the last time they'd been in Monte Carlo. She wasn't French—he could just tell by the way she carried herself. She didn't have that empty, hungry look French socialites had. There was a sparkle in her eyes, a confidence in her gait. And the teeth—shockingly white, even at a distance. He'd guess American if there were euros on the table.

“Nicolas? Are you still with us?” Nico snapped to attention, remembering he was in a meeting, and smiled apologetically. “*Desole*. What were you saying?”

Chapter Two



I stepped into the St. Mark's extravagant dining room on the arm of Hugo Revere, Monégasque billionaire. It wasn't exactly a difficult task meeting someone like Hugo—billionaires stood on every corner of Monaco, looking to avoid wealth taxes or dreaming of Formula 1 fame. Not that I could ever imagine Hugo squeezing his 6'4 frame into one of those matchbox cars. He wasn't overweight, but he was freakishly tall for a Riviera man, likely originating from some towering Greek stock.

I swished through the dining room in my Carolina Herrera silk. Even in my five-inch strappy red-bottomed sling-backs, I barely grazed his shoulder. There were advantages to being only 5'1. I might never walk the runway in Milan, but I could strut in any height heel Christian Louboutin could inflict.

The Maître d' led us to our usual table in the back of the dining room, the ideal distance from the string quartet and the doors, yet with a wide-open view of the opulent room. The best part of St. Mark's, in my opinion, was the entertaining clientele. I had a front-row ticket to the *cirque de luxe*.

We settled into our seats and the server popped a bottle of champagne that was already sweating in a bucket on the table.

"Merci," I said with a smile. Hugo barely acknowledged it with a curt nod. When I first met Hugo, I'd found his aloofness so alluring. He was a powerful man with a commanding presence and a baritone voice that stopped you in your tracks. He was one of those men who had "business" all

over the world doing who knows what (imports, exports? Who really knew), but it kept him and me in life's comforts.

I tried to stay focused on Hugo as we sat, but my eyes kept wandering. I was annoyed with myself for the way I was feeling, but the truth was, I was growing tired of him. At first, Hugo had been exciting, but the shine had quickly worn off as his true colors came through—he was controlling, cold, and honestly a little boring. He didn't have much to say about anything and was constantly glued to his phone "working."

I had known from the beginning it would be a challenge to stick it out with him—men like him could be self-centered and impossible. But I thought I could probably ride it out for a few years. Save up enough to make this my last endeavor. I always figured it was more likely he'd grow tired of me first, anyway. Men like Hugo had short attention spans. Thus, I had worked quickly to secure my future. Every day was a tenuous tightrope.

"You seem more distracted than usual," Hugo said, stabbing a fork into his foie gras. I looked up, surprised he'd noticed.

"Hmm? Oh, no, I'm just always so impressed by this place," I lied. The truth was, I wasn't even remotely. I thought St. Mark's was stuffy and dated, catering to a dying breed of brittle aristocracy who needed their egos massaged with overstuffed leather and gilded forks. But Hugo would never want to hear that. He wanted to think I was awestruck by every Baroque armchair. Even though his flat was only thirty minutes or so into the hills, he still stayed at St. Mark's on a regular basis, just to be close to the water. And because he had to spend his money somewhere.

Hugo smirked at my response but said nothing more. After a four-course meal of braised rabbit, Camembert, and crème brûlée, accompanied by champagne, a rich Bordeaux, and cognac, I felt like I was going to be sick. I had never quite acquired the taste for rich old-style French cooking—really, I much preferred the light Mediterranean fare of the Riviera. But once again, Hugo didn't want to hear about it—even if it

was *my* birthday. Hugo was a man who liked what he liked and couldn't imagine anyone ever disagreeing with his tastes.

I sighed internally. The things I would do for my lifestyle.

As the evening wore on, my eyes continued to wander around the opulent dining room. As always, I was captivated by the various faces and their accompanying conversations. I imagined the stories behind each person, weaving intricate tales of glamour and intrigue. It was an entertaining pastime that helped me endure the monotony of Hugo's droning voice.

As I glanced over the crowd, my gaze suddenly locked with that of a man seated across the room, engaged in discussion with a small group. He had a striking appearance, with dark, intense eyes that seemed to pierce right through me. For a moment, we shared a silent, electric connection that sent my heart racing unexpectedly. He flashed me the ghost of a smile, but just as quickly as the moment had come, it was gone, and the man turned his attention back to his meeting.

I was left with a fluttering sensation in my chest, a feeling I hadn't experienced in quite some time. I welcomed the small distraction and felt a tiny smile invade my face.

"Stella, are you listening?" Hugo's voice snapped me back to reality, his irritation palpable.

"Of course, darling," I replied with a forced smile.

* * *

I was growing increasingly bored as the meal dragged on for literally hours. I couldn't help but tune Hugo out as he went on about one business venture or another. It wasn't that I wasn't interested in financial matters. On the contrary, I was doing everything I could to invest what I was able to attain. But Hugo had the keen ability to make a child's first trip to Disneyland dull. No wonder at forty-five he already had two ex-wives and a slew of failed relationships.

Finally, needing a break, I excused myself and headed to the ladies' toilette.

I enjoyed a few appreciative glances on my way through the dining room, never too proud to admit my vanity ran strong. Then I passed by a man who caught my eye. It was the man from across the room. He was even sexier up close with an olive Mediterranean complexion and dark, captivating eyes in such a deep blue they were like a midnight sky. Up close, I could also see he was tall and lean in his fitted tie-less suit. His gaze seemed to bore right through to the center of me. He watched me like a predator as I moved, and I suddenly felt vulnerable, naked. As though he was peeling away the layers of me and poking around in the tender bits to test my measure. I quickly averted my eyes and darted into the ladies' room.

I relieved myself, then freshened up in the mirror. I reapplied my red lipstick and touched up my hair, smoothing back any flyaways that were determined to ruin my reputation this time of year. I pulled out my compact and delicately powdered away any moisture coming through my meticulously applied layer of makeup. With Hugo, I wore more makeup than I liked to. Hugo and his ilk didn't go for the natural, carefree look, preferring their girlfriends to be heavily made up. It was as though the higher maintenance they were, the more unattainable they seemed and thus added value to male portfolios.

When I stepped from the toilette, the handsome man was gone. I sighed, not sure what I was expecting. I straightened my spine and made my way back into the dining room toward my date. And as I approached, I could not miss Hugo's wandering hands skimming the waitress's backside.

I rolled my eyes and gritted my teeth. It was not the first time I had seen Hugo misbehave in such a way. But he wasn't usually so brazen about it. It was almost as if he was advertising the slow unravel of our relationship. I did some quick math in my head. I calculated the gifts he had given me and the allowance he'd thrown my way to maintain appearances. With careful budgeting, I'd managed to stash away at least half of it, adding it to my investment portfolio.

I thought of all the time we had spent together. Surely it was long enough that if Hugo let me go now, he would feel

obligated to compensate me in some way. That was how these arrangements usually worked. Hugo knew the game. I doubted he had seen wedding bells in the future, anyway. But still, I hadn't been ready to walk away. I still had plans. My investments were growing, but it wasn't enough.

So, I breathed through my frustration, then made my way back to the table, forcing my red lips into a plastic smile. Hugo's eyes lit up slightly when I approached. I could see his eyes glazing over, growing heavy with alcohol and too much rich food. He was becoming more and more overindulgent as the days passed. It would seem any pretense he had of maintaining some decorum and charm with me had quickly faded.

"What do you say, my love?" I said, touching his hand. "Should we get the check and go back to the room? Or should we have an after-dinner cordial?"

That was probably the last thing Hugo needed, I thought, noting the far-off look in his eyes. But it was my birthday. I had the urge to celebrate *me* for once.

"Hmm. Yes, the check, I think. I do think it's time to retire. We can dip into the minibar upstairs."

Hugo nodded and signaled the waitress.

As we made our way up to the presidential suite, I couldn't help but think that maybe this relationship was salvageable yet. I had, in fact, been quite attracted to Hugo in the beginning. And his incredible business acumen had been a crash-course education in investing. He was relatively handsome, if not a bit older than my twenty-nine years. I wasn't the type that could stomach a terribly old and overweight man for the sake of his wallet. No, I needed it to be mutually beneficial to enjoy his company. I wasn't that good at faking it, in or out of the bedroom.

We entered the presidential suite, and I slipped off my stiletto heels.

In truth, when I got into his life, I had hoped that one of my "companions" would actually turn out to be someone I

could spend my life with. I wasn't so vapid that I intended to spend my entire life alone, charming men out of baubles and expensive dinners. And while I didn't really believe in all that love garbage, I did think some lifelong companionship wouldn't be so bad. Life could get a little lonely.

"Perhaps we should order some champagne and sit on the balcony?" I said. "It's a beautiful night. Very romantic."

I turned around to face Hugo, and my mouth fell open when I saw that he was already face down on the bed, snoring.

"Well, happy birthday to me then," I said, flubbing my lips to no one.

Although I had pushed to leave the dining room, the truth was I really wasn't ready to go to bed. I just didn't want to spend the rest of my birthday staring down poor taxidermed elk heads while Hugo drunkenly ogled the service staff.

I eyed the bustling promenade below our hotel. I glanced back at Hugo. He was likely passed out for the night and would never miss me if I popped out. Perhaps I could just slip down to the hotel bar and have a glass of champagne by myself. Toast the last year of my twenties.

I checked my appearance in the mirror, slipped my heels back on, and grabbed my handbag. I was almost out the door when I felt a stab of pity for Hugo. I walked back over, slipped off his loafers, tucked a blanket around him, and made sure his head was securely on the pillow. I set a glass of water by the bed placed a gentle kiss on his forehead.

"Sleep well, Hugo." I turned and slipped out of our hotel room.

Being mid-week and the middle of August, the hotel was particularly dead, and the hotel bar was no exception. I stepped in to find myself the only patron and the bar absent a bartender. I double-checked that it was, in fact, open and saw the sign read that it was open until 2 a.m. I wandered over to the bar and slid into an ornately carved wooden high-backed stool. The bartender was undoubtedly on a cigarette break.

After a few moments of sitting there in the quiet, playing around on my phone, I decided that perhaps I was mistaken about the hours after all. Or maybe they closed down the bar early for lack of patrons. I sighed. Figured. Just my kind of birthday, I thought. Perhaps I could ask the concierge to provide me with a bottle of champagne, and I'd take it to the promenade.

As I stepped away from the bar, I spotted a man lounging on one of the sofas. He spotted me and jolted upright.

“Oh, I didn't realize anyone else was in here,” I said in English. Then, remembering myself, I switched to French. “*Je suis désolé! Je pensais que j'étais seul.*”

The man jumped to his feet. With alarm, I realized it was the handsome man from the dining room. I felt a little jolt shoot through me at the sight.

“Oh, I am so sorry as well,” he said in English but in a smooth French accent. “I did not see you there.” He brushed back a thick shock of black hair just tickling the ends of his ears.

“Quite all right,” I said. “It would seem the barman has retired early. I had hoped for a glass of champagne to close out the night. It's my birthday,” I added, with a foolish giggle I immediately wanted to retract. In my exhaustion, I was letting myself slip.

His eyes flitted to the bar, then back to me, as though thinking something through.

“Yes, he's obviously slacking on the job. Not a drink in sight.”

“I figured he was out smoking.”

He held up a finger as though having an idea. He rushed over to the bar.

“I say we go ahead and help ourselves,” he said.

My jaw dropped slightly, then I laughed. “Help ourselves? I'm not sure the hotel staff would be too keen on that.”

His eyes ran over me in a way that made me both want to melt and run for the door. It was like he could see right through me. “Well, something tells me no one in this hotel would be too keen to deny you anything, mademoiselle.”

I felt my cheeks flush. “And you are a VIP guest or something?”

He had to be someone important, or at least a frequent guest, to be so bold as to fix his own drink. I wouldn't even do that. This place didn't exactly have a sense of humor.

He gave me an overdramatic, old-fashioned bow.

“You might say I am something of a regular here. I have... certain privileges. They will not mind at all if I'm back here. I quite assure you. Champagne, was it?”

I laughed and then curtsied. “Oui, champagne.”

He flashed me a winning grin as he pulled an open bottle of Roederer from the small fridge and filled a flute.

“*Je suis* Nico,” he slid the glass toward me, then poured one for himself.

I batted long lashes and smiled. “Stella.”

“Stella,” he said my name slowly, tenderly. He took my hand and pressed a gentle kiss on it. “*Un plaisir.*”

I used every ounce of willpower not to blush. I raised my glass and sipped. Champagne had never tasted so good.

Chapter Three



I wasn't sure exactly when blackness overtook me, but it must have been some time after we opened the second—or was it the third—bottle of Roederer. One moment I was floating on the stars, the next—I was floating in a black hole toward the abyss.

And it hurt. Oh, sweet baby Jesus, did it hurt. I woke, feeling sensation flood every inch of my body, but I couldn't force my eyes to open. A dull thud began at the back of my skull, slowly crawled toward my temples, then clawed at the back of my eyes until it felt like someone was drumming inside my head with hot pokers.

What on Earth had I done? I finally forced one eyelid open and looked around. I was enveloped in plush white cotton and down feathers. Ah, yes, the St. Mark's Hotel. I was safe and warm in my presidential suite. Hugo was snoozing beside me. I must have stumbled home in the wee hours. I smiled then and allowed the other eye to flutter open. I looked around the room but then froze. Miss Clavel—something is not right.

This wasn't my room.

I rolled over and then jumped with fright when I saw a pair of brooding blue eyes staring back at me. Not Hugo's. Definitely not Hugo's. Definitely not my room.

“Shit!” I screeched. I scrambled to pull the covers up over me without even realizing that I was actually fully dressed in my silk Carolina dress from the night before. I blinked, reassessing, eyes scanning my body. The pounding in my head

reached a crescendo, and I winced. I forced my eyes to focus and take in the scene.

Nico flashed me a wry grin.

“Sleep okay?” he asked, lifting a tiny white porcelain espresso cup to his mouth.

“Um, what happened?” In my haze, I realized I’d let my voice slip into my natural twang. I cleared my throat and said more clearly. “What exactly happened?”

Nico stood, dressed in worn-in jeans and a navy polo, and walked to the sideboard. He plopped a Nespresso capsule into the machine and filled a tiny white china cup. He brought it to me without answering my question.

“Thank you,” I said gratefully, needing the small jolt of caffeine more than anything. I sipped, letting it renew me. Then I met Nico’s eyes again.

His expression brightened.

“Champagne is what happened,” Nico finally said.

My cheeks burned, likely a lovely shade of crimson if I knew myself.

“Well, I’m rather embarrassed then. I’m not normally such a ...”

“A lush?” Nico chuckled.

“Yes, I suppose that’s a good word for it.”

Suddenly the horror of what I had done sunk in. I had gone to another man’s room. A stranger! And where was Hugo? Oh god, Hugo. My eyes darted around the room, looking for a clock. I spotted my handbag on the bedside table and snatched it up, rummaging wildly for my phone. Five a.m. I sighed. Hugo was not an early riser, and he’d been out cold when I’d left. There was hope he didn’t know I was gone.

But the guilt—God, what had I done? I knew I wasn’t going to win the piety award anytime soon, but I always practiced expected fidelity.

Nico looked amused. I glowered.

“What?” I snapped, feeling the pressure mounting inside me.

He smiled. “I know what you’re thinking. But I want you to know, nothing happened.”

I simpered and looked down at myself, tangled in his sheets. “Nothing?”

“Well, we didn’t sleep together, I mean.”

My cheeks burned hotter. “Well, yes, obviously I know that,” I lied, but felt overwhelming relief. I racked my brain for morsels of explicit memories. There was definitely champagne—I remembered the taste of fine bubbles going down far too smoothly. There was laughter—Nico was funny. At least, I thought I remembered he was. Champagne did take the edge off dull people. But we talked, didn’t we? We laughed and joked, but then—I shook my head.

“So, um, it’s a little foggy and—”

“We had a great time. Good talks, good laughs. But suddenly you were over the tipping point. You said you couldn’t go to Hugo like that—I assume that’s your partner—so I said you could sleep it off here.”

Great. He had to be a perfect gentleman in addition to being gorgeous. Surely, he had a few dead bodies stashed in one of these closets.

“Um. Well, you still must excuse my behavior. I hadn’t eaten, and I’m quite a lightweight.” I lied again. I’d eaten plenty. And I could out-drink an Irishman on St. Patrick’s Day.

“It’s nothing,” he said. His voice was like silk. God, I had the urge to have that voice pressed against my ear. I shook my head. Don’t be any more ridiculous than you already are, Stella!

I pushed myself from the bed and forced my words into a controlled cadence. “I really must go.”

“Of course.”

I scrambled up, then had a second horrifying realization that I only had my evening dress and heels. I wasn’t going to

be able to fake a morning beach walk in this getup if Hugo was awake.

“Might I suggest the hotel boutique?” Nico said.

“Excuse me?” I spun around.

“They have a lovely selection of sportswear. You could change in the lounge toilette.”

How did he know my every thought!? Clearly, this wasn't his first rodeo. But it was, in fact, a brilliant idea.

I found a hairband in my handbag and pulled my hair back into a loose ponytail.

“Thank you for being such a gentleman,” I said.

He gave a dramatic bow. “It is a Frenchman's duty, mademoiselle. You will be okay?”

“Oui, merci.” I tried not to let the blush creep back into my cheeks. It was a most unfortunate tic, especially in my line of work.

I reached the door.

“Stella?” I slowly turned back around. The sound of my name on his lips was like music. “Should your man not treat you right, keep me in mind.” He winked.

I smiled but said nothing more as I left.

Chapter Four



Following Nico's advice, I quickly scurried down to the hotel boutique, mustering as much haughtiness as I could to make up for the fact that I was clearly in last night's attire with a solid case of overpriced raccoon eyes. It was a trick I'd learned—act as though you are entitled to do anything you please, and more often than not, people will let you. So, I kept my chin lifted as I strode through the posh hotel in my skimpy blue silk and stilettos at five a.m., my hair pulled back, and my mascara smudged. No one dared stare directly. It was Monte Carlo, after all. I could just as easily be coming back from a night gambling at the famed casino as from a drunken mistake.

I slipped into the boutique and made my way to the sportswear rack. Scanning quickly, I plucked a pair of very overpriced jogger pants and a stretchy tank top. Then I grabbed a pair of powder blue trainers in my size, and without bothering to try anything on, I rushed them to the cashier. I kept my gaze steady as I tried to ignore the disapproving look of the salesgirl. At these prices, no one better say a damn word to me, even if I walked in wearing a paper shopping bag.

I rushed into the lounge bathroom and quickly changed, tossing my evening clothes in the paper sales bag. Then I gently washed the makeup off my eyes with a tissue. Hugo would be suspicious of my unmade face—I didn't even go to the gym without a light layer—but I would make an excuse about needing my skin to breathe. It was better than clearly still sporting my evening eyes.

Fully transformed, I ran up to my room, hoping the flush on my cheeks would be mistaken for a brisk walk along the promenade.

As I slipped into the suite, I heard the reassuring growl of Hugo's deep snore. I exhaled a sigh of relief. I quickly stashed my evening clothes in the bathroom and stepped into the bedroom as though refreshed. One eye flitted open on Hugo's tanned face.

"Well, hello, early bird. Nice walk?" Hugo said.

I smiled sweetly. "It was very refreshing. Coffee?"

A few hours later, still groggy but with my headache caffeinated away, I found myself in a tea-length turquoise crepe dress with gold braided espadrilles and a large white hat, stepping onto the Princess Beatrice Yacht docked in the Monaco marina, courtesy of Jean-Luc Gauthier III, some French aristocrat who could supposedly trace his lineage to the overthrown Bourbon dynasty (and was still apparently quite put out by the state of French democracy).

We would be spending the day sailing around the cove, being well-supplied with caviar and champagne while the Riviera's *who's who* compared peacock feathers.

Under normal circumstances, I would delight in the escapades. I loved being on the water more than anything, and the crowds were nothing if not front-row entertaining. But today, all I wanted to do was stay in my plush hotel bed and binge cheesy American Netflix dramas while nursing my hangover with bloody Marys. And what I wouldn't give for a fried egg taco with Tapatio. Even if I had seen one in the last five years, that wasn't the kind of thing I could eat in public.

But I didn't really have a choice. I had briefly mentioned a slight hangover to Hugo when he'd inquired about my hazy mood. He'd laughed and commented on what a lightweight I was.

Right. At least I had him fooled there. Men like Hugo preferred their women to be lightweights. It wasn't lady-like to be able to keep up with the boys at the pub, after all.

While August on the French Riviera could be stifling inland, today a subtle breeze kept the sun's prowess at bay. The day was, in fact, pristine—the water azure, the sky a vast stretch of robin's egg blue dusted with puffy marshmallow clouds. Nothing about summer on the Riviera was subtle—it was a canvas mixed for a connoisseur's palate, with watercolor nuances splashed across the silkscreen blue sky from dawn till dusk.

The miniature principality of Monaco, less than one square mile bordering only the Mediterranean and France, was a magical place for me. Not to mention one of the strangest places I'd ever been. A hundred years ago, celebrities from London to Moscow flocked to the French Riviera, or *La Côte d'Azur*, to socialize, gamble, and escape the dreary weather at home.

It was home to one of the world's most luxurious and exclusive casinos and one of the most famous car races. It had more people in the philharmonic orchestra than the army. And while I knew the majority of Monaco's residents called the glittering tiny principality home simply to avoid paying high taxes on their vast fortunes, for me, it was a land of dreams and opportunity. A place for movie stars and American princesses. Sitting on the floor of our tiny one-bedroom apartment in even-God-forgot-about-you-nowhere-Texas, watching Grace Kelly strut around in her jewels in *To Catch a Thief*, I heard the Siren's call.

I stepped onto the yacht and was instantly greeted with an elegant glass of some sparkling boozy concoction. I drank greedily, knowing the fastest way to cure my hangover was with a bit of hair of the dog, as they said back home.

Depending on who was on board, day outings like this would go one of two ways. If it was a group of Hugo's businessmen—as was typical—I would be briefly ogled and praised, then relegated to a corner of the boat with the other girlfriends to be ignored for the rest of the day. But if it were a social situation filled with the Riviera's upper-crusters, I would be expected to mingle and make intelligent conversation. That was part of my package—what set me

above other women in my trade—I wasn't just a pretty face. I actually held a master's degree in economics. And if there was one thing I knew, it was who was a good investment.

Today would be a mix. It was mostly a social affair with some business thrown in, but there wasn't anyone Hugo needed me to impress, so I would be left to lounge as I pleased. Which, in fact, pleased me a great deal today. I finished my cocktail, plucked a glass of champagne from the passing waiter, popped a crudité in my mouth—delicately, so as not to smudge my artful Dior rouge—and made my way to the starboard side of the yacht to settle in for the day.

“Stella?” A woman's French voice rang out. I opened my eyes and stared up at Margot Delacroix, a third-tier French socialite desperately trying to maintain relevance.

“Ah, Margot. How lovely to see you.”

I stood and air-kissed each cheek. Her rail-thin frame—courtesy of a diet of champagne and cigarettes—was decked out in a backless, silky white jumpsuit and black leather kitten heels. Her silky blonde hair had been bobbed just below her ears since last I had run into her at a gala, during which Margot had passed out in a water fountain.

“Likewise. And you are here with Hugo?” Margot asked, looking over my shoulder.

“Oui. He is over there. And who are you with today?”

Margot smiled coyly. She had married some Madrid football star last year. But since discovering his many infidelities, she had chosen not to divorce him but rather to flaunt herself and whatever young thing caught her fancy wherever she wanted. She was brazen, perhaps a little genius, but definitely a scandal-maker.

“Allow me to introduce you to my friend,” Margot said. She stepped aside to reveal a tall, lean man with chiseled arms and velvet olive skin. Dark hair kissed the top of a sharp jaw. He removed his sunglasses, flashing steely blue eyes, and I nearly fainted.

“This is Nico,” Margot said, squeezing his bicep like he was a show dog.

“Stella, was it?” Nico said, his eyes flashing amused recognition. He took my hand and kissed it gently.

Margot leaned into me and, as though Nico couldn’t hear, said, “Found him in a bar. Of all the luck. What would Paulo think?”

“I can’t imagine,” I said evenly, not taking my eyes from Nico.

The moment seemed to stretch an eternity as I tried to think of what to say. I was never—never—tongue-tied, but Nico had succeeded in catching me so entirely off guard, I was at a literal loss for words.

Despite his smug smile and the glint in his azure eyes, Nico also looked equally taken aback by my presence.

We were both, apparently, in new territory.

I examined the situation more closely, trying to make sense of it all through my foggy brain. He certainly wasn’t the type Margot normally went for. Usually, she tried to make some ridiculous show of things by proving to Paulo—her wandering husband—that she could do whatever she wanted. She was more likely to show up on the arm of a butler than your run-of-the-mill handsome millionaire.

Did Nico know about Margot’s marital status?

“Tell me again, how you met?” I asked, hearing the uptick in my voice. Nico’s eyes narrowed at me, and not in an amicable way.

Margot flicked her bony wrist in the air as though trying to recall some detail. A row of diamond bracelets caught the sun, nearly blinding me. Before she spoke, Nico took her hand and stepped in.

“We were both at the same bar, sharing a nightcap. We got to chatting. Then went for a coffee. The rest is, as you Americans say, history. You know the story well, I’m sure.”

Margot blushed as though Nico wasn't one of a slew of affairs she'd paraded across Riviera yachts.

"I see. How fortuitous," I said.

"Stella!" I turned to see Hugo bellowing across the deck, waving his hands at me to come like I was a well-trained dog. I sighed. He was really grating on me. But I didn't let it show. I smiled sweetly to Margot, then offered Nico a more cynical smile.

"Please, excuse me. Business calls."

Chapter Five



I waited for the right moment to approach Nico again—the right moment being after I’d sufficiently put enough champagne in my system to loosen my nerves.

Finding him at the far end of the deck alone, staring out into the sparkling panorama of the Riviera, I walked over, champagne flute in hand.

“What are you doing here?” I asked briskly. My hangover was suddenly gone, replaced by thrumming anxiety.

“Same as you, it would seem. Enjoying the rejuvenation of La Côte d’Azur.”

I scowled through my oversized sunglasses. “You know what I mean. How do you happen to be aboard this particular yacht?”

Nico looked around curiously. “Is it your yacht?”

I blinked. “What? No, obviously not.”

“Then I suppose I could ask you the same thing. What are you doing on this particular yacht?”

I was taken aback for a moment. I wasn’t exactly used to being outwitted on this front. I blamed the hangover and too much sun.

“I’m here with Hugo. Obviously.”

A small smile played at Nico’s lips. “Ah, Hugo. And that is your husband? The one you were so keen to get back to this morning. *From my bed.*” He leaned closer and whispered. His

words sent a shiver down my spine. I blushed and pushed him away.

“He’s not my husband. You already know that.”

“Then what is he? A boyfriend? A lover? A boss?” He wiggled his eyebrows.

I faltered. What was Hugo anymore? He didn’t seem to fit any of those descriptions. I was entirely too old for a boyfriend. And there was definitely no love between us.

“He’s not my boss, you ass. He’s my...companion. Yes, he’s my companion.”

“Ah,” Nico said, seeming to register in a moment the nature of my relationship with Hugo.

“But he does not make you happy.” It was a blanket statement, not a question.

“That’s presumptuous. And none of your business.”

“I have known many women like you, Stella,” I loved the way he said my name—his French accent wrapping around the syllables. Then I chided myself for enjoying it.

“And what kind of woman am I, then?” I snapped.

“The bored rich girl.”

I wanted to laugh. His judge of character wasn’t so keen after all.

“If I were you, I wouldn’t be so quick to judge.” My eyes trailed the deck of the yacht. “So, what, you’re dating Margot?” I asked, nodding toward the socialite and trying not to include sharpness in my tone.

Nico smirked. “Dating. Such an American phrase.”

“Then what would you call it?”

He shrugged. “For today, she is my companion. Same as yours.”

“She better keep a better watch on you then,” I said.

“And what concern is it of yours? It’s not as though this morning you didn’t have to run after your own commitments.”

Nico arched an eyebrow in a way that could almost be described as coquettish if he were a woman.

My stomach twisted up with something. Was that—jealousy? Surely not. What business was it of mine who Nico was with? It wasn't like I had any room to talk. We had both been guilty of wild impropriety. Perhaps that lessened my feelings of guilt just a little. I was not alone in my trespasses.

“Ah, there you are.” We were interrupted by Margot's French accent as she sauntered toward us, swaying slightly in her kitten heels. She'd been at the bar more than once.

I plastered on my fake smile, the one I used with all high society, and stood straight.

“I was just getting to know your new friend here. He's quite an interesting fellow,” I said.

Margot giggled girlishly, dramatically pressing a hand to her chest, her diamond baubles catching in the glittering sunlight.

Margot leaned in again as though Nico couldn't hear her. “A catch, right? Let Paulo get wind of this one.” She ran a manicured hand down his well-toned arm.

I looked Nico over now, really taking him in. There was something more there, beneath a well-constructed façade. He wasn't just another wealthy man traipsing about the Riviera. No, there was something in him, something that reminded me of ... myself.

And then something clicked.

The subtle signs were there. I should've seen them before. He was meticulously dressed, but there were threads showing on his couture. I could see it now. Only a truly discerning eye could tell the difference. It was my job to know these things, and I kicked myself for having not noticed sooner. I blamed it on the champagne. In my line of work, I could not afford to waste time on those pretending at a game they did not know the rules to. A game they had no right to play.

“Nico, be a darling, will you, and grab me another glass, *s'il vous plaît*? This sun is draining me.” Margot extended her

empty flute to Nico.

He flashed me a look, and that did it. The gig was up. He knew it. I knew it. But what had he been playing at with me? Was he trying to con *me*?

“You know, I think I need a top-off as well. I’ll join you,” I said.

I followed him in silence until we reached the onboard bar.

As the bartender filled fresh flutes, I said casually, almost under my breath, “You’re not wealthy at all, are you?”

Nico’s smile wavered. “And what would make you say that?”

I ran my eyes down his frame. Tall drink of water indeed, I heard my grandmother’s voice.

“Call it a hunch. For one, your shoes are a few too many seasons past.”

Nico shrugged, unconcerned. “I like them. They’re classic. Money doesn’t have to mean wasteful.”

I tapped my lips.

“And I don’t see you traipsing about with a married woman unless you were after something.”

He raised a brow in mock surprise. “She’s married? *Mon Dieu*”

I folded my arms.

“Maybe I like a woman already spoken for. Fewer expectations.” He eyed me.

I rolled my eyes. “No, I think perhaps—” I paused. “I think perhaps you’re just like me.”

“A lightweight with poor taste in men?” Nico asked, taking his flute and pressing it to his lips as though to hide his expression. I glared.

“I think you know exactly what I’m saying. One who exchanges companionship for,” I flicked my hands out toward

the yacht, toward the shimmering panorama at the Riviera. “In exchange for a certain way of life.”

“You mean *une prostituée*?”

I held back a slap.

“That is not what I said.”

He grinned, so very amused with himself. “Don’t get so easily offended. We are all prostitutes to something. Don’t we all exchange our time and companionship for our livelihood?”

I considered this. I took no shame in what I did, and there were many women like me. But there were just as many who were eager to jump on the opportunity to judge me. Usually, other Americans. And that was part of the reason I operated here, rather than back in the U.S. Besides, was there anywhere in the world more pristine? Was there anywhere in the world filled with more billionaires per capita?

“Why is it so different from someone who tends bar or offers a museum tour? Everyone is just trading their time for a way to live,” Nico said.

“So, as I said, we’re not so different after all,” I said.

Nico shrugged. “Those are your words, not mine. Who’s to say that I don’t, as you put it, have wealth of my own? Perhaps I have different motives for spending time with Margot.”

I smirked. “And what motives might those be?”

“Perhaps I’m really a spy, and she holds deadly state secrets.”

I bobbed my head. “Reaching.”

“Perhaps she’s a marvelous lover.”

“You haven’t slept with her.”

“How do you know?”

“I know.”

He tapped his glass. “Maybe she suits my business needs. Perhaps it’s not about companionship, but rather professionalism.”

“I suppose you could be telling the truth.”

“Until you have proof otherwise, that’s my story,” Nico said cheekily.

But before I could continue my thoughts, Margot found us again.

“Nico! There you are. I am dying of thirst.”

Nico winked. “Until next time then, mademoiselle.”

Chapter Six



It had been a long day, and I was utterly spent. My feet ached from wearing heels all day on an unsteady boat. I was dehydrated, and my head throbbed from too much champagne—both all day and from last night. And Hugo was grating on me—even more so than usual. I sighed, realizing it was finally time to admit that my time with Hugo was probably dwindling. As much as I wasn't ready to let him go, I didn't want to keep him hanging on when my feelings had changed so drastically. Maybe we needed to have a candid conversation about the state of things. When was the last time we had even had a serious conversation?

When I first arrived in Monaco, I had been overwhelmed with insecurity and a lack of confidence. I certainly hadn't been born and bred to live in this world. I'd been raised continents and a lifetime away from all this glitz and glamour. The French Riviera was almost something of a joke back where I was from. It was the place of the Cannes Film Festival, where Leonardo DiCaprio hung out with Taylor Swift on his yacht (seemed logical in my head, anyway). It was a place of the heat-seeking wealthy and the elite of the elite. A tinsel star upon which I had no place.

But for some reason, I had gotten the confidence to come here. Ever since I had seen Grace Kelly woo Cary Grant, I had wanted just a taste. I had wanted just to stand on the sidelines, to look into the fishbowl of the beautiful people.

So, as a fresh-faced 24-year-old with a shiny UCLA graduate degree in hand, I had packed a backpack and bought

the cheapest redeye plane ticket I could find. Twenty-two hours later, after an all-night layover sleeping on a bench at the Frankfurt airport, I landed in Nice on the vibrant Côte d'Azur in the south of France.

I had nearly regretted my decision the moment I set foot on the Promenade des Anglais. Skinny and pale and dressed in a cheap Old Navy sundress, I didn't belong here among the stars. I sat on the rocky beach, drinking two-euro rosé from the bottle, watching Europeans file in and out of Belle Époque resorts and beaches crowded with bronzed sun worshipers. I figured maybe I'd head somewhere a little darker on the Eastern Bloc, where my drabness would blend in.

But then something most curious happened. That evening at sunset, someone had spoken to me at a lazy beach bar where I was nursing an overpriced cocktail. Not just anyone, but a millionaire. A bona fide *millionaire*, who said I looked new here and did I have any plans that next afternoon? Would I like to come to a party on his yacht?

I could hardly believe my luck. Obviously, someone was playing a joke on me. I looked around at the impossibly lean and tanned bikini-clad beauties on the arms of wealthy older men. I watched the Lamborghinis and Ferraris race down the main drag like giant Hot Wheels. I spotted other yachts dotting the glittering horizon, fading into the watercolor sky.

No, I didn't belong here. I was just a tourist, a spectator playing at life. I had no place on one of those yachts. But despite my misgivings, I had reluctantly agreed. Knowing this might be my one and only opportunity to get an inside look into this world of beauty and glamour.

He also might be a sex trafficking murderer who was going to sell me, but I figured I'd take my chances.

Anton wasn't a murderer, luckily. Just a party guy with a lot of beautiful friends. And what I found on that yacht came as quite a surprise to me. Everyone looked exactly the same. All the women were simply clones of one another. Too thin, too many injections, too much chisel and paint. There was nothing soft or natural about any of it. It was a far cry from the

languid French and Spanish beaches I'd seen in travel guides. These were not unfussy French women. No, these were women who were all carefully carved from the same block of marble. I realized then that while I had considered myself nothing special, my fresh-faced American looks stood out like a soft pearl in a sea of hard diamonds. No wonder I'd caught his eye.

I was also educated and fun. I had something to say—having not quite learned the art of aloofness just yet. And soon, it caught the eye of the *Who's Who* of the Riviera, quickly landing me in Nice's swankiest circles. For some reason, people liked having me around. At first, it was simply men looking for something new. But then, I quickly became friends with other women—socialites who were also looking for something new to add spice to their humdrum parties.

Looking at my reflection in the mirror now, I saw the subtle changes that had taken place over the past five years. I had become more polished, more refined. But it was as though someone had taken an old painting with good bones and simply refurbished it. I was still myself beneath a bit of touchup. I had promised myself I would never lose myself and become one of these clones. Although sometimes tempting, if I did that, I would lose my edge.

I imagined women everywhere were victims of comparison-itis. The world, Hollywood, social media, did their best to pit women against one another. I had seen now that this was not just an American thing, but a global phenomenon. And I, too, was just as guilty as I gazed upon the women who took painful measures to ensure that nothing fell out of place or jiggled. I also stayed exceptionally fit. But I was something more than someone who simply survived on champagne and cigarettes. Anyone could be skinny and vapid. I ran miles every day along the promenade and sculpted lean muscles in the gym. And most importantly, while I relied on the wealth of others, I didn't act like it. For anyone who met me, I seemed perfectly self-reliant. The playboys who funded my lifestyle were grateful to be in my presence.

I glanced over at Hugo where he stood against the window to the balcony, red-cheeked and glassy-eyed. He had clearly had a lot more to drink than I had today. He had also gotten far too much sun. Sigh. Wouldn't it be nice not to have to worry about the sun's deadly aging properties? I thought wryly.

"What do you say we order room service, get a bottle of something cold, and sit on the terrace?" I asked as I tossed my hat onto the armchair and stripped out of my sunbathing clothes. I stepped into the bathroom, contemplating a nice cool shower to wash off the day.

Hugo said nothing.

I popped my head out. "Hugo? Did you hear me?"

He stepped out onto the terrace and stared out at the ocean below. I tied a dressing gown around me and stepped out to join him.

"Hugo? Is everything all right?"

"You know, I have eyes everywhere," Hugo finally said.

I felt a small knot form in the pit of my stomach. "Eyes? What are you talking about?"

"I know where you were last night."

I tittered. "I don't know what you're talking about. I was here, with you."

He smiled thinly, not facing me. "You are an excellent liar most of the time, Stella. But on this, your guilt is seeping out of you as much as your hangover. Perhaps you're losing your touch."

My cheeks went flush. "Hugo—"

He interrupted me. "Don't bother, Stella."

"Please, let me just explain what happened."

He shook his head. "We both knew this was coming to an end, anyway. I've been bored with you for some time now."

I was taken aback. "Bored? With me?"

He chuckled low and condescendingly. “Is that so hard to imagine? That somebody isn’t enthralled with your so-called wit and charm? You overestimate yourself.”

Yes, I had detected his apathy growing, but he was just being cruel now. “I don’t understand. What exactly are you saying?”

“I’m saying, Stella, my darling, that I know you were hanging around with that young Frenchman last night. The one Margot Delacroix has on her payroll. I know you went to his room in a drunken state. There is security footage, so don’t bother trying to deny it.”

I didn’t.

“You either didn’t care if you were caught—perhaps you wanted to be caught as a way to exit this arrangement—or you simply got careless. I can’t imagine he pays as well as I do, though, so the joke’s on you.”

“Hugo—that’s not at all what happened. It’s not like that. I ___”

“Save it. I don’t really care what it was or wasn’t like. We’re through here. Pack your things. I’m checking out today, and so are you.”

My cheeks burned, but I just nodded.

“I’ll find my own way back to the flat then.”

Hugo laughed. “No, you won’t. You won’t be going back to the flat either.”

“Excuse me? That’s my home,” I said indignantly, thinking of the brilliant apartment on the cliffs with an expansive view of the entire Mediterranean.

“Is it? Do you pay the mortgage on it? I thought not. It’s my flat, dear. And you are no longer welcome there.”

I glared. “You can’t just toss me out. I have rights. Expectations of—”

“Yes, I most certainly can. You have expectations of nothing and zero rights. Read the fine print.”

“I have things there!”

“They will be sent to you. I’m not a take-back. You can keep what I’ve gifted you, but nothing more. I’ll take your credit cards now.” He extended his palm with a satisfied smile.

My entire body burned with shame and anger. He was tossing me out like trash? Who did he think he was? Oh, right. A billionaire. I didn’t have a lot of power here—he was right about that. Angrily, I walked inside and grabbed my handbag. I threw the cards on the ground at Hugo’s feet.

“Give me ten minutes, and I’ll be gone,” I snapped and slammed the terrace door.

Chapter Seven



My stomach was twisted up in barbed knots as I sat at the St. Mark's bar, nursing a chilled glass of rosé, wracking my brain, trying to figure out what to do next.

It wasn't like I was destitute. I had saved quite a bit of money over the past few years, carefully building a nice nest egg for my future—but it was supposed to be for my future. I wasn't ready for that yet. I had also set up my finances in such a way that most of my money was invested. There wasn't all that much available to me at the snap of my fingers. I also didn't have a high-limit credit card. I'd always purposely kept my limits low to keep from being tempted into excessive debt—an easy endeavor here on the Riviera with Dior at my fingertips. And now I suddenly found myself in the curious situation of not even having a place to live.

Homeless. Huh. New territory.

I did have some cash I could access—enough to find something to rent for a few weeks. But I needed a long-term plan. I wasn't too keen on dipping into my own assets to support my lifestyle, let alone provide me with a place to live.

I sighed. But what choice did I have at this point?

No, none of this had been in the plan. Stupid, I chided myself. I had been so, so stupid. Not to mention utterly careless. What had I been thinking by dropping my guard with Nico? Going up to his room? I never drank that much. Had I been so bored with Hugo that I couldn't hang in there just a little bit longer so I would never have to do any of this ever

again? So that I could live life on my own terms? Stupid, stupid girl, Stella. I drained the rest of my wine.

As it stood, my immediate choices were limited until I could figure out a plan. I would simply just have to put myself up at a hotel for the foreseeable future until I could find a new living situation. In the past, I had kept my own modest residence for situations just like this. But I had quickly found that it seemed to be a complete waste of thousands of euros every month. Why should I pay for my own place when my current companion was always too eager to foot the bill? They never wanted to actually live with me. They simply wanted to provide me with a nice flat and a comfortable life. It helped assuage some of the guilt of not wanting to commit to me. They weren't interested in marriage, but they would provide me with a comfortable home. As if I wanted anything more.

But now...

I was settling into my despair and debating another glass of rosé when I heard a familiar voice beside me. I looked up to see Nico standing there, his usual smug expression having melted into something that mimicked concern.

I blinked, then glared. "What do you want?"

"Is this seat taken?" he asked. Everything in his velvety French accent sounded so much more seductive than intended.

"It's a free country," I said. Or was it? I wasn't sure anymore.

He sat beside me.

"A note for your thoughts?" he said, mimicking the American phrase.

"You can't possibly afford me."

"So I've heard. But then again, I might be willing to try. Why are you so down and drinking alone at this hour?"

I laughed incredulously, then signaled the bartender for another glass. Momentarily, it was refilled, just a little fuller this time. I took a heavy swallow, then turned to face Nico.

“Because of you, I now find myself in the precarious position of not having a place to live.”

Nico cocked a thick, black eyebrow. What was dark and sexy last night now just looked like a dead caterpillar across his forehead. I wondered if I could peel it off.

“Because of me? I can’t imagine how I have had such power over your life in the short forty-eight hours I have known you.”

I said nothing. True, it wasn’t entirely Nico’s fault. I had my own stupidity to blame. But still, I much preferred having someone to share the burden.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, shaking my head. “If you don’t mind, I would just rather be alone right now. I have some things to sort through.”

A life to reimagine, I thought. I stared into the beautiful blush shade of my wine. The color of the Riviera sunset.

“Let me guess—your companion has called things off,” Nico said.

“Don’t need to sound so smug about it.”

“I don’t take pride in your pain, contrary to what you might think.”

I said nothing for a moment. Nico signaled the bartender for a drink of his own.

“For what it’s worth, he’s a fool. I can’t imagine a good reason why he would let you go,” Nico said.

I turned to him and laughed. “He let me go because of you, my new dear friend. Because he saw us go up to your room together.”

“Is that so?” Nico said without inflection. “That was rather careless of us, wasn’t it? But did you explain that nothing happened? That you were simply out of your wits on champagne, and I simply gave you a safe place to stay?”

I smirked. “You obviously don’t know men like Hugo. They aren’t interested in explanations or the truth. They only

want to understand their own perception of things.”

And that, I knew, was the real rub. Had Hugo still been infatuated with me, he would've let the trespass slip. Because, to my point, Hugo would believe what Hugo wanted to believe. And his ego would not allow him to entertain the idea that his beloved would prefer the company of anyone else should he still be interested in possessing that beloved. No, I realized now, Hugo was all too eager for an excuse to cast me aside—an excuse that made him come out in the right and made me look like the careless harlot. It was frustrating and embarrassing. He had been done with me before I was ready. That never happened to me. Never. I was always the one to leave the trail of broken hearts. Was I losing my touch? I was getting older, but I was only twenty-eight—wait, now twenty-nine. But it wasn't like I was approaching middle age with any gusto. In fact, I could easily pass for someone twenty-two if I wanted to.

I realized Nico was staring at me intently.

“What?” I snapped, a little more sharply than I intended.

He shook his head. “It's nothing. I'm just sorry for any trouble I've caused you. Perhaps I can make it up to you?”

I snickered. “I highly doubt that. But as it stands, I have nowhere to live and no cash. So, unless you have a spare apartment lying around, I need to get back to it.” It wasn't entirely true, but I preferred the drama of the explanation.

“I understand. Well, will you at least allow me to pick up the tab for these drinks?”

I tilted my head and studied him. I shrugged apathetically. “Yes, thank you. It's the least you can do.”

He raised his glass to me. “A toast to better days?”

I sighed, but complied. We clinked and drank. It's going to be alright, Stella. You've been in far worse predicaments than this. If you can pull yourself out of Whiskey Lake, Texas, you can figure out this little mess.

I was just starting to actually feel better about things when an all-too-familiar voice caught my attention. I dared a quick glance behind me and spotted Hugo stepping through the doors of the lounge. I winced. Dammit.

I snapped back around and breathed.

“I’m sorry, but I better be off,” I said to Nico. “Thanks for the drink.” I slammed back the remainder of my wine and jumped up.

“So soon?” But as Nico said it, his eyes caught sight of Hugo, and the situation registered. He, too, turned his gaze away. I didn’t see a way to slip out unnoticed. This was going to be awkward. So I might as well face the awkward head-on.

It didn’t take Hugo long to spot us there.

“You have some nerve!” Hugo’s baritone bellowed out across the small space. I winced. Then I sighed and pulled myself upright. The best course of action was just to slip out and avoid further confrontation.

“Hugo. I was just leaving.”

“You should have been gone hours ago! You think I will be paying this bar tab?” He mocked me. My cheeks burned.

“Of course not. I will cover my own tab.” I tried to keep my smile tight.

Hugo snorted incredulously. “That’s a first.”

“Actually, I will be taking care of the lady today,” Nico stepped forward. I blanched. No, sit down! This was not going to go well.

Hugo’s thick eyebrows went up. “And who are—Ah. I recognize you. You’re the scheming cad she’s taken up with, I see. Does Margot Delacroix know you’re here with my girl?”

If Nico found Hugo’s silly words offensive, it didn’t show.

“Thought she wasn’t your girl anymore?” Nico said.

“Let’s all just call it a day, shall we?” I intervened. This wasn’t going to end well for anyone.

But two large men with even larger egos were not to be deterred. They stepped closer, staring each other down like dogs in a backwood junkyard.

“And who do you think you are? Coming in here?” Hugo snapped, flailing his hand out dramatically.

Nico smirked. “Someone who will be a lot kinder to the lady, it would seem.”

I saw the anger flash in Hugo’s eyes. It wasn’t that he prided himself on holding kindness as a particular virtue, but he loathed being challenged on any virtue by anyone. Truth or not.

“Say that again, little man,” Hugo growled, comically because, while he was leaner, Nico was nearly as tall. Nico took a step even closer, the two men standing toe-to-toe. God, the melodrama of Mediterranean men, I thought.

“Gladly, you arrogant ass,” Nico spat.

Before I could interfere anymore, Nico was stumbling back, clutching his jaw. Hugo’s fists pulsed, and his cheeks flared crimson.

“Hugo!” I shouted, fury and confusion raging in me. I had never seen Hugo so outraged. He was always so controlled.

“*Qu’est-ce qui se passe ici?*” someone shouted. Voices and footsteps scurried in toward the squabble. In an instant, two security guards and a man who I assumed was the hotel manager were at their side. The security guards grabbed hold of Hugo, keeping him in place, while the manager helped steady Nico.

“Nico? What is going on here?” The manager asked, eyes darting about frantically. I didn’t imagine they got a lot of bar fights at the St. Marks.

Nico rubbed his jaw. “Nothing, sir. Misunderstanding.”

I furrowed my brow as best as the Botox would allow. Sir? My eyes darted about the players on the scene.

“Are you all right then?” The manager addressed Nico again. Nico nodded.

“*Je vais bien.*” Nico glared at Hugo, who met his stare with equal intensity.

The manager nodded and turned toward Hugo. “Monsieur Revere? Are you all right?”

Hugo’s chest was heaving, and his face was red, but he was slowly regaining his composure.

“*Je vais bien.* Just a misunderstanding between adults,” Hugo said.

The manager nodded. “Bien. Well then, regardless of who’s at fault, we can’t have you causing a scene with the guests, Nico. You should go home for today.”

Nico nodded. “My apologies, sir. Things escalated.”

I was now royally confused.

“Nico? What’s going on?” I said. “Why are you speaking to the hotel manager as though you work for him?” I heard the haughtiness in my tone, but couldn’t hold back. The manager clearly deserved it, talking down to him like that.

Nico said nothing for a moment. The manager blinked, confused, then laughed.

“Because he does work for me, mademoiselle. I see Nicolas has been spinning lies. Yet again. Nico, you are a fabulous barman, but you have been warned. I’m placing you on a temporary suspension.”

I choked on my own spit. “Barman?”

Nico looked apologetic and shrugged.

Hugo, meanwhile, roared with laughter. My cheeks burned with utter humiliation as the gravity of my mistake settled in. A bartender. Not a wealthy Riviera playboy. Not even my equal. Just a run-of-the-mill bartender with a good smile and an easy lie on his tongue. I had never been so mortified in my life. I was in absolute horror, wanting to run from the hotel. But I kept my head high and my jaw tight.

“Well then. I will let you all sort out this mess on your own. I am quite done with St. Mark’s,” I said and nearly ran

out of the lounge before I could burst into tears.

Chapter Eight



“Stella! Wait!” I heard Nico’s voice behind me, but I kept walking, my shame burning a trail like a wildfire through me. I was afraid if I saw his face, I might punch it.

“Stella, please!” His voice grew louder as his footsteps gained on me while I hurried as fast as I could in my wedge heels along the promenade.

Finally, he grabbed my arm. I spun around in a fury.

“What?” I snapped.

“I’m so sorry, Stella.”

I laughed incredulously. “Sure, that’s rich. Unlike you.”

He looked half ashamed, half amused.

“Can I at least help you?” Nico said.

“I think you’ve done quite enough, bartender.”

“C’mon, don’t you think you’re being a little unfair?”

I crossed my arms angrily. “You lied to me.”

“No, I didn’t, actually. You never asked directly if I was a barman at the hotel. You never asked me at all what I did for a living at all. You made assumptions, and I simply declined to volunteer any information on the subject.”

“Critical information!”

He looked amused and crossed his arms. “Critical, why? Because you would have never spoken to me if you knew I was a barman?”

I glared.

“Don’t be so haughty. You came willingly to my hotel room,” Nico said.

“Because you got me sloppy drunk!”

“Don’t blame that on me. I didn’t force it down your throat.”

God, he was infuriating! “And that’s another thing. How did you have a room at the hotel?”

Nico averted his eyes out toward the water. “I, uh, just used a key for an unoccupied suite. The head of housekeeping is a...a friend.”

I groaned and shook my head. “I’m sure she is.” God, I was so stupid! How many women had he done that with? I suddenly felt so used, so icky.

“Unbelievable,” I muttered.

“Nothing happened, Stella. You know that. And it’s not like I was the only one being less than honest. You were only entertaining me because you thought I was rich. You knew Hugo was getting sick of you, so you were looking for your next mark.” I started to argue, but he held up his hand. “I’ve known plenty of women like you, Stella. You’re not my first hustler.”

I guffawed. “I am not a hustler. I am simply a woman of business.”

He laughed. “The business of fraud.”

“I never defrauded anyone. Hugo knew exactly who I was. Our arrangement was quite clear, I will have you know.”

“So, then you are a prostitute.”

My jaw dropped. And before I could think or stop myself from reacting, I slapped him. Hard.

He snapped back, but instead of looking angry, he smiled regretfully. “Alright. You can have that one. I deserved it.”

“You most certainly did.”

“Let me make it up to you,” Nico said.

I glared at him. “Can’t imagine how you think you can do that at this point. I think you’ve done enough.”

“You said you have nowhere to stay, right?”

I snorted a laugh. “If you think I’m going to stay with you, you’re delusional.”

He grinned. “Wouldn’t dream of it. Let me put you up in a hotel, at least. At least until you figure out what’s next.”

“I’m not staying in some youth hostel.”

His thin smile masked any hurt feelings at my jab. “I’m sure we can find you suitable accommodations. Name your poison. Anywhere you like.”

“Anywhere?” I said incredulously. This was Monte Carlo—did he realize what he was signing up for?

“Anywhere.”

I folded my arms and considered. I went through the list of hotels I knew in the area. There had to be one nicer than St. Mark’s. Finally, I remembered one.

“Fine. I’ll take a room at the Excalibur.”

I saw the brief calculation in his eyes before he shrugged nonchalantly. “The Excalibur it is.” Nico pulled out his phone and did a quick search. Then he placed the call, going off in rapid-fire French that I had trouble understanding despite my relative fluency.

After a moment, he hung up and looked at me with a satisfied smile. “Your suite awaits.”

Chapter Nine



The Excalibur was indeed finer than St. Mark's in many respects. While St. Mark's was old and stuffy—a relic of a time when stodgy men with round bellies and cigars ruled the world (didn't they still?), the Excalibur was stark and modern in shades of chrome and azure as clear as the water outside. I marched up to the reception desk with Nico at my heels.

“Bonjour. Bienvenue à hotel Excalibur.” The desk receptionist said with a smile.

Nico stepped forward and spoke in French. “Bonjour. I have reserved a room. Under Nico Arquette.”

The painfully thin receptionist, whose nametag read Ines, nodded and typed a few strokes into her computer. She nodded.

“Oui. I have it here. The palace suite. For two nights?”

I flashed him a withering look. Nico's expression wavered. “Is it possible to extend the reservation for three—”

I ed. “Four nights?”

Ines typed in a few more things, then nodded. “Oui. That is possible. Two guests, then? I will need your passports.”

I snickered. “No, we will need separate rooms.”

“I don't need to stay here, Stella. I have a flat—”

“You would leave me here alone after what happened?” I batted my long lash extensions. Ines stared at us curiously, as

though eagerly awaiting more of the drama to unfold. Nico cleared his throat.

“Yes, um, of course. Two rooms.”

Ines searched again. “Will you also require a suite? And for four days?”

“I don’t need a suite,” Nico said. I started to protest, but he shot me a withering glare that said, *don’t push it anymore*. I backed down, hiding my smile.

Ines typed away for another minute. “Alright, all done. I will need a credit card to secure the room.” Nico’s hand looked like it was made of lead as he reached for his wallet. I almost felt sorry for him. Almost. He gently, slowly, slid out his credit card and set it on the desk. In an instant, Ines whisked it away and had secured what was likely thousands of euros on his card.

Ines offered a tight smile as she slid over the keys and room numbers.

“The lift is right there, past the lounge. You will need your keys to access the floor. Will there be anything else?” She batted her lashes in a way that felt sarcastic to me.

“Thank you, no,” I said just as sardonically. I plucked up my key. “Oh, actually, yes, one more thing. Do you have a boutique? I’m in need of a few items.”

“Oui, mademoiselle. To the left there.”

“Wonderful. I assume you take room charges?” I flashed Nico a combative look. Your move, buddy. He kept a straight face.

“Well, I’m exhausted. I’ll see you later.” I turned my back on Nico and rushed to the elevator as quickly as I could manage without being gauche.

Nico scrambled after me. “Wait up there.”

“Need something?”

“That’s all? Not even a thank you?”

I blinked. “A thank you? For what?”

He snickered. “You really want to play like that?”

“The way I see it, you were simply repaying a debt. Should you thank someone for paying what’s owed?”

He folded his arms and leaned against the elevator door. “Is that really how you see it?”

“The way I see it is that I wouldn’t be in this mess if it weren’t for you.”

“I didn’t force you to drink your weight in champagne and pass out in a stranger’s bed. That’s on you.”

“You lied about who you were.”

“We’ve been through this.”

I folded my arms. “You misled me.”

“So basically, you got drunk and went to my room because you thought I was a millionaire. Somehow, that justifies your mistakes?”

I opened my mouth to argue, but couldn’t quite find the right words.

“Well—no. I just—”

“You messed up at your own game, Stella. Broke your own rules, and now you want to blame me.”

I had the urge to slap him again but figured that while one might be acceptable, more than once was bordering on unhinged. Instead, I jabbed my finger into the elevator button repeatedly until the carriage arrived. I stepped in.

“This one’s full.” I pushed the up button and watched Nico’s face fade behind the closing doors.

“Call me,” he called out teasingly as the carriage doors closed.

Chapter Ten



Once settled into my room, I quickly found the minibar. I popped the cork on a bottle of chilled champagne and slipped off my clothes, tossing a plush robe over my tanned frame. I stepped onto the terrace and swigged right from the bottle. Screw it. No one was around to see my crumbling facade. I'd let my Texas show in peace.

I stared out at the glittering cerulean landscape in front of me. Even after five years on the Riviera, it hadn't lost its luster for me. It was just as remarkable as the day I stepped off the plane in Nice and laid eyes on the paradise where dreams and fortunes could fall or be made.

I'd had nothing then. Just a passport and a svelte figure that could work a bikini as well as anyone. That, and a whole lot of ambition and charm. I'd had fantasies of basking in the glowing sun on the arm of some dashing American entrepreneur, a la Cary Grant. What I found, of course, were fewer American entrepreneurs and a lot more Euro-trash and Russian call girls.

I swigged the champagne and contemplated my situation. I needed to devise a plan, and quickly. I tried to mentally calculate my assets. I'd built a little nest egg, but it wasn't enough yet to fully retire the way I'd planned. I still figured I was years away from my goal of truly being free. I closed my eyes and envisioned my hilltop villa with sweeping views. Peace, serenity, the smell of fresh citrus.

I had hoped Hugo might be my final project. I swigged again. While I was good at what I did, building up trust took

time. Men like Hugo didn't just throw money instantly at me. I had to lure them in with my charm. Get them to drop their guard and open their wallets freely. It wasn't just my future on the line here. Josie was depending on me. Her stability was still too fresh. I wasn't going to let her end up like our mom if it was the last thing I did. She could never go back to Whiskey Lake.

I stared out at the beach and watched a young couple splashing on the shore. They were lean and tan, hair wild and blowing in the wind. Their eyes barely left each other, and their hands stayed clasped. I smiled at the sight of what seemed like pure, unadulterated love. Then I felt the gesture melt from my face. Maybe it was plain old jealousy, but I felt a pang of resentment run through me. And then anger. Didn't they know love didn't last? How long would it take for him to stray to someone younger? Or for their money to run out and the stress to settle in? Life wasn't a fairy tale, and I resented anyone who pretended otherwise. It offended every truth I'd convinced myself of these past years.

There was a knock on my hotel door then. Housekeeping? Odd hour for it. I picked up my bottle of champagne and secured my robe around me. I opened the door and nearly slammed it shut just as quickly when I saw Nico's smug grin staring back at me.

"Go away."

"Stella, come on."

"How did you even find me?"

"I saw the number on your room key. We're on the same floor."

"Go. Away."

I started to close the door without a word. He sprung his hand out to stop me.

"Oh, come now. You're not still bitter, are you? Look at this suite! You can't possibly ask for anything more."

I resisted the urge to bite my lip—a childhood habit I'd all but beaten into submission. Only my livelihood back, I

thought. But he was right. He'd more than paid for his mistake, I supposed. What had he really done, after all? Hadn't I actually been the guilty party, if for nothing more than my terrible misjudgment of character? I sighed and opened the door.

"Fine. Come in for a drink. I'm bored anyway."

I stepped aside and opened the entry.

He stepped through. His eyes then ran over me curiously, and only then did I remember I was wearing nothing but a robe and clutching a half-drunk bottle of champagne.

"I like the way you party," he said with a grin.

"Let me, um, put something on. Make yourself comfortable." I slipped into a pair of black leggings and a loose cotton tee shirt, then found two glasses on the minibar and filled them up. I found Nico on the terrace.

"Well, santé," I said, handing him his glass.

"And what are we toasting to?" Nico asked.

I sighed. "Figuring out life, I guess."

"The eternal quest." He took a generous sip. "I am sorry I ruined your game."

I drank and bobbed my head. "It's all right. It's not entirely your fault. I suppose, with some reflection, I can admit I'm equally to blame."

"How big of you."

"Watch it. My forgiveness is green. It could still turn."

He splayed his hands in supplication.

"What will you do now?" Nico asked.

"Move on. Find a place to live, at least temporarily. And then—"

"Find your next mark?"

I snapped around and glared. "Don't pretend like you know me."

“I wouldn’t presume anyone really knows you.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

Nico shrugged and finished his champagne. “Shall we order more?”

I eyed him suspiciously as though it might be a trick.

“In a moment. Finish your thoughts.”

“I only mean that it would seem you keep your true self close to the heart. Suppose I don’t blame you. Probably a necessity in your line of work.”

“Again, with the *line of work* nonsense. What is it exactly that you think I do, Nico?”

“You’re a hustler, my dear. A very good one indeed, it seems. But you are, in fact, a hustler.”

I finished my glass. “And you’re any different?”

“I never said I was. Although one could argue we are very different. I may enjoy the occasional company of a bored heiress, but I keep my own residence and accounts. I simply enjoy some added benefits now and again. Hardly makes me a con man.”

“And what were you hoping to gain from me, then?”

He shrugged. “A few footed dinners, perhaps. Nothing much. Not the platinum card with endless limits you were hoping from me.”

I was annoyed that I had been so blind and transparent. When had I lost my edge?

“I don’t judge you, you know,” Nico went on.

I snickered. “No? Sure seems like that’s all you do.”

“On the contrary. I admire you. This world isn’t always an easy place for women. Men have long taken advantage of your sex. Why not return the favor?”

My brow went up. “You make it sound like I’m just a regular gold-digger.”

“Aren’t you, though? But it seems to me you only con the willing and deserving. No shame in that at all if you deign to ask my humble opinion.”

I felt my cheeks redden. I shook off the feeling. “Well, I didn’t ask. How about you make yourself useful and call for that champagne?”

Chapter Eleven



The second bottle of champagne led to another, and then suddenly I found myself with a mini-bar cocktail in hand, strolling along the hotel's private stretch of beach. Things were quiet. The lap of the waves and faint laughter trickling in from docked yachts created a soft evening melody. The full moon cast a shimmering spotlight on us.

I felt a wave of something I couldn't identify taking over. A comfort, like a warm blanket, spread through me, and I didn't think it was merely the wine. There was something about Nico that softened my edge, brought my walls down just enough to penetrate the tender parts beneath my shell.

"I could get used to this," I said in jest. My words were a little lighter, my tongue looser.

"I'm pretty certain you are already used to it. This is your life, Stella," Nico said.

I laughed. "Who would have ever thought?"

Nico shot me a coy glance.

"What?" I said.

"Your accent. Something changed a little there."

I turned away. "Probably just the champagne."

"Where are you from, anyway?"

"America."

He rolled his eyes. "I know that. Which part?"

“Doesn’t matter. I haven’t been back there in a long time. You? You’re not from Monaco, are you?”

“*Non*. I grew up in France. Near the border. Just a little town with a boulangerie and a boat dock.”

I smiled at the image coming to mind. Maybe not unlike Whiskey Lake, but it seemed a lot quainter in French.

“How long have you been here?” Nico asked.

I exhaled, replaying the past five years in a slow reel in my mind. “Five years. Feels like a lifetime.”

He stopped and stared at me.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing. I am just trying to figure you out.”

I laughed and shook my head. “Don’t bother. There’s nothing to unravel here.”

“I highly doubt that. I think the Stella before me now, in all her glory, is a long way from who she used to be.”

The words pricked at something in me, but I blinked it back. Nope. I was not going to play this get-to-know-Stella game.

“What about you?” I lobbed the ball back to him. “How long have you been in this glittering paradise?”

He smiled, somewhat nostalgically. “Three years now.”

“And have you been at the St. Mark’s the entire time? Hustling unsuspecting rich girls?”

He grinned. “More or less.”

“It’s time you up your game, then.”

He grinned. “I suppose I need lessons from the best.”

I shook my head playfully, then paused. “All right.” I pressed a finger to my lips. “For a start, you are now Nicolas LeClair, French Architect.”

Nico raised his brow with an amused expression.

“Well, you can’t very well tell people you’re just a bartender from a French border town, can you?”

“Oui, or non. But I don’t know the first thing about architecture.”

I waved away his concerns. “Neither does anyone else. It’s an easy sell.”

Nico flubbed his lips. “If the lady says.”

“She does. This world is full of business tycoons and heirs. Something with a creative flair will get you through doors. They won’t expect the same pedigree. Let’s see. You attended ETH Zurich - Swiss Federal Institute of Technology and studied under the renowned—” I rotated my hand, thinking. “—Hans Stefan. Just spend some time acquainting yourself with some famous buildings, and that’s all you’ll need to know to sell yourself.”

Nico made a show of writing notes in an invisible book. I rolled my eyes but laughed.

We started walking again. The conversation was too easy with Nico. And that terrified me. But then part of me felt a wave of relief to finally just be able to be. It had been so long since I’d felt my genuine self in front of another person. I’d been play-acting for so long—I wasn’t even sure I knew my true self anymore. But on that beach, swaying barefoot in the sand from too many bubbles, I was starting to remember.

A thin veil of moonlight spread across the beach. The vast blue ocean, now a velvet navy in the night, reflected the dancing stars above. It was a tableau crafted specifically for clandestine romance. If only that’s what this was. We walked along the sandy shoreline, trying to keep our balance in the wake of a little too much champagne and the suction of warm sand. I stumbled slightly, and Nico grabbed my arm to hold me up. At the touch of him, a jolt of something went through me. Was that the electric pulse of chemistry romance books always touted?

My instinct was to pull away, but I did nothing. I stood frozen in the moonlight as though his touch paralyzed me,

allowing myself to feel. To be present. I finally mustered the courage to look up and met his gaze. He stared back at me with such vigor that shivers coiled around my spine. I longed to squirm under the intensity of his gaze, but I held steadfast, invisible bonds keeping me in my place. Finally, his head tilted, and he leaned forward. And before I could think, could breathe, could do anything to stop him, his mouth was on mine. I stumbled back slightly and then fell into him. I met his kiss with fervency.

Then I remembered myself. I snapped to attention and forced myself to pull from his embrace. No. This wasn't something I could do.

Nico had a slight smile tickling his mouth. I could not bear to stare at it. I did not understand what exactly was running through my mind, coursing through my veins at that moment, but I knew it terrified me. And I knew I needed to make it stop.

“Stella,” he started.

I shook my head. “No. Don't.”

Despite my haze and imbalance, I turned and bolted up the beach toward the hotel without saying a word. I did not look back. I did not stop until I was safely within my room, the door locked, and buried beneath the plush covers.

Chapter Twelve



Nico woke with a throbbing in his temple, thanks to a night of indulging in champagne and the Irish whiskey he had talked himself into when he returned to his room, confused and aroused. There was something about Stella that stirred things within him—deep things. Things he had not felt in a very long time. Perhaps he had never felt them quite like this.

He reached for a bottle of water and two paracetamol tablets. As he swallowed the pills and drained the bottle, he rubbed his temple. What exactly had happened last night? The evening had gone so well. They were having such a great time, and then she bolted like prey running from a predator.

But he wasn't the hunter. She was. She had undoubtedly decided he was unworthy prey. And she had chosen an inopportune time for his arousal to realize this.

Clearly, she had her sights set on bigger game. She had allowed herself to be distracted and to enjoy an evening of fun and carefree living, and who could blame her? Everyone needed that now and again. But at the end of the day, she had bigger fish to fry.

And honestly, didn't he as well? He couldn't really afford to waste his time and energy on someone like her if she was going to expect him to foot the bill. After all, that wasn't the game he played. It wasn't a game for which he could even afford the entry fee.

He found her utterly fascinating, though. He had encountered his fair share of social climbers and players in his

time in Monaco. He'd seen them come and go from across the globe on the arms of Russian billionaires, American tech investors, and stodgy British nobility. And they were usually all the same. Overly plucked and chiseled, with inflated lips and deadened eyes. Not much for conversation.

Stella was definitely in her own league. Accomplished, charming, and witty. Beautiful to boot. But beautiful in a way that was not overly processed. She didn't look like some plastic doll plucked from a shelf of identical mannequins. No, she seemed custom and expertly crafted. Everything about her intrigued him. And infuriated him.

But he had to focus. He had to worry about keeping his bar job first. That was his meal ticket in more ways than one. In addition to the steady salary, it was his best bet at meeting bored young rich girls looking for company. And right now, thanks to Stella, he was on very thin ice.

Chapter Thirteen



I woke the next morning groggy and disoriented. I wasn't exactly sure what I had been thinking last night. Sure, it had been invigorating to let my guard down a bit. Just to roll along the sand with somebody, laughing and forgetting about my predicament. But I chided myself now. While it might've felt nice to let my defenses down, it was dangerous for more than one reason. Firstly, I hardly knew this Nico guy. And what I did know of him was that he was a two-bit hustler, too quick with an easy line. He was used to slithering into wealthy women's beds and squeezing out a few bits of gold. He was a liar, too. He had tried to fool me, mistaking me for something other than what I was. And a man like that could never be trusted.

As I pulled myself together, taking a scalding hot shower, then sipping an espresso on the terrace, I considered what I had to do next. I had relaxed for one day, and one day was long enough. It was time to get back to work. I had been so close to my dream of financial freedom with Hugo, I could almost taste it. I couldn't give up now. I needed to put my best foot forward, put on my lipstick, and go find myself another companion. Josie's tuition was due soon.

I flung open my closet door and selected a shimmering amethyst number that hugged my sculpted curves in all the right places. The kind of thing only meant for the early days of the hunt. The type of dress meant to ensnare. I picked up my champagne-colored slingback heeled sandals. Then I added a few curls to my chestnut hair and ran poppy red across my lips and kohl around my eyes. Just enough to stand out but still

subtle enough for daytime—barely so. I batted and puckered. I was ready.

* * *

Daytime was better for making new connections. Sure, it was easy to score a bar tab once the sun had set on the Riviera, along with morality and good judgment, but that was only if I never planned on seeing them again. For a lasting connection, you needed to strike at just the right moment. People were a little more well-behaved when the sun still shone.

I sat at the beachside bar, sipping champagne, my eyes fully cloaked in oversized sunglasses but darting about to scan the scene. I casually pulled out a small notebook and began to jot down mindless thoughts.

As I suspected, it didn't take long for a well-heeled man to saunter up and stand a little too close. For some reason, men could not resist interrupting a woman who looked to be busy with something. It was as though feminine productivity short-circuited their wiring.

His cologne was overpowering, but he was good-looking enough with a cropped beard and broad shoulders. And thank God he wasn't sporting Speedo briefs. I figured he was worth entertaining to see if there was any potential.

I tilted my head and smiled in a welcome but casual greeting, then turned back to focus on my drink and my notebook.

“Is that your diary?” The man asked in heavily accented English. I thought it was French with a tinge of something else. French Albanian, perhaps?

I set down my pen and looked up. “Sort of. I was working on a novel.”

He smiled as though that were rather quaint. They always did. The ruse worked like clockwork every time.

“Full of romance, then?” He said as though he were the first to utter such a profound line.

I flashed a pouty smile. “Of course. But I found myself lacking inspiration.”

He took the bait easily, sliding into the seat beside me.

“You know what always inspires me? Champagne.” He signaled the bartender for a bottle.

Chapter Fourteen



Nico wasn't exactly sure what he had been expecting. Perhaps he had deluded himself into thinking Stella was more than met the eye, but when he saw her at the beach bar earlier that day, leaning into some overly furry thug with a blindingly gold watch, he knew. Maybe he'd known the truth about her from the first moment he spotted her in St. Mark's. She was just a gold digger, only out for her next mark. Maybe she wasn't even capable of real attachments. Every authentic look, every warm brush of a hand, it had all been a play, a show. She had spent years perfecting the art. And although he prided himself on being a strong judge of character, he had fallen for it, nonetheless. The player had been played by someone much better at the game.

Perhaps instead of being upset about the whole thing, he should be amused. Maybe he should take it as a precious lesson and a learning experience. He should take a page out of her book, perhaps. In fact, that was precisely what he was going to do.

He looked around the overpriced hotel room, one that was likely going to max out his limits, and laughed. What else could he do but laugh? He couldn't get a refund at this point, so he might as well stay the night and pretend he could afford it. He went into the polished bathroom, eyes sweeping over the marble and chrome fixtures, and helped himself to the overpriced toiletries. He freshened up, brushed his teeth, and ran some water through his hair. Then he threw on the only outfit he had with him and decided he would keep the bar company. If he was going to wallow in his own misery, then

he was at least going to do it from somewhere posh. What was one more overpriced drink on his credit card at this point?

The drinks lounge was empty when Nico entered. Fine by him, he thought. He wasn't exactly in the mood for company, constantly feeling the need to put on the show. It was too ingrained in him after so many years of tending bar. He moseyed up to a polished black lounge table next to the bar and ordered himself the cheapest rose on the menu. He settled in, clutching his glass and ready to drown his sorrows with as many drinks as his bank account would afford.

As he was diving into his second glass, he noticed another patron stepping in. A woman, perhaps on the older side of middle-aged but still incredibly well put together. The kind of graceful aging only money could buy. At first glance, he would've mistaken her for a woman much younger, but there was a maturity in her eyes and a confidence and grace in the way she carried herself that gave it away. He noted the understated luxury in her dress—a cream-colored sundress in velvety silk, finely tooled leather sandals, and a structured leather tote bag with no discernable label. Nothing flashy, everything chic.

He glanced up and caught her eye, offering her a simple smile. Nothing too flirty or inviting. He was undecided if he had it in him for company. She returned his gaze with an equally aloof smile. Her eyes flashed over him, and something sparked in them—something bordering on interest? Like a switch flipped on, Nico couldn't help himself, and he flashed her his best grin. Was it his imagination, or did she blush slightly? She settled into a table next to his, ordering herself a champagne cocktail.

“It's rather dead in here, isn't it?” She said in English after a moment. A Brit. Plummy and posh. At first, Nico pretended not to hear her and then perked up.

“Oh, did you say something to me?” He turned up his accent.

She smiled subtly, as though she knew the ruse. “Yes, I was simply remarking on the lack of patrons this evening. One

would think it would be more crowded this time of year.”

Nico glanced about and shrugged. “I suppose it’s early yet. The locals do not come out until much later, and it perhaps may be the hour when tourists are off having dinner.”

“Very astute. And by your accent, I can see that you are local?”

“Relatively so, yes. I am French. I grew up not far from here though. And I can tell by your accent that you are not local. English?”

She shrugged. “Londoner through and through. We are impossible to hide. Our accents are too well known.”

Nico shrugged apologetically. “Then I’m afraid your career as an international woman of mystery may be short-lived.”

She chuckled then. It was a nice lighthearted sound, like one plucking on the high notes of a harpsichord.

“Are you dining alone this evening, then?” Nico asked.

“If you can call champagne dining, then yes, I am.” She raised her glass toward his. He raised his in salute as well.

He shrugged. “We call that an acceptable dinner in France. But it does seem a shame to enjoy your meal alone. Perhaps you care for some company?”

She tilted her head and studied him with razor-sharp blue eyes. He was clearly her junior by nearly two decades. But they were just two lonely souls sitting in a bar by themselves. Why shouldn’t they enjoy conversation and company? He said as much to her.

“Well then, I suppose if it’s just for some conversation and company. I do wish to keep up my appearances as one who is constantly surrounded by the pleasures of others,” she said.

Nico laughed in earnest. Her wit was refreshing. Perhaps this evening was salvageable.

“Nico,” he said.

“Nico. Lady Eleanor Devry, at your service.”

“Lady?” Nico said, kissing her hand.

She shrugged apathetically. “Something I was born with, sadly.”

Nico chuckled. He rather liked Lady Eleanor.

The evening did, in fact, progress quite well. One drink turned into three, and soon they were both giddy and lighthearted from the alcohol and the absence of food, buoyed further by refreshing conversation. Her cheeks glowed rosy, smoothing out the subtle lines. Nico felt a restorative warmth spread in his belly. While he never completely turned off his charm, he did find himself relaxing a bit in the ease of this woman’s company. It was low stakes and low pressure. Dripping in diamonds and couture, he believed her title. She gave nothing away about why she was in Monte Carlo alone, but she didn’t strike him as lonely or insecure. She was confident in every gesture and word.

As the hour grew late, Eleanor showed the telltale signs of wanting to move on by pushing herself away from the table and yawning.

“Well, I’m afraid I’m not as young as I used to be. I do believe I must retire at a respectable hour,” she said, gently patting her chic platinum bob.

Nico stood from the table as well. “Yes, I think I’m with you. S’il vous plaît, allow me to walk you out.”

He signaled the barman for their check.

“Please, let me pick it up this time,” she said.

“No, I couldn’t possibly,” Nico said, pressing his hand to his heart dramatically.

“I insist.” She picked up her handbag and pulled out a thick black card. Nico made a mental note. He knew the caliber of people that carried that particular brand of currency.

“Well, I do appreciate it then,” Nico said. “Perhaps one day I can return the favor.”

She smiled, amused. “Perhaps.”

* * *

After paying the tab, Eleanor floated through the lounge with Nico trailing behind her designer kitten-heeled sandals. He was finally feeling uplifted from his disastrous encounter with Stella. It was amazing how one woman could so quickly upend his world. But that was in the past now.

So he thought.

As they passed the front desk on their way to the elevator, he heard his name.

“Monsieur Arquette!”

Merde. Nico pretended not to hear and picked up his pace, laughing loudly to drown out the call.

“Monsieur Arquette!”

He was tempted to ignore it—somehow knowing it signaled trouble—but he couldn’t make a scene in front of his new friend. He stopped and found a smile. He turned and flashed it pleasantly at the clerk.

“*Désolé*, I didn’t hear you. What can I do for you?” he said in French.

The clerk flashed an apologetic smile at Eleanor, then turned to Nico.

“Perhaps you would like to step to the side?”

Nico smiled through his nerves. “Oui. Of course. Excuse me, Eleanor, won’t you?”

Nico stepped into a small inlet with the hotel clerk.

“Well, what is it?” Nico tried to adopt the haughty tone he thought Stella would have used.

“It is your card, sir. It has been...declined.”

Nico’s stomach turned. “Surely not? The limit must be—” he swallowed. He had no idea what the limit was. He rarely had a reason to use it. But with rooms at 800 Euros a night,

plus the dinner tab and room service with Stella... His cheeks flushed as the calculations ran through his mind. *Merde* indeed. What was he going to do?

“Perhaps you could... run it again? There must be some mistake?” And perhaps he could get to his room and escape out the window before they caught him.

“We have tried, sir. Perhaps you can place another card down for the charges?”

Nico tried to smile as he reached for his billfold, hands trembling.

“Yes, of course. I must have another.” He took his time, as though hoping in those few seconds he would find a solution to this impossible situation.

And then he did.

“Oh, Nico, don’t be ridiculous!” He turned to see Eleanor at his side. “You know I told you to leave my card for the charges. You are always such a gentleman, even when it’s supposed to be on the company dime!” She shook her head lightly and laughed, then produced the black card again and handed it to the clerk.

“Please put any outstanding charges on this.”

The clerk looked unsure for a moment, then smiled gratefully with a slight bow. “Oui, Madame Devry.”

After he’d hurried off to the front, Nico turned to Eleanor. “Honestly, you shouldn’t have. The drinks tab is one thing, but—I don’t know what the mix-up was.”

She held up a hand glittering with diamonds. “Please. Allow me. We have all found ourselves in a jam of sorts. I am able to help, so I will.” She shrugged.

“*Merci beaucoup*. I will repay you.” But as Nico said the words, he couldn’t fathom how he would anytime soon. The bill had to be thousands of euros. He’d either have to find a good mark or work seven days a week for the rest of the year.

“I’ll make you a deal, Nico. You can make it up to me by accompanying me to something.”

He raised his eyebrows. “But of course. I would be happy to. A party?”

She smiled thinly, creasing the delicate skin around her sharp blue eyes. “I suppose they call it that. It’s some charity event for Le Musée Enfants. Dreadful affair, I imagine. Not that I have any issue with a children’s museum, just the so-called patrons who spend more on their baubles than on donations. Anyway, I find myself in need of a date.”

Relief engulfed Nico like a warm embrace. “I think I could manage that. When is it?”

“The night after tomorrow. Cocktail attire.”

“I would be happy to oblige.”

She nodded. “Good. I’ll sort out the details for you in the morning. Now, come to my room for a nightcap. I think I’ve found myself with a second wind.”

She winked cheekily as the elevator door opened with a ding.

Chapter Fifteen



Sitting at a table strewn with the remnants of a luxurious brunch and surrounded by what was supposedly my inner circle of friends, I forced myself to maintain a smile. The conversation at the table was all polite chatter and laughter, but the underlying current was clear to me—everyone had heard about my breakup with Hugo. And everyone was trying to decide where they stood on the matter. Alliances were fickle here, and everyone, especially this variety of women, trod lightly.

Gabriella, maybe my one only real friend, flashed me the occasional sympathetic glances beneath her long false lashes. I didn't have a lot of friends here in Monte Carlo. That wasn't anything new in my life. I had never been one to have a lot of close friendships, especially of the female variety. I think when you grow up in a troubled background, you tend to be guarded. You don't let people in very easily, less they see the mess and chaos behind the curtain. But Gabriella and I had bonded unexpectedly and quickly. We first met at a stuffy charity event Hugo had taken me to. Despite the artificiality of our surroundings, Gabi stood as out as something refreshingly authentic. At first glance, *authentic* might not be the word one would use to describe Gabriella. She had a top-rate plastic surgeon, and everything from her breast implants to her chiseled cheeks was artfully designed. But she owned it, and there was something welcomed about that. There was no false modesty, no showmanship about how she was just *naturally blessed*.

I never let my guard down around anyone, but I think there was something about her that pulled out some of my true self. She hailed from a well-to-do family in Milan, but moved to Monte Carlo after marrying a wealthy shipping tycoon. However, her marriage was short-lived, and soon she found herself alone in a foreign city. Albeit, quite a bit richer. She said she liked the glitter of the Riviera and decided to stay. She used her circumstances to build a name for herself in Monte Carlo, and she soon became a notable figure in the charity and fashion scene. While I wouldn't say I trusted her implicitly—I don't know if I will ever trust anyone like that—I think she was the closest thing to a friend I was ever going to have around here. She at least understood me. She had sensed early on that I might have come from humble beginnings but she was polite enough not to push the issue or inquire too deeply. But I think she knew that I had fought my way up and learned the ropes the hard way. I wasn't the only one around here to do that. But you never know who was guilty of such an origin story. No one here wanted to let you know that they weren't just born into the glitter. For being a naturally born rich girl, herself, Gabriella was surprisingly down to earth.

This brunch table was the last place I really wanted to be right then, but I had to save face. I also had to gauge the temperature of what our circle thought now that I was no longer with Hugo. It was pathetic and outdated, but unless you had serious clout of your own, your partner's status could be everything here in Monte Carlo. And yes, I'd worked hard to lift myself up, but the truly discerning of them could still sniff out my pedigree—or lack thereof—from across the Med. And the women at this table were as good as bloodhounds when it came to sniffing out imposters.

“So, Stella,” Celine finally said with a wicked little glint in her eye. A statuesque French blonde married to the CEO of some spirits conglomerate, she never passed up an opportunity to stir the pot. “What did happen between you and Hugo? We heard he broke things off.” She twirled the stem of her champagne cocktail between her thumb and forefinger, her cat eyes staring into me with thinly veiled delight.

She punctuated her question with a sip of her champagne. All eyes were on me. I shrugged, trying to keep my tone casual.

“We just wanted different things, I suppose,” I said, my fingers playing with the stem of my own champagne glass.

“That’s the understatement of the century,” Astrid—ten years removed from Norway—chimed in. She flashed me a wry look. “You wanted a lifestyle, and he wanted a woman who wouldn’t run up his credit card bill every month.”

A ripple of delicate laughter ran through the group at the thin joke. I offered up a small laugh.

“A good man is hard to find.” I raised my glass, and they all chuckled politely.

“That wasn’t the story I heard,” Alessandra said, almost under her breath.

Everyone’s head swiveled toward the Italian temptress. Her scarlet lips were curved into a knowing leer as she stared me down. All right, here we go, I thought. I had bet on Alessandra being the lead viper here. She was generally bored on any given day and could be nasty just for fun.

“Oh?” I said.

Alessandra casually sipped her champagne as though she weren’t contemplating whether or not to shatter my reputation. My heart thudded. Alessandra’s partner, Marco, was a close associate of Hugo’s. It was very likely she knew the details of what happened.

“I heard you were flirting with a bartender, and Hugo got so jealous he punched him,” Alessandra said.

I exhaled a sigh of relief and forced a laugh, as though it were all such a silly memory. It was a half-truth, but I came out much better in this version than in the full story.

“Oh, yes. Well, I wasn’t going to say anything. I know Hugo feels bad enough. You know how hotheaded he can be. All such a ridiculous thing, really.”

“You’re terrible, Stella. Flirting with a bartender!” Celine laughed.

“Oh, I wasn’t *flirting*. Just being friendly enough to coax out a stronger drink. But he was really cute.”

They all found this quite amusing and laughed along with me as though they’d also secretly committed the audacious sin of flirting with the staff. All but Alessandra, who continued to eye me with sharp daggers.

“So, where will you stay now that Hugo has kicked you out?” Alessandra continued. She artfully lit a cigarette.

My stomach twisted.

“He kicked you *out*?” Astrid said with horror. “You must have really been flirting.”

“It’s not like that,” I said quickly. “The truth is, we were on the verge of ending things anyway. We just—it was time I moved on. I couldn’t really stay living in his flat after we broke up, could we? But,” I said, my tone as light as I could muster. “I am looking for a new place to stay. Wouldn’t any of you lovely ladies have a spare room for a friend in need?”

The laughter around the table was half-hearted at best, punctuated by nervous glances and awkward shuffles. It was clear to me that other than Gabriella, none of these women considered me more than a passing acquaintance. But even she flashed me a strange look and I knew I never should have even suggested it. Suddenly, the view of the Monte Carlo harbor from the brunch terrace seemed much colder and far more lonely.

I laughed it off, raising my glass in a mock toast. “Just joking, of course. I’m staying at the Excalibur for now. Or maybe for forever. I wouldn’t trade that view for anywhere. It’s fabulous. Have you been?”

With another sip of champagne, I hid the growing lump in my throat.

“That’s why it’s always crucial to have a backup plan,” Celine said. Her words were met with a chorus of agreeing hums and nods.

“Well, it’s true that in our world, one can’t afford to put all one’s golden eggs in a single basket,” Astrid said.

“Do you have a backup plan?” Alessandra asked. I had never felt her acerbic tone more than today. It was as if she’d always despised me, and now that she no longer had to keep up the pretense for Marco and Hugo, she could release all her venom.

Feeling my cheeks warm up, I picked up a silver fork, pushing around an uneaten piece of croissant. It was tempting to devour it, but now more than ever, I couldn’t afford the carbs.

“I’m keeping my options open for now. There’s no rush to get into anything else so soon.”

“That’s the spirit, *mon amour*,” Celine said. She squeezed my hand gently. “Plenty of wealthy fish.”

I smiled thinly.

The light-hearted banter hung in the air, yet there was a sudden, palpable change in the atmosphere at the table. The chit-chat that had been vibrant before died down into sporadic bursts of forced mirth. The talk continued around me, but the chatter became just background noise. It was clear that they were not going to extend me any real assistance or sympathy. These women weren’t my friends—they were my competition. In the world of the Monaco elite, there was little room for friendship.

The conversation moved on to the next bit of gossip, and I let myself sink into my chair, sipping and letting the empty laughter wash over me. This, I realized, was the other side of the glamorous life I had chosen—fleeting friendships, superficial conversations, and a never-ending race for the next bigger, better thing.

* * *

“Don’t let them bother you,” Gabriella said as we lingered over the last of our brunch after the rest had departed. I wasn’t

in a rush to leave, seeing as I had nowhere to be. I didn't even really have a home. My days at the Excalibur were numbered. Depressing.

I shrugged lightly. "They don't. Opinions aren't hard to come by here, nor are they expensive."

Gabi stared at me until I wanted to swat her gaze away.

"What?" I said.

"I admire your strength, Stella. And your survival instinct. I always have. It's not easy to survive in this world, and you've done it flawlessly. In a way that has made you a target."

I eyed her suspiciously. "A target?"

"You know how jealous people can be. There are a lot of women who are excited to see you taken down a notch."

"Like Alessandra?"

Gabriella blew air from her lips. "That Napolitana harlot? You can never trust a Southern Italian. It's truth."

I half-laughed.

"Stella, it's gross that the world is still like that, but it is what it is. I don't make the rules."

"I'll be fine. Those women can't hurt me."

"Just don't linger too long in limbo. It makes you vulnerable. And obsolete."

I stared into the last traces of bubbles in my glass. "Obsolete." A death sentence around

Chapter Sixteen



The morning breeze rustled my hair. I tightened my favorite blue-patterned Hermes scarf under my chin as the petrol pump thumped. A puffy whipped-cream cloud cover and a late summer breeze conspired to make it a perfect day for a drive—a perfect day for solitary thoughts. “Solitary” seemed to be my go-to state in one form or another these days.

It wasn’t that I didn’t favor company. Like any person of normal faculties, I craved companionship, but it wasn’t always forthcoming for me. Like all strong people, I often felt a measure of loneliness. Despite having lived in Monaco for years, I remained a marginal outsider. And not just because I was a foreigner by citizenship—I was also a foreigner by class.

I concealed my pedigree—or lack thereof—quite well. I was unmistakably American, but I had rehearsed every line of my backstory to vague perfection, never giving away enough that a curious gossip might look me up to unravel my facade. But as I was reminded by the discerning stares at brunch, some people saw through me. I had to be careful. Now as not the time to falter.

Once all this was over, once I had enough, I would retire to that tiny village on the Italian Riviera I’d visited long ago—Mare Sereno. I remembered looking out my window at the vast expanse of the Ligurian Sea, the colorful hillside buildings leaning into one another, the emerald mountains to the east, and the unhurried town below. It was the kind of place where you woke to the rooster and the bustle of the

morning fish market with an ocean breeze rustling the lacy curtains. Where you could sip limoncello by a lapping shore, and both the chef and the fisherman responsible for your dinner would sit down with you, light a cigarette, and express curiosity about what brought you to their sleepy town. The kind of place where time slips away, and you might awaken a century later.

I could envision myself there, sipping wine, shucking oysters, and idling away the rest of my life.

I gently ran my manicured fingers along the pale blue paint of the Porsche 911 Carrera. My pulse quickened at the touch, as it had when I first set eyes on it three years prior—an apology gift from Alexander Braun, the German supermarket tycoon, after he “broke my heart.” (His words, not mine. I was, frankly, relieved to see him return to Berlin.) I rarely drove anywhere anymore, being accustomed to being chauffeured. But the allure of the open road occasionally called to me. At heart, I was still a Texas girl—the vast expanse of the open road forever beckoning. The coastline’s long stretch was even better. The feel of the salty breeze, the rumble of the engine—it was exhilarating.

From where the station sat atop the hillside, I could see the Mediterranean stretching over several countries. That was the beauty of Europe—numerous cultures and scenes combined into one picturesque tableau. I inhaled the salty air, taking in the surroundings. Perhaps I would indulge in some fragrant cheese, a bottle of rosé, and spend the afternoon alone, gazing out at the sea.

But then my eyes settled on a familiar figure, and my elation drained away. I quickly looked down as I filled my car’s tank. *Dammit*, I thought. Just when this was shaping up to be a perfect day.

The pump clicked, and I promptly swiped my credit card.

Despite my efforts at discretion, he approached, that self-satisfied look on his unfairly handsome face. He was so infuriating to look at.

“Fancy seeing you up here,” Nico remarked. “I didn’t think you ever ventured beyond the yacht or hotel.”

I responded with a sardonic smile. “And I didn’t think they let you out of the bar. Oh, wait, you were fired. I forgot.”

He sidestepped my barb, surveying my sports car appreciatively. “To which gentleman does this beauty belong? I presume he’s inside. How thoughtful of him to let you fuel up. Mind your nails, though.”

Frustration simmered within me, but being underestimated was nothing new. I merely cocked my head and smirked. “Who says it isn’t my car?”

He returned my smirk, amusement evident in his gaze. His eyes then scanned the area, presumably for my returning companion. Finding none, his attention settled back on me. I stood assertively, hip jutted out, tapping my beige leather driving shoe against the ground.

“Are you serious? This is your car?” Nico inquired.

“Is that so surprising?”

He chuckled and shook his head. Then, more somberly, he said, “On reflection, no. Nothing about you is surprising. I’ve learned to anticipate the unanticipated with you, Stella.”

My gaze darted about, pondering what vehicle he might’ve driven. I doubted he’d even own a car—too nomadic. My suspicions were confirmed when I spotted a gleaming black motorcycle. Reading the question in my eyes, Nico chuckled and shrugged.

“Oui, that’s mine. I relish the feel of the wind against my face when I ride,” he confessed, his eyes once again roving over my convertible. “It seems you do too, though with a touch more panache than me.”

“I suppose I’m not rugged enough for a motorcycle. Doesn’t quite work with heels,” I quipped.

“So, where are *we* headed then?” he teased.

“*We* aren’t headed anywhere. I’m driving up the coast.”

He lightly traced a finger over the car's paint. "Come on, take me for a spin. Show me exactly what you're made of, Stella."

I tried not to interpret the innuendo. And I wished he'd stop saying my name in *that* tone.

I shook my head. "I think not. I have matters to attend to."

"No, you don't."

I glared. "You're very presumptuous, you know? If one didn't know you, they might assume you were an arrogant ass."

"Oh, I don't think you need to know me to make that assumption."

"Go away. I'm busy." I reached for the car door.

He stood closer. Too close. "I don't think you are."

"And I think you're a little dense. Let me try again. I don't really feel like company. Especially not yours."

"I think you owe me."

I snorted a laugh. "And I think you're just like all men. Entitled."

"C'mon. I bet I know these roads better than you do. I can show you a few beautiful lookout places."

"I've lived on the Riviera for five years. I think I know my way around, thank you."

"No one will ever know it like a native." He flashed me a melting smile. "Don't worry so much. It's all platonic. I know where things stand."

My cheeks went a little warm as a tinge of guilt flickered in me. I realized how I'd just left him the other night without any explanation. Why was he even here?

"Are you just a glutton for punishment or what?"

He bobbed his head. "Yes. Probably that."

I rolled my eyes and sighed. "Fine. But don't get the interior muddy. I just washed her."

A smile tugged at his lips as he opened the passenger side door and slid in.

I always felt a certain invigoration when I was behind the wheel of my car. I felt the energy reverberating through my body, from my fingertips to my toes, spreading out to the tips of my hair. It was a thrill unlike anything else I could think of in life. I wasn't exactly an adrenaline junkie, but there was something about unleashing myself, all this power, on a winding open road. It was just me and my instincts and the fortunes before me. I could not predict. I could not control. I could only adapt.

But the variable here was having someone in the seat beside me. I never went out for drives like this with anyone else, ever.

The companions I was usually with weren't exactly the type to sit in the passenger seat. They weren't the type to sit in the driver's seat either, to be honest. They were the type to have somebody drive them around, whether in a town car, a private jet, or a yacht.

I saw Nico's fingers twitching, itching to grab hold of something as I sharply turned a corner. It gave me a small thrill to see his nervousness. It wasn't like I was sadistic, but I was a girl who liked to take people by surprise. And by the way his eyes were just a little too wide, I could tell Nico was definitely surprised.

I shifted gears as I slowed into a turn, then came out in a nice, cool coasting.

"Nico, my friend. You look a little nervous," I said with a smile.

He offered a weak smirk. "Only because you drive like a maniac."

"I like to think of myself as a budding Formula 1 driver."

Nico chuckled. "An American girl who likes F1 racing. What will they think of next?"

I flashed him a sultry look as the car settled into a straightaway cruise.

“I guess they broke the mold with me.”

I heard those words pouring from my mother’s mouth in a backwater twang. But somehow, coming from her lips, it was less of a compliment. I had constantly tested my mother’s country sensibilities. I was always too much, too big, too bold. Too much for the world to handle. I couldn’t get out of my hometown fast enough. The moment I graduated, I packed my rusty truck and headed West. A young woman with no direction, no idea where I fit in the world. I knew it wasn’t in some nowhere small town. In time I realized, maybe it wasn’t anywhere in the U.S. The Riviera had allowed me to reinvent myself. To be whoever I wanted to be.

And out here on the open road, I was exactly who I wanted to be.

“Hold on,” I said as I shifted again.

“Perhaps you should slow down,” Nico breathed, his accent growing thick with his discomfort.

I grinned. “Where’s the fun in that?” I let loose the gas on the next turn.

Standing at my favorite outlook, leaning against my car, was an entirely different experience with someone else by my side. Especially someone like Nico. At first, I felt a pang of irritation that he was with me. This was my happy place, my space of solace and peace where I could look at the world and dream whatever dreams I wanted without the interruption of some man blabbering on about his ideas and his opinions. Because sometimes, frankly, I couldn’t give a damn about what a man thought. But it was different with Nico, somehow. For starters, he said nothing. His dark eyes simply grazed the horizon. He, too, seemed lost in the tranquility of the place. Perhaps he could see what I saw—a slice of the world so stunning humans didn’t deserve it.

I felt a small crackle of energy between us. Something that pulled me, begging my body to lean in just a little. I suddenly longed to rest my head against his shoulder, like something from a predictable American romantic comedy. The ones I used to binge as a teenager. I shook my head and forced

myself to take a step in the opposite direction. I was just being stupid, caught up in what could be a romantic moment in a different life if we were two different people. Where we both didn't need to carve out a path for survival.

But as I pulled away, he seemed to lean a little closer to me. And like a magnetic force, I found my body shifting toward him again. And then, without thinking, my head found the smooth cradle of his shoulder. He was tall, but he had leaned down so he was in perfect alignment with me. Was that on purpose? I was reading too much into things. And then his fingers brushed my hair from my eyes. I closed them against the sensation. I bit my lower lip. I opened my eyes and turned to meet his gaze. For a moment, nothing else seemed to matter but that small space between us, traversing time and space and energy. I felt a quickening in my chest. A pull. A tightening. I leaned closer. His lips parted.

Abruptly, he pulled away. My body nearly folded in on itself in momentary shock. I stiffened and straightened.

I blinked.

Nico cleared his throat.

"I have a date I need to get to. I suppose we should be heading back," Nico said.

"A date?" I said, hearing an annoying squeak in my voice.

Nico shrugged. "Yes. I, uh, met someone. Last night. Someone I think would meet your standards should she be the opposite sex."

I blinked. "Oh," I said dumbly. What was I expecting? Did I think I could leave him in the dust and that he would chase me down and pine after me forevermore? Why would I even want that? I was being ridiculous.

"Well, that's good. I'm glad you have a social life." The words were flat, but I was lost for anything of substance. I picked up my keys. "I shall get you back before the sun sets."

Chapter Seventeen



I knew I shouldn't be so despondent. This wasn't the first time I had found myself without direction, but I was still filled with a sense of panic. Images of a life back in Whiskey Lake in our run-down one-bedroom apartment, mom working two jobs to make ends meet... I shook my head. Although I was a world away from that reality, the fear of somehow ending up back there followed me around like a shadow.

I was always different from my peers, feeling a pull toward the elegant and the grand. I'd spend hours at our little town library, getting lost in novels about far-off places and high society. These enchanting worlds filled me with a longing for more than my bleak reality.

My high school years were challenging, to say the least. I was a good student but never quite fit in. Despite my efforts at being likable and funny, I was tormented for my hand-me-down clothes and the "weird" dream of living in places like Monte Carlo. Poor and friendless, I buried myself in books and academics. The experience nurtured in me a strong resilience but also sowed the seeds of self-consciousness and a fear of showing my authentic self.

When I went off to UCLA on a full academic scholarship, I saw an opportunity to reinvent myself. I decided to major in Communications and Theater, fields that would allow me to build the skills I needed to create my own narrative. It was there that I learned to adopt a persona that could charm and enchant.

One night, while waitressing at an upscale Westwood lounge during my subsequent MBA program, I had a group of French actors at my table. One man looked up at me and said, “Why are you wasting your spark here among the city lights when you could shine among the diamonds of the Mediterranean?”

He might have been more than a little drunk, but it struck a chord in me. Why not me? Why not chase that dream I’d seen in a Hitchcock film so long ago?

After college, the decision to move to the Riviera came naturally. I’d been dreaming of it for so long, and I finally decided I had nothing to lose. The allure of the opulent lifestyle I’d dreamed of was too strong to resist. Besides, I couldn’t go back to Texas, not even for Josie. I was going to find a way to help Josie get out, too.

I really had hoped Hugo would be my last. I was tired of this. I didn’t think I really believed in love, but I certainly didn’t want to keep pretending. And maybe I was just growing up, but men like Hugo and his ilk were getting really exhausting.

I thought back on everyone I’d had the pleasure of knowing these past five years. It had been an interesting mix, to say the least. And I wasn’t sure I regretted any of it, despite the fact that things hadn’t worked out the way I’d hoped. They had all run their natural course, as things do. All relationships had a shelf life, after all. I was merely allowing things to unfold and crumble naturally.

It had been a ride, that’s for sure.

Back home in Texas, I knew people had money out there in the world. Hell, everyone had more money than we did, so even shopping at the Gap seemed like a luxury.

But there’s money, and then there’s *money*. Shortly after my arrival in France, after my first evening out on Anton-the-millionaires’ yacht (I quickly learned that millionaires are cute in the South of France because now I know *billionaires*), I landed a receptionist job at a small niche art gallery in Nice. Other than a moderate fluency in French and a warm

introduction from my new yacht-loving millionaire friend, I had no idea why they even hired me. I think it had something to do with a labor strike and not having to deal with paperwork. I was willing to work under the table, and I was young and desperate enough not to care about any consequences to my passport.

I didn't know much about classic art then, but being a contemporary gallery, that didn't matter much. I had an easy smile and worked hard—mostly because I absolutely loved being at work. I loved being surrounded by beautiful things and beautiful people.

One day, an art dealer from Paris walked through the doors—a man who would change my life. He was twenty years my senior, but still devilishly handsome with just a touch of salt creeping into the pepper. I'd never been wooed by an older man before, but his French charm was infectious and addictive. A dinner invitation turned into a year of education in the lifestyles of the French Riviera's elite. I fell head over heels for Pascal. I really did. And it was a valuable lesson. Pascal showered me with gifts, took me to glamorous parties and weekends away, and introduced me to so many beautiful people. Unbeknownst to me, Pascal was also very married and left me in a puddle on the floor when he eventually broke the news.

I knew then that love was a losing game. And if I was going to win, I was going to write my own rules.

When I met Luke, an American tech entrepreneur in Nice consulting with a French start-up, I took a different approach. There were no expectations of feelings, no emotions. Our three-month romance left me exhilarated and an entire couture wardrobe richer. Luke didn't care—he said he had nothing better to spend his money on.

Armed with a new attitude and a proper luxury makeover, I had a new lease on life. By the time I met Hugo Revere—billionaire investor—last year, I had perfected my art. But Hugo—he was something more. Something powerful. His status took me to a whole new level, the high society of Monte Carlo, Monaco. The most exclusive club in the world.

My phone buzzed on my dresser, pulling me from my meandering thoughts. It was from Gabi.

“Bella! What are you doing this afternoon? Come to the race.”

“Race?”

“The special event down at the track today. I have an invite to the private box.”

I sighed. Socializing in the hot sun while cars raced by at high-octane speeds didn't exactly appeal at the moment, but I knew the event would be packed with Monaco's upper crust.

“I'll be there!” I typed back.

I set down my phone and eyed my closet. All right. Here we go, Stella. You got this.

Chapter Eighteen



Monte Carlo, a diamond-encrusted paradise of excess, had turned into a pulsating hive of adrenaline and wealth, playing host to a special event Formula 1 race that sunny afternoon.

The narrow course laid out in the streets of Monaco—with many elevation changes, tight corners, and a tunnel—made the Monte Carlo track one of the most demanding tracks in Formula 1 racing. The prestigious Monaco Grand Prix, held in the spring, was one of the three event victories which that counted toward the Triple Crown of Motorsport. Owing to the slow speeds required by the tight, narrow streets, it was a less typical race in the F1 calendar, with a premium placed on car handling and driver skill rather than outright power.

Despite the relatively low speed compared to other tracks, it was still quite dangerous due to the tight quarters and lack of overtaking opportunities. The course was incredibly challenging for drivers, as it required great precision and concentration. Even a small mistake could lead to a serious accident.

The track was rarely used outside of the annual spring races, but apparently, this was some major thing cooked up by His Royal Highness to boost late-summer tourism after the past few years of decline.

Gabriella's invitation to this event had come from Jean-Luc Gauthier III—yes, the same French aristocrat who's yacht party I'd attended recently. It was a small world here.

Dressed in loose white trousers, a silk top, and cork wedges, I sat in a shaded event box on the ground floor of the race. It was a scorching hot day, but the private box was well chilled with overhead misters and fans. Not to mention a steady supply of icy beverages to take the edge off.

Gabi was dressed in a canary yellow sundress with a plunging neckline that complemented her bronzed skin—and her ample assets—perfectly.

In addition to Gabi and myself, there was an entourage of socialites with too much money for their own good. Usually, this would be my element—a swirling sea of champagne flutes and discreet designer labels. But my mind was adrift that afternoon, scattered like dice on a gambling table.

“What’s up with you today?” Gabi asked.

“Hmm? Nothing. Just a lot on my mind, I suppose.”

She shot me a sympathetic look. Being born into this world, she never patronized me by pretending to understand my situation—something I was grateful for. I hated pity above just about anything. I wasn’t a victim of my circumstances. I just had to figure out how to navigate my ship to the next port in the storm.

“More champagne always cures me when there’s a lot on my mind,” Gabi winked. “And Jean-Luc sprang for the extra good stuff.” She pulled a sweating bottle of Cristal from a silver bucket and topped us both off with a cheeky smile. Gabi could always cheer me up, that was for certain.

The roar of engines snapped us to attention.

“Here we go then,” Gabi said. “Let the wealthy testosterone reign.”

I laughed. It was true—these races, while wildly entertaining, were a spectacle. Formula 1 wasn’t a sport for the masses—at least not if you wanted to be on the ground floor. Teams were owned by billionaires, and drivers were the spawn of tycoons. This special event was no exception to the spectacle. Without the pressure of actually qualifying, and even the drivers were acting like peacocks.

“This ought to be entertaining,” I said. We leaned back in our chairs and prepared to be amused.

“Enjoying yourselves, ladies?” Jean-Luc approached wearing loose linen pants and a pale blue polo shirt. His face had that weathered look people get from years in the sun—not unattractive, though. He was still handsome with just a touch of patina.

Gabi raised her glass. “I think we are living just right.”

Jean-Luc looked pleased with himself. “Très bien. Do let me know if you require anything at all, belle.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes at his cheesiness, but I simply smiled.

I leaned back, feeling more relaxed than I had in days. Maybe this was exactly what I needed. And maybe I would find my next endeavor here among the glittering stars.

A voice caught my attention. *Merde*. I shot up and looked around.

And then, like a ghost from a forgotten past, I spotted him. Nico. A knot tightened in my stomach, sending a chill up my spine, defying the warmth of the Mediterranean sun. He was there, in all his roguish glory, a playful smile that spelled nothing but trouble etched onto his lips.

He spotted me, too. Confusion danced across his face at first, as though trying to place me. Then he smiled and started over.

“Dammit,” I muttered. Gabi lowered her giant Chanel glasses and followed my gaze.

“And who is that refreshing morsel?”

Playing dumb, I took a sip from my flute, the bubbles of the Cristal fizzing against my tongue. “No idea.”

But Nico was already on his way, navigating the labyrinth of wealth and privilege with the ease of a seasoned sailor, steering his ship to the shore. As he approached, the other women in our box—and I think a few of the men, too—eyed

him with a mixture of curiosity and hunger. I mean, really, could he just turn it down a *notch*?

“Bonjour, mademoiselles,” Nico said with a wicked little glint in his blue eyes.

Gabi surveyed him with a mix of curiosity and suspicion, her smile guarded as she assessed this potential interloper into our carefully curated circle.

I watched Nico through my dark sunglasses, my heart pounding in a rapid cadence. He was here, disrupting my carefully choreographed day with his unexpected presence.

Poker-faced, I responded, “Bonjour.”

“*Bonjour*,” Gabi said, not hiding her flirtation even a little. Nico glanced down at her, looking quite amused and intrigued. A tinge of lust flashed in his eyes. I was used to it—Gabi could tempt a monk.

“And you are?” Gabi went on.

“Nico. Enchanté.” He leaned down and kissed Gabi’s slender, well-manicured hand.

Gabi offered a slight, light laugh at the theatrical gesture. “Gabriella. Enchanté.”

I rolled my eyes. What was he doing here?!

“Is there something we can do for you?” I asked, the annoyance creeping into my tone.

Nico stared at me, and I couldn’t tell if my words upset him or not.

“I simply wanted to say hello to a friend. But I can’t linger. My date is waiting in our box.”

“Date?” I asked, my voice creaking.

“Oui. Do you know Lady Eleanor Devry? She’s over there.” He pointed to an older woman in a chic navy sundress and large hat. I forced a smile.

“No, I don’t think we’ve met. You’ll have to introduce me at some point. Maybe later.” My voice was tight. Nico flashed

me an amused smirk. What was he playing at? Was he trying to make me jealous? It wasn't going to work. Nico and his cougar were the last things on my mind.

"Well then, it was lovely to see you, Stella. And to meet you, Gabi."

Gabi batted her long lashes. "Please don't be a stranger. Bring your Lady Eleanor over. We have plenty of Cristal to go around."

"What a lovely invitation. I just might," Nico said. I didn't miss the wink he gave me as he turned to leave.

As soon as he was out of earshot, Gabi rolled her head toward me and lowered her glasses.

"All right, darling. Spill."

"Spill what?" I pulled my sunhat down.

"Don't you dare! What was that all about? Who is he?"

"He's no one. Just a guy I know."

"No way. You don't just know someone like that. Is he a... lover?"

I guffawed. "No! Not even close. I met him on Jean-Luc's yacht a few days ago. He was with Margot Delacroix. He's just another Monaco playboy who enjoys the company of older women. I don't know anything else about him, really."

Gabi shimmied her shoulders. "I'd like to find out more. Think he's *only* into older women?"

I grit my teeth, annoyance flourishing in my gut. "Wouldn't know. You should ask."

Gabi leaned back and slipped her sunglasses back up. "Maybe I will."

I kept my silence, forcing a smile. This would be a long day. Once again, Nico had stepped into my life like an unwelcome storm, turning my neatly arranged plans into disarray.

* * *

The race was winding down and Gabriella slipped off with Jean-Luc to meet some friends of his. It didn't bother me to be abandoned. I was actually delighted for a few moments of solitude.

“And here I thought I would never see you again,” a male voice with a smooth Spanish accent said over the faint roar of the fading engines.

I looked up and it took me a moment to recognize the towering figure in front of me. And then, I sucked in a breath. Prince Alejandro Bourbon de Granada. The corners of my mouth turned up in a very welcomed smile.

“Your Grace,” I said, with a little smile

He laughed lightly. “It's ‘Your Highness’, really.”

“But of course. I was just keeping you on your toes.”

It had been well over a year since I had met Prince Alejandro at a function with Hugo. He was, in fact, a Spanish prince by blood, but so far removed from the line of succession that you could hardly call him that. But it was still a fun little joke, and he had a good sense of humor about it. When I had first met him, he had definitely charmed me. He was tall and handsome, much younger than Hugo. And legitimate royalty to boot. Wouldn't people back in the States get a kick out of that one? Even Los Angelinos had royal fever.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

He shrugged and looked around. “Does one need a good reason to enjoy a spectacle from a fellow prince?”

I laughed. “I suppose not.”

“Jean-Luc is a cousin of mine. Fifth cousin, I think, but family is family. He owed me a ticket for inviting him to my Swiss Chalet last Christmas.”

I grinned. With Alejandro, you never really knew if he was being cheeky or serious.

“Imagine my surprise to find you in my cousin’s VIP box. How do you know him?”

“I’m here with my friend who is, um,” I paused, not knowing exactly what they were. Alejandro nodded in understanding. These things needed no explanation. “He should be back any time now. Would you like to sit?” I indicated toward one of our spare loungers.

He gave it a consideration and then finally nodded. “Gracias.”

He slipped into the chair next to me and stared at me for a moment. I couldn’t help but blush under the intensity of his gaze.

“And where is Hugo today?”

I sighed and tried not to let my frustration show. “We have recently parted ways, actually.”

“I am so sorry to hear that.”

“Thank you, but really, it’s for the best. We weren’t exactly a great match. In the end, we didn’t have all that much in common.”

“It is so hard to find one’s true soulmate.”

I chuckled. “And you believe in soulmates?”

“Most definitely not. But, I enjoy the company of others like anyone else. I think it is the human condition to want to share your time with others. We are pack animals at the end of the day.”

“I suppose you’re right,” I said. “Champagne?”

“How could I possibly refuse?”

I smiled and reached for the bottle, draining the last of it into a fresh glass. I handed it to Alejandro.

“Since you find yourself unencumbered, what are you doing next weekend?” Alejandro asked.

“Next weekend? I’d have to check my calendar. But not much of anything, I don’t think.”

“Perfect. Then you can accompany me to the *wedding of the season* in Lake Como.”

I tried not to let the shock show on my face. “Oh?”

“Si. Everyone who’s anyone will be there. The Earl of somewhere or another is marrying into the Longo family.”

“The coffee empire?”

“They very one.”

“Wedding of the season indeed. That’s a lovely invitation. I—”

“You have to say yes. You owe me.”

“Is that right? How do I owe you?”

“Well, for sitting here now, keeping you company. Allowing you to be in the presence of royalty in public.” He grinned.

“I see. Well then. How could I possibly refuse?”

* * *

Alejandro’s polished charm was a stark contrast to the raw energy around us. Just as I was getting comfortable in his presence, relishing the familiar banter, I spotted a figure approaching from the corner of my eye. A smug grin already curling his lips, Nico came striding over with the confidence of a man who knew he was about to stir the pot.

My stomach twisted up. Seriously, what did he *want*?

“Nico. You’re back,” I said dryly.

Nico spared a suspicious glance at Alejandro.

“Did you need something?” I said.

“Non. I was just passing by and wanted to say hello.”

I narrowed my eyes at him suspiciously. “You’ve said it.”

Alejandro eyed us both curiously then, ever the diplomat, extended a hand. “We haven’t been properly introduced. I am Alejandro.”

Nico shook his hand, his grin unyielding. “Nice to meet you, Alejandro.”

“Prince Alejandro,” I added nervously. Both men spared me a curious glance. I smiled nervously. Keep it together, Stella!

“Prince,” Nico echoed slowly.

Alejandro chuckled. “It impresses others more than me. Would you like to join us in the tent?” Alejandro gestured toward the comfortable seats.

“No!” Nico and I both said in unison. I had no idea what game Nico was playing, but one thing was clear—I needed to stay out of his orbit if I wanted to keep my sanity intact.

Alejandro’s expression furrowed. I tittered awkwardly.

“I meant—”

“Like I said, I was just passing by,” Nico said.

Something caught Alejandro’s attention then, and he turned to me. “Please excuse me. I need to speak with someone. It was nice to meet you—Nico.” The last part was said as though he wasn’t quite sure.

As soon as Alejandro was out of earshot, I turned angrily toward Nico. “What are you doing?” I growled through gritted teeth. If my frustration was getting to him, he didn’t bother to react.

He shrugged casually. “Just working. Same as you.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not *working*,” I said, emphasizing the last word. I hated how he reduced my lifestyle to some cheap hustle.

“I’m just doing the same thing as you, OK? Trying to meet important people who can help me have a better life.”

“Yes, I get that. But you’ve already said your hellos. Why are you back?”

“I—” he looked uncertain.

I cast a glance around the glitzy crowd, then back to Nico. “How is it that I have been here for more than five years, and I’ve never run into you, and now suddenly you’re everywhere? You’re at every party I go to, mixing in my business. And for whatever reason, you won’t leave me alone?”

He shrugged. “I haven’t been in Monte Carlo that long. And I guess it just took some happy luck to meet the right person.” He grinned cheekily. I wanted to slap that grin right off his face.

“Can you please just leave me alone today? Haven’t you caused me enough problems? Why are you tormenting me?”

“Because it’s ever so fun.” I glared at him, and his face softened. “I’m sorry. I’m not trying to ruin your life. I was merely trying to get you to loosen up a little bit. I had fun with you the other night. I don’t know why we have to be adversaries.”

“We are not adversaries. We are nothing. OK? I need to get on with my life. I have to figure out my next steps, and I can’t keep tripping over you. People are going to start talking. People all already talking.”

He wiggled his bushy black eyebrows. “Oh no. People talking. The absolute worst.” He said it in a mock American accent.

I tilted my head and crossed my arms. People were probably talking right now. Alejandro was probably wondering what the hell was going on.

He raised his hands in mock surrender. “Fine. I am sorry. I will stay out of your way. We can make up a story if anyone asks why I know you. We did run into each other on the yacht the other day, didn’t we?”

I sighed. “Fine. We met on the yacht. But please, just let me get on with my day, OK?”

* * *

The deafening roar of the race filled the air, a hum vibrating in my chest, a chaotic symphony of thundering engines and excited chatter. Yet, over this cacophony, a distinct laughter managed to cut through. I turned around, my eyes instantly drawn to the source. There he was, Nico, holding court in the midst of a gaggle of women—a sea of fluttering eyelashes and dazzling smiles. My heart clenched at the sight, an unexpected surge of jealousy shooting through me, strong and fierce. He met my gaze and winked.

“Oh, that’s how it’s going to be, is it?” I muttered under my breath. This... was unexpected. I was the one who kept pushing him away, so why did it bother me to see him charming other women? I shook my head, trying to shake off the irrational annoyance, but it clung to me, a prickling under my skin.

With newfound determination, I stalked toward Nico, cutting through the crowd like a hot knife through butter. The ladies’ giggles and coos suddenly silenced as I neared, their attention shifting to me. I made my voice as saccharine-sweet as I could manage, batting my eyelashes at Nico. “Well, Nico, I didn’t realize the charity event was here, too. Are you collecting donations from all these lovely ladies?”

The chatter faltered, a few gasps echoing around us. The women were all wide-eyed and curious now. Nico looked equally surprised, but he quickly masked it with a smirk. I gave him a glare in return and spun on my heel, stalking away with a rage pounding in my veins.

The distinct sound of Nico’s footsteps chasing after me echoed behind me, yet I refused to look back. Let him chase. I was done playing his stupid games. His hand on my arm made me flinch, but his pleading voice made me falter. “Stella, wait —”

I tried to yank my arm from him, which inadvertently yanked him forward, causing us both to stumble. And then, as if caught in some comedic chain reaction, we collided with a third figure. A collective gasp echoed around us, and I looked up, my eyes widening in shock. We had crashed into Marco Bellini, Formula 1’s current *it-boy* driver.

Everything seemed to slow down after that. My balance gave way, and I tumbled onto Marco, Nico landing on top of me a moment later. Before I could even process what was happening, a shower of champagne rained down on us. A waitress had tripped over our tangled pile, her tray of drinks drenching us in a sticky, golden downpour.

I blinked, momentarily stunned. Here I was, sandwiched between Nico and Marco Bellini, at a prestigious racing event, covered in champagne. How had my carefully constructed life come to this?

Chapter Nineteen



Oh God. No. This was a complete disaster. A catastrophic disaster. Clutching my morning coffee in one hand, I zoomed in on the blog on my phone with the other.

“American socialite makes a Bellini out of famed driver Marco Bellini.” Not the best headline, but maybe something was lost in translation.

Words aside, it was the picture that told the real story—or the version of the story the gossip blogs wanted to tell.

Me, sandwiched between Marco and Nico. And how nice of the photographer to catch me at just the opportune moment, so my face looked like I had just taken a bite of rotten sauerkraut.

“Drunken antics from yet another American interloper? When will they learn this isn’t Spring Break?”

I pulled up Instagram and navigated to the top-known gossipers on the French Riviera. Yep. There I am. Stella sandwich.

I set down my phone and breathed. Did I mention this was a category six disaster? Okay. I could fix this. It was bound to happen, eventually. Even the best got dragged down and caught on camera sooner or later. What I needed was a run, yoga, and a sauna.

Then probably a gallon of Cristal.

My phone buzzed.

“Oh God, girl.” It was from Gabriella.

I sighed and typed back. “I know. I know. Champagne?”

“Already in the car. See you downstairs.”

* * *

“So, who is this sexy Frenchman?” Gabriella asked me as we sipped very expensive champagne beneath the awning of the Excalibur terrace. She had her Instagram open to Elle Chambert’s gossip account. Ugh, the girl called herself an influencer, but I wasn’t sure exactly what she was influencing. All she did was report gossip from the elite.

“Hmm?” I said, quickly pressing the glass to my lips to avoid having to answer.

She shot me a cheeky grin. “You’re blushing.”

“I am not. And you’re going to have to be more specific. There are a lot of sexy Frenchmen around here, if you haven’t noticed.”

Gabriella chuckled. “Sure, sure. Not the one you’re splashed all over the gossip blogs with. Definitely not that sexy Frenchman.”

“Oh, you mean Marco Bellini?”

“He’s Italian, nice try.”

I set my glass down. “He’s just somebody I met on Jean-Luc’s yacht, I told you. He was with Margot Delacroix. We just got to chatting a bit. Friendly enough. He was just saying hello at the race and—” I let my words trail off. I didn’t know how to explain my way out of the awkward situation that now stared back at me from every smartphone on the Med.

Gabi drained her champagne glass and refilled it, but the amused expression did not leave her tanned face.

“Mmm. I see. I just hate it when I find myself smooshed between celebrities and sexy men I casually know.”

“I’m sure you’re familiar with the situation,” I said dryly, but I might not be wrong. It did seem like a situation she might

welcome.

“You’re sure there’s nothing more there? Perhaps a little chemistry?”

I shook my head. “Don’t be so dramatic.”

“He was quite sexy,” Gabriella said.

I sighed. He was. And it was infuriating. “So? Look around. Everybody is sexy. This is like the sexy Mecca of the world.”

She chuckled and shrugged in agreement.

“Well, just be careful.”

I furrowed my brow. “What does that mean?”

Gabriella sighed dramatically. “This is all kind of funny, it’s true. And luckily, these viral posts aren’t nearly as juicy as they could be—the gossip season is slow in August, so that’s really the only reason anyone cares about this. Well, that and it’s Marco Bellini, of course. Sort of impossible not to get your photo taken when you tackled one of the most famous athletes in the world.” She sipped her champagne. “My point is, though, that you can let this blow over without much consequence. But whatever is going on with this Frenchman, end it.”

“There’s nothing going on.”

“He was worked up about something yesterday. You both were. That wasn’t nothing, and you are clearly not just two people who met once on someone’s yacht. Unless, of course, that one meeting resulted in something steamy in a yacht bathroom.”

“No!”

She grinned. “Then whatever it is, let it go. You have someone like Alejandro interested in you. Don’t go mucking it up with some nobody Riviera playboy who can’t get you what you need.”

“What is it that I need?” I said playfully batting my lashes.

“What we all need. Some stability in our life. A future.”

Her point made sense to me, but she, Gabi, was more than set for life. I couldn't imagine she needed anything.

“Stability seems a little overrated,” I teased. “Don't worry about it. He's nothing. As I said, I don't even know him. He's just one of Margot's boy toys. You know how Margot is. And yesterday—well, he was a little drunk and flirty, that's all. Everyone got clumsy. Too much fun in the sun.”

Gabriella shrugged. “Whatever you say. I just don't want people gossiping. The thing with Hugo is still very fresh, and people talk.”

I stopped mid-sip. “And are people talking about that?”

Gabriella drummed her nails on the wooden table. “Look, I'm not trying to upset you, and I don't want to gossip. But you're my friend, and I think you should know that—” she hesitated.

“Just out with it, please, Gabi. You know I can take it.”

“There's just speculation as to why things with Hugo ended so abruptly.”

I half-laughed. “Why does anyone care? Relationships come and go with the tide around here. Don't people have anything better to worry about?”

“Well, for a lot of people, Hugo is quite the catch.”

“Hugo was insufferable,” I said. “But you didn't hear that from me.”

Gabriella chuckled. “I know. I know Hugo and lots of men just like him. But I mean, he was an actual billionaire. I know there are a lot of them around here, but there are not that many. And certainly not that many that are as nice to look at as Hugo.”

Nice to look at...It was hard for me to see him through that lens anymore, but I suppose he was handsome enough in a powerful, domineering kind of way.

“Well, the gossiping Bettys can have the man. He was a jerk. Honestly.”

“So you broke up with him?”

I tried not to chew my lip.

“I didn’t say that. We just decided to go our separate ways. It happens.”

She shot me a sly smile and raised her glass. “It does happen.”

My phone buzzed on the table, and I glanced down. I couldn’t contain a small smile.

“What?” Gabi said.

I picked up my phone and opened the message.

“It would seem my antics at the race amused more than the gossip blogs.”

Gabi raised her brow.

“Alejandro is congratulating me on my performance and wants to know if I can attend a charity event tomorrow night. At Jean-Luc’s Provence estate.”

I glanced back at Gabriella, who looked as overjoyed as I did. She clapped her hands together with glee.

Chapter Twenty



Nico didn't know why, but he felt exceptionally nervous as he and Lady Eleanor Devry arrived at the party. *Party* seemed like an understatement as their private car pulled up to the gates of a sprawling villa just north of Nice in the foothills of Provence. Vibrant green vines stretched out, illuminated by moonlight and clever pearlescent string lights decorating the entirety of the estate. The car stopped at the vast iron gates. The driver presented their invitation, and they were ushered through to a stunning Spanish-style villa surrounded by lush orange trees and rolling vineyards.

They stepped from the car into the perfectly sultry summer night, made a touch sultrier by the distance from the ocean.

“Well then. Ready for the circus?” Eleanor asked.

“Who did you say lives here?” Nico asked, trying to keep his tone casual, as though he might actually know said host.

Eleanor laughed as though detecting his awe. “I know it’s absurd, isn’t it? Some monied aristocrats. Fancies himself a French royal, some distant cousin of the Bourbons. Probably rubbish if you ask me, but then again, who can keep track? Europe is filled to the brim with distant royalty. I should know. I’m a peer.”

“And why is he raising money for the Nice Children’s Museum?” Nico asked incredulously.

“Why not? Any excuse to host the *crème de la crème* of the Riviera, no?”

“Well then, let’s do this, yes?” He took her arm as they entered the fray.

Nico instantly felt himself melt into the crowd, donning his new hat and slipping right into the character at hand. If Eleanor seemed to notice his act, she didn’t let on. He was being exactly who she needed him to be. Isn’t that what Stella had suggested he do? Find out who people want you to be, and then be it?

Growing up on the border of Monaco in a dying French town and spending his adult life entertaining the wealthy behind the bar, he had seen a lot of strange things on the Riviera. It was the kind of place that attracted all manner of life, a human circus bursting with colors and flavors from across the world. It had flare. It had glitz. International football stars frequented the casino. Russian billionaires lazed about its shores. American movie stars waved at Cannes from their yachts. Some of it was awe-inspiring, some of it absurd. All of it was entertaining. It would seem tonight was an amalgam of all things Riviera. He spotted bespoke Italian suits next to Avant-Garde trainers. Couture dresses as glittery as the casino, offset by chic pantsuits. Come one, come all, and open your wallets.

“You seem nervous,” Eleanor whispered in his ear. Nico wanted to laugh. Did she really think he would be otherwise? This was new territory, but maybe she wouldn’t assume that.

Nico shrugged it off. “Oh, I’m fine. Just trying to take it all in. As you can imagine, it’s not my usual crowd.”

Eleanor laughed, a gentle, throaty sound.

“It’s not most people’s crowd, is it? Frankly, it’s not really my crowd, either. But sometimes you have to do what you have to do. And there are times I must make an appearance. I find the best way to approach it is to stand stoically and keep your mouth closed. Not because you have nothing interesting to say, but rather because they find the strong silent type irresistible. A man of mystery is something everybody wants to get their claws into. Especially a mysterious creative

architect.” She gave his arm a light squeeze, letting her fingers linger on his bicep.

A man of mystery? He could play that part just right.

“And if all else fails, simply talk about your favorite football club. It’s something every walk of life has in common.”

Nico chuckled. He could wax lyrical about Olympique de Marseille any day.

“Come on. I will make the rounds with you and introduce you to anyone you need to meet. Then you can be free to hit the open bar and fade into the background if you please.”

Nico patted her hand, feeling the cold diamonds brush his palm. “Eleanor, my darling. I am nothing if not an entertaining date. I shall do my best to charm your friends.”

She chuckled. “I knew I had chosen wisely. After all, you do make me look good. And appearances are everything with this crowd.”

The night was a lot more exhausting than he had anticipated. He thought having years of experience making annoying small talk with tourists in the bar would have prepared him. But this was an entirely different league. It was endless chatter and protocol and fake smiles. By the second hour in, his face hurt from smiling.

How did Stella do this day after day? All the pretending, never letting her mask slip for even a moment?

And then, as though he had somehow manifested her from the ether, there she stood in a floor-length charcoal gray dress that hugged her tight curves and shimmered in the moonlight. Her chestnut hair was pulled halfway up with curled tendrils sweeping her delicate collarbone. Nico’s breath quickened. She turned and her piercing blue eyes caught his from across the yard. Her entire body seemed to tense for a moment, equally caught off guard.

Stella excused herself from the small group of people she was talking to, then slowly made her way toward him, smiling

at everyone she passed. She approached slowly, clutching a glass of champagne like a lifeline.

“Nico. I’d say I’m surprised to see you here, but I guess I shouldn’t be.” Her tone was clipped.

“Ahh, we meet again so soon. Not a hello, then? Just right down to accusations?” He smiled, but her face was stony.

“It was just a simple question,” she said, but he heard the grit through her clenched smile. “You didn’t say you’d be here.”

He shrugged. “Again. You didn’t ask. You seem to be under the impression I must share my calendar with you.”

“I’m asking now.”

“I am here as a guest of Lady Eleanor Devry. And you? Found yourself another sugar daddy so soon?” Nico had always thought that was a hilarious American term—sugar daddy—and delighted in the chance to finally use it in earnest.

She looked like she wanted to slap him, but she held herself in perfect restraint.

“I’m here with Prince Alejandro’s if you must know.”

Nico whistled dramatically. “Nice work, mademoiselle. You’d make a fine princess.” Annoyance splashed across her face, but she didn’t take the bait.

She leaned closer. “Look, Nico. I’m sorry about everything. Things at the race turned...messy. I didn’t mean it.”

He shrugged. “No harm done. Hey, it made us Instagram famous.”

“I’m glad one of us thought it was amusing. But we need to be more careful. Tonight won’t be a problem, will it?”

“What kind of problem?”

She glanced about. “Well...you know. I hope I can count on your discretion. And that you won’t let the heated feelings between us cause you to do anything...rash.”

Nico finished his champagne, setting it down on a passing waiter's tray.

"You don't give me enough credit, Stella. Or perhaps it's that you give yourself too much."

Stella's beautiful face tightened further. "That may be. But the question still stands. Can I count on you to control yourself?"

"It might surprise you, Stella, but I have more important things to worry about than ruining your reputation."

This time, she snickered. "Is that so? Really working Lady Eleanor, then?"

"What I'm up to is none of your business. And I can't imagine what you're even talking about. Perhaps I need to worry about your discretion."

She guffawed. "Fine. Enjoy the party, Nico. And do me a favor? Just leave me alone tonight, alright?"

He snorted. "*Avec plaisir.*" He offered her an exaggerated bow and turned to find another glass of something potent.

Chapter Twenty-One



I had successfully ignored Nico all evening. What was he thinking showing up here? This was my turf! Admittedly, it wasn't like he was a rival, exactly. I doubted we'd be going after the same patrons, but still. It made me nervous to have him there. I had let myself get too close to him. Let down my guard. He had seen me at my most vulnerable, and that made him a liability. I didn't *do* liabilities.

What did I really think he was going to do, though? I didn't know him all that well, but I didn't think he was malicious. My treatment of him might have hurt him, but I doubted he'd be out to ruin me. That seemed like far too much effort for someone like him. And he might be making light of it, but I was sure the spectacle at the race rattle him as well.

I scanned the crowd. You could never be too confident, though. Perhaps the best line of defense was a good offense. The idea came to me over my third glass of champagne. I needed to bring him into the fold.

I tapped a nail against my glass as I thought it through. I'd never entertained anything like it before, but...It wasn't a half-bad idea.

There was a lot more potential there than I had initially thought. True, up until now he might've been just a run-of-the-mill hustler operating at a low level, but everyone started somewhere. With the right coaching, perhaps he could be a formidable force. He was here as the guest of some aristocrat, after all, so maybe he could be just as effective as I was.

Perhaps we could form a partnership? I had never considered that before. But now, well, it seemed glaringly obvious.

I waited for the opportune time to corner him. Or rather, waited until the lull of alcohol had given me enough liquid courage and confidence.

“And what do I owe the pleasure?” Nico said with rich sarcasm as I approached.

“I wanted to make amends,” I said, keeping my voice plummy.

“Not needed. But thanks,” he turned from me.

“Nico, wait. Please.”

He stopped at my pleading and turned. “Please?”

I sighed and rolled my eyes. “You heard me. I’m asking you nicely. I have something to say.”

He smiled and came closer. “Do tell.”

I sighed. “I think—well, you’re doing a pretty good job at this whole thing. But frankly, you could be doing better.”

“Thank you for the backhanded compliment. But I’m not sure I get your meaning. What whole thing?”

I splayed out my arms, indicating our surroundings.

“Look, I’ve been at this a little longer than you have,” I said.

“I doubt that. I’m older.”

I fought back another eye roll. “I’ve been at it at a higher level than you for longer. I know this world, in particular, a little better than you. And while you’re doing fine enough, I can help you up your game. Get to the next level.”

“I think I’m doing just fine. I found Margot, didn’t I?”

I waved my hand in the air. “Third tier. You can do better.”

“She was just the start. In case you’ve forgotten, I’m here with an actual *Lady*.”

“Right. But so far, all you have is a fancy party invitation and a drinks tab. How would you like a whole lot more? Enough to quit that stupid bar job you’re too good for?”

Nico folded his arms over his broad chest and tilted his head, his dark hair brushing the bottoms of his ears. I suddenly remembered what it was like to run my fingers through that hair, like cool silk. I shook off the sensation.

“Ok, I’m listening. What are you proposing?” Nico said.

“I think I could coach you. Teach you what I’ve learned about this world and how one gets around effortlessly within it.”

“And why would you do that? I thought you blamed me for all your ills,” he asked.

“I do. Well, I did. But I realized something. If you could dupe me into dropping my guard—and I consider myself rather a professional at this—then I think you could be very successful indeed. With the right coaching, you might just have something here.”

Nico looked at me incredulously. “Have something? Am I to assume you think that I do not currently possess any talents?”

I fought a blush. “I didn’t say that. But I can get you out of that bar and into the right circles. More of this. All of this. All the time. Let me tell you a secret, Nico. I haven’t worked a proper job in years. And I don’t intend to ever again. This,” I splayed my hands out toward the group of well-heeled patrons. “Is my job.”

“Tell me again how this isn’t just glamorized prostitution?” Nico asked with a smirk.

I waved off the insult. I had heard it before, and it wasn’t going to faze me any longer.

“Prostitution is the exchange of money for sex. It is a simple transaction. Both parties know exactly what they are going into. This... this is something with a lot more subtlety. The key thing being here is that I trade nothing for sex. If I choose to sleep with a man, it’s because I want to. Because we

have a connection. Not for any pre-determined monetary reparation.”

“And what do your unwilling marks think of such things?”

“For one, they are always willing. And there is no expectation of sex. This isn’t a transaction. This is about charming people with conversation and wit so that they want to spend time with you.”

“Convincing them to give you money?”

I shrugged. “It’s not just money. It’s the lifestyle. It’s a home, clothes, dinners. Invitations to the best parties. It’s essentially allowing them to bankroll your lifestyle. In exchange, they get a worthy companion to accompany them to events such as this.”

“So just very, *very* high-end prostitution then,” Nico said with a wink and smirk.

I play-slapped his arm. “So, did you sleep with Lady Devry in exchange for your invitation here?” I cocked an eyebrow.

“Touché.” He grinned. “So, sleeping with rich women for money. I don’t see why every man in the Riviera isn’t doing this.”

I rolled my eyes. “Because there is an art to it. Women are not simply out to get busy with whoever is willing. Especially moneyed women. Women who have been taught to watch out for predators. Women who are vulnerable because of their bank accounts. Women like your Lady Devry there are wary. And while they can be most generous, they are not easy to dupe. But the more challenging the companion, the bigger the payoff. Trust me. It’s a win-win for everyone involved. You’re not hurting anyone. They get something from you, and you get a whole lot in return.”

Nico considered me curiously. “It’s an interesting proposition. I’m still not entirely sure why you’d want to help me. What’s your motive here?”

“It seems like you’re going to be around whether I like it or not so I’d rather have you as an ally than an adversary. It

might be beneficial for us to work together. We could help each other out, especially at events like this. Wouldn't you rather have someone else on your side than swim with the sharks alone?"

He bobbed his head. "It's an enticing offer."

I spotted Alejandro approaching in the distance. "I have to go. But think about it. Come by the Excalibur tomorrow around 10 a.m. We'll have a coffee and talk more."

"You're still staying at the Excalibur?"

"Don't worry. It's on someone else's tab now," I winked, then pressed a manicured nail to my red lips. "Until then, discretion."

Chapter Twenty-Two



I was doubtful Nico would even show up. I waited patiently on the hotel bistro terrace with a pot of French press and an almond croissant I shouldn't be eating and stared out at the gentle lapping of the cerulean sea beyond.

"Is this seat occupied?"

I glanced up to see Nico's smiling, smug face. A bolt of both lust and annoyance shot through me, colliding at the center, so my body didn't know whether to smile or grimace, resulting in an expression that felt psychotic.

"It will be soon if you don't sit down. You're late," I said, finding my voice.

"Sorry. A little too much champagne last night."

"That's something you'll need to learn to control."

"My champagne intake?" He took his seat and poured some of my coffee into the spare mug. He tsked. "Never say that to a Frenchman."

"Yes, the intake of anything in general. I'm all for loosening up—God knows sometimes you need the added veil of courage—but you have to keep your wits about you, always. You can't afford to ruin your reputation by doing something stupid while drunk."

He took a healthy sip of coffee. "Like, say, going to a stranger's hotel room?"

I rolled my eyes. "You know that was different. But yes."

“Was it? Why was it so different? I thought I was a mark, just like anyone else? Shouldn’t you have had utter and complete control around me?”

I shook my head, feeling the familiar rush of heat to my cheeks. “I knew you weren’t a mark. Well, at least after that first night I knew.”

“Then what was your excuse the first night?”

I averted my eyes. He had a point. A very valid, infuriating point. One I had chided myself over repeatedly over the past week. I had thought he was just another wealthy man I could seduce. And yet, I had still allowed myself to drink beyond my usual measure. To lose control. What was it about him that lulled me into such ease that I so easily dropped my guard?

“Just shut up. It doesn’t matter now. It’s in the past. What we’re talking about now is the future.”

“You’re good at that,” Nico said.

“What’s that?”

“Deflecting.”

I pressed my lips, then shrugged. “You will be too in no time. It’s all part of the game. Never have a conversation you don’t want to have.”

“That’s a skill indeed. I think one every bartender in Europe would be happy to have.”

“Well, then it’s a good thing you’re here, isn’t it? I can see you have a lot to learn. Lesson one: the art of keeping your mouth shut.”

“Also a hard task for a Frenchman.”

“Hey, if a girl from nowhere Texas can do it, you can too.”

Nico laughed. “Ahh, so that’s where you’re from. The mystery unravels.”

I shot him a look. “It’s not like you know where that is.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but is that the place where everything is bigger?”

“That’s the place.”

“Do you think that I don’t have a map? We French are a bit more well-versed in geography than you Americans.”

I rolled my eyes. “Another thing, you have to stop insulting the women you’re with if you want to get anywhere with them.”

Nico made a playful apologetic gesture with his hands. “Désolé. Please continue, master.”

“The art of keeping your mouth shut is one of the most valuable things you can do in any conversation. Not just with your companions, but in life in general. People find silence uncomfortable. They quickly aim to fill the void with chatter.”

“Wouldn’t that make your companions uncomfortable, then?” Nico asked.

I shrugged. “It can. But if done right, it can serve to make you more mysterious. It can also serve to tilt them off-kilter. Make them more willing to please you. People often assume silence is masking annoyance or anger. And trust me, people so much want to please. Everyone in this world longs to be liked and accepted. It’s part of the human condition.”

“Everyone?”

“Unless you are a psychopath, yes, I think so. Some more than others, of course. But let me tell you something about the women you are likely going to be attending to. Women like Eleanor. They will be older, wealthy. They will be confident beyond measure in certain areas. But they will be lonely. And they will be constantly insecure that men are with them for their wealth.”

“I can’t imagine that my presence is going to set that particular fear at ease.”

“Again, you would be surprised. They want to believe that you are with them for more than their money. So, you have to make them think that. One of the ways to fish out that information is with silence. Let her do the talking. Let her reveal herself to you. But—and here is the essential part.”

Nico made a playful show of taking notes with his hand in the air.

I groaned but continued. “Let her do the talking, but you have to listen. Remember the details. Remember the things she says. She will tell you exactly what she wants if you let her. And then you give it to her.”

Nico stared at me as I chatted on, watching me intently as I prattled on.

“You should teach a course on this,” Nico said.

I sipped my coffee, then refilled it from the French press. “We have a saying in the United States: ‘Those who cannot do, teach.’” I met his eyes. “And right now, I can very much do.”

Nico felt warmth spread through him. He didn’t doubt the things I was capable of.

“Another thing I think you should do right away. You need a more convincing backstory.”

“Oh? I thought we had already determined I was a famous architect?”

“Mmm. Yes, and that’s a good start. But you need to have an intriguing mix of approachability and mystique.” I tapped a nail against my glass as I thought. “I think we should make you just a little tragic.”

Nico raised his brow. “May I ask why I must suffer in this new life?”

“Tragedy is sexy. And while Americans love an underdog, Europeans can’t resist a tragic artist. They lap it up like a kitten to milk.”

Nico sighed. “Oui. It is true. You make a very valid point.”

“So, Nicolas LeClair—your father was a renowned French architect as well. But tragically, he died when you were just a teen.”

Nico pressed a hand to his heart theatrically. “And how did he perish?”

“Mmm. It was a skiing accident. He had traveled far into the Alps to be inspired and was caught in a brutal storm. He never returned. They found his body in the summer once the ice had melted.”

“Morbid, mademoiselle.”

I shrugged. “I cannot change the past.”

“Debatable. But all right, we shall go with that. It would explain why I don’t ski and have never been to the Alps.”

I pointed a finger at him. “Bingo.”

Nico raised an eyebrow. I shook my head. “It’s an American thing. Never mind. Now, where do you live—”

“Please don’t say Le Excalibur. I’m maxed out.”

I grinned a little wickedly. “Don’t worry. No one needs to see your flat. You are renting a temporary flat here in Monte Carlo, but your primary residence is a townhouse in Paris. You travel a lot, so you don’t bother with a big home.”

Nico bobbed his head. “All sounds reasonable.”

“Do you have any hobbies?”

“Aside from swindling the rich and pouring champagne? What more does one need?”

“Hmm. Reputable pastimes, but maybe think of something interesting you can go on about and bore people with. Football or something.”

“Now you’re just making it easy,” Nico said with a grin.

I leaned back and studied him. “You might just make something of yourself yet.”

He raised his glass. “I can’t decide if you are complimenting me or tossing me underhanded insults.”

“It’s a mystery. One of my many skills. Are you seeing Eleanor again?”

“Tomorrow. She’s invited me sailing.”

“Good. Keep your notes close, and you’ll ace the test.”

Nico raised his glass. “All hail the master.”

I flashed him a playfully annoyed look, but raised my glass anyway.

Chapter Twenty-Three



The sunlight danced on the azure waters of Monaco's port, casting fleeting golden sparkles. The mega-yachts docked neatly in rows felt like a mirage from a world I sometimes felt I barely belonged to. I took a sip from my champagne, its bubbles tickling my lips, trying to drown out the recent memories of Nico and our tangled web of emotions.

I had chosen this spot—a luxurious café with a view to die for—as a place to retreat, to lose myself in the overwhelming opulence around me. The gentle clinking of cutlery against porcelain and the hushed neighboring conversations formed the comforting hum of my thoughts.

My mind kept wandering to Nico. The electricity between us was palpable, a force I wasn't sure I could, or even wanted to, resist. It might all be a dangerous game. This world was about appearances, strategy, and survival. Emotions? They were a luxury I couldn't afford. Was I making a huge mistake bringing him closer into my world? His presence was both a balm and a storm, and I couldn't discern if he would be my ruin or my redemption.

I leaned back in my chair, letting the cool breeze kiss my cheeks. Nico was a complication, an intoxicating one. Everything was becoming more tangled, and I couldn't help but wonder if, in trying to give Nico a taste of this life, I'd set us both on a path to heartbreak.

Just as I was slipping deeper into my reverie, a shadow momentarily shielded me from the afternoon sun. I looked up, preparing to flash an annoyed glare at the intruder. But the sun

masked the figure's features, making her a silhouette against the shimmering horizon. It wasn't until she stepped forward that recognition struck me like a bolt.

"Josie?!" The name escaped my lips before I could fully process it.

She looked both unchanged and entirely different from the sister I had left behind in Texas. Despite her rough road, she still had a youthful innocence in her eyes that the world hadn't completely stripped away yet. But she also looked—wary.

Our hug was a clash of worlds—the luxurious opulence of Monaco and the raw reality of my past. Her embrace was a bit too tight, almost desperate, and I could feel the thud of her heartbeat against mine.

Pulling back, I searched her face, trying to piece together why she was here. "Why are you here?" The question lingered between us.

She hesitated, biting her lip, the same nervous childhood habit as mine. "I... I just needed to see you," she finally whispered.

As a waiter approached, I gestured for an additional champagne glass, trying to merge my two worlds, if only for a moment. Josie's eyes wandered, taking in the magnificent yachts, her wonder evident. I tried to see them through her eyes, but all I saw were gilded cages.

"Did something happen?" I asked.

She nervously picked at chipped nail polish. "I just—I needed to get away. I wasn't doing all that great in Atlanta."

I looked at her sternly. "Were you using again?"

"No! But—but things were getting stressful, and I thought I might."

I pressed my lips into a tight smile. "Ok. We can get into the details later. I'm glad you got away." *I'm glad you're here* wasn't exactly true. Her timing couldn't have been worse. But that was life, wasn't it? We didn't get to choose the timing of our tragedies.

A familiar face appeared then, striding toward us with a bag of groceries. Nico. He waved casually then stared at Josie curiously.

He had that casual, easy-going charm radiating from him, but his eyes were sharp, taking in the unfamiliar scene.

“Nico, bonjour,” I said.

“Bonjour. Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“Um, no, you’re not, um.” I hesitated, looking from Josie, who was eyeing Nico with clear interest, to him. “Nico, this is... my sister, Josie.”

A fleeting, charged look passed between Nico and me. “Sister?”

“Oui!” Josie stood, extending her hand, her Texas accent dripping with playful flirtation. “Pleasure to meet a handsome Monegasque like you.”

Nico took her hand, raising an eyebrow in my direction. “The pleasure is mine. Though I must correct you. I’m not Monegasque. I am French.

Josie giggled, pulling her hand back slowly. “Well, whatever you are, it’s working for you.”

There was an awkward tension, thick and palpable. I could feel Nico’s questions hanging in the air, and Josie’s arrival was a curveball I hadn’t prepared him for. Trying to deflect, I interjected, “Josie just arrived. Unexpectedly.”

“Ah,” Nico replied, his eyes never leaving mine. “That explains the... surprise.”

Josie, sensing the undercurrent between Nico and me, cocked an eyebrow. “I think maybe I’m the one who interrupted something.”

“No,” I replied quickly, almost too quickly, and then added, “Just some... training.”

Nico’s amused expression hinted that he might be enjoying the awkward situation a bit too much. “Yes, Stella has been teaching me many things.” He paused, letting the innuendo

sink in before adding, “About the high society of Monte Carlo.”

Josie flashed me an incredulous look and I shook my head, communicating, I’ll tell you later in the silent ways sisters can.

With Josie here, I suddenly like a trashy Texas girl again, not the polished woman of Monte Carlo I’d become.

“I’ll leave you two to catch up,” Nico said, shooting me a lingering look filled with unasked questions. “*Au revoir*, Josie. Stella, I’ll see you soon.”

As the door closed behind him, Josie turned to me with a grin. “So, ‘training’ huh? Is that what they’re calling it these days?”

I sighed, preparing myself for the interrogation that was sure to come.

Chapter Twenty-Four



The weight of the key card felt unusually heavy as I slid it into the door of my suite at The Excalibur. The ornate door swung open, revealing the room that I'd become so familiar with — the panorama of Monte Carlo from the windows, the chandeliers, and the luxurious furniture that always felt a little too lavish for a girl from nowhere.

Josie took a few steps in, her worn cowboy boots contrasting sharply with the immaculate marble floors. She paused, her eyes wide as they scanned the opulence that surrounded her.

“I knew you had climbed, Sis,” she remarked with a chuckle, “but I didn't know how high.” There was a playful edge to her voice, but I could hear the underlying astonishment.

Before I could respond, Josie sprawled herself out on the plush bed, her eyes tracing the intricate designs on the ceiling. I bit back a sigh, indicating for her to take her boots off the white covers. Without waiting for a response, I made my way to the minibar, retrieving a bottle of one of the more expensive wines they had. I figured we'd need it.

As I poured the wine into two crystal glasses, Josie had already changed into her pajamas — an old band tee and shorts that had seen better days. In contrast, my own pajamas were a soft silk set, the material cool and comforting against my skin.

I handed Josie a glass, our fingers brushing briefly. She looked up at me with those familiar hazel eyes, eyes that had the same questions and curiosities I had once harbored.

“Why are you here, Jo?” I finally asked, taking a sip of my wine.

Josie swirled her wine thoughtfully, her gaze once again settling on the opulent room. “Isn’t a girl allowed to visit her fancy big sister? Or have you forgotten your family while playing princess with the Europeans?”

I rolled my eyes, though her words stung more than I cared to admit. “It’s not like that. Don’t deflect. What’s going on?”

Josie propped herself up on one elbow, her gaze never leaving mine. “I—Like I said, things weren’t going well in Atlanta.”

“Not well, how?”

She ran a hand through her hair. “I met this guy, and he was just—well, he was just trouble. Exactly my type, you know?” I offered a sympathetic look. I did know. A certain type of boy had always been Josie’s drug of choice. “Anyway, we got pretty intense, but then I felt myself slipping. It terrified me. So, the only thing I could think to do was get as far away from Brock as possible.”

“His name is Brock?”

She shrugged. “Fitting, right?”

I sighed and wrapped an arm around her. “I’m glad you did, Josie. You did the right thing in getting away. I know how hard it is. How’d you afford a plane ticket.”

She shrugged. “Credit card.”

I squeezed her tight. “I’ll pay you back for it.”

“Thanks, Stell.” She leaned into me. After a moment, she pulled away, and all traces of sadness were replaced with her usual cheeky smile. “So, how are *you* affording all this, Stella? Last I checked, you were shackled up with some rich guy, but this... this is something else.”

Choosing my words carefully, I replied, “I’ve... met the right people. Made some connections.”

Josie’s raised eyebrow told me she wasn’t buying it. “Connections? Is that the fancy term for it now?”

Exhaling, I set my wine glass on the table. “It’s complicated, Jo.”

She took a moment, her expression softening. “Then un-complicate it for me. I want to understand.”

I felt a pang in my chest. The life I’d built here in Monte Carlo was a world away from our shared past in Texas, and trying to bridge that gap felt daunting. But looking at Josie, with her genuine curiosity and concern, I knew I owed her an explanation. She was my baby sister after all.

Taking a deep breath, I began, hoping that by the end, she’d understand.

Chapter Twenty-Five



The Mediterranean wind that had whipped against Nico's face as they'd sipped coffee while the sun rose across the sea still lingered, its ghostly fingers tousling his hair and carrying with it a faint taste of sea salt. Their conversation from that morning kept replaying in my mind, a cinema reel of intellectual discourse, architectural marvels, and shared laughter. He had sputtered out some memorized facts about architecture that he'd mentally downloaded from Google the previous night. Eleanor had knocked him over when she showcased her own knowledge of Gothic architecture. He had expected a superficial appreciation, but her enthusiasm for flying buttresses and rib vaults was so genuine, it was almost infectious. He found himself drawn into the depths of their discussion, momentarily forgetting he wasn't actually a renowned architect and that his entire knowledge on the subject wasn't gleaned from a Wikipedia page.

He now sat across the table from Eleanor at the waterfront patio café. They sipped strong espresso and nibbled at chocolate pastries. Usually, Nico wasn't one to indulge in pastries. He was more of a *café au lait* and a morning jog type of guy, but he took a page from Stella's book. You did whatever your partner was doing. You made them feel at ease. The first and biggest mistake you could ever make, especially in the beginning, was making them feel self-conscious about any of their choices. He had snorted and questioned whether a British aristocrat could be made to feel self-conscious about anything. But Stella assured him that even the extremely wealthy, perhaps even more so, had deep-rooted insecurities.

And while a lesser person may simply shut down under such scrutiny, an aristocrat such as Eleanor may lash out.

“I’ve never tasted such delicious *pain au chocolat*,” Nico said, eagerly popping the last bite into his mouth. He was already getting a headache from the sugar, but he smiled through it. He reached for his water and cursed stupid Monaco restaurants for their tiny shot glasses of water. Stella had commented yesterday that one thing she truly missed about the United States was the buckets of tap water placed on the table without question at every restaurant. There was no automatic assumption that you would either purchase a 6-euro bottle of water or dehydrate.

“Yes, some of the best,” Eleanor commented. “One of the main reasons I travel down here every summer. British pastries are all hard as a rock. Like our souls,” she said with a wry smile.

Nico was growing rather fond of Eleanor. Maybe it was a bit of a shame he had ulterior motives here.

He tried to remember what Stella had said. If you do it right, then it is not a con. It is a mutual exchange. Eleanor gets what she wants, and Nico gets his. When done right, no one ever needs to get hurt. The relationship will simply end naturally once the time has come.

Everything has a shelf life, Stella said. Marriage is the most unnatural thing. It forces people to stay together long past their expiration dates.

Nico couldn’t agree more.

“I wonder,” Eleanor said, pulling him from his reverie. Her eyes grazed over the azure water in front of them. Nico waited patiently for her to continue. He held his breath, expecting her to call him out. To say she had known all along what he’d been up to. But instead, she tilted her head and looked at him coyly through her bright eyes. She mindlessly stroked a lock of platinum hair with a mauve fingernail.

“I wonder if you might be ready.”

Nico arched an eyebrow. “Ready?”

“Yes. I have an event. It’s a rather exclusive event. One that is not for the faint of heart, let us say. And I, of course, require a date, as you might imagine.”

Nico exhaled, feeling a sense of relief. She wasn’t kicking him off the boat just yet.

“What kind of event? Like the party the other night?”

She bit her lip.

“No, a bit more pompous, I’m afraid. It’s a wedding. A very important wedding. *Of the season*, so they say. It’s going to be a weekend-long affair at Lake Como.”

Elation washed over Nico. A weekend in Lake Como? Yes, this was precisely what he was in it for. Stella, it seemed, did know a thing or two about this game.

“It’s a white-tie affair. Dreadful things, really,” Eleanor went on. “But the wine is always top-notch and the company entertaining.”

Nico lowered his eyes in a well-practiced manner. “I’m not sure I have something suitable for a white-tie party.” It wasn’t exactly a lie. A tuxedo was one thing, but white-tie was the top of the top. And at an exclusive wedding, anything other than a bespoke designer suit would stick out like fur on the beach.

“I, of course, would have proper attire selected for you. You need not worry,” Eleanor said.

“Then I would be honored to accompany you to such an affair. If, of course, you think I am, how did you say, ready?” He said with a smile.

Eleanor laughed, blushing slightly. The gesture gave her a girlish quality. “Oh, I hope you don’t take any offense to what I said. I just mean that it’s the type of crowd that can eat one alive if one is not fully prepared.”

Nico tilted his head. “Oh, I assure you. One’s claws are quite sharp.”

She pressed her espresso to her lips. “Yes, I’ve noticed. Well then. Allow me to extend a formal invitation. It’s this coming weekend. Looks like we’ll need to do some shopping.”

Chapter Twenty-Six



Nico stood in the lobby of one of the most upscale men's clothing boutiques on the Riviera. It was the kind of place he often eyeballed as he strolled the winding streets of Monte Carlo, too vain to admit he secretly admired all that fluff and polish. But even with the tips and trinkets he received from the wealthy women in his life, he never quite had the excess cash to feel comfortable striding in and ignoring the price tags. Because this was the kind of place that ignored the price tags. If you had to ask, you couldn't afford it.

By the look on Eleanor's face, she was somebody who happily ignored the price tags. The shop clerks greeted her with familiar warmth—this was obviously not her first visit. Considering it was a men's boutique, Nico found this both curious and amusing. Clearly, he wasn't the only companion she had entertained in such a manner. He didn't take it personally. Actually, he found it a relief. She knew how to play the game too, which made him feel much less duplicitous.

He mentally pulled up Stella's lessons. You couldn't get too attached. You couldn't take things personally. Everything was a mutually beneficial transaction. Follow the rules, and no one gets hurt.

“*Bienvenue à La Boutique Demain!*” the overly coiffed shop manager greeted them with a wide smile. He wore a meticulously cut cornflower blue suit with a styled pocket square and slim cropped trousers. He eyed them both up and down greedily. Nico could never stand the salesmen in Monte Carlo, whether in an upscale shop or a tourist trap. There was

something so very un-French about pushing your wares so hard.

He reminded himself that while the similarities were vast, this was Monaco. And Monaco was most certainly not France. Monaco catered to the wondrous world of wealth and glamour and, in the end, was nothing but a giant sales tool. The Prince had monetized the entire country, and everyone was in on the hustle. Nico couldn't blame the Prince, but it still left a sour taste in his mouth. A Frenchman would never be so in your face, never so desperate. But he smiled back at the manager as genuinely as he could.

"Pleasure to be here," he said in English for Eleanor's sake, not sure as to the correct response.

"I will need my friend here fitted for a white-tie wedding," Eleanor told the manager. "It's something of a *crème de la crème*, if you catch my meaning."

He nodded. "Oui, madame. I have just the thing." He snapped his fingers like something from a movie. "Sophie? Please come and assist. Sophie will take good care of you, monsieur."

A thin young woman in tailored slacks and a white blouse hustled over. Her jet-black hair was pulled back in a severe bun, revealing a bare and serious face. Her eyes ran over him with contemplation. She tapped a short square nail against her lips a few times, then nodded curtly.

"Oui. I think the Brioni with the satin lapel."

"Wise choice," the manager concurred. "You see? She has an eye. You are in good hands. Cocktail, madame?"

"Yes. French 75, please. I'll be in the waiting salon," Eleanor said.

Nico had been treated to dinners and events, given the odd expensive trinket, and generally been made to feel appreciated, but what Eleanor had in store for him was unlike anything he

had ever experienced. It made him feel expensive, valued, and utterly cheap all in one sweep. It was deliciously intoxicating.

“You have a lovely form for things right off the rack,” Sophie said in French, standing with her measuring tape and smiling sweetly. Did she find this whole thing ridiculous? What was it like to watch people day after day drop thousands of euros on something they might only wear once?

“Thank you?” Nico said, unsure.

She laughed. “Yes, it’s a very good thing. It means you have the figure designers have in mind. And it will not require much in the way of tailoring, which is useful when you have a last-minute affair. You are lucky. You keep yourself very trim and fit.” Her hands brushed his backside in a way that felt intentional and delightfully inappropriate.

He flashed his best grin at her, bringing a rosy glow to her fresh face.

“I do my best. But I must say I don’t get fitted for a lot of white-tie suits.”

She laughed again, pushing herself up and sliding her tape into her apron. “Yes, I can tell.”

“And how can you tell?”

“By the way you let me do my work. Those who are used to it like to boss me about. Think they know what they’re doing. And they always think I take the wrong measurements. You’d be surprised how vain men can be. *‘I cannot possibly be 140 centimeters!’*”

She grinned, and Nico laughed, thinking of Stella and the way she expected everyone to jump at her well-practiced snap. But with her trim figure, he doubted she needed vanity sizing.

“I assure you, I will be an easy customer. No snapping here.”

She nodded. “Let’s get that Brioni on you. I think it’s going to be perfect.” She led him to the mirror, then slipped out and returned momentarily with a trim suit in blinding white with a shimmering pearl satin lapel. She slipped the

jacket over his shoulders, and he was indeed in awe of how well it fit instantly off the rack. The fine fabric melded to his skin.

“Yes, see? Just a little tuck here and there, and everyone will think it is bespoke for you,” Sophie said.

Nico admired himself in the mirror, allowing the full power of his vanity to unfold.

It didn't stop with one suit. By the end of the day, Eleanor had outfitted him in an entire wardrobe for the weekend. He had snug linen trousers, custom casual shirts, and a daytime blazer, as well as the proper footwear and accouterments for everything, including a sun hat, glasses, belt, and a James Bond-worthy watch.

“Suppose now all I need is a shave and a haircut,” Nico said, admiring himself in his new summer linen as he slipped it on to wear out of the shop.

Eleanor tilted her head. “No, I think you should stay exactly how you are—a little rugged. It adds to your mystique.” She wiggled her eyebrows in an unexpected way that made Nico laugh. *Mystique*. Stella had used that word, too.

“As the lady commands,” he said.

She patted her lap and stood. “Well, now that's done, I'm famished.” She turned to Sophie. “Box these up, please, and have them sent to my hotel.”

“Oui, madame. Shall we charge the card on file?” Sophie asked.

“Yes, that's fine. Come on, Nico. I think there is a table at *Le Rev* waiting for us.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven



The humidity had finally broken, surrendering to the rain that washed away the sweltering heat of a particularly unforgiving August, painting the Riviera with an almost ethereal quality. Nestled within the glamorous boutiques that lined the narrow cobblestone streets, Gabriella and I sought refuge from the rain, surrounded by the intoxicating scent of expensive perfume and silk garments.

Gabriella, ever the influential fashionista, was engrossed in a collection of intricate silk scarves, each one more beautiful than the last. I was drawn toward the array of dresses—magnificent creations of chiffon, lace, and silk.

I eyed the limited sizing—this place catered to a very specific clientele.

I allowed the cool, smooth fabric to run through my fingers, the sensation offering a tangible connection to the surreal world I had found myself in. I fingered the delicate, silky fabric. What did someone wear to a last-minute wedding with a prince, anyway? Even I was out of my league here.

“Here, try this one,” Gabriella suggested, jolting me from my reverie. She extended a stunning, teal, strapless dress. It was slinky, undeniably seductive, the color of the Mediterranean Sea.

“I’ll look like a mermaid in that one,” I chuckled, gingerly taking the dress from her.

“Think of it more like a siren,” she countered.

“Luring men to their death?” I quipped, the analogy fitting more than I cared to admit.

She shrugged nonchalantly, her eyes glinting with mischief. “I just call it like I see it. “It’s your color. It will be stunning on you.” Her reply elicited a laugh from me as I held up the dress, imagining myself wrapped in the exquisite fabric.

“Am I too short for this? I always feel the floor-length numbers swallow me whole,” I mused, studying my reflection in the full-length mirror.

In response, Gabriella produced a pair of lethal-looking, strappy stilettos. “That’s why

“Bon!” The sales associate hustled over. “A lovely choice, oui. I have only sold one other of these dresses, and it was to a German heiress.”

I smiled. She might have been lying, but I liked the idea of that.

Just as I was about to indulge in her antics, the chime of the door signaled a new arrival. I stole a glance, and my heart fell into my stomach.

Hugo strolled in on the arm of a woman with jet black hair tumbling down her back and a figure made for after-dark endeavors. She wore massive sunglasses and a silk Hermes scarf around her head. I assumed this was his new mistress. People worked fast around here. I swallowed back a bit of bile rising in my throat. I hadn’t been in love with Hugo, but seeing him so quickly replace me was like a slap in the face. His easy dismissal still stung.

The woman removed her sunglasses, and my heart gave an unexpected lurch.

Alessandra.

What the...I shook my head to make sure I was seeing things correctly. I straightened my back and squared my shoulders. I would not let him—or her—see me falter. Maybe they just happened to run into each other outside...nope, his hand went to her sculpted backside and squeezed shamelessly.

They strode by, she seeming non the wiser to me. He didn't bother removing his dark Armani sunglasses as he walked past us.

“Hugo,” I offered coldly.

He stopped and turned at the sound of his name, offering me a perfunctory nod. “Stella. What a surprise,” he responded, his voice dripping with insincerity. “You do realize these clothes cost money, don't you?”

A wave of humiliation washed over me at his rude jab. I bit back a retort, maintaining my composure as I turned away, my grip on the silk dress and my pride equally unsteady.

Alessandra turned back and looked at me. At first, her expression registered shock, then a satisfied smirk ticked at her mouth.

“Stella. Ciao.”

“And where's Marco?” I asked, trying to throw the sting back at them.

Alessandra laughed ever so effortlessly, like the villain temptress she was. “Oh. We have parted ways. As it goes.”

I offered a tight smile and didn't bother with a response.

Hugo's lips curved into a smirk as he flicked his gaze dismissively over me. Then, he turned his attention back to his new companion, leaving me standing there, shocked at the intensity of both their audacity.

“Bonjour Monsieur Revere!” the sales clerk eagerly rushed over. “We have your private salon ready.”

Private salon. Well, someone was getting ready to drop a small fortune. Against all better judgment, I spared a glance back to Hugo only to be met with his rare form of smugness. Ass. He turned back to Alessandra and slipped a hand around her waist. I felt smoke coming out of my ears.

Gabriella rushed over to me, her expression panicked. “My God. Was that Alessandra?”

“It was,” I said through gritted teeth.”

“What happened to Marco?”

I slowly shook my head. “I guess a bigger fish wandered into her net.”

“I can’t believe it. Are you okay?”

I blinked rapidly, forcing an easy smile. “I’m better than okay,” I said. “I think it’s time for champagne, don’t you?”

Gabriella laughed, looping her arm through mine.

“Need you even ask?”

“I’m buying this, then we’re having a drink.” I placed the dress on the cashier’s desk.

“*Trey bien, mademoiselle,*” the clerk said with a smile that did little to hide her discomfort at the awkwardness that had just transpired.

“Forget about Hugo. And to Hell with that backstabbing bitch,” Gabriella said with conviction as we stepped back out into the summer day. “He’s yesterday’s news. You, my dear, are dating an actual *prince* now!”

I took a deep breath. “I wouldn’t say we’re dating just yet. But yes, I know. You have a point.”

Gabi was right. I needed to let Hugo and all he represented go. That was the past, and my only path now was forward.

The potential ahead of me was limitless. I just needed to focus.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



“Are you sure you want to be out somewhere so public with me?” Nico said as we ascended the steps to the over-the-top famed Monte Carlo Casino. The plaza was filled with starry-eyed tourists, happily snapping pictures while Ferraris, Bentleys, and Rolls Royces zipped between the casino and the Hotel de Paris—where, for as little as \$16,000 a night, one could stay in the Diamond Suite with a sea view.

I flashed him a coy look. “Citizens aren’t allowed to gamble, didn’t you know? We won’t run into anyone.”

“You know only about a tenth of the people who live here are actually Monégasque.”

I playfully pushed his side. “Don’t worry about it. Just pretend like you belong.”

Nico sported a sleek, tailored sport jacket and trim trousers that were definitely elevated from his usual attire. Someone had been shopping, and I doubted it was on his dime. I wasn’t going to say it out loud, but well done, Nico.

“And me? Do *I* belong?”

I flashed my little sister an annoyed look. “No, you don’t. So just keep a low profile. Lower than low.”

She wrinkled her nose at me. I wanted to scream in frustration. I had all but begged her to stay behind—she was a complication I couldn’t afford right now. But she was undeterred. She wasn’t missing a chance to be a “high-roller” in the world’s most famous casino.

I'd loaned her one of my dresses—a simple sheer black number that unfortunately molded to her amble curves in a way that turned the modest V-neck into a plunging canyon. The sky-high studded Louboutins she'd paired with them and the excessive black eyeliner did little to lessen the effect. Josie had always had a figure made for trouble. And by the appreciative glances offered up by passing pedestrians, I geared myself up for some.

“You're so boring, sis. Here I thought I'd landed at the non-stop party.”

I rolled my eyes but ignored her. I had to remind myself she was still so young. She hadn't learned the art of subtlety.

We stepped through the doors into the ornate entry. Golden lights spilled from chandeliers overhead, bathing the Monte Carlo Casino in a lavish glow. The building was designed by Charles Garnier, a pioneer of the Belle Époque architecture adorning streets in Paris. The casino building was inaugurated by Charles III of Monaco in 1863. I'd read it once generated over 95% of the tiny Principality's revenue.

We paid the entry fee and slipped into the main lounge.

The late afternoon sun refracted through the windows, creating a prism effect. Tiny rainbows danced across our table. From my plush seat, I had a clear view of the entrance, the glittering chandelier, and the host of affluent guests who floated around the room.

Nico made his way to the bar and returned momentarily with three Grey Goose martinis, artfully adorned with a lemon twist and two perfectly round olives.

“Didn't take you for a martini drinker,” I said, accepting the drink.

He shrugged. “Seems apropos, does it not? I keep expecting James Bond to saunter in and settle at the roulette table.”

“Wouldn't that be a treat?” I grinned and sipped the crisp, aromatic cocktail.

“Only if it's the Daniel Craig version,” Josie added.

“Do you come here often, then?” Nico asked me.

“No. Rarely.”

“Not much for the cards?”

“I’m not actually half bad.” My thoughts drifted back to Texas hold ‘em parties in friends’ basements. Taking Jimmy Bartlett for all his milk money as Lone Star beers scattered across the floor. Cigarette halos adorning too much hair bleach. “But it’s not really my scene. Everyone’s all civilized now that it’s barely dark, but it gets a little rowdy for my taste. However, it’s an excellent place to people-watch. Especially if the people you’re looking for are dripping in wealth.”

“Aren’t you guys going to gamble?” Josie asked.

“No,” I said sternly. Josie looked like the petulant teenager I remembered. I sighed. “Nico and I have work to do. So why don’t you go explore? Take advantage and check out the scene.”

She practically jumped to her feet, nearly spilling her martini. “Best idea ever. Love you, sis.”

“Josie, just—just be smart, ok? And subtle.”

She flashed me a saucy look, then turned on her—or rather my—heel.

I leaned back, already exhausted by her.

“She’s a...handful, no?” Nico said.

“Oui.” I shook my head and took a long sip of the cool vodka.

“Well then, let us start the watch party.” Nico playfully shimmied his shoulders.

I smiled lazily and scanned the room. “Ok, let’s. So, the key to identifying the truly wealthy isn’t as simple as just looking for expensive clothes or flashy jewelry, especially in a place like this where everyone is literally sparkling. It’s in the subtle details. Watch their mannerisms, listen to their speech, and pay attention to their attitudes.”

I gestured subtly toward a man who had just approached the bar. “Take him, for example. His suit might not be the flashiest, but it fits him like a glove. It’s undoubtedly tailored, and it’s this season.”

“How do you know that?”

“I read the luxury men’s magazines as well as the women’s. I highly recommend it. It’s invaluable training.”

“Noted.”

“Always keep in mind, not everything of value glitters here. In recent years, I’ve noticed this trend of stealth wealth.”

“Nice little rhyme,” Nico teased.

“Makes it easy to remember. But really, what it is, is this trend toward subtlety. Think a billionaire in a simple polo shirt—but a polo shirt that costs 500 euros.”

“Ah. Oui.”

“Sometimes it’s the flashiest people who actually have the least. They are often trying to prove something.”

“So if I spot a man in worn-out trousers sipping Cristal at the bar, I know he’s my man.”

I mock glared but laughed. “Something like that. Also, check his wrist. He’s probably sporting a Patek Philippe to the tune of \$100k.”

Nico whistled.

“Exactly. But it’s not just about the clothes. Some things are harder to fake.” I nodded back toward the man at the bar. “See how he moves with an air of authority and assurance? That comes from years of privilege and wealth. He’s at ease in this setting, commanding the room effortlessly. His posture, his confidence, the way he carries himself. These are all subtle indicators of wealth.”

Nico was now staring at him so intently I was sure the man would feel his eyes.

“Listen to how he talks,” I instructed as he chatted with the bartender. His voice, although low, was clear and articulate.

His language was polished. “Usually, the very elite are always polite, yet also commanding. People who bark orders or talk down to staff are probably trying to prove something. Mask insecurity for not feeling good enough. Those with nothing to prove hardly see the staff. That sounds terribly stuck up, and I guess it is, but they’re just used to being served.”

“I’ve noticed,” Nico said, almost wincing. Sometimes I forgot he’d tended bar here for years.

“Right. So you have probably experienced both. The man who tosses a drink order your way without making eye contact but is nonetheless polite and tips well.”

“Oui. And the ones who snap their fingers and send the drink back even though it’s exactly what they asked for?”

I laughed, having also witnessed both types. “Exactly. They have a sense of entitlement, not necessarily because they think they’ve earned it. But because they were born with it. Because it’s always been there. They don’t even notice the way doors open and how champagne magically appears. It’s the norm for them.”

“Must be nice,” Nico said with a lazy half-smile.

I looked out around the room again. “OK. Now, look at that woman,” I discreetly pointed toward a statuesque woman in an elegant black pantsuit. “Her clothes are understated, not flashy, but you can see the quality in the material, in the way it falls just right. Also, her bag has no discernable labels, but you can tell by the soft leather and the solid hardware. And it’s the nonchalance with which she carries it, the air of indifference. It’s an extension of her, not something she uses to flaunt her wealth. And her necklace? Those are South Sea pearls, extremely expensive.”

Nico squinted. “How can you tell?”

I shrugged. “Again, I’ve been studying it for a long time. It takes a keen eye, but eventually, you know what to look for. She’s striking in appearance, but you see how she’s completely unfazed by the admiring glances? She’s used to them, almost immune. That’s another thing about the ultra-rich. They’re

used to admiration, used to turning heads, whether because of the way they look, their reputations, or simply dominant personalities. It's just another day for them."

I paused, sipping my martini, which was going down far too easily. "This is all just an art, Nico. It's about reading between the lines, picking up on the understated signals. It's not about the loudest or the flashiest. It's about the refined, the subtle, and the polished."

* * *

The crowds picked up as the night wore on. It was like having a front-row seat to the best performance in town.

I spotted Josie from time-to-time flitting about like a butterfly. I nervously kept an eye on her. I didn't know what I expected her to do, and I supposed that was the problem. She was unpredictable. I half expected to find her ordering pickle-back shots at the bar.

Nico, being the ever-so-charming Frenchman, had eventually been roped into a gaggle of older wealthy ladies, who, with their over-the-top baubles and flashy summer dresses a little too loud for polite society, resembled overdressed peacocks more than anything else. Each woman was trying to outdo the other, but their shared goal was obvious—Nico's attention.

I stood near a roulette table, trying to mask my amusement. The ladies fawned over Nico, giggling like schoolgirls at his witty comments and sly compliments. His expressions were priceless—humoring them, yet constantly throwing me exasperated looks. He was good at this. Much better than I had ever given him credit for. A born hustler.

Finally, he flashed me a look that begged for a reprieve. Observing his distress, I decided to step in, not because I actually felt any pity for him, but because the whole spectacle was just too amusing to resist. Sauntering over to them, I plastered on my most charming smile.

“Ladies,” I said, lightly touching Nico’s arm as though marking my territory. The women eyed me warily, their smiles faltering a bit. “Isn’t Nico just the life of the party?”

A collective murmur of agreement rippled through them.

“Oui. He is quite charming,” one particularly well-maintained woman with razor-sharp cheekbones said.

I turned to Nico, our eyes meeting in silent communication. I winked. He glared back, but there was an understanding in his eyes.

“Nico, there is someone I desperately need you to meet. Would you mind?”

“My pleasure. Ladies, please excuse me.”

The women let out a collective, “*Ahhh.*”

He offered the group a silly bow and turned to walk with me. I led him out of eyesight from his new friends and grinned.

“Your heroics are appreciated, mademoiselle,” he said. “I was running out of charming one-liners.”

“I expect you to return the favor one day,” I replied. “But you were doing great. You’re a natural.”

“So you keep saying. I have worked up a thirst. Oui?”

I debated, eyeing the bar like a holy grail. I shouldn’t overindulge, but... it had been a hell of a day. Week. Month. Life.

“Maybe just one more. A very teeny one.” I pressed my thumb and forefinger together.

He sauntered off to the bar, tossing a flirty wave to his new friends, then returned momentarily with two more martinis. I sipped and savored, the bite of the vodka just what I needed.

We stood for a moment in silence, taking in the night. The casino buzzed with life, the high stakes and whispered stories morphing into the fabric of the Monte Carlo night. I was filled with a mixture of exhaustion and a strange new exhilaration. It was fun to have a partner, a contemporary who knew exactly

what I was going for. Even Gabriella didn't really know me. We shared a knowing look, an understanding that only people like us could fathom. It was a peculiar bonding, a shared kinship in this strange world of pretense and extravagance.

Finally, I leaned in. "Think you have another round in you?"

With a resigned sigh, he made a show of straightening his jacket, preparing to dive back into the lion's den of fawning women. "Who is our next victim?"

I strummed my nails against the glass. "Let's go to the tables in the back. Watching the way people win—and lose—great amounts of money is both amusing and educational."

"After you, mademoiselle," he said with a playful roll of his eyes.

I drained my martini and marched into battle.

The casino buzzed with the soft, intoxicating lull of murmuring voices, clinking glasses, and the occasional cheer of triumph. As we navigated through the crowd, I shot Nico a warning look.

"Keep it casual. Don't draw attention."

Nico merely shrugged, adjusting his jacket. "When have I ever drawn unwanted attention?"

I mock glared. "It's the thing you seem to be best at."

"My confidence is infectious. I won't apologize for it."

"Confidence, arrogance."

Nico grinned stupidly.

We reached the roulette table, the wheel spinning lazily as the croupier's monotone voice echoed the previous number.

"Let's just place a small bet," I said in a low voice.

"Why start small?" He flashed me a dubious grin.

"Don't get overly confident now. Just be cool and don't seem too eager."

"Me? Never."

Nico slid a stack of chips across the plush layout.

My skin pricked at the amount. “Nico, that’s too—” but the dealer whisked the stack away before I could calmly convince him to reconsider.

“*Trente-deux, rouge,*” Nico said assertively, pointing to the red number on the table. The croupier nodded, placing Nico’s bet. As he spun the wheel, Nico turned back to me. Panic swelled in me as I watched the wheel spin. Nico seemed entirely unbothered by the outcome either way.

I ground my jaw and forced a pleasant smile. “Idiot,” I muttered under my breath.

The world seemed to slow down as the ball danced across the spinning wheel, finally falling into its resting place. The croupier’s voice echoed in the opulent room. “Red, thirty-two.”

Cheers erupted around me. A tide of patrons, attracted by the buzz, began to close in, patting Nico on the back. The croupier slid a mountain of chips to Nico.

I stared at him with a mix of disbelief and annoyance. “You just had to show off, didn’t you?”

Nico looked both smugly satisfied and giddy. I eyed the stack and did a quick calculation. That had to be...

“Jesus, Nico. That’s about ten thousand Euro.”

He shrugged. “What can I say, Stella,” he said, picking up a chip and flipping it in the air, “Lady Luck seems to favor the audacious.” He tipped the dealer then tossed a chip toward me with a wink.

“Drinks on Nico!” Josie’s twang rose above the din as she appeared at our side. I cringed. Why couldn’t anyone follow directions? “Well done, Frenchie.”

Nico playfully flicked a chip to Josie.

* * *

The night stretched on and so did my exhaustion. My feet were also killing me. I hadn't had nearly enough downtime this summer to let them recover from strutting in stilettos for hours on end, night after night.

The gentle murmur of the casino's patrons enveloped the room, punctuated by the clinking of glasses and the occasional exclamation from someone having won or lost big. The night hadn't gone how I'd hoped exactly, but in the end, Nico was 10,000 Euro richer, I'd managed to get our bar tab covered—with a complimentary dinner voucher thrown in for Le Salon Rose for being "such charming patrons," — and Josie had yet to do anything too wildly embarrassing.

That was, until I heard a familiar, slurred voice rise above the hum.

"Come on! Let's get another round, on me! Or rather, on him!" Josie's twangy laughter echoed through the packed room.

Oh, God.

Whipping my head around, I spotted her, glass in hand, draping herself dramatically over a group of older, tuxedo-clad men. They seemed equally amused and bewildered by her boldness. The straps of her tight dress were falling down, leaving little to the imagination. Her cheeks were flushed, and even from a distance, I could tell her eyes were glassy.

Nico, sensing my alarm, leaned in and whispered. "Is she ok?"

I nodded tersely. "I need to handle this. Delicately."

Approaching Josie, I tried to use my most calming, placating voice. "Josie, let's take a break, okay? I need to talk with you for a moment."

But Josie wasn't having it. She twirled away from me, tossing back her auburn hair. "Come on, Stell! These gentlemen are *fascinating*. And so generous." She dangled a heavy gold necklace in front of me, winking. "Did you know Ivan here is in oil? Just like home, eh?"

Ivan, apparently, chuckled and said in a heavy Russian accent. “Your sister is quite the character, Miss...Stella, was it?”

Great. My sister was hanging on Russian oligarchs now. Perfect.

“Does her spirit run in the family?” Another said with a lecherous grin, his eyes running over me. I resisted gagging.

But then a chill ran down my spine, realizing that Josie’s word vomit was putting my reputation at risk.

I smiled. “Sister? Oh, she’s so funny, isn’t she? We roomed together at Université Paris Cité. We grew to be like sisters, it’s true. Come on, Josie, we need to head home now. So nice to meet you, gentlemen.”

Josie flashed me a petulant look that indicated she would not be leaving her new friends.

“The night is young,” Ivan said. His hand ran up Josie’s back and I saw red.

I nearly said something I was about to regret when Nico stepped up and touched my arm.

In an overly thick French accent, he said, “Mademoiselle, I am the casino manager. Perhaps it’s time we head to a quieter place. This establishment has its... decorum and you are a bit loud. *S’il vous plaît.*”

Josie’s defiant eyes met Nico’s, but there was something in his tone that even her intoxicated mind seemed to understand. Maybe it was respect or maybe a challenge.

“Right. But only because this handsome Frenchman asked so nicely.” She winked at him. “Sorry for any disturbance.”

Nico offered his arm, and Josie, with a dramatic sigh, looped hers through his. As we made our way out of the casino, I ignored the curious whispers and stares. Surly our little trio wasn’t important enough to stand out.

Outside, I turned to Nico, gratitude flooding me. “Thank you. I’m so sorry. She’s—“

But he shook his head. “It’s okay, Stella. Families can be... complicated.”

The sound of retching yanked us both around.

I groaned. Nico patted my shoulder.

“I will call us a taxi,” Nico said as we watched Josie unload the contents of her stomach into a bed of artfully planted gardenias.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



“Hey, I’m—I’m sorry about Josie.” I said as we sat, utterly exhausted in my hotel suite. The rumble of Josie’s snores vibrated through the doors. “It’s—”

“*Non*. You don’t have to apologize. You don’t have to explain. Family is—it’s complicated, *oui?*”

“*Oui*, indeed.

“You can talk about it if you want though. It seems, well... well, it seems very complicated indeed.”

I half-laughed, but I stopped short. I didn’t want to talk about Josie. It felt too personal. Josie, with her wild curls and wide blue eyes that mirrored my own, had always been the firecracker of the family. Eight years my junior, she was always daring, relishing the thrill of the chase—whatever the chase might be. Our small-town Texas life was too confining for her spirit, but instead of channeling her energy into her future, by the time she was fourteen, Josie was restless, teetering on the edge of rebellion.

It began with minor infringements—sneaking out to meet friends, the occasional truancy, coming home late with alcohol on her breath. Then, the stakes got higher. One day, I got a call from the Whicksy Lake sheriff, informing me Josie had been caught with a group of friends carrying drugs. That was the day my heart sank, and I realized Josie’s restlessness had driven her into a dangerous path. If I didn’t help her and help her fast, she was going to end up just like the rest of Whiskey Lake’s trash—an addicted, pregnant high school dropout with

no future beyond the local gas station. The ensuing years were a painful blur of rehabilitation centers, counseling sessions, court visits, and sleepless nights. It felt like a cruel irony that I was living the high life in on the French Riviera while my baby sister was spiraling out of control back home. But I made it my mission to pull Josie out of the hole she had dug for herself. I would spend hours on end on transatlantic calls, consoling her, pleading with her, sometimes even fighting with her. I saw her at her worst, but I also saw a spark in her, a desire to change.

Eventually, with much effort and countless heart-to-heart conversations, Josie made a turnaround. She managed to kick her drug habit and got her high school diploma through an alternative program. I was proud beyond words but also knew that getting her out of Texas was crucial. The environment, the memories, they were too fresh, too real. That town was like quicksand.

So, I made a proposal—I would finance her education if she'd enroll in college and leave Texas. I remember the day she agreed over a Skype call. There was fear in her eyes, yes, but also a flicker of hope, a glimpse of the old Josie who used to climb trees and dream of the world beyond our sleepy town.

Now, Josie was studying Sociology in Atlanta. Or at least she was until last week, apparently. I wouldn't say the journey had been entirely smooth. There had been a few missteps, a few relapses, but she was holding on and nearing graduation. For the first time in a long time, Josie had a future that didn't involve courtrooms or rehabilitation centers, and that was a victory in itself. And while I lived in a world of opulence and glamour, knowing that I'd played a part in saving my little sister from a dark path was, by far, my proudest achievement.

“I don't want to talk about me. Let's talk about you. You did well tonight,” I said as Nico artfully plucked the cork from the bottle of Bordeaux. “The clothes look good on you. Well done.”

He didn't miss a beat as he flashed me a look.

“I had a good tutor. It seems you know what you’re doing. I didn’t know tonight would be so lucrative.”

“I think you might owe me a tip.”

He smiled and filled up two wine glasses, then handed one to me.

“Merci,” I said, taking a long, satisfying sip. I had been completely irritated with him for his bold bet, but in hindsight, it was all pretty funny. And hey, Nico was now ten thousand richer, which made me feel a lot less bad about the Excalibur fiasco.

Teaching turned out to be both rewarding and exhausting. It was one thing to feel like you knew what you were doing for yourself, but entirely another to have to put it into words. I imagined it was like being an expert at math and then having to actually explain your work. Not everyone had the skill set, but as it turned out, I wasn’t half bad.

“You’ll get better every day. Every conversation gets a little easier, flows a little more naturally. You should have seen me when I first stepped off that plane in Nice.” I laughed to myself as the memory flooded my mind. A tattered backpack and mousy hair in a messy knot. Beat up Adidas and ripped jeans.

“Tell me about it,” Nico said, pulling me from the memory.

“Huh?” I said, coming to attention.

“Tell me about the beginning. How did it start? How did you become the marvelous creature you are today?”

My mouth fell open a little, then I blushed, lowered my eyes, and laughed. “You don’t care about all that.”

“On the contrary, I care very much. You have come a long way, I think.”

I looked back up and met his eyes. “A very long way indeed.” I sipped my wine and tried hard to think of how to change the subject. Nico just stared back at me with amusement.

“I’m waiting,” he said. I laughed. Then I sighed and set down my glass.

“Fine, fine. Ok, a little history. I got here when I was twenty-four. I’d left Texas as fast as I could and went to school in Los Angeles.”

“Let me guess, you’re from a nowhere small town where nothing ever happens, and no one goes anywhere,” Nico said.

I tilted my head. “And how would you know that?”

He grinned and sipped his wine. “Takes one to understand. Besides, why else would you leave? Why else would you try so hard to reinvent yourself? People who come from good places don’t usually leave to end up on the other side of the world pretending to be somebody new.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Who says I’m somebody new?”

“Nobody has to say it. I won’t pretend that I know you, but I know that all of this,” he waved his hand in front of me, “is a front for something else. And your sister is kind of a dead giveaway to your origins.”

Maybe it was the wine, loosening my lips, but I didn’t have the strength to argue or pretend. I shrugged. I laughed lightly. “She’s doing her best to blow my cover, it’s true. You’re right. I come from nowhere, from nothing. Single mom, no money. No future. But I managed to get myself a scholarship to school and find a new path. It took a lot of hard work, but I clawed my way out of it.”

Nico said nothing for a moment, just stared at me, as if he was studying me. “How did you go from that girl to this?”

I sighed. “When I got here, I was lucky to meet the right people. I just kept elbowing my way in, latching onto to one person after the next who could teach me anything at all. Open that next door. Just help me get one step higher up the ladder. Five years later, here I am.”

“That’s impressive. Most people can’t rise above their circumstances, let alone rise to what you have in such a short amount of time.”

“It’s not enough, though. I still haven’t gone far enough.”

“And what would be far enough? Why don’t you just marry one of these guys and cash it in?”

“Because I don’t want to marry any of them. I don’t—” I shook my head. I wasn’t sure I could possibly explain it in a way that he would understand or accept. “I want to be free on my own. I want to have my own means of supporting myself. I can’t be reliant on somebody else.”

“But aren’t you right now?”

“Sort of. But in the way that somebody is reliant on a paycheck. I don’t lie to anyone. I mean, they might not know exactly where I come from, but it’s not like I’m tricking them into anything. And in the meantime, I save. I’ve stashed away a good amount. I’m getting there, but it’s not enough to just give it all up.”

“And God forbid you have to get a regular job?” Nico said with a smirk.

I mock-glared at him and laughed. “Can you imagine me working behind the counter at a shop? No, I don’t think I have those kinds of life skills. I have a very specific résumé. And I think it’s best if I see it through. Besides, I have to—”

“Have to?” Nico asked.

I sighed. “Look, Josie—she’s had a really rough go for a while. Drugs, boys, trouble with the cops, you name it. Our town, it has this way of swallowing you up, trapping you. But I promised her if she got herself out, if she could get to college, I’d pay for it. And she did. So I do.”

I blinked back some rogue tears thinking of the life I left behind.

Nico said nothing for a moment. “You’re an incredible person, Stella.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know about that. But you can see why I can’t just walk away. Why I have to keep going. It’s not just me.” I spared a glance at the closed doors to the bedroom. I met his eyes. “But someday. Someday I will.”

“And what is it you want then? When this is all said and done?”

His words sent heat to my cheeks. “Freedom. A house of my own overlooking the sea. Or maybe tucked away in the vineyards. I want peace. To be myself again.”

I felt my eyes prickling as I thought about it all. The dream was so real, so vivid, I could taste it, but the reality of its distance was still painful. I shook off the feelings.

“And who is the real Stella, then?”

I half-laughed. I wasn’t even sure I knew anymore. “I’m still working on that. But I know I want to wake up and live my day on my terms. I want to do yoga. Learn to cook.”

“To cook? You can’t cook?”

I shrugged. “Not really. I haven’t had much need for it. But it was something I liked when I was a kid. And I think I’d enjoy it.”

There was an amused twinkle in Nico’s eyes. “What?” I said.

He smiled and shook his head. “Nothing. I didn’t peg you for the culinary type. But I think that’s great. Maybe I can teach you sometime.”

I raised my brow. “You cook?”

He shrugged. “On occasion. It’s cathartic. And you know us French take cuisine quite seriously.”

“It sounds silly, doesn’t it?” I said. “So simple and... mundane, compared to all this.” I gestured vaguely at our surroundings.

“No, it doesn’t sound silly at all. It sounds peaceful and authentic. It sounds like you.” He studied me, his eyes thoughtful. “You’re too good for this life, Stella. You deserve more.”

His words lit a tiny spark in me. Was it a spark of warmth or annoyance? I wasn’t sure. He didn’t know me. Who was he to say what I deserved?

“Enough about me. Let’s talk about your Lady Eleanor.”

Nico gave me the courtesy of not pushing it. I got the feeling he, too, knew what it was like to guard yourself from the world. To not want the world to see who you really are.

Because that was the thing about the world—if you showed it your weak points, that’s exactly where it would stab you.

Chapter Thirty



Tucked in Italy's stunning lake district in the shadow of the snow-capped Alps, Lake Como was a storybook land meant for communing with nature and forces bigger than myself. I had visited before, of course, but its charm never dulled for me. Every time was like seeing it through a new lens.

We hopped on a small private jet in Nice and were whisked over Italy. Just an easy hour's train ride north of Milan, Como felt a world away from the bustle of Italy's second-largest city. Wistful 19th-century villas were overgrown with ancient vines that seemed to be longing to tell their stories. Dislocated palm trees, standing in stark contrast so far north, appeared to be held captive. It was a place crafted for poets and artists to lose themselves.

I felt slightly on edge as I approached the luxe villa on the outskirts of Bellagio, the Lake's pearl village. I wasn't sure why. It wasn't the first weekend away I had spent with one of my gentleman friends. Maybe it was leaving Josie alone in my hotel room in a strange city. She was in her twenties now, true, but I still felt so responsible for her. But I had to live my life right now. I couldn't fight everyone's battles.

This was one of the more luxurious trips I had ever been on. Perhaps it was my new companion. For all intents and purposes, he was a step above Hugo, a significant improvement from many of the men I found myself smiling at. He wasn't just some billionaire but legitimate European royalty. And he was handsome, in a swarthy kind of way. The American in me wanted to laugh. I was on the arm of a bona

fide Spanish prince. Granted, some distant cousin of some royal, who stood zero chance of ever inheriting anything other than a title and a bank account, but still. I decided to enjoy the experience for what it was. Who back home in my swamp town could ever say they had attended a party at a villa on Lake Como as the guest of a prince? No one, that's who. If only I cared about anyone back home enough to gloat.

Besides, Alejandro was just plain old nice. That was a rarity. Men in my orbit could be fun and charming, but they were never nice. Not even Nico was *nice*.

“What do you think? Not too shabby, si?” Alejandro asked at my side as we stepped from the hired car onto the vast estate.

I simpered. “I suppose it will do. If I really want to live like the masses.”

He grinned and pressed a hand to my back.

Alejandro and I were greeted by the butler, who had one of the footmen lead us to our rooms. Yes, that's correct—the butler and the footman. As per my usual, I had insisted that Alejandro and I have separate rooms. It was not lady-like, I insisted, to be sharing rooms in public like this. It was always the ruse that I held onto. Until I had established a solid dating rapport, I did not share bedrooms with my companions. I was very particular about who I slept with. Attraction was only part of the equation. It didn't matter if I was wildly attracted to the person. Until I had properly set my mark and ensured a certain level of security, I would not so much as get undressed in front of anyone. That was a privilege reserved for the very few. It kept them wanting, desiring. And desire was power.

It also protected me.

Nico's words ran through my mind. Did that make me a prostitute? No. If I were a prostitute, I would've gone to bed with anyone willing to pay. I shook my head, silently chastising myself. Why was I so concerned about what Nico thought of me, anyway? He was under my skin far too deep, and I didn't like it. I needed to gouge him out like a buried tick. Whatever good idea I thought it was taking him under my

wing, it clearly wasn't. I was no teacher. I was someone who worked alone. That's how I preferred to go through life. I had plenty of companionship. I didn't need someone to be that close to me. Because he was too close. I saw that now. It made me uncomfortable to have had someone see behind my mask. The mask I had so carefully constructed these past five years. It was far too vulnerable to know that with just a single tug, he might unravel the delicate tapestry I had woven. I had been stupid to let him get so close.

It would be good to have some distance for a few days. Here, at this posh weekend-long affair, I could let myself truly shine. I could unleash all my potential, all the talents I had cultivated these past years. Perhaps this could be my final project. Prince Alejandro Mateo Juan Carlos Bourbon de Granada was wealthy enough that if I played my cards right, I might make enough to finally retire from this game. To finally move on to something a little less taxing—like lounging around my very own villa somewhere along the Cote d'Azur, learning to make pesto and doing yoga with the sunrise.

Just as I was smiling at these thoughts, I heard a familiar laugh.

No. No, no, no. Not here. Not now. Why hadn't he said something?

Chapter Thirty-One



Nico stepped from the luxury sedan onto the lakefront property in a well-tailored Brioni sport coat and fine Italian loafers. He thought he'd be more nervous this weekend, but he was strangely calm. He took in the view stretching kilometers into the distance with the Alps towering beyond, white-capped even in summer. A brisk breeze brushed past—a welcome relief from the sultry weather of summer in Monaco. He felt alive, confident, on fire, ready to tackle this new challenge. Eleanor slipped her arm through his and smiled.

“Our audience awaits, sir.”

He bowed slightly. “Of course, your Ladyship.”

She smirked at his theatrics, but Nico thought she secretly enjoyed it.

They were greeted at the door by the butler—a butler!—a tall, thin man with salt and pepper hair and coal-black eyes that Nico imagined missed nothing under his roof.

“*Benvenuta a Villa Verde, Signora, Signori.* I am Sr. Gisepe,” the butler said in crisp English with a thick Italian accent.

“Ciao. I am Lady Eleanor Devry.”

“Ah, si, Lady Devry. Benvenuta! And your guest is,” he scanned his iPad, “Nicolas LeClair?”

Eleanor nodded and pulled Nico a little tighter. “Si, Signore.”

“We are most delighted to have you. You will find your rooms are ready with the previously noted refreshments waiting for you. Sr. Milano will handle your baggage and see you to your rooms comfortably.”

Sr. Gisepe snapped his fingers, and a moment later, a footman scuttled over. Two more ran to the town car to retrieve their luggage.

Exhilaration shot through Nico’s veins. This was what Stella had been talking about. This was the life she had been leading for the past few years? He wanted to laugh at all the things he had apparently been missing out on. While he had been toiling away at a bar, carefully crafting drinks with an equally crafted smile for wealthy heiresses and tourists, hoping to squeeze out a few trinkets and a day on a yacht, Stella had been living like a princess. He had a whole new level of respect for the minx.

They made their way through the villa foyer, and Nico’s breath caught. Striking white walls climbed to the sky. The domed ceiling, made of precious Italian Lasa white marble, boasted brilliant ornate frescoes telling heroic tales.

“This villa was built in 1573 by Count Giovanni Anguissola, governor of Como, who decided to transform the fresh spring and the surrounding land into an iconic location,” the footman said chattily as he led them up the winding staircase flanked by Romanesque pillars.

“It is practically built into the waterfalls, you see. We have some of the highest security on the lake. Even bomb-proof doors and impenetrable rooms.”

“Is that really necessary?” Nico asked.

The footman shrugged. “With the caliber of our guests, one never knows. We’ve had a lot of famous people here over the years: Byron, Shelley, Liszt, Prince Joseph II.”

“Impressive indeed,” Nico whispered. What ghosts lingered in these walls?

Chapter Thirty-Two



After freshening up and changing from my traveling clothes, I now stood beside Prince Alejandro de Granada, sipping a crisp Pinot Grigio from a crystal glass and scanning the crowd. This wasn't the Jet-set crowd, the international film crowd, or the tax evaders. No, this was ancient money. This was the original "It" Crowd—the people with titles dating back centuries, those who owned tracts of land worth so much money it could never be sold. This was true aristocracy, the kind that didn't care about "F-you" money if you had to earn it. Even I felt a little out of my depth. It was uncharted territory of the sink-or-swim variety.

I turned and locked eyes with Nico across the villa grounds. I'd done everything I could to avoid him, but I knew it was inevitable. My breath caught. He was on the arm of Lady Eleanor. I was filled with a mixture of annoyance and pride—well done, Nico! You must have had a brilliant teacher... but my stomach tightened, and I felt my heart drop into my gut. How had I not known he would be here? Why hadn't he told me about this? When we both shared we'd be doing a weekend away, neither of us shared specifics. I had to wonder why.

The questions raced through his eyes as well, and we both stood in awkward silence, both of us rushing to calculate the next move. We were off script, and I didn't like it one bit.

But it was fine. Everything was fine. Nico and I were partners, on the same team. This didn't have to be disastrous.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity but was likely just mere seconds, I forced my body to relax. I flashed an easy smile and a gentle wave in Nico's direction.

Prince Alejandro stared at Nico and Eleanor curiously and then leaned into me. "Do you know them?"

"Yes," I said casually. "I met them at a party in Monaco recently. Nice couple. She's British, and I believe he's French." The lie came out and then I remembered the Formula 1 race. Crap. Alejandro would remember him. We were plastered across the internet in a Marco Bellini sandwich, everyone would recognize him.

"And who are they exactly?" Alejandro asked incredulously. He might be more laid-back than most, but pedigree and background were still of utmost importance to him, as it was to most European aristocracy.

"Eleanor and Nico. I believe she's some British peer of sorts. As for her date—actually you know what, you met him briefly at the race the other day."

Alejandro squinted and then his face lit up with recognition. "Ah, right. Your little tango partner? What was that about anyway?"

My cheeks burned. "Yeah, um, that was just one of those random awkward encounters. It was nothing."

"Well, let us greet them properly, shall we?" Alejandro said. "Lady Devry. I might know her come to think of it."

My nerves burned a trail down my spine, but I did not let it show. I flashed a pearly white smile and nodded. "I know how you royals all run in the same circles. Half of you are related." I gently poked his side, and he laughed half-heartedly.

As Alejandro and I approached, I saw the worry and concern flash in Nico's eyes. I tried to offer him a friendly look, communicating my intentions: I come in peace! But at the same time, I also wanted to yell out, "Keep your cool!" Nico, surprisingly, seemed to get my message. He kept his posture light, his smile easy. He leaned in a little closer to Eleanor. My stomach turned over. What was wrong with me?

“Bonjour,” Nico said as we approached. “Stella, wasn’t it?” His accent was a touch thicker, a touch more velvet. Nice touch.

He’s good, I thought. Very good.

“Bonjour,” I replied. I leaned in and kissed both cheeks lightly.

“You recall Lady Eleanor Devry,” Nico said. Eleanor extended her hand to me.

“Bonjour,” I replied, taking her hand. “Madame. How lovely it is to see you here in Lake Como. I didn’t know you were acquainted with the Earl?”

“Oh yes, we go way back. Incestuous circles, you know,” Eleanor said with a plummy laugh. I hated to admit it, but I liked her.

She turned and locked eyes with Prince Alejandro.

“Oh, Your Highness,” Eleanor greeted.

“Lady Devry,” Prince Alejandro replied. “It is you. I thought I recognized you. How lovely it is to see you. I don’t believe we’ve crossed paths since the ball in Liechtenstein.”

Eleanor pressed a hand to her chest, her array of diamonds catching the light. “Oh! The one with the swan parade? What an evening that was. Did you ever connect with Princess Aisha in Dubai?”

Alejandro looked appropriately nostalgic. “Sadly, no. She was called away to a tour in the Grenadines the week I was there.”

“Oh, what a shame. She was really a good time.”

I bit back laughter. It seemed like contrived dialogue from some poorly written American film. Nico seemed to be sharing the same sentiment, based on his barely contained smile. But no, I reminded myself. This was the ridiculousness of these people. And that was why I knew, as hard as I worked to fit in seamlessly, this would never truly be my world. It was something you were born into and could never be earned. I would always be an outsider.

We exchanged a few additional pleasantries before Eleanor and Alejandro went off on a tangent about some aristocratic family whom they both knew. I took the opportunity to lean into Nico.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were going to be here?” I asked in a low, controlled tone, without breaking my smile.

“I see that’s going to be the standard greeting from now on,” Nico replied.

“Don’t be smart with me,” I snapped.

“Well, could you blame me for wanting to attend the hottest wedding of the European season? You said you wanted me to up my game. Well, here I am. Quite up.”

I simmered with annoyance, which I knew I shouldn’t have. It was very impressive he was there at all. “Yes, you’ve certainly climbed high in a short amount of time. How did you manage an invitation to this? I barely did.”

“As it happens, as you so gently pointed out, I had a good foundation to work with. And I was quickly able to secure the trust and companionship of the very lovely Lady Eleanor Devry, daughter of the late Earl of Devry.”

I felt a jolt run through me—both invigorating and infuriating. “Oh, how lucky you are.”

I heard the salt in my tone but didn’t care.

“Stella, why are you upset? What’s the big deal?”

I sighed, trying to rein in my annoyance. Why was I so upset?

“I just don’t like surprises, that’s all. I wish I’d known you’d be here is.”

“You didn’t exactly tell me either.”

“Yes, you’re right. Things with Alejandro are...well, they’re brand new and I just want to make sure everything goes perfectly, okay?”

He held up his hands in surrender. “Okay. No problem from me.”

I heard my name and snapped around back toward Alejandro. “What was that?” I asked sweetly.

He spared a glance at Nico, then smiled at me. “I just said we should probably freshen up before the drinks hour.”

“Yes, we should.” I slipped my arm through his. Perhaps the prince would get lucky after all. Maybe he might be the kind I was willing to share a room with. I wanted to see how Nico liked that idea.

And why did I care whether or not Nico liked that idea? My head was not in a good place, obviously.

“Come, Your Royal Highness,” I said theatrically.

Alejandro smiled and bowed to Lady Devry. “You heard the lady. And when the lady beckons, who am I to protest?”

We said our goodbyes and turned to go. I kept a subtle eye trained on Nico’s reaction. The flash of annoyance in his steely eyes did not disappoint.

Chapter Thirty-Three



The main wedding ceremony was a semi-private affair, at which most of the guests were not in attendance. I envied them as I sat through the two-hour-long Catholic ceremony, full of kneeling, standing, communion, Latin, and incense. I made a mental note: should I ever settle down, I should not marry into a devout Italian family solely to avoid such an ordeal.

Finally liberated, I stepped into the grand ballroom for the post-ceremony drinks reception and breathed a very unprofessional sigh.

“I know. Antiquated and boring,” Alejandro said, smiling.

I laughed lightly. “Sorry. I should be more polite.”

“Don’t worry. No offense taken. I understand tradition, but I think even God would have appreciated the abbreviated version of that. Come. Drinks await.”

The grand ballroom was utterly exquisite. I could say that with absolute objectivity. I had seen some fine event halls, ballrooms, and castles in the last five years, and I could say that this rivaled even the most opulent. By the look in Alejandro’s eyes, I could tell that I was not off my mark in my assessment. He would likely have been in some of the finest palaces in all of Europe, and it would appear he also agreed. The Earl and his new Italian bride spared no expense this weekend.

But—and I wasn’t too proud to admit it—I was looking right at home in a long champagne dress with subtle pale blue beading, elegant enough to stand out but not so much that I

would cause a stir. That was the key—subtlety. I had wound my chestnut hair back into a delicate chignon and slipped my painted toes into sky-high champagne-colored Giuseppe Zanotti heels with crystal beading. I clutched the matching handbag to my side.

Prince Alejandro looked equally striking, wearing a tailored suit of a similar sky blue and polished Italian loafers. His dark hair was slicked back, and he had just a hint of stubble growing around his chin that only someone of his status could get away with at such a prestigious event.

I instinctively glanced around the room, studying faces and trying to determine whom I might already know and whom I should most definitely get to know. My stomach turned over when I spotted two very familiar faces walking into the room. Hugo was there, looking as bold as ever, and on his arm was none other than Alessandra. Apparently, they really were an item. How had the gossip columns not picked up on that one?

Hugo's eyes landed on me, and we exchanged an uncomfortable glance. Then he smiled faintly when he noticed Alejandro at my side. His expression registered confusion, but then it softened and he took Alessandra's arm, leading her toward us.

"Stella, I'm surprised to see you here," Hugo said, all polished charm.

I forced myself to smile back sweetly. "Hugo. Lovely to see you again. And with Alessandra no less. What an interesting choice."

Alessandra's eyes narrowed in fury, but she didn't dignify it with a response.

"Alejandro, is that you?" Hugo inquired.

"Hugo, my man. Good to see you. It's been a while."

"I didn't know you were acquainted with Stella," Hugo said, his eyes darting back and forth between us.

"Oh, yes. We recently reconnected. In fact, we can thank you for introducing us all those years ago at the event in

Ibiza.” Alejandro’s hand slipped around my waist, pulling me in a little tighter.

Alessandra seemed to register who Alejandro was, and her eyes widened a bit.

“Oh, let me introduce you,” I interjected. “Alessandra, this is Prince Alejandro de Granada. Alejandro, this is... someone I used to know.” I flashed Alessandra a look that said, *you don’t win this round*.

“Pleasure to meet you, Mademoiselle,” Alejandro said, politely kissing her hand.

Just then, the music shifted to a waltz I recognized—the kind of antiquated tune meant for another time, a time in which so many of these people still lived. A time of glitz, elegance, and old-world fancies.

Nervously, I spared a glance at Alejandro. I needed to extricate myself from the situation immediately.

“Do you hear that? I think the waltz is beckoning us to dance.

He grinned and extended his arm. “Should we show them how it’s done?”

We stepped onto the dance floor where couples of all manners were polishing the marble with their expensive shoes. Alejandro was an accomplished dancer, no doubt. He pulled and moved me around with practiced precision. But while the steps were in sync and meticulous, it struck me that he lacked passion. There was no feeling in his movements. But it didn’t matter. I knew the moves. I swayed and dipped right in time with him.

His hand moved down my back slowly with each turn. And then his palm was grazing the base of my spine, his fingers gently brushing my tailbone. I resisted the urge to stiffen. For all intents and purposes, I should be thrilled at the idea of dating Alejandro. He was handsome, funny, rich. But somehow, his touch felt off, wrong. It sent tendrils of unease up my spine.

He leaned in closer to me, so close I smelled the gin on his warm breath.

“I am so glad you came with me this weekend,” he said in my ear, his words in cadence with the music.

“I am too. Thank you for the invitation.”

“I think, perhaps, we could have spared them a room, however.”

I stiffened. My cheeks reddened. For once, I didn’t know what to say or how to react. I merely stayed silent, falling into the mindless steps of the waltz.

Alejandro sensed my unease and leaned away. “You are not happy with that idea, I see.”

The music slowed as the song came to an end. “Oh, no,” I stuttered, trying to find an appropriate response. “Not at all. I just—”

A welcome tap on my shoulder broke my jumbled thoughts. I saw Alejandro’s eyes go cold with annoyance, and I had a feeling who I would find as I turned.

“I find myself without a partner temporarily,” Nico said smoothly. “Perhaps you could entertain me while Lady Devry makes her rounds?”

I feigned a blush. “Well, if Alejandro doesn’t mind?”

Nico flashed a mouthwatering grin. “I can’t imagine His Highness could possibly object to sharing your beauty with the world. He doesn’t seem the covetous sort.”

Alejandro snorted but let go of my arm. What could he really say to that? And although I loathed being passed around as though I were a pretty object, I played the part.

“Well then,” I extended an arm to Nico. “I do hope your waltz is on par.”

“Ah. Sadly, it’s not. That is why I’ve requested something better.”

On cue, the music shifted, and I felt my body instantly warm to the sound of a Spanish guitar. What the hell was Nico

playing at?

“I’m not sure I know the moves,” I said with a shaky breath.

He leaned in, his lips brushing my ear. “Oh, something tells me you’ll do just fine.”

Nico slipped a hand around my waist and pulled me close. The music revved up, and so did our steps. The way Nico moved sent shivers down my spine. While Alejandro was all well-practiced, meticulous steps, Nico was fire and passion. He moved my body across the floor with ease, as though I were water flowing down a stream, twisting and ebbing at the leave of his current.

My heart thudded against my chest in rapid staccato. I found myself breathless in his arms as he flung me about the floor. Heat rushed through my body. I was both sweating and chilled.

And then the song came to an end, and our moves suddenly stopped. I blinked as though waking from a dream to find myself pressed against his chest, our breaths heavy in matched cadence. I met his gaze—that piercing blue gaze like a tempest on the horizon—and I lost all sense of space and time.

A cough snapped me to attention.

I glanced to the side to see that most of the room had ceased dancing and was now staring at us in amusement. My body went hot now with embarrassment, countering the desire coursing through me. I stepped away from Nico, unraveling myself from his arms.

I brushed a sweaty rogue lock of hair from my eyes. Nico reached out and gently brushed it back behind my ears. I instinctively swatted his hand away.

“Don’t,” I said quietly, almost under my breath.

He stepped toward me and breathed, “Don’t what?”

I met his eyes again. I saw that longing in them, the desire mirroring my own. No. I could not do this. I would not. It

would ruin everything.

“Don’t do any of it,” I whispered. I turned and all but ran away from him, leaving the ballroom in a blur of glitter and glam.

Chapter Thirty-Four



I circled the villa grounds, my head cloudy and my body a mess of nerves and emotions I couldn't contain. I knew I needed to go upstairs, just go to bed already, but my adrenaline was racing. The last I saw of Alejandro, he was still drinking at the bar with some group of men—their boisterous laughter reverberated throughout the ballroom. He didn't seem all that concerned with what I was getting up to the rest of the night. At least I could ignore him for now.

Moonlight cast a pearly glow over the garden. My head was spinning, both from champagne and nerves. I was rattled, and my head was all over the place. I couldn't focus, and I very much needed to.

Maybe what I needed to do was just finish that bottle of champagne and lose myself to the night. Go to bed with the prince and forget all about stupid, infuriating Nico. I never let myself get out of control, but maybe that was the problem. Maybe it was about time I just let life direct me instead of trying so desperately to control everything. I was learning that, as it turns out, I couldn't control everything. Sometimes the universe was just determined to screw you over. Maybe I should lean into it and enjoy the beating for once.

"Nice display back there," a woman's voice said.

I angrily spun around, not in any kind of mood. I nearly laughed when I saw it was Alessandra strutting toward me in the moonlight.

"I have nothing to say to you," I said, turning away.

“Too bad.”

She stepped up to me but said nothing.

“What do you want?” I finally said after a beat too long.

“Oh, nothing really. I’m just curious what you’re playing at.”

“I couldn’t begin to guess what you mean.”

“Mmm, right. I recognize that Frenchman. He was the one in your little threesome tango at the race.”

“So?”

“So who is he? What’s his role here and why have I only seen him on the scene since you broke up with Hugo. Or rather, he broke up with you.”

I ignored the jab. “Why do you care? Why do you care about any of it?”

She shrugged and sipped her cocktail. “Call it morbid curiosity.”

“What are you doing with Hugo, anyway?” I turned the tables. “What happened to Marco?”

She sighed melodramatically. “Marco was a good catch. But not the biggest fish in the Med. Hugo—now he’s a catch worth keeping. It would be stupid to release him back into the wild. But I guess not everyone sees that.”

My cheeks burned, but I let it go. She could have him. They deserved each other, vipers both.

“I wish you all the best, Alessandra. Truly. Have fun with Hugo. While it lasts.”

She started to say more, but I turned and moved as quickly as I could until I was around the bend from her.

I polished off my glass and stared out over the gardens. To Hell with Alessandra. With Hugo. With Nico. With everyone! God I was tired. Just so tired.

Even though it was summer, a cool alpine breeze moved in from the water, pricking at my bare arms. I shivered, but it was

a welcomed sensation after the stuffy confines of the villa ballroom.

“Any to spare?” A voice said.

I closed my eyes. No, just go. Don’t turn around, and he’ll be gone.

“I thought I told you to leave me alone,” I said.

“I’ve never been a very good listener.”

“Nico—”

“Stella.”

We stood in silence, my back to him, so many things unsaid between us, yet silent words still passed between us on the breeze.

“I can’t do this,” I whispered to the night.

His hand brushed my bare back, sending a thousand tiny fires dancing across my skin.

“Can’t. Or won’t.”

“Stop,” I said.

His body pressed against mine. His lips to my shoulder.
“No.”

I spun around then, anger and frustration coursing through me, crashing into my desire like a tsunami. I shoved him.

“I see consent isn’t a value you hold close.”

He smiled. I couldn’t peel my eyes from the smooth curve of his lips.

“Fine. Tell me again. Tell me to go, and I will.” He brushed my cheek. “Tell me no, and I’ll listen without another breath and I will forget your name. Stella.”

I closed my eyes, falling into that touch. A small voice inside me screamed for me to turn and run. To never look at Nico again. My livelihood was on the line. But another voice—a much, much stronger one—held me in place.

“Tell me,” he whispered again, his lips moving closer.

I opened my mouth to protest, to yell. But no words would surface. I let my lips part. I let them find his in the darkness.

The voltage between us electrified my entire body, overwhelming my synapses. After a minute, he pulled away, leaving a pulsing vacancy where his lips had been. I didn't want to open my eyes. I didn't want to break the spell.

"We should go somewhere more private," he said. "There are a lot of eyes out here."

And then I was back in the moment. I opened my eyes.

I pressed my hand to Nico's chest, feeling the thick muscles beneath.

"Nico—we, I—I don't know what this is, but this isn't the time to figure it out. We're both here with other people." I stepped away. "I need to get back to Alejandro."

"Let's just leave," he said. "Leave this villa, drive off into Provence and find a place to just be."

I smiled regretfully. "We both know that neither of us can afford to do that, figuratively and literally. You'll thank me for it in the morning. Goodnight, Nico."

Chapter Thirty-Five



“You can’t keep doing this,” Nico snapped, running after me.

I felt the rage bubbling over in me, colliding with my confusion and desire until it reached a crescendo inside me. I couldn’t keep doing this?! I spun around, my eyes hardened.

“Doing *what* exactly?” I snapped at him.

“You want to stand there in those designer heels and tell me there is nothing here? That our kiss, these moments, mean nothing to you?”

I couldn’t meet his eyes. The lump in my throat felt like cement, but I breathed and continued, my determination now hard as steel.

“Yes. That’s exactly what I’m telling you.”

“You’re lying to yourself if you think that’s the case.”

I laughed in disbelief. “I think you’re the delusional one, Nico. Your entire life is just one big fantasy. No responsibility, no commitment. What could you possibly know about any of it?”

I felt my resolve cracking under the weight of my rage. Nico kept his expression deadpanned. How did he do that? It was infuriating.

“After all I’ve done for you, you just keep showing up here and running my life,” I seethed, but I lowered my voice. Losing control wasn’t going to get me anywhere.

Nico laughed incredulously.

“Me ruin your life? I was perfectly happy just doing my thing when you had to come take a hammer to my very existence! You bat your eyes and purse those perfect lips and just expect every man on the Riviera to fall over for you.”

“Well, it worked, didn’t it?” I glared at him.

Nico snickered. “You don’t care who you hurt, do you? Men are just playthings for you. Means to an end.”

“Like men have not been treating women as such since the dawn of time?” I retorted.

Nico visibly chewed on the words.

“You know I wasn’t like that. I have never been like that,” Nico said softly.

Was that hurt I detected in his tone? I almost bought it.

“Right. Spare me the theatrics, Shakespeare. Just because your stakes were smaller doesn’t make you any less culpable. We both played the same game. You’re just mad because I beat you. I think you stepped into the big leagues a little too soon.”

Nico took an aggressive step forward. “You beat me?”

My breath caught. I snapped my mouth closed as though to keep in my breath.

“I did.”

He leaned in closer still. “So beating me is dropping your guard on a moonlit beach? It’s sharing a tender kiss with the lake glittering in the background?”

My cheeks flared. “Stop it.”

“Stop what?”

“You know what!” I glared at him, but when I met his gaze, I saw the pure red desire swimming in the blackness of his irises. Just walk away, I thought. Just turn and run. But I was frozen in place.

Nico’s eyes bore into me so intensely, peeling back the layers of myself.

“This is crazy,” I whispered.

“Ahh, but there is always some madness in love. But there is also always some reason in madness,” he whispered.

A spark smoldered in the vacant space between us. My muscles relaxed, my body ebbing closer to Nico’s with an uncontrollable force. His hand came up to stroke mine, a calloused fingertip gently running over the prickling skin of my bare shoulder.

I shoved his hand away. Fury pulsed through my veins—fury at what, I wasn’t really sure. At myself, at the situation, at Nico.

“You should just go,” I snapped at him.

“Is that really what you want?” Nico asked, his tone low and throaty. His eyes questioned my sincerity.

I pushed by him, but he grabbed my arm. He spun me around and met my eyes with his piercing stare.

Something crackled in the air—electricity, warning signs. Run, something inside me called out. Run and don’t look back. Lock the door behind you.

But I was too far gone to run now.

I was angry. Burning.

Just like the moment before someone jumps off a cliff, I knew precisely what I was about to do and knew it was a terrible idea. But there was something about the siren call of free-floating through the air that pushed me toward the edge. Push me, I thought. Just push me over the edge. Because I can’t do it myself.

Even in the split-second I knew that Nico’s mouth would be on mine, I let it happen.

As his lips brushed mine, as every shred of sense and decency I had protested, I felt no regrets.

His teeth gnashed against mine, and I fought back. Biting, grating, growling. Animalistic urge bubbled up from the pit of me, spilling out of my mouth and into his. My knees

threatened to buckle out from under me. Dizziness swirled around me.

“Come with me,” Nico whispered, his words barely audible over the thrumming of my heart.

“Where?”

“To my room.”

I didn't let myself think, only nodded and took his hand.

The door had barely closed behind us, and his hands were on every inch of my body, tearing away the layers of fabric that stood between us. I couldn't think, couldn't process anything other than the raw need, the pounding of my heart, the blazing heat of my skin.

With our designer clothes a crumple at our bare feet, Nico pushed me to the floor, my body hitting hard against the plush carpet.

I lay there, raw and vulnerable, exposed as he paused to take in the sight of me. His gaze, dark, dangerous, locked with mine. I ached for him. Needed him. I wanted him. All of him. On this floor. Right now.

The question danced in his eyes. We shouldn't be doing this. We couldn't do this, could we?

All reason spiraled into a vortex of oblivion.

“Yes,” I whispered. “Yes.”

Our bodies pressed into each other, molten heat fusing our skin. I couldn't focus, couldn't think. A flurry of desire consumed me.

It hurt. It burned. It was all I wanted.

Chapter Thirty-Six



I woke in a malaise. I struggled to open my eyes against the assault of the dawn breaking through the window. Despite the many late nights on the Riviera, I'd always prided myself on being a morning person. No matter how much I played the part, I would always take a crisp morning to a moonlit party.

But this morning, all I wanted to do was bury my head deep in my down pillows and go back to bed until the sun had long set and night coated my existence. It wasn't a hangover. No, it was something bigger. Something deeper that went right down to my bones. It was something like grief for the things I knew I had to lose.

I sighed and pulled myself up, forcing my eyes to adjust to the light.

I had screwed up. Oh God, I had royally screwed up this time. I had broken all my rules. All of my carefully and painstakingly crafted rules to protect myself. I resisted every urge to chew on my manicured nails. I paced my hotel room. I could still feel him. Still smell him. Still hear the gentle cadence of his breath as we drifted into sleep with the moon peering in through the cracks, bathing our naked bodies in pearly light. I had let myself linger there till the subtle break of dawn began its fan across the night sky. Then I had slipped out like a thief to my own room.

What the hell had we done? It hadn't been worth it—or had it? I couldn't think. My mind was a jumble. My nerves were shot.

Enough of this! I scolded myself. Get up and face yourself. Own what you've done.

I forced myself from bed and stared into the bathroom vanity mirror. I barely recognized this person I was becoming. Someone who lazed about in the mornings, wallowing in her own mistakes. Never before had I wallowed. No, when I made a mistake, I dusted myself off, and I rose strong. I kept pushing forward. Because that was the only way to survive in this world. The moment you allowed yourself to lay face down in the dirt, that was the moment when the world would step right over you.

I needed a hot shower and a strong coffee.

Scalding water did little but burn my skin, but at least it distracted me for a few minutes. But now I sat on my balcony, flushed and nowhere closer to an answer to my predicament.

I should just move on. Pretend none of it had happened. But first, I needed damage control. If we were going to keep running into each other, I needed to ensure this didn't blow up in my face. I needed to make sure he wasn't going to come running, fawning all over me and begging me to make it work. Maybe I was giving myself too much credit, like he said. Maybe Nico was having just as much regret as I was. He had a livelihood on the line, too. Maybe everything he had said beneath the cover of night was all a lie.

I had been stupid. Naïve and stupid, letting my emotions get in the way of rational thought. Emotions and plain old lust. Nothing good in history had ever come from such a combination. But I didn't have time to wallow. Not now. Not when I was close to my goals. Nothing was irreversible. I just had to pull myself together. I could still make things with Alejandro work. I just had to forget Nico Arquette ever existed.

Right.

Chapter Thirty-Seven



Dressed in skimming silk trousers in a soft eggshell cream color over a sleeveless V-necked bodysuit and teal slingback Louboutin stilettos, I felt ready to attack the day. I wound my hair back in my signature chignon with a few tendrils tickling my highlighted cheeks. After a post-wedding brunch, we would head back to Monaco. After that, I would push Alejandro harder and try to secure some future.

I had survived this long, and I wasn't about to let my defenses crumble now over this stupid Frenchman with broody eyes.

The brunch room was entirely too bright as I stepped through the doors to the great hall, the blistering lights assaulting my senses. The sun bounced off the gilded chandeliers and gold-rimmed drink ware. Crisp white linen lay perfectly over tables. Servers scurried about, filling each table with bowls of ripe berries, buttery pastries, and paper-thin prosciutto. The savory smell of croissants turned my stomach.

I had finally reached my limit of these events. My lips ached from smiling, my feet ached from the high heels, and I longed to stop sucking in my stomach—which, while well-toned, was becoming utterly bloated from all the rich food and wine.

I spotted Alejandro sitting at our designated table from across the room. I was grateful I had asked to meet him there, needing the time alone to freshen, to get my head straight. I couldn't wait to be by myself again. I longed for a luxurious bath, a long run, some yoga. I needed to figure out what to do

with myself next. I was in new territory for the first time in a long time.

A waiter circulated a tray of champagne and other non-alcoholic beverages. I plucked a shot of green juice from the tray as well as a delicate stem of bubbles. All this alcohol was not doing much for my skin, but I needed the liquid courage today to fend off my nerves.

And then, feeding my nerves, out of the corner of my eyes, I spotted Nico. He was with Eleanor, looking too dashing, too handsome. Too entirely unconcerned with what happened last night. It fanned the embers at my core. Shame crept throughout my entire body, spreading to every fingertip, to the ends of every hair. How could I have been so stupid? Here he was, back on Eleanor's arm, like nothing had happened in the dark.

Nico spotted me too. His eyes locked with mine from across the room. His expression was blank. I could not read anything in it. I quickly turned away. I could not do this. I would have to forget. I could never look back. It was a good thing I had a lot of practice in leaving life in the dust and never looking back.

The brunch dragged on for at least an hour too long. My head was pounding by the end of it, and I wished to God I could just snap my fingers and be back in Monte Carlo. I was already dreading the arduous journey of getting home. I watched as Nico and Eleanor left the great hall, arms linked. My entire body shook, and I felt like I might burst into tears. I absolutely hated myself for this weakness. I needed to pull it together. I excused myself and made my way to an alcove of the hall. I pressed my head into the wall and breathed.

"Stella, are you all right?" I heard Alejandro say behind me. I took a deep breath, trying to calm the redness that was surely flooding my face. Trying to bite back the tears pricking at the back of my eyes.

"Yes, I'm fine. I was feeling a little woozy from the rich food last night at the wedding, I think." I forced myself to turn

around and face him. "I've been really busy lately and I think all of a sudden I'm just very tired."

He smiled placidly as though my weak lines were an amusement to him.

"Ah, Stella," Alejandro said. "Such a lovely girl you are. Beautiful, charming. Intelligent. More so than any woman I have met in so long."

I heard the words, but they masked unsaid thoughts. I waited for him to continue.

"But it is clear to me you are a duplicitous one," he said with a smile.

I stiffened. "I don't know what you mean."

He laughed slightly. "Of course, you do. Look, I was not under the impression you were at my side purely for my charming smile and sparkling personality. I was not born yesterday, as you say in America. But I do hope for some loyalty and discretion in the women I choose to spend my time with."

I felt my stomach twist. How did he know?

"I—" I started. He held up a hand to stop me.

"It has been fun these past few weeks. I have really enjoyed your company. Enjoyed getting to know you."

"As have I," I said.

"Si," he nodded. "But it is clear to me I am not the one you wish you were spending your time with."

I blinked, not knowing what to say. I was caught off guard.

"Ali—"

He chuckled. "You don't need to look so serious. It's not so dire, honestly. You love someone else, that is clear. I can't fault you for that. But I can ask not to be made a cuckold. I don't wish to try so hard if your affections cannot be won, so to speak. You should go to the one you care about."

"I care about you," I said.

“Por favor, let us not embarrass ourselves.”

“There isn’t anyone else, Ali.”

“Oh, no?” the prince said, raising his eyebrows. “Not that dashing Frenchman you have been going tit-for-tat with over the entire weekend? I don’t know who he is, but he clearly has your heart.”

I felt my cheeks burn. “It’s not what you think. He is—it’s a complicated relationship. But I don’t *love* him. We’re not involved like that.”

Alejandro nodded slowly and said with a sly smile. “I see. I hate it when things are complicated. I try to avoid complications myself. Such as why I think it’s best that when you and I return to Monaco, perhaps we go our separate ways. No hard feelings, don’t worry.”

I felt a sinking feeling deep in my gut. No, I wanted to scream. Not yet. I’m not ready yet. Just give me another chance. But I said none of those things. I could not bring myself to beg, to cower. I could not even bring myself to turn on my usual charm. I simply bit my bottom lip and nodded.

“I understand. I suppose it’s for the best.”

“Do you have anywhere to go?”

“I’ll figure it out.” In my time since breaking up with Hugo, I hadn’t figured out a new living situation for the long term. I had hoped the prince would buy me time.

As though sensing this in my eyes, he said, “Why don’t you just stay on at the Excalibur for a little while? Take as long as you need to get situated. I understand that sometimes a woman in your position may be, *come se dice*, adrift?”

He made me sound like a vagabond, but the truth was he wasn’t wrong. I was adrift.

I blinked. “You mean that? Really?”

He shrugged. “Of course. I have already paid up through the month, anyway. But I think I am ready to move on to other parts of the Riviera. Perhaps I will head down to Montenegro. I hear a lot is happening there this time of year.”

“I don’t know what to say,” I said. “That’s incredibly generous of you. Thank you. I don’t understand why you’re being so kind.”

He grinned. “Do you have a low opinion of all men, or is it just me?”

I blushed and laughed a little. “I suppose I’m not used to men being generous for no reason.”

“I guess a lot of people of means can be expectant. Entitled. I suppose I, too, can be those things. So consider this my great act of philanthropy. It is my gift to you.” He kissed my hand. “I do hope you find what you’re looking for, Stella.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight



Josie was lounging on my terrace when I returned to the Excalibur hotel. She was sipping a glass of white wine and flipping through a luxury travel magazine when I walked in, exhausted and confused, my mind still reeling from the weekend. I could still feel Nico's touch. Hear his voice in the darkness. My stomach was rolling with confusion. Alejandro's kindness echoed in my mind as well. His offer had been so generous—but that only bought me some time. What was I going to do next?

Josie glanced up and arched an eyebrow.

"You look like you've had quite the weekend," Josie said, with a little smirk tugging at her lips.

I let out a weary sigh and dropped down on a plush chair. "It's complicated."

"Things not go well with your dashing prince?"

"They—" I hesitated. "It's not really going to work out between us. As it turns out, we want different things."

Or different people, I thought. But I shook that away. Nico was not a factor in this equation. This had nothing to do with Nico.

Did it though?

Josie tilted her head as though reading right through me. Josie had many faults, but her ability to read people was uncanny. I needed to teach her how to channel that.

"And what does Nico have to say about it?"

I shifted my body uncomfortably, not daring to look her in the eye. “I don’t know what you mean.”

She snickered. “Come on. I’ve seen the way you guys look at each other. It’s...intense. You can lie to yourself all you want about how you’ve just taken him under your wing. That he was just some sort of weird protégé for whatever it is that you do. But it’s more than that. Anyone can see that. I’m sure that’s what Alejandro saw.”

It was uncanny how close to the truth she could get. “Well, yes, we’re more than just business partners. We’re friends.” Even I heard the uptick in my voice.

“Friends. Right.” She shot me a *whatever you say* kind of look and went back to her magazine.

I took a deep breath, trying to organize my jumbled feelings. “Josie, look in this world, you need to be selective about who you’re with. It’s not just about feelings—it’s about strategy, survival.”

Josie shrugged. “Sounds lonely.”

“Sounds realistic. You know what life can be like when you make the wrong choices. Fall for the wrong man.” We exchanged a look, neither of us having to mention out loud our mother’s poor choices.

Josie sighed. “But it seems like you two actually have something real. And it’s not like he’s some loser. He’s funny and nice and totally sexy. Why are you fighting it so hard?”

I looked down, my fingers playing with the delicate lace of my sundress. “Because sometimes ‘something real’ isn’t enough. Funny and nice and sexy can’t pay the bills or maintain a lifestyle.”

Josie’s face softened, and she moved closer, her voice gentle. “I think you’re just afraid. Afraid of getting hurt, afraid of letting someone in.”

I shot her a sharp look. “You don’t know what you’re talking about Josie. You think this is all so easy? This life isn’t a fairy tale, it’s a business. And everyone here knows it. Nico knows it too. Don’t be so naïve and idealistic.”

Josie leaned back. “Maybe I’m naïve and idealistic, but I believe in love, in people. Maybe, just maybe, you can have both the lifestyle and the love. Maybe with Nico.”

I felt a pang in my chest, torn between hope and skepticism. “You don’t get it, Josie. You haven’t been here long enough.”

She sighed. “Maybe not. But I see how you are with him. Just... don’t let fear rob you of something beautiful.”

I stood. “I have to unpack.” I went back inside.

Chapter Thirty-Nine



Life was fairly calm for once. In fact, it hadn't been this slow in a long while. The days had faded from so many glitzy affairs into a gentle lull as the early summer grew to a heated crescendo. Even the elite passed up parties in the scorching weather. But honestly, it was all fine by me. The moment I slowed down was the moment I realized just how tired I really was. I had been burning the candle at both ends for so long, pushing myself day after day—night after night, really. All the theatrics and the showmanship—it was really starting to wear on me. I needed a vacation from my life—how ridiculous was that?

When we got back to Monte Carlo after the somewhat disastrous wedding in Como, Alejandro had stunned me with a proposal.

“Are you really not involved with that Frenchman?” He asked.

“I'm really not. Swear.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “Then I have a proposal. I get what you are trying to do in your life. And I understand. It's a hard world for women trying to make it on their own. I've been giving it a lot of thought over the last twenty-four hours. Let me help you.”

“I don't want your charity,” I had said, almost rudely, but really just feeling embarrassed.

“It's not charity, Stella. We both need someone. I will help you get back on your feet. Help you find your next path. And

in exchange, maybe you will keep me company at some rather boring affairs. No strings, nothing expected. I'm not looking for a mistress, just a friend with no expectations."

I blinked. "I don't understand. Why would you want to do that?"

He shrugged. "You'd be surprised how difficult it is for someone like me to have meaningful companionship without expectation. Women see me—a real live prince!—and see either a bank account or wedding bells." He winked playfully.

"In my defense, I never wanted wedding bells."

He laughed. "I do know that. And maybe that's precisely why this works well for me."

It all seemed a little too good to be true, but then I could see it from his perspective. Sometimes an arrangement is easier for men in his position.

So here I was, still in my Excalibur suite, trying to force myself to relax as I calculated my next move.

Josie had begged to stay, but after two weeks, I insisted she go home and face her life. She needed to see it through. The full story of her struggles back in Atlanta had come out. How she fell for Brock, the dark road she felt herself going down. But that fact that she got herself out of there spoke volumes to how much she'd grown, and I knew she couldn't give up. I would fly back there myself if I had to drag her back to school.

"Why can't I stay here and play princess with you?" She whined. "Who needs college?"

"You do. Princess isn't all it's cracked up to be. Go be a doctor or something."

"Sounds boring. I want yachts."

I laughed and pulled her close. "Be good, Josie. Just keep being good."

I hadn't heard from Nico after Como. Part of me ached for it. Part of me was relieved. I wasn't sure I had the strength to fight it. What I needed now after everything was to sit on this terrace and read a good book. How long had it been since I'd

just done that? Months, at least. I plucked up my eReader and opened the app to scroll through my downloaded library. So many sad, lonely reads just staring back at me through the screen, begging to be opened. Maybe a good light-hearted mystery. Something old-fashioned, Agatha Christie style. I had always loved those as a kid. Truthfully, I was always an old soul—a part of me forever living in a past I had never actually experienced. Can you have nostalgia for memories that aren't yours? I think lots of people do. People pine away for the 50s, when life was supposedly so glamorous and easy—but it was only that way for the select few. There was a great movie I loved where a man in Paris longs for the roaring 20s. He magically goes back in time only to find the characters he meets long for the Belle Époque. We are all longing for something other than our current reality. Because the truth is, life is hard, no matter who you are. Life gets boring eventually because that's its natural state of being. Routine and ease are what we secretly long for but then secretly loathe. We are cursed creatures.

I opened my book but quickly found I couldn't concentrate. It was hard for me to just “be” sometimes. I was so used to acting all the time. But Alejandro had seen my true colors in a way that shocked me. He had seen perhaps a little weariness beneath my eyes.

Maybe I did have enough to walk away and live a different life. Maybe I could find meaningful work, invest what I had wisely, and live comfortably.

My phone buzzed. I glanced down. It was Alejandro.

“Free tonight? Charity event. Need my wing woman.”

I half-laughed, half-sighed. Maybe not today. I pulled myself up and went to my closet in search of just the right thing.

Chapter Forty



Of course, it had to be Lady Eleanor hosting that night, didn't it? I told myself not to be such a baby about it. Even if he was there—enough time had passed. We would both be mature about it all. Alejandro and I stepped into the grand villa—me donning a fitted floral number and Alejandro in crisp cream linen.

The grandeur of the event was overwhelming, even for seasoned socialites like Eleanor. Crystal chandeliers hung from high ceilings, their light shimmering off the expensive dresses and the champagne flutes held by Monte Carlo's finest. I sucked in a breath at it all.

The room was awash with a soft, golden glow from the afternoon sun and opulent chandeliers accentuating the gilt edges of the baroque-style furniture. Round tables, each covered in pristine white tablecloths with centerpieces of fresh flowers in a riot of summer colors, filled the space. Large French windows framed the stunning view of the Mediterranean Sea.

The guests were an assorted mix of Riviera elite, each sporting their afternoon best, adorned with a vast assortment of diamonds. White-gloved servers discreetly passed around silver trays with an array of artfully arranged culinary delights. Their movements were so stealthy, you barely noticed the trays passing by as you picked up a pintxo or smoked salmon blini.

This was a place of luxury and wealth, where every detail was designed to impress. As I walked through the crowd, my

senses filled with the fragrant aroma of expensive perfume, the rich scents from the kitchen, and the mesmerizing sight of the luminous bay beyond the windows.

“She’s really outdone herself,” I said. Alejandro smirked.

“She’s definitely decided to up her game in her advanced years.”

“Don’t be ageist,” I teased.

He laughed. “You mistake me. I think she’s getting bolder. She cares less about what others think with every passing day, and I think that’s rather refreshing, don’t you?”

Alejandro had a point. And it was refreshing. There were too many people here who were afraid to be their authentic selves, myself included. To finally reach a point where you no longer cared, where you were going to do whatever you wanted despite the snide looks and gossip. That sounded like true freedom. Of course, having Lady Eleanor’s fortune certainly helped. It was a lot easier to do whatever the hell you wanted when you didn’t have to think about money.

“What is this raising money for exactly?” I asked.

Alejandro pursed his lips like a child and shrugged. “Penguins. Dolphins. Something like that.”

“Coral reefs,” a plummy voice said.

We turned to see Eleanor beside us with a grin.

“Your Divine Ladyship,” Alejandro said dramatically. Eleanor snorted a laugh.

“Lovely to see you. Thank you for carving time out of your royal duties.”

“You recall Stella,” Alejandro said, turning toward me.

“Yes, yes. So nice to see you again. Thank you for coming.” She extended a hand to me, and I covetously eyed the quarter-sized emerald ring.

“And why coral reefs?” I asked.

“I’ve always been a lover of the sea, and our precious ocean jungles are in trouble. People are hesitant to take action for things they can’t see. But I’m someone who can perhaps effect change.”

I smiled. She was a kind person, Lady Eleanor. Although, glancing around, I had to wonder if maybe she could have spared a few mushroom tartlets and just donated the money.

“Oh, please excuse me. I must do the rounds,” Eleanor said.

“Shall we get ourselves a little tipsy?” Alejandro said.

“Most definitely,” I responded assertively. We made our way over to the bar and ordered two French 75 cocktails. The bartender swiftly and professionally mixed them up and handed us each a glass.

“Well, let’s do this,” Alejandro said. We clicked our glasses lightly and sipped.

I did feel a little lighter, a little freer, than I had in a long time. Ever since Nico—I shook my head. I didn’t want to think about Nico. But how could I not think of him being here at Lady Eleanor’s event? I’m not sure I would’ve agreed to it initially had I known it was her event, but Alejandro had left out that little detail. I don’t think he knew the whole tangled mess of it, and I wasn’t going to volunteer the information.

But as if the universe had read my mind and decided it wasn’t done twisting my heart just yet, there he was. Standing tall in a dapper and well-tailored summer suit, he clutched a glass of something in a deep amber shade. He was making small talk with a group of older women who were dripping in diamonds and pastels. The very sight of him took my breath away. I suddenly felt the void of his absence like a razor to the gut.

He didn’t notice me at first, and I quickly averted my gaze. I glanced around the room, trying to figure out my escape route. I couldn’t do this. Not now.

I turned to Alejandro. “Would you please excuse me for a moment? I need to use the ladies’ room.”

He nodded. “Of course. You don’t need my permission.” He winked.

I smiled thinly and rushed off as quickly as my towering stilettos would allow. I managed to make it to the bathroom before I could fall apart. I slipped into a stall and tried to collect myself. I breathed in and out, noting that even the bathroom smelled lovely. Finally, I calmed down enough to step out and touched up my makeup, ensuring there were no traces of black beneath my eyes. So much for my meticulously applied makeup.

I finally mustered the courage to walk back out into the ballroom. Thankfully, Nico was no longer in his spot. I breathed a sigh of relief. Suddenly needing some fresh air, I stepped out through French doors onto a balcony. The view was incredible, with all of Nice stretching out below. The sun was just dipping into the horizon’s cradle, splashing watercolors across the Mediterranean.

“Care for a drink?”

I spun around at the voice—a voice I knew too well. It was all too raw, too real. And there he was, as though my mind had manifested his very presence.

He extended the glass of champagne toward me. I hesitated but then wrapped my fingers gently around the delicate stem.

“I was just out, as a matter of fact,” I said. I tried to keep my tone light and seductive, but I felt the wobble in it. My composure was gone. He had crumbled it so long ago. I might never forgive him for the cracks.

“A lady like you should never be without champagne.”

I smiled and sipped my drink. I didn’t know what to say. What did one say in this situation? I hadn’t exactly studied this in my etiquette training.

“Nico, I—” he raised his hand, interrupting me.

“We don’t have to do this, you know. I know it’s awkward. And maybe I shouldn’t have come over here, but I thought it

would be even more awkward if we saw each other and I didn't say anything."

"I guess we're both a little under-prepared for this one, then?"

"You really should've covered this in your training," he said with a smile. "But it's good to see you again."

"You too. So, you are still seeing Eleanor, then?" My eyes glanced down at my drink, focusing on the tiny bubbles.

He spared a glance back inside. "Yes," he said hesitantly. "In a manner of speaking."

"You don't sound too convinced."

He smiled thinly. "It's a complicated situation. You know about those."

I pressed my lips into a tight line. "I do."

"And Alejandro?"

I averted my gaze slightly and shrugged. "In a manner of speaking. But you know, complicated." I echoed.

"So here we are," Nico said.

"Here we are."

The awkward silence stretched on as the sun dipped lower.

"I'm sorry, for what it's worth," Nico said.

I resisted the urge to bite my lip. I kept every muscle tight and engaged. I couldn't let myself falter now.

"Me too, Nico. Things got messy. Messier than either of us intended."

He nodded but didn't add on. What was there really to say, anyway? We were both realists. We knew what was at stake. We couldn't afford to entertain silly fairy tale fantasies.

"I suppose I should get back," I said. It was the last thing I wanted. I wanted to stay here on this balcony with Nico and Champagne and this view and pretend that this was all there ever needed to be in life. But this was not a fairy tale, and I was not a little girl.

He smiled thinly. “It was good to see you.”

“You too.” I forced my lips to curl up, but I’m not sure it was very convincing. I brushed past him and stepped back into the party.

Chapter Forty-One



The afternoon was becoming a blur of smiles and glitter. But I had been gracefully navigating the sea of socialites, a champagne flute never out of arm's reach. Alejandro had gone off to talk to some dignitaries or something, leaving me alone for the moment. Alone with my thoughts—I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not, but there I was. Other than unexpectedly encountering Nico, I supposed the night was going fairly well. Nothing too gossip-worthy unfolding. The wealthy and well-connected were in full force, mingling under Lady Eleanor's elaborate chandeliers, the air rich with the sounds of idle chatter and laughter.

My mind was adrift, eyes reflexively staring out over the Med through the large glass window when I felt a hand on my lower back, the touch slightly too familiar. I snapped around and nearly stumbled to see a man standing entirely too close.

“Stella, darling.” It was Wilf Müller, a German businessman who had sometimes met with Hugo. It had been a while since I'd seen him anywhere, but his aura was just as smarmy as the last time he'd attempted to grope me under the table at Le Rev.

“Wilf, um, hello,” I said, fumbling with a proper response.

His hand crept up my spine, and I felt a cold shiver run through me. I immediately pulled away, but the moment felt drawn out in molasses.

“You are a vision as always,” he said in his slightly accented English, a thick layer of artificial charm failing to

mask his predatory intentions. “How are you tonight?”

“I’m fine, thank you,” I replied, trying to keep my voice even, my smile polite. His hand reached for my back again, and I had to resist the urge to swat his hand away. This wasn’t the first time I’d encountered unwanted attention in this world, and I didn’t want to make a scene, but tonight it felt especially invasive, especially repelling.

“I was sorry to hear you had parted ways with Hugo. It was always nice to see you at his side.”

I forced a thin smile but didn’t respond. I wasn’t sure where his point was leading.

He leaned closer—too close. “Should you now find yourself untethered, I could make you a very generous offer.” He traced my bare shoulder with his finger, and I felt bile rising in my throat. A sudden panic gripped me, and the room spun. I thought I was going to be sick.

“Stella! Bella. There you are.” I spun around in what felt like slow motion to see Gabriella hurrying toward me. I could have passed out with relief.

“Scusi, signore. I need to borrow Stella here. Prince Alejandro is looking for you.” She flashed Wilf a withering look that could have melted the Alps in January.

“Excuse me,” I managed to squeak out. Gabriella hooked her arm through mine and all but yanked me along until we were out on the patio.

“Are you ok?” She asked, looking me over as though she’d just pulled me from a burning car. I felt that way a little.

I sighed. “I’m fine. I just—he was getting a little too friendly, and something about it just—” I shook my head, not even really knowing how to express myself. Gabi nodded in understanding and gently rubbed my arms.

“It’s ok. You don’t need to explain. I get it. Wilf is a pig.” She made a little oinking noise that made me laugh.

“Gabi—I can’t do this anymore.”

“Do what?”

My heart was pounding, my hands shaking. I felt claustrophobic, my senses overwhelmed by the sights and sounds of the event. The room suddenly seemed too bright, too noisy. I could still feel the ghost of Wilf's hand on my back, his falsely sweet voice in my ear. I felt dirty, like I needed to scrub his touch from me.

"This." I gestured out toward the entire tableau.

"Stella, you're not seriously going to let Wilf get to you. He's not worth it."

"I know, but it's not just Wilf. It's everything. This life. It's becoming too much."

Gabriella looked deep into my eyes, placing her hands on my shoulders. "You can't let one bad apple spoil the bunch. Remember why you're here. For Alejandro. And for yourself. Don't let these vultures bring you down."

She was right. I nodded, wiping at the tears that had formed at the corner of my eyes. Taking a deep breath, I fixed my makeup, gave Gabriella a quick hug, and walked back into the fray with newfound determination. The night stretched on, an endless blur of faces and laughter. Alejandro eventually found me and we metaphorically danced the night away. I'd almost forgotten about Nico. Almost.

Chapter Forty-Two



In the quiet aftermath of the charity event, Nico found himself alone with Eleanor in her living room, each nursing a well-deserved drink. The smell of old books mixed with a hint of lavender from the nearby gardens was comforting, almost home-like—a feeling he hadn’t experienced in a while. The party’s echoes had retreated to a soft, muffled hum in the background, giving them a chance to escape the spotlight and bask in solitude.

Nico was experiencing conflicting emotions. He enjoyed socializing and living the high life—it was hard not to revel in the best champagne on the Med—but something felt empty. A spark was missing from his life.

Eleanor was ensconced in a high-backed leather chair, her stylish afternoon cocktail dress replaced by a comfortable, flowing silk robe. She held her crystal glass with elegance, the amber liquid within swirling gently as she moved. Nico still wore his afternoon suit but had unbuttoned the top button of his shirt, a quiet concession to the end of a long day and evening.

Eleanor’s gaze was fixed on an oil painting on the wall. It was a vibrant landscape of the Côte d’Azur. The artist had captured the gentle light of the setting sun bathing the pastel-colored villas and the calm sea in a warm glow. It was so lifelike Nico could almost feel the light breeze on his face and hear the soft lap of the waves against the pebbled shore.

Nico leaned forward, placing his empty glass on the mahogany coffee table between them. “You really have a keen

eye for art and architecture, Eleanor,” he said, watching as she turned her gaze from the painting to meet his eyes.

She smiled lazily. “I’ve always been fascinated by the interplay of creativity and functionality in architecture. There’s undeniable beauty in the craft, in the careful attention to detail. It’s like piecing together a story, brick by brick, each one carrying a tale of its times. Don’t you think?”

“It’s a reflection of the human spirit, isn’t it? The grand cathedrals of the past weren’t just buildings—they were the embodiment of faith, of hope, a testament to human ingenuity,” Nico said.

Her expression lit up, and she laughed. “Beautifully put. Quite the poet you are.”

Nico resisted the urge to confess he’d read the line on a museum website and simply bowed his head in mock appreciation.

Seeing Stella had rattled him. Her presence was unexpected—although maybe it shouldn’t have been, given the incestuous nature of the wealthy elite of the Riviera. But it had been over a month since he’d seen her, and he’d tried to put her out of his mind. Well, he’d pretended to, at least. In reality, he’d filled his time with more distractions than he could handle in an effort to quell her ever-present presence.

Eleanor’s gaze was lost in the dancing flames of the fireplace, the light casting a warm glow on her age-softened features. She was still a striking woman, but sometimes Nico was starkly reminded of their age difference.

Her voice, a delicate mix of nostalgia and sadness, broke the silence. “Nico, do you believe in love? Real, true love?”

The question caught him off guard, and the words hung in the air for a moment before he answered, “I suppose I do, in its own complicated way.”

Eleanor smiled somewhat nostalgically.

“That was out of the blue,” Nico said.

She laughed lightly. “Yes, sorry. A few too many digestives, and I get a little sappy. I was just thinking today. Here I am in my 50s, alone. Well, you know what I mean. No offense.”

Nico smiled. “No offense taken. I understand what you mean.”

They hadn’t really spoken about it, but ever since Lake Como, they had settled into a friendly companionship with no talk of anything more. She still treated him to lavish dinners and extended coveted invitations, but a quiet understanding seemed to have settled over them regarding the nature of their relationship.

“There is a lot of theater here in Monaco. People pretending to be things they are not,” Eleanor said.

Nico’s stomach turned at the insinuation—maybe he was reading into things too much. He couldn’t help but think of Stella. She was so afraid of being authentic that every interaction felt like a well-rehearsed act.

With a nostalgic lilt in her voice, Eleanor continued, “Many years ago, in Nice, France, I met a young artist. He was passionate, wild, and madly in love with me. We spent the most magical summer together, but things were... complicated.”

Nico noticed a faraway look in her eyes, the kind that speaks of distant memories and unfulfilled dreams. “We both had our lives to lead, our ambitions to chase. We convinced ourselves it was best to part ways. We told ourselves we had time and that if it was meant to be, our paths would cross again.”

Eleanor’s voice trailed off, and she took a slow sip of her drink. “They never did, of course. The folly of romantic youth. I married, of course. And Teddy was a good man. A fine husband, though perhaps a bit reserved, as we Brits can be. I used to tell myself passion was for the young and idealistic, that it had no place in the real world.” She sighed and sipped her drink. “Maybe I was right. But I can’t help but wonder as life passes by.”

Nico felt a pang in his chest. Eleanor's words stirred up thoughts of Stella—the stolen glances, the simmering tension, the unspoken words. Were they also letting love slip away, just like Eleanor had? Was he on the precipice of making a grave mistake?

He looked at Eleanor, a woman of luxury and wealth, but who carried a lifetime of regret.

Nico took another sip of his drink, his gaze fixed on the dancing flames. As he pondered a series of “what ifs,” he wondered if he could really be happy living a life of luxury without true connection.

He could see himself among the elite, but the more he imagined it, the less appealing it became. The wealth and opulence, once alluring, now felt empty and cold.

In a world of so many hard diamonds, where would genuine warmth and true connection be found?

Nico looked back at Eleanor, empathy in his eyes. Her eyes, though vibrant, revealed a longing money couldn't satisfy. It was a life of regret that Nico realized he didn't want.

“Eleanor—”

She turned her head slowly to face Nico. Her eyes were a little glassy, but her smile was gentle.

“It has been a lovely time, Nico. I've enjoyed knowing you.”

“Me too. Thank you for—well, for everything. I hope you know—”

She held up a hand. “No need for clarification or addendum. We've had our moments. I thank you for a wonderful summer.”

They shared a peaceful moment of silence, and then Eleanor sighed.

“I'm heading back to England this week. But what would you say to a homemade full English breakfast? Always has been my specialty.”

Nico smiled softly. “I wouldn’t miss it.”

Chapter Forty-Three



Alejandro's question hung in the air between us, a tantalizing offer that stirred up a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions.

“What do you say? Want to come with me?”

I sat across from Alejandro at the breakfast bar at the Excalibur. I stabbed a bright red strawberry with my tiny fruit fork, its vibrant color a stark contrast to the white china plate. Was I seriously considering this?

“To Argentina?” I asked.

Alejandro grinned, his face lighting up with the innocence of a child receiving a gift. The morning sun poured through the windows, accentuating his golden skin, making him look like a bronzed Greek God in Tom Ford.

“Si! It's a fascinating new prospect. And you know I've been looking for a little something more in my life. Being a roaming prince has its moments, but investing in a technology startup? I could get behind that.”

His words filled the air between us. He was like a man reborn, his zest for life, technology, and everything else rejuvenated by this new adventure. The strawberry found its way into my mouth as I tried to process everything. Its sweet tartness exploded on my tongue, a welcomed distraction. I took a sip of my coffee, buying some time to marshal my thoughts.

When he started to wax lyrical about Cielo Abierto, a tech start-up that had developed an AI-powered platform aimed at transforming the renewable energy sector, I hadn't really given

it much thought. Alejandro had often gone on about his love of technology and the future.

“The technology essentially uses advanced algorithms to predict weather patterns, thereby optimizing the generation of solar and wind power. It’s especially valuable given the global shift toward sustainable energy!” He had gleefully told me.

“Stella?”

“Hmm?”

“You’re not saying anything.” He tilted his head. Sometimes he was like an adorable puppy. I really did like him.

“Sorry. It’s just a huge proposition. I mean, I’m sure Buenos Aires is a great place, but it’s the other side of the world.”

“Isn’t that the glory of it? Get away from all this glitter and facade.”

“But my entire life is here. I don’t know, I—” Was it, though? What did I really have here? I was comfortable here, and I knew the ins and outs, but was Monte Carlo really my home?

I chewed my lip. I had always dreamed of the French Riviera and a future here. Of settling in, conquering her and making her my home. And I was so close. With the investments Alejandro had helped me secure these past few months and with just a little more planning, I was so close.

But maybe I had to be real with myself that my life here hadn’t really worked out the way I thought it had. So much had transpired, and I’d made so many mistakes. I’d allowed myself to get hurt—something I swore I would never do again. I’d been able to set up a college fund for Josie, so I felt confident she would be taken care of. What did I have to lose?

Alejandro’s soothing voice brought me back to the conversation. “It’s only for a year, maybe. Then we will probably move on. Expand elsewhere,” Alejandro went on. He seemed genuinely so excited about this project.

“I think there is a lot you could bring to the table,” Alejandro went on.

“Me?”

“Si. You’re smart, Stella. You have ideas. And you’ll keep everyone on your toes.”

I blushed. I had grown used to not needing the validation of others, but the words were still like a salve to my momentarily bruised ego.

“I’ll think about it. It’s a huge change.”

He nodded. “It is. Only if you want it to be. Or it could be an adventure.”

An adventure. The word echoed in my mind. Wasn’t that what life was all about, after all? An unpredictable, thrilling adventure. Maybe Argentina was my next big leap, my next adventure, waiting to unfold. Maybe that was just what I needed after all.

* * *

The evening sun painted the sky with hues of orange and pink, setting the Riviera ablaze as it sunk low on the horizon. I sat across from Gabriella at our favorite seaside restaurant, the soft murmur of the ocean waves serving as our background music.

“I think I misheard you,” Gabriella eyed me over her French 75, her wide brown eyes looking skeptical.

My fingers traced the rim of my glass before moving to poke at my salad Nicoise, shifting the lettuce and salty fish aimlessly. “I know it seems crazy, but why not? What do I really have to lose?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper, a feeble attempt to mask my own uncertainties.

Gabriella, impeccably dressed in a poppy-print Dolce & Gabbana bandage dress, strummed her pale pink nails against the table rhythmically. It was a sign of her mulling over my words, measuring her response with caution and care. “I think

you're looking at it wrong. It's not what is it to lose so much as, what will you gain? Don't forget everything you've learned these past five years, Stella."

I picked at my salad, selecting a piece of seared tuna and popping it into my mouth. "Is that really what life is all about? What can we gain from others?" I retorted, a faint sense of bitterness creeping into my voice.

Gabriella blinked at me, her surprise clear on her well-maintained face. She shrugged nonchalantly, but her eyes held a hint of something deeper, something I couldn't quite read. She reached for her glass, the golden liquid within swirling gently, and drained it in one swift movement. Catching the eye of a passing waiter, she gestured for another round.

"I think it's very romantic to think that life can be any other way. But take it from me, the world will chew you up and spit you out the first chance it gets. I was given every opportunity in the world, and I still have to take what I am owed."

Her words resonated with me. As much as I wished to deny it, there was an inherent truth in what she was saying. I had learned that lesson the hard way. It was survival of the fittest in the most brutal way.

"But who's to say I won't get a lot from this endeavor? Alejandro seems to think this is a really big opportunity." I responded, hoping to counterbalance her cynicism.

She raised her perfectly arched eyebrows, her icy stare holding my gaze. "An opportunity for whom? For him to play investor? What are you really going to do with yourself in Argentina?"

I sighed, my head spinning with the weight of her words, the champagne, and the staggering uncertainty that was unfolding in front of me. My life in Monte Carlo was comfortable, familiar, yet somehow unfulfilling. It felt as if I was caught in a loop, going through the motions without truly experiencing life. There was a spark missing, a sense of excitement and adventure that had slowly ebbed away, leaving behind a void that was becoming harder and harder to ignore.

The silence between us lengthened, punctuated by the gentle lapping of the waves against the shore and the distant chatter of the other patrons. Gabriella sat quietly, her gaze thoughtful, leaving me to grapple with the crossroads that lay before me.

Was I ready to give up everything I knew for an uncertain future in Argentina? Or was I willing to continue living in the shadows of Monte Carlo, yearning for a change that seemed more elusive with each passing day? Or was there another option somewhere out there on the horizon?

Chapter Forty-Four



Later that night, I found myself aimlessly meandering along the glimmering Mediterranean coastline. The vibrancy of Monte Carlo ebbed with the sinking sun—the partying crowd in the casino was drowned out by the crashing waves. I walked along the water, lost in the hypnotic rhythm of the sea and the distant chatter of the city.

The sky was drenched in deep navy studded with diamonds, a magnificent spectacle mirrored on the tranquil water. I watched as yachts dotted the horizon, their masts silhouetted against the moonlight. It was a scene straight from an impressionist painting, and yet it felt surreal. As I stood there, absorbing the beauty around me, I could feel a lump forming in my throat.

My thoughts, much like the restless waves, were in a state of constant turmoil. I was at a crossroads in my life and a choice had to be made. Could I get on that plane with Alejandro, say goodbye to the city I had come to love, the city that had become a part of me? A man that ticked all the boxes but left my heart unstirred? Feelings had never mattered in my line of work, but then Nico entered the equation, bringing with him an array of unexplored emotions. Could I give it all up?

For the first time in so long, I didn't know what to do. Did I say goodbye to a perfectly perfect match because...because what? Some stupid notion about love? Because I just didn't *feel* anything? But then, when had I truly felt anything genuine? It hadn't ever mattered before, but it was a question I

found increasingly hard to ignore, and perhaps therein lay the problem.

“Stella,” a familiar voice rippled through the air, jolting me from my musing. I whirled around, and there he was. Nico, this man who had a knack for appearing at my most vulnerable moments.

“Hi,” I said weakly, my voice barely above a whisper. His appearance was slightly disheveled, and his half-smile was laced with a sense of melancholy. The lazy tilt of his head and the glassy look in his eyes gave it away. He’d been at the whiskey.

The tension between us hung heavy in the air. He was the last person I wanted to have this conversation with, yet he was the only person I needed to talk to.

“Here we are again,” he finally said.

“Nico, I think you’re a little drunk.”

He shrugged. “Maybe a touch. Give a guy a break. It’s been a tough week.”

I gave a half-smile. He wasn’t wrong. We lingered there for a moment. Awkwardness danced around in a well-practiced tango.

“Nico—”

“Stella—”

We said at the same time, then both laughed at the synchronicity of our words.

“You go,” I said.

He sighed. “We’re making a mistake.”

I closed my eyes and shook my head. “No. We are doing things we have to do. The right things.”

“But what if—”

“There are no what-ifs, Nico. I’m—” The words caught in my throat. Did I say it and make it true? “I’m leaving Monte Carlo.”

His demeanor stiffened, and he looked at me, shocked. “What? Where?”

I swallowed. “Argentina.”

He laughed as though I was just teasing. I didn’t blame him. It sounded absurd to me too.

“Wait, you are serious?”

I nodded. “I am. Alejandro has a business opportunity there and has asked me to come along. So, I am.”

Nico said nothing, just stared at me, deadpan. The silence swelled with nervous energy.

“Nico, you have to understand...” I began, my voice cracking.

“No, Stella,” he interrupted, his voice stern yet laced with desperation. “You’re not the one that needs to understand here. I am.”

His words didn’t come out right, and he shook his head. “What I mean is—You think this is all just a game, don’t you? You think our lives are just a series of hustles and cons, and we’ll move on when it suits us.”

“I think us trying to be anything more is a recipe for disaster, Nico,” I said calmly.

His gaze bore into mine. “Or maybe you’re just scared.”

I recoiled as if he’d slapped me. Scared? Me? I’d spent my entire life dodging disasters, hustling for survival, maneuvering through the hurdles of life, not out of choice but out of necessity. How could he dare call me scared?

“I’m not scared of anything, Nico.” It wasn’t entirely true. The fear of falling back into that hole I was born in—that fear was raw and real and ever-present. My denial was swift and fierce, a knee-jerk reaction to his provocation.

He laughed incredulously. “Says only the fool.”

I shook my head. “I’m done here. There’s nothing to say. I’m glad I met you—well, I think I am anyway—but our time

is done. Move on with your life, Nico. Go live and succeed. Enjoy your life, and stop pining over me.”

He snickered. “Pining? Giving yourself a lot of credit once again.”

Rage flooded my body, and I wanted to scream. I settled for running in the opposite direction.

“Stella, wait!” He called out, but I was already gone, swallowed by the encroaching darkness.

Chapter Forty-Five



Nico was, in a word, a little pissed. Or maybe he was just embarrassed. Or disappointed in himself. Or all of the above. He clutched his glass of chilled beer tightly as he stared out at the placid sea from his apartment balcony. Damn that woman. She'd been nothing but trouble since the moment he'd laid eyes on her. He'd been complaining of boredom—what he wouldn't give for just a little predictable direction at this moment. Now what? He'd left his job—his stable job—at her direction to follow some stupid plan. And for what? He was out of a job, no companion—what a stupid word anyway—and no prospects. And where was she? Gallivanting across South America on the arm of that prince. On his private jet. Or yacht. Or magic *putain* carpet. Not a care in the world. Not a bother that she'd just wholly upended his life and then disappeared.

He drained his beer.

Fine. If she could win at this game, then he could too. He just needed to find another mark. No, another *companion*. He rolled his eyes to himself. He glanced at the suit hanging in his hotel closet. He eyed the watch on the nightstand. Eleanor had been kind enough to let him keep what she'd bought him. So he had the right tools. It was time to put them to good use.

Nico had to admit he was getting more comfortable in this new skin. When he wore a suit behind the bar, it was a uniform. Something he was comfortable in but nothing that he chose. He looked good—he knew he was an attractive man that could pull off most looks. But this—he admired himself in a passing mirror—yes, this was *him*. This was a style made

just for him to his structure and personality. He was starting to feel more confident. More himself than he'd ever been. And yeah, he guessed he had Stella to thank for at least that small thing. A small lesson learned, even if it had cost him his dignity. The best lessons always came at a steep price, he figured.

The afternoon sun cast golden rays across the shoreline, illuminating the Riviera in an explosion of blues and silvers. God, it was beautiful here. How lucky he'd been to have grown up in this paradise. He had lived his entire life a stone's throw from glitz and luxury, and he had never even fully appreciated it until these past few weeks.

He settled into a beachside bar that was littered with tourists of every ilk. His refined eye could pretty easily pick out the various demographics. Russians stood apart from Brits and Australians with their plastic surgery and svelte figures. The Americans were easily spotted by their painfully white teeth. That and how damn polite they were. An American woman in his bar had once confessed her fear of being seen as the ugly American tourist, loud and boisterous and rude. Nico had to laugh. In his experience, American tourists were the epitome of polite, ever concerned about their manners, the best tippers, and overly polite to service staff—even if the lot of them did dress a bit like wandering children in tee shirts and oversized shorts.

He spotted one American now, he thought. But she was definitely no child. She sat at the bar alone in a cherry red sundress that hugged tightly toned muscles—another thing that set them apart from their French counterparts—how some of them worshiped the gym.

She sipped champagne through glittery lip gloss. She wore oversized sunglasses, but he could see by the slight tilt of her head that she was glancing around, looking bored. He could solve that problem. He slid into the bar seat next to her and ordered a glass of Rose du Provence. Up close, he could see that she while boasted an expensive-looking diamond necklace and matching tennis bracelet, she had no wedding ring. He'd put her age somewhere in her 30s, though she looked to have

the kind of facial structure and complexion that would look much at fifty as it did at twenty.

She noticed his presence with the slight shift in her body language, turning ever so slightly toward him, her leather wedge sandal accidentally brushing his foot.

“Oh, sorry,” she said. Her voice was smooth velvet, definitely American but with the refinement that came from a good upbringing. He had learned the difference.

“No, I am. I have invaded your space. Please forgive me,” Nico said, turning up the accent. He waited a beat. “Are you here for Holiday?”

“Yes. A wedding of all things.” She said it as though exhausted by the prospect.

“A long way to travel for a wedding.”

She smiled. “Yes. A cousin is marrying some European Billionaire or another. Event of the season,” she said half sardonically.

Ahh, if she only knew how many *events of the season* he witnessed on the Riviera each day. Or at a weekend in Lake Como...

“But you are here alone now?” Nico said, dismissing thoughts of the past weekend.

She sighed and sipped her bubbles. “Yes, today is the post-wedding lunches and all that. I was bored. It’s not really my scene. And it was such a beautiful day. I hated to be inside when this awaited.”

“Ahh, I agree. But it’s a shame you should be alone to enjoy it. Perhaps you’d like the company of a local?”

She tilted her head and examined him over the top of her sunglasses as though to assess thoroughly whether he could be seen with her. Finally, she smiled and extended her delicate, tanned hand.

“With pleasure. I’m Bridget.”

“Nico. My pleasure indeed.”

Chapter Forty-Six



Nico had to admit it was getting much easier. Far easier than he thought the whole thing would be when Stella first suggested he might be good at this game. And in truth, he felt far less slimy than he thought he would. Stella had been right. When done right, no one got hurt. It was all about expectations. It was about positioning yourself in the right place in front of the right people so that they took notice of you. So that showering you with trinkets and affection was all their idea. He wasn't duping anyone. They were just two consenting people out for a lovely day on the Riviera.

What was the harm in that?

He thought nothing as he and his new friend Bridget drained their second bottle of Dom Perignon. He had tasted it before, but my God, it was so much sweeter on someone else's dime. Bridget set down her credit card with ease, and he realized this was just another day for her. Did she do this often? Entertain strangers at bars in one of the most expensive cities in the world? He hardly cared if she did. And not that there was anything wrong with an older woman like Eleanor, but who said he had to go after the older ones? Bridget was probably only five years his senior and, as far as he could tell, just as moneyed. It was a good bet that if an American made it all the way here, they had some cash to burn. As far as expectations...well, she could expect anything she liked from him as far as he was concerned.

Before he knew it, hours had ticked by. They had laughed and talked about everything under the sun. Bridget was the

daughter of Southern California real estate moguls. She now ran a wellness company and volunteered with horses, whatever that meant. They'd enjoyed oysters and cheese and too much champagne. Dusk was falling now, sending rippling shadows across the water. The twilight stretched out across the sky in a fan of watercolor oranges and reds.

"Well," Bridget finally said. "What a day it's been. Thank you, Nico. Thank you for distracting me from the mundane of my life."

Nico smiled, amused at how her life could possibly be considered mundane. He took her hand. "The pleasure has been all mine. But the night is young. Do you really have to rush off?"

She blushed like a girl half her age. "Ahh, I probably should. I've had too much wine to make good decisions."

He nodded. Don't push, he remembered Stella saying. If you push, they run.

"I understand," he kissed her hand like a proper Frenchman. "Perhaps we will meet again another day should you feel like making bad decisions."

He did not miss the twinkle in her eye.

"Nico?"

Nico froze. He felt his entire body stiffen at the sound of that voice. He stood straight and turned. Stella stared at them through the pearly moonlight. Nico's entire body reacted to the sight of her. He couldn't stop the tidal wave of longing that came over him. But he fought it down, not wanting his new friend to see his reaction.

"Stella," Nico said. "What a surprise. I thought you were on a plane to Argentina." He didn't bother keeping his tone light. He wanted—no needed—her gone. Now.

But she stepped closer, her pale skin glowing in the moonlight. Stella's eyes ran over Bridget's.

"Not until tomorrow. Who's your friend?" Stella said with a tight smile. Was it just Nico's imagination, or did her voice

carry a boozy lilt?

“Bridget,” Bridget said sternly before Nico could say anything. “You are?”

Stella’s eyes narrowed. Nico was caught, not knowing what to do next. Funny enough, the thing that came to mind was, what would Stella do in this situation? He nearly laughed out loud at the irony.

“We were just about to head off,” Nico said, wanting desperately to diffuse the situation. Bridget leaned into him then, almost territorially. Nico had had jealous girlfriends before. Insecure and immature. But there was something different in this standoff here. It was like...a battle for ownership. It was two confident women standing their ground not out of insecure jealousy but out of confidence. It was an incredible turn-on and he used every muscle not to smile.

He quickly brushed aside his fantasies of taking them both home and returned to the situation. Stella was out of sorts, and he needed to walk away. Who did she think she was anyway? She had absolutely no right to be standing there, causing him any more trouble.

“Well, if you’ll excuse me,” Nico said, taking Bridget by the arm. “Nice to see you, Stella. Get home safely.”

They brushed past Stella, and Nico caught the slightly smug expression on Bridget’s face. She was a woman used to things going her way.

“He’s not worth your time!” Stella snapped at their backs, her accent shifting from posh to something guttural, provincial. Nico stiffened. She could not be serious right now.

“Ignore her,” Nico said.

Bridget glanced back at Stella, who was huffing in the moonlight.

“Who is she?”

“Just some girl. No one important,” he said.

The words felt like ash on his tongue.

Chapter Forty-Seven



The next morning Nico stared at Bridget as she chatted on over giant sunglasses and a bloody Mary. He could never understand how Americans loved the taste of that disgusting concoction. It was like they just threw everything in the kitchen into a glass and added vodka, and somehow found it an acceptable drink in the morning. He found it almost as offensive as mimosas. Spoiling perfectly good champagne with sweet juice? He shuttered just thinking about it.

After a late night of too many cocktails, he had escorted her to her hotel room, leaving her in a state, and returned to his flat. He was mildly annoyed to be back at the posh hotel this morning. God, how he missed his favorite run-down corner cafe with strong French press and the scent of cigarettes and buttery pastries dancing on the breeze.

He snapped back to attention, trying to catch up with whatever Bridget was going on about. He had to admit that even without the slight hangover, he found her incessant chatting a bit intolerable.

It wasn't that he minded a talkative woman. On the contrary, he much enjoyed thoughtful conversation and banter and even friendly arguments. A well-versed woman who could verbally spar was a sexy thing. But Bridget didn't seem to have anything all that interesting or meaningful to say. As far as he could tell, as tan heiress with a sort of fake job, her life revolved around gossip circles and tabloids. He pressed a finger to his throbbing temple. Who wanted to spend their life like that? Is this what he had in store? Is this what Stella dealt

with on a daily basis, simply the male version of Bridget? Vapid and catty inconsistently rambling on about uninteresting topics?

“What do you say we order a bottle of champagne?” Bridget said.

Nico glanced at his watch. It was ten in the morning. He enjoyed a glass in the morning as much as anyone did. All good Frenchman could handle a glass of champagne over breakfast or even a crisp rose at a warm summer lunch. But Bridget was bordering on intoxication before noon. He had to give her a break. She was on holiday, after all. Everyone was guilty of such, he supposed. He smiled friendly and nodded.

“But of course. What is a morning on the Riviera without a fine bottle of something to quench your thirst?” He found himself throwing out well-practiced lines. Things he would’ve tossed about at the bar to entertain vacationing foreigners. They were contrived. Empty. Things that tourists wanted to hear from a dashing Frenchman. But there was little heart in any of it. He found himself longing for the ease with which he and Stella had conversed. They had laughed without preamble. Without guards up. They had simply been themselves. But maybe that was the problem. They were two people too used to putting on a mask to ever truly be comfortable taking it off.

Chapter Forty-Eight



I packed up my belongings, glancing around the exquisite hotel room forlornly. A weight of great sadness sat like a lump in my stomach. Something like grief, I supposed. Everything had an expiration date. How many times had I said that? I supposed my life here in Monte Carlo did too. Maybe it was time to seek out greener pastures and new adventures elsewhere. This place was too small, anyway. I could only roam these beaches for so long.

Alejandro had taken the news well. Of course, he had. He took everything in stride—that was the glory of him. He was so charming, good-looking, rich. But in the end, I couldn't make myself feel anything for him. And I was tired of living like a statue, cold and unmoving. And as long as I was at his side—even platonically—it prevented me from finding the spark I needed in life.

My stomach was twisted in knots as I thought of stepping on the plane in Nice and saying farewell to this life I had fought so hard for. But for all my hard work, what did I really have to show for any of it? I had a padded bank account and a storage unit packed full of luxury items. But no home, no family. Really even very few true friends. Only a circle of people who needed me to be a certain thing. If I was any different version of myself, and I no longer fit the mold. It was time for me to find something else. Milan seemed like the right kind of place to start that journey.

“Are you sure about this?” Gabriella had asked me as we lingered over an overpriced bottle of Champagne.

“Oui. It’s time I moved on. It’s been a glorious few years but I’m ready for something new. This place gets a little small after a while.”

She offered me a sympathetic smile. “Well then. You must go to Milan. It’s the heart of the world. You’ll fit right in. More than you ever did here, I think. I have an apartment there. Right off Palazzo Reale. Use it as long you need until you find your next adventure.”

I squeezed her hand. “Merci, Gabi. You’ve been the best friend I could hope for.”

Not one for sentiment, she waved me away. But then she slid a small, wrapped box toward me.

“What’s this?”

“Open it.”

I carefully unwrapped the tiny box and sucked in a breath at the sparkling pink diamond brooch staring up at me. I met her eyes. “Um—what’s this?”

She sipped her champagne and shrugged. “Just a little trinket.”

“More than a little. I’m not used to other women giving me diamonds.”

She grinned. “It was a peace offering from my ex-husband when I caught him with his assistant. It’s worth quite a lot. It reminds me that those who hurt us don’t define us. Keep it for a rainy day. In case you ever find yourself without means.”

I closed the box and bit back tears. Coming from Gabi, it was the most sentimental gift she could have given.

I folded my final packing cube and zipped the bag. I was leaving most of my belongings in storage for now, but I was bringing a modest bag of clothes and a small carry-on bag of my most personal things. It was quite freeing to travel so light.

There was a knock at the door. I froze mid-pack. It must be housekeeping, although it was an odd hour for it. I peered into the peephole. A female hotel clerk stood there in her white button-down blouse and black slacks. I opened the door.

“Bonjour, mademoiselle. I have your check out receipt?”

“Oh, right. Oui. Merci.” I extended my hand, and she handed over a slip of paper.

“The charges have, of course, all been settled by Prince Alejandro.” There was no judgment in her tone, which was something I appreciated about the staff here. They didn’t pretend things weren’t what they were, and they didn’t judge for it. Then she handed me a small gift bag.

“Compliments of The Excalibur Hotel. We have very much enjoyed having you here with us.

“Merci. I will miss calling it home.”

She smiled respectfully and turned.

I shut the door and then opened the small bag, finding a small box of truffles and a delicate gold necklace with a small ruby pendant. Not a bad parting gift. I placed the necklace in my handbag and opened the chocolates. No time like the present.

I was savoring the velvety truffle when there was another knock.

“Pardon mademoiselle for the intrusion,” the clerk said as I opened the door again. “But you have a visitor.”

“I can’t imagine that’s true,” I said. “No one would be coming here to see me.”

The clerk glanced to her side as though someone was standing there. “He is...insistent.”

The clerk stepped aside, and my breath caught. Then I got ahold of myself and started to close the door.

“No. I have nothing to say to you,” I said.

“Stella, please. Just hear me out,” Nico said.

“Mademoiselle? Would you like me to call security?” The clerk asked.

I glared at Nico and nearly considered it. But the pleading in his eyes tugged at my compassion. I sighed.

“No, it’s fine. I will hear him out, as he so insists. You can go, merci.” The clerk looked wary, but I smiled, hopefully reassuringly. “Honestly, it’s fine. He’s harmless.”

I glared at Nico.

The clerk nodded. “Oui, mademoiselle. Please ring if you need assistance.” With that, she turned and left.

I opened the door wider. “Well, come in then,” I said, annoyed.

Nico stepped through, and I slammed the door. Then I spun around and glared at him.

“What do you want?” I snapped.

“Not exactly the warm greeting I had hoped for.”

I rolled my eyes and crossed my arms. “Why would expect a warm greeting? Why are you here?”

“I needed to see you.”

“Where’s your new friend *Bridget*,” I said like a petulant child.

“I left her happily drowning in champagne. She is not the one for me. Stella—”

“What could you possibly want with me anymore? Haven’t I done enough? Haven’t you done enough? Haven’t we destroyed each other’s lives enough?” I felt the hysteria rising in my throat.

Then, Nico unexpectedly laughed. I wanted to slap him.

“I’m glad this is amusing to you,” I said.

“Stella, please,” Nico took my hand. “There is truth in what you say. We have utterly destroyed each other’s lives. But,” he tightened his grip as I tried to pull away. “But, they were lives that needed to be destroyed. They were lives that needed to be upended, turned upside down, and shaken until the truth came out. And now here we are, faced with the truth. Are you telling me you’re really going to run from it?”

“You still don’t get it, do you?” I said. “I don’t have the options that you do.”

He laughed. “You have an interesting perspective about your lot in life. And I think that comes from somewhere deep within you. From some dark and painful past that you still have not escaped. But look around you. Look what you have accomplished, Stella. Whoever she is, you’re not that girl anymore. That girl you’ve been running from.”

“You don’t know me, Nico.”

“But I do. You’re a powerful, intelligent woman. A force. You don’t need these people to survive. You’ve built a life for yourself. You have assets. You don’t need them to support you. You don’t need me to support you. You can take care of yourself in every way.”

I laughed and folded my arms over my chest. “Maybe that’s all true. But if it is, then what is it that I could possibly need from you?”

Nico grinned. “Because life is not all about the money. Maybe you need someone to take care of your heart when it gets a little bruised. To hold you at night. To make you laugh.” He stepped closer, pressing his chest to mine. He leaned in, brushing my lips with his fingertips. “Someone who will prize you even more when the glitter comes off.”

“And what happens when one of us gets hurt? What then, Nico?”

“Then we will savor the pain.”

And then he kissed me hard.

Epilogue



ONE YEAR LATER

The Dalmatian Coast was a place where the Mediterranean's azure embrace met the rugged allure of the Balkans. Where ancient stone walls whispered tales of time and the sweet aroma of citrus trees perfumed the air. I found myself nestled amidst this coastal haven, a land that seemed to have been plucked straight out of a dream.

I was currently perched precariously on a cliff side, overlooking a vast expanse of cerulean sea stretching endlessly toward the horizon. Below, white-pebbled beaches kissed the crystalline water's edge, their natural beauty undisturbed by the passing of time. Dotted the coastline, small inlets and hidden coves played hide and seek with the sun, creating a beautiful spectacle of dancing light on the water's surface.

Beyond the beach, the sea itself was a swirling canvas of blues—from the pale, nearly transparent hue of the shallows, deepening to a rich sapphire where the sea floor dropped away into fathomless depths. Occasionally, a yacht would skim across the surface, leaving a frothy white trail in its wake, adding a sense of quiet dynamism to the peaceful tableau.

Inland, lush vineyards and olive groves carpeted the hilly landscape, their rows a testament to the region's rich agricultural heritage. Ancient stone houses, their sun-bleached walls softened by climbing bougainvillea, stood as silent spectators of the ever-changing panorama. Amidst them, medieval chapels and ruins spoke of a storied past, their weathered stones a testament to the ebb and flow of

civilizations that had once claimed this corner of the world as their own.

Rising above it all were the towering Dinaric Alps, their jagged peaks stark against the cerulean sky. At sunset, the mountains would catch the last rays of the dying sun, their silhouettes aglow with an ethereal orange hue, painting a spectacle that seemed to belong more in a grand oil painting than real life.

This was the Dalmatian Coast, a symphony of natural beauty where each element played its part to create a harmonious whole. From the soothing lap of the sea against the pebbled beach to the soft rustle of the wind through the olive groves, to the majestic quietude of the towering peaks, it was a place of serene beauty and tranquility, a perfect escape from all of life's ills.

I wasn't sure any of this was real. Surely this all had to be an illusion crafted by some ancient magic. Or at least the travel bureau.

I felt the cool sea breeze scrub the warm salt from my bare skin as my long, poppy-red dress tangled up around my tanned legs. My bare feet sank into the hot sand as I stood at the little beach bar waiting for my drink.

"You must be new to the coast," a voice said. I turned and peered over my oversized sunglasses at a thick man with salt and pepper hair, a little too much chest hair, but a nice jaw and a massive platinum Rolex glinting in the midday sun. I'd peg his accent as Greek if I were betting money.

"How can you tell?" I asked, my voice all honey. Lately, I'd let the Texas seep back in, enjoying the feel of it on my tongue.

"Because you are still wearing all those clothes. Once a woman has been here for a few days, she starts to walk around in less."

Was that flirting? I could only assume so. But he could use a lesson or two.

“Is that right? Well, I guess we’ll see what this drink does for my modesty then.”

“You should not drink alone.”

“What makes you think I’m alone?” I said.

“There is no one beside you. And a woman like you should not stand without company for even a moment.”

“Well then, it’s a good thing you’re here now then, isn’t it?” I plucked the glass of chilled Gemišt from the bartender and took a nice long sip.

“I’ll take care of that glass. And how about a bottle of something fine?”

I internally chuckled but batted my lashes. “How generous.”

The bartender and I exchanged a look as he popped the cork.

“Thanks,” I said, swiping the bottle and turning.

“Wait, but—” Mr. Greek said at my back.

I grinned to myself as I sauntered back to my little beach hut, a cold bottle of Graševina wine in hand, feeling a little giddy.

* * *

The sun began to dip into the waters of the Adriatic Sea, casting a golden hue across the beaches of the Dalmatian Coast. There was a charm to the rhythm of the waves, the scent of the sea, and the distant laughter of children.

The beach café was a mishmash of tourists and locals, but there was a serene simplicity to this life I had grown to love.

“Madame, is this seat taken?” a familiar voice interrupted my thoughts. I looked up, feigning surprise, as Nico, now donning a few days of scruffy beard and casual beach attire, stood holding a tray with drinks.

“I was saving it for a mysterious bartender I met in Monte Carlo, but I guess you’ll do,” I replied with a smirk.

Nico set down the tray of drinks and eyed the expensive bottle on our little wicker table. “You just couldn’t help yourself, could you?”

I leaned back, satisfied. I let my head flop to the side, and I looked at him adoringly.

“Old habits. He was too easy.”

“That’s a nice bottle.”

I shrugged. “I don’t think it dented his bank account much.”

“I’ll drink to that then,” Nico said. He picked up the bottle and drank straight from the lip. He passed it to me, and I giggled, then followed suit. The cool Croatian wine went down like honey.

Nico sat in the lounge opposite me. He leaned in and stroked my tanned arm. “Still got it, huh?”

I winked. “Always. But remember, this is a two-player game. You’re done with your shift, I take it?”

He cracked his neck. “Finally. Never thought I never thought I’d take pleasure in making porn star martinis all day, but it’s actually kind of fun. Topsy beach tourists are a lot nicer than your crowd.”

I mock glared, then grinned.

Leaving Monte Carlo had been an easy decision for us both. Nico, as it turned out, had quite the nest egg of his own. So, together, we could afford that villa after all. But the Riviera was *soo* last season. Croatia was a peaceful paradise I could have only dreamed of. Not to mention our hilltop villa overlooking the Adriatic Sea barely put a dent in our savings.

Technically, Nico didn’t really have to tend the bar anymore, but he wanted to. He liked having something to do, being a part of the local community. It fit his personality. And without the pressure of constantly feeling like we had to hustle, it all became fun.

I wasn't sure what my long-term plan was but for now, I was enjoying learning to cook. Croatian cuisine was a brave new world I'd never considered. I had gotten a yoga certificate a few months back and taught a few classes a month at Nico's resort. Who knew, maybe I'd look into some kind of lifestyle retreat here on the Dalmatian Coast.

Josie, seemingly appearing out of nowhere, slid into the seat next to me, her mischievous grin on overdrive. "Well. I just scored complimentary dinner for three on that Greek guy's yacht tomorrow night. Apparently, he appreciated your rejection."

"So, the student surpasses the teacher," I said. "Well done, little sis."

Josie had stuck it out and graduated this past spring. The ink was barely dry before she'd hopped a plane to Zagreb. In no time, she'd found an internship with a non-profit here helping troubled youths through adventure travel. My sister was a case study in resilience. As it turned out, I was so glad to have her here with us.

Nico shook his head, feigning exasperation. "What will I ever do with you two?"

I air-kissed. "Just love me forever."

"Like I have any choice. What are you doing over there? Come here."

I stood and climbed on top of him, planting a giant kiss on his lips, which always tasted a little like lime and sea salt these days.

"Gross," Josie droned. "But this wine is decidedly not gross."

Our little trio clinked glasses, laughing, enjoying the moment, and the unexpected journey that had brought us to this beautiful coast.

"Life is good," Josie said.

I smiled. "Life is most definitely good."

In the distance, as the sun finally kissed the horizon. I glanced down at Nico—this person who'd seen me at my most vulnerable and not given up. And to my little sister who'd beaten every odd. They'd both beat me at my own game. But the future looked as bright and unpredictable as ever.

The End

Did you enjoy Monte Carlo Mistake? It would mean the world to me if you would [please leave a review!](#)

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About June



June Patrick writes witty, escapist romance set in swoony far away places. She is obsessed with all things European and dreams of moving to the Riviera where she can run around all day like Grace Kelly.

A Northern California native, she now moves around the country like a nomad with her real-life hero of a husband and their toddler daughter. They currently call Colorado home, where they live in a giant country house and begrudgingly battle snow.

You can find her at junepatrick.com or connect on Instagram and TikTik: [@junepatrickauthor](https://www.instagram.com/junepatrickauthor).



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