



# DEAN

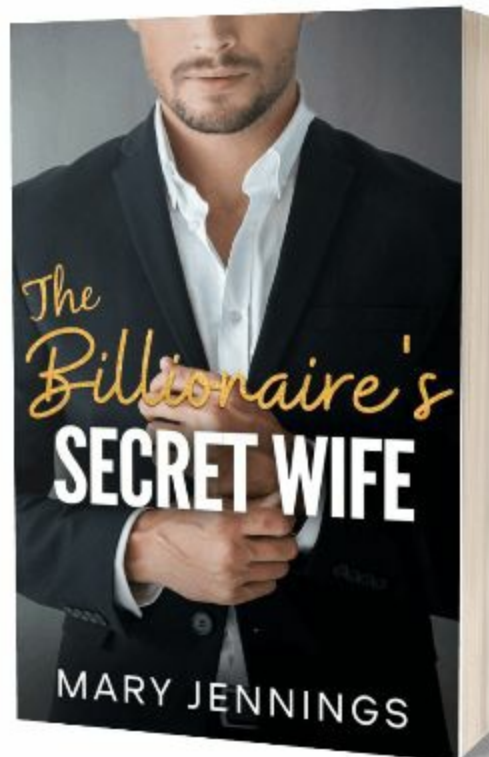
NEW YORK CITY BILLIONAIRES BOOK 5

MARY JENNINGS

Mr. Dean:  
New York City Billionaires Book 5  
by Mary Jennings

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## **Prologue: Astor**

“—and, of course, Williamsburg is arguably one of the most coveted neighborhoods in Brooklyn, so this property won’t stay on the market for long,” I said to the group of potential buyers as I led them through the main living room of the loft-style apartment.

“By ‘not long’, you mean there were already a handful of pending offers before any of us stepped through the door, huh?” replied a man dressed in the kind of overtly preppy attire that spoke of work in finance and was definitely new money.

I offered him a polite smile. “The New York real estate market can be tricky, but I assure you this property is still available.”

The man, barely chastised, shot me a playful wink as if we were co-conspirators in a scheme I was unaware of before carrying on to view the rest of the space.

About a dozen people showed up for the viewing that morning, which was quite a lot considering the property wasn’t even listed for the public yet. Which meant most of them were developers or landlords, not individuals looking to make the property their personal home. That was typical in this city. The sellers had approved the listing just last night, but I was certain they’d settle on the winning offer by the end of the day. That was New York City in a nutshell. Things moved at the speed of light. Even when properties weren’t nearly as nice as this Williamsburg gem, the market moved before you could take the time to blink.

Despite all of that, it would be a small deal by Brooklyn standards. It

was a two-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment that was listed for \$2.3 million. The competition in this popular neighborhood would likely push the final sale price up to about \$2.5 million. With my five-percent commission, half of which I would have to share with the buyer's agent, my final cut would likely be a little over sixty thousand dollars. Maybe that was enough to be considered a livable annual salary elsewhere in the country, but it was pocket change in New York.

It wasn't that I was greedy. In truth, money wasn't a significant motivator for me the way it was for most people in this city. I didn't want to buy fancy shoes or bags, nor did I care much about paying rent for an exclusive high-rise. I just wanted to make enough to pay for my necessities and to take care of my family back home.

I'd be able to do that a lot more easily if it weren't for the fact that all I ever seemed to get were the tiny scraps leftover from whatever the guys at the firm gobbled up first. It might be the twenty-first century, but the male-dominated staff at the real estate company where I worked always enjoyed their gender privilege. With their loud voices and aggressive attitudes, they snatched the best deals away from each other in a weekly verbal brawl that I was never invited to. By the time they were finished deciding who would get to score a twenty-million-dollar sale versus a thirty-million-dollar sale, I was left with the small stuff.

They treated me like small stuff, too. In their eyes, I was a petite blonde woman playing a big man's game. I had no doubt it was comforting to them to receive consistent confirmation that women would never be a threat to their success.

One day, I would prove them wrong. Somehow, I would reverse the tide and finally show them that I was a force to be reckoned with.

Unfortunately, until then, I would continue battling my way through the trenches of paltry real estate offerings.

“If you’d all like to follow me down this hallway to the kitchen—” I said, gesturing for the group to gather once more. “The sellers had it renovated two years ago to update the countertops and include some modern tech in the layout.”

“No wonder this city is being overrun by software engineers. Everyone’s been turning their homes into robotic paradises,” quipped the same man as before, chortling at me as though he expected me to agree.

“The upgrades have increased the efficiency of the home,” I replied smoothly. “More often than not, it is also this same technology that makes the property more livable for disabled individuals.”

“Good point, ma’am,” he responded, though I could tell he was faking his graciousness. “This industry needs more warmhearted women like yourself.”

I fought the urge to narrow my eyes at him and spit out a harsh retort. While it was technically a compliment to be referred to as warmhearted, the man’s tone of voice suggested that he meant it to be taken as a synonym for soft and weak.

Instead, I inclined my head in silent thanks and turned away from him as the rest of the group took note of the kitchen’s details.

“Is this a boiling water tap?” asked the only other woman present, pointing to a device above the gas range stove. She was quite a few years older than me and had barely said a word since the viewing started. From her meek demeanor and inexpensive clothing, I assumed she was merely a broker’s assistant, sent in their stead to gather information on the property without wasting the actual broker’s time.



Still, she was my only gender ally, so I reserved the bulk of my kindness for her.

“Yes, it is,” I replied. “You can fill a pot with instantly boiling water right on the stove without having to carry it over from the sink and wait for it to heat up.”

“I wish I had something like this at my place,” she remarked with a small smile, keeping her voice low as if she were embarrassed to be dreaming of living in an apartment like this while surrounded by wealthy real estate developers.

I knew what it was like to want the best for yourself and your loved ones—not because it was fancy or expensive, but because it would genuinely improve the quality of your life.

“Me, too,” I murmured to her with a smile.

“How funny,” commented the rude man, who had been hovering close by without my realizing it. “You women are always going shopping inside your minds, picking out this and that to nag their boyfriends or husbands for.”

From the look on his face, he seemed to think that both the other woman and I would laugh at his sexist statement. I didn’t understand what was wrong with him. Why would we be entertained by such conversation? Either he didn’t realize how insulting his words were, or he got a kick out of spewing misogyny in the faces of women who could do nothing but smile and nod if they didn’t want to lose their jobs.

Something told me it was the latter.

Unsurprisingly, none of the other men in the room bothered to tell him to shut his trap. They were too busy surveying the property to determine if it was worth purchasing. Or perhaps, like my colleagues back at the office, they

saw nothing wrong with what the rude man was spewing on an otherwise pleasant September morning.

However, just when I was about to politely remind the man that, like many independent and ambitious women nowadays, I was more than capable of buying the things I wanted without having to ask for permission from my significant other first, somebody else cut into the conversation.

A deep, warm chuckle sounded from right behind me.

“Paul, you’ve always been such a traditional guy,” the stranger remarked jovially, addressing the rude man with relative familiarity colored with the barest hint of annoyance. “I can promise you that it’s usually *me* begging this beautiful lady to indulge something on my shopping list.”

Utterly confused, I turned to find myself face to face—or rather, face to chest—with a tall, slender-yet-toned man. Up until that point, he had clung to the fringes of the group from the moment I led them inside the apartment, though I had noticed how handsome he was. It was hard not to. Not only did he have the physique of a god, but his chiseled jawline, regal nose, and chestnut brown hair made me feel as if I were in the presence of a model or movie star.

On top of that, there was a warmth in his gaze that immediately made me inclined to trust him. At first, I had no idea what he was talking about, but then I realized that *I* was the beautiful lady he was referring to.

Clearly, he’d overheard the conversation and decided to come to my rescue.

The other man, whose name was apparently Paul, raised his eyebrows at his much more handsome counterpart. “What? Elijah? I don’t—I didn’t realize you two were together.”

I decided to play along. From the disappointment in Paul's eyes, it was obvious he had recognized that I was out of his league. That should have already been clear to him without the handsome stranger's assistance, but I enjoyed watching his face fall, nonetheless.

"Well, I don't like to discuss personal matters on the clock," I replied smoothly, faking a smile and angling my body toward my fake boyfriend. Hopefully, my body language was enough to conceal the fact that today was the first time I'd ever laid eyes on him.

"Yes, exactly," hummed my newfound partner in crime, placing a protective hand on my shoulder. "Rest assured, Paul, Ms. Astor definitely wears the pants in our relationship. Welcome to the twenty-first century."

His tone was warm and light, the rebuke impressively subtle.

Paul pursed his lips. "Congratulations, I guess."

"By the way, I'm surprised to see you here," the unknown divinity beside me continued, winking at Paul conspiratorially. "I know your uncle often sends you as his errand boy to these showings, but I had no idea a property like this was in his company's budget. His portfolio must be doing well. Congratulations are in order all around."

I nearly gasped in amusement at the sheer bite of his words and the thinly veiled insults they carried. Thankfully, I managed to hold myself back and merely smiled placidly at Paul as he digested the remarks. Not only had the taller man audibly noted for everyone else in the vicinity to hear that Paul was a lowly nepotism hire, but he also insulted the company itself by suggesting they couldn't afford a property that was, by New York standards, fairly cheap.

A range of reactions flitted across Paul's face. Initially, it seemed as though he wanted to blurt out a deluge of blatant insults at the stranger, but

then he appeared to remember that he was surrounded by other professionals in the industry. His reputation was on the line. He didn't care if people knew he harassed females, but he certainly didn't appreciate insults to his image and status.

"Right," was all he muttered after a prolonged pause. "Thanks. If you'll excuse me, I need to make a call."

Without another word, Paul ducked out of the conversation and practically scurried out of the kitchen, heading toward the exit. The second he was out of sight, the gorgeous man removed his hand from my shoulder and stepped away to allow for an appropriately professional amount of space between us once more.

"Sorry about that," he said with a small smile, nodding at the tingling curve of my shoulder where his unexpected touch had felt impossibly comforting. "I'm sure you could've told him off on your own, but I couldn't resist stepping in. I can't stand that guy."

I turned to face him fully, stunned by the masculine beauty of his face. His dark eyes glittered with boyish charm, contrasting with the light stubble along his jaw in the most captivating way.

"No worries," I responded, the corners of my lips curving upward automatically as I continued to drink in the sight of him. "It seemed to do the trick."

"I apologize for not introducing myself earlier," he continued. "I'm Elijah. Elijah Dean."

"Dean ... as in Dean Properties?"

"The one and only."

I should have known. His perfectly tailored suit was by Tom Ford,

there was an understated silver Rolex on his wrist, and the leather loafers on his feet were undoubtedly handmade in Italy. This man had the kind of wealth that didn't require boasting about with obvious designer labels and flashy accessories.

Honestly, I was surprised I didn't recognize him. Dean Properties was one of the most successful property development firms in New York City. They had a massive portfolio of residential, commercial, and industrial buildings all over the five boroughs and northern Jersey. The company I worked for had them on our regular client list. It wouldn't have been difficult to search Dean Properties on the internet and find Elijah's headshot, especially since his grandfather and father had been the masterminds behind the firm for the past fifty years.

Basically, the man in front of me was not only my knight in shining armor, but also a gorgeous billionaire.

"It's nice to meet you," I told him, shaking his hand. "I know I introduced myself as Lucille Astor earlier, but you can call me Lucy."

"The pleasure is all mine."

"I didn't know Dean Properties was sending a representative to this viewing," I continued.

He shrugged, leaning against the counter and shoving his hands into his pockets with alluring nonchalance.

"I received a tip that the *New York Times* is about to list Williamsburg as the number one neighborhood in Brooklyn, so I figured it was a good time to snatch up a few available properties before prices skyrocket even more than they already have," he explained.

Not only was he handsome, he was intelligent and savvy. My stomach

flipped with admiration ... and something else I wouldn't dare name while I was still on the clock.

At that point, the guided tour was finished. The visitors who came to the conclusion that they weren't interested in the property had already left, leaving only a handful of interested people milling around the large space. While they made calls to their colleagues to confirm offers to be made, Elijah and I were alone in the kitchen. In his presence, it was easy to forget that I was supposed to be doing my job, but I suppose talking to him was part of the gig.

"That's wise of you," I answered. "No wonder Dean Properties has remained at the top of the pyramid for so long."

"My father taught me well," Elijah chuckled. "Let me give you my card."

In any other situation, my reaction to a sexy man asking to exchange contact information would have been downright rude and vicious. I didn't have the stomach for male attention nowadays. Not since my ex-boyfriend ruined the entire gender for me in one catastrophic night that had changed the entire trajectory of my life. Thanks to *him*, I now went out of my way to avoid situations where serious flirting might occur.

Of course, this wasn't flirtation. This was work. Elijah and I were conducting business. Whenever I stepped into my high-powered real estate broker shoes, I became vastly more confident and capable. I also became much more professional.

I pulled one of my business cards out from the clipboard I'd been holding since I arrived and handed it to Elijah, accepting one of his in return.

"Thank you," I said, ignoring the way my skin tingled where his had briefly brushed against it.

“Likewise,” he replied. Then, although none of the others were within earshot, he leaned in and lowered his voice. “I’d like to put in an offer for three million.”

I blinked in surprise, but didn’t miss a beat.

“That’s thirty percent above the asking price,” I reminded him.

Elijah grinned. “That was impressively quick mental math.”

“It’s an easy calculation to make,” I responded humbly.

For some reason, his grin grew more pronounced at that. “Well, that being said, I am fully aware of the asking price and would like to stick with my offer. I’m not a big fan of wasting time, so I’d like to cut past whatever foolish offers the rest of this group are about to make.”

It was a fair strategy, and Dean Properties could definitely afford to play like that. If the apartment sold directly to them for three million, I wouldn’t have to share the commission fee with another agent. I’d receive one hundred and fifty grand for this sale.

That could pay off the rest of my parents’ mortgage *and* leave enough left over to gift them a peaceful resort vacation somewhere warm and sunny. God knows they deserved it after working hard to support me and my siblings for more than half their lives.

“Great!” I chirped brightly. “I’ll reach out to the seller right away and let them know about the offer. I’m sure they’ll have a response fairly quickly.”

“Perfect,” said Elijah, glancing down at his phone for a moment before smiling at me as if I’d just told him he’d won the lottery. “I’ve got to head back to the office, but it was really nice to meet you.”

“You, too. Thank you for—well ... thanks.”

I didn't know how to thank him for pretending to be my boyfriend for five minutes so that the rude guy would stop pelting creepy, sexist commentary at me. Luckily, Elijah seemed to understand what I was referring to without my needing to say much more.

"Anytime," he replied with a wink. "Take care, Lucy."

"I'll be in touch, Elijah."

He turned to walk toward the exit, but paused to throw one last twinkling glance over his shoulder at me.

"Looking forward to it," he murmured.

Before I knew it, he was gone.

Instead of standing there staring at the space where he had just been, I forced myself to focus on the task at hand. I pulled out my phone and typed an email to the seller to let them know I had a fantastic offer that they would not want to waste any time in accepting.

I'd just hit *send* when an older gentleman who attended the viewing approached me.

"Hello, ma'am. I'm very interested in this property and am willing to put in an offer above the asking price for two-point-five million."

I smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry, sir. We've just received an offer for three million. If you'd like to make a higher offer, I'd be more than happy to inform the seller right away."

The man pursed his lips and shook his head, wearing his disappointment like a familiar hat. "Dean beat me to it, didn't he? That kid is fast as lightning and sharp as a whip. Never mind, dear. I'll rescind my offer."

Clearly, smaller developers like him were used to being outbid by



Elijah. If I wasn't mistaken, it was almost as if he expected it to happen.

"No problem. However, if you're interested in this area, I have a one-bedroom in Bed-Stuy that I can send you the specs for."

"No, thank you," he sighed. I didn't blame him. The neighborhood right next to Williamsburg was definitely up and coming, but not at the same pace or with the same level of style and prestige.

Just as he was about to walk away, another man approached me.

"Excuse me. I'd like to—"

The first man turned around and cut him off with a simple shake of his head.

"Don't waste your breath. Dean Properties already grabbed it for three."

The other man flinched before glancing back at me. "Right. Never mind."

"Apologies," I told him. "The offer was only made about five minutes ago."

The two men shuffled away, muttering something to the others who were hovering nearby and waiting to make their own offers. News of Elijah's high offer spread and everyone else appeared to have the same *never mind* reaction. Within five minutes, the apartment had cleared out.

*That was easy*, I thought to myself. Slipping my clipboard into my purse, I confirmed the apartment was empty and locked it up behind me on my way out.

I'd heard a lot of things about the Dean family. The most commonly accepted fact about them was that they almost always got what they wanted. It was my first time dealing with them directly, so it was fascinating to see it

in action.

But not quite as fascinating as Elijah Dean himself.

## Chapter One: *Dean*

“We scored that loft apartment in Williamsburg,” I said to my father as I sat at the table laden with fine china and silver cutlery. “It’s move-in ready. I bet we could start renting it for about five thousand a month once Kelsey gets the lease draft approved by the legal department.”

My father sighed. “Why on earth did you buy a property in Williamsburg?”

“It’s a very fashionable place to live nowadays, dear,” my stepmother Beatrice interrupted on my behalf, offering me a conspiratorial smile across the table. “In fact, Brooklyn is ripe with investment opportunities.”

“Exactly,” I said. “I know you always say you don’t want to clutter our portfolio with too many residential properties, but the passive income in these popular areas is too good to pass up, Dad. Especially since we absorbed that property management company last quarter.”

“Yes, yes, whatever,” he relented, rolling his eyes in a lighthearted manner. “In that case—good work, son.”

*That* was the reason why I worked so hard. My father’s praise was not only a sentimental indication that he was proud of me, but also confirmation that I was right on track to take over the throne of Dean Properties someday soon. My career was everything to me. I’d do whatever it took to convince my father I was worthy of the family legacy he’d worked so hard to create.

“Thanks, Dad,” I said as a member of the kitchen staff entered the dining room to pour each of us a glass of wine.

“What is this? Riesling?” grumbled my father sarcastically.

“Sauvignon Blanc, honey,” Beatrice corrected him. “I told you the chef

was preparing a seafood dish tonight, so I chose a white wine to pair with it.”

“Right,” he muttered, then took a sip as the staff member cautiously left the room before causing more disgruntlement. “It’s nice, I guess. Good choice.”

Beatrice patted my father’s hand affectionately and he relaxed before my eyes. That was the effect she had on him. I referred to it as the “magic touch”. Not many people could win my father’s agreement and approval as easily as my stepmother did with a mere blink of her eyes. They’d been married for almost ten years, but the miracle of it never ceased to baffle me.

I was twenty-five when Beatrice came into my life. That’s when my father remarried, just barely a decade after my mother succumbed to the cancer that had slowly started to conquer her body the year I turned fifteen. I’d never seen anyone love someone the way my parents loved each other, so I always assumed my father would spend the rest of his life as a grieving widow. I was proved wrong when he met Beatrice.

At first, I spent a lot of energy trying to determine what the catch was when it came to their relationship. However, the truth was, Beatrice wasn’t a gold-digging spinster who wanted to sink her claws into the Dean fortune by preying on a broken-hearted aging man. As it turned out, she was a widow, too; her husband had passed away while serving overseas in 2003, so she knew all about sudden and unexpected loss. She also came from old New York money, and therefore had no need for my father’s wealth and status. Beatrice was kind, patient, and always lovely to be around.

Sometimes, I wished she had been more like the evil stepmother they described in fairytales. It would have been easier that way. Instead, I was forced to grieve my mother and find it impossible to dislike my stepmother at the same time.

“How was your week, Elijah?” asked Beatrice when the first course was served. “Besides securing the Williamsburg property, what made you smile?”

As corny as her question sounded, my stepmother had a way of phrasing things that made her inquiries sound as genuine and heartfelt as they truly were.

“I got a lead on a warehouse down near Coney Island,” I replied with a shrug. “It’s an old storage facility, but it could be converted into beachfront accommodation. By the way, Jerry would be the perfect project manager for it, Dad.”

“Jerry? That new kid?”

“The one you hired from Cal Tech, yes.”

“Hmm. If you think it’s a promising project, go for it.”

“But what about outside of work, Elijah?” Beatrice asked, somewhat exasperated. “Did anything make you smile besides your career?”

Before I could come up with a response, my father snorted loudly.

“Elijah doesn’t do anything besides his job, dear,” he chortled. “God knows I’ve been cursing him for it for years now.”

I groaned and sat back in my chair, preparing myself for the usual berating.

My father was a very traditional man. Not necessarily in the political sense, but more so when it came to family life. He firmly believed that classic family units were the backbone of society and that a man’s greatest deed in life was devoting himself to his wife and children. Deep down, I knew that was part of the reason why he had married again after losing his soulmate.

It was also why I was at his house for dinner. Every Sunday evening, I

was obliged to return to the brownstone in Gramercy Park where I was raised to have dinner with my father and Beatrice. His excuse was that, although I could see him anytime I wanted during the week at the office and could visit Beatrice just as easily, family dinner was a tradition that could not be replaced with any other form of quality time.

I agreed to it for the same reason I agreed to most things where my father was concerned. Once you saw the man who raised you burst into heaving sobs over the casket of his dead wife, it was hard to be anything other than a perfect son.

Unfortunately, those traditional beliefs of his extended to everyone around him. Since I was his only offspring, I received the worst of it. While my father praised me for a job well done at work every week, there was something else he'd rather see me do besides increase Dean Properties' profit margins.

He wanted me to have a family of my own.

"There's nothing wrong with taking your time to find love, Hamish," Beatrice offered, automatically coming to my defense. She was always playing the diplomat, unwilling to watch her husband and stepson argue at the dinner table.

"Well, what is taking so long, son?" my father asked me before spearing a piece of asparagus onto his fork. "You're not getting any younger. You're a handsome boy, so it's not as if no one would want you."

"Hamish—" sighed Beatrice.

"What? Am I wrong?"

I took a heavy gulp of wine. No matter what I did, my being thirty-four years old and unmarried was always going to be a source of shame for my

father. It would always stand in the way of his truly being proud of me. The conversation didn't come up every single time I came over for dinner, but it was brought up often enough that my immediate reaction to any mention of romance was unbridled frustration.

"I'm too busy to date," I replied, giving him the same response as always. "It's important to me that I contribute to the family legacy."

My father huffed in annoyance. "There won't be a family legacy if you don't give me any grandchildren. Have you considered that?"

It was the same verbal brawl all over again. Just like always, I claimed that I was too busy with my career to settle down and start a family, and my father countered that part of my duty as the eventual inheritor of Dean Properties was to have a son of my own who I could pass the company on to when I became old and gray. It was what my grandfather had done for him and what I hoped he would do for me.

Infuriatingly, proving that I was capable of leading Dean Properties didn't hinge on my ability to close deals and secure profitable assets.

"Let's discuss something else," Beatrice offered in the silence that followed my father's rhetorical question. "Hamish, weren't you saying you were thrilled about a new property that's going on the market?"

Beatrice's bringing up work over dinner meant that she was just as desperate to avoid the same old arguments as I was, but she was better at hiding it. Her strategy worked wonders to instantly distract my father, though. The deep furrow in his brow softened and he nodded.

"That's right," he said, gesturing at me with his butter knife. "I got a tip. An old factory in Harlem is going up for auction. The place closed down decades ago and was under management by some kind of conservation organization or another, but now it's up for grabs."

“Harlem?” I asked. “Where in Harlem?”

“West side. Manhattan Avenue and West 118th, I think. It takes up half the block. It’ll need to be fully gutted and renovated, but it’s massive and was built way back when people still knew how to give a building good bones.”

“Sounds promising. Harlem is developing pretty fast, but it’s not without complaints of gentrification, Dad. We don’t want Dean Properties’ reputation to get mixed up in those politics.”

“Yes, that’s what I thought at first, but then I thought about how most of those protests are directed at the shiny new high-rises some of these foolish developers are throwing up and charging four thousand a month for a studio. The real shame is that all these transplants from the Midwest with their fancy finance and software engineering degrees fall for it every time,” he ranted.

When people thought of Dean Properties, they thought of the company that owned a significant portion of New York City. Despite that, my father was adamantly opposed to contributing to what he referred to as the *tacky* developments. Adding a little bit of flavor to the city’s skyline was one thing, but diverging entirely from the traditional architecture that made the city so special was worse than sinning, in my father’s book.

“I see,” I replied, already knowing where he was headed with his train of thought. “If we convert the warehouse into an industrial-chic apartment building and turn it into a co-op of sorts, we can latch onto the cash cow without facing the bulk of the criticism.”

“Precisely!” exclaimed my father, smacking his hand on the table for emphasis as he grinned broadly. “That’s my boy. You get it. You always get it.”

I wished *getting it* was enough to deem me worthy of the title of CEO,



but I wasn't about to bring up that discussion again.

"I'm sure we're not the only ones with that idea, though," I continued.

My father exhaled loudly. "That's true. There are already about a dozen other guys who want to partake in the bidding war."

"So, we'll outbid them. That usually works for us."

"This time around, it won't be enough. They don't want to offer it to the highest bidder. The sale is contingent on them approving the development project ahead of time."

"Interesting," I muttered.

It wasn't unheard of to conduct the sale of a historic building in such a manner, especially when it was located in a neighborhood that was as congested with construction projects as Harlem. The local government usually wanted to make sure whoever bought property would develop it in line with the community's values and future prospects.

"Empire Realty is handling it," continued my father while Beatrice carried on sipping her wine in relative peace. "We've worked with them before, so we might be able to use the camaraderie in our favor."

"Empire Realty? That's who brokered the deal for the place in Williamsburg we just acquired."

"What a lucky coincidence!"

Suddenly, a lightbulb burst to life inside my head.

*Lucille J. Astor. Empire Realty.*

Her card was still in my wallet. The viewing where she'd handed it to me had only been a few days ago. I had an email from her at the top of my inbox confirming the seller had accepted the three-million-dollar offer and that she would be sending the paperwork over to my assistant on Monday.

It was perfect.

In spite of all my talk about being too focused on my career to date, I wasn't blind to beauty. When I first showed up to that apartment and saw Lucy, I couldn't help but devote the majority of my brain to appreciating how incredibly exquisite she was. On paper, she was the typical hot girl: blonde, blue-eyed, and an amazing body. Yet, there was something deeper that made Lucy so much more alluring than that. There was a bookishness about her, a no-nonsense intellectualism that I found unbearably enticing.

Or maybe, I just had a thing for women who wore glasses.

Either way, when I had seen Paul Rancorn giving her a hard time, I decided to step in and take the opportunity to introduce myself. Watching him try to amuse her with his suitcase of sexist jokes was painful enough on its own; somebody had to stop the guy before he crashed and burned in front of everyone.

I was both shocked and amused when she played along with my improvisation. She was witty and charming, with just a hint of bashfulness that proved she didn't have an inflated ego.

If I was being honest with myself, I'd thought about Lucy Astor quite a bit since that first meeting. When dealing with Empire Realty in the past, I'd only ever communicated with other men. In fact, I had started to wonder if they employed any women at all.

Regardless, we really hit it off. I had a reliable contact at Empire Realty, which could earn me an important advantage in outbidding the competition for this Harlem warehouse that my father clearly wanted. Not only was the contact friendly, she was also a stunning, intelligent young woman.

Maybe I could kill two birds with one stone.

After all, our brief skit in which we pretended to be in a blissful relationship was convincing enough to scare Paul all the way out of the building. Obviously, Lucy took cues well and could think on her feet.

If I played my cards right, I could use Lucy to secure the old factory building for Dean Properties *and* to prove to my father that I was seriously dating someone. That was exactly what I needed in order to prove I was worthy of becoming CEO. In fact, it might even be enough to show him that I could take over the role sooner rather than later.

“Actually—” I began, straightening in my chair and setting my silverware down. “The coincidence is even luckier than you think.”

“Oh? How so?”

“Well, I have a reliable connection at Empire Realty. She’s the one who brokered the Williamsburg deal.”

“I bet you built a good rapport with them, right?”

“You could say that,” I chuckled, praying that I could tell the lie without fumbling. “Her name is Lucy Astor. We’re, uh—we’ve been seeing each other for a few months now.”

Their reaction was instantaneous. Beatrice sucked in a loud gasp, pressing one hand to her chest and breaking out in a glowing, hopeful smile. Beside her, my father nearly choked on his next bite of grilled salmon, then stared at me as if he truly couldn’t believe the words that had come out of my mouth.

“Oh, Elijah!” crooned Beatrice, reaching across the table to squeeze my hand affectionately. “That’s such amazing news! Why didn’t you tell us sooner?”

“Yes, why not?” chimed in my father. “You’ve been letting me give

you a hard time while you've been dating a woman for *months*? How many months? You said she's a broker? What's her name again?"

I could tell he was thrilled by the news—perhaps even more thrilled than he would have been if I showed up to dinner and told him that I'd miraculously already secured the coveted West Harlem factory. It was hard not to be annoyed by his reaction, but I did my best to breathe life into the lie.

"Her name is Lucy Astor," I repeated. "We've been keeping it casual for about three months now and only recently decided to go steady, so I didn't want to mention it until it was worth getting your hopes up. She's really fantastic, though. I'm crazy about her."

Surprisingly, it wasn't hard to lie about Lucy like that. I hardly knew her at all, but the memory of her playful smirk and glimmering blue eyes allowed me to construct the ideal woman out of thin air for my father and stepmother.

"It's about time, son," laughed my father, clapping me on the shoulder with a firm hand and grinning as I'd never seen before. "What's she like? Is she well-educated? Where did she go to school?"

"Hamish, don't be so nosy!" giggled Beatrice. "We can get to know her better in time. When do we get to meet her, Elijah?"

"Why don't you bring her to dinner next Sunday?"

I tried not to outwardly cringe at the suggestion. Stupidly, I hadn't considered that my father would actually want to meet my not-girlfriend.

"She's actually going out of town next weekend, but I'll let her know that you're both very eager to meet her," I answered as smoothly as possible.

"Good. Great. We're looking forward to it," said my father with a proud twinkle in his eye. "Now, about this factory—"

That had gone easier than I expected. One simple lie and I was suddenly the best son any father could possibly be blessed to have. My father looked happier than he had in a long time. Even Beatrice was radiating more warmly than usual. Apparently, this was all they wanted from me—news that I was going steady with someone.

Now, all I had to do was convince a stranger to be my pretend girlfriend.

## Chapter Two: *Astor*

“I just don’t understand why they’re being so stubborn,” Gabriella scoffed, glaring at the television screen. An episode of *Gossip Girl* that had originally aired when we were still in high school was playing. “Like, why can’t Blair and Chuck just admit that they’re in love with each other?”

I shrugged, taking a swig of the deep red wine in my glass. “Their pride is at stake. In their eyes, admitting they love each other is the equivalent of showing weakness.”

“Ugh!” exclaimed Gabriella, punching the throw pillow beside her with frustration. “Pride this, weakness that. Blah, blah! That’s so *dull*. He’s hot and she’s beautiful. I just think they should kiss.”

I snickered at my best friend. “You’ve seen this show, like, a million times. You know they end up getting married in the end.”

“Yes, but it’s the convoluted journey to that conclusion which really irks me. If the script writers would just cut to the chase and stop making everyone act like whiny babies, they would’ve been able to wrap up the show within three seasons! Efficiency!”

“I don’t think efficiency is what these productions are aiming for.”

“Fair enough,” she grumbled, sipping her wine with a pout.

I couldn’t help laughing at her dramatics. Gabriella and I had known each other since college. We’d been randomly paired together as lab partners for a gen-ed science course when we were sophomores and immediately became the best of friends. It was crazy to think about. She wasn’t the kind of person I typically gravitated toward. When I met her, Gabriella was an art history major and president of the vegan club. She was free-spirited, a firm

believer in having a go-with-the-flow approach to life.

By comparison, I was stiff and unapproachable. Still, we made a good pair. When I received an offer of employment from Empire Realty and Gabriella was granted an internship with the curation team at the Whitney Museum, we were excited to both be heading to New York City after graduation because that meant we would still have each other.

Yet, I had no idea I would need Gabriella as much as I had these past few months. Not only was she my best friend, but she was now also my roommate. Just temporarily, of course. Until I battled through the trenches of the Manhattan rental market and found a decent place of my own, I was sleeping on her couch.

That had definitely not been in my original ten-year plan.

But, plans change. When you walk in on your long-term boyfriend cheating on you with one of your friends *at your own birthday party*, your life tends to shift a bit. All of a sudden, I didn't have a wonderful partner with whom I shared an adorable apartment and planned to marry someday soon. Instead, the majority of my belongings were stuffed into a storage unit in the Bronx and I was taking up space in Gabriella's tiny one-bedroom in midtown because it was the only place I could go.

Gabriella had told me I could stay for as long as I wanted to. I know she meant it. She wasn't the kind of person who was uptight about privacy and having a space to herself. Unfortunately, I was. As kind as she'd been, I desperately wanted to have my own place. However, in New York, that was easier said than done—even when you worked for one of the biggest realty companies in the city.

“My sister used to love this show,” I commented, focusing back on the nostalgic teen drama playing out on the screen in front of us. “She’s basically

the only reason I watched it in the first place.”

“That’s cute. How’s Lily doing, by the way?”

“She’s good. You know, senior year of college and all that. Super stressful. She’s taking the LSAT next month, so she’s been radio silent while studying for it.”

“God, not the LSAT. She really wants to go to law school?” Gabriella groaned. “Why is everyone in your family so obsessed with being over-educated?”

I snorted. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“Don’t get me wrong. I love my nerdy little Lucy, but you Astors really love to go to school. I mean, both you and Luke got your MBAs and now Lily wants a JD?”

“To be fair, it’s not as if Luke is using his business degree anymore.”

“Where is he nowadays? Cambodia? Thailand?”

Luke was my older brother. Once upon a time, he was a completely different person than the man people knew today. He’d gone to Harvard for both undergrad and business school, then gone on to accept a prestigious position at a bank in Boston. Luke used to wear Ralph Lauren to die for shirts and expensive loafers to the corner store because that’s what all the bankers did.

Then, a few years ago, he’d had a minor mental breakdown and realized that he hated his career. If I remembered correctly, he said it was sucking the soul right out of him. To remedy that, he quit his job at the bank, donated all of his belongings, and joined the Peace Corps.

“He was in Cambodia last year, but moved to Ghana this past spring,” I corrected her.



“That’s right. I remember now. Wow, he’s really getting out there and seeing the world, huh?”

“He sure is.”

“Maybe Lily should do that,” Gabriella suggested. “I bet she wouldn’t want to go to law school anymore if she saw how much more interesting the rest of the world is.”

I smirked and shook my head at her mischievous comment.

Lily was the baby of the family. Luke and I were relatively close in age—he was four years older than me—but Lily was a late addition, born eight years after me. Arguably, she was the most ambitious of us, which was really saying something when you took into account my unwavering determination and Luke’s unquenchable thirst for adventure.

As fate would have it, we didn’t come from a privileged background. Our father worked for a landscaping company and our mother was a small-town schoolteacher. They tried their best to make ends meet with three children to feed and clothe, but when it came time to pay for our extravagant educations, they seriously struggled. That was why I wanted to succeed as badly as I did. I wanted to pay them back tenfold for everything they’d given me.

Plus, law school wasn’t cheap. Lily already had to shell out a ridiculous amount of money to pay for her LSAT tutor and the exam fees. Once she took the test, there would be application fees. When she got accepted to the school of her dreams, she would then have to pay the deposit. Then there were books to buy, a professional wardrobe to invest in, and she’d probably need a new laptop, too. Not to mention the exorbitant cost of tuition. Even with scholarships and grants, there were living expenses to think of on top of that.

It was an endless uphill battle to become educated and successful when you weren't born into wealth.

Our parents weren't getting any younger, either. Taking on extra shifts was hard on our father's body and my mother could only do so much with her teaching degree in rural Vermont. Now that Luke was no longer earning six figures a year as a banker and had funneled most of his savings into our parents' retirement fund, despite their humble protests, he wasn't much help in terms of supporting our little sister's future.

Basically, it was up to me. If Lily wanted to be an attorney, then I would make sure it could happen. If I brokered another sale like the apartment in Williamsburg, Lily wouldn't have to worry about a thing for at least the first year of law school.

If only those douchebags at the company would let me get my hands on the bigger deals ...

"Uh, oh," Gabriella said, coaxing me out of my troubled thoughts as she snuggled closer to me on the couch. "Someone's got their thinking face on!"

"What's a 'thinking face'? Isn't that just a normal face? Aren't we always thinking, all the time?" I joked.

"It's the face you make when you're getting yourself lost in an anxious thought spiral," she replied. "I've gotten very familiar with it over the years. You do it often."

I swatted at her. "That's nonsense. I wasn't in an anxious thought spiral. I was just concerned about the state of Blair and Chuck's relationship. I mean, look at them. Their misery is oozing through the television screen."

Gabriella threw her head back with laughter. "Right. Sure. How about

instead of watching another episode of *Gossip Girl*, we turn this into a night out on the town and gossip, girl?”

“Clever,” I snorted. “No, thanks.”

“Why not? It’s Friday night!”

I hadn’t always been such a homebody, but after what had happened with my ex, I’d lost my taste for going out on the weekends. I discovered that the person I thought I was in love with was cheating on me at a party where everyone was drunk and having a good time, which caused me to mistrust anything that was classified as harmless fun. Plus, going to a club or a bar meant inevitable altercations with the opposite sex. It was exhausting to have to constantly bat away their advances, claiming over and over again that I simply wasn’t interested.

The whole thing just wasn’t enjoyable to me anymore.

I’d explained this to Gabriella before, but she insisted that my hatred for socializing would fade if I boldly confronted my fears. But I wasn’t ready for that.

“You know why,” I told her. “I’m not in the mood to go out.”

“But, you’re—”

“Before you say it, I’m well aware that I’m never in the mood to go out anymore,” I interrupted, anticipating the protest that was forming on her lips. “But that doesn’t mean you should let me hold you back. Why don’t you call Stacy or one of your friends from the museum? I’m sure they’d love to join you.”

Gabriella pouted, but she relented. She wasn’t a stubborn or pushy person.

“Fine,” she sighed, snuggling closer and draping an arm around my

shoulders. “You know I’m a huge supporter of processing heartbreak at your own pace. I’m sorry if I put too much pressure on you.”

I wrapped an arm around her waist and hugged her back. “It’s okay. I know you intend for it to be more like encouragement than pressure, so I get it. Who knows? Maybe one day I’ll feel better and suddenly decide that I’m totally in the mood for a spontaneous night on the town.”

Gabriella giggled at me. I wasn’t trying to sound sarcastic, but we both knew how ridiculous my declaration sounded. Even before I ended my relationship with that beast-who-shall-not-be-named, I wasn’t wildly extroverted. For the most part, I only went out to appease Gabriella or because my ex begged me to. Otherwise, I was too busy being concerned about getting enough sleep so that I could be well-rested for work the next day.

In general, I wasn’t the partying type of girl. My older brother often joked that it was because I was an old soul, sarcastically implying that I was more like a grandma than a young woman. The truth was, I’d always opt to be cozy in bed by ten than chatting with strangers in a crowded space with an overpriced drink in my hand as the clock ticked past midnight.

“I’ll call Stacy,” Veronica told me, ending our heart-to-heart and hopping up from the couch with an eager grin.

She started buzzing around the apartment, tossing clothes and accessories all over the place as she sought out something to wear for whatever adventure she craved that evening. I stayed put on the sofa, trying to ignore the way I felt—somewhat meek and pathetic in my sweatpants as another episode of *Gossip Girl* automatically played on the television.

Gabriella was incredibly nonjudgmental, but even I understood that my behavior was odd. I was a young, single, attractive woman choosing to stay

in on a Friday night in one of the most exciting and interesting cities on the planet. Shouldn't I be more like my friend? Shouldn't I want to get out there and rebound from the disaster of my last relationship with a few shots of tequila and a handful of bad decisions? Wasn't that what any girl would do?

I frowned to myself as Gabriella hopped around on one stiletto while she searched for the other, her hair thrown up in a set of curlers as she chatted on her phone to our mutual friend Stacy about where they were meeting up. I liked Stacy a lot, and not just because she had to be held back from pummeling my ex-boyfriend to a pulp when I caught him at the scene of the crime a couple of months ago. She was like Gabriella—sweet, carefree, and loyal. Stacy also liked to dance the night away, so I suppose it was convenient for Gabriella that she had one friend for staying in and another for going out.

Part of me wondered if I should swallow my misgivings and jump into the adventure with Gabriella and Stacy. What was the worst that could truly happen? If I was miserable, escaping would be as easy as bidding my friends goodnight and hailing a cab back to the apartment.

And since when was I such a coward? Since when did I allow a man to dictate how I lived my life?

I huffed with frustration, but Gabriella was too busy digging around for her mascara in the bathroom cabinet to hear me.

Just as I was about to throw up my hands in defeat and exclaim that I was willing to go out after all, my phone vibrated on the coffee table. I had an incoming call. I recognized the name that popped up on the screen immediately.

*Elijah Dean.*

I'd saved him to my contacts earlier that week when we decided to

exchange personal numbers for easier communication during the closing process on the Williamsburg apartment. It was common practice nowadays, but it wasn't without the unspoken agreement that we would only reach out during business hours.

It was nine-thirty in the evening on a Friday. Why was Elijah Dean, the handsome prince of the Dean Properties empire, calling me?

My immediate reaction was to send the call to voicemail. I was steadfastly devoted to my career, but I drew the line at discussing business while I was half a bottle of wine deep and all but glued to the sofa for the rest of the night. It baffled me that Elijah didn't have such boundaries for his own professional life. He was hot, rich, and likable. A guy like him should have been too busy entertaining high society at an exclusive club in Soho to be dialing calls to a random broker he was working with for an admittedly inconsequential acquisition.

Yet, in spite of such thoughts, my curiosity got the better of me.

I answered the call.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Lucy! It's Elijah. How are you?"

It was definitely him. He hadn't accidentally hit the call button or had his phone stolen. It certainly sounded as if he had called me on purpose, his tone just as warm and friendly as it had been in every conversation we'd had since that first meeting.

"I'm fine," I replied timidly, subconsciously waiting for the punchline. "How are you doing? Is there something I can help with?"

Gabriella shot me a questioning glance as she fumbled with her earrings by the front door, but I shook my head to indicate I'd explain later.

“Yes, actually,” Elijah said. “Firstly, I’m sorry for calling so late. I’m not interrupting anything, am I? If you’re too busy to deal with me at the moment, please feel free to hang up. I promise I won’t be offended.”

There was a smile in his voice. I found it difficult not to smile to myself at the sound of it. It was almost bothersome how contagious his charm was.

“No, it’s all right,” I responded. “I’m not busy. I can talk.”

“Great!”

“Is there a problem? Did something come up with the sellers?”

What I meant to ask was, *is there a specific reason that this conversation couldn’t wait until Monday morning?* Except, for some reason, I was less inclined to be as snippy with Elijah as I would have been with the average male colleague. Annoyingly, something about him softened my icy exterior.

“No, no,” he replied. “There’s no problem at all. In fact, the sellers have been abnormally easy to work with. I’m sure it has something to do with how great their agent is at her job.”

The subtle compliment threw me for a loop. I didn’t know what to say, still puzzled over the purpose of his call, so I merely muttered, “Right. That’s good to hear.”

“The reason for my call is unrelated to the property. I’m going to have to ask you to humor me for a moment and allow me to explain myself, but I can promise I’ll make it worth your while, okay?”

He sounded like a salesman preparing to make a big pitch. If I wasn’t mistaken, I detected a hint of trepidation in his voice. I didn’t think a man of his reputation was capable of such an emotion.

“Okay,” I said. “No problem.”

Meanwhile, Gabriella secured the strap of her purse over her shoulder and waved to me on her way out the door. I waved back to her and settled deeper into the couch cushions to hear the rest of Elijah's strange speech.

"It's a little unorthodox—" he continued before trailing off.

"I don't understand," I said, fighting the urge to impatiently tell him to get to the point. It was the memory of his sexy, mischievous smirk that held me back.

Elijah cleared his throat. Whatever he was about to say, he really had to gear himself up to spit out the words.

"Okay, Lucy. If you're willing to indulge me, I have a proposal for you."



## Chapter Three: *Dean*

*Goddamn it, she's beautiful*, I thought to myself as Lucy walked through the front doors of the cafe. It was a charming little coffee shop in Greenwich Village, a hidden gem whose appeal hadn't yet been ruined by even the most aggressive of Instagram influencers.

The lovely ambience paled in comparison to Lucy, though.

When I first met Lucy, she'd been dressed in a sleek suit, her blond hair pulled back in a low bun. That was her professional persona, a mask we were all guilty of wearing in the city that never sleeps.

But it was mid-morning on a Saturday and this was not a work meeting. In true New York fashion, the September weather was still as warm as it had been all summer. Lucy was dressed accordingly. Somehow, I could tell from the casual gracefulness of her posture and the nonchalant smile she offered the barista who greeted her that she wasn't doing anything special for me. Rather, she always made herself look like a Grecian goddess.

She wore a sundress the color of fresh cream that clung to her figure as a breeze wafted through the open windows of the cafe. A pale green scarf was tied around her throat, a chic accessory that made her look like a stylish French woman. Her thick, golden blonde hair spilled down around her shoulders. Everything about her beauty was effortless, as if she'd been painted into my reality with a few strokes of an omniscient artist's paintbrush.

It occurred to me that Lucy might be out of my league ... which was really saying something. I was humble, but that didn't mean I wasn't aware

of the fact that I was an extremely eligible bachelor.

Uncharacteristically, I felt a twinge of nervousness in the pit of my stomach as Lucy paused to scan the cafe in search of my vaguely familiar face. I was beginning to think it would be more difficult than I originally expected to convince her to work with me on this scheme.

When Lucy's crystal blue eyes landed on me where I sat at a table in the corner surrounded by greenery and exposed brick, I offered her my trademark smile and waved her over.

She nodded, gave her order at the counter, then floated over to me with uncertainty written plainly on her face.

"Hello," she said softly, glancing at her dainty wristwatch. "I'm not late, am I?"

"Not at all," I assured her. "I just have a bad habit of being perpetually early."

"Well, I wouldn't call that a bad habit," Lucy chuckled, taking the seat across from me and draping her purse across the back of the chair.

"I'm glad. Thank you for agreeing to meet me on a weekend, by the way."

Lucy shrugged. "My curiosity got the better of me. I had to know more about this so-called proposal of yours. Anyway, I'm no stranger to working on the weekends."

"Me, too."

"You look different when you're not wearing a suit."

I couldn't help smiling at her observation. Her tone made it impossible to know if she meant it as a compliment or an insult, which I found inexplicably sexy for some reason.

"Likewise," I murmured.

At that moment, the barista bustled over with her order—an iced coffee with enough cream in it to turn the dark brew into a notably pale concoction. Lucy thanked the barista warmly, throwing in a compliment about her earrings as the younger woman blushed and hurried back to the counter.

"You know, they don't typically do table service," I said when the barista was gone.

"Oh? That was nice of her, then."

I smiled again. She had no idea the effect she had on people.

"They put quite a lot of milk in your coffee," I commented, mostly because I didn't know how else to keep the conversation moving forward without jumping right into the main topic at hand. I didn't want to scare her off, so I figured it was better to take baby steps in my approach to the proposal.

Normally, business proposals were second nature to me. I never struggled with determining how to communicate with colleagues and clients. However, I'd also never asked anyone to be my faux girlfriend before.

"Yes, I like it this way," Lucy answered. "I suppose I'm not cool enough to drink it black."

She raised her eyebrows and nodded at my drink, a basic Americano.

"Trust me, I don't drink this because I think I'm cool," I replied. "It's

just that it's pretty much the only thing I know how to order. I don't usually drink coffee."

"Seriously? In this industry? How do you survive?"

"Sheer willpower," I joked.

Lucy snorted delicately. "Right. Well, what did you want to discuss? You were so vague on the phone last night that I've been going insane with curiosity ever since."

I hadn't wanted to pitch the proposal to Lucy via a phone call. Giving her the opportunity to hang up on me before I could fully explain myself seemed counterproductive. Face to face conversations always had better outcomes when it came to tricky situations.

Still, when I asked Lucy to meet me today so that I could describe the entirety of my so-called proposal, I hadn't expected her to agree. Maybe she enjoyed mysteries.

"First of all, I need you to promise that you won't get up and walk out of here until I've delivered the entire proposal," I began.

"That's a great way to preface something," Lucy said with a smirk.

I chuckled nervously. "It might sound a bit ridiculous at first, but I swear it will be mutually beneficial. It's also completely open for negotiation."

"Fine. I promise. You don't have to worry about me walking out on you. I'm not a quitter."

There was a playful determination in her gaze that sparked a sensation within me that definitely wasn't work-appropriate. Everything about her,

from the flawless waves in her hair to the silk scarf around her slender, sexy neck was bewitching. Lucy looked like a Hollywood starlet, the kind of woman who belonged on the silver screen, not sitting across from me in a local coffee shop.

“Good,” I replied. “So, first of all, there’s a property in West Harlem that Empire Realty is handling the sale of. It’s an old factory that needs serious refurbishing—”

“On West 118th?” she chimed in. “Yes, I’m familiar. It’s a massive property. The starting price is nineteen million. Two of my colleagues have partnered up to handle the bidding war together.”

The way her lips melted into a soft frown suggested that she wasn’t thrilled about the unnamed colleagues dealing with the property. It was as if she was holding herself back from rolling her eyes about it.

“Yes, that’s the one. Dean Properties is interested in acquiring it,” I responded.

She settled back in her chair, tapping her petal pink fingernails on the side of the glass cup that contained her milky coffee. “I’m not surprised.”

“I didn’t think you would be.”

“I thought this wasn’t about work, though,” Lucy countered. “Did you really drag me down to Soho on a Saturday to discuss real estate?”

“No, it’s much more than that,” I replied quickly. “My father wants that property and I want to obtain it for him. I can imagine that you’d love to be the one to broker the deal when we win the final bid—”

“Confident, aren’t we?”

“Very. But what I’m saying is, your cut from a deal like that would be well over a million.”

“It would be,” she sighed. “If I were the one handling it.”

“Well, what if Dean Properties refused to parle with anyone at Empire Realty other than Ms. Lucy Astor? Would that help?”

Lucy furrowed her brow. “Why would you do that?”

“Because I want you to have the chance to cut the biggest deal of your career so far,” I rebutted.

“How do you know what sort of deals I’ve made?”

“No offense, but I don’t think you’d be brokering sales for Williamsburg penthouses if you had a track record of conducting industrial property acquisitions in Manhattan.”

“Fair enough,” she sniffed. “But why do you care what opportunities are afforded to me at my job? What does it matter to you if I receive the fee from the Harlem factory building over my colleagues?”

I sat up a little straighter. “Because I need you to do something else for me, too.”

Lucy took a sip of her coffee and pursed her lips at me. “I’m listening.”

“I need a fake girlfriend.”

There it was, the punchline that would either earn me a kick in the groin or a cackle of incredulous laughter. I braced myself for the public humiliation that I had mentally prepared myself for ahead of time if Lucy chose to storm out of the cafe.

Except, she merely raised her eyebrows at me and remained where she was sitting at the spindly-legged table opposite me.

“Excuse me?” she murmured. “A fake *what?*”

“It’s a long story, but the summary is that I need an intelligent, beautiful woman to help me convince my father that I’m not a useless playboy. He’s a very traditional man, you see.”

Lucy sighed. It was hard to figure out what was going on inside her head. She had a fantastic poker face, which was probably why she was working in real estate in one of the most competitive markets in the world.

I waited as patiently as I could, knowing that saying too much ran the risk of pushing a potential partner in the opposite direction. Taking a nervous sip of my drink, I watched her gaze wander around the cafe as she absorbed the ridiculous request.

Finally, her bright blue eyes flitted back to me.

“I can’t promise you the factory,” she began. “As I’m sure you’re aware, our client wants the sale to be contingent on their preferred proposal for the property’s use, and I can’t make their mind up for them. Furthermore, I’m not certain I can even touch the deal, thanks to my greedy male coworkers.”

“What if I request you specifically?”

“It’s not really up to you, but considering who you are, Elijah Dean, it might help. *Might.*”

“Noted.”

Lucy chewed on her lower lip for a moment. “However, I’m not sure

I'm interested in playing house with a random billionaire, either."

Luckily, I knew how to negotiate.

"Well, I'm not just a random billionaire," I argued lightly. "Like you said, I'm Elijah Dean. I have a good reputation. If you Google me, you won't find any scandals or controversial political statements. I'm polite and respectful."

"If that's the case, why can't you find a real girlfriend? Isn't it better to not lie to your family?"

It was a sharp remark that definitely stung, but it was a fair question that deserved an honest response.

"That's the thing. I don't have time to play the dating game. I've always been married to my career, which hasn't allotted me much time to deal with the complicated pool of eligible New York women. Plus, this is much easier. All I have to do is convince my father that I'm capable of being a family man and a successful businessman, even though I only see true value in the latter. Regardless, as soon as he sees I can do both, he'll pass over the baton of CEO to me and then I can tell him that we amicably parted ways after the fact."

"So, you want to swindle your own father."

Before I could stop myself, I let out an exhale of frustration.

"It's more complex than that. He's a very difficult man. I know I can do the job, but it's just this one ridiculous road block that's keeping me from my goal."

"I'm not an actress," Lucy said, her expression still as unreadable as



ever. “Our little improv session in Brooklyn last week was a one-time thing. I’m not confident I can lie to Hamish Dean’s face for—how long? A year? More than that?”

“Let’s negotiate the terms,” I suggested. “How about ... ninety days? Three months. If I can prove to my father that I’m in a stable relationship heading toward an engagement *and* I manage to score that old factory, I’ll get the company in a heartbeat. My stepmother has been pushing him to retire for years now and I can tell that he’s eager for it, as well.”

“And the only thing stopping him is the fact that he thinks you’re not capable of finding a suitable wife? What is this, the Victorian era?” Lucy replied.

I refused to give up. The fact that she was discussing the matter at all meant there was potential she might agree if I was convincing enough.

“I know,” I sighed. “Trust me, I know what it sounds like. Believe me, if there was any other way, I wouldn’t be wasting your time with this nonsense.”

“So, to be clear, if I agree to this scheme of yours, you’ll get a fake girlfriend for ninety days, the guaranteed role of CEO at the biggest property management firm on the East Coast, and one of the most coveted properties in the whole city. What will I get? Besides the added stress of handling a massive, complicated sale and the mere potential of a decent cut?”

“Name your price,” I told her.

Lucy wrinkled her nose at me. “I’m not an escort.”

“That’s not what I meant. Just ... tell me what your time and energy are worth in this situation. How about fifty grand?”

Her eyes widened, the shock breaking through her poker face for the briefest of moments before she managed to rein it in again.

“Fifty thousand dollars?”

“Yeah,” I replied with a shrug. “Cash, wired directly from my personal account to yours.”

“What exactly does being your fake girlfriend entail?” she inquired.

Bingo. I could tell that my target was within reach. Lucy was intrigued, which meant all I had to do was keep playing my cards right.

“You’ll need to attend weekly family dinners at my father’s house with me every Sunday. That alone will prove that it’s serious between us. Also, there might be a few functions here and there—a charity gala my stepmother is hosting next month, for example. I’ll cover all expenses, of course.”

Lucy frowned. “Weekly dinners with your family is a lot to ask. Not only will I be lying along with you, but I’ll also have to convince them to like me.”

“I don’t think that will be hard. Have you met yourself?”

She cocked her head to the side in confusion. “What?”

I shrugged. “Just be yourself. You’re well-educated, eloquent, classy —”

“You barely know me—”

“And yet, it was clear to me from the moment we met that you possess all these qualities.”

I noticed a subtle blush coloring her cheeks in spite of the downturned

corners of her lips. “You’re flattering me. That won’t work in your favor.”

“I’m merely being honest.”

“How do you even know that I’m single and available for something like this?”

“You didn’t say anything before in Williamsburg,” I replied. “I assumed ... you are single, right?”

There was a flash of something—a mixture of annoyance and anguish—in her eyes. Yet, that too, was gone in an instant.

“Yes, I am single,” she answered. “Fifty grand isn’t enough, though. Not when I have to consider how much of my personal and professional time will be occupied by you for the next ninety days.”

“That’s fair. How about I double the offer?”

“One hundred grand?” Lucy gasped.

“Yes. One hundred thousand dollars. I can send half today and the rest when our agreement is finished.”

“You say that like it’s pocket change.”

“Not to sound like a douchebag, but—”

“Never mind,” Lucy muttered.

“So, what do you say? Are those reasonable terms?”

She pouted slightly in a way that made me spend a little too much time fixating on her lips.

“For the record, I don’t need your influence to navigate my difficulties

at work with the gender hierarchy. I can secure deals without you.”

“I’m not suggesting you can’t,” I said, holding up my hands in surrender. “I’m simply offering my assistance. There’s nothing wrong with getting a little boost from a friend, Lucy. You don’t have to do everything by yourself. In fact, it’s incredibly unrealistic to expect such a thing is possible.”

Something about my statement appeared to strike a chord within her. It was as though I’d said the magic words, even if she wasn’t sure she was ready to hear them, but knew they were true, nonetheless.

She was quiet for a long moment. It took everything within me not to fidget nervously or show an ounce of uncertainty. If it looked as if I wasn’t sure about the plan, Lucy wouldn’t feel confident enough to be my partner in crime.

“Okay, fine,” she said at last, holding out her hand across the table for me to shake. “You have yourself a deal.”

I breathed out an exhale of relief that I’d been holding in for too long and took her hand within both of mine, holding it between my palms and looking her deep in the eyes.

“Thank you,” I replied. “Really. Not everyone would be willing to do something like this for someone they barely know. I truly appreciate it.”

Lucy glanced down at her slender hand engulfed in my much larger ones, the blush returning to her cheeks. Gently, she tugged out of my grasp and reached for her drink to take a large swig of coffee.

“It’s no problem,” she answered after swallowing. “I should probably get going, though.”

“Let me pay for your cab,” I insisted, standing up along with her. I pulled out my wallet and left a twenty on the table for the bill.

“No, it’s okay. I’m taking the train anyway,” Lucy replied, already halfway out of the cafe. I hurried after her, wanting to make sure she wasn’t making a desperate escape. It seemed important to say goodbye to her properly.

As soon as we stepped outside, a warm gust of wind blew down the street. My fingertips brushed Lucy’s shoulder in an attempt to slow her departure. She turned around, golden hair blowing wild in the blustery air. It was so strong that it whipped the scarf right off her neck and sent the square of green silk drifting off like a leaf into the nearest alley. Lucy gasped, her hand fluttering to her throat as she ran after it.

I couldn’t let a young woman wander into an alleyway by herself, even if it was broad daylight, so I rushed after her.

She let out a muted curse as the narrow space created an efficient tunnel for the wind to pass through even more powerfully. Every time Lucy was within reach of the delicate scrap of fabric, it floated further away. At one point, the breeze pushed it up so high that I worried it was about to drift up over the top of the brownstones, but the current dropped the scarf right over my head. With a chuckle, I reached up and grabbed it, walking deeper into the alley and waving the green silk with a victorious grin.

Lucy laughed, smoothing the front of her dress with her hands. “Thank you.”

“You should be careful,” I told her, stopping right in front of her. “What if it had blown into traffic? Would you have still run after it then?”

Her smile turned sheepish. “Probably. It’s vintage. My mother gave it to me.”

“I see. Well, it suits you. I’m glad I rescued it for you.”

She rolled her eyes playfully and held out her hand for the scarf. I didn’t give it to her, though. Something about the way she looked in that moment, breathless and blushing, caused me to forget normal, polite boundaries. Acting on instinct alone, I pushed her hair off her shoulders with both hands and looped the scarf around the back of her neck gently. Lucy remained still, practically frozen to the spot, and gazed up at me with wide blue eyes as I tied the fabric into a loose knot around her slender throat.

“Thanks,” she breathed when I was finished, eyes locked on mine.

I didn’t remove my hands from her yet, though. The air suddenly felt charged. The attraction I felt for her, coupled with the overwhelming relief I felt at how well she accepted my offer, heightened the effect of our proximity in the relative privacy of the alleyway.

She wasn’t resisting it. In fact, it could have been a trick of the light, but I swore she was leaning into me. Was she practicing for the pretending that was to come in her role as my fake girlfriend? Personally, I wasn’t acting. Being this close to her felt good in ways I couldn’t describe. I also wasn’t in the habit of denying myself basic pleasures, so I refused to be the one to cut the moment short.

Suddenly, before I was fully aware of how much the proximity between us had shrunk, our lips were merely a breath apart. Her perfume was floral and delicate, an aura of soft sweetness.

I wanted her more than I was willing to admit and couldn’t hold myself

back any longer. My hands ghosted down her shoulders to her waist, pulling her closer. Then, although I knew I could have been inviting immediate punishment for such boldness, I closed the distance between us and pressed my lips to hers.

Miraculously, there was no backlash for my actions. Lucy didn't gasp in horror or slap me in the face. She didn't push me away.

She kissed me back. She wasn't timid about it either. The way her body melted into mine, her mouth hungrily seeking out mine ... it felt as if she'd been craving it just as much as I was. Not out of any sort of real desire, of course, but mere curiosity. We were acting on raw attraction, an animal instinct.

We kissed for a long minute, so long that I began to wonder if I should suggest taking this tryst elsewhere. However, all of a sudden, Lucy tensed. I sensed the change instantly, loosening my hold on her hips and pausing the kiss at the exact moment she decided to let go and step away.

Her blue eyes were wide with shock and embarrassment, blinking fast in confusion as if she thought this was all a mirage.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I have to go."

She made her escape quickly, ducking her head and rushing out of the alleyway as if her life depended on it. This time, I chose not to pursue her. I was overcome with surprise, too, but not because I was ashamed of kissing a beautiful woman in the secret shadows of downtown Manhattan. How could I be? Rather, I was surprised by how much I enjoyed it.

And, more than that, how badly I wanted to do it again.

## Chapter Four: Astor

*What had I just done? What did I just agree to?*

Never in a million years had I planned on becoming a high-end hooker to make ends meet in New York City. That was practically what I was doing, after all—hooking. I was exchanging my body and my time to a man for money.

Then again, I suppose we all did that when we got up and went to work in the morning, no matter what our job was.

Still, there was nothing acceptable about what I was doing with Elijah Dean. What kind of young, ambitious woman agreed to be someone's fake girlfriend? It went against every definition of female progress and accomplishment. Instead of putting myself out there and getting to know someone so that I could move on from my ex in a healthy, normal way, I was wasting time playing house with a guy I barely knew. How on earth had Elijah managed to get me to agree to something like that?

Was it his dark, mischievous gaze? His sexy five-o'clock shadow? His broad, muscular shoulders and deliciously above-average height?

Or, was it merely the fact I couldn't look one hundred thousand dollars in the face and turn it down?

I didn't consider myself a shallow person, but I suppose allowances had to be made on personal morals when the offer was good enough. That amount of money might have been pocket change to Elijah, but it was a godsend for me and my family. With that much money, I'd have a large enough deposit to get out of Gabriella's hair and find a place of my own. I'd be able to tell my



little sister Lily that she wouldn't need to worry about working through the summer before law school; she'd be able to spend her time preparing and getting a head start on her classes, which I knew she'd appreciate.

With a hundred thousand dollars, I could buy my father a new car, because God knows the ancient station wagon he'd been driving around town for most of my life was in danger of falling apart from the next strong gust of wind to strike it. On top of that, I could surprise my mother with a spa day at the fanciest resort in New England. I could send a care package to Luke in Cambodia, no expenses spared for expedited international shipping.

Elijah had no idea what he was truly offering me when he put that amount on the table. To people like him, people who grew up with endless wells of cash, it was just numbers. Those numbers fluctuated in the millions, always growing and never reaching critically low points. To people like me, money was the answer to all my prayers, the key to achieving things I'd only ever been able to dream of for most of my life.

So, in the end, I suppose that made it worth it. I could smile prettily at Hamish Dean over family dinner for the next few Sundays, and parade about in pearls and Prada for New York's elite. There were worse things than having to be Elijah Dean's hired arm candy.

Of course, none of that explained why *I had kissed him*.

"Jesus Christ," I muttered under my breath as I marched across the avenue ahead of the crowd, anticipating the walk signal as I impatiently watched the traffic lights overhead turn yellow.

I'd just barely made my escape from the alley, my scarf tied around my throat once again. As I hurried away from the scene, relieved that Elijah wasn't coming after me, my fingers fluttered to the green silk as another

strong breeze wafted through the late summer air.

I didn't know where I was going, but I allowed my feet to carry me in the general direction of *away*. This part of the city was somehow quaint and sophisticated at the same time, many of the streets narrow and cobbled like a European village. It was crowded with tourists, their arms lifted out in front of them to take selfies in front of the charming buildings. I expertly dodged the groups of them, stomping down the sidewalk with my head down as if I were on a mission to somewhere very important.

The only reason I kissed him was because I was too overwhelmed with everything else to have the energy to resist him. That was what had happened. I definitely wouldn't slip up again. Pretending to be Elijah's girlfriend was one thing, but actually sharing a moment of intimacy with him was like playing with fire. Men like him didn't end up with girls like me. I was well-educated, but I was also penniless and unrefined. If I allowed myself to entertain the possibility of a romance with him, I'd only have myself to blame when I got burned.

I side-stepped a gaggle of teenage girls ogling the display window of an expensive designer boutique and carried on past the busy patio of a cafe scattered with little iron chairs and tables. There was so much anxiety building up within me that I felt as if I might explode if I stopped moving.

It wasn't all bad, though. If Dean Properties really had their sights set on acquiring that old factory building in Harlem, I might have finally made a connection that could secure me the biggest win of my career so far. It was all completely accidental, too. If Elijah hadn't attended that showing in Williamsburg, I'd still be scraping the bottom of the barrel.

It was okay to accept help sometimes. He was right about that, though I

hated to admit it. *You don't have to do everything by yourself*—that was what he'd told me. It certainly felt as if I was on my own, though. With my brother on the other side of the world, my sister still in school, and my parents worn out from a lifetime of doing their best to provide for us, there was a lot of responsibility resting on my shoulders.

More than anything, I suppose I was finding it difficult to acknowledge that accepting help didn't mean I was incapable of handling the pressure.

But the guys at work had help. They had their gender-exclusive networks and men's-only clubs to sift through for clientele. They had Ivy League legacies and Fortune 500 connections to rely on thanks to generations of privilege. The truth was that those men looked down on me because they saw me as a threat. If a skinny girl from the middle of nowhere could make it to their level based on hard work and sheer determination alone, their position in society was shaky, at best.

When they found out that Dean Properties wanted *me* to handle the Harlem deal, Empire Realty would run the risk of losing a loyal, wealthy client if they denied me the opportunity.

And when I helped Elijah secure the deal for what would likely be a hefty fifty-million-dollar price tag, I would be a multimillionaire at the age of thirty and the people I cared about would never have to worry about anything ever again.

Plus, my male colleagues would have no choice but to bow down to me.

Imagining the looks on their faces when they realized I beat them at their own game was enough to convince me that I'd made the right decision. Agreeing to Elijah's deal was the best course of action. We made a good

team. Together, we could accomplish great things.

Relaxing slightly, I slowed my pace and tried to get my bearings. I was on Canal Street, right at the border of Soho and Tribeca. This was the stomping ground of the rich and famous, a place where I would never belong even if I had the money to purchase property in this neighborhood. That's not what I wanted, though. I didn't need status or materialistic prestige. No matter how successful I became, I knew my tastes would remain fairly modest. At least, by New York standards.

Feeling more confident about the uncertain road before me, I decided to step into a charming homeware shop on the corner. It was one of those places that was full of expensive nonsense that the average person didn't need—such as seventy-dollar crystal wine stoppers—but the fact that I'd be able to move into my own place sooner rather than later had me feeling dreamily domestic all of a sudden.

I entered the store, gravitating toward a shelf of hand-painted casserole dishes that were totally impractical to own but nice to look at. It was a fairly big shop and the staff were busy helping the other people who had decided to wander in here on a Saturday afternoon, so I was left to my own devices.

I was enjoying daydreaming about a life in which I might have a use for an elegant copper candelabra, when I heard a painfully familiar voice.

“—babe? What about this?”

I froze in place, relieved that I was partially concealed by a rack of decorative dish towels. The owner of the voice must not have noticed me yet.

Blood turning to ice in my veins, I dared to turn my face an inch to the left.

Sure enough, a slender brunette with bony joints and a tacky designer tote bag was standing several feet away from me, her eyes focused on a table where an array of gleaming silverware was laid out.

It was Charlotte Windell.

Once upon a time, Charlotte and I had been friends. We weren't the best of friends, not close like Gabriella and I were, but I had stupidly seen her as someone I could trust.

I should have known better than to wander this close to Tribeca. The last time we hung out, she wasted an immense amount of breath bragging to Vaneesa and me about the apartment she'd bought in the same building as some pop star I didn't care about.

Of course, the last time we hung out was also the day of my birthday party. Later that night, I caught her having sex with my boyfriend. The worst part was that it wasn't even their first time. He'd been cheating on me for weeks at that point, something he admitted when I moved the last of my things out of his place. He claimed that he and Charlotte had something *special*, as if that was any excuse for hooking up with one of my friends on my birthday, of all days.

According to Gabriella, who was the queen of well-meaning gossip, they were still together. At least he didn't lie about his feelings for *her*.

Which meant that there was only one person Charlotte could be referring to as "babe" in public. I drew in a sharp breath and concealed myself more thoroughly behind the towel display, peeking through the cracks as my ex-boyfriend, Derek Moss, sidled up to Charlotte with a soft grin on his face.

He looked happy. He'd gotten a haircut since I last saw him and he was wearing the light blue polo shirt he'd bought a few months ago when we ventured to an outlet mall in Jersey City.

Derek was looking at Charlotte the way he used to look at me. Even though I was supposed to hate him with every fiber of my being for what he did to me, I also felt my heart breaking with sadness all over again. It was excruciating to think that someone could be so cruel, that a lover's heart could change its tune without warning. It made me feel as though what we shared had never been real in the first place if he was capable of throwing it away for someone else that easily.

Like an idiot, I lurked in the background while Derek and Charlotte smiled and chatted about silverware together. Not long ago, *I* was the one he would share such pleasantly mundane conversations with. Together, we would daydream about our future home and the life we would live in it.

I wondered if Derek was giving Charlotte the run-around, too, or if he was actually serious about her. If so, what made her different than me? What made her worthy of loyalty and respect when I received neither?

In the aftermath of the birthday disaster, Charlotte had tried endlessly to apologize to me. She claimed Derek had told her he intended to break up with me eventually, and that was the only reason she indulged in her traitorous desires. As if that made it any better. I had a feeling that, if I hadn't caught them in the act, it would have gone on for much longer. My only comfort during those days was the fact that Gabriella and Stacy and all of our acquaintances adamantly turned against Charlotte and Derek. They were cast out of the circle, exiled for their behavior.

But that kind of satisfaction doesn't heal wounds completely.

Suddenly, as if things couldn't get any worse, I noticed something strange about Charlotte's figure. From my vantage point, I could see that they'd given up perusing the silverware and had decided to head toward the exit. Derek wrapped his arm around Charlotte's waist. As she turned to follow beside him, I noticed a rounded curve in her abdomen that couldn't be mistaken for mere weight gain. If that were the case, Charlotte wouldn't be showing it off in a tight cotton dress.

She was pregnant ... pregnant enough to be showing already.

I had to clap a hand over my mouth to stop myself from letting loose an exclamation of horrified betrayal as they walked out of the store together. They weren't just living together. They were having a baby together.

They were building a family. Just like that. As soon as I was out of the picture, all the things I'd been yearning to do with Derek for years were suddenly happening. Clearly, timing wasn't the issue, as he had claimed time and time again whenever I reminded him that neither one of us was getting any younger.

Rather, I was the problem.

He didn't want to have a family with *me*.

"Excuse me, ma'am? Can I help you with something?"

I turned to see a staff member eyeing me somewhat nervously. I probably looked ridiculous, half crouching behind a display and peering at the front of the shop as if I were playing hide and seek.

Clearing my throat awkwardly, I smoothed the front of my dress and fixed a smile onto my face that I prayed was decently convincing.

“No, thank you,” I told her. “I was just leaving.”

Without further ado, I ran away from another sticky situation. I seemed to be pretty good at doing that.



## Chapter Five: *Dean*

“How was your weekend, Elijah?”

“It was good. Same old, same old. How was yours?”

Dr. Ridley smirked at me over the rim of her glasses. “Therapy isn’t about me, but thank you for asking. It was fine.”

I gave her one of my cheeky grins. “Glad to hear it.”

Veronica Ridley, or Ronnie as I sometimes liked to call her when we weren’t in the middle of a session, was an extremely successful young woman. She was New York City’s sexiest psychiatrist for billionaires and trust fund babies alike. I’d been seeing her for years and had been friends with her since before my father remarried, so we were close. Despite that, we’d never crossed physical or sexual boundaries. As gorgeous as Veronica was, she was swift and brutal in rejecting her clients. Not that I ever made advances. I saw her in a purely platonic light.

“How was Sunday dinner with your father and Beatrice?” Veronica asked.

She was, as usual, perched in her leather chair beside the window. I was sinking into the plush cushions of the sofa opposite her, admiring the view of the city’s skyline outside. On the other end of the room was an antique desk laden with various documents. Veronica wasn’t just a psychiatrist by trade, but also a professor of psychology at Columbia, so she was even busier than I was during her work day. Dealing with me and my problems was just a small part of her Monday morning every week.

“It was normal,” I replied. “Nothing out of the ordinary.”

Veronica pursed her lips at me. She knew me too well. “Are you sure?”

I sighed and sank lower into the couch. “Fine. You caught me. Sunday dinner was anything but normal because they spent practically the whole time peppering me with questions about my girlfriend.”

Just as I expected, she practically choked on her next inhale.

“Did I hear that correctly?” gasped Veronica. “Girlfriend? You’ve never mentioned you were dating someone in our previous sessions.”

“Well, that’s the thing. She’s not real.”

Veronica raised her eyebrows. I could tell she was holding herself back from scribbling down her concerns on the notepad in her lap. It took everything within me not to burst out laughing at her reaction.

“Elijah, can you please clarify the meaning of your statement for me?”

My smile grew. It was always entertaining to watch Veronica amend her usual vocabulary to sound more professional. If we were in a less formal context, she would have asked me something more along the lines of, *What the hell are you talking about?*

“It’s a long story,” I told her.

“Well, we have an hour and it’s quite literally my job to listen to you, so please proceed.”

“Okay, so ... a couple of weeks ago, I met a woman,” I began. “Her name is Lucy and she’s a broker at Empire Realty. We hit it off because Paul Rancorn—you know, that sexist jerk I complain about on a regular basis—

was bothering her, so I improvised and pretended to be her boyfriend to get him to leave her alone.”

“And she went along with it?”

“She did. I was surprised, too. She barely missed a beat.”

“Interesting. Then what?”

“Then, I bought the place. I mean, Dean Properties did. It turns out that we work together really well, professionally speaking.”

“So, now she’s your girlfriend?” Veronica asked, cocking her head to the side. I didn’t blame her for being so confused.

“No. Not really.”

“Elijah ... please get to the point.”

“It’s complicated,” I argued. “There are many facets to the story.”

“Well, keep talking. I promise I can keep up.”

“Fine. So, Empire, the company that Lucy works for, is handling the sale of a large, old building in West Harlem and my father really wants it. He brought it up over dinner last Sunday. Apparently, the competition is intense, but I mentioned that I had a new connection at Empire who might come in handy.”

“Lucy, you mean.”

“Exactly.”

“Okay—”

“Anyway, a lightbulb came on at the dinner table and I realized I could

kill two birds with one stone. My father thinks I can't be CEO without a future wife in the works and Lucy, who is also involved with the Harlem deal, played the part of my girlfriend so well before."

"Oh, God, Elijah," sighed Veronica, pushing down her glasses to pinch the bridge of her nose. It was a reaction that I often elicited from her, so I was used to the disappointment in her tone. "Please don't tell me what I think you're about to tell me."

"You don't want to hear the rest of the story?"

"Of course I do, but I don't think I like where it's headed. But, by all means, keep going."

"So, I asked Lucy to meet me for coffee on Saturday," I continued, trying not to laugh at the sheer horror on Veronica's face. "I asked her to help me out with the warehouse nonsense and she agreed. I also asked her to be my fake girlfriend to convince my overly traditional father that I'm capable of taking on the leadership role I've been training to handle for the past decade."

"And? Did she agree to that, as well?"

"Of course she did. I offered her a hundred grand to do it."

"You're joking. Elijah, please tell me that you're joking."

"I'm afraid I can't," I replied. "It's fine, Ronnie. I promise. No one's being forced to do anything they don't want to do, and one little lie isn't going to hurt my father. If anything, it'll help him because it means he can retire sooner rather than later."

"As your therapist, I cannot condone justifying lies for the sake of a

loved one's alleged work-life balance. Surely your father will retire when he is ready and choose you as his successor because you are the best fit for the job, not merely because you have a steady girlfriend?"

I frowned at Veronica. She knew she was wrong. After years of these sessions, she knew my father as well as anyone else. She was fully aware of how strict he was about his beliefs on marriage and settling down.

"You know how it is," I grumbled. "In his eyes, I'm not suitable for anything as long as I'm single. He wants me to be CEO *and* a family man, and we both know he won't compromise on the latter."

"Why don't you find a real girlfriend, Elijah?" Veronica asked. She was frowning deeply, observing me with concern the way a scientist might glance upon a lab rat that wasn't quite behaving the way they expected it to. "You're a great catch. I mean that. You could have any one of the most eligible women in New York if you wanted."

"I appreciate that, but the problem is I don't have time to date the old fashioned way," I argued. "You know that. It's more trouble than what it's worth and it rarely works out. It's just easier this way."

"You're saying that it's easier to simply pay a woman to pretend to be your girlfriend."

"Precisely."

Veronica shifted in her chair, crossing her leg to the other side and spending a long moment wiping the lenses of her glasses on the hem of her blouse. Her brow was creased, indicating she was deep in thought. I waited patiently and quietly for her verdict, unsure if I was about to receive the therapist-flavored response or the more friendly version.

Either way, it wasn't as if I expected her to react well to the news of what was going on between Lucy and me. I wasn't delusional enough to believe anyone would think it was acceptable. In fact, I still counted myself unbelievably lucky that Lucy had agreed to go along with it. She seemed to be extremely motivated by the money, but not in a shallow way. Something told me Lucy desperately needed that cash for something much more important than designer shoes or a luxury vacation. Not that it was really any of my business.

At last, Veronica sighed and fixed her gaze back on me. "Elijah, I'd like to discuss why you would arrange for such a situation to occur between a stranger and yourself."

"I already told you—"

"No, I understand the reasons you've provided at the surface level. What I mean is that I want to dig deeper," she explained. "You know I'm not the kind of therapist that will tell you what to do, so I'm not going to say that you need to call off this scheme. Instead, I'd like to examine how your past experiences have affected your decision-making process as an adult."

I cringed. "Can't we just go grab a beer and discuss current events?"

"It's nine-thirty in the morning."

"Well, it's five o'clock somewhere."

"Elijah."

I groaned, feeling a bit childish as I did so. Normally, I didn't give Veronica such a hard time with her professional boundaries, but I was feeling strange after the weekend I'd had and I was craving her friendship much more than her doctoral guidance.

It had taken a lot of convincing for Veronica to agree to taking me on as one of her patients. We'd been acquaintances for half our lives because we grew up in the same circle of New York blue bloods. Her father was a wealthy transportation mogul still benefiting from the rewards of their family's smart business during the Industrial Era, and her mother was an heiress in her own right from out West.

When I learned Veronica had graduated from medical school and had started her own practice, specializing in the specific mental ailments that plagued the idle rich, I was fascinated. I wasn't the kind of overly masculine guy who thought he was too good for therapy; in fact, I thought it was a sign of manly strength to admit that you needed a little bit of help navigating your own mind.

Of course, not all of my problems stemmed from the fact that I was rich. However, my wealth did offer a particular nuance to troubles like those of my mother's death and my father's strictness. That was something Veronica understood.

Despite that, when I first asked her if she'd take me on as a patient, she had adamantly refused. Her excuse was that blurring the lines between friendship and professionalism was particularly dangerous in the realm of psychiatry. She warned me that she would have to tell me things during our sessions that she would never want to discuss as my friend.

My argument was that we weren't *that* close. Plus, I also mentioned that she was undoubtedly familiar with the rest of her clients, given that we all came from similar backgrounds. If my memory served correctly, I drove my argument home by promising that I would only treat her as my doctor when we were in a session together. Outside of her office, we would go back

to being nothing more than friends and wouldn't discuss a single thing that had been mentioned between doctor and patient.

In the end, I managed to convince her. I was glad for it, too. Shopping for a therapist was tedious work. Most people who were in need of mental health treatment didn't have the energy for it.

Luckily, Veronica turned out to be a perfect fit for me. The only downside was that she was merciless when it came to finding the root cause of my issues. In her eyes, most of my problems as an adult stemmed from the loss of my mother when I was a teenager. Tried as I might to assure her that I had grieved in the healthiest manner possible, I had a feeling she was right.

Because of that, I knew she was about to steer the conversation back to my mother. I braced myself.

"I already know what you're going to say," I told her.

Veronica quirked an eyebrow at me. "Oh? Enlighten me."

"You're going to remind me that the reason I struggle with intimacy, commitment, and consistency in romantic relationships is because of the trauma I experienced when I witnessed my father lose the love of his life to an incurable disease," I recited.

"Is that all?"

"No. You were also going to say that, in an effort to avoid experiencing that pain myself, I continuously push people away and have unconsciously resigned myself to a life of being single. Not only do I not want to risk losing someone I love the way my father did, but I also don't want my future children to experience the grief of losing their mother like I did."



“How intriguing,” Veronica murmured, pursing her lips at me in amusement. “Anything else?”

“Yes. I’m sure you were also going to tell me that the fact I’m willing to pay someone to help me lie to my father about my dating status suggests that I would rather take unreasonable risks than consider embarking on a true romantic relationship with another human being.”

“Well, it sounds like you’ve got it all figured out!” Veronica exclaimed, throwing her hands up in defeat. “What do you even need me for at this point?”

It was obvious that she was being sarcastic, so I didn’t take the praise to heart.

I shrugged. “Am I wrong?”

She sighed as if she were explaining something to a particularly naive and inept child.

“You’re not wrong,” she allowed. “However, as you know, therapy isn’t just about identifying your problems. Being self-aware is only half the battle, though I do commend you on your ability to be so candid about your motivations.”

Defeated, I pouted at her from the sofa. I’d been starting my weeks in this way for a long time, but heading to the office on Monday morning after a therapy appointment with Veronica was never easy. After the more difficult sessions, it was hard not to be pensive and distracted for the rest of the day. I could already sense that this would be one of those days.

“Fine,” I muttered. “You’re the expert. I’m listening.”

She grinned. “That’s what I like to hear. Now, what I’d like to know is why you chose this woman over any other to be your fake girlfriend. I know you mentioned that your little skit at the apartment showing went well, but that can’t be the only reason you felt bold enough to reach out to her with a proposal like this. Suffice to say, I can’t imagine many women would respond well to this sort of scheme, so why did you take a chance on her?”

“I’m not following.”

“How so? What would you like me to clarify?”

“I guess I just don’t know what you want me to say,” I admitted.

Veronica smiled softly. “I’m not trying to get you to say anything. I’m only asking you to be honest with me.”

“Lucy is beautiful, I suppose, so that helps,” I explained. “She’s also very intelligent and ambitious. She’s polite, but not boring. I don’t know. I figured she’d charm the hell out of my father and Beatrice.”

“And are you attracted to Lucy?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Are you attracted to her, Elijah?”

“She’s very attractive, yes.”

“That’s not what I asked,” Veronica replied sternly.

I thought about the kiss we had shared in the alleyway on Saturday afternoon. It was nice, even if afterward she ran away. At least she had called me later that day to confirm our arrangement was still in place despite that.

Did I want to kiss her again? That was hard for me to answer. I didn’t

*not* want to. It felt good to give in to reckless desire like that, especially since she'd responded to me so naturally. Yet, it wasn't a wise idea to indulge in such thoughts. Lucy was my *fake* girlfriend. We were partners in crime. Whenever everything was settled, we would go our separate ways and move on with our respective lives. Muddying up those boundaries would only make the tricky situation more complicated.

Still, I didn't like to make a habit out of lying to my therapist.

"Yes, I guess I am attracted to her if I'm willing to acknowledge how attractive she is," I mumbled.

"Do you think it will be easy to pretend to be her boyfriend in front of your family?"

"I mean, I think my father is so relieved that I'm seeing somebody that he'll overlook any moments of awkwardness."

"Once again, Elijah, that's not what I asked."

I scowled at her. "Fine. Yes. She's very easy to get along with—a very pleasant woman. Pretending to be her devoted boyfriend won't require that much effort on my part."

"Could you see yourself entertaining something real with Lucy in the future?" Veronica pressed.

"No," I answered quickly.

"Why not?"

"Seriously, Ronnie?"

"Seriously."

“Because we’re both too busy,” I replied, offering the first excuse that came to mind. “She’s just as focused on her career as I am, so I doubt she has time to date. Plus, I don’t even know if I’m her type. What if she likes artsy guys, or blue-collar men?”

“Is she your type, though?”

I wanted this conversation to be over. My discomfort was impossible to hide, which was only feeding Veronica’s argument even further.

“I guess she is,” I muttered, crossing my arms against my chest.

Veronica snorted, amused by my petulance.

“In that case, aren’t you worried you’ll catch feelings for her? Shouldn’t you have chosen someone less appealing to be your fake girlfriend?”

“Well, like I said, I didn’t think about it for very long. I was sort of thinking on the spot. The only reason I thought of it was because I’d just been working on a deal with Lucy,” I replied. “And no, I’m not worried I’ll start having real feelings for her. Romance isn’t on my list of priorities, so I really don’t think the issue will come up.”

She observed me for a long moment before asking, “What if it does?”

“Then you’ll be hearing about it on a future Monday morning,” I sighed.

Veronica chuckled. At the same time, my pocket started vibrating with an incoming call. I pulled out my phone, thinking it was work, but the name that was glowing on the screen was so pleasantly unexpected that I immediately forgot the tense conversation and burst into a grin.

“Do you need to take that?” Veronica asked, noticing the change in my demeanor.

“No, no. It’s just an old friend,” I responded, putting the call on silent and slipping my phone away again. “I’ll call them back when we’re done.”

“Sure. Would you like to change the subject or would you prefer to dig deeper into your new partnership with an attractive woman?” Veronica inquired, offering me an innocent smile.

“You’re giving me a choice?” I gasped.

She snickered, her professional facade slipping for the smallest of seconds to offer me a dose of comforting camaraderie.

“There’s always a choice, Elijah.”

## Chapter Six: *Astor*

“Do you know why I’ve asked both of you here today?”

My gaze flicked from my boss, Mr. Morey, a surly man in his late forties, to the other senior broker in his office. His name was Jared Dunn and he was one of the greasiest, most self-absorbed men at the firm. I detested him. Of course, I didn’t allow my facial expression to reveal that. Standing before my boss, I was the epitome of pleasantness and pliability.

Before I could say anything, my male counterpart invited himself to speak for the both of us.

“No, sir,” Jared replied without so much as a glance in my direction. “However, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that commercial space in Midtown. Our client—”

“I’m not interested in discussing that overpriced dump today,” sighed our boss. “I called you two in here because I received a very interesting phone call this morning from Dean Properties.”

I stiffened. This was it, the proof that Elijah was going to hold up his end of the bargain. Even though it was hard for me to accept that someone was helping me get ahead, it was undeniably true that I was wrong for thinking I could make it in this industry without so much as a helpful boost from a friend.

Not that Elijah was my friend. I didn’t know what he was. Other than referring to him as my new fake boyfriend, I supposed I considered him a vague acquaintance or a professional connection. Then again, I’d never kissed someone like that in a random alley before.

“Interesting, sir?” Jared prompted our boss while I remained quiet and patient.

“Yes. It was in regard to that old factory the Urban Conservation Society is selling in West Harlem.”

“Oh, right. I was going to take the lead on that listing, since I’m familiar with such large deals,” answered Jared with an annoying, self-important grin. “I closed on that old factory in Queens last month, so I figured I’d be able to handle this one.”

Not once did Jared look at me. It was as if I wasn’t even there. In his eyes, I was so insignificant that I wasn’t worthy of his attention, let alone a glimmer of curiosity. That infuriated me more than anything, but I kept my expression neutral while I waited for our boss to deliver the punchline.

“Usually, the handling of active listings is decided among the brokers to foster healthy competition. I am well aware that you have all but claimed this Harlem factory, Mr. Dunn,” replied Mr. Morey. “However, this time, I would like to pass the baton to someone else on our team.”

“Who?”

Mr. Morey nodded his head at me. “It seems that Ms. Astor has been diligently making some very important connections while working her way through the smallest listings on our roster. Elijah Dean himself has informed me that if Ms. Astor is not handling the factory, his company is not interested in bidding.”

Jared looked dumbfounded. He finally turned his eyes toward me, brow crinkled as if he’d never seen me before in his life. The truth was that he’d snickered patronizingly at me just last week when I closed on a tiny studio in

Chelsea that sold for less than a million. As if I'd had anything else to sell after he and his cronies had gotten their greedy hands on the listings of the week.

Instead of saying anything, I smiled softly at Jared and feigned innocence.

He narrowed his eyes and turned back to Mr. Morey.

“So what?” he grumbled. “Dean Properties isn't the only interested buyer. The competition is steep.”

“Mr. Dunn, you know as well as I do that Dean Properties has been one of our most loyal clients for nearly two decades. Furthermore, I'd be willing to bet money on them being the one to win this bid in the end. Empire Realty cannot afford to lose their business, so I have chosen to take Mr. Dean's request very seriously. Ms. Astor will take on the sale of the Harlem property.”

“But she's never handled a sale this big before!” protested Jared somewhat childishly.

*No thanks to you*, I wanted to reply, but I held myself back. He was doing a good enough job of making a fool of himself in front of our boss without my help. Instead, I stepped forward and offered Mr. Morey a grateful smile.

“I am confident that I can take the lead on this and bring it to a positive, profitable conclusion for Empire Realty, no matter who wins the final bid,” I told him. “I can promise that, despite my professional connection to Mr. Elijah Dean, I hold no bias.”

“Glad to hear it,” replied my boss. “We scheduled an open house for



the property this afternoon at two. I trust you'll be able to rearrange your schedule to attend?"

"Yes, sir. No problem."

"But—" Jared attempted to argue, but Mr. Morey's harsh glance cut him off.

"You may return to your office, Mr. Dunn."

It looked as though Jared wanted to say something else—perhaps to curse at me in front of our boss—but he swallowed his frustration and stormed out of the room.

His anger wasn't just due to the fact that I'd stolen a prestigious opportunity right out from underneath him. More than anything, it was the money. That was all he and my other coworkers cared about. The starting price for the factory was nineteen million dollars. Undoubtedly, it would settle for much more than that, but based on that price alone, the broker who closed the deal would make well over half a million dollars off the sale once the company took their cut.

"Thank you, sir," I said to my boss.

He was eyeing me with scrutiny, as if he was also confused as to how I'd managed to gain the upper hand.

"No need to thank me. I am merely acting in the firm's best interests," he replied. "I do not know the nature of your connection to Dean Properties, but I am impressed that you have finally learned how to leverage a professional network in your favor. It's the twenty-first century, Ms. Astor, but this is still very much a boys-only game in New York City. You won't get ahead unless you play by their rules."

“Right. I see that now,” I responded. It was the best I could offer in reply without openly seething about how Mr. Morey should have been at the forefront of changing traditionalist and sexist patterns like these if he wanted Empire Realty to remain relevant in the future. Now was not the time for me to chastise the man who had just guaranteed the biggest deal of my career so far.

“Perfect. I’ll be looking forward to the outcome, so don’t screw it up. You may be dismissed now.”

As I obediently vacated Mr. Morey’s luxurious office on the executive floor, I didn’t take his warning lightly. He meant it. If I messed this up, he wouldn’t do me any more favors. Elijah Dean’s recommendation be damned, my boss would not let me play the so-called game if I couldn’t prove myself capable.

It was unfair, of course. The other guys at the firm didn’t have to prove that they were flawless at their jobs to stay in Mr. Morey’s good graces. But he was right in saying this was just the way it was. If I gave up and went into a different line of work, I’d be letting down all the other women fighting through the trenches in this convoluted industry.

Plus, I’d already come this far. I wasn’t a quitter.

I had a lot of work to do, so I waltzed past Jared’s office on the way to mine without so much as a backward glance. If I was nothing to him, then he was nothing to me.

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Later that afternoon, a heavy ring of keys in hand, I arrived at the old factory building on West 118th Street half an hour before the open house was

set to start. I'd already reviewed the official photographs of the space, but I wanted to get my bearings of the massive building on my own.

To the untrained eye, the property was in disrepair and better off being demolished. The cement floors were coated in a layer of dirt and dust, muffling the click of my patent leather heels as I surveyed my surroundings. I cringed as I noticed roaches in the corners dead on their backs and a scattering of droppings that indicated city rats frequented the dark corners. The wall plaster was crumbling throughout the place, suggesting the potential risk of asbestos poisoning if I got too close.

Despite all of that, someone experienced in real estate would know that finding this building was akin to finding buried treasure. The bones of the structure were strong and sturdy. The ceiling was cavernous, rising up high to the original steel beams. Sunlight filtered through a mosaic of dusty arched windows all the way to the top. Faded brown brick that had been a feature of Manhattan's architecture for over a century formed steady walls that had refused to waver over time.

In the silence of the space, I imagined what it must have been like when the factory was full of heavy machinery and burly workers. The noise must have been deafening, echoing up the ceiling and reverberating back down to the people below. Thinking about the way life was like back then put things into perspective for me. People worked themselves half to death in order to barely get by. That was the norm. At least nowadays, there were more opportunities to fight for a worthwhile existence.

I checked my watch and took a deep breath, heading toward the entrance. Before I knew it, a crowd of interested buyers had arrived and it was my job to appreciate this space for what it was so that the sellers would

be satisfied closing the deal.

“This factory was originally constructed by an entrepreneur by the name of Henry LaCombe in the 1890s, specializing in textiles, but a severe market crash left it in the hands of Philip Samson, an African American businessman who contributed greatly to the historical movement we know today as the Harlem Renaissance,” I explained, guiding the thirty or so visitors through the space.

I’d spotted Elijah immediately, largely because he was one of the first to arrive, but I was too focused on doing my job to the best of my ability to deal with him quite yet. The memory of our kiss was still lingering a bit too strongly on my lips.

“The crash at the end of the 1920s and the ensuing Great Depression left it abandoned for about a decade, until the American war effort repurposed the factory into an industrial epicenter for our soldiers overseas,” I continued. “However, in the sixties and seventies, as industry was slowly outsourced to foreign soil, the building’s private owner couldn’t afford the maintenance, so it was handed over to the Harlem Historical Society.”

Most of my showings didn’t require so much research and memorization, but this was a special case. Whenever I did bother to provide facts about the small residential properties I handled, people rarely listened. In contrast, every single person in the building was paying attention to the words coming out of my mouth. This wasn’t just any property, after all. This was a goldmine.

“It’s been under the ownership of the society since the eighties, but they have since decided it is in the best interest of the community to be sold to the right purchaser, which is exactly why you’re all here today, of course,”

I finished. “Please feel free to take a moment to observe the space on your own. Pictures and videos are permitted. If you have any questions, I’ll be available to answer them.”

At that, the crowd scattered. Low murmurings of conversation filled the grand space, dozens of phones lifted in the air to capture the grandeur of the rundown factory.

With my speech finished, I expected Elijah to be the first person to approach me, but as I caught his eye from several yards away, he hung back while a handsome, blond man in a navy suit stepped toward me. The man was large like a Viking, with a shockingly blue gaze and strong jaw that caused me to wonder if he’d stumbled off the front page of a magazine.

I knew better than to get lost in a man’s good looks, though. If they were working in this industry, they were usually not worth the trouble. Elijah was one of the few halfway decent men I’d interacted with throughout my career.

“That lecture was impressive. You must be a professional historian in your free time,” the stranger said to me, a practiced smirk on his face.

I laughed, slipping into the easy small talk that typically occurred at these events. “What free time?”

“Tell me about it,” chuckled the man, holding out his hand to shake mine. “I’m Sean Lloyd. I admit I had no idea Empire Realty had such a beautiful, charming broker on their staff.”

I took his compliment with a grain of salt. There was something about the twinkle in his eyes and smooth cadence of his flirtation that told me it was all a facade. This was a man who knew he had the power to get whatever he

wanted, the kind of man who wasn't accustomed to losing.

"Lucy Astor," I introduced myself. "It's nice to meet you. Forgive my frankness, but I don't believe I recognize your name. What firm are you with?"

"My own," Sean answered, his smirk growing deeper. He kept ahold of my hand for a little too long, releasing it only when he was satisfied that I registered the oddness of it. "I've been running a successful real estate development company in Chicago for the past few years and decided it was time I come out here and try to make it in the Big Apple."

I almost snorted out loud, but managed to keep my expression blank. It was a tale as old as time. People always thought that being successful in one major city meant they were destined to continue growing in New York. The majority of them realized very quickly that this city was a completely different beast.

Still, Sean Lloyd didn't strike me as a fool. What did I know? Maybe he knew what he was getting himself into. He certainly wasn't taking baby steps if *this* was his idea of breaking into the Manhattan real estate business. Fortune favors the bold, I suppose.

"Well, good luck," I told him with a polite smile, wordlessly excusing myself.

"Wait," he said, placing a hand on my shoulder before I could walk away. I froze, halted by the intimidating strength in that single touch. Sean leaned in close, far too close to be professionally appropriate, and slipped a small rectangle of paper into my hand. "Take my card."

I had no choice but to accept it, his hot breath ghosting across my cheek

in a way that made me want to flinch away. Then, before I could collect myself, Sean walked away as if he were the one who initially meant to excuse himself from the conversation.

Frowning, I watched him saunter away to survey the space. In spite of his good looks, my skin was crawling at his proximity. I tucked his card into my pocket quickly—out of sight, out of mind.

“Be careful of that guy,” said a familiar voice.

I whirled around to find that Elijah had finally caught up to me.

“You know him?” I asked in lieu of *hello*.

Elijah pursed his lips in disapproval, glancing in the general direction of where Sean had wandered off to.

“Unfortunately, I’ve become fairly well acquainted with him this past year or so,” he replied. “Apparently, he’s a big deal in Chicago and wants to be a big deal here. He’s got way more money than he should and he throws it around like he’s doing target practice.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means he’s managed to steal quite a few properties away from us, which is not only absurdly impressive for a New York newbie, but also—”

“Suspicious,” I remarked. “He must know somebody.”

“I’m the somebody to know, though,” Elijah countered. “And I certainly haven’t done him any favors.”

Ensuring that no one else was listening to our conversation, I rolled my eyes at his playful egotism.

“Speaking of favors, what exactly did you tell my boss?”

Elijah grinned cheekily. “That’s between me and him. It must’ve worked, though, considering you’re here today.”

“Yes, I suppose,” I sighed. “I should probably stop letting you monopolize me, by the way.”

“Wait ... speaking of monopolization—”

He reached out to touch my shoulder as I moved away. Unlike Sean Lloyd’s contact, Elijah’s was gentle and polite, a simple tap that he would have offered to anyone to get their attention. It wasn’t a power move or a chance to assert his alpha male strength. I had the feeling Elijah was too secure in his masculinity to bother with such trivial things.

“Yes? What is it?” I replied.

“I was browsing Empire Realty’s website and saw a property on the Lower East Side that I’m interested in. It’s a small apartment building on Suffolk Street. You wouldn’t happen to be handling that, would you?”

“The walkup across the street from the prep school?”

“That’s the one.”

“It’s been on the market for almost two weeks now. The location is a bit awkward for most interested buyers. They don’t want to deal with school busses and children clogging up the street.”

Two weeks on the market in New York was akin to months of disinterest in any other city. I’d been on the verge of asking the sellers to lower the price if there weren’t any inquiries by the end of the week.



“Well, I’d like to see it,” Elijah said. “Any chance I can schedule a private showing?”

I sighed. More alone time with him. The idea of it both thrilled me and made me anxious. “Sure. Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow is perfect. My people will call your people.”

“Right.”

Elijah and I didn’t have the chance to talk for much longer because I was soon overwhelmed with questions from the open house guests. It seemed the main strategy for having the upper hand was to flatter me beyond belief. Maybe that would have worked if Jared was still the lead broker, but I wasn’t shallow enough to fall for it. I merely informed them over and over again that their bid would be considered by the sellers alongside their development proposal.

By the time I was able to shoo everyone out of the factory, it was nearly five in the evening. If I was one of those lucky people who only worked nine to five, I’d be off the clock in just a few minutes. However, I had to head back to the office to get a few things done before I could call it a night. I could already tell that handling the sale of this building would be a handful, but I relished the opportunity to take it on. The memory of Jared’s spitefulness had me smiling to myself all day.

As I locked up the dark, cavernous building, I hummed under my breath. Rush hour in West Harlem wasn’t quite as loud and hectic as it was in Midtown, but it was just chaotic enough for me to nearly miss the incoming call that came through on my phone with a steady buzzing.

I glanced at the name on the screen, expecting it to be someone from

work or maybe even Elijah, but it was neither. It was my brother.

“Luke! Hi! How are you? Is everything all right?” I answered immediately.

“Hey, Lucy! I’m great. Why do you sound so stressed? Is it work?” replied the warm, relaxed voice of my older sibling.

“No, work is fine! Better than fine,” I chuckled nervously as I carried on down the street toward the nearest subway station, the keys to the factory jingling in my bag. “I just figured that a phone call out of the blue from you while you’re all the way over in Africa would entail an emergency!”

“Well, there’s no emergency,” laughed Luke, as easygoing as ever. “Actually, I’m not even in the jungle at the moment.”

“What? Why? Did they transfer you already?”

“No, I’m on leave! I’m about to board a flight to New York, Lucy-Loo.”

I rolled my eyes at Luke’s favorite nickname for me. When I was younger, my thick blond waves used to be unruly curls, just like the children’s book character of the same name.

“New York? New York *City*? Why didn’t you tell anyone you’re coming?”

Once again, Luke let out a hearty laugh on the other end of the line. He didn’t always used to be like this. Once upon a time, he was more high-strung than me. All of that changed when he left his finance job and joined the Peace Corps, though. He became a completely different man. Or rather, he became more like the carefree, kindhearted boy he’d been when he was a

child. It was nice to see the change in him, but it wasn't a journey I could see myself going on. As tiring and frustrating as my job was, I actually enjoyed the hustle.

"Yes, New York City!" Luke replied. "I thought it would be more fun if it was a surprise! I can hang out with you and then head up to Vermont to see Mom and Dad, then surprise Lily at Dartmouth. I've got ten days, so I figure I can split it evenly."

"Well, that's great. I can always make time for you. When do you land?"

"I've got a ridiculously long connection in Paris, so I won't get into the city until late afternoon."

"Want to grab dinner?" I asked.

"Actually, I already reached out to an old friend from my Harvard days and promised I'd meet him for a few drinks as soon as I check into my hotel."

"Traitor!"

"Hey! I haven't seen him in a while and he's a busy guy."

"Do I know him?"

"I doubt it," snorted Luke. "Anyway, I'm all yours on Wednesday and Thursday."

"Okay ... let me check my schedule and rearrange a couple of things. We can get lunch? Maybe catch a show on Broadway in the evening?"

"Ugh," Luke groaned, causing me to giggle. He was well-known in our family for despising musical productions. Lily and I used to terrorize him

when we were younger by putting on endless performances of *Wicked* and *My Fair Lady*, our favorites.

“You know, not every live stage production includes singing, right?”

“Let’s catch a movie instead. All this time abroad has made me seriously miss the old-fashioned American movie theater popcorn.”

“Sounds good to me,” I replied. “Have a safe flight. Text me when you land, okay?”

“Okay! See you soon! Don’t work too hard, Lucy-Loo!”

I hung up with a smile on my face. I’d missed Luke a lot. However, it was nothing compared to how excited my parents would be to see him. As relieved as they were that Luke had stopped working himself to the brink of insanity, the fact that he was now traveling to remote villages thousands of miles away from home worried them in an entirely different way.

Heading back to the office with a spring in my step, I realized that I’d had one of the best Mondays in my entire career so far. Part of that was due to my happiness at getting to see Luke soon, but the bulk of the positivity came from Elijah’s new influence in my life.

Admittedly, I wasn’t quite sure what to make of that.

## Chapter Seven: *Dean*

“Fancy meeting you here,” I joked the next morning as Lucy walked up to the front of an old pre-war building. Her heels clicked briskly on the pavement, halting sharply when she reached me.

She rolled her eyes at my lame comment, but there was a smile on her face, nonetheless.

“You’re early again,” she remarked.

“Early bird catches the worm,” I countered with a shrug.

She jingled a ring of keys in front of me. “You won’t get any worms without these.”

“Well, then it’s a good thing I have a beautiful bird to help me.”

“Call me a bird again and I’ll toss these keys into the Hudson.”

I snorted. “I think that would be more of a problem for you than me.”

“Fair enough,” she sighed, stepping past me to climb the steps of the stoop.

Lucy looked as lovely as ever, though I couldn’t help thinking I preferred the carefree goddess who’d met me this past weekend to the tailored suit and tied-back hair version of her. She was a chameleon, able to blend into her surroundings effortlessly no matter what they were.

Once again, I found myself thinking how lucky I was to have stumbled upon a woman like her. There was no doubt in my mind that she’d be able to help me pull off this fake relationship scheme.

“Do you need any help?” I asked her, noticing that she’d been fumbling with the keys in the lock for quite some time while I’d been impolitely admiring the flawless curves of her body.

“Nope,” she grunted, finally getting the lock to obey and shoving open the front door to the apartment building. I followed her inside to a dingy, narrow hallway with a thin, threadbare carpet underfoot.

“Hmm,” was all I managed to say when I took in the sight of the flickering fluorescents and cracked, peeling paint.

“Hmm, indeed,” Lucy echoed. “Why do you even want this place?”

“What do you mean?”

She gestured vaguely around her, implying that the old building that clearly hadn’t been updated in a few decades was not exactly the hottest commodity on the market.

I smirked at her. “You know, brokers are supposed to try to convince their clients to actually want to buy the properties.”

“I had no idea,” she remarked sarcastically.

I couldn’t wipe the amused grin off my face as she turned toward the first door on the left and unlocked it, letting me into the first apartment. Something about her demeanor was inexplicably delightful, a playful brazenness that seemed as though it was reserved especially for me. From what I’d observed about her thus far, Lucy didn’t whip out the sarcasm in professional settings.

“Oh, interesting,” I commented, taking in the sight of the tiny apartment. “It’s ... vintage.”

“You could say that.”

The entire apartment could be seen from the doorway. There was a rusty, yellowish kitchenette to the left and a narrow doorway to a basic, somewhat grimy bathroom to the right. The rest of the space was nothing but a square room with two windows, which served as the only living area available in the apartment. Whoever lived in a place like this would likely have to choose between having a bed or a sofa. It was common to cram oneself into tiny alcoves like this in New York, but it never ceased to amaze me that some people really paid an arm and a leg to live this way.

“Are all the units in this building this size?” I asked Lucy.

“There are five floors—no elevator, of course—and twenty units.”

“Four on each floor?”

“Correct. The street-facing units are all studios, then there are nine one-bedroom apartments and a single two-bedroom space on the top floor where the building actually extends up into a modular addition that was built by the last owner about a decade ago,” she recited.

I was impressed that, despite the lack of interested buyers for this property, Lucy knew the details about it by heart. She was unfailingly devoted to her career.

“Can I see the two-bedroom?” I asked.

She nodded and wordlessly led me out of the sorrowful studio and toward the cramped, dusty stairwell. There were rodent droppings in the corners, but that was all part of living in Manhattan. Pest control services would be one of the lowest costs of bringing this building appropriately up to date.

“I should warn you,” Lucy began as we ascended the stairs. “The last time an inspector looked at the building, they warned us about some serious water damage and the possibility of a mold issue. This is really quite the fixer upper, Elijah. It’s a stylish neighborhood, but with the school nearby, it’s hardly worth the investment in renovations.”

“You’re assuming I want to turn this into a normal residential property.”

“What else would you do with it? Zoning won’t allow it to be converted into a commercial space.”

As I opened my mouth to respond, a shrill school bell pierced through the building’s thin insulation from the aforementioned school across the street. Unless the renovations included some serious sound-proofing, the future residents of this building would have to deal with that noise several times a day when school was in session. However, that particular sound was endearingly familiar to me.

Lucy glanced back at me as we continued our trek up to the fifth floor, raising her eyebrows to silently press me for an answer to her previous question.

“Actually, it’s a personal charity project,” I told her. “That prep school is my alma mater. It’s my old high school.”

“Of course it is,” she sighed.

“What does that mean?”

“It looks exactly like the sort of snobby, overpriced place where rich New York families would send their sons.”



I snickered. “Yes, it’s true. It’s not just for privileged brats like me, though. They have a scholarship program, too, and it’s open to students across the country. The problem is, they’re running out of room to board those students, so—”

“So, you want to buy this place and convert it into a dormitory, then donate it to the school.”

“Precisely.”

It was one of many small projects I had going on in the background of my usual daily business at Dean Properties. My father encouraged such charity work and, considering that he had also attended the school, he approved of the expensive project. It would bring the firm some good press and it would help young, bright minds. It was a win-win.

Lucy was quiet for a full minute, presumably thinking over what I’d just revealed about my plans for the building. When we reached the fifth floor landing at last, she turned to gaze up at me. Both of us were slightly breathless from the climb. On top of that, thanks to the narrow confines of the hallway, I couldn’t help but be reminded of our steamy moment in the alley on Saturday.

“I think that’s amazing,” she said softly. “More absurdly wealthy people in this city should spend their money the way you do.”

I cracked a smile. “As in, donating large sums to young brokers in hopes they’ll pretend to be their girlfriend?”

“That’s not quite what I was referring to,” she murmured.

When I only continued to smile at her, she tutted her tongue and turned away to hide the undeniable amusement in her eyes, busying herself with

unlocking the door of the two-bedroom apartment.

“Why did you agree, anyway?” I asked her. “Was it merely the money that convinced you?”

She shrugged, ushering me into the apartment ahead of her. “The money certainly helped your case, but I also figured it could be fun. I’m not really in the market for a real boyfriend at the moment, so it’s not like I’m missing out on other opportunities in the meantime.”

“I bet there are hundreds of potential suitors lining up outside your door,” I argued.

Lucy crossed her arms against her chest. “Even if there were, I wouldn’t entertain them. Anyway, this is the biggest unit in the building. I suppose you could turn it into a common area for the students or convert it into an apartment for the dorm supervisor.”

“Both are very good ideas,” I agreed, moving toward the grimy windows as she allowed the door to swing shut behind us. There was a dead cockroach lying on its back on the windowsill, hairy legs pointed up in the air. I wrinkled my nose at it, then pointed it out to Lucy.

She huffed out a breath of laughter. “At least it’s dead.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

Lucy stood in the kitchen alcove. It was bigger than the kitchenette in the studio downstairs, but still just as outdated. However, other than the roach in the window, the space was decently clean.

“It’s two-point-five,” Lucy mentioned, watching me wander slowly around the apartment and take note of the water stains in the ceiling.

Two-point-five, as in the asking price was two and a half million dollars. It was cheap as far as similar buildings on the island were going for, but would likely require almost as much in cash to fix up properly.

“That’s reasonable,” I answered. “I’ll take it.”

“Great. I’ll reach out to the seller as soon as I get back to office.”

“Great.”

“Perfect. Anything else? Would you like to see the basement? The boiler room? The rooftop?”

“As enticing as those options sound, I don’t think this suit goes well with cobwebs and cockroach casings.”

Lucy chuckled. “That color looks nice on you, by the way.”

Surprised by the compliment, I glanced down at my attire instinctively.

“What, gray?”

“No, your tie. That burgundy color looks good with your complexion,” she clarified. “I know that’s kind of a girly thing to say, but—”

“Thank you,” I told her, smoothing the silk tie I chose at random earlier that morning. “I’ll remember to wear burgundy more often.”

She leaned against the kitchen counter, arms still crossed. I moved closer to her, reclining against the wall opposite her and mirroring her stance.

“What?” she murmured.

“Are we really not going to talk about it?” I dared to ask.

“Talk about what?”

“About what happened the last time we were alone together.”

Lucy sighed and dropped her arms to her sides as if mentioning the kiss caused her to give up the fight entirely.

“I was hoping we could just keep mutually avoiding the topic,” she sighed.

“I’m sorry if I caught you off guard on Saturday. It really wasn’t my intention for our meeting to escalate to *that*.”

“It’s okay. It was ... nice.”

“Nice?” I laughed.

“Yeah,” Lucy said, blushing lightly. I dared to inch slightly closer to her as she continued speaking. “I mean, if we’re going to be putting on this charade, we’ll have to be comfortable with physical affection anyway, so I’m glad it wasn’t entirely unpleasant.”

“Well, I’m relieved that kissing me wasn’t the most upsetting thing you’ve endured in life,” I joked. Then, because I couldn’t resist giving in to the raw desire I felt for her, I added, “I liked kissing you, too. Maybe we could do it again sometime.”

“I don’t—”

“Don’t get me wrong,” I said quickly before she could protest and run away again. “Obviously, neither one of us is interested in actual romance or feelings, but I can’t deny that I find you attractive, Lucy. How can I not?”

“What are you saying? That you want to add friends-with-benefits to the list of requirements in our arrangement?”

She didn't look annoyed by the suggestion. In fact, from the wicked gleam in her big blue eyes, she seemed to like the idea of it.

"We could leave it off the books," I offered, taking another step toward her and leaving only a few inches left between us. "But, does this mean we're friends?"

"I can't imagine being friends with someone like you in any other context, but ... sure. We're friends."

"You should come out with me tonight," I suggested, boldly reaching out to place my hands on her hips. "An old friend is in town. I haven't seen him in years—he's a bit hard to pin down—so I reserved the entire VIP section of Method Club in Soho this evening. You should come. A bunch of people will be there."

"You want me to come hang out with you and your friends at a club tonight? Like, as your girlfriend?"

"Yeah, why not? It could be a good practice round. Plus, I think you'd like my friend. He kind of reminds me of you."

She cocked her head to the side. "Really? I don't know ... I don't tend to frequent exclusive clubs on weekday evenings. Or ever, honestly."

"It'll be fun," I assured her. "And, you can leave whenever you want, I promise. I won't be offended. Just come out tonight. Let me show you who I am outside of business hours."

For some reason, it mattered to me that Lucy didn't see me as a sleazy guy who was trying to scam himself into a promotion and casual sex at the same time. I wanted her to know that I was a good person, even if she was helping me show my father I deserved the position of CEO, that I was worthy

of it. Even if I was paying her a large sum for her assistance, I also wanted her to feel good about helping me. I didn't want her to feel as if she was making a mistake.

Although I barely knew her, her judgment felt crucial.

"Fine," she replied with a loud exhale. It was clear that saying yes to the invitation had taken a lot of effort from her. That was strange to me; Lucy didn't strike me as an introvert, or a hermit. Perhaps she had another reason for not wanting to spend an evening out at a club.

"If you really don't want to, it's okay," I insisted. "I mean, I don't want you to think you have to agree to everything I invite you to simply because I'm paying—"

"If I didn't want to go, I would've said no, regardless of the money," she cut me off. "But, I do want to go, so I guess I'll see you tonight."

Relief flooded through me. "I guess you will."

"So—" she continued, batting her eyelashes at me. "Are you planning on doing anything about the fact that your hands are currently on my body or do I—"

"Say no more," I chuckled, interrupting her.

Just like before, I wasted no time giving in to the moment. I wanted her, at least physically speaking, and she seemed to want me, so there wasn't anything standing in the way of indulging those basic human needs.

With a low growl, I tugged on her waist and pulled her tight against me. She gasped, bracing herself on my shoulders. Her face was already tilted toward mine, awaiting an encore to the first kiss. I refused to disappoint her,

capturing her lips with mine in a perfect balance of gentleness and urgency.

The way she melted into my arms felt like magic, as if my touch had cast a spell on her and she was putty in my hands. That thought alone drove me wild. I deepened the kiss, but that wasn't enough. I wanted more of her. My hands slid down the curve of her behind, gripping the back of her thighs in my palms as I hoisted her onto the counter.

Without hesitation, Lucy circled my waist with her legs, locking her ankles behind me. She moaned into my mouth as my hands roamed her body, pushing up the hem of her skirt and grabbing at the silky material of her blouse.

Lucy's slender hand slipped away from where her fingers had been tangled in my hair and trailed down the center of my chest. Her palm glided down the length of my tie, dipping lower between our bodies until her fingertips were tracing the shape of my belt buckle. Instead of undoing it, she dropped her hand further, palming the stiffness in my trousers that was impossible to hide.

Even through the layers of clothing, the sensation was too good to deny. I groaned, breaking the kiss to press my mouth feverishly against her throat.

"We should stop," she gasped, though she continued to palm me through my pants.

"Yeah, we should," I breathed, but didn't stop grinding against her touch.

What was this magnetic desire between us? Why couldn't we share a simple kiss? This was the second time I'd felt unbearably overcome with

burning need for her the moment my lips touched hers. Once we started, it was nearly impossible to stop.

“Wait, but really—” Lucy whispered, pulling her hand away and leaning back a few inches. “There’s a dead cockroach across the room and I’m pretty sure the cabinet under this countertop is about to cave in. This feels like a bad porno.”

She had a point. As badly as I wanted to explore her body, a dusty apartment that hadn’t tasted fresh air in years was not the right place to do so. She deserved better than that.

With a regretful sigh, I stepped away from her and willed my body’s response to her to calm down. Her cheeks were deliciously flushed and her pupils noticeably dilated. As Lucy lowered herself from where she’d been resting on top of the counter, she took deep breaths and readjusted her skirt.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yeah ... that was—”

“Not entirely unpleasant?” I prompted.

Lucy burst out laughing. “It was definitely better than that.”

“Now you’re just stroking my ego.”

With a mischievous roll of her eyes, she moved toward the door, took her purse off the hook, and secured the strap back on her shoulder. Quietly, desperately begging the front of my trousers to lie flat again, I followed her out of the apartment.

We descended the stairs side by side, but this time I rested my hand on her lower back under the guise of guiding her down the rickety wooden steps.



The truth was, I couldn't stand to keep my hands off her completely. Not while our alone time was dwindling down to its final seconds.

Once we were back out on the street, reality crashed down on us like a rude awakening. Luckily, she didn't run away from me. Instead, she simply offered me a shy smile.

"So, I'll contact the seller."

"Right," I replied. "Yes, please. Thank you."

"No problem."

"And I'll see you tonight?"

"Yes," she answered. "See you tonight."

"Great."

"Goodbye, Elijah."

"Bye, Lucy."

We parted ways, the countless blurred lines between us making me feel somewhat dizzy as I waited for a cab on the avenue.

## Chapter Eight: *Astor*

“You *what?*” gasped Gabriella, her jaw practically on the floor.

I shrugged from where I was standing across the living room, trying to decide which pair of work-appropriate heels would look less matronly at the club. All of my old clubbing attire was stuffed away in my storage unit along with the ghosts of my past.

“I’m going out,” I responded simply.

“You’re going out with a *guy?*”

“Correct.”

“Did a demon possess you?”

“What?”

“No, I’m serious. Did you give a tour of a haunted house and now you’re possessed by a ghost? Are you really my best friend?”

I snorted at her theatrics. “There’s nothing spooky about this, Gabriella. I’m simply meeting a friend for drinks. We met through work. It’s casual. It’s not even a date. We’re just *friends.*”

She placed her hands on her hips. “What’s his name?”

“It’s Elijah,” I said as nonchalantly as I could. “You know, the client I met up with this weekend?”

“Right, right. Elijah Dean, the billionaire bachelor. And you’re just casually going out to meet him at one of the most exclusive clubs in the city.

Because you're friends."

"That's right."

"I'm not buying it," Gabriella said, pursing her lips.

"What do you mean?" I sighed, glancing at my phone. There was a message from my brother confirming that he'd landed safely and checked into his hotel a couple of hours ago, as well as a message from Elijah telling me what time to meet him in Soho.

"You won't even go out with Stacy and me to a dive bar—and when we do manage to convince you to come for one drink, you snarl at every member of the male species—but you're willingly going out with some random rich dude you met through work? I'm really trying not to be offended here."

I frowned at my friend. I could tell she was mostly joking, but there was also something genuine in her words. She had the right to feel frustrated. I'd all but refused to socialize for months now, to the point where even I was becoming annoyed at myself. Now, here I was, suddenly getting all dressed up to meet someone I barely knew and hang out with people I'd never met before.

It barely made any sense to me, either. I hated to admit it, but something had broken inside of me when I learned Charlotte was pregnant. By the looks of it, she was far enough along to have been sleeping with my boyfriend for at least a couple of months before I discovered the truth. I'd told Gabriella right away, of course, so she knew that my healing progress had suffered a small setback.

With a groan, I collapsed onto the sofa cushions in defeat. There was

no point in keeping this from Gabriella. If I was going to be lying to everyone else in the world about what was going on with Elijah, it would be nice to have at least one person who knew the truth.

“Okay, fine,” I sighed. “He’s not a real guy.”

“Excuse me?” snorted Gabriella as she came to sit beside me. “Please tell me you haven’t started hallucinating.”

“No, I mean ... it’s not really like that. We made a deal with each other. It’s complicated. Honestly, I don’t really know how to explain.”

“Well, I’m all ears,” she assured me. “And you know I’m never one to judge.”

That was true. She was the least judgmental person I knew, unless you wronged someone she cared about. Derek and Charlotte were certainly getting plenty of negative judgment from her for what they had done to me.

With my eye on the clock, I told Gabriella everything as quickly and concisely as I could manage. She gasped and sighed a few times, but she didn’t interrupt once.

“—and I know it’s kind of sleazy to accept money for doing something like this, but it’s not like I’m an escort all of a sudden. The cash doesn’t have anything to do with what happened earlier today in that horrendous apartment building,” I finished.

Gabriella smirked. “Right. That only happened because you totally have the hots for Elijah Dean.”

“I do not *have the hots* for him! Who even says that anymore?”

“So, you don’t think he’s attractive?”

“Of course he’s attractive,” I scoffed. “That’s all he is to me, though. Whatever physical chemistry we share is completely unrelated to deeper emotions. We both agreed that neither one of us have the time or the patience to entertain nonsense like that.”

“Basically, you’re friends with benefits.”

“We’re in a mutually beneficial arrangement.”

“That’s what I said,” Gabriella replied with a giggle.

I let out a loud exhale and stood up from the couch. I didn’t want to be late, but I was suddenly feeling more anxious than ever.

“I’ve lost my mind, haven’t I?” I asked her.

She shrugged. “Do you want my honest opinion?”

“Yes, please.”

“I think it sounds fun,” she admitted. “I mean, you get to have a no-strings-attached affair with the hottest billionaire in New York City. Not everyone gets to have a rebound like that, Lucy.”

“You don’t think I’m making a huge mistake?”

“Of course not! Obviously, this is the last thing I’d ever expect someone like you to do, with all your rules and morals and whatnot, but I think it could be good for you.”

“Really?”

“Lucy, you’ve just had your heart broken after spending years in a committed relationship with somebody. Usually, that would send someone flying off the rails. Instead, I watched you curl up into your shell like a sad,

little turtle,” Gabriella lamented. “This thing with Elijah will allow you to let loose for the first time in ages—maybe for the first time in your whole life. It’s deliciously scandalous.”

“You can’t tell anyone, Gabriella. I mean it. Not even Stacy.”

“My lips are sealed,” she promised. “I’ll just be here to listen and enjoy the secondhand thrill of it all. You deserve to have fun with a sexy guy after everything you’ve been through. Plus, you get a hundred thousand dollars and a boost at work on the side. It sounds like a win-win-win to me.”

That was enough to calm me down again. Gabriella was right. This was supposed to be a good thing in my life. It was an opportunity I might not have gotten otherwise if I’d never met Elijah. There was no danger of this turning into an emotionally complicated mess either because we were both on the same page about our views on relationships. Elijah didn’t know about my reasons for avoiding romance at this juncture in my life, but it wasn’t necessary. I would allow him to assume that, like him, it was simply because I was too focused on my career.

“Fine. Okay. Great,” I said to Gabriella. “Now, can you please tell me which pair of shoes looks better with this dress?”

“Neither,” she remarked, crossing her arms and frowning at my outfit. “In fact, the entire ensemble is leaving a lot to be desired.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“You’re going to Method, right? That club in Soho? You do realize that the kind of people who are on the list at that place are *very* important? Plus, if you’re really going to impress Elijah’s friends, you need to dress the part of his glamorous, untouchable girlfriend.”

I should have seen this coming. Gabriella loved fashion. One of the side effects of her being a skilled art curator was that she had also amassed an impressive and eclectic wardrobe. If I was going to humor her, tonight was the night.

“Whatever you have in mind, you need to make it quick,” I said. “You know I don’t believe there’s anything fashionable about being late.”

With an excited squeal, Gabriella leaped up and ran into her bedroom. It was half past nine. I’d agreed to let Elijah send a car for me at ten. Normally, I’d prefer to be in bed by that hour, but there was a part of me that was genuinely looking forward to the evening ahead. I only hoped I would be able to fit in well enough with Elijah’s friends. He was incredibly humble and tolerable for someone with absurd amounts of generational wealth, but I wasn’t foolish enough to think everyone in his circle was just as pleasant.

Luckily, Gabriella was efficient. She returned from the depths of her closet within minutes, a length of lavender satin and a pair of silver pumps in her arms.

“This is perfect, actually,” she explained, tossing the dress at me. “I picked this up last month, but it’s not quite the right length on me. It’ll look amazing on those long, model-esque legs of yours, though.”

“Purple? Seriously?”

She sighed at my audible doubt. “Trust me. It’s vintage McQueen.”

Obediently, I slipped out of the simple black dress I’d been wearing before and shimmied into the dress Gabriella had presented me with. It only took seconds for me to understand her vision. Standing before the full-length mirror in her room, it occurred to me that I hadn’t felt this sexy in a long

time. The shimmering lilac material clung to my slender frame, hugging my waist and draping across my hips in an artful array of pleats. The hemline fell short on my thighs, but not in a way that looked trashy. Once I stepped into the metallic heels Gabriella offered me, the entire image came together flawlessly.

“Wow,” I whispered.

“My thoughts exactly,” Gabriella responded with a proud grin. “For the record, I always thought you were too hot for Derek. That’s what really pisses me off. He knew you were out of his league and he fumbled it anyway.”

I didn’t want to think about Derek anymore, so I replied with a thin-lipped smile and collected my purse from where it was waiting for me on the coffee table.

“I should get going,” I announced, fidgeting by the door. “You don’t think I’ll need a jacket, do you?”

“If you dare wear a jacket over that masterpiece of a dress, I will throttle you,” she joked. “Now, run along, you little minx! Have fun with your fake boyfriend! Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

I rolled my eyes. “That list is fairly short, don’t you think?”

“It is,” she agreed with a mischievous cackle. “By the way, if Elijah has any hot, rich, single friends—”

“Don’t worry. I got you,” I laughed, guessing what the end of her sentence would be before she had to utter it aloud.

“You’re the best.”



“Thanks for the dress, Gabriella.”

“Yes, yes, no problem. Get going!”

Gabriella was so excited to see me leave the house for something other than work that she practically pushed me out the door. My stomach fluttered with butterflies as I made my way to the elevator, and then tried to avoid the curious gaze of the doorman as I walked across the small lobby of Gabriella’s apartment building.

Outside, there was a black town car idling on the curb. As soon as I stepped out into the warm evening air, an older gentleman in a black suit and tie emerged from the driver’s side and came around to open the rear door for me.

“Good evening, Ms. Astor,” he greeted me. “I’ll be taking you to Soho this evening.”

“Thank you,” I awkwardly replied before ducking into the backseat.

I’d never been chauffeured anywhere. Did this man work exclusively for Elijah? Should I make conversation with him? Was I supposed to tip him?

My nerves spiked again, but I forced myself to take deep breaths to calm myself down. There was light classical music playing from the vehicle’s speakers, which the chauffeur hummed along to quietly as he pulled into the dense flow of Manhattan traffic.

As we drew closer to the club, I wrung my hands in my lap. It was too late to turn around, but I was fighting regret with every passing second. What if Elijah’s friends hated me? He said he’d organized this entire evening to celebrate one of his college friends who had been out of town for a long time. What if that friend resented having a stranger show up at his event?

*You're doing this for a reason, I reminded myself. This is for Lily. For your parents. For yourself. You can do this, Lucy. You have to.*

By the time the chauffeur stopped in front of the club, which was located in a nondescript cement building with a line of ferociously stylish people spilling out of the door and curling around the block, I was more determined than anxious. When the car door opened for me, I thanked the driver one last time and walked straight up to the bouncer. It took immense willpower to ignore the curious, pointed stares from the people waiting in line.

“My name is Lucy Astor,” I said to the bouncer. “My friend—”

“Go right in, miss,” he replied immediately without even glancing at the tablet in his hand.

When he lifted the rope barrier for me to pass, I heard a few people protest impatiently. Although I'd done nothing to earn the important status that earned me entry into the club besides knowing Elijah Dean, I felt a rush of confidence as I passed through the dark doorway and carefully descended a narrow staircase into the basement.

At the foot of the stairs, the walls opened up into a vast, high-ceilinged space. An open loft rimmed the circular room above my head, where well-dressed individuals leaned against the railing and gazed at the dance floor and teeming bar down below. It was one of the nicest clubs I'd ever been to—not that I had been to all that many—which wasn't surprising when I considered how exclusive it evidently was.

It was also fairly crowded for a Tuesday night. Then again, the kind of people who were privy to this glamorous underworld probably didn't have to worry about making it to their nine-to-fives the next day. Most of them could

probably party as much as they wanted.

At first, I had no idea where to go. The club was vast, pulsating with light and music and a whirl of laughing, chattering people. After some frantic searching as I hovered by the entrance, I noticed that the wide staircase leading up to the second level was cordoned off by a velvet rope. It was considerably less crowded up there, so I figured it had to be the VIP section.

I headed that way, a bubble of nerves forming in the pit of my stomach as I approached the security guard standing before the velvet rope. He was the keeper of the gate between the VIPs and everyone else, but hopefully my name would be enough to get me through, just like before.

Just as I opened my mouth to greet the guard, a familiar voice cut through the noise.

“Lucy! Hey! Over here!”

Both my head and the guard’s turned in the direction of the voice. Elijah was standing by a table a few yards away, smiling and waving at me. With no further questions asked, the velvet rope was unhooked and moved aside for me to pass through.

I was shaking slightly as I headed toward Elijah, but I tried to look as confident as Gabriella would if she were here. This was the big moment. Pretending to be Elijah’s girlfriend in front of a pesky client was one thing, but impressing the glamorous group of people gathered around him was another beast entirely.

What if I failed? Would he take everything back? Would I lose it all?

Despite the anxiety buzzing inside my head, I managed a bright smile as Elijah swooped toward me and wrapped a strong arm around my waist as

if it was the most natural gesture in the world between us. Then, as the breath rushed out of my lungs, he kissed me.

I suppose that was one way of setting the right scene. Though, admittedly, nothing about his kiss felt forced. He was a skilled actor.

When we parted, I felt dizzy and overwhelmed, but the smile remained firmly on my face.

“Well, hello to you, too,” I whispered.

Elijah merely grinned, waggling his eyebrows at me mischievously as if deeply entertained by our charade, and guided me closer to the table where it seemed most of his party was gathered. I felt everyone’s eyes on me, practically burning through me with the force of their curiosity, but Elijah redirected my attention toward someone else who had his back to us.

“The first person I want to introduce you to is the man of the hour, my longtime friend and old Harvard partner-in-crime,” Elijah said to me, reaching out to clap his hand firmly on the stranger’s shoulder. Something about him seemed oddly familiar to me, but the flashing lights made it difficult to discern.

“It would be an honor,” I replied.

“Hey! Dude!” Elijah called out to the stranger. “I want you to meet the girl I was telling you about.”

Elijah’s friend turned away from the group of people he was talking to and turned to face us with a wide smile on his face—a smile that faltered with confusion the moment he laid eyes on me.

I froze. I knew exactly who this guy was.

“Luke?” I gasped.

My brother was *here*. I knew he was in New York City, but I hadn't expected to see him until tomorrow. More baffling than that, however, was the fact that my brother was ... one of Elijah Dean's closest friends?

If there was a God, he had to be laughing at me in that moment.

## Chapter Nine: *Dean*

“—Luke?”

“Lucy? Lucy-loo? What are you doing here?”

“What are *you* doing here?”

Clearly, something wasn't right. I hadn't expected my old college friend to instantly recognize the woman who was posing as my fake girlfriend. For a brief and horrifying second, I wondered if it was because they'd dated in the past. *That* would certainly make for an awkward evening.

Then, it all clicked into place. Suddenly, I couldn't believe I'd been so stupid. *Lucy Astor ... Luke Astor*. They both had the same round blue eyes and thick hair, though Luke's blond waves were a couple of shades darker than Lucy's.

Luke had even mentioned that his sister lived in the city and worked in real estate so she had a very tight schedule.

His *sister*. Oops.

Forcing out an easy chuckle and praying that I was wrong, I asked, “Do you two know each other?”

Luke threw his head back with laughter. “Dude! This is my sister! You're dating my sister?”

He didn't look upset, so at least he wasn't the overly protective type of brother. If anything, Luke looked thoroughly amused.

“Luke, why didn't you tell me you knew Elijah?” Lucy asked.

“Well, how was I supposed to know that *you* knew Elijah?” he countered with a shrug. “I didn’t even know you were dating again!”

I remained silent, unsure of what to say.

Lucy sighed, shaking her head. She glanced at me, a twinge of panic in her gaze, then looked back at her brother. I understood. Pretending to be a couple in front of her brother was more intense of a challenge than either one of us had bargained for that night.

Yet, just as I’d seen her do several times before, Lucy recovered quickly. Quick-witted, as always.

“Whatever,” she laughed. “It’s good to see you, Luke.”

I stepped back as the siblings embraced. Luke had been abroad for months, working in a remote village in Ghana. Joining the Peace Corps was a far cry from being the finance wizard I’d met back at Harvard, but he looked happier and healthier than ever. It had been a long time since I’d seen him, but Lucy obviously had reason to miss him even more than I did.

Mind spinning, I waited patiently while they had their unexpected reunion. She’d never mentioned she had siblings. Not that it was an important factor in any of our conversations thus far. Still, it was strange that she at least knew the basics of my family dynamics, but I knew next to nothing of hers.

In fact, now that I thought about it, I barely knew anything about Lucy Astor at all. What had I gotten myself into?

“I’m happy to see you bounced back quickly, sis,” Luke said to her as they broke their embrace. “Trust me. This guy is *much* better than the last one.”

Luke shot me a wink. I was touched to know that I had his approval, considering he had seen me during the messiest and most reckless days of my youth, but his words confused me. I also noticed Lucy wasn't quite able to hide the way she cringed at his commentary, though she did her best to brush it off with a simple roll of her eyes.

"Good to know," she chuckled, curling her arm around my waist as I draped my arm around her shoulders.

"You know what? This is actually great news," Luke replied, smiling at the two of us like a kid on Christmas morning. "We should celebrate."

"We're celebrating you and your homecoming," I reminded him.

"Oh, who cares about little old me?" laughed Luke, waving me off. "You, chronically single Elijah Dean, have convinced my stubborn, serious sister to give you the time of day! That's worth a bottle of champagne, I think."

Before either of us could protest, Luke flounced off toward the stairs and made his way down to the bar.

"Great," muttered Lucy sarcastically. "This is fun."

"I'm sorry," I said to her, keeping my mouth close to her ear so that she could hear me over the music without raising my voice and risking anyone else overhearing. "Asking you to lie to my family is one thing, but forcing you to lie to yours—"

"It's okay," she insisted, shaking her head. "It's no big deal. Luke is so relaxed and carefree, he probably won't even think about this again when he heads back to Africa."



I nodded. “Right.”

“I bet he’s already gotten distracted,” she continued, motioning for me to follow her to the railing where the VIP section overlooked the ground floor of the club. “See? He’s got a one-track mind.”

Sure enough, when I followed the direction of where her finger was pointing, I saw Luke down in the crowd, his bright blue shirt standing out among the glamorous blacks and grays worn by most New Yorkers. He hadn’t even made it to the bar, instead stopping halfway there to chat with a group of girls at the edge of the dance floor. Even from our distance, I could tell that the girls were laughing and smiling at whatever he was saying to them.

I rolled my eyes and chuckled. “Charming little shithead.”

Lucy giggled. “Sorry about that. Maybe I should’ve mentioned that I have a brother. I guess I haven’t shared that much about myself.”

“It’s my mistake,” I insisted. “I’m the idiot who didn’t bother getting to know his fake girlfriend.”

She smirked up at me. “Well, I do have one other sibling—a little sister—but there’s no way she’d be here tonight, so I think it’s safe for you to introduce me to the rest of your friends.”

“Cool,” I replied with a grin, placing my hand on her waist and guiding her back toward the table. “By the way, what did Luke mean by ‘better than the last one’?”

“Hmm? Oh, it’s nothing. He was just kidding around.”

Although I shouldn’t have known her well enough to understand when

she was lying, I could tell right away that Lucy was holding something back in that response. The instant coldness in her eyes told me that the last man she dated couldn't have been a good guy. It was also clear that she wasn't going to divulge the details to me right then and there.

"Sure," I responded, smiling to diffuse the small moment of tension.

When we reached the table, Veronica and the handful of devoted lemmings she'd brought along with her looked at us expectantly.

"Is this her?" gasped Veronica, standing up right away.

*Her, as in, the woman you conned into pretending to be your girlfriend.* I knew that's what she really wanted to say to me, but we weren't in a therapy session, so she held back on her clinical judgment.

"Ronnie, this is my girlfriend, Lucy Astor," I began. "Lucy, this is one of my best friends, Dr. Veronica Ridley."

"It's nice to meet you," Lucy offered shyly, holding out a hand for Veronica to shake, which was promptly ignored in favor of a gentle hug.

"Nice to meet me? You're joking. It's nice to meet *you*. Oh, my God, you're absolutely gorgeous!" Veronica gushed. "Elijah, you didn't tell me she was this drastically out of your league!"

I snorted. Lucy let out a bubble of laughter and relaxed slightly. That was the thing about Veronica. Even when she wasn't in therapist-mode, she knew exactly how to make people feel comfortable in any situation. I didn't mind that it meant making a joke at my expense. As long as Lucy didn't get freaked out and abandon the entire strategy, I'd be happy.

"Good one, Ronnie," I snapped back with a wink.

“You’re a doctor? What is your specialty?” Lucy asked her as we gathered around the table.

I offered Lucy a glass of Prosecco, poured from the bottle Veronica had ordered a few minutes prior, which she accepted wordlessly and took a healthy gulp of the moment it was in her hand.

Veronica grinned brightly at Lucy. “Psychiatry. Boring stuff. Totally not worth discussing. I want to hear all about you. Am I correct in interpreting that Luke Astor is your brother?”

Lucy shrugged. “That is correct. I had no idea he and Elijah knew each other. Are you friends with him, too?”

“Only acquaintances, really. I didn’t go to Harvard like these losers. I went to Yale for undergrad.”

“Really? Me, too!” exclaimed Lucy. “Maybe we crossed paths and never realized it? I was in the Class of 2014!”

“I’m afraid I have to admit I’m quite a few years older than you,” Veronica giggled, leaning in toward Lucy conspiratorially. “I was in the Class of 2009.”

“Oh! Goodness, you look like you’re younger than me.”

Veronica placed a hand over her heart dramatically and closed her eyes as if soaking in Lucy’s compliment for all it was worth. When she opened her eyes, she glared at me with mischief in her gaze.

“Elijah, I’m afraid I might have to try to steal your girlfriend from you,” she announced.

Lucy burst out laughing, as did the other girls at the table.

“Sorry,” I said, quickly jumping back in to finish the introductions. “This is Casey and Carly. They’re twins, of course.”

The brunette twins, who had been running in the same elite Manhattan circles as me for my entire life but had always been closer to Veronica, smiled and shook Lucy’s hand across the table. They eyed her with lighthearted scrutiny, sizing her up the way all of us blue bloods had been trained to do. Immediately, I felt protective over Lucy. I didn’t want her to get caught up in shallow gossip, which Casey and Carly were known to participate in. I’d have to keep an eye on them both.

“Wait, so, Lucy ... if Luke is your brother, that means your parents named you Luke and Lucy?” said Carly, the judgment in her tone painfully obvious.

That hadn’t occurred to me. I’d missed so many obvious signs. That was embarrassing, considering I normally believed myself to be remarkably detail-oriented.

Lucy laughed nervously. “Yeah, our parents aren’t very creative. They really loved the name Lucille and thought their firstborn was going to be a girl. Except, Luke turned out to be a boy, so they went with the name Lucas until they had the chance to try again!”

“How funny,” mused Casey. “So, you’re not twins?”

“No, Luke is four years older than I am.”

“Which means Elijah must be four years older than you, too?” Carly remarked.

“Yes, I think we all understand how linear time works, Carly,” I cut in. If I wasn’t firm enough, the twins would continue the interrogation

relentlessly.

The twins backed off, sitting back in the booth and returning to their own private conversation. Lucy, visibly awkward, fidgeted slightly. I could tell she didn't spend a lot of time in social situations like this one. It was strange to see her out of her element. Normally, she was perfectly poised and a chameleon communicator when she was on the clock. Then again, that was in a different context. Real estate professionals were easy enough to understand. The world I came from was convoluted even to me.

Plus, Lucy had never hidden from me how strong her distaste was for those who benefitted from generational wealth. Veronica and I were outliers among our demographic. Carly and Casey were a more accurate representation of what Lucy was going to have to deal with while she acted the part of my girlfriend.

And yet, somehow, there was a part of me that knew she wasn't going to walk away. If she hadn't called things off the second she saw her brother, I felt confident there was little else that could shake her. Lucy Astor wasn't a quitter.

"Hey! Elijah!" Luke's voice echoed toward us. I turned to see him rushing over with a bright smile on his face. "You'll never guess who I just ran into! Zach Aldridge! Little Zach from our tutoring group, remember? He's all grown up! Man, you've gotta come down and take a shot with us."

I couldn't help laughing as Luke practically dragged me out of my seat, barely paying attention to his sister or the other girls. Lucy was right. He really was only capable of focusing on one thing at a time.

"How about you invite Zach to join us up here?" I replied, gesturing toward Lucy to wordlessly remind him that I had certain priorities to attend to

that evening.

“It’s fine, Elijah,” Veronica interrupted. “Go take shots with your Harvard buddies and reminisce on your glory days. I’ll take good care of Lucy.”

Lucy caught my eye. She didn’t seem particularly fond of the idea of being left alone with the girls, but Luke was yanking on my arm so forcefully, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to resist his drunken stubbornness for much longer.

Then, she did something that surprised me. She inserted herself between Luke and me to press a soft kiss to my cheek.

“It’s okay,” she said, loud enough for the others to hear. “Go have fun with the boys.”

“Yeah, listen to your girlfriend, dude,” taunted Luke with a smirking smile. “Come have fun with the boys.”

I was torn. I didn’t want to leave Lucy alone to fend for herself. What if one of the twins started asking her questions about me that she couldn’t answer and the integrity of our fake relationship faltered? At the same time, it was a perfectly normal and healthy thing for a couple not to spend every single second together. The longer I struggled to make such a simple decision, the weirder the moment became.

“Okay, fine,” I chuckled, leaning forward to kiss her temple. “But we’ll be right back.”

Luke made a sound of disgust, followed by an impatient huff. I smacked him in the shoulder as I got up to follow him down the stairs.

“Man, I’m happy for you and all of that, but do you really have to kiss my sister in front of me?” he joked as the security guard removed the velvet rope and allowed us to pass from the VIP section.

“Well, considering I only just found out approximately twenty minutes ago that my girlfriend is your sister, you’re going to have to give me a little while to adjust.”

“What’s that about anyway?” he countered. “I mean, has Lucy really not mentioned me at all? How long have you even been together?”

“She’s mentioned she had a brother a few times,” I lied as smoothly as I could, glad that Luke was thoroughly inebriated. “But I’m afraid you aren’t the main topic of conversation for us.”

I avoided answering his second question, mostly because I couldn’t remember if Lucy and I had agreed on an exact timeline for our relationship and I didn’t want to get anything wrong.

Just as Luke opened his mouth to respond, his gaze caught on something over my shoulder. We’d reached the ground floor of the club and were suddenly engulfed by a thick crowd of people from all directions.

“There he is!” Luke exclaimed, waving at someone behind me. “Hey! Zach! Over here!”

Diving into the throng after Luke, I breathed a sigh of relief that he had so easily forgotten the unfinished threads of our conversation. Hopefully, it wouldn’t come up again. At least, not before Lucy and I had the chance to sit down and go over the details of our false relationship.

Casting an anxious glance up at the balcony, Lucy and the girls were currently out of my line of sight. The only thing I could do was hope that

Veronica had meant what she said when she promised she'd take good care of her in my absence.



## Chapter Ten: *Astor*

The first emotion I felt when meeting Elijah's friend Veronica was the familiar trickle of insecurity. She was beautiful. Effortlessly gorgeous. The kind of pretty that was obvious without being flashy, undeniable without being generic. It was also immediately evident that she carried herself with the confidence of someone who was fully aware of how attractive she was.

Not only that, but she was a doctor. She had beauty *and* brains. It was hard not to feel self-conscious around women like that. It wasn't that I disliked her for it, but rather that I was overwhelmed to see exactly what kind of people Elijah kept company with.

After all, with a woman as gorgeous and successful as Veronica as his friend, why did he need to pay for a fake girlfriend?

Not to mention the nosy brunette twins who were also fairly pretty, though lacking in charm. Clearly, Elijah had plenty of options to choose from if he needed someone to convince his father that he was in a committed relationship.

But, if Elijah was surrounded by all these beautiful women, why wasn't he in a *real* relationship? Was it truly because he didn't have the time for romance? Or was there a deeper reason that I would never be privy to? Was there something wrong with Elijah himself?

With Elijah and my brother running around on the ground floor of the club, I was left to handle the girl talk all by myself. It wasn't uncharted territory for me, but I also didn't belong to the same world as these women. They had grown up being fed by a silver spoon. I had grown up on a dirt road

in the middle of the Vermont wilderness. There were chasms between us that not even the most complex of metaphorical bridges could close.

Because of that, it was hard not to feel painfully out of place. I was certain that I wasn't the only small town girl in the club, and even though I knew I looked amazing in Gabriella's dress, I couldn't help feeling frumpy and ridiculous in front of the others. Their glamour was effortless because it wasn't something they had to rely on to prove their value in this social circle. Their bank accounts spoke for them. Even with Elijah's partial payment sitting in my personal account, I couldn't say the same.

Yet, the longer I spent internally fretting over the differences between Elijah's friends and me, the more socially awkward I would appear to them. That wasn't wise. If I was going to play my role well and actually earn the full one-hundred-thousand-dollars that was promised to me, I needed to do a better job of ignoring my anxiety.

"Oh, look!" Veronica said all of a sudden, breaking me out of my nervous reverie. "Daisy and Bradley are here!"

That meant nothing to me, but Veronica's announcement immediately caught the twins' attention. They sat up straight and gasped, zeroing in on an unfamiliar couple who had just crossed through the barrier of the VIP lounge.

"My God, it's been forever!" exclaimed Carly.

"They've been on that damn honeymoon for *ages*," whined Casey.

Without another word, the twins stood and rushed over to greet the newlyweds whom I didn't know and likely wouldn't be properly introduced to. It left me alone at the table with Veronica, which was undeniably intimidating.

Except, all of a sudden, she was offering me a conspiratorial smile and leaning in as if we were close friends who shared a secret.

“Don’t worry,” she said to me. “Elijah told me everything. You don’t have to pretend in front of me.”

I tensed, so baffled by her words that I struggled to respond.

“What?” was all I managed.

“I know all about the fake dating thing,” she clarified. “Elijah’s one of my best friends, but he’s also one of my clients, so he tells me everything.”

“He ... what?”

I was really going to have to work on my eloquence if I wanted to make it through the rest of the night.

“I know it sounds a bit questionable, but it’s true,” Veronica chuckled. “For one hour every week, I’m Elijah’s therapist. Trust me, I didn’t want to accept him as a patient at first, but he can be very stubborn.”

“How does that work?” I asked. “It can’t be easy to differentiate the time you spend with him like that.”

“We’ve gotten used to it. Basically, when we’re in a session together, we don’t discuss anything that happened when we’re hanging out as friends unless he brings it up first. And, of course, when we’re at the club together, we don’t talk about anything that was brought up in therapy. Not only would that be awkward, but it’s also vaguely illegal.”

“I see—”

“Except in this circumstance,” she quickly corrected herself. “I figured

it might make you feel a little more comfortable if you knew that I was privy to his little scheme.”

In truth, I did notice that I had relaxed slightly. Just as I had confided in Gabriella, Elijah had also come clean about the convoluted plan to his best friend. I didn’t blame him, but it also confused me.

“So, you—you approve of this?” I asked her.

She sighed loudly, glancing over her shoulder to confirm that the twins were still distracted by their mutual friends several yards away.

“As his friend, I know that Elijah would much rather use his wits and his wealth to get what he wants, especially if it means he can avoid the dating world,” Veronica explained.

I nodded slowly. “And as his therapist—?”

“As his therapist, it’s obviously not something I can ethically approve of, considering it involves lying to several people at once. However, from my point of view, his overall goal is harmless.”

“Because of his father, right? He said his father wouldn’t promote him to CEO if he didn’t show him that he could be in a committed relationship.”

Veronica pursed her lips. “Yes. Hamish Dean is a very strict, traditional man. Those who are close to him learn that the best way to deal with him is not to try to change him, but to *adjust* reality.”

“Interesting.”

“Either way, please tell me that Elijah is at least being a gentleman to you throughout all of this.”

I bit my lip. Memories of our heated moments flashed in the forefront of my mind. Kissing in public alleyways and making out on the countertops of unsold real estate weren't exactly the most classy of activities, but it wasn't as if I thought any less of Elijah because of it. After all, I was a willing participant.

"Of course," I said. "He's very polite. I think one of the reasons I agreed to everything in the first place was because I could tell how awkward it was for him to ask me."

Veronica laughed. "So, you felt bad for him? That's why you agreed to this whole charade?"

I cracked a smile. "No ... I mean, I guess I did want to help him once he pled his case, because it sounded unfair to me, too."

"What was it then? He said he offered you money—"

"It wasn't just the money," I interrupted. "I don't go around pretending to be someone's girlfriend simply because they offer me a lot of cash."

"No, I wasn't suggesting that," Veronica assured me, placing a hand on my arm and fixing me with a gentle, patient gaze. From that look alone, I felt inclined to trust her, though I was aware it was probably a technique she used on her clients whenever they became defensive.

I downed the rest of my Prosecco. Where had my brother and Elijah disappeared to? I could have really used that bottle of champagne Luke had promised to bring back.

"The money helped nudge me in the right direction," I admitted. "My little sister needs help paying for law school and my parents deserve to retire soon. With Luke overseas working for pennies and good karma, I'm really

the only one who can help. My career field is a tough place for young women, so it's been difficult."

"Real estate, right? It's full of male swine," scoffed Veronica.

I snorted, remembering Jared's temper tantrum on Monday morning.

"Yes, it is," I agreed. "Anyway, when Elijah first proposed the deal to me, I thought he was totally insane, or playing a prank on me, or something."

"That's reasonable to assume. What changed your mind?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I think I realized that he was offering me a chance I wouldn't get from anyone else, ever again. I'm not the type of person who likes to accept help, but it's actually been nice to have someone like him on my side. So far, at least."

Veronica smiled softly. "Elijah is a good man. We grew up together, so trust me when I say that he's always tried to be moral and dependable in everything he does."

"Somehow, I think I knew that about him from the very beginning."

Sure, one could argue that hatching a plan to fool your own father was hardly a sign of morality, but it was nuanced. Perhaps this was Elijah's last resort. He'd tried everything else.

"Well, no matter what, you can trust me to keep the secret," Veronica said. "Not just because I'm legally sworn to protect Elijah's confidentiality, but because you also seem like a good person, Lucy Astor."

"Likewise, Dr. Veronica Ridley."

"Oh, God. Please, just call me Ronnie," she giggled.

“Sure.”

It was a cute nickname, a little too adorable for the classically beautiful and elegant woman sitting beside me, but it suited her trustworthy aura.

I hadn't expected to earn a friend of my own that evening, but there was a real friendship blossoming between Ronnie and me. Despite all of my misgivings about our different upbringings, I felt relaxed around her. I didn't feel as though I had anything to prove. It was similar to how I felt around Elijah, but in a less intense and intimate way. Simply put, Ronnie was a safe person.

Just when I was about to suggest we try to hunt down Elijah and Luke, Ronnie spoke again.

“I hope you don't mind me saying this, but ... it doesn't seem as though it's all that difficult for you to act the part of his girlfriend.”

I blinked in surprise. It was a bold statement, a comment that I might have expected from Gabriella, but not someone I was just barely getting to know.

“That's good,” I replied with a shrug. “I guess I'm a better actress than I thought.”

She had a subtle smirk on her face. “It's very natural between the two of you.”

“Is it?”

“When you arrived and he kissed you, I almost forgot that the relationship was a ruse. The two of you have really strong chemistry.”

She wasn't saying anything that hadn't occurred to me before.

Obviously, I was well aware of the chemistry between Elijah and me, but it was all on a physical level. It wasn't anything more than that. How could it be? I barely knew him. Plus, after everything that had happened with Derek and Charlotte, I wasn't ready to consider having feelings like *that* again.

Did Ronnie also know that we'd kissed before? Had Elijah mentioned something in his last session with her about it? There was no way he had any real feelings for me ... right?

"I suppose," I answered. "Or, maybe we're both equally good at lying."

"Or, maybe the lie is easier because there's already a basic level of attraction and understanding between the two of you."

I frowned. "I guess we're fairly intellectually compatible—"

She quirked an eyebrow at me. We both knew that wasn't what she was implying. Only, I wasn't inclined to give her the satisfaction. Whatever sort of chemical compatibility existed between Elijah and me was not the point. We were doing each other a few favors and enjoying some salacious benefits on the side. I wasn't ready to acknowledge there might be potential for anything deeper than that.

In truth, I was still heartbroken.

Ronnie seemed to take the hint in my silence. "Sorry. I didn't mean to therapize you. It's a bad habit. I'll mind my business from this point forward, I promise."

"It's okay," I replied. "If I were a doctor of psychiatry, I would probably analyze everyone around me, too."

She smiled with relief. For some reason, she really wanted me to like



her.

At that point, the twins returned to the table with the aforementioned Daisy and Bradley in tow. Ronnie and I had no choice but to cut our conversation short, since no one else could be privy to the knowledge we shared.

Introductions were exchanged. Just as I expected, the recently married couple were filthy rich and also utterly uninterested in me because it was immediately evident that I came from a different tax bracket.

I was perfectly okay with that. I settled back into the booth and contemplated the risk of losing myself in the crowd downstairs versus the benefit of having Elijah and my brother with me again. Both of them had really abandoned me, just like that. I wasn't angry, but I was a little annoyed. Still, they were friends and it had been a long time since they'd seen each other, so I suppose it was kinder to simply let them bond. That was what a good, patient girlfriend would do, right?

Hadn't I always been a good girlfriend? Hadn't I given Derek all the patience and kindness in the world? I'd never complained when he was out late with the guys or when he worked long hours in favor of date night. I'd never pestered him about anything, even when it really bothered me.

Then again, maybe that was the issue all along. Maybe my conflict avoidance was the reason why Derek felt unfilled enough in our relationship to cheat on me. Perhaps he wanted me to fight with him a little bit. Maybe he wanted some resistance. Did Charlotte argue with him? Did she complain about the annoying things he did?

I spiraled deep into my own thoughts while everyone else at the table debated the merits of one luxurious vacation spot versus another—a

conversation I wouldn't have been able to participate in if I tried. I nodded and smiled when necessary, but I wasn't really listening.

I couldn't believe I was blaming myself for what had happened between Derek and me. He had cheated on me because he was a terrible person. If he really hated being my boyfriend that much, he should have broken up with me before he started his affair with Charlotte.

Maybe I needed a therapist, too. I wasn't sure I could afford Ronnie's undoubtedly premium price tag, but talking to a professional about the current state of my life would probably help me come to terms with it more easily. Except, the thought of opening up to a complete stranger like that was so terrifying, I almost preferred to keep everything bottled up for the rest of my life.

The more I thought about it, I was impressed that Elijah was in therapy. It showed that he was capable of being vulnerable. It also suggested that he was more self-aware than the average man. He understood the importance of accountability and self-reflection. In truth, it was the bare minimum, but still incredibly rare among most people.

As I watched Ronnie melt into the elite group as effortlessly as she related to me, I found myself observing the infinitesimal ways in which she offered kindness to those around her. She listened closely. She didn't make rude jokes. She didn't laugh at others' expense. Those were all things Charlotte had failed at, though Gabriella had to be the one to point it out to me after the fact.

Ronnie was a good friend to Elijah, which meant she also certainly made a very good therapist for him.

Yet, I couldn't help wondering what could have possibly happened in

Elijah's past to make him seek out a therapist. Although it was true that even the happiest person in the world could benefit from therapy, most only bothered with it when their mental health would otherwise suffer.

Had Elijah suffered in the past? Is that why he avoided romance? Had someone cheated on him, too?

Or maybe it was darker than that. Ronnie claimed that he was a good person, but that didn't mean he was without flaws. It didn't mean he hadn't made mistakes before. All of a sudden, it occurred to me that there might be an even more complicated explanation for why Elijah didn't seek serious relationships with women ... something he intended to keep hidden from me.

What kind of dark past was he covering up? Should I be worried about it?

I felt anxious and socially awkward all over again. Searching for something to distract myself, I fetched my phone from my purse and resolved to appear thoroughly absorbed in my work emails until Elijah came to my rescue.

Unfortunately, the first thing I saw when I looked at the screen was an unread message from Gabriella proving that she knew me a little too well.

*If you're about to use your phone as your social crutch, don't you dare! You're a brilliant woman, Lucy. Just be yourself,* she wrote.

I sighed quietly. She'd sent it approximately twenty minutes ago, knowing I would see it at some point during the night. I typed a single heart emoticon in response to let her know that I appreciated the small confidence boost and tucked my phone back into my purse.

Tuning back into the conversation, I resolved to find a way to

participate. At the very least, I didn't want Elijah's friends to think his girlfriend was a dud. Or worse, a snob who felt she was above whatever discussion they were having.

However, as soon as I pondered how to pretend I knew anything about ski resorts, my prayers were answered.

"Don't worry, everyone! The life of the party has returned! Oh, and Elijah is here, too," announced Luke, grinning with a drunken smile as Elijah threw his arm around his shoulders and laughed at the good-natured quip.

Both of them looked as though they had consumed a considerable amount of alcohol since they'd left the VIP section. Once again, I was shocked by the revelation that my older brother was friends with Elijah Dean. How had he fit into this circle for all these years? Either he was a better social chameleon than I thought, or he simply didn't mind that he had so little in common with these people.

"Hi, beautiful," Elijah greeted me, clumsily dropping onto the seat beside me and pressing a kiss to my cheek before turning to grin at the rest of the table. "I hope everyone was *very* nice to my girlfriend in my absence."

I rolled my eyes, but it was hard not to be amused by drunken Elijah. More than that, his presence had a profound effect on everyone else. Suddenly, it seemed as if he was the most important thing in the world, as if he were the sun and they were the planets rotating around him. The shallow conversation died as everyone turned their attention onto him.

He was like a king holding court and I was his queen.

The problem was, I'd never been all that interested in royalty.

## Chapter Eleven: *Dean*

I'd forgotten how persuasive Luke Astor could be, especially when it came to drinking. By the time I'd gone through several rounds of shots with him and our old classmate Zach, I was light in the head and heavy on my feet.

Still, I wasn't so far gone that I missed the relief in Lucy's eyes when she saw me returning to the table upstairs. It was as if I were the answer to her prayers. I'd be lying to myself if that didn't boost my ego in a way I'd never quite experienced before.

It also turned me on.

"It's boring up here!" Luke exclaimed. "We should go dance!"

The twins cackled at him.

"You Astor siblings are total opposites," Carly remarked snidely.

It was a double-edged insult, implying that she thought Luke was *too* extroverted and Lucy was *too* introverted. People like her were never satisfied, and they used that to make everyone around them insecure.

Of course, the comment slid right off of Luke. He all but ignored Carly, bouncing impatiently behind my chair. From the expression on Lucy's face, I could tell that she knew what Carly was doing and didn't like it, but she didn't snap back with a retort of her own.

"Come on, Ronnie," Luke whined, reaching out to take Veronica's hand across the table. "Don't you want to dance? The air is so stuffy up here."

Both Lucy and I shot a glance at him. Had he intended to imply that the company itself was stuffy or was he merely making a drunken complaint? It was hard to tell with Luke. During his time at Harvard and his years in the finance sector afterward, he'd become really good at playing nice with the wealthy.

Veronica giggled and fanned herself with her hand. "You know what, Luke? You're right. I can barely breathe! A crowded dance floor sounds like the perfect solution."

I snickered as Veronica leaped up from the table. She slipped her hand into Luke's palm and ran off with him toward the stairs. Veronica didn't often abandon me when we were out, so I figured this little maneuver of hers came with a hidden message.

She wanted me to come with her, perhaps to take Lucy out of this scrutinizing situation.

"What do you say?" I asked Lucy. "Shall we dance?"

"I think I need to be at least half as drunk as you in order for that to happen," she replied, eyes twinkling with amusement.

"Totally understandable," I answered with a wink. "Let's go down to the bar."

"Why don't we just order a couple more bottles for the table?" Bradley Haig cut in, his wife sitting pretty and brainless by his side like always. "There's no need to fuss around with the crowd and the bar staff down there when we can just have someone bring it to us."

I'd gone to prep school with Bradley. I'd never been particularly fond of him, but he was a decent connection to keep because his father ran one of

the biggest banks in New York. Unfortunately, that was the main reason why I maintained an acquaintance with most people in this city—they were convenient people to know.

“That’s true, but it’s much more fun to order shots when you have to beg and plead for attention in the process, no?”

Bradley furrowed his brow at me as if he couldn’t comprehend what I was saying. Before anyone else could protest, I grabbed Lucy’s hand and gently pulled her away from the table. I tugged her close to my side and pressed my lips to her ear so that she could hear me over the noise of the club.

“Sorry about that,” I murmured to her as I steered us toward the velvet rope and its stoic guardian. “I didn’t mean to leave you alone for so long, but Luke—”

“It’s okay,” she cut me off, smiling up at me. “I get it. My brother is a difficult person to wrangle.”

“The twins weren’t too terrible, were they?” I asked.

Lucy shook her head. “I mostly talked with Ronnie.”

“Ronnie? So she convinced you to play along with her nickname?”

“Is that not what people call her?”

“She’s been trying to get people to call her that for years,” I explained. “I do it mostly just to tease her. God knows her mother would lose her mind if she knew her daughter was going by anything other than Veronica.”

She snorted. “That’s strange to me. Parents shouldn’t mind when their child chooses a nickname for themselves. They are their own person, you

know?”

“I agree. Although, I don’t think there are any good nicknames for my name.”

“Maybe I can think of one for you,” Lucy chuckled.

I wrapped an arm around her waist as we descended into the crowded main floor together. The music was pounding loudly, thrumming deep into my bones. It replaced my heartbeat, booming with a steady rhythm that intoxicated me even more than the alcohol. Working in tandem with the unbearably sexy woman beside me, the atmosphere of the space left me feeling utterly mesmerized.

Veronica and Luke were waiting for us at the bar, waving to get our attention. I took Lucy’s hand, partly because I was playing the role of her boyfriend, but also because I didn’t want to lose her in the writhing mass of people. She intertwined her fingers with mine without question. Together, we shouldered our way past the parade of faces.

Though he’d barely had much of a head start, Luke had already managed to convince the bar tender to pour an entire tray of tequila shots for us. Veronica handed one to Lucy with a grimace.

“Come on, girl,” she sighed. “We have some catching up to do.”

Lucy wrinkled her nose at her brother after giving the shot of alcohol a curious sniff. “Seriously? You know I’m not a fan of tequila.”

“Too bad! I go back to Africa in a week and you won’t see me until Christmas, so I’m making the rules tonight!” he responded, sticking his tongue out at her. Lucy rolled her eyes.



I imagined them bickering like this as children and smiled. I would worry about the complications of pretending to date my friend's little sister tomorrow. For now, I wanted to enjoy both of their company.

“Fine,” snapped Lucy.

While she and Veronica downed their first tequila shots in tandem, Luke and I applauded for them. I expected Lucy to cringe, since she'd just complained that she didn't approve of the alcohol choice, but she ended up taking it like a champ. For some reason, that small reminder of Lucy's unwavering determination turned me on even more.

Or, maybe I was more drunk than I thought.

“Another one! Another one!” Luke and I chanted together.

The girls obliged, downing two more shots of tequila each before Luke allowed us to join them in the communal drinking. A few minutes later, the tray was empty and the four of us were adequately inebriated. Veronica shot a wink at me, then waggled her eyebrows at Lucy, a gesture I couldn't quite determine the meaning of. What had she and Lucy talked about when I wasn't at the table? Would she come armed with special information to our next therapy session? I suppose I'd have to wait and see.

Luke made a dramatic bowing motion and offered his hand to Veronica.

“My queen,” he said, a theatrical accent in his voice. “Shall we dance?”

Veronica burst out laughing as Lucy openly cringed at her brother, then slipped her hand into Luke's waiting palm. Without so much as a backward glance, they flounced off toward the main area of the dance floor together, leaving Lucy and me standing at the bar.

“They aren’t—?” Lucy trailed off, nodding her head in the direction of where they disappeared. I understood what she was implying. She wanted to know if Veronica and her brother were an item.

“No, not at all,” I chuckled. “At least, I don’t think so. Last I knew, Veronica was in a casual relationship with a pilot, or something like that. She’s the faithful type. Luke flirts merely for the thrill of it, so I don’t think there’s anything going on between them.”

Lucy nodded thoughtfully. We drifted away from the bar, hovering at the edge of the room where it was slightly less crowded and the music wasn’t quite as loud.

“Isn’t it weird to be that close with your therapist?” she asked all of a sudden. “I mean, doesn’t it feel strange to know as much about her personal life as she does about yours?”

So, that’s what they’d discussed. Veronica must have told Lucy right away that she knew the truth about our relationship and provided the fact that I was one of her patients as an excuse.

“It’s actually kind of nice,” I replied. “I know it’s not for everyone, but the dynamic works for me.”

“Fair enough.”

There was no judgment in Lucy’s gaze, no snark in her tone. She hadn’t asked the question to imply that she thought it was strange, but because she was genuinely curious. Like her brother, she was pure of heart.

“Now you owe me an answer,” I told her, leaning in as the song changed to something with an even louder rhythm.

“To what?”

“The same question as before. Who was ‘the last one’ your brother was referring to?”

Lucy frowned. Part of me regretted asking. I didn’t know why I was so invested in that small piece of information. Perhaps it was just that I had realized I didn’t know much about her at all.

“It’s a long story,” she muttered, avoiding my eyes.

“Is it?” I pressed.

After a few seconds, Lucy let out a sharp exhale. “Fine. His name was Derek.”

“What happened with him?”

“We dated for a few years. I thought he was the one. We lived together and I thought he might propose soon. But then, he cheated on me with one of my friends. I caught them together at my birthday party. Now she’s pregnant.”

*Damn.* I didn’t know what to say. It was no wonder she wasn’t interested in dating the traditional way—the real way. She’d not only been betrayed by her significant other, but by a close friend, too.

“Wow. I’m so sorry Lucy. How long ago—?”

“My birthday was two months ago.”

Two months ago. The *last one* was a relatively recent fixture in her life. I had no idea Lucy was walking around with a broken heart. She carried herself with so much confidence and brightness, it was hard to imagine any

kind of dark cloud hanging over her head.

At that moment, however, there was a trickle of sadness creeping into her expression, the ghost of regret and anger weighing heavily on her shoulders.

“Well, you know what I think?” I asked.

“What?”

“I think Derek is a stupid name. I also think a man like that doesn’t deserve a woman as incredible as you. Do you want me to pay someone to hit him with a bus?”

She snorted. “People can’t actually do that, can they?”

“What? Hire hitmen? I’ve never personally done it, but I’m sure I could find a guy on Craigslist.”

With another giggle, I watched with relief as the melancholy drifted away from her like wisps of smoke. It was probably just the alcohol, but I suddenly felt as though I’d do anything to make sure she was never heartbroken again.

“You’re only saying that because you’re drunk,” she replied with a smirk.

I shook my head. “I’m not drunk. I am pleasantly intoxicated.”

“Right.”

“Speaking of, we should probably join Luke and Veronica.”

Lucy wrinkled her nose. “Isn’t it kind of awkward to party with my big brother and my fake boyfriend who happens to be his friend?”

I could tell she wanted to join the dancing crowd, but something was holding her back. It was a gentle fear, perhaps leftover trauma from the night she walked in on her ex-boyfriend cheating on her. It seemed as though, if Lucy allowed herself to let loose and be free, something bad might happen again.

“Oh, grow up,” I laughed. “Far more awkward situations have happened.”

“I don’t know, Elijah. What if—”

“Come on, Lucille Jean Astor,” I interrupted, taking her hand and pulling her into the center of the club.

She gasped in mock horror, barely putting up a fight. “Luke told you my middle name, didn’t he?”

I grinned. “Only because I asked. I like it. It’s cute.”

“But, now you have to tell me yours!” she shouted. We’d reached a spot on the dance floor where yelling was the only way to be heard.

With a wink, I tugged her close to my body and started moving to the beat of the music. I wasn’t much of a dancer, but I also wasn’t the type of man who was afraid to move his hips a little bit. Lucy rested her hands on my shoulders, but she didn’t start dancing. Instead she pouted up at me. She was stubborn, and it was clear that she wasn’t going to dance until I gave up my middle name.

How was it possible that every single thing she did was so adorable?

I brushed her hair off her shoulder and tilted my head close to her cheek, pressing my lips against her ear.

“It’s Conrad,” I whispered. “Elijah Conrad Dean.”

Being this close to her—smelling her perfume, feeling the curve of her waist under my touch, hearing the way her breath hitched when I told her my name—was more intoxicating than the alcohol.

She smiled, eyes twinkling as the tequila finally started to make its way through her bloodstream.

“I like it,” she said. “Elijah Conrad Dean. It’s very dignified.”

I rolled my eyes playfully and pulled her closer, which was easy because the crowd didn’t allow for much space between us.

“Let’s not talk about dignity right now,” I suggested.

Lucy bit her lip, her gaze darkening the way it had when we were alone together in the apartment that morning. It lasted for half a second before she turned away to glance nervously over her shoulder. When it was clear that neither Luke nor Veronica were in sight, lost somewhere else in the dancing mass of strangers, she focused back on me.

And then, we danced. The music was a mixture of familiar and unfamiliar, but it sank deep into our bones and guided our bodies in delicious synchrony. Lucy clung to me tightly, lips parted and temples damp with sweat. It was hot in the club, but I didn’t care. I held on to her waist tightly. When I dared to lower my hands a few inches further, she pressed herself even closer. The silk dress she wore was thin. I could feel her hip bones digging into me, the delicate fabric of what was unmistakably a lace thong underneath the dress, and the smooth curves of a body that I desperately wanted to savor inch by inch.

Even though I was vaguely aware of the other people around us—the

occasional stray elbow or chorus of laughter—I couldn't help feeling as though Lucy and I were alone. No one else mattered. We could have been in the middle of a hurricane and I wouldn't have noticed.

She must have felt the same way because, for the first time, she made the first move. As she rolled her hips against me, she leaned in and kissed me deeply. It was excruciating to resist the urge to rip off her dress right then and there. We'd left things with unfinished business earlier and now it was impossible to resist her.

When we parted for air, she gasped against my lips.

“Take me—take me somewhere private,” she breathed. “I want you.”

I didn't bother stopping to remind myself that this relationship was fake. We'd already established that we didn't mind indulging the physical chemistry between us. All I knew was that I didn't have the willpower to ignore her command.

“Say no more,” I replied, grabbing her hands and immediately pulling her out of the swarm. There were very ultra-exclusive VIP lounges on the first floor, intimate spaces for entertaining just a handful of chosen friends. At the very least, it was classier than bringing her to a bathroom stall.

As I steered us toward blissful privacy, I scanned the room. I found Luke and Veronica almost instantly, both of them standing at the DJ booth and undoubtedly trying to convince the guy to play a song he had no intention of adding to the mix that night. Neither one of them noticed as we slipped away from the dance floor, which was probably for the best.

I glanced upstairs, knowing that the twins would be up there all night. They'd always believed they were too good to leave the VIP section. God

forbid they be seen fraternizing with the regular masses.

Suddenly, I spotted someone whom I wasn't happy to recognize: Sean Lloyd. He was leaning against the railing on the second floor, observing the rest of the club alongside Bradley.

*Fuck*, I thought to myself. Leave it to that slimy Midwestern transplant to buddy up to Bradley Haig as soon as possible. How had he even gotten up there? I was controlling the list of VIPs that night. Perhaps the security guard thought that a friend of Bradley's was a friend of mine, but that was certainly not the case.

I didn't trust Sean. It wasn't just that he was an annoying source of competition at work, but also because I simply didn't like the way he did business. His cutthroat strategies and unnerving number of loyal minions in a city that was supposed to be new territory for him suggested that he cared little for morality and politeness. Sean Lloyd took what he wanted by whatever means necessary.

For months, I'd been watching him carefully from afar, knowing that his main goal was to dominate Dean Properties. This was as close as he'd gotten to infiltrating my circle so far.

Yet, that wasn't why I felt a sudden urge to punch someone in the face.

At first, I thought Sean was looking at me. However, the sudden illumination of a roving spotlight determined that he was actually eyeing Lucy, who had her head down and was focused on shouldering her way through the busy club. How he'd managed to locate either one of us from his vantage point was beyond me, but I didn't like the way he fixated on the woman at my side with little regard for the fact that I was obviously witnessing him do so. Where was his decorum? His shame? Clearly, Lucy



was taken.

Bradley was talking his ear off, oblivious to the silent standoff that was occurring across the club. To send a clearer message, I let go of Lucy's hand so that I could wrap my arm around her shoulders. She thought nothing of it, still blithely unaware that a professional colleague was observing her like a predator stalking his prey.

For that alone, I wanted to go up there and shove him over the edge of the balcony. It wasn't that I felt possessive over Lucy. I just hated the greedy look on his face. He wanted her. She was his key to winning the bid for the old factory in Harlem. Unfortunately for him, that train had already left the station. Lucy and I had a solid agreement.

So, instead of interrupting the moment with Lucy to threaten Sean with blatant violence, I locked eyes with him and smirked as I pulled her away from his sight and into the shadows of the most exclusive zone in the club.

I hope he got the message. He could try as hard as he wanted, but some parts of this city would always be untouchable to him.

## Chapter Twelve: *Astor*

I was drunk.

Not drunk enough to be totally incapable of rational thought, but just intoxicated enough to release the bulk of my inhibitions.

The last time I'd had this much to drink was on the night of my birthday party months ago, but I refused to think about that for longer than a second. I didn't want to relive all of that.

In fact, I wanted only one thing. Or rather, one person.

As soon as I told Elijah I wanted to be alone with him, he obliged quickly. Everything was a blur. For a moment, I thought we were leaving the club altogether, but the dim hallway he steered me down turned out to be an even more exclusive part of the club than the VIP section upstairs. I hadn't even noticed it before.

It all happened so fast. One minute, Elijah was tipping a guard outside one of the rooms and the next minute, I was lying underneath him on a satin chaise and he was kissing my neck. The logical part of my brain that insisted I be aware of my surroundings at all times took in the lush red rug on the floor and the surprisingly tasteful furnishings. There was a low table next to the chaise and a scattering of other seats. The lights were low, a soft sienna glow that reflected off of the fleur-de-lis wallpaper. It was like being in a cozy living room rather than an undeniably public place, which certainly helped calm the incurably anxious voice inside my head.

The music, which had been deafening on the dance floor, turned into a muted rumble as soon as Elijah kicked the door closed behind us. My mind

buzzed from the alcohol and the heat and feeling of his hands on my skin.

He peppered kisses along my collarbone and I moaned softly, tangling my fingers in his hair as he moved lower. He kissed the curve of my breast that peaked over the low neckline, his palm massaging the soft flesh through the fabric.

It wasn't enough.

I was too breathless to form words, so I communicated my desires by reaching down between us and undoing his belt. I wanted to finish what we'd started that morning. I didn't care that this probably wasn't the best way to have sex for the first time since Derek and I broke up. I didn't care that my brother was somewhere out there in the club. I didn't care that it would blur a dozen lines between us if we took this step. All I knew was that I wanted him and that, if I didn't have him, I was pretty sure I was going to explode.

Elijah groaned low in the back of his throat when I unbuttoned his trousers and slipped my hand inside. It wasn't the first time I'd felt him aroused, but it struck me like a bolt of lightning when I realized how big he was.

"Lucy," he whispered, voice strained with hunger. "Are you sure ... here?"

"Yes," I sighed, wriggling so that the hem of my dress slipped up past my hips.

"Right now?"

"Right now," I confirmed. "Right here."

"I don't want you to think I don't respect you—"

“Shut up,” I laughed. “My hand is down your pants and you’re worried about being polite?”

“Good point.”

He shifted, nudging my thighs open a little wider. The pads of his fingertips drew small circles over the fabric of my underwear. Just as I was about to whimper for more, he pressed his lips to mine. Every sound I made after that was muffled by the kiss. When he pushed the flimsy thong aside, I bit down lightly on his lower lip and elicited a growl from him.

“Elijah—protection,” I panted. “I have an IUD.”

“And I have a condom in my wallet,” he replied.

“That’s tacky,” I giggled.

“I know,” he chuckled.

Impatiently, I pushed his hand aside and tugged down the waistband of his pants. His eyebrows raised at me in surprise.

“What?” I asked.

“You don’t waste time, do you?”

“Well, we don’t want to be gone for too long.”

“At least let me—”

“I don’t need—”

“But, I want to taste you,” he insisted, offering me a stern look through dark eyelashes.

Whatever protest I had prepared died on my tongue when I saw the

look of raw desire in his eyes. All I could manage was a single nod of my head. With a satisfied smirk, Elijah lowered himself to the rug on his knees. He grabbed my ankles and pulled me to the end of the chaise, draping my legs over his shoulders and lowering his head between my thighs.

After that, it was all I could do keep myself from completely falling apart at his touch. I clapped a hand over my mouth to quiet my moans. My eyelids fluttered shut in ecstasy. I'd forgotten how incredible this could feel. It had been so long. Only—Derek had never been this good at it. Elijah was in a league of his own.

Shimmering sparks burst to life behind my eyelids when I reached my climax. There was a brief moment of clarity that immediately followed when I realized what I was doing and *where* I was doing it—a place where such things had definitely been done before—but then I met Elijah's gaze and it was as if all of my thoughts were instantly turned into nothing more than radio static.

He got to his feet and lifted me off the chaise, readjusting our positions so that he was lying down beneath me and I straddled his lap. Our clothes remained on, merely pushed aside where it needed to be. Somehow, that made everything even more erotic.

He guided my hips as I sank down on top of him, tossing my head back and enjoying the sensation of the pleasure-pain that came with adjusting to his size.

“You're so beautiful,” he murmured. “So sexy.”

It was hard not to smile at the way he responded to my body. Bracing myself with a hand on the silky pillows piled under his head and shoulders, I moved in a rapid rhythm that he mirrored effortlessly.

Elijah was ... incredible. I forgot where I was, relishing the two of us coming together in the most gorgeously human way. And yet, it wasn't romantic. It wasn't soft or tender or sweet. There was no room for such formalities. We both knew what we wanted from each other, and it was that candor which heightened the whole experience.

There were no secrets between us. We weren't having sex in a private room in the back of a club because we *cared* about each other. We were doing it because there was an unbearable chemistry between us that begged to be acknowledged. It was the sort of thing I'd never experienced before. Any time I'd been physically intimate with someone, it had always been as a result of us being in a committed relationship with each other.

Something about it made me feel more free than I ever thought possible.

And when we reached the height of ecstasy together, we tumbled over the edge as one. After, I waited for the awkwardness to settle over the scene, but it didn't. Instead, I gazed down at him and we laughed together.

"This isn't how I expected tonight to go," he chuckled as I climbed off of him and readjusted my clothing.

"Are you sure?" I replied with a smirk. "I mean, you did invite me here while we were in the middle of making out."

"Well, maybe I dared to fantasize this was a possibility, but I didn't think you'd be on the same page."

"Why? Did you think I had more class than this?" I joked.

Elijah snorted, running his hands through his hair as he sat up on the chaise.

“This doesn’t tarnish my opinion of you in the slightest, Lucy. If anything, this has revealed a side of you that makes me feel even more fond.”

His words caught me off guard. Sure, we’d shared moments of intimacy multiple times, but the thought of him being *fond* of me took me by surprise.

Yet, with the alcohol flowing freely through my veins, I was able to shake off the comment easily. I decided not to respond. Using the compact mirror in my purse, I fixed my lipstick and the rest of my makeup that had gotten smudged by our private activities, then checked to confirm that Elijah had also put himself back together again.

“We should get back out there,” I said. “My brother—”

“Right,” he replied, wincing slightly. “Your brother.”

Nothing else needed to be said. There was a chance Luke hadn’t even noticed our absence yet, but if we were gone for too long, it would be obvious what we were up to. I couldn’t handle the embarrassment of that, so I led the way out of the private room.

When we emerged from the secret hallway, I scanned the club for any sign of Luke. I found him easily, not because he was nearby, but because he was clinging on to Ronnie for support on the stairway to the VIP section. They were both noticeably wobbly on their feet, so much that the guard was glaring at them with pursed lips.

“God, he’s a mess,” I sighed, grabbing Elijah’s hand and pulling him across the crowded space. “Come on.”

“He’s making up for months of sobriety in one night, I guess,” laughed Elijah. “You can’t really blame him.”

That was a good point. I was sure there were plenty of clubs and bars in Ghana where Luke spent time with his colleagues, but there probably wasn't much time for drinking when he was busy changing lives for the better. If he was going to indulge in debauchery anywhere, New York City was the ideal place.

Upon seeing us approach the foot of the stairs, Luke burst into a grin and threw up his arms in celebration.

"Lucy-Loo to the rescue!" he exclaimed, stumbling down a couple of steps. Ronnie's unexpectedly strong arms around his waist were the only thing preventing him from diving downward headfirst. "Hey, that rhymes!"

I let go of Elijah and rushed up to meet him.

"Since when are you so bad at handling your liquor, Luke?" I grumbled.

"I was just about to call him a cab, but he can't remember the name of the hotel where he's staying," Ronnie explained, visibly amused at Luke's sloppiness.

Elijah caught up at that moment. "I've got him. This isn't the first time I've had to carry him out of a club."

"Elijah! My best friend! My brother!" Luke exclaimed, throwing his arm around Elijah's shoulders when he took hold of my brother's waist to guide him down the stairs. I glanced back and noticed that the guard was satisfied to see someone else was taking care of the situation before he had to step in.

While we maneuvered him toward the exit, I fished his wallet out of his back pocket and located the keycard to his hotel room, glad that he had texted



me the name of the hotel before his plane took off from Africa. This was the first time I'd ever had to deal with my brother while he was drunk, but it could have been worse.

"Work with me, Luke," complained Elijah, nearly tripping to keep Luke from careening into a group of blithely unaware bystanders. "At least try to put one foot in front of the other, yeah?"

Luke merely giggled, sounding more like a child than a grown man in his thirties. It caused me to roll my eyes, but Ronnie ended up giggling along with him. I wondered if she'd had more to drink after we'd taken those shots and was doing a better job of hiding it than my brother was.

"Such a good friend," Luke crooned, smiling brightly at Elijah. "You're like a brother to me, man."

"Thanks, buddy," snickered Elijah. "Likewise."

"Wait! Oh, my God, you're dating my sister! That means you basically *are* my brother!"

I tried not to outwardly cringe. Best case scenario, Luke wouldn't remember much of the evening and I'd be able to get away with this lie without facing too many repercussions.

At last, our clumsy quartet burst outside, where the line was still curving around the block despite the fact that it was well past midnight at that point.

"I'll take him back to his hotel," Elijah offered while Ronnie went to the curb and hailed a cab.

"No, it's okay," I protested. "I'll do it. I'm his sister, so I guess he's my

responsibility tonight.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded. It had been an eventful evening, and although the last hour or so had been blissful, I wasn't interested in going back upstairs to join the other VIPs again. In truth, Luke's messiness gave me an excuse to dismiss myself at an ideal time.

“Yeah, I'm sure,” I replied as a yellow taxi stopped a few feet away. “I had a really nice time tonight. I'll see you soon.”

“Right. See you soon.”

Elijah wasn't able to say much more than that as he and Ronnie wrestled Luke into the back of the cab. He was mumbling something about how he wasn't *that* drunk and didn't need to be sent home yet, but we all ignored him.

There was a brief pause, a beat of uncertainty, just before I ducked into the taxi right after Luke. I stood before Elijah, not sure how to say goodbye to him. Ronnie knew we weren't truly dating and Luke wasn't paying attention, so there was no need to kiss him goodnight the way a true girlfriend would. Still, after the moment we'd just shared, it felt strange to part ways with nothing more than a few words.

Despite that, all I managed was an awkward wave before I turned away from him and lowered myself onto the seat. With a polite smile and an expression that was otherwise impossible to read, Elijah shut the door and tapped the top of the cab.

The driver narrowed his eyes at Luke in the rearview.

“If he throws up, there’s a fifty-dollar fine—”

“Then step on the gas and get us to where we need to go before that happens,” I snapped.

With pursed lips, the driver did as he was told and pulled into traffic with a jerk of the steering wheel.

Beside me, Luke giggled again. “You really have become a proper New Yorker, Lucy-Loo.”

“It’s only out of necessity,” I replied. “This city will eat you alive if you give it the opportunity.”

My older brother offered me a lopsided grin and dropped his head against the back of the seat. It didn’t seem like he was on the verge of throwing up, but I knew that such things often came without warning when people were drunk.

“Sorry,” Luke said after a moment as the taxi made its way up the avenue.

“For what?”

“I didn’t mean to be such a mess tonight.”

“It’s okay,” I told him. I meant it. “Clearly, you had a lot of steam to blow off. It’s probably a good thing you came here first before going to see Mom and Dad.”

“True,” he chuckled.

Luke fell quiet. I reached past him to roll down the window a couple of inches in hopes that the fresh night air would sober him up. Unfortunately,

the summer heat was persistent this year and the nights were barely a few degrees cooler than the days.

To everyone's relief, we made it to the hotel without Luke vomiting in the back of the cab. The drive seemed to calm him down from his mischievous state, lulling him into a dreamy peacefulness as I helped him across the lobby and into the elevator. The room number was written on the little envelope that the keycard was slipped into, so it wasn't hard to navigate Luke to his room.

Once inside the decently large but modestly decorated suite—after all, Luke was on a Peace Corps budget nowadays—I deposited him on the small sofa and fished two bottles of water out of the mini fridge.

“Drink,” I commanded him, shoving one of the bottles into his hand after uncapping it with my slightly more sober hands.

He was lying on his stomach, sprawled across the cushions with his legs hanging off the edge. Accepting the water, he sipped it a couple of times, then allowed his head to drop unceremoniously onto the sofa.

“Room is spinning,” he murmured.

“Don't you at least want to get in the bed?” I asked.

He groaned. “Can't move. Body too heavy.”

With a sigh, I left him where he was and fetched the empty ice bucket from the tiny coffee station in the corner. It was the closest thing to a bucket I could find. Hopefully, it wouldn't be necessary. I set it on the floor close to Luke's face as he closed his eyes.

Presuming he was on the verge of passing out, I checked the time. It

was one-thirty in the morning. Waking up for work was going to be hell, but it was too late to regret any of my decisions. Weighing my options in the quiet suite, I decided it was best to claim the unused bed for the night instead of bothering to take a cab back to Gabriella's place on the other side of the city at that hour.

My brother's suitcase was left sitting open on the floor, so I helped myself to one of his old t-shirts, stepping into the bathroom to change out of my party dress. When I returned to the main room and pulled back the duvet to climb into bed, Luke stirred on the couch nearby.

"Lucy," he murmured.

"Get some sleep, Luke," I whispered. "You're a monster when you're hungover and I don't want to deal with that."

He cracked open his eyes and pouted at me through the dim light.

"I just wanted to say ... I meant it before. I'm glad you're with Elijah. He's a good guy. He won't treat you like that other guy."

"Okay, Luke," I sighed. "Good to know."

They were the slurred words of a drunk man, but I also couldn't help feeling comforted by the fact that Luke approved of Elijah. For all his flaws, Luke's judgment had never failed. Not that it mattered what my brother thought of him. My so-called relationship with Elijah was fake. But, still.

"You know his mom died, right?" Luke asked all of a sudden.

I froze where I was sitting on the edge of the bed. Luke was staring at me with wide, clear eyes that seemed somewhat sober, though he remained crumpled on the sofa like a doll with his limbs bent out of place.

“What?”

I knew only the bare minimum about Elijah’s personal life. I was aware that he had a difficult but well-intentioned father and I hadn’t missed his mention of a stepmother during our initial meeting. Yet, I assumed that it meant his parents were merely divorced. I’d done a fairly thorough internet search on him as well, and hadn’t turned up any information about a deceased mother.

“Yeah,” Luke muttered. “I’m not surprised you don’t already know. He doesn’t talk about it.”

“What happened?”

“Cancer. He was in high school, I think.”

“Why—?” I didn’t know what my true question was. Why didn’t Elijah talk about his mother? Why was Luke mentioning it now? Whatever I had intended to ask, it didn’t matter, because seconds later, the sound of a gentle snore drifted across the room. Luke had lost the battle against his alcohol-soaked brain and fallen asleep, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

In the silence that followed, sleep didn’t come as easily to me. The death of Elijah’s mother was such a random thing for Luke to mention, but if it was on the forefront of his mind when he was thinking about Elijah and me together, it had to be important. Drunk words revealed sober thoughts, after all.

Did losing his mother have anything to do with his distaste for romantic relationships? Was he afraid of losing another important person and therefore resisted being truly vulnerable to others?

With a quiet scoff, I rolled over and pulled the blankets over my head.

Elijah's trauma was none of my business. I wasn't really his girlfriend. It wasn't my problem to spend the early hours of the morning fretting over his hardships.

Then why did my heart ache so deeply for him?

## Chapter Thirteen: *Dean*

After I'd put both Lucy and Luke into the back of the cab, Veronica and I returned to the second floor of the club together. I'd been tempted to grab the next taxi back to my place as soon as Lucy and her brother were gone, but I had one more thing I needed to take care of.

Sean Lloyd was still up there when I crossed the rope barrier into the VIP section. He was leaning against the railing, his back to the rest of the club, and laughing along to whatever Bradley was saying. Veronica wandered off back toward the table, muttering something about not being in the mood for displays of *machismo*.

Bradley, always the type of guy to be aware of brown-nosing opportunities at every moment, noticed me right away and waved for me to come over.

"Elijah! Please tell me you've met my buddy Sean Lloyd before," he chortled.

*My buddy?* Who did this Sean Lloyd think he was? Bradley Haig was a Manhattan-born blue blood—an elitist piece of shit at the best of times. A new-money entrepreneur from the Midwest was not the type of person he would bother befriending. Despite that, it seemed as if he and Sean were already quite familiar with one another.

What was Sean's secret? He'd been in New York for less than a year and he'd managed to locate the most important targets in the city as though he had a broad network of spies. Except, it was just the real estate business. There was no way his methods would be *that* intense.



Then again, given the rumors I'd heard about him ...

I eased into my trademark networking smile and sauntered up to the two men as though I was totally unbothered.

"We haven't met formally, but we've crossed paths a few times," I replied, holding out my hand for Sean to shake.

My business opponent, who I already disliked for the way I caught him looking at Lucy, offered me a greasy grin and shook my hand.

"It's an honor to meet you, Elijah Dean," he said. "The empire your grandfather built is legendary."

Rather than it coming across as a compliment, the remark sounded snide and oddly threatening in his pompous tone of voice. How could other people stand to be around him? He might have been good-looking, but Sean Lloyd's entire aura reeked of poisonous duplicity. It gave me the creeps.

"Thank you," I responded.

"I was just telling Sean about the old days at St. Charles," Bradley cut in.

He was talking about our high school years at the club? That was strange. I wondered if it was because Bradley enjoyed bragging about all the important people he knew, or if Sean had specifically asked about me.

"How funny," I remarked lightly before turning my attention onto Sean. "How'd you manage to make it past the bouncer? I'm controlling the VIP list tonight."

Sean chuckled and shrugged. "I think he wanted to avoid telling the owner of this place *no*."

I felt my eye twitch. “Excuse me?”

“Man, you didn’t know?” Bradley interrupted with a laugh, totally unaware of the thickening tension. “Sean bought this place last week!”

I frowned. Of course I didn’t know. If I had, I wouldn’t have chosen it as tonight’s venue. A flicker of annoyance raced down my spine. I hadn’t even known that Method Club was for sale, which was extremely odd considering that *I* was usually the one who snatched up valuable real estate before anyone else knew it was available.

Then again, Dean Properties didn’t really dabble in nightlife. We had a few commercial properties which were leased by independent bar owners, but we typically avoided the mess of liability that nightclubs could potentially bring. I had noticed, however, that there were quite a few notable clubs among the real estate Sean Lloyd’s company was gobbling up in New York City, including a historic speakeasy in Midtown. Yet, I never imagined he would sink his teeth into Method of all places. This was *my* social turf. Surely he knew that?

“How is that possible?” I asked him, keeping my tone casual. “This place has been operated by the same family since the eighties. I’m surprised the Goldmans sold it so suddenly.”

Once again, Sean shrugged. “Well, Sam Goldman is an old friend of mine. We went to Northwestern together. He told me he was tired of running the place, so I offered to take it off his hands.”

A flare of victory sparked to life within me. Sean could pretend he belonged here all he wanted, but there were a few things he would never get right. The casual mention of Northwestern University instantly caused Bradley’s smile to falter, and just like that, Sean had forever tainted himself

in the old-money brat's eyes. Northwestern was a great school—one of the best in the country—but it was not an Ivy League institution. Which meant that he was neither impressive enough to be accepted to one of the Ivies, nor was he able to gain admittance by being a legacy student.

Although Bradley was hardly an intellectual, that sort of stuff mattered to him. It mattered to all of them. Veronica and I were probably the only two people there who truly didn't care where anyone was educated.

What a hilariously careless mistake for Sean to make.

“How very enterprising of you,” I said. “If you'll excuse me, I think it's time for me to call it a night.”

Before Sean could protest, Bradley jumped in.

“Yes, I should go check on Daisy,” he explained, walking away with a simple nod to both of us.

A faint glimmer of confusion in Sean's eyes suggested that he had no idea where he'd just gone wrong. He might have thought he had done something clever by purchasing one of the exclusive clubs that my circle and I frequented, but he hadn't truly gained the upper hand. Within the next few minutes, Bradley would mention Sean's low-born schooling and everyone would know that he wasn't one of us.

That was the sort of thing you could never recover from. It was different from Lucy's circumstances. She might have been raised by a middle class family in a small town, but she was a Yale alumna. An outsider like her was much more easily accepted by this crowd than Sean, even if he had billions more dollars than the rest of us to throw around. Though many didn't realize it, prestige often granted more status than mere money.

Satisfied with the outcome of the situation, I grinned at Sean.

“Goodnight. I’ll see you around.”

Something appeared to click for him as he narrowed his eyes at me. It had taken him a minute, but he seemed to have identified the source of his error.

“Yes, we will be seeing each other,” he replied coldly. “Goodnight.”

It was an ominous farewell, but I let it slide right off of me. I left to say goodbye to Veronica and the others, abandoning Sean at the railing as he searched for a way to remedy his mistake. However, unless he had a time machine that would allow him to go back and lie about his alma mater, he was screwed.

By the time I made my way downstairs and turned to look for Sean one last time, he was nowhere to be seen.

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“I want this old factory, Elijah,” my father grumbled from where he was perched, as usual, behind the antique oak desk in his massive executive office. He’d called me into the space the second I arrived that morning, forcing me to pretend I’d gotten more than a few hours of sleep after drinking and partying the night away.

“I know,” I replied. “It’s not going to be easy, though. There was a huge crowd of interested buyers at the showing on Monday. Of course, only a fraction of them actually have the means to handle it.”

“Don’t be so sure,” he cautioned me. “The seller is leveling the playing field by refusing to hand it over to the highest bidder. They care more about

its intended future purpose than how much money they can make.”

Obviously, I knew that, but talking back to my father wasn't wise.

Instead, I nodded in agreement. “Right. Well, the draft of our proposal is almost finished. I've also got my eye on what the competition is proposing so we can be prepared to counter with a more advantageous offering for the community.”

“Good. What have you heard?”

“Nonsense, mostly. Paul's guys want to turn it into a small market center. It's true, the neighborhood could benefit from more options to shop for groceries and basic necessities without the residents needing to go down to the Upper West Side, but we all know that the Rancorns will lease to whoever is willing to pay the highest rent, rather than to actual local merchants.”

“Greedy idiots,” my father muttered. “The sellers will see right through them.”

“I agree.”

“What else?”

I fought against the twinge of pain in my temples, disappointed that this conversation wasn't going to be as short as I'd hoped it would be. I'd managed to avoid a full-scale hangover, but I still desperately needed to rehydrate my body before I went about the rest of my day.

“Well, there was a representative from Target—”

“Corporate beasts! That building deserves to be converted into something worthy of its charm, not a monolith to suburban mommies and

Pilates housewives.”

An amused smirk crept onto my face. For a billionaire who controlled half the city of New York, my father had very big opinions about unfettered capitalism. His ethics had always fascinated me. He wanted to make a lot of money, but he wanted to do it the *right* way.

“Agreed,” I replied. “An Amazon representative was also present at the showing.”

“What do they want with it? A local shipping warehouse would boost job opportunities for the community, but their reputation has been in the toilet recently, so I don’t—”

“Actually, I think they’re proposing a Whole Foods.”

“The ultimate foreshadower of gentrification? Yeah, right! The seller would never fall for it.”

“Yes, I think—”

“Listen, Elijah,” my father interrupted, slamming his hand down on top of the desk for emphasis. “Our proposal needs to be fresh, but not controversial. It should be modern, but with classic touches. We need to convince the sellers to have faith in our idea above all the others. We need them to believe that *our* proposal will be the best thing for the community.”

Being lectured by my father at the age of thirty-four wasn’t something I enjoyed, but I told myself it was worth putting up with if it meant it would get me one step closer to taking on the role of CEO. As soon as I was sitting right where he was, I wouldn’t have to deal with this. He would be retired and I would be in charge of the entire company.

“Yes, sir. Absolutely,” I answered.

“You always do good work, son. That’s why I’m hard on you. It keeps you on your toes, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, it does.”

“Now, speaking of this property, I’ve been thinking about this *connection* you have at Empire Realty.”

I fought the urge to sigh loudly. My father settled back in his chair and smiled, indicating that the real business talk had ended for now. As soon as the conversation dwelled within spitting distance of my future at the company, my father’s mind circled back to my relationship status.

“Well, Lucy’s definitely on our side, but she can’t exactly show favoritism,” I said. “Anyway, it’s not like she’ll be the one making the final decision.”

“Yes, yes. How long has she been employed at Empire Realty?”

“A couple of years, I think.”

“You think?”

“There are many other things about her that interest me besides the precise date she began her employment at Empire,” I muttered.

“I was merely being curious,” said my father, holding up his hands in surrender. “I’d like you to bring her to dinner on Sunday.”

It wasn’t a question. It wasn’t even an invitation. It was a demand. If I showed up to Sunday dinner this weekend without Lucy, I’d run the risk of my father thinking our relationship wasn’t as serious as I claimed it was.

More than anything, I needed him to believe that Lucy and I were the real deal, that I was falling for her and intended on proposing sooner rather than later.

Was Lucy an example of ideal wife material? Yes, of course. She was the total package. It was astounding that she wasn't already married. Then again, I suppose she would be engaged by now if she hadn't caught her ex-boyfriend cheating on her.

Even though I didn't know the guy who'd done that to her, it pissed me off enough to want to find him and ruin his life. Lucy was *everything*. She was beautiful, kind, witty, and just the right amount of daring and mischievous. After all, there were very few women who had a ten-year career plan mapped out for themselves, and would also take their clothes off and ride me in the back of a posh downtown club.

Not that *I* wanted to be Lucy's husband. I wasn't changing my mind when it came to listing marriage at the bottom of my list of priorities. It was just that I thought the man who Lucy ended up marrying would be very lucky indeed. That was an undeniable fact based on logic, not emotion. That was all.

"Yes, sir," I said to my father. "I've already told her. She's looking forward to meeting you and Beatrice."

"Perfect!"

"Is that all?"

"For now."

"Great."



I stood up to return to my own office, which was just a few steps down the hall and half the size of my father's office. When I was about to reach for the doorknob, my father spoke again, stopping me in my tracks.

“Oh, and Elijah?”

“Yes?” I glanced over my shoulder, thinking he was about to tell me he wanted to see a draft of the factory proposal on his desk by the end of the day.

Instead, my father offered me a rare look of softness and vulnerability.

“I just wanted to say ... your mother would be very proud of the man you've become.”

I froze, a hundred different emotions slamming into me with such force that it knocked the breath out of my lungs. All I could do was respond with a halfhearted smile and a trembling nod of my head before I turned away and practically threw myself out of the office. If my father thought my reaction was strange, he didn't come after me.

When I stumbled back to my office, I closed the door and slumped onto the leather loveseat by the floor-to-ceiling windows.

*Your mother would be very proud ...*

He'd never said that to me before. It was a sentiment I hadn't realized I longed to hear, confirmation that I was walking the path that would have made my mother happiest. Perhaps it was childish of me to care about such a thing, but I couldn't help it. As it turned out, parental approval still carried a lot of weight and meaning even when you were a grown man.

At the same time, however, there was a tinge of anger at what my

father had said. He'd withheld that comfort from me until this very moment ... and what had I done to earn it? I'd convinced him that I had a girlfriend. After everything I'd done, everything I'd achieved my entire adult life thus far, was unworthy of my dead mother's pride until now merely because I'd proven I was on track to becoming a husband and father.

I would never understand his twisted and archaic point of view. It made no sense to me that my father, of all people, could be this way. His wife, my mother, whom he loved more than anyone else in the world, had died tragically. He lost her to forces nobody could have foreseen. That should have been enough for him to discourage his offspring from pursuing love and marriage.

After all, Beatrice was lovely, but she was also an anomaly. The chances of falling in love with a second wife who was as wonderful to my father as she was were slim to none. Most people only got one shot at true love, and if they managed to achieve it, there was always the possibility it would be ripped away from them without warning.

How could he expect me to endure something like that? I refused to risk it.

As soon as my father was fully persuaded that Lucy and I were madly in love and he signed over the company to me, I would end our arrangement immediately and never bother with the real version of it ever again.

Unlike my father, I intended to protect my heart.

## Chapter Fourteen: *Astor*

“Yes! Yes! Harder! Oh!”

“You’ll piss off the neighbors—*fuck*, Lucy”.

“There aren’t any neighbors,” I gasped.

“Right. Carry on, then.”

I moaned loudly, biting down on Elijah’s shoulder through the fabric of his shirt as he pounded into me on the polished honeycomb tile of the newly renovated kitchen in the vacant apartment.

It was one of six units in the Little Italy building where Elijah had scheduled a private showing that afternoon. After our tryst in the nightclub, I knew there was no going back, but nothing could have prepared me for the overwhelming physical attraction I would feel for him now that we’d finally gone all the way. It was as if the floodgates of my desire had burst open and nothing could hold me back anymore.

Evidently, Elijah felt the same way. The second I closed the door of the first apartment on the ground floor behind us, he pulled me toward him. It had been days since we’d seen each other, an agonizing week that I spent the majority of daydreaming about the next time I’d be able to get my hands on him. The fact that I was busy entertaining my brother was a welcome distraction, but it wasn’t completely effective.

Thus, within five minutes of saying hello, we were fucking on the kitchen counter. When we were finished, Elijah made an amusing show of being impressed with the apartment and then asked to see the second one,

where he took me against the wall right beside the doorway. Then we moved upstairs. In the third apartment, we managed to keep ourselves together long enough for me to actually give Elijah the correct details on the property.

Once I confirmed the square footage, Elijah offered me his trademark smirk full of mischief, and before I knew it, I was on my knees in front of him.

We couldn't get enough of each other. It felt like I would go insane if I didn't feel his body against mine. In the back of my mind, it struck me that I'd never felt this way about anyone before, not even with Derek in the earliest days of our relationship. This was a frenzy—a frenzy that felt less scary because there were no complicated emotions involved. We could rip each other's clothes off and simply enjoy it without wondering what the repercussions might be further down the road.

That's how we ended up on the floor of the final apartment in the unit, our professional attire bunched and pushed aside, wrinkled without a care in the world. I was pretty sure he'd left his tie behind down on the first floor and my linen blazer was flung into the far corner of the empty living area, but I didn't care.

In fact, it was exhilarating to think about just how little I cared. What I was doing with Elijah Dean was unprofessional and reckless. A more cruel person might call it downright trashy.

Normally, I wouldn't be able to handle such verdicts against my character, but things were different within me recently. I'd loosened up, fraying at the seams the second I learned that Charlotte was pregnant with Derek's baby. Elijah made those frays feel less like wounds and more like an opportunity.

Elijah braced himself with one hand on the tile beside my head, the other hand wrapped around the back of my knee. He was getting close to the edge, his low grunts vibrating from deep within his throat. I clung to him, gasping in ecstasy as I reached my own climax. It was the fourth time in the past hour I'd done so.

“Oh, *God*,” he barked out, burying his face into the crook of my neck as he collapsed with his full weight on top of me.

I giggled, stroking his hair as he came down from the high.

He lifted his head and grinned down at me, his tousled hair falling across his forehead. “What are you laughing at?”

“Nothing,” I replied, biting my lip to hide a bigger smile.

“Tell me,” Elijah insisted, gently pulling out of me without moving off.

I felt a blush rise to my cheeks. “Nope.”

A wicked gleam came to life in his eyes. Without warning, the pad of his thumb was rubbing soft circles over a spot that was incredibly overstimulated at the moment. I hissed and squirmed away, but I couldn't deny that I liked the way the pleasure-pain felt. It was written all over my face.

“Tell me,” he repeated.

I gave in, rolling my eyes and pushing his hand away.

“I like the way you sound when you—”

Elijah's smirk turned downright devilish. “When I ... what?”

Pouting at him, I moved to gently shove him away, but he replaced his

hand between my thighs and lowered his lips to my ear.

I whimpered. “Elijah—”

“Lucy Astor, are you trying to tell me that you like the way I sound when I cum?” he growled low in my ear.

A warm shiver went down my spine. My brain turned to mush as his fingers worked their magic and I instinctively spread my legs a little wider.

“You’re playing dirty,” I moaned.

“Not at all,” he purred. “Trust me, you’ll know when I’m playing dirty.”

“Fine,” I gasped, unbearable pleasure once again building down below. “Yes. Maybe I have a moaning kink! Sue me!”

Elijah chuckled low, pressing a series of kisses to my neck as he unraveled me with nothing but his fingers.

Make that *five* times in one hour.

At last, Elijah rolled off of me and collapsed on the tile beside me. After a few minutes of comfortable silence in which both of us caught our breath and slowed our heartbeats, I sat up.

I checked my watch. It was half past four in the afternoon. I had to get back to the office to finish up a few more things before the weekend, but all I wanted to do was stay with Elijah in this secret corner of the city we’d made for ourselves. Unfortunately, there was still a logical part of my brain that spoke loud enough to be heard.

*You’re not supposed to want to spend more time than necessary with*

*the guy you're hooking up with, I reminded myself. No emotions, no quality time.*

While I climbed off the floor and wandered to the bathroom to readjust my clothing in the mirror, I heard the muffled sounds of Elijah also putting himself back together again. I stared at my reflection, praying for my flushed cheeks and swollen lips to calm down before I made it back to the office.

When I returned from the bathroom, Elijah was tidy again. His hair was once again pushed back, the wrinkles in his trousers smoothed flat. I paused a few feet away from him, admiring the view without apology.

“By the way,” he said. “I’d like to put an offer on this place.”

I laughed. “You’ve barely seen it.”

His eyes raked slowly down the length of my body, taking their time on the way back up to my face. “I’ve seen enough.”

I snorted softly, brushing off the double-meaning of the comment. I couldn’t afford to get all flustered yet again.

“Great,” I told him. “I’ll let the sellers know right away.”

“By the way,” Elijah added, walking over to where his briefcase had been dropped carelessly by the door. He pulled out a thick manila envelope and handed it to me. “Here is Dean Properties’ proposal for the Harlem warehouse.”

“Most people just email it to me,” I chuckled, accepting the packet.

“Well, I thought it would be nice to make it more personal. I had enough materials printed—using recycled products, of course—so that everyone on the board of the historical society can have a more tactile explanation of

our plans rather than simply being copied on an email thread and asked to open an attachment.”

I nodded slowly in approval. It was the attention to the smaller details that would sway the seller of the warehouse in anyone’s favor. I hadn’t told Elijah that; he was just very good at his job. Like an idiot, I couldn’t help thinking how sexy that was.

“The devil is in the details,” I replied.

“That he is. I hope you like the proposal.”

“It doesn’t matter what *I* think of it,” I reminded him.

“Of course it does,” he countered.

I could tell he meant it, that my opinion of his work meant a lot to him. I didn’t know what to make of that, so I tucked the envelope under my arm and looked down at my shoes.

I’d noticed how close we were getting again, inching toward each other as if there was a magnetic pull between us that was impossible to fight against.

“We should probably get out of here,” I suggested.

“Sure,” he answered with a soft smile.

I led the way, making sure there were no clothing articles left behind in any of the apartments on the way back downstairs. Elijah collected his tie and I waited patiently while he ducked into one of the bathrooms and redid the tangled mess that the knot had become in my earlier efforts to wrench it off his neck and undo the top buttons of his shirt.



While he put the last professional puzzle piece back into place, I moved toward one of the windows in the living area. It looked out over a small courtyard shared with the building on the street behind it, decorated with lush green plants that would soon start to brown and crinkle as autumn continued its slow approach.

Luke had already left the city to surprise our parents in Vermont. Further north, the leaves would already be changing. I remembered how much I loved autumn as a kid, the rainbows of gold and scarlet and fiery orange that appeared as the nights grew colder. Our parents used to take Luke, Lily, and me on long car rides through the mountains to admire the colors at their peak. On those trips, Lily tended to fall asleep and Luke usually entertained himself with his Gameboy, but I always had my eyes glued to the trees beyond the window.

In New York, autumn was less colorful. Not only because there were far fewer trees in Manhattan than there were in rural Vermont, but also because the warm persistence of summer in the city didn't lend itself to the same vibrant hues that I recalled from my childhood. Still, I could go see the Vermont scenery anytime I felt like it. It wasn't as if I'd run off to another country like Luke.

I hoped my brother enjoyed his time in Vermont. I also hoped that it wouldn't result in any complications for what I was doing with Elijah in New York.

When I had walked my brother to the train station yesterday, I asked him not to mention Elijah to our parents yet, unless it was purely in the context of Luke talking about his old Harvard friend. At first, he'd been confused by that. I didn't blame him. According to the story I'd woven,

Elijah and I had been seriously dating for at least a month. Naturally, that was something one would bring up on a weekly phone call to their parents.

Except, things were more complicated than that where my dating life was concerned. Derek and I had been together for years. *Years*. My mother thought she would one day call him her son-in-law. My father was undoubtedly stressing out about the potential wedding costs, yet excited about the prospect of grandchildren. When I broke the news to them that Derek and I had broken up—sparing them the worst of the details regarding the reason *why*—they were understandably disoriented.

More than that, they were worried about me. They tried not to make it obvious, never wanting to seem like the smothering type of parents, but their constant check-ins in the aftermath of the breakup indicated their concern. They even tried to convince me to move back to Vermont for a little while. It was only thanks to Gabriella's generosity that I was saved from leaving my career behind and heading back to my hometown in shame.

Telling my parents that I was dating again so soon after that disaster would result in another flurry of worrying and hovering. They'd already done so much for my siblings and me that I didn't want to continue being a source of anxiety for them.

It was also easier this way. When Elijah's and my agreement was terminated, my parents would be none the wiser. All I would have to do was mention to Luke that we amicably ended things and we would never have to speak about it again.

One day, when I recovered from the damage Derek had done to my heart and actually fell in love again, I would be thrilled to tell my parents all about the mysterious man I cared for. Until then, there was no need to string

them along for a fake relationship that was fated to end the moment it began.

I had to admit, however, that it was a shame ... now that I'd gotten to know Elijah better, there was no doubt in my mind that my parents would adore him. He was funny and polite and charming. He was successful. He always presented himself well. He was every parent's dream.

If only ...

*Nope.*

I stopped the thought right in its tracks. It was dangerous territory. There was nothing between Elijah and me but a contract. We were friends with benefits. That was all. Fantasizing about a version of reality in which Elijah and I might have formed a relationship based on different principles was a waste of time.

Plus, the entire point of this arrangement was that Elijah wasn't interested in romance in the short or long term. He wasn't that kind of guy. Daring to imagine a future with him would result in my heart being broken all over again.

I definitely didn't want to take that risk.

"Lucy?"

I jumped, wrenching myself out of my reverie to find Elijah smirking at me from the front door of the apartment. I'd completely spaced out and forgotten where I was.

Forcing a smile onto my face, I smoothed the collar of my blazer and approached him.

"Sorry," I replied.

“You look like you have a lot on your mind.”

I tried not to cringe and simply responded, “Yes. Work nonsense.”

“Right.” His smile faltered, the mischief in his gaze softening slightly. It looked as though he was about to say something else, but I breezed past him and stepped out into the hallway of the building.

“Email me the offer details—” I began, but Elijah grabbed my hand before I could make it all the way to the exit and forced me to pause.

“There’s one other thing,” he said. “This Sunday, I need you to come to dinner at my father’s house. He and my stepmother are very eager to meet you.”

Of course. Our agreement. That was why he was here in the first place. He needed someone to convince his father that he could be a well-rounded man worthy of the title of CEO, which included maintaining a stable relationship.

My mind fixated briefly on the word *stepmother*. I remembered what Luke had drunkenly revealed to me that night after we left the club. A small pang came to life in my chest—sympathy for what he had gone through when he lost his mother. Obviously, I didn’t know the details of it, but I couldn’t imagine that losing one’s parent was pleasant in any context.

“Sure,” I answered with a smile on my face that felt a bit too forced. Then, despite my best efforts to keep my thoughts to myself, I continued talking. “Your stepmother—is she—? I mean—well, I hope you don’t mind, but my brother told me about your mom—”

It was as if my words poured a bucket of ice water over him. Instantly, he stiffened. His face took on a strange, emotionless expression as if he’d

placed a mask over it before my very eyes.

I didn't know what to think of the sudden iciness. Clearly, I'd said the wrong thing. Perhaps he didn't like talking about his mother and Luke had forgotten to mention that small detail.

Or maybe, I'd crossed a boundary in our formal agreement by being a little too nosy.

My cheeks warmed with shame, but Elijah had already turned away from me.

"It was a long time ago," was all he said.

"Sorry, I—"

"I'll email you about the offer and the dinner details," he interrupted the weak apology that was forming on my lips. "I should get going. See you later."

Without another word, Elijah flung open the door and marched out onto the street, hesitating only briefly to hold the door for me as I awkwardly hurried out after him. Even when his mood changed for the worse, he was unfailingly respectful.

He offered me a halfhearted wave over his shoulder, but didn't meet my eyes as he hailed a cab and ducked into the backseat. I was left standing alone on the sidewalk, his proposal still tucked under my arm. The taste of him lingered on my tongue, my skin stubbornly sensitive in all the places he'd touched it mere minutes ago.

*What just happened?* I thought to myself, not only about that icy goodbye, but the entire afternoon. *Who have I become?*

When I was with Derek, I was the picture of a morally flawless woman. I was faithful and modest and loyal. My devotion to career never got in the way of my desire to be a good partner to him. Even during our most passionate times, I never would have brought Derek to a property for which I was brokering the sale to make love to him in every other room.

Maybe that was the problem. Maybe Derek wanted someone more like Charlotte, with all her moral grayness and whatnot. Maybe I was too boring for him.

Maybe there was a chance I was too boring for Elijah, too. Hadn't I just completely killed the mood after our sordid afternoon by bringing up his dead mother? Perhaps, if he was truly looking for the real thing, I wouldn't even be his type. At least, not romantically.

Or, perhaps Elijah wasn't capable of romantic love. That was a thing nowadays, wasn't it? Some people identified as purely sexual beings, incapable of romantic attraction. It was a difficult concept for me to wrap my head around, but I wasn't in the business of invalidating others.

I suppose, as far as Elijah was concerned, I would never know such things about him. It wasn't my any of my business. I was a means to an end.

## Chapter Fifteen: *Dean*

I'd messed up.

It was childish, the way I handled that final conversation with Lucy on Friday afternoon. One mention of my late mother had me burrowing deep inside myself like a pathetic turtle of a man.

Usually, I wasn't so sensitive about the topic. I'd had many years to get used to the fact that my mother was gone. I knew how to handle conversations about her without acting like a grieving teenager.

Something about Lucy made me feel more vulnerable, though. That was the problem. Something about her softness—her unwavering warmth and brightness—made it difficult for me to hide away in the comfort of my usual shadows.

Still, that didn't mean I should have responded to her the way that I did. I basically ran away from her. That alone must have freaked her out.

If I wasn't careful, I was going to ruin this entire thing all by myself.

"So, she cancelled on you?" Veronica asked me from her usual spot by the sunny window in her office.

It was another Monday morning—another therapy session. The allotted hour was almost up, as my closest confidant had decided she wanted to get down to the nitty-gritty of what had occurred during our night out. I spared no details for my therapist, even though I might have kept a few things private if I had been talking to Veronica as a friend. I told her about sleeping with Lucy at the club, then again—and again and *again*—at the empty

apartment building on Friday.

“Yeah,” I replied, exhaling a loud sigh and sinking lower into the couch cushions.

“And how did you handle it? I thought her attendance at Sunday dinner was part of your agreement?”

“It is, but—” I trailed off, glaring at the carpet.

Lucy hadn’t spoken to me at all after we parted ways on Friday except to send a brief email confirming she’d informed the sellers of my offer on the building we had toured. I figured she was busy with her own personal life. At the end of the day, I wasn’t her real boyfriend, so it wasn’t appropriate to poke and pry.

However, when Sunday morning rolled around, I received a text message from Lucy claiming a sudden bout of the stomach flu. She told me she wouldn’t be able to make it to dinner, so I was forced to show up alone for the umpteenth time.

“But?” Veronica prompted.

“What was I supposed to say?” I replied with a shrug. “For all I knew, she was telling the truth. Maybe she really was sick. I don’t want to become the kind of guy who accuses a woman of lying to get out of a previous commitment, so I told her it was no big deal.”

“But it is a big deal to you. I can tell.”

“I just don’t want to pressure her to do anything she doesn’t want to do.”

“You paid her fifty thousand dollars to do this.”



Despite her argumentative words, Veronica's tone suggested that she was neither on my side nor Lucy's. Rather, she was simply nudging me toward a conclusion she wanted me to make on my own.

"Just because I paid her doesn't mean I have the right to force anything on her," I grumbled.

Veronica smiled softly. "You've always been a good man, Elijah."

I merely huffed and massaged my temple. A headache had been growing worse since I'd woken up that morning.

"Anyway," I continued after a moment. "She promised she would be there next Sunday. Everything will be fine."

My friend tapped her pen on the notebook in her lap. "I'm wondering if you might be disappointed about her last-minute cancellation for another reason, too."

I pursed my lips at her. "What do you mean?"

She raised an eyebrow at me. We both knew that I was well aware of her implied meaning. The silent suggestion in her tone was that I was not only disappointed that Lucy hadn't come to dinner yesterday because it threw a kink in my scheme, but also because I'd been looking forward to seeing her.

It was true, of course. I always looked forward to seeing Lucy. I enjoyed her company as much as I enjoyed her body.

"We're friends," I muttered sternly.

Veronica ignored the warning in my voice.

“The two of you look good together,” she replied softly.

I couldn’t help it. I shut down, slamming the metaphorical doors on my vulnerability.

With a single glance at my watch, I sat up straight.

“Our time is over,” I told her. “I don’t want to cut into your next appointment, and I’ve got quite a lot of things to take care of at the office, so —”

“Elijah—”

“I’ll talk to you later, Ronnie.”

The sound of her nickname—the one that I rarely used—quieted her protests. It was a signal that I was done talking to my therapist, that the boundary we drew for the sake of our friendship was now officially back in place. It meant that the time for forcing me to talk about the deeper things was over.

I caught one last glance from Veronica, her lips pursed and eyes full of quiet disapproval, before I stood up and strode to the door, showing myself out of her office.

It wasn’t the most graceful of exits, but I’d find a way to make it up to her later.

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The next day, I was just about to head out to grab a quick lunch from the deli on the corner near the main office of Dean Properties when my phone started ringing with an incoming call from Empire Realty.

I pushed back from my desk, immediately assuming it was from Lucy.

But why would Lucy call me from her official business line? Ever since that first sale she'd brokered for me, we'd used each other's personal numbers. It was easier that way, allowing us both to cut in front of the long lines to earn each other's attention.

*Maybe her phone died*, I thought to myself. Lucy wasn't the sort of person who was careless enough to let her phone run out of battery by midday, but I suppose anything could happen. It was either that, or she was still sick with the same ailment that caused her to cancel on dinner that weekend.

"Hello?" I answered casually.

"Hello, sir. This is Nathan from Empire Realty. Am I speaking with Mr. Elijah Dean?"

The young male voice that greeted me was far from the tinkling melody of Lucy's tone. I tried to ignore the disappointment I felt in the pit of my stomach.

"Yes, it is," I replied. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, sir, I just wanted to let you know that the West Harlem Historical Society has reviewed your proposal for the old factory on West 118th Street. They were very impressed with the vision Dean Properties has for the building and would like to move forward by accepting your bid."

I let out a long, quiet exhale. The sensation of unexpected victory raced through me, but it was somewhat bittersweet.

"That was fast," was all I managed in response.

The younger employee—perhaps an intern or assistant—on the other end of the line chuckled lightly. “Yes, sir. I believe Ms. Astor handed it directly to them on Friday evening. It was our understanding that they were very eager to sell, so they deliberated over the weekend.”

“That’s ... great. Is Lu—Ms. Astor still not feeling well?”

“Sorry?”

“She—we—I apologize. I had heard through a mutual connection that she was ill this past weekend. I assumed that was why she wasn’t calling with the news herself.”

The employee cleared his throat awkwardly. “No, sir. Ms. Astor is—well, she is stuck in a meeting and she asked me to relay the message so that you—so that the good news could be given—I’m her assistant, but I can tell her—”

The poor kid was stammering, so I decided to put him out of his misery.

“It’s quite all right, Nathan,” I said, at last recalling the name he’d given me. “I appreciate the call. This is great news. I’ll look for the paperwork from Ms. Astor in my inbox shortly?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thank you. Take care.”

I hung up before the assistant could say anything else, then sat in silence for a long moment. My lunch plans were temporarily forgotten.

I had won. I’d proven myself capable of winning one of the most sought-after properties on the market. My father was going to be thrilled

when he found out that we were officially buying the old Harlem factory. It brought me one step closer to being worthy of his title as CEO.

It also meant that I'd beaten Sean Lloyd. That greedy transplant thought he was clever for buying Method Club, but that was nothing compared to the real estate goldmine I'd rightfully wrestled from his grasp. I was satisfied that, as soon as he heard the news, he would understand that all the money in the world couldn't win against having a true, meaningful vision. The source of his mysterious cash flow remained ambiguous and somewhat ominous, but this would be an important lesson to Sean Lloyd, nonetheless.

He couldn't simply waltz into *my* city and lay claim to it.

Despite all of that, I didn't feel as delighted as I should have. I knew why, of course. Just because I had an avoidant personality didn't mean I lacked self-awareness, as Veronica would say.

The reason this victory was slightly tainted was because I had hoped somebody else would have delivered the good news.

Lucy could have been telling the truth about all of it. She truly could have been too ill to attend Sunday dinner and very well could have also been too busy with meetings today to tell me about the Harlem property herself. Yet, I couldn't shake the feeling that she was distancing herself from me on purpose. If that were the case, I only had myself to blame. I was the one who'd made things weird when we parted ways last Friday.

Therefore, it was my responsibility to reach out first and smooth things over. If I didn't, I would risk ruining everything for myself.

So, I decided to send her a quick and harmless text.

*Glad to hear you're feeling better*, I typed out.

I didn't receive a response until an hour later.

*Thanks. Congratulations on winning the bid,* she wrote back.

*Couldn't have done it without you,* I replied as I headed out later that afternoon for a caffeine fix. *Are we all set for dinner this Sunday? Attempt number two?*

I waited another hour before her answer came through. She must have been busier than usual at work this week.

*Yes, I will be there,* Lucy responded.

*Can I see you before then?* I dared to ask. *There's a block of townhouses in Murray Hill that I'm interested in viewing.*

*Those went off the market this morning,* she answered.

I sighed, tapping my foot and frowning at my phone while waiting for the barista to make the cappuccino I ordered.

Something was bothering Lucy. She was never this short with me. Maybe she was annoyed by the implication that I wanted to break professional boundaries and fuck in one of Empire Realty's empty properties again. Perhaps I should have been a little less brash about my physical desire for her.

Before I could come up with a reasonable follow-up to her text, another message came through.

*But the entire block behind it is about to be listed within the next three business days or so. Commercial and residential combo. Foreclosure. Proximity to the UN makes it a cash cow,* she wrote back, including a link to the photos that would be published as soon as the listing went live.

I collected my coffee from the counter and smiled to myself, flipping through the pictures as I sauntered back onto the street.

Most of Murray Hill was being rapidly modernized, gobbled up by developers who were eager to surround the Headquarters of United Nations with sleek, luxurious accommodations for visiting dignitaries and overpaid politicians. Dean Properties already had a piece of the neighborhood in our portfolio, but it wouldn't hurt to snatch up more and flip it to our advantage.

Lucy already knew that. The fact that she was mentioning it to me before it went on the market meant she wasn't totally repulsed by me.

*Looks promising,* I texted back. *When can I get a private showing?*

*I have an hour on Thursday afternoon,* she replied twenty minutes later while I paced back and forth in my office like a fool.

*Thursday it is ...*

Lucy sent another slew of property photos in her response, mainly of the shamefully outdated kitchen units. However, her next comment sent my blood roaring through my veins.

*Maybe I'll even have time for you to bend me over this tacky granite countertop,* she said.

I ran a hand through my hair, overwhelmed by the sheer number of things I felt in that moment: passion, desire, amusement, and ... relief. I was relieved to know that whatever awkwardness I'd caused didn't have a lasting effect on Lucy's attraction to me.

I'd been enjoying our intimate moments far too much to be able to give them up quite yet.

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Thursday came and went, Lucy's whimpering moans still echoing in my mind at the memory of what I'd done to her on those *tacky granite countertops*. There was no talk of her cancellation, nor did she bring up the topic of my late mother again. It was as if the previous weekend never happened.

By the time Sunday came around again, everything was back to normal between us. Or rather, about as normal as things could be for a fake couple.

Together, we paused outside a classic brownstone on the Upper East Side. Beatrice, a lover of all things seasonal, had already decked out the front door with an autumnal wreath, and a collection of plump gourds were arranged tastefully on the stoop.

I had no doubt my stepmother would be watching and waiting for the moment I arrived with the woman she believed to be my girlfriend, so I'd taken Lucy's hand the minute we were within view of the front windows. She didn't protest, allowing her fingers to entwine with mine as if it was a natural gesture we did all the time.

This Sunday, she was dressed in a charming skirt-and-sweater ensemble that lent itself to old-money-prep-school vibes and classic sophistication. A string of pearls sat at her throat and her golden waves were swept back from her face with a pair of pretty barrettes.

She was perfect.

She was better at looking the part than I ever expected, a verifiable chameleon.

"So, this is where you grew up?" she asked, gazing up at the large



home with unapologetic awe on her face.

“Yes,” was all I said, trying to keep the frown off my own face.

It wasn't technically a lie. I had grown up in the house before us. I'd called it home from the very first day my parents brought me home from the hospital. However, after my mother died, I couldn't stand to be surrounded by all that empty space where she no longer was, and begged my father to let me stay on campus downtown until I graduated from high school. He obliged, shuttering himself inside the depressing house until Beatrice walked into his life and helped him brighten it up once more.

It had taken me many years to be able to come back to it without being painfully reminded of the woman who once filled it with her warmth and laughter. Sometimes, it still hurt.

“It's lovely,” Lucy murmured. “Much bigger than the house I grew up in.”

“It's excessive,” I assured her, tugging her gently up the steps. “It's a family home, passed down through generations. That's the only reason we keep it.”

“Right.”

“Ready?” I asked her, my hand on the doorknob.

She took a deep breath, squeezed my hand, and allowed a soft smile to form on her beautiful face.

“I'm ready.”

The second I opened the door, Beatrice had materialized in front of us, beaming from ear to ear. She cooed at the sight of me, pulling me into a tight

hug as if she hadn't seen me in months, the same way she did every time I came to dinner. I was vaguely aware of my father hovering by the archway that led to the formal dining room, watching his second wife's dramatics with amusement and adoration.

"You must be Lucille!" exclaimed Beatrice, taking both of Lucy's hands in hers and offering her a kind, genuine smile. "Goodness, you are absolutely stunning, my dear."

Lucy blushed delicately. "Thank you, Mrs. Dean. It's lovely to finally meet you. I apologize that it's taken me so long to join Elijah for dinner at your home."

"Oh, darling! Call me Beatrice, you sweet thing!"

"Only if you insist."

Gracious, courteous, and poised. Lucy was a flawless girlfriend.

But, I could tell she wasn't acting. This was just how she was. She didn't have to pretend to be likable. It came naturally.

My father stepped forward. It was hard to read his expression, but I took it in stride.

"Dad, allow me to introduce you to my girlfriend, Lucy Astor."

He reached out a hand to shake hers and remarked somewhat gruffly, "You know, I was beginning to think you were nothing but a figment of my son's imagination. Welcome to our home."

"Thank you, sir," replied Lucy with a bashful smile in my direction. "It's an honor to finally meet the mastermind behind Dean Properties."

My father grinned. “The honor is all mine. I have no doubt that it’s thanks to you we won the bid on that factory in Harlem.”

“No, no!” interrupted Beatrice in a sing-song voice. “No business talk tonight, Hamish! None at all! Now, come along, Lucille ... how about a brief tour before the first course is served?”

My stepmother put an arm around Lucy’s shoulders, guiding her away from the foyer and toward the lavishly decorated parlor. I was left alone with my father in the entryway, waiting for him to utter the thought I could see dancing in his eyes.

Beatrice and Lucy’s voices echoed toward us, bright laughter intermixed.

At last, my father spoke.

“She’s very pretty,” he said.

“Yes,” I replied. “She is.”

“Too pretty for you.”

I raised my eyebrows, catching the playful smirk on my father’s face. He looked ... happy. Happier than I’d seen him in a long time.

“Yes, that’s true,” I chuckled.

He clapped me on the shoulder, steering me after the two women. “I’m proud of you, son. You’re proving just how capable of a leader you’ll be someday. Someday *soon*.”

There it was again, that praise I’d craved for so long. He hadn’t even expressed his pride when I told him about the win in Harlem. Once again, I

was faced with the reality that living the life I wanted to live would never be good enough for him. It was, as always, infuriating. However, I managed to keep it hidden as we caught up with Lucy and Beatrice in the dining room.

Any guilt I might have felt at lying to his face that evening melted away.

## Chapter Sixteen: *Astor*

I was a liar.

I'd lied to Elijah last weekend when I claimed I was too sick to come to dinner. I'd lied again when I asked Nathan to tell him I was too busy with meetings to personally announce the good news about the factory.

It was just ... the way Elijah cut me off when I brought up his mother reminded me that I wasn't anything more than a convenient, professional acquaintance and beneficial friend to him. It was a sobering reality check.

But I got over it. Even though Gabriella tried to convince me that it was okay if I was developing feelings for him, I ignored her. Elijah was just a guy who was helping me out, and who I was helping out in return. A hot guy who I enjoyed having sex with, no strings attached. That was all.

Once I reminded myself of that, it was easy to go back to our previous dynamic. We fucked in one of those foreclosure properties on Thursday afternoon, and Elijah followed up with an offer on the entire block.

And yet, I was still a liar. It was a lie when I took his hand and walked up the front steps of his childhood home, when I passed the threshold and entered that private space under the pretense that I was his girlfriend. It was a lie when I smiled at his father and stepmother, laughing and nodding and saying all the right things.

They believed it, of course. Elijah said they would be easily convinced. He had admitted to me on the cab ride uptown that he'd never brought a girl with him to Sunday dinner before. That alone signaled just how serious we allegedly were. Thus, I wouldn't have to do much else to convince them

except be my usual self.

Somehow, that made it harder. I could tell how happy both Beatrice and Hamish were to see Elijah in a committed relationship. They were going to be devastated in the end when they learned that it didn't work out between us.

Of course, Elijah would already be CEO at that point and there would be no going back on the matter. My family and I would be financially secure for years to come, thanks to Elijah's original cash offer and the commission I was earning from all the properties he was buying.

I should have been happy.

Instead, a deep sense of sadness grew more apparent within me as the evening went on.

As intimidating as Hamish was, he was an excellent conversationalist. With sweet, attentive Beatrice at his side, the older couple had me talking all through dinner. They asked me about my years at Yale, my childhood in Vermont, and all about my family. I told them the truth because it was easier than concocting a completely different story for myself.

Unlike Elijah's snobbier acquaintances at the club, neither Hamish nor Beatrice balked at the fact I wasn't born and bred in Manhattan. Instead, they appeared to be fascinated by my humble roots. Hamish even went so far as to claim I was exactly the kind of woman Elijah needed. The remark caused him to stiffen almost imperceptibly, but he kept an easy smile plastered on his face.

I liked them. I hadn't expected to like them. When I arrived, Beatrice led me to a parlor where portraits of past generations of Dean men hailed

from the walls. The legacy went all the way back to George Dean, the railroad heir who came to New York just as the Gilded Age was dawning upon the city and took advantage of the industrial boom to build his family an endlessly flowing fortune.

My own family had no such story to tell. My paternal grandfather was a postman and my maternal grandparents were both farmers. My siblings and I didn't have a legacy to carry on like Elijah did. I almost pitied him for it, especially since he was an only child. The pressure to be worthy of his surname rested on his shoulders alone.

No wonder he went to such extreme measures to show his father that he deserved to run Dean Properties.

All in all, dinner went spectacularly well. Before I knew it, we'd moved on to coffee and dessert. Elijah was resting his arm along the back of my chair, and I remembered to offer him casual, tender touches every once in a while. We were supposed to be falling in love, after all.

I knew what it felt like to be in love, so I could fake it. Elijah, too, seemed to fall into the give-and-take of the dynamic easily. Despite the fact he'd never had a serious girlfriend before, he was certainly good at pretending there was genuine chemistry between us.

“Now, Lucy, I don't mean to pry—” Hamish said, a mug of black decaf coffee sitting before him. He was relaxed and content, proving just how delighted he was to accept me into his family. “But I can see the way you and my son look at each other. How long does an old man like me have to wait before I might be blessed with grandchildren?”

I nearly choked on my next inhale, but turned it into a laugh at the last second.

“Hamish!” Beatrice gasped, tapping her husband’s arm in a chastising gesture.

“Dad—” Elijah groaned.

“What?” the older man chuckled, shrugging. “It’s very clear that you two kids are in love. Of course, I don’t mean to imply you should skip the important steps of an appropriately timed engagement and a wedding, but I am curious to know when the next generation of Deans might grace this city.”

*It’s very clear that you two kids are love ...*

Hamish Dean was more easily fooled than I ever could have imagined. Elijah and I were most certainly not in love, and yet his father made the declaration with such ease and confidence, it was as if he was commenting on the fact that the sky was blue.

Under the pretense of giving my fake boyfriend a loving glance, I turned my face away from his father and stepmother to catch his eye. There was panic and discomfort evident in his gaze, not only because he hadn’t expected his father to be so bold, but also because he wasn’t sure how to handle the question. It wasn’t something we’d prepared for ahead of time.

But, he was under enough pressure, so I placed a hand on his thigh under the table and subtly shook my head.

When I turned back around, Beatrice was still pursing her lips at her husband and silently telling him to mind his business. However, I could tell from the sparkle in her eyes that she was also curious if there was hope for grandchildren in the future.

I couldn’t give them that hope, but I could at least quell the



conversation.

“It’s all right,” I told them with a light laugh. “I’ve always wanted children and would love to be a mother one day, but I think we’re taking things slowly for the moment.”

It was the right thing to say. Both Hamish and Beatrice beamed.

“That’s great to hear,” said Hamish.

“You have such a lovely, warm aura, Lucille,” added Beatrice, who insisted on calling me by my full name no matter what. “You will make a wonderful mother.”

“Yes, she will,” murmured Elijah.

All three of us turned to look at him. His voice was soft, tinged with an emotion I couldn’t quite place. He was staring at me, his hand resting over the top of mine where I rested it on top of his leg.

For the briefest of moments, my carefully constructed boundary wall crumbled.

“And you will make a wonderful father,” I told him. I meant it.

It was as if the words caused him physical pain to hear. He hid it well enough that I was pretty sure the older couple didn’t notice, but I knew that I had once again misspoken. An icy shell froze over him just as it had when I’d asked about his mother last week.

He withdrew his hand from mine and I subtly removed it from his thigh, taking a sip of wine in the strange beat of silence that followed.

“Well, anyway,” laughed Beatrice, brushing off the moment with a

subdued look of concern in her stepson's direction. "Lucille, I hope you won't deny me the sheer pleasure of showing you old pictures of Elijah when he was a child."

I giggled. "Of course not."

She rose from her seat, reaching out her hand and gesturing for me to follow her out of the dining room. I obeyed, keeping a soft smile on my face as I left Elijah behind at the table with his father.

Beatrice, with all the affection and radiance of an old friend or close family member, took my hand and brought me further into the house where a less formal sitting area was situated underneath an atrium-style ceiling. Two entire sides of the room were made of glass, overlooking a lovely little garden full of greenery.

She brought me to a chaise by the windows where the fading autumn light cast a golden glow against my back, and collected a stack of photo albums from the bookcases along the far wall. Settling down beside me, Beatrice nudged me with her shoulder and cracked open the first album.

"Of course, I didn't know Elijah until he was already in his twenties, but I love him like my own son," she explained softly. "He was such an adorable boy, and I never had children of my own with my first husband—"

She paused, smiling sheepishly as if she hadn't meant to reveal such a personal thing. I had no idea what her story was—Elijah hadn't explained who Beatrice was before she married his father—but I felt the urge to assure her that I was comfortable in her presence. In some ways, she reminded me of my own mother. My mother would never wear Dior to dinner or eat from a silver spoon, but their gentle kindness was the same.

“I know Elijah is very fond of you,” I told her. “I can tell he cares deeply about you.”

“Thank you for saying that,” she murmured, blinking a few times before turning the page.

The first few shots in the album were old polaroids of a baby boy in a hospital bassinet, swaddled in a cheerful blue blanket. Elijah. I couldn’t stop myself from grinning.

“He was so cute,” I whispered.

“Don’t you think?” giggled Beatrice. “He used to have the deepest dimples—look! They faded as he grew older, but they still pop out a bit when he smiles.”

I grinned. “I’ve noticed that. He has a nice smile.”

It wasn’t something I said to convince her how much I adored her stepson. I meant it. Elijah’s inherently mischievous yet boyish smile was one of the first things that captured my attention. Whenever I did anything to make that smile appear, I felt I’d accomplished something great.

Beatrice turned to the next page, showing photos of Elijah still as an infant in the hospital, but cradled in various family members’ arms.

“This was his mother,” she told me, her voice so quiet that I had to lean closer to hear.

The woman holding Elijah in her arms was dressed in a hospital gown, grinning from the narrow cot with a bright smile on her face. She was *beautiful*. Beautiful in the way that was utterly undeniable. Beauty in its purest form.

In the quiet that sank into the room around us, my heart broke for both the mother and child in that photo. Neither one of them knew that they would one day be parted from each other far too soon. The way that Hamish—thirty years younger but just as tall and imposing in the photos—looked at her and his son spoke of true, absolute love.

“She was beautiful,” I forced myself to say past a tightening throat.

“I never met Eloise,” Beatrice explained. “I never even knew of Hamish until years after her passing. But, I was told she was one of the kindest people you could ever meet. A truly beautiful soul. I always worried that I would never be able to compare to that, but then I learned that there are different kinds of love we will experience in life.”

I glanced at her in silent question.

“The way that my husband loves me is not the same way that he loved his first wife, just as the way I love him is not the same as how I loved *my* first husband,” she continued. “We were both very different people when we loved the ones we lost. When he came into my life, it was like I had started a new chapter. I wasn’t replacing what I no longer had, but supplementing the love that would never truly leave me.”

Beatrice was a widow, too. I didn’t know. Elijah had failed to mention so many things. But why should he divulge the personal details of his family members to a stranger for the sake of a fake relationship?

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I told her. “And I know we’ve only just met, but it makes me so happy to know that both you and Hamish got a second chance at love.”

“Oh, you are the sweetest thing,” sighed Beatrice, wrapping an arm

around my shoulders. “You are just what that young man needs.”

I tried not to flinch.

“My parents—they’re high school sweethearts,” I said by way of explanation. “So, I think I’ve always had a little too much faith in love.”

That was why I’d been so utterly crushed by what happened with Derek. All my life, I grew up believing that love was pure—that, once you felt it, it was *forever*.

“There’s no such thing as too much faith in love,” Beatrice assured me. “Only too little faith.”

With a nod and a smile, I nudged her to turn to the next page. After that, the conversation drifted away from the sad and sorrowful. I had no idea what Elijah and his father were up to, but Beatrice and I spent the next half hour pouring over pictures of Elijah on his first day of school, dressed up smartly in his private school uniform. He was a skinny, awkward kid with bony joints and ears that stuck out a little too far from his head, all of which I found incredibly endearing.

As a child, Elijah was always smiling ... and his mother was usually in the background smiling just the same. At his birthday parties and soccer games and holiday celebrations. I watched him age through photographs, growing into his handsome features and gaining muscle little by little over the years.

The photo album ended around the time of Elijah’s freshman year of high school. Before Beatrice could reach for the next one, two broad male figures appeared in the doorway.

Hamish and Elijah found us at last, the spice of an expensive cigar

hanging around them and hinting at what they'd been up to while the women were cooing over baby photos.

I smiled at Elijah, who remained at the threshold while Hamish approached his wife with pure joy on his face.

Rather than answering my smile, he looked away.

“We should probably go,” he announced.

I fought the urge to sigh. He'd taken one look at the albums and shut down once again. It was as if any mention of the life he'd had before his mother passed away was completely unbearable. I suppose *that* was why he had a devoted therapist.

But, at the same time, it wasn't my business. I wasn't actually his girlfriend.

With that cold reminder washing down my spine, I rose from the chaise and joined Elijah at his side.

“Must you go already?” asked Beatrice. “Stay for a little while longer, Elijah.”

Feeling the urge to come to his rescue once again, I spoke up before he was forced to make an excuse to his stepmother's face.

“It's all right, Beatrice. I'm afraid I am feeling a little tired. Thank you for inviting me to dinner.”

“We'll see you again next Sunday, right?” Beatrice asked.

She looked so desperately hopeful that I couldn't bring myself to acknowledge the fact that one day, sooner rather than later, they would never

see me again.

“Yes, of course.”

“Don’t take a cab home, you two,” his father spoke up, fishing around the pocket of his sport coat. “Drive her home in the Benz, Elijah.”

Elijah raised his eyebrows at his father. “The Benz—are you sure?”

“Well, take the keys before I change my mind,” chortled Hamish, tossing them at Elijah across the room, who caught them with expert precision. “It’s parked right outside on the curb.”

After a round of heartfelt goodbyes, I followed Elijah out of the house. Without a word, he led me to a sleek silver Mercedes Benz parallel parked on the street. It was the kind of understated car that was obviously very luxurious without being ostentatious. The kind of car wealthy people drove in Manhattan when they didn’t want to become break-in bait.

Silently and still avoiding my gaze, Elijah opened the passenger side door for me. Feeling as though I’d done something terribly wrong, I slid onto the supple leather seat and waited for him to come around the driver’s side. It wasn’t until we were both buckled in and the engine was humming that he finally spoke.

He rested his hands on the wheel, still parked in front of his childhood home, and sighed quietly.

“My father has *never* let me drive this car.”

“Oh.”

“I’ve never seen him so happy,” he continued, talking to the windshield instead of my face. “I mean, he’s been happy since he—since Beatrice. But

this is something else entirely. I've been trying my entire life to get him to treat me like this and all it took was—”

All it took was me. All it took was a lie.

I struggled to figure out what to say.

“They're very nice. Beatrice, especially. She's sweet.”

“Yeah—”

Quietly, Elijah pulled out of the space and steered us toward Midtown where he would drop me off at Gabriella's house, rather than bring me back to the apartment where I was sure his father and stepmother assumed I spent most of my time. I'd never even seen where he lived. Whenever we were together, we were playing house in empty apartments.

If that wasn't a metaphor, I didn't know what was.

“I feel like shit,” I admitted aloud when we turned right down Second Avenue.

“Yeah,” he muttered. “Me, too.”

“Maybe we should call it off,” I suggested lightly. “Before they get too attached.”

“We can't. It's too late now. Might as well follow through.”

At that point, my patience with his icy attitude ran out. I huffed in frustration.

“Why are you so angry right now?” I asked.

Elijah tightened his grip on the steering wheel and shot me a sideways



glance. "I'm not angry."

"Could've fooled me."

"I'm *not*."

"It seems like you're pissed that your parents like me, but wasn't that the whole point? I mean, I know this whole entire thing is a lie, but I was barely pretending back there, Elijah. They're good people."

"Parent," he corrected. "Singular."

I scoffed. "She loves you like a mother loves a son."

"Whatever."

"What's your problem?" I snapped. "You're acting like a child."

Finally, Elijah looked me in the eyes. Frustration seemed to be the most dominant feeling roiling within him.

"I guess I'm just a little uncomfortable about the unbalanced exchange of information happening between us," he grumbled.

"What does that even mean?"

"It means that you were just flipping through my entire life story in an album, but I barely know anything about you except that your ex cheated on you."

"Jesus Christ," I scoffed. "If you wanted to know anything about me, all you had to do was ask."

"Oh, really? Then tell me, Lucy, why have you been living on your friend's couch for the past three months?"

“You, of all people, should know how tricky the New York rental market—”

“Yeah, and I, of all people, am also well aware of the advantages a professional broker at one of the largest firms in the city would have if she wanted a decent one-bedroom anywhere in this city. Your salary isn’t exactly pennies, Lucy, especially not now that I’ve—”

“Not now that what? That you’ve contributed so much to my commission?” I hissed. “Is that what this is about? You think you haven’t gotten *what you’ve paid for?*”

“That’s not what I—”

We jolted to a stop, both of us too engaged in the argument to realize traffic had started to pile up the further downtown we drifted. Elijah muttered a curse under his breath and tapped his fingers impatiently on the wheel while we waited at a particularly clogged red light.

“It’s none of your business where I live or who I live with,” I said after a moment. “*You’re* the one who needs a fake girlfriend to play house with at family dinners. It’s not my fault you didn’t realize that would involve me learning a few things about your background.”

“I didn’t say—”

I wasn’t done, though. I cut him off. “And just because you have serious trauma about the loss of your mother doesn’t mean you don’t deserve to love somebody someday, you know? Do you really think that’s what she would’ve wanted? For you to be perpetually single? For you to completely shut down at the mention of having children?”

“I’m not talking about my mother with you,” he muttered, his tone low

and menacing with a warning.

“Why not?” I snapped. “Because I’m not Ronnie? Because this isn’t a formal therapy session that you can just walk out of when you get too uncomfortable? Some things are unavoidable, Elijah. One day, you’ll have to learn how to talk about them.”

“You want to talk about avoidance?” he half-shouted back, grunting in frustration when we hit yet another red light. “Let’s talk about the fact that you’re totally incapable of being alone!”

“What?” I exclaimed, jolting back in surprise.

“In fact, you’re so incapable of being alone, Lucy Astor, that you’ll make up *any* excuse for why you can’t get your own place to live. You’re so codependent that you willingly agreed to become somebody’s fake girlfriend just for a smidgeon of attention!”

The car started inching forward again, but I’d heard enough.

“Stop the car,” I demanded.

“Lucy—” Elijah sighed, deflating ever so slightly.

“Stop this *fucking* car right now, Elijah Dean, or I swear to *God* you’ll regret the next breath you dare to inhale into your pathetic, self-righteous lungs.”

“Bloody Christ,” he muttered, but he did as I said. As soon as there was an opening, he pulled over to the curb. I had my seatbelt unbuckled and the door open before he even came to a complete stop.

“I need some space,” I said, climbing out of the car.

Elijah groaned, the sound colored with both annoyance and regret.

“Lucy, you can’t walk home. It’s thirty blocks. You’re wearing heels.”

“I’m not walking home, asswipe,” I snapped, hands braced on the edge of the door. A passing pedestrian shot me a glance at the sound of the pure vitriol in my tone, but I ignored them. “I’m taking the subway, like the rest of the lower class, couch-crashing people in this city do.”

Elijah opened his mouth—either to continue the argument or offer an explanation for his attitude—but I slammed the door in his face and marched down the avenue without a backward glance. I didn’t care if he stayed parked there or drove off. I simply wrapped my arms around myself and blended into the sea of people having entirely unique Sunday evenings of their own.

*Idiot*, I thought to myself. *How dare he?*

He started the argument. It was his fault. If he was capable of being even the slightest bit vulnerable, then maybe I could be a real friend to him, not just a piece of ass who was doing him a favor. Clearly, he didn’t want that from me. He didn’t want me in that way.

Elijah didn’t want me at all ... because he let me go. He didn’t come after me. I made it all the way back home—if that’s truly what I could call it—without a single message or voicemail from him on my phone.

And that alone spoke a thousand words.

## Chapter Seventeen: *Dean*

“You seem upset.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because we’re ten minutes into our session and all you’ve done is glare at the carpet.”

“I’m fine,” I grumbled.

Veronica was not convinced. After our last session ended poorly, I’d apologized to her, but here I was again fighting the urge to storm out. I couldn’t help it.

Maybe Lucy and I were more similar than I originally thought. We were both avoiding difficult truths.

My best friend sighed and placed her notepad down on the coffee table between us. Then, without explanation, she stood and smoothed the front of her trousers.

“Come with me,” she said.

“What?”

“You heard me. Get up.”

“Where are we going?”

“Out.”

“Out?”

She rolled her eyes, visibly annoyed that I wasn't eager to go along with whatever game she was playing.

"I'm taking off my Dr. Ridley hat. We're going for a walk in the park."

"The park?"

"Yes, Elijah. There's a rather big one not far from here. Perhaps you've heard of it? Central Park?"

Her sarcasm made me bristle, but I didn't protest. It was a nice day outside, possibly one of the last breaths of warm weather we would have until Spring. Spending the morning outside with my friend sounded a lot better than cooping myself up in an office with my therapist.

"Fine," I sighed at last, getting up from the sofa.

Veronica offered me a smile and led the way out of her office, murmuring to her secretary that she'd be back in a little while.

"Don't you have other patients to see this morning?" I asked when we were out on the street.

"My ten o'clock cancelled, so we actually have plenty of time."

I merely grunted. Veronica might have insisted that this was now friend-time instead of psychiatry-time, but I could tell she was up to something. She was lulling me into a false sense of security, bribing me with sunshine and the glory of classic Manhattan scenery.

Or maybe, I was being a little too defensive. Maybe, like always, she was just trying to be a good friend to me.

Still, I didn't say anything. Veronica steered us toward a food cart on

the corner, ordering two black coffees and shooting me a glare when I attempted to pay for them. She shoved one of the steaming paper cups into my hand, pursed her lips at my continued silence, and marched into the lush green park.

Thirty-four years I'd lived in New York City and the sheer beauty of Central Park never failed to soothe me. To have a green space that was so wild and diverse and unexpected in the middle of a behemoth of steel and concrete was a precious thing. Like a child who'd been on the verge of a temper tantrum, I found the peacefulness of the delicately browning leaves and winding dirt paths calming me within minutes.

I let out a loud sigh. "Sorry."

Veronica nudged my arm with her elbow to indicate that I didn't truly have anything to apologize for. At least, not where she was concerned.

"So," she began, the long shadows cast by Billionaire's Row looming behind us. "I take it that dinner didn't go well yesterday."

"Actually, it went really well," I corrected her, frowning as I took a sip of the rich, thick-as-mud coffee. "They adored her. Beatrice especially."

"You don't sound happy about it."

There was a question wrapped inside that statement. She was implying that it made no sense for me to be annoyed that my father and stepmother liked Lucy, considering that was the entire point of this ridiculous scheme.

The problem was, I didn't know why I was so mad in the first place. I didn't know why I had started that fight with Lucy last night. I didn't know why I couldn't just drive her home and enjoy the victory we'd won together.

I didn't know why I let her walk away from me.

"I think—" I trailed off, admiring the view of the pond that hailed on the southeast corner of the park, teeming with geese and pigeons alike. "I think maybe the problem is that they *did* like her. They fell for it easily. *Too* easily."

"Well, Lucy is a very likable woman. Personally, I also adored her within two minutes of meeting her."

"They were so happy," I muttered, unable to keep the misery out of my tone. "I know this is what they wanted for me, but I think it just pissed me off knowing that this was the only thing I could've done to make them that happy ... and it's a lie, because it's the one thing I don't want for myself."

Veronica nodded thoughtfully. I could tell that she was treading the line carefully, trying to figure out how to talk to me as a friend instead of my therapist on a Monday morning.

"Why don't you want that, Elijah?" she finally asked. "Doesn't everyone want to be in love?"

As if to punctuate her point, we passed by a couple having their pictures taken on a romantic wooden bridge. They were smiling brightly at each other, the photographer cooing at them for how lovely they looked.

I turned away.

I didn't want to answer Veronica's question. The answer felt stupid inside my own mind; it would sound even more idiotic if I tried to utter it out loud.

So, I deflected.



“Beatrice kept getting this starry-eyed look on her face like she was going to burst into tears while we ate,” I explained. “And then, she brought Lucy into the library and showed her a bunch of old baby pictures.”

Veronica chuckled. “Classic.”

“It was the kind of thing my mother would’ve done.”

She furrowed her brow in concern, guiding us down a path that was less crowded with meandering people.

“Not to sound like a typical psychologist right now, but I think a lot of this stems back to her, Elijah. I know you love Beatrice, but it’s also clear that you still haven’t quite fully accepted her into your heart.”

It was easier to talk about my stepmother than it was to talk about Lucy, so I answered before Veronica could bring the topic back to the woman who undoubtedly wanted nothing to do with me at this point.

“I think it was harder for me that Beatrice turned out to be as perfect as she is,” I admitted. It was the kind of thing I’d only say to Veronica, the kind of thing I struggled to say even to myself.

“You expected an evil stepmother.”

“I kind of hoped for it, honestly.”

“Why?”

I kicked a stray pebble off the path, frustration and shame roiling deep within me. “Because the fact that my father found someone just as beautiful and kind and graceful as my mother proves that she was replaceable to him ... and that isn’t *fair*. No one can replace my mother.”

“I don’t think your father sees her as a replacement.”

“How do you know? He’s a traditional man. He lost his first perfect wife, so he went and found himself a different version of the same thing.”

“I would argue that your mother and Beatrice are very different from each other,” Veronica offered.

“Whatever,” I snapped. “The point is, I’d rather die alone than deal with the possibility that someone might replace *me* like that.”

“Or, that you would ever love someone as much as your father loved Eloise and run the risk of losing them ... am I right?”

“You make it sound like I’m a petulant child with abandonment issues,” I grumbled.

“No offense, but you are,” she countered. When I glared at her, she held up her hands in surrender, her expression soft and patient as ever. “Your inner child is still wounded by the loss you endured. Losing a parent before you’ve had the chance to fully develop your brain and your overall awareness of yourself and the world around you is extremely traumatic. So, when you lash out against the consequences of your mother’s death, that child’s voice is the one who is speaking the loudest.”

“I thought you said you were talking the Dr. Ridley hat off.”

“I’m afraid I’m incurably analytical, no matter what,” she laughed. Without prompting, she took a seat at a wooden bench and waited for me to join her before continuing. “Also, I care about you, Elijah. I love you.”

I raised my eyebrows at her. “Oh?”

She rolled her eyes and snorted. “I love you *as a friend*. It’s platonic

love.”

“Right. I guess I love you, too,” I mumbled, running a hand through my hair. I wasn’t in the mood for all that mushy-gushy nonsense.

Veronica’s eyes twinkled with amusement at my begrudging response.

“There are different kinds of love. That’s all I’m saying. I mean, think about the way you love your stepmother versus the way you love your mother.”

“They’re incomparable,” I argued.

Unperturbed, Veronica nodded. “Yes, they are.”

“Right.”

“The same way that your father’s love for Beatrice and his love for Eloise are incomparable.”

“Can you just get to the point?” I groaned.

“What I’m trying to say is, your father did not erase his love for your mother when he started loving Beatrice. He supplemented it. He grieved in an impressively healthy way, then moved on with admirable grace for such an old, traditional man,” Veronica murmured.

“Okay ... and?”

“So, you’re not replaceable, Elijah. Love is not a finite resource. You can love and lose and love again. You show people platonic and familial love every day despite the loss of your mother. Why do you shy away from romantic love?”

“Because it’s a waste of time.”

“How do you know?”

“Excuse me?”

“How do you know if love is a waste of time if you’ve never bothered to try wasting your time on it? How do you know it won’t make you feel as though there is *more* time in your life? More space and possibility to live and grow?”

“You’re one to talk,” I snapped back. “It’s not like you’ve had a consistent track record for serious relationships since I’ve known you.”

Veronica pursed her lips, but she let the pointed remark glide right off her.

“We’re not talking about me right now,” she reminded me. “But, if you must know, I’m actually seeing someone.”

I startled. “What? Who?”

She bit her lip. “Zachary Aldridge.”

“You’re joking. *My* Zach? From Harvard?”

“He’s not *yours*,” she snorted. “And yes, that’s the one. While you and Lucy were off doing God-knows-what at the club a couple of weeks ago, Luke introduced me to him. We—well, after you left ... I went home with him.”

“And you didn’t think to mention this until now?”

“You don’t really ask about my dating life.”

“Because I didn’t think you had one.”

Veronica quirked an eyebrow at me. It was a challenge. Normally, I wouldn't back down from banter, but this was my closest friend and I didn't want to risk screwing things up with her in the middle of everything else I was dealing with.

"I'm surprised," she muttered coolly. "Personal attacks aren't usually your style when you're feeling defensive."

A trickle of shame went down my spine. "I'm sorry. That was rude."

"It's all right."

"I hope things between you and Zach continue going well."

"Thanks, Elijah."

Even though I appreciated Veronica for all her patience and loyalty, I suddenly felt like I wanted to be alone. I shifted on the bench.

"Would it be all right if I cut the session short and went for a walk on my own?" I asked her.

"Well, technically, this isn't a session ... but, yes, of course, as your friend, if you want to be alone right now—"

She offered me a tentative smile.

"Thanks, Ronnie," I murmured, pulling her in for a quick, one-armed hug.

"See you later."

Veronica waved goodbye as I got up and walked away from her, heading deeper into the less populated area of Central Park.

It was a beautiful day. The warm weather was working in overdrive to soothe my sour mood and I tried my best to let it work its magic.

The gentle breeze, wafting across dappled sunlight splashed across the pavement before me, ruffled my hair. Just like that, I remembered a similarly breezy day barely a month ago when Lucy entered that cafe like a goddess traveling on the wind. Back then, I thought I'd sent myself on a fool's errand.

In retrospect, I truly never expected Lucy to say yes to this convoluted scheme of mine. But she was so unlike anyone I'd ever met before, I should have known better than to think I could predict anything about her.

I cursed under my breath, trying to shake Lucy from my thoughts. It was useless. No matter how far I walked, ignoring the fact that I was going in the opposite direction of my office, I couldn't clear my head.

I couldn't get her off my mind. It was torture. Except, I'd never known that torture could feel this good.

## Chapter Eighteen: *Astor*

I was tired.

No, I was *fed up*. I was done with men and their flakiness and their pathetic mommy issues.

Maybe I was cursed. Clearly, men had a difficult time committing to me. After all, I was with my ex-boyfriend for years without a whisper of a proposal, but one sloppy night with my friend resulted in them being engaged and expecting a baby.

Elijah was exactly like Derek. He was flimsy and moody and totally incapable of understanding what he wanted. One second, he was begging to put his hands on my body and moaning my name as if it was the melody of his favorite song. The next second, he was cold as ice and accusing me of being codependent.

He was ridiculous. His own personal issues caused him to lash out at me. Elijah was so unwilling to accept that he was flawed in his own right that he resorted to throwing personal attacks at people who were only trying to help him.

I didn't need that in my life. I didn't need any of that noncommittal bullshit. Why couldn't people just say what they meant? Why couldn't people just act with true intentions?

Then again, Elijah Dean didn't owe me any kind of commitment beyond our foolish bargain. He owed me the second half of the one hundred grand he'd promised me. That was all. I wasn't sure I had the stomach to carry out the rest of this farce long enough for Hamish to name his son CEO

of Dean Properties. I'd survive. I had the first fifty-thousand, as well as the commission from the sale of the factory in Harlem and all the other smaller properties Elijah had purchased these past few weeks.

I didn't need him anymore. I had enough for a deposit on a decent apartment—which I *was* actively looking for, despite what he'd suggested about my pathological need to be stuck on my best friend's couch. Furthermore, I'd already finalized a large sum of money to be deposited into an account for my sister, which she could use for whatever she needed in terms of preparing for law school. On top of that, my parents would be surprised this Christmas with an all-expenses-paid vacation to Cancún.

I'd accomplished what I wanted. Sure, without that second fifty grand and Elijah's continued contributions to my commission income, I would have to keep fighting tooth and nail for my fair share of opportunities at Empire Realty. Yet, thanks to my participation in the Harlem sale and my so-called direct connection to Dean Properties, things were improving.

In short, Elijah's assistance was no longer an absolute necessity in my life. I could get by without him—could figure it out on my own.

I was certain he would find a way to accomplish his goals without me. He could convince a different woman to lie to his father's face for him.

Muttering under my breath, I fumbled with the ring of keys in my hand to open up the wide front doors of the property Empire Realty would be listing on the market shortly. It was a warm day for October, warmer than it had been the day before. It was Tuesday, which meant I hadn't heard a word from Elijah in two days.

“Good,” I grunted to myself, stomping across the empty foyer. “Screw him.”



Luckily, I'd come to the property alone that morning, so no one was around to hear me talk to myself. Empire Realty's usual team of photographers were overwhelmed at the moment with the sale of a beautifully historic theater in Queens, so I volunteered to grab one of the spare cameras and take matters into my own hands.

The house was a large, standalone property with beachfront access in Belle Harbor. It had taken me ages to get here, riding the train all the way down to the bottom of Brooklyn before switching to a local bus at Coney Island Station. I didn't mind. It was nice to get out of Manhattan for the day, to smell the ocean breeze. I'd always forgotten how close the seaside was. New York City contained boundless multitudes.

The property I was photographing had significant square footage and would be listed for four-point-six million because of it, but it was also fairly outdated. The woman selling it had been hanging on to it since her grandparents purchased it several decades ago, waiting for the value to skyrocket before she let it go. Otherwise, the woman seemed to barely use the house. It had minimal furniture, threadbare carpeting, and a dusty kitchen with appliances that were nearly as old as I was.

Still, I did my best to make the place look appealing in the pictures. Aesthetics were worth everything in real estate. Sometimes, they trumped location. If a house was attractive enough, many potential buyers were willing to move outside their preferred neighborhood.

Belle Harbor wasn't exactly unpopular, though, so I knew we'd have no trouble selling it in a heartbeat. I'd likely walk away with a quarter-million dollars in commission.

*See? You don't need that man at all,* I reminded myself.

I moved around the property in quiet solitude, flinging open the heavy curtains to let the natural light pour in. Upstairs, I kicked off my heels and spent time rearranging the scattering of antique furniture to make the rooms look slightly more attractive.

Sometimes, Empire Realty hired a third-party company to come in and decorate an entire apartment with temporary furniture, but it was an expensive service that some sellers didn't bother with. Typically, such luxury was reserved for the high-rise odes to unattainable wealth back in Manhattan.

This was just a humble beach house in the less-desirable part of Long Island. It was the sort of place that was overlooked by people who preferred status and prestige more than anything else. Those sort of people would hunt for a beach house in the Hamptons or Montauk, not this narrow little island sticking out awkwardly from the mainland.

"Their loss," I thought aloud. The neighborhood of Belle Harbor was nice. It was charming and peaceful, the street clean and quiet. Despite the high property values, there was a humility in the air that felt comforting and safe.

If I could afford it, I might consider buying this house—for my family to enjoy. It would be a great place for my parents to retire to, and I knew Luke and Lily would enjoy spending long summer weekends here.

Maybe one day I would be able to afford it. Maybe.

I finished snapping pictures of the informal family room on the upper floor and the bedrooms on the second floor, so I headed downstairs to tackle the rest of the house. The entire process was mind-numbing enough to distract me from the majority of my frustrated thoughts. Before long, I found myself humming as I propped open the back doors and allowed the fresh

ocean air to flood the space. It wouldn't contribute anything to the pictures, but it soothed my soul, nonetheless.

Losing myself in my work, my phone and email inbox ignored for the moment, I wandered around the expansive house and snapped pictures to the best of my ability. Hopefully, I could manage to make them appear professional-quality with a little bit of editing.

When I wandered back to the entryway to photograph the sweeping staircase that greeted you at the front door, I noticed someone was standing on the porch outside. I'd left the main door open, only locking the screen door in place because the quiet, empty street beyond had given me a semblance of security.

Tentatively, I stepped closer to the doorway, thinking it might be a curious neighbor or a friend of the seller.

The stranger noticed me right away, smiling warmly and waving at me through the barrier of the screen door. That's when I realized that he wasn't a stranger at all.

"Mr. Lloyd?" I called out, undoing the latch and opening the door to find him, as usual, dressed to the nines. He looked utterly out of place among the beach community, but his demeanor was relaxed enough that it didn't seem as though he cared.

"Please, Ms. Astor, called me Sean," he replied, reaching out to shake my hand.

"In that case, please call me Lucy."

Sean Lloyd had been one of the bidders on the Harlem factory. The grin on his face and confidence glittering in his eyes proved that he wasn't a

sore loser, though.

Elijah had warned me about him a couple of weeks ago. He said the rumor mill reported that Sean dealt in shady business back in Chicago where he was from, and his outrageous amount of cash flow despite not coming from a historically wealthy family was questionable.

Now that I thought about it, Elijah's advice sounded ridiculous. Just because someone hadn't come from a fancy family like his didn't mean they couldn't become rich and successful at a fairly young age.

Perhaps Elijah was more prejudiced than he realized.

"I apologize for the intrusion, Lucy," Sean said. "It's been a while since we've seen each other, hasn't it?"

I shrugged. "Not since the viewing at the old factory, right?"

Something shifted in his gaze—something I didn't quite understand as his smile deepened and he crooned, "Right. Not since then."

"What are you doing all the way out here?" I asked him.

"I heard this place would be going on the market soon. I was hoping I could get a look at it and possibly put in an offer before it's listed."

I frowned. "I'm just here to take pictures, not give a private tour."

"That's quite all right, but at least allow me to get in a good word before the Deans swoop in," he chuckled.

I tensed at the mention of Elijah's family. This was normal procedure. It happened often in New York. Real estate came and went so rapidly that I was regularly fending off attempts to win access to private tours and

exclusive bids with pure flattery. Most of the time, I told them to get lost and come back when the listing went live.

But ... hadn't I been doing that exact thing for Elijah these past couple of weeks? I'd granted him access to a half dozen different properties before they were officially on the market. Meanwhile, I spread my legs for him during those exclusive showings.

I was an embarrassment.

Doing my best to keep the shameful heat off my face, I smiled at Sean.

"Fine," I told him, stepping aside and allowing him enough room to step over the threshold. "I suppose it won't do any harm to give you a sneak peek, but I will *not* be communicating any offers made."

Sean wandered through the grand archway to the main sitting area to my left and glanced over his shoulder with a smirk. "Not even if I offer ten million?"

Before I could stop myself, I scoffed. "Don't be ridiculous."

Unbothered by my tone, he merely shrugged and moved further into the house. Wholly responsible for letting him inside, I had no choice but to play chaperone and follow after him.

"Isn't that what Elijah Dean does?" Sean countered after a moment of quiet. "He sneaks in to these properties, offers far above the asking price, and wins some of the most coveted real estate in the city before any of the little guys even know it is available. That's the strategy, no?"

I raised my eyebrows at Sean, confused by his tone. He sounded simultaneously amused, annoyed, and ... something else. Something I

couldn't quite name. Something vaguely dark.

“I don't work for Dean Properties, so I am not aware of the official company protocol.”

“Please don't think me a fool. We both know you're well aware of what goes on at Dean Properties.”

I regretted letting him inside the house. Maybe Elijah *was* right to warn me about this guy. I remembered why he made me so uncomfortable the first time we met. Something about him felt slimy and false, as if he would do or say *anything* to get his way. As if he had been fighting his entire life for the status he now enjoyed and had lost a certain semblance of morality along the way.

Crossing my arms against my chest, I stared him dead in the eyes. “Excuse me? What is that supposed to mean?”

Sean let out an easy laugh. “Forgive me. I merely meant to imply that you are a smart woman, Lucy. I assume you know how all of the largest real estate firms in this city do their business. That is all.”

He wasn't wrong. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling he was merely saving face.

In spite of that, it was hard to deny that Sean Lloyd was handsome. He was taller and broader than Elijah in a way that was overwhelmingly intimidating, but I suppose many women were attracted to that sort of thing. He kept his dark blond hair somewhat long and styled with an almost European effortlessness. His strong jawline and firm muscles reminded me of a Viking.

Elijah, with his dark hair and long, lean swimmer's body was more my

type.

Not that it mattered. I was done with him. I was done with all men.

Or was I?

The way Sean was looking at me suggested he saw me as more than a broker who could help him gain the upper hand. I'd bet anything he'd sought me out on purpose. Perhaps he'd called the office and my assistant had told him I would be out here. I'd never let Nathan survive it if he was giving out my location that willingly ... but it wasn't as if I was in any danger.

Sean was just a businessman. A businessman. He wanted something from me ... and I suppose it wouldn't be hard to want something from him in return.

"I'm finishing up in here, so I'm afraid I have to kick you out now," I said to him.

Without waiting for his response, I turned and headed into the dining room where I'd left my purse and the camera bag. As I suspected, he followed after me without prompting.

*Screw Elijah, I thought to myself for the umpteenth time. If he really thinks I'm so desperate and codependent, he can go to hell.*

His words on Sunday evening wounded me. They were mean and unnecessary, designed to hurt my feelings because he was feeling bad about himself. It was blatantly immature behavior.

I doubted someone like Sean would treat me like that. He definitely seemed like the kind of man who didn't mince words or mess around.

Even though it was childish of me, I felt the urge to get back at Elijah

for the way he'd used me. After all, maybe he didn't really care about convincing his father he had a serious girlfriend. Maybe all he wanted was a connection at Empire Realty and some midday sex. I'd certainly delivered. I'd willingly lied for him. I'd lied to my brother. I'd even asked my brother to lie to our parents.

Perhaps I was even more angry at myself than I was at him.

Perhaps that was why, when I turned my back to Sean and felt him approach slowly and confidently until he was standing a little too close for professional standards, I didn't back away.

I simply collected my things and turned around, finding myself mere inches away from him, caught between the counter and his broad, unforgiving body.

"I was wondering—" he murmured, fully aware of how close he'd gotten to me from the wicked glint in his eyes. Something about it sent a thrill through me, an odd mixture of trepidation and animal desire.

He *was* handsome. There wasn't much chemistry between us. He didn't banter with me like Elijah ...

*Stop it, I chastised myself. Stop comparing everyone to him. You're pathetic.*

"Yes?" I replied to Sean smoothly.

"Can I see you again? Soon?"

"In what context?" I countered, deciding to play dumb. "I'm overseeing an open house for a commercial property tomorrow afternoon in Chelsea. Feel free to stop by."



Sean chuckled. "I get it. You appreciate it when a man is more forward with what he wants, don't you?"

Discomfort wafted down the length of my spine. I told myself the uneasiness I felt was merely a result of the general aversion to the male species I'd developed ever since Derek broke my heart. Elijah was the only one who ...

There I went again, making it about *him*.

Forcing myself to focus on the man before me who was most certainly *not* Elijah, I cocked my head to the side.

"I don't like having my time wasted," I replied.

"I wouldn't dare do such a thing to an exquisite woman like yourself," he murmured, daring to come just the slightest bit closer. "From the moment I first saw you, I was intrigued. Please allow me to take you out on a date."

"A date?"

"Yes, a date. Not just some flimsy offer of dinner and drinks, either. A proper date."

I hesitated. Hadn't I just been cursing the entire male species a mere hour ago? Wouldn't I then be betraying myself if I accepted a date from one of them?

No, the only man I truly had a problem with at that moment was Elijah. Even Derek had begun to fade away to irrelevance in the back of my mind.

Sean wasn't my enemy.

"I'm free this Friday evening," I replied in subtle acceptance. "Let me

give you my personal number.”

He grinned at me as if he'd just won a rare prize. “Wonderful.”

Once we exchanged numbers, Sean offered to bring me back to the city in his town car. I declined as politely as possible, relieved when he accepted it with a simple shrug of his shoulders. I waited until he had slid into the back of his chauffeured car, which had been waiting for him in the driveway the entire time he was inside, and disappeared around the corner at the end of the street. Only then did I lock up the house behind me and head back to the bus stop.

I could have called a cab. That would have been an easier way to get back to the office. However, something about the way my pride had been damaged by my argument with Elijah made me feel like I had something to prove. I didn't need a chauffeur or fancy cars. I was perfectly content taking public transportation.

I was fine on my own. I didn't *need* anyone else, no matter what he said. I chose to stay with Gabriella until I was ready ... and I was *choosing* to go on a date with Sean.

And, unfortunately for Elijah, I didn't think he was a choice I felt like making anymore.

## Chapter Nineteen: *Dean*

“You’re joking,” I snarled.

“I’m afraid not, sir,” replied my father’s assistant.

“The entire building?”

“Yes, sir.”

“All forty floors?”

“—yes, sir. The entire thing.”

I fought back the urge to growl, not wanting to scare the young woman standing before me. She already looked nervous enough, perhaps worried that I was the type of man who was inclined to kill the messenger.

Instead of revealing how I truly felt in that moment, I inhaled deeply and nodded at her as if she’d merely come to report that everything was going exactly as expected throughout the entire company.

“Thank you, Jen. I will take care of it.”

She scurried out of my office quickly. The girl was a fresh hire and was already intimidated by the overall experience of working on the executive floor of Dean Properties. Perhaps I should have reined in my fury a little bit better.

But, with her gone, I did no such thing. With a grunt of annoyance, I slammed my hands on my desk and pushed away from the surface, standing up and stalking across the room. I wanted to punch something until my fists were bruised, but I was in the workplace and I couldn’t let my temper show.

That wasn't the appropriate behavior a future CEO would display.

My father was in Boston for the next few days for a conference, leaving me to temporarily take on his role. It was a test—a reward for how well things had gone at dinner on Sunday. He wanted to give me the chance to actually stand at the helm of this company.

He had no idea how badly things had fallen apart after Lucy and I left the townhouse on the Upper East Side.

Unfortunately, that was the least of my concerns that morning.

Sean Lloyd had gotten to us again. This time, it wasn't just a nightclub he'd gotten his sneaky hands on, but a massive commercial property that Dean Properties had considered as much of a win as the Harlem factory. It was a deal my father had orchestrated, offering twenty million for the skyscraper. Even though it would take another ten million to renovate, he knew the returns would be lucrative enough to repay the cost within a year or so. It was a smart move. A move that most other property developers in the city couldn't afford to make.

The sellers had accepted my father's offer. The contracts were drafted. Everything was going according to plan.

But, according to my father's assistant, Sean had swooped in. He'd offered twenty-five million *and* a stake in his company. The sellers were well within their rights to rescind their acceptance of *our* offer and there was nothing we could do about it. Apparently, the high-rise was where Sean intended to make his headquarters. Thus, his presence in New York would be permanent.

It was a huge loss. It was a rare occurrence when this company was

outbid by another ... and I knew exactly why it had happened.

I clenched my hands into fists. Sean was pissed. He was vengeful. He was angry that we'd won the Harlem property and therefore gained an extremely valuable foothold in the neighborhood. Much like me, he didn't like to lose.

I wasn't an idiot, though. I also knew that he was pissed about what had happened at the club. His pride had been wounded when I showed him that he would never belong among the Manhattan elite, no matter how much of the island he had in his portfolio.

He was lashing out. I didn't know where he got the money to do it, which was concerning enough on its own. Endless internet searches revealed that he had no family wealth or inheritance to speak of, yet the amount of cash he threw around suggested otherwise.

Who was this man? He wasn't a prodigy. He didn't have a patent that he'd sold for billions. He hadn't struck gold in some foreign territory.

Therefore, only one conclusion made sense. Sean Lloyd was a con artist. He was a fraud. He obtained his money through questionable means. Sure, there was a veritable amount of hard work involved in what he accomplished, but there was no doubt in my mind that he had his fingers dipped in shady, back-alley business to fund his day job.

He was bad news. I didn't want him in this city. I didn't want him anywhere near me ... or Lucy.

Especially Lucy.

The way he looked at her that night at the club ... my blood boiled with rage at the memory of it. From that look alone, I knew that Sean would stop

at nothing to take whatever he wanted from me and my father. He didn't just want to be a worthy adversary to Dean Properties.

He wanted our throne. He wanted it all.

Once I managed to calm down slightly, my first thought was to call my father. I wanted to ask him how he wished to proceed regarding the loss of the skyscraper.

But, if I called him and asked for advice, that would suggest I wasn't ready to handle this company on my own. If I truly wanted to show him that I could be a good CEO, I needed to figure out a way to account for the loss and put Sean in his place without running to my father for guidance.

Suddenly, the landline on my desk started ringing. Grumbling under my breath, I dropped back down into my chair and answered it.

"Yes?" I snapped.

"Sir, there's a Dr. Ridley calling for you," replied the C-suite secretary, utterly unbothered by my poisonous tone. The older woman had dealt with far worse beasts than me in all her years working for executives.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Put her through."

A few seconds later, my friend's voice sounded in my ear. "Good morning, Elijah."

"Why are you calling my business line, Ronnie?" I muttered.

"Because I figured you'd ignore me if I called your cell."

I sighed. She wasn't wrong. It wasn't anything personal—we'd made up since our tense discussion in the park earlier that week—but I rarely

checked my personal phone when I was at work.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“Have you called her yet?”

I didn’t need to ask who she was talking about.

“I’m dealing with some stuff at work right now,” I replied sternly. “I don’t have time.”

“Nice excuse.”

“Veronica—”

“Call her.”

Before I could respond, she hung up.

I slammed the phone down on the receiver and dropped my head into my hands, rubbing my temples to quell an oncoming headache.

*Call her ...* I hadn’t spoken to Lucy since she walked away from me on Sunday night. It was Friday. Soon, my father and stepmother would expect to see her sitting at their dinner table again, having no idea that none of this was real.

I wasn’t mad at Veronica for the interruption, as ridiculous as it was. She was only trying to remind me of what was important.

And the truth was ... Lucy was important. Her feelings were important. Treating her as though she was deserving of respect was important. I’d royally fucked up in that regard.

I had admitted as much to Veronica and she agreed that the best thing

to do was bridge the gap that had formed between Lucy and me with an apology.

It was the least I owed her.

She didn't have anything to be sorry for. It was all me. I was the one who'd gotten her all tangled up in this stupid fake dating situation. And for what? So I could become CEO instead of one of my distant cousins, or a random non-relative in the company? Was it really so important to me that I would use somebody like that instead of standing up to my father for once in my life?

I was the one who knew that she would be motivated by the offer of money. I knew she wasn't a New York blue blood. I knew she was struggling to earn a fair share of lucrative properties to broker at Empire Realty. I knew exactly how to take advantage of her, even if I swore to myself that wasn't what I was doing.

It was me who unapologetically used her to win the Harlem factory building. The second I learned she worked for Empire Realty that very first day we met, the scheme clicked into place.

And it wasn't as if any of this was a secret. Both of us were well aware of how we were using each other, especially in the purely physical sense.

God, the sex ... I would miss the sex ...

All in all, our exchange was uneven. Lucy had done nothing but favors for me. I should have been grateful for her, should have offered more to her. Instead, I pushed her away because ... why? Because her beauty and wit and ambition made me fall for her a little bit?

What was wrong with me?



I groaned out loud, letting my head fall directly onto my desk. It was a good thing the door was closed because anyone walking by would think I was taking a midmorning nap.

The truth was unbearable. I had fallen for Lucy. I liked her. She wasn't just a partner in crime, or a friend with benefits to me. I admired her. She was beautiful in a way that was more than merely sexually attractive.

Watching her interact with my father and stepmother with such ease had given me a glimpse into the future we might have had together if things were different. It was the kind of future I'd always been too afraid to indulge in. The kind of future I was still unsure I wanted.

Because ... what if she left me?

*What if she didn't?*

I had to call her. Even if I couldn't quite put into words how I truly felt about her—couldn't quite figure it out myself yet—I owed her an olive branch. Our argument on Sunday was my fault. She wasn't the one who was responsible for patching it up.

"All right, Ronnie," I muttered to myself as I sat up and dug my phone out of my back pocket. "Let's call this personal growth."

Before I convince myself not to, I pressed the call button on Lucy's contact entry. It rang once, then twice, then a third time when I started to worry that she would ignore me entirely.

Except, the fourth ring was cut off short and the hum of a city street in the background was audible.

There was a long pause. Then, finally, "Hello?"

I exhaled in relief. She'd answered.

"Lucy. Hi. It's Elijah."

Another pause, as if she were deciding whether or not she wanted to hang up. Fortunately, she seemed to decide against it.

"What can I do for you?" she asked. Her tone was formal. Professional. She was speaking to me as if we were merely business colleagues. As if I hadn't spent glorious hours inside her, savoring her body. As if we'd never enjoyed each other's company in any regard.

"I was wondering—I mean, first of all, I wanted to say that I'm sorry," I practically choked out.

"What?" Lucy's response was harsh and impatient. I cringed internally.

"I'm sorry that I haven't reached out in the past few days," I continued. "It wasn't fair of me to keep you in the dark."

"Let me guess—you're reaching out now because you want to make sure I'm coming to dinner on Sunday?"

"No, no. Not at all. I'm reaching out because I want to apologize for—well, for everything. What I said in the car ... I didn't mean it."

Lucy took so long to respond that I worried she'd hung up. If it wasn't for the rumble of traffic and the click of her heels, suggesting that she was walking down one of the countless city streets of New York, I would have taken her silence for absence.

"It certainly sounded like you meant it," she replied at last.

"I didn't," I insisted. "It was rude and stupid. I lashed out because I'm

an immature idiot that not even years of therapy can rectify. I might be a lost cause.”

I dared to let out a chuckle, hoping to lighten the tension, but Lucy didn't answer with a laugh of her own.

“I had a really nice time with your stepmother,” Lucy said, her voice softening around the edges despite the rigid coldness in her words. “She gave me a glimpse into your life that you'd kept from me. I didn't even know about your mother until my brother mentioned it to me while he was wasted. You made me walk into this whole thing completely blind, and then, *you* got upset at me when it went well, regardless.”

“I know.”

“This whole thing is fucked up, Elijah.”

“I know,” I repeated.

“Don't worry about the rest of the money,” she added.

“I—no. Let me pay you, Lucy.”

“I'm not a whore,” she hissed.

Even though she couldn't see me, I flinched. “That's not what I was suggesting. I just want to give you what I promised from the beginning.”

“I'm not coming to dinner. Not again. This is done. We're done here. I can't—can't do this to Beatrice. Seeing the way she was so full of hope was painful. I can't lie like you can.”

It was a sharp jab aimed to wound me. I let it strike me without backing down, knowing I deserved it.

“I know. I’m sorry. I regret everything.”

“Good. Then we’re in agreement,” she snapped. “Anyway, I have to be at a viewing in five minutes, so—”

“Wait,” I interrupted. “Please. Wait.”

She didn’t hang up. I took it as a good sign, even if she didn’t say anything else.

“Can I see you?” I asked her. “Not to hookup and not as a fake couple—just to see you. Maybe we could have dinner? Tonight?”

Was I asking her out on a date? I didn’t know for certain. All I knew was that it had been too long since I’d last seen her smile and heard her laughter. That alone was evidence that my feelings for her were deeper than I was ready to acknowledge, but that wasn’t my call to make. Even if, moving forward she only wanted to see me in a professional context, I would take it.

I’d take any crumb she offered me at that point.

“I’m busy tonight,” she answered, offering no other details beyond that.

I refused to back down. “What about Saturday night?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Are you ... what are—”

It was rare for me to be at a loss for words. Especially when it came to women. As opposed to serious relationships and romance as I was, flirtation had always been second nature to me. It was easy to smooth talk and charm the pants off of anyone I wanted.

Anyone except for Lucy. She was a challenge unlike anything I’d come

across. Even though we'd slept together, I didn't see me as having successfully seduced her. Rather, it was more equal. We seduced each other. We were on the same level.

Maybe that was what scared me the most. I didn't have the upper hand when it came to Lucy, so that meant it wouldn't be easy to run away from her like I had all the others.

She seemed to understand what my fumbling half-questions were trying to express.

"I have a date tonight," she explained. "And if it goes well, I'm sure I'll want to see him again on Saturday, as well. That's why I'm not available this weekend."

The blow hit me like a gust of wind. Reality was brutal. From those words, it was apparent that I was nothing to her. I was a game with a financial incentive. She didn't feel the same way about me. Her feelings didn't go beyond basic platonic fondness. If they did, she wouldn't be spending her time going out on dates with other men.

"I see," I replied, trying to sound as unbothered as possible. "I didn't know you were seeing anyone else. I thought—"

*I thought I was the only one you were fucking.*

"It's not anything I entertained while we ... whatever," she grumbled. "It's new. I barely know him. Actually, you probably know him better than I do."

"What do you mean?"

"It's Sean Lloyd," Lucy said. "He asked me out."

“You’re going on a date with Sean Lloyd tonight?” I hissed, sitting up ramrod straight as my blood ran cold as ice through my veins.

No way. This was low. *Lower* than low.

“Yes, I am.”

“You can’t,” I replied before I could stop myself.

“Excuse me?”

“He’s not a good guy, Lucy. You can’t go out with him.”

She huffed. “Well, unfortunately for you, Elijah, you don’t control me. You never did, no matter how much money you wired into my account. So, yes, I am going out with Sean Lloyd tonight and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

That was the final strike. She punctuated her statement by hanging up on me. The line went dead silent and I dropped my phone onto the desk with a heavy clatter.

He knew. Of course he knew. He’d warned me without stating it explicitly and I had missed it. When he was at Method Club, watching Lucy as if he were stalking prey from afar, he knew what we’d been up to in that private room. The room itself didn’t have cameras, but there was plenty of security equipment that would allow him to see us go into that room, and then come out together more ruffled than before.

Sean knew that, in some form or another, Lucy was mine. Because of that, she’d become a part of this competition between us. It was dirty. It implied that he was just as shady as I suspected because he wasn’t interested in keeping our rivalry in the professional realm. He was boldly going after

my girl, too.

Of course, she wasn't *my* girl. That much was obvious. But, Sean didn't know that. All he knew was that I didn't make my possessiveness over Lucy a secret when I glared at him from across the club. I should have been more careful.

But, in truth, I had no idea who I was truly dealing with when it came to Sean Lloyd. I feared that none of us, including Lucy, did. Maybe I should have minded my business, but I had a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach.

A very bad feeling.

## Chapter Twenty: *Astor*

“You look lovely tonight, Lucy,” purred Sean.

I smiled in thanks as I slid out of the cab, trying not to look too surprised when he stepped forward and placed a confident hand on the small of my back.

He’d offered to send his town car to pick me up for our date, but I insisted on finding my own way to him. Just like our farewell in Belle Harbor earlier that week, he obliged easily. It occurred to me that, where women were concerned, Sean Lloyd was not a stubborn man.

Either that, or he was toying with me. It was difficult to read Sean. He wasn’t like Elijah, who wore his heart on his sleeve. Elijah was consistently genuine, even when he wasn’t being pleasant. I always knew that the version of himself he presented to me wasn’t false.

Perhaps that was the true root of the problem. I mistook his genuineness for good intentions. I wrongfully assumed that, while we were lying together, he wasn’t lying to me.

But I wasn’t going to think about Elijah that night. It wasn’t fair to me or my date.

“Thank you,” I replied to Sean.

I was wearing one of my own dresses that night, though Gabriella had gone shopping with me to pick it out. It was a deep green, made of a silky material that gleamed like emeralds. The dress was sophisticated and modest, but gorgeous all the same. For some reason, I didn’t feel as though I wanted



to be sexy for Sean.

Not the way I had donned that lavender silk shift to meet Elijah at the nightclub.

*Stop it, I cursed myself. No more Elijah thoughts tonight.*

“I apologize for dragging you all the way out to Queens,” Sean said to me, guiding me toward what looked to be an empty retail space on an otherwise unremarkable street. “I promise it’ll be worth it.”

When Sean texted me with his official plans for our date, I had expected him to suggest one of the most expensive and exclusive restaurants in the city. Or, maybe surprise me with a helicopter ride and a catered meal on a private pavilion. He seemed like the type of rich man who wasn’t afraid of flaunting his wealth. It was different than the subdued expression that I witnessed from the old money families in New York.

“What is this place?” I dared to ask.

As the cab had brought me closer to the address Sean texted me, I admitted to feeling more and more wary. I didn’t often spend time in Queens and I knew there were many hidden gems among the borough, but the dull, undeveloped suburban streets covered in graffiti and lined with chain-link fencing were hardly what I expected from a romantic date with Sean Lloyd.

I’d almost expected myself to be kidnapped the second I stepped out of the taxi, imagining a cinema-worthy action scene in my panic.

Sean seemed to read the nervousness on my face because he paused briefly before the unmarked door and rubbed my lower back with the palm of his hand in what I assumed he thought was a comforting gesture. I had to fight not to squirm away from it, though I couldn’t explain why.

“It’s all right, Lucy,” he assured me. “Trust me, this will be a treat.”

“Sure,” I replied, forcing an easy smile onto my face. “Lead the way.”

Sean, tall and hulking beside me, led us to the door. Instead of opening it himself, he knocked three times in quick succession. Half a second later, a dull *thud* from the other side suggested a lock being slid out of place. The door cracked open and I caught sight of a single eye scrutinizing us through the crack. It skimmed over me, narrowed slightly, and I tried my best not to tremble.

The moment the eye landed on Sean, however, it retreated into the shadows and the door opened up wide.

“Good evening, Mr. Lloyd,” said a deep, masculine voice from within. “We were hoping we’d see you tonight.”

Sean snorted. “Of course you were. Me and my money.”

The response that came was a low, menacing chuckle. I had a bad feeling about this, but I allowed Sean to press me forward with that strong hand on my back until I was past the threshold.

A massive, hulking man in dark clothes closed the door behind us and slid the bolt back into place.

We were in a blank, concrete hallway. It was grimy and rundown, like an old hospital wing that had been abandoned for decades. Fluorescent lights flickered ominously across the empty space. In the distance, I overheard the hum of conversation and the gentle pulse of music, but nobody appeared to greet us.

“Where are we?” I asked.

My question was met with another grumbling laugh from the security guard.

Sean grinned mischievously. “I know it looks creepy, but it’s a necessary evil. Trust me. Come this way.”

*Trust me.* He kept saying that phrase, as if the more times he repeated it, the more likely I would be to obey. However, each time he asked me to trust him, I had the feeling that I should be doing the exact opposite.

This was a mistake. I should have never agreed to go out with Sean Lloyd. I’d been warned about him, about the mysterious ways he earned his enormous wealth. Why had I ignored it? Was it merely because I wanted to prove to Elijah that I didn’t need him? Was I truly that pathetic?

I was certain I had become one of those idiotic women in horror films who ignored all their instincts and ended up killed before the film was halfway over.

Except, there was no escaping now. A man who was three times my size guarded the heavy, locked door behind me and a man who was also very large and visibly strong had a firm hand on my body that could quickly turn into a restraint around my waist if I decided to run.

Even if I was being paranoid, I knew with absolute certainty that I wanted to go home. The only thing I could do was find somewhere private—a bathroom, maybe—and send Gabriella an SOS message.

Until then, it was important for me to keep the smile on my face. Showing fear or hinting at rejection always spelled trouble for women in difficult situations like this. It was in my best interest to act as if this wasn’t the scariest thing I’d ever been faced with in my life thus far.

“Okay,” I said to Sean, letting out a shaky exhale that I disguised as a delicate laugh. “I’ll trust you.”

“Good girl,” he crooned.

We carried on down the hallway. It was long and the air was colder and damper inside here than it was outside. However, as we reached the end of the hall, the sound of talking and laughter and music grew louder. I took comfort in the knowledge that we weren’t alone. Perhaps there was another girl here who had unwittingly said yes to a date with someone like Sean and we could help each other out.

Once again, Sean paused before the door at the end of the hall. It was plain gray steel. This time, he didn’t knock. Without waiting for invitation, he used his free hand to wrench the knob down and heave open the door. It groaned loudly as it opened, revealing a long, dark staircase that descended into a smoky, dimly lit basement.

Blue and purple lights danced lazily across slick concrete floors, hazy clouds of smoke floating in between scattered groups of people. Electronic music thumped from a source I couldn’t identify, but not so loudly that it might be overheard on the street.

I hesitated at the top of the stairs, gazing down into the glamorously-dressed crowd as I tried to make sense of what I was seeing. At first, it seemed as if Sean had brought me to an underground speakeasy of sorts, but prohibition was a thing of the past, so it didn’t make sense to me why such a place would need to take so many precautions to appear nondescript and unimportant on the surface.

Unless there was more than perceived exclusivity going on down there. Unless there was a real reason why these people had to cover up whatever

business was going on.

I sent a questioning glance at Sean, but he merely smiled and gave me a gentle nudge down the stairs.

Feeling trapped, I began the descent into the mysterious party.

Sean was quiet, as if waiting for me to elicit an audible reaction before he said anything.

When we reached the bottom and emerged into the vast, concrete space, a dozen heads immediately turned in our direction. Countless pairs of eyes drifted past me with cool disinterest and fixated on Sean beside me with a shrewd spark. In truth, I was relieved that I was ignored. Perhaps Sean showed up to these events with a different woman every time, so no one bothered to pay much attention to whomever accompanied him.

I could tell right away that many of the onlookers had been waiting for Sean to arrive. They knew him. He was a regular here.

But where was *here*?

I gazed around, noticing dozens of paintings and sculptures scattered around the space. There were also makeshift display cases along one of the walls housing various jewels that glittered under flashing lights that seemed better suited for a nightclub.

People milled around with glasses of champagne and slender cigars in hand, clothed in attire that was obviously expensive. I noticed several people who were dressed entirely in black, just like the man upstairs. These individuals flitted around the room to share hushed conversations with the attendees about whatever treasure they were eyeing.

“Is this an art show?” I asked.

“Of sorts,” he replied smoothly, an amused smirk on his face.

Hand still on me, he guided me through the crowd and led me over to one of the paintings hanging on the wall. It was abstract, painted in bright colors that were almost garish. The shapes painted onto the canvas were cartoonish in a way that felt inexplicably eerie.

“Interesting,” was all I could think to say.

“Do you like Murakami?”

I presumed that was the name of the artist. I’d never heard of him, but I didn’t want to offend the only person who knew how to get me out of here safely.

“I’m not well-versed in contemporary art,” I replied.

“I understand. It’s a bit strange, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Owning the right art grants status, though, and we all know that image is everything,” Sean continued. Before I could figure out what I was supposed to say to that, he lifted his hand in a simple beckoning gesture without taking his eyes off my face. In seconds, there was an attendant in a black ensemble at his side.

“Good evening, Mr. Lloyd,” said the man, barely casting a glance at me.

“What’s the highest bid so far?” he asked the stranger, avoiding pleasantries as he jutted his chin at the painting before us—the one he’d just

called strange.

The attendant smirked greedily. “You know I can’t reveal that at a silent auction, Mr. Lloyd.”

As if he’d expected that response, Sean chuckled and reached into the inside pocket of his suit jacket. A one-hundred-dollar bill flashed under the lights as it was slipped into the less statuesque man’s waiting hand.

“Please don’t make me ask again,” he crooned.

“Seven-nine,” replied the attendant.

I knew enough money talk from the real estate industry to know those numbers meant the painting was currently bidding at seven thousand and nine hundred dollars.

Sean sniffed as if that were pocket change. “Ensure me the winning bid at the end of the night and I’ll uphold my end of our little bargain.”

The attendant grinned. “Yes, sir. Anything else?”

“Yes, I’d like to get my hands on that Rembrandt I know you’ve got hidden away in the back.”

“That’s not—”

“It wasn’t a request.”

The shorter man frowned, casting a sideways glance at me for only the second time as if he thought I might come to his rescue, but I was utterly confused.

“Yes, sir. The Rembrandt, as well.”

“That’s all,” Sean dismissed him.

The attendant hurried away. Sean moved his palm to the curve of my waist, twisting me through the crowd and ignoring everyone else as we made our way to the display cases. I was struggling to find the words to express how baffled I was at this entire scenario.

What kind of art show had eight-thousand-dollar contemporary paintings *and* Rembrandts for sale in a basement in Queens? What was going on?

Either Sean assumed I was fully aware of the situation I’d gotten myself into or he relished my confusion, because I was provided with no explanation as we made our way to the jewels on display.

I gasped at the beauty of them, unable to stop myself as I beheld glittering diamonds and emeralds and rubies of all sizes. Many of them rested in velvet without proper settings, but others had been crafted into gorgeous—if not somewhat gaudy—necklaces, bracelets, and rings.

“Beautiful,” I forced myself to say, mostly because I felt as though I’d been too quiet so far. “Who designed these pieces?”

Sean chuckled and moved closer to whisper in my ear, “It’s best not to ask such questions, but if I had to guess, I would say it was an anonymous back-alley jeweler who wishes not to be named.”

Confusion sank deeper into my bones. I pretended to admire the rest of the jewelry as I puzzled through the clues I’d absorbed thus far.

Then, when I caught sight of a Cartier emblem, I finally understood. Cartier was one of the most famous diamond sellers in the world. They wouldn’t peddle their gorgeous products in the damp basement of an



abandoned building. Not on purpose.

The jewels were stolen. That's what Sean meant when he suggested I not question the designer. The *designer* in question was a criminal who took stolen jewelry and remade them into different pieces that couldn't be tracked down by the original owner. I'd seen enough heist movies to be able to piece together the details.

This wasn't just any silent auction. This was a black market event. The people here were wealthy, sure, but they weren't concerned about acquiring covetable items the moral or legal way. Someone had stolen these things and now they were being resold.

And Sean was a *regular* here.

I was horrified, but I tried my best to keep it out of my expression. Despite that, my companion seemed to pick up on my sudden discomfort because he squeezed my waist lightly.

"I know this isn't how Elijah Dean acquires his precious art pieces, but some of us do not have the luxury of inheriting family heirlooms," he laughed as if he were telling a joke, but I didn't return his smile. "The rest of us make do as we try to fit in with the society they created."

That was how he justified dealing in such business. He was acquiring things that would make him appear as effortlessly elite as the rest of the people in Elijah's circle. Perhaps Sean even profited off of this black market of stolen art and jewels. Maybe that was the shady business that earned him his true wealth.

"I have no knowledge of Mr. Dean's art-buying habits," I replied coolly.

I bristled at the casual mention of Elijah. Alarm bells were ringing in my head. Something was very *wrong*.

“Oh?” snickered Sean, his flirtatious facade slipping ever so slightly to allow a wicked gleam to come to life in his eyes. I tensed. “I was under the impression you two were quite close.”

No one else bothered to pay any attention to our conversation as I glared up at him, ignoring the steady beat of the strange, dissonant music.

“Is that so?” I answered. “What would give you that idea?”

Sean snorted and *rolled his eyes*. “Because I watched you two fuck through a security camera at a nightclub two weeks ago.”

My blood turned to molten lava in my veins. Fire crept into my cheeks from embarrassment and horror.

“No, you—there wasn’t—you couldn’t—”

He shrugged as if what he’d just revealed was no big deal. “I own the club. I can put up new security cameras wherever I wish. Not to worry, though, darling. I deleted the tape.”

“I—” I was so horrified that I was rendered speechless.

“I must say, you looked absolutely exquisite while you were riding that \_\_\_”

“Enough,” I snapped, smacking his arm and stepping away.

He held up his hands in surrender. “Forgive me. I was merely curious to know how Elijah Dean gains the upper hand in this city and it appeared that the key was to make connections with people like you.”

*People like you.* He didn't mean hardworking women with strong ambition. He meant morally gray sluts who would spread their legs for buyers if it would get them more commission. Even if he wouldn't say it out loud, I could see the notion written all over his face.

"That's a fairly bold assumption you're making," I hissed.

"Oh, come on, gorgeous. I can promise you I'm a much better lover than that old-fashioned snob. Give me a chance to prove it and we might be able to come to an agreement."

Technically, his words weren't that far off from what Elijah had asked of me during our first meeting in the coffee shop a few weeks ago. Back then, he'd proposed we'd reach a mutually beneficial agreement, but sex wasn't on the table at that point. Not yet.

Still, Elijah wasn't creepy like Sean. He wasn't creepy at all. When he'd reached out to me for assistance, it had come from a more altruistic place. He just wanted to be a good leader for his company. He just wanted to make his father proud.

"I don't think so," I said to Sean, crossing my arms against my chest.

"Are you sure?" he purred. "The ink is still wet on that factory contract and I have it on good authority that the escrow check hasn't even been cashed yet. If you let me convince you, I can show you that switching the contract over to me could be a quick and easy and *very* pleasurable process for you—"

I seethed. I could hardly believe what I was hearing. Sean was worse than the rumors made him out to be. He was downright disgusting.

Part of me didn't even blame Sean for thinking I was that kind of woman. All perceived evidence pointed to such a thing. He noticed a

connection between Elijah and me, caught us being intimate, and then, Dean Properties won the bid on the Harlem factory. Never mind that the truth was I had nothing to do with the historical society's final decision. Never mind that Elijah's and my physical relationship had nothing to do with our professional affairs.

If I was Sean and I didn't know Elijah or me, I'd likely draw the same conclusion.

I only had myself to blame.

Still, I didn't appreciate Sean being so crude. I thought he truly wanted to go on a nice, innocent date.

When would I learn that men never meant what they said, or said what they meant?

I fixed Sean with a firm glare. "I'd like to go home."

Disappointment flickered in his gaze. He tried to close the distance between us, but paused when I took another step away from him.

"Lucy, I deeply apologize for the misunderstanding. Truly, I was under the impression that this was the sort of arrangement you regularly partook in."

Again, my cheeks flamed. He thought I was a harlot. No doubt the other guys at Empire Realty thought the same thing. It was a branding so many professional women couldn't avoid, merely because of our gender. If we were successful, it surely had to mean we were sleeping with someone.

I narrowed my eyes. "Take me home. Now."

Sean bowed and gestured for me to move past him, nodding back

toward the staircase. “Of course. We can leave right away. I’m parked close by.”

Perhaps I should have called a taxi, but I didn’t like the idea of having to wait around for a car to come and collect me in this strange part of town where black markets full of stolen goods were alive and well underneath the streets. My skin itched with paranoia and my heart trembled with anxiety.

I stomped past Sean, pretending as if I didn’t notice the onlookers who were curious as to what might have cut our visit so short.

I also pretended to not notice I saw Sean give the same attendant as earlier a meaningful nod before following me back up the stairs. For some reason, I had a feeling it was about more than the Rembrandt.

## Chapter Twenty-One: *Dean*

At half past nine that evening, my phone rang with a call from an unknown number. An inexplicable gut feeling led me to answer it instead of sending it directly to voicemail.

“Hello?”

“Hi ... sorry—is this Elijah Dean?”

“May I ask who’d like to know?”

“Sorry. This is Gabriella Hamwell. I’m Lucy’s friend.”

I’d been lounging on the sofa in my empty penthouse, debating cracking open one of my more expensive bottles of whiskey to soothe myself through the lonely evening. However, at the mention of Lucy’s name, I shot upright.

“Is everything okay?”

“Well, I was just wondering if she was with you? I know this is a little weird of me to ask, but she’s not answering her phone and she said she was going out tonight, so I figured it was with you and she’d given me your number at one point because, you know, stranger-danger and all that—”

“No, she’s out with—she’s not—I’m not out with her this evening.”

“Oh.”

“What’s wrong?” I pressed.

“Nothing! Sorry for bothering you. I’m sure it’s fine,” Gabriella

babbled. “It’s just that we have this agreement whenever we go on dates, we always text each other when we’ve arrived. We’re young women and this city is full of freaks, so it’s just a strategy we came up with for safety purposes—although Lucy did assure me you were safe, so there was no need for that with you ... but then, she didn’t specify *whom* she was out with tonight, so I started panicking when I realized she hadn’t told me she’d arrived at wherever this date of hers is—”

“Whoa, slow down,” I interrupted. Lucy’s friend was certainly a lot wordier than she was. She talked a mile a minute, cramming as many words into a single breath as she could. “Are you saying you think Lucy might be in trouble?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’m just being paranoid. It’s just that I have a bad feeling. She was acting so strange before she left and wouldn’t tell me much. I mean, I know you two had a fight, but I thought—whatever. I’m sure it’s okay. Sorry for bothering you, Mr. Elijah, sir.”

“Wait,” I replied quickly, getting up from the sofa and pacing across the living room toward where I’d left my keys and wallet on the table in the entryway. “I know the guy she’s out with right now. His name is Sean Lloyd. He’s bad news.”

“Oh, God. I knew it. Lucy *always* answers an SOS message, but she’s been totally silent.”

“Do you know where she is?” I asked, already shoving my feet into my shoes.

“We have our locations shared with each other at all times, yes. It looks like she’s in Queens.”

Queens? What the hell was Sean doing with Lucy all the way out there?

“I’ll pick you up in ten minutes,” I said to Gabriella, remembering that Lucy had told me where her friend lived when I had originally planned to drop her off after dinner last Sunday. “We’ll go find her together.”

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“It’s nice to meet you,” Gabriella said simply, sliding into the passenger seat of my Range Rover without hesitation. She was attractive in a dark, alluring way, but noticing other women had become difficult ever since I’d met Lucy, so I didn’t think much of it.

“Likewise,” I replied.

This was the woman whom I accused Lucy of being codependent with, the woman who was kind enough to offer her friend time and space to heal from having her heart broken.

I didn’t deserve Lucy.

But neither did Sean.

Without prompting, I pulled away from the curb and headed toward Queens while Gabriella helped herself to the Bluetooth system and connected Lucy’s live location to the GPS. It was almost comical the way we worked together in silent tandem despite not knowing each other, but Lucy’s friend had a way of making me feel comfortable, as if I was an old friend. I was glad Lucy had someone like her.

“They’re in East Flushing,” muttered Gabriella. “That’s so random.”

“I can’t think of anything in that neighborhood that would be good for a date,” I replied. “At least, not by his standards.”



“So, who is this guy?”

“He’s from Chicago. He’s a real estate developer. Bad news.”

“How so?”

“Nobody can seem to figure out where he gets the money to buy as much property as he has. Shady stuff.”

“I get it.”

We were silent as I turned into the Queens Midtown Tunnel to cross the river. It was hard not to speed faster than necessary, but I really didn’t want to slow us down by getting pulled over. According to Gabriella’s phone, Lucy was still in the same spot on a side street in what I was pretty sure was a residential neighborhood. Had Sean brought her to someone’s house? Why would a man obsessed with appearing to be glamorously wealthy have a house in the humble, ordinary suburb of East Flushing?

“So—” Gabriella said when we emerged into Long Island City. “Why isn’t Lucy out with *you* right now? I was under the impression that things were going well between you two—you know, besides the fact that it’s all fake.”

I cringed. Her tone was devoid of judgment, but I also knew that I was currently under the scrutiny of one of Lucy’s most trusted friends. Maybe, if I played my cards right, it would go far with convincing Lucy to give me a second chance.

“I fucked up,” I admitted. “At first, everything was easy. We had this stupid deal that you know all about, but then we slept together. A lot—”

“So I’ve been told.”

I cleared my throat awkwardly. “She’s ... Lucy is—”

“Lucy is the best person I know,” Gabriella said, a warning in her voice. “Her ex never deserved her. Part of me was relieved he showed his true colors in the end, but it was horrible to see how devastated she was. I never want Lucy to have to go through that again.”

Yeah, that was definitely a warning. A threat. If I dared to break Lucy’s heart, Gabriella would personally assure my demise. I didn’t blame her.

“She’s the best person I know, too,” I said, realizing it was true as soon as I said it. “Better than me.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. We’re quite literally on a rescue mission right now.”

Despite the tension of the situation, I cracked a smile. “Anyway, I’ve got issues of my own. I think I started to realize that my feelings for Lucy were starting to go deeper than normal friendship and it freaked me out. I said some stupid things and now she’s pissed at me. This is all my fault.”

“You like her.”

It wasn’t a question.

“I do like her,” I replied. It was the first time I’d said it out loud, the first time I had dared to vocalize the torrent of emotions inside me. “I like her a lot. I like her so much that I’m pretty sure I’m not a far cry from being in love with her.”

“Wow.”

“And I know you don’t know me that well, but that’s not something I ever thought I would admit about someone.”

Gabriella frowned at me. “Lucy told me you’re a bit avoidant when it comes to romance. Why is that?”

I rolled my eyes, thinking about how Veronica would laugh when she heard me answer, “Mommy issues.”

The woman beside me snorted. “Right. Say no more.”

I liked Gabriella. She had good energy. Lucy was surrounded by good people. I wished I could count myself as one of them.

Throwing a glance at the GPS as we weaved through Sunnyside, I noticed that the little blue dot indicating Lucy’s location had shifted slightly.

“They’re on the move,” I said.

Gabriella immediately jolted forward, practically pressing her nose to her phone to follow their movements in real time. “It looks like they’re heading into Jackson Heights. Are they coming back this way?”

“I guess we’ll find out,” I muttered, then tossed my own phone at her. “Here. Try to call her again. I doubt she’ll answer if she sees it’s me, but if Sean sees an incoming call from me, he’ll—well, I don’t know what he’ll do, but it’s worth a shot.”

“Agreed.”

I tapped my fingers impatiently on the steering wheel, watching the distance close between us and that little blue dot. In the back of my mind, it broke my heart that women had to be so cautious that they made sure to be constantly aware of their friends’ whereabouts. This world was cruel and unfair.

After a minute, Gabriella cursed under her breath and placed my phone

into the cupholder with a defeated sigh. “It’s going right to voicemail.”

“It’s okay,” I told her. “We’re closing in.”

We were getting closer to the blue dot. They were traveling a block north of us, and in just a few hundred yards, would be right on top of us on the map. Mindful of the traffic around me, I switched lanes and executed a last-minute turn up a side street, racing up to the end of it until we reached the intersection with the street Sean and Lucy were traveling on.

Grateful there were no cars behind us, I idled. Together, Gabriella and I watched the blue dot draw closer and closer. We would be able to watch them drive right past us and then follow from behind. Wherever he was taking her, we would go. I wouldn’t give up until I knew that she was safe.

I wouldn’t give up until I had the chance to tell her how sorry I was, how much I wanted her in my life ... for *real* this time. How I was afraid that I would disappoint her, but that I would do anything for the chance to prove myself worthy of having her in my life.

“There! That one!” exclaimed Gabriella, pointing as a large black vehicle drove past our stakeout spot at the exact same time Lucy’s blue dot passed by. It was a massive Cadillac Escalade, exactly the sort of thing someone like Sean would drive. I wasn’t surprised. He wasn’t exactly subtle.

Without hesitating, I turned onto the street behind them.

“Seems like we’re heading back to Manhattan,” I said after a minute of trailing them, maneuvering to ensure no other vehicles on the street could sneak in between us. “He just skipped the turn to go into the Bronx, so it’s really the only option left.”

“Maybe he’s just bringing her back home,” Gabriella suggested

sheepishly.

I felt the same way, the sensation that we were probably being overdramatic.

“Well, if he is, we’ll make sure that neither one of them knows we did this because it’ll be way too embarrassing to live down.”

She let out a breath of laughter. “Yes, and then you can grow some balls and tell Lucy how you really feel.”

“Yeah. That, too.”

She was right. We were just being paranoid. We both cared about Lucy and had therefore panicked enough to respond ridiculously, but we were now on track to go right back into the east side of Manhattan as if nothing was wrong. Perhaps there was something wrong with Lucy’s phone service and that was the only reason why she wasn’t responding to our attempts for communication.

Sean was a creep, but he couldn’t be *that* much of a creep ... right?

One after the other, we pulled onto FDR drive and headed south back toward Gabriella’s apartment in the East Village.

“He drives like a maniac,” Gabriella growled.

She was right. As soon as we hit the highway, the Escalade sped up and swerved into the fast lane. I had to slam my foot into the gas pedal to keep from losing him.

“I don’t like the way he’s driving with her in that car,” I muttered. “He’s putting her in danger.”

“Well, feel free to put *me* in danger to keep up with them!” snapped Gabriella.

“I’m trying,” I replied through gritted teeth.

But, Sean was going *fast*. Fast, as if he was trying to lose a tail. Whenever he was met with a car that wasn’t speeding to his standards, he navigated around them, using the lanes on either side to put space between us. It took all of my concentration not to get into an accident as I raced to keep up with him. I wasn’t bad at driving in the slightest, but navigating New York traffic was treacherous even on a good day. Everyone else on the road was a wildcard.

“You don’t think he knows we’re following him, do you?” Gabriella asked, gripping the armrests tightly.

“I think that’s a likely hypothesis,” I grunted, veering to avoid smashing into the rear end of an innocent Toyota Camry as I fought to keep Sean’s car in our line of sight.

“But these windows are tinted. He can’t even see us.”

“Yes, but he hates me, my name just showed up as a missed call on Lucy’s phone, and an expensive car is chasing him down. He’s not an idiot.”

“Why does he hate you?”

“Because he wants what I have.”

“Whiny brat.”

“Exactly.”

“Crap,” Gabriella hissed, whipping her head to stare out the side

window all of a sudden. “That’s the exit for our neighborhood.”

Up ahead, I could tell it was no an accident that Sean drove right past the turnoff, because he missed the next exit, too.

He had no intention of bringing Lucy back home. They were going somewhere else entirely.

“Shit,” was all I could manage to say as I fought to slip through the traffic as it grew denser toward the narrowing bottom of the island.

“What do we do?” Gabriella exclaimed, sounding more panicked than she had when she first called me. “She’s not answering her phone, she’s stuck in a car with this creep who drives like a madman, and we have no idea where he’s taking her! What if he’s *really* bad news, Elijah? Like, mafia type of stuff?”

I scoffed. “Sean Lloyd in the *mafia*?”

“I don’t know! It’s possible! We’re practically in the white collar criminal capital of the world!”

With a groan, I understood how much truth there was to her words. It was my fault that I had a bad habit of assuming most people were good and harmless, given that my father always stressed the importance of morality in our industry. Even when it came to Sean Lloyd, I never went as far as to suspect him truly capable of dealing in truly illegal things.

Maybe that was my mistake from the beginning. I should have done more to take him down, to keep him as far away from Lucy as possible.

I slammed my fist on top of the wheel in frustration.

“This is my fault!”

“Save the self-hatred for after we save my best friend,” hissed Gabriella. “What do we do? One wrong move and we’re either going to lose him or end up with this car wrapped around a streetlight.”

“Call the police,” I told her. “What else can we do?”

“And what if NYPD has more important things to worry about than a reckless driver and one single person out of millions who could be in danger?”

“Call the Commissioner,” I growled, knuckles white as I clenched the wheel with all my strength as the speedometer slipped past ninety miles per hour. No matter what, though, Sean maintained the lead. There was a chance this wasn’t his first car chase.

“Excuse me?”

“The Commissioner of Police. She’s a good friend of mine. In my contacts, just scroll for her name—she’ll be able to help us get past the emergency hotline bureaucracy.”

I tossed my phone back at Gabriella, spelling out the name of the Commissioner. I knew she would answer, even if she was confused at first when she heard Gabriella’s voice. We were both deeply connected to this city we called home and had a common interest in keeping New York’s glory intact.

“Hello? Miss—um, I mean, Commissioner—”

“Put it on speaker,” I commanded. Gabriella did as she was told.

“Elijah Dean? What’s the problem?” demanded a stern, no-nonsense tone from the other end of the line. “It’s Friday night.”



“Sorry for interrupting your evening, ma’am,” I shouted into the phone that Gabriella held outstretched toward me, still navigating the rushing traffic as we descended deeper toward Brooklyn. “What do you know about Sean Lloyd?”

“Lloyd? Lloyd Enterprises? Shady guy.”

“Well, he’s got my girl in the front seat of his car and she’s not answering her phone. Any chance you can give us some help with this action movie chase scene?”

“Can you get me a plate number?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Gabriella cut in. “It’s—”

She spelled out the series of numbers on Sean’s license plate, which I hadn’t even thought to pay attention to. Once again, women knew better how to protect themselves in this world, arming themselves with information that might come in handy further down the road.

My blood boiled.

“Got it,” responded the Commissioner. “I’ll dispatch some of my guys. Keep me updated, Dean.”

“Will do.”

Without another word, she disconnected. Seconds later, as one of the many bridges that led into Brooklyn came into view ahead of us, Sean’s Escalade buried among the throng of impatient drivers a dozen yards ahead, sirens broke through the din of honking horns and roaring engines.

“That was fast,” Gabriella exhaled in relief.

“The Commissioner is very good at her job.”

“How do you know her?”

“Every native New Yorker knows each other somehow.”

“Sure.”

“To be clear, just because the police are involved now, I’m not giving up,” I said to her. I had no intention of pulling off the highway and letting Sean out of my sight. I wouldn’t be able to relax until I saw that Lucy was unharmed and safely away from that man.

“I had hoped not,” Gabriella replied, gripping the seat again as I swerved to let the cruiser with its flashing lights slip past us. “You don’t seem like a quitter, Elijah Dean.”

## Chapter Twenty-Two: *Astor*

“Stop the car!” I demanded. “Where are you taking me?”

We’d just passed the exit for the East Village, but I’d already had a bad feeling he had no intention of driving me home once he started driving like an idiot on the highway. I couldn’t tell if he was insane and thought someone was after us, or if he simply enjoyed scaring the crap out of me.

Either way, the man behind the wheel was no longer the suave smooth-talker who’d flirted with me back at the beach house. I should have known that the mask he’d wore during that interaction covered up a dangerous beast underneath. I should have known better.

*I should have known better.*

Those were the words I’d been punishing myself with for months. When I found out about Derek and Charlotte, I blamed myself. I convinced myself that I should have known about them sneaking around behind my back, that it was my fault I didn’t figure it out before I had the misfortune of walking in on them.

Then, when things went south with Elijah, I was once again beating myself up because I believed I should have known better.

But I didn’t want to be like that. I didn’t want to be the kind of person who guarded her heart viciously and kept it locked away behind impenetrable walls. I didn’t want to be like Elijah, closing myself off from any opportunity for love that I had.

*Elijah ...*

God, he was right. He was right about Sean. He was right about me and my codependence. That was why I had agreed to go out with Sean in the first place, wasn't it? Because I couldn't stand the fact that I might be alone, yet again.

That was why I clung on so tightly to Elijah in spite of the fact that I was well aware our arrangement was fake. It felt real, so I fooled myself into believing it could be.

The worst part was that I *wished* it was real. That was the thing that truly hurt me as I clung to the seat while Sean's outrageous SUV barreled down FDR Drive. I wished that, instead of arguing with me that night after Sunday dinner, Elijah had admitted he was just as happy as I was and didn't want to pretend anymore.

I wished that both of us had been brave enough not to walk away.

Now, here I was, faced with a critical situation that might end up claiming my life in more ways than one.

"Where are you taking me?" I repeated, raising my voice. "Am I being kidnapped?"

Kidnapped? Sex trafficked? Held as hostage?

Sean let out a bark of laughter. "Let's just say I'm a man who knows what he wants and I will stop at *nothing* to achieve it. I don't care what I have to do, Lucille Astor. I will take everything in this city that I desire, including you."

"I'm not a piece of property," I hissed. "You can't buy me."

He ignored me, glaring at something in the rear view mirror as we

careened around the lefthand side of a construction van to get ahead. My stomach twisted and I prayed this evening didn't end with my body smeared across the highway.

“If Elijah won't hand over what I want, then I'm not afraid to take extreme measures.”

“Seriously? This is about that stupid factory? Elijah won that bid fair and square.”

Sean sneered. “That pompous billionaire boy wouldn't know ‘fair and square’ if it bit him in the ass. He wants to turn that place into affordable housing, right? What an idiot. You need to understand that I'm a *real* businessman. True profit is earned by being the stronger man, not a humanitarian. Just because that damned historical society couldn't see that doesn't mean I've lost my chance. There is always another way.”

My mind raced, thinking back to the proposal Lloyd Enterprises had submitted for the Harlem factory. They'd wanted to turn it into a parking garage, I believed, both for commercial and private vehicles. It was a decent bid, one that wouldn't necessarily harm the community, but it wasn't the best. Elijah's proposal had offered more than neutrality. He wanted to provide something to Harlem that would improve their lives *and* the local economy.

Simply put, Elijah was the better man. He was a good guy.

I had known that from the beginning.

“You can always build a parking garage in another part of the city,” I hissed. “It's not like there's a shortage of large buildings in New York.”

Sean snickered at me. “You're so innocent that it's laughable. That factory was prime real estate for more reasons than one.”

I thought about the silent auction we'd left behind. The stolen art and jewels. Sean's obvious connection to the shady people there.

"It was a front, wasn't it? Your proposal hid the true purpose," I said.

"There you go. Now you're using that pretty little brain of yours."

Morality aside, it was a genius idea. A public parking garage saw all manner of vehicles going in and out of it thousands of times a day in Manhattan. If Sean used it as a hot spot for trafficking stolen goods, no one's suspicions would be aroused. Vehicles of all sorts could go in and out ... and the immense basement beneath the factory could be used as the main hive. It could become an operation that was vastly more sophisticated than the random building we'd just visited in Queens.

If Sean had gotten his hands on that factory and used it for what he intended, his fortune would have increased tenfold in this city. Would he ever stop? What city would he conquer next? How far could his underground ventures go before he was finally caught?

He was a snake, but surely even the slipperiest of reptiles weren't unstoppable. Someday, someone would find a way to take him down. Sean Lloyd would be reduced to nothing but a forgotten memory in this city. I would relish that day.

All I had to do was survive tonight.

"That's what you did in Chicago, isn't it?" I asked him, thinking that if I kept him distracted long enough, a stray NYPD officer on highway patrol might notice his erratic driving and inadvertently come to my rescue.

Sean snorted and shook his head at me. "Believe it or not, my business in Chicago started with altruistic intentions. I graduated from Northwestern

with all kinds of big dreams and plans for the future, but with barely a dime to execute them. I'm sure you know what that's like."

I glared at him. "You don't know anything about me."

"I know plenty. It's not hard to find out somebody's backstory nowadays, even with your limited internet presence."

"What happened in Chicago?" I deflected, shaking off the goosebumps that rose on my arms at the thought of him researching me in his leisure time. I didn't want to think about how much he knew about me—or about my family.

"I took out a bank loan," he answered gruffly, once again narrowing his eyes at something in the rearview mirror. "Bought a small property. Flipped it. Rented it out. I found a couple of investors. Bought a few more properties. Things were going pretty well for me in those first couple of years, but it wasn't enough. I knew I would never make it to where I truly wanted to be if I kept playing it safe and doing things by the book."

"So, you cheated."

"One of the most important things you'll learn in this life, Lucy, is that cheating is the key to success. Don't let anyone convince you otherwise."

"That's an awful way to see things."

Unbothered by my insult, Sean merely shrugged, and with a twist of his wrists, changed lanes without warning. I desperately wished I could call Gabriella for help, or even dial 911 at that point. However, the second I'd gotten into Sean's car, he'd snatched my phone away and tossed it into the furthest back seat before peeling away from the curb and locking the doors securely so I couldn't escape. That was how I became a pathetic sitting duck,

awaiting my fate with increasing anxiety.

“I made some advantageous connections in Chicago,” Sean explained with a wicked gleam in his eye. “They showed me much more lucrative ways of building an empire. I realized I had a knack for it—”

“A knack for breaking the law, you mean.”

He laughed, amused by my attitude. “You’ve got a mouth on you, huh? Don’t worry, gorgeous—I like it when my women talk back.”

Nausea rolled through me. *My women*. I certainly didn’t belong to him.

“Fuck you,” I snarled.

That only made him laugh again.

“Gaining my status in Chicago took a while, but in the end, it was surprisingly easy. Only, like any smart businessman, I wasn’t satisfied. I wanted something bigger. I wanted to claim the city that everyone thirsts after. I wanted to grow my empire to the point where nobody would dare take me down.”

“That’s why you set your eyes on New York,” I grumbled. “It’s been a bit harder than you thought it would be, though, huh?”

“It’s nothing I can’t handle.”

“I’ll ask again ... *where are you taking me?*”

“Somewhere private where we can talk,” he replied coolly.

“Talk?”

“Yes, Lucy. You see, I’m going to give you two options.”



“Enlighten me.”

“One: you can promise me you’ll erase that contract between Dean Properties and the Harlem Historical Society before they can cash that first deposit—”

“I don’t have that power,” I snapped.

“I’m sure you could find a way if enough pressure was applied, no?” Sean responded wickedly, shooting me a wink.

My stomach dropped.

If it came down to it—if there was a gun pressed to my temple—I could find a way to mess up the contracts. I could tell the historical society that Dean Properties was withdrawing their bid. I could call the bank and tell them to cancel the check on behalf of our client. I could work my charm and convince the sellers that Lloyd Properties was actually the most advantageous proposal for them to accept. If I had to do it, I could probably make it work.

But I didn’t want to. I believed in Elijah’s vision. He’d worked hard on it. He cared about it. I remembered the way he spoke with such passion about his projects, especially the dormitories he wanted to build for scholarship students at his alma mater. I thoroughly believed Elijah didn’t deserve to be screwed over by Sean, even if it meant that I had to risk myself to ensure it didn’t happen.

“That’s what I thought,” Sean purred when I didn’t respond. “And then, of course, there’s always the second option.”

“And what might that be?”

“You can find out if Elijah really cares enough about you to trade the

factory for your safety.”

“You’d blackmail him?”

Sean chuckled darkly. “You don’t think you’d make convincing bait?”

I clenched my fists, digging my fingernails into the fabric. With Sean behind the wheel in the middle of all this rushing traffic, there was no safe way to attack him without risking my life in the process. There was no way to escape. All I could do was try to talk my way out of it.

Thus, I allowed myself to let slip a truth that Sean clearly hadn’t considered in all his scheming.

“Elijah doesn’t care about me like that,” I said. “You misunderstand our relationship.”

I wouldn’t tell Sean everything. He didn’t need to know that Elijah and I were under an unspoken contract. There was nothing between us beyond that. Nothing. He’d made that clear.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that. I’ve seen the way he looks at you.”

If those words had come from anyone else, I might have softened. However, given it was Sean making the observation, my skin crawled with the thought of just how much he’d been watching us.

“What are you talking about?”

“Elijah knew I was there at the club that night,” he replied flippantly. “He wasn’t aware that I’d purchased the place yet, but when he saw me watching the two of you leave the private room, he looked every bit the part of a wild male guarding his precious mate.”

“Such a primal observation,” I sneered.

Sean smirked. “I’m a primal man.”

“Whatever you think you saw, it isn’t true. Elijah doesn’t feel possessive or protective over me. It’s not like that. So, if you really think I’m going to win you a decent amount of leverage, you’re wrong.”

He merely shrugged, as if he didn’t believe me. As if he saw something in the way Elijah behaved around me that I couldn’t see. He was out of his mind. If Elijah cared about me enough to rescue me from him, he wouldn’t have pushed me away the way he did.

Yet, there was a small voice in the back of my head that reminded me he’d tried to apologize. The regret I’d heard in his voice during that phone call was real. However, I knew it wasn’t regret at losing me. Knowing Elijah and his goals, I was certain the only reason he was sorry for the way things turned out was because he’d lost his opportunity to lie to his father about being in a serious relationship.

It had nothing to do with me.

“Are you willing to bet on it?” Sean chuckled.

“Bet on what?”

Another glance in the mirror. “On how far Elijah is willing to go to ensure your safety.”

Ahead of us, a bridge loomed. Before I knew it, we’d be in Brooklyn. Would we stop there? Would we dive deep into Long Island and end up at an isolated property where no one could hear me scream for help? Would we go back to the beach and take a boat from there?

Was I truly in real, permanent danger? Or, was this all just some sort of game to him?

“What do you mean?” I dared to ask.

“Well,” he sighed heavily. “You seem convinced that he doesn’t give a damn about you, but it appears as though *somebody* in a limited edition Range Rover has been trailing us since we left Queens.”

“What?” I gasped, finally daring to whirl around in the seat. I couldn’t see anything through the dark tint of the back windows, so I twisted back around, craning my neck to look in the sideview mirror.

Sure enough, there was a familiar vehicle rushing toward us, fighting to squeeze in between the traffic to get closer.

My heart leapt into my throat. How did he know where I was?

*Gabriella ...* Of course. My heart swelled with affection for my best friend. She would have been alerted to a problem the moment I failed to send her a text that I’d arrived safely. I’d been too distracted by the uncertainty and fear I felt at the auction to pull out my phone, and by the time I thought to reach out to her, Sean had already ensured it was too late for me to call for help.

She must have called Elijah. *Why* she chose to call him of all people was beyond me, but it was probably a wise decision. Elijah was an influential member of New York society. He knew important people. If anyone was going to get me out of the clutches of an insane, egomaniacal criminal, it was him.

He really was my hero. He really did care.

“Aw, look at you, lovesick fool,” Sean crooned sarcastically, tutting his tongue at me. “You really think I’m going to let him win this easily? You think I didn’t plan for this?”

“The police—”

Sean cackled like a villain. “I’m five steps ahead of you and that bastard. I’ve got half the NYPD force focused on a little *problem* of sorts on the other side of the city right now. Let’s just say that nobody is going to be all that concerned about one missing woman—at least, not for tonight. Elijah is on his own.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing too destructive. Just a bit of arson.”

“You—*what?*”

“Don’t look so shocked, gorgeous! Like I said, there’s very little I won’t do to ensure I reach my goals.”

“You can’t do this!” I shouted, panic rising with such force that my head started spinning. This was bad. This was very, very bad.

“I can, actually.”

I debated wrenching open the lock and flinging myself out the door. There was a chance I’d survive the impact with the concrete, even if I lost some skin in the process, but there was no way to know if I’d avoid getting run over by another car shortly after making my escape. We were quite literally in the middle of the highway. Any attempts to get away were potentially fatal.

Sean had chosen his venue well.

“You’re not going to get away with this,” I told him, though my voice trembled enough to let him know I feared I was fighting a losing battle.

“We’ll see about that,” he murmured, eyes fixed on the road ahead.

We were almost on the bridge. I’d lost sight of Elijah’s car in the sideview mirror, which meant he’d probably dropped far behind us. Maybe he’d already lost us entirely.

Maybe this was truly the end for me.

Then, all of a sudden, a flash of light burst through the back windows of the SUV. Blue and red, glaring brightly in the night. The sight was followed closely by the splitting shriek of a siren.

Part of me dared not to hope. It could have been an ambulance, or a firetruck.

But when I looked behind us once more, there was a police cruiser right on our tail, with two others flanking it in the dense traffic beyond.

It wasn’t just any police cruiser, either. It was the Sheriff.

“I guess we will see,” I replied to Sean, who had become very tense and still.

## Chapter Twenty-Three: *Dean*

The NYPD worked fast, especially with the Commissioner barking demands at them about retrieving a kidnapping victim. According to an influx of texts that Gabriella read aloud to me, a portion of her forces were preoccupied with a fire in midtown that was currently threatening to take over half a city block, but there were still plenty of officers to spare.

The Sheriff himself had volunteered to jump on duty on a Friday evening.

“I don’t think this is his first rodeo,” Gabriella said, holding onto the dashboard for dear life as we followed the police who were chasing after Sean’s Cadillac.

It was pure chaos. All around us, people honked their horns in frustration as they were forced to move out of the way to let the cruisers through, hot on Sean’s heels. Ahead, I noticed signs of the Brooklyn police force shutting down streets in preparation for what was heading their way. This wasn’t the first active car chase that had occurred in this city and it certainly wouldn’t be the last. There was a procedure for everything.

And yet, I refused to step aside. I had to be there until the very last moment, until I knew for sure that Lucy was okay. Gabriella agreed, encouraging me to keep up with the police even as they used their radios to tell me to back off and let them do their job.

“You’d think he’d give up once he realized the cops were on his tail,” I growled.

“Unfortunately, he doesn’t seem like he’s much of a quitter, either. You

stubborn men will do anything to achieve your ends, even if it means driving yourself to your own self-destruction.”

“Yeah, yeah. Write a poem about it later.”

Gabriella scoffed at me. Tensions were high. One minute, Lucy’s friend and I were in agreement and the next, we were bickering.

“Give up!” Gabriella shouted, directing her anger toward the large Escalade in the distance. “We’ve caught your sorry ass!”

“He seems like he knows what he’s doing,” I observed, trailing one of the Sheriff’s backup cruisers with as much expertise as I could muster. “As in, he probably planned for this to happen.”

“What a creep,” Gabriella muttered. “Maybe he has a whole network of cronies working with him on this. What does he even want with her anyway? Does he really think Lucy’s going to offer that much leverage?”

My stomach flipped.

“For me?” I replied softly. “Yes. He knows.”

Gabriella grew quiet for a moment, then muttered, “I’ll kill him with my bare hands.”

“Not if I get to him first,” I argued.

“We’ll kill him together.”

“Deal.”

“And then, we’ll go to prison for murder, together.”

“True.”



“And Lucy will be left without either of us.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t kill him.”

“Maybe not,” Gabriella huffed. “I would love to rip his testicles off, though. With my teeth.”

I cringed, shooting her a sideways glance. “You’re disturbingly feral, you know that?”

Gabriella merely offered me a vicious grin, eyes glinting with the desire for revenge against the man who’d taken her best friend prisoner.

“I’d do anything for Lucy,” she said. I could tell she meant it. *Anything.*

“I think I would, too,” I admitted.

But, suddenly, Gabriella wasn’t paying attention. She pointed through the windshield at what was happening before us on the road.

“They’re losing him!”

Sure enough, when I flipped my focus back to the narrow streets of Williamsburg, Sean’s vehicle was nowhere to be seen. The police were curving sharply down a street to the left, which was presumably where he’d disappeared to.

I carried on past them and turned down the next street parallel to them, blatantly running over a traffic cone that had been placed to cut off the flow of traffic for the sake of the car chase.

If the NYPD wanted to stop me, they would have. For now, it seemed they’d begrudgingly allowed me to come along for the ride, choosing to expend their energy on the true purpose of this endeavor.

“He’s heading down into Long Island’s suburbs,” I muttered.

Sean was doing an infuriatingly good job at losing the police. As the web of twists and turns on the outskirts of New York threw the cruisers for a loop, one of them getting tied up in the JFK Airport traffic by accident, I was glad for the advantage of our GPS tracker on Lucy’s phone. It was a miracle that Sean hadn’t thought to toss it out the window or turn it off.

He was sloppy. His strategies weren’t flawless. He’d slipped up before when he tried to win the support of my snobbiest old money friends. Sean could pretend all he wanted, but there were some details he would never get right.

Before I knew it, we were flying into the quiet suburbs that hailed from Long Island’s map of tidy, manicured lawns and sprawling driveways. There was old money here, too. Veronica’s family owned a house out here. I knew my way around well.

Better than the police, anyway.

In less than ten minutes, they’d lost track of him entirely. I couldn’t even see the flashing lights of their cruisers anymore, though the distant sound of their sirens could be heard when Gabriella rolled down her window.

Sean had cut down an unmarked road that the GPS didn’t pick up on, confusing me enough to lose sight of him. Overhead, the sound of helicopter blades pounded through the night, but there was no way to know if it was police backup or a media station reporting on the drama.

“We’re on our own, I guess,” Gabriella murmured nervously. “I think we’re in the lead.”

I nodded, eyes flashing between the GPS screen and the road ahead.

Sean's winding journey had plunged us deep into a part of the island that was serene and full of lush trees. The roads were narrow and deserted, the scattered homes quiet and dark at this late hour. It was almost midnight at that point. The glittering lights and hectic streets of Manhattan were a distant dream, not even visible from this point.

"Where the hell is he going?" I muttered.

Sean was about a quarter mile ahead of us, racing at top speed down a road slightly south of where we were. I ran a stop sign to keep pace with him, Gabriella cursing aloud when the headlights of an innocent driver flashed dangerously close. They honked angrily at us, but we were already gone.

The sirens grew louder, but they were still too far behind us. Sean was gaining distance, driving way too fast for these thin, narrow lanes. He was going to kill both of them if he wasn't careful.

"Elijah—" Gabriella muttered. "Elijah, I think maybe we need to slow down. I'm scared. I think—I think it's time to let the police catch up."

"They won't!" I barked. "It'll be too late!"

"I don't want to give up either, but look at the way he's driving!" she shouted, gesturing frantically at the GPS. Once again, Sean had cut across an area of the map that didn't have a marked road on it.

How was he doing that? He was new to this city. Someone was clearly helping him navigate to whatever evil lair he was taking Lucy. I wondered if it was one of his employees at Lloyd Enterprises, or if he had an entirely different slew of minions to do his bidding under the cover of darkness.

Instead of giving up, I pressed harder on the gas and sped ahead, jerking the wheel to take a right turn at the last second. Gabriella squealed. I

felt bad for scaring her, knowing it didn't make me much better than Sean, but I was willing to do whatever it took to catch up to Lucy. Deep down, I also knew that Gabriella would happily take that risk.

"I have an idea," I announced, watching as Sean turned onto a road a half mile ahead that I knew curved back around on itself before being bisected by the very road that led to the aforementioned Ridley Estate.

"What is it?"

"It's dangerous. Possibly crazy."

"I'm all ears."

"Are you sure?"

"Like I said, Elijah, I'd do anything for Lucy."

"Great. Hold on."

"What are you—Jesus Christ!" The rest of Gabriella's words were practically stolen from her throat as I stomped on the break and yanked the car into a U-turn.

I knew exactly where we were. As kids, Veronica and I used to run around in these woods with our friends while our parents drank expensive wine and smoked foreign cigars back at the mansion.

There was a gravel path that led from one end of the property to the neighbor's smaller cottage, which used to be servants' quarters back in the nineteenth century. Nowadays, it was a pleasant path for people to travel via golf carts and ATVs. It would barely be wide enough to accommodate my Range Rover, but I would happily take some scratched paint and dirty bumpers over losing sight of Lucy.

We sailed down the path, the only illumination available coming from my headlights. Branches clawed against the sides of the vehicle, scraping and screeching. A particularly large branch struck the windshield with a dull *thwack*, resulting in a hairline crack along the edge.

“It’s fine,” I barked before Gabriella could say anything.

I prayed Veronica’s parents weren’t home because the sound of my large car roaring through their backyard would not only wake them up, but also scare them half to death.

“I can’t even tell where the police are anymore,” Gabriella said, gazing out the windows with wide eyes.

I ignored her to focus on the task ahead. Cutting across the path that was left unmarked by the GPS map meant I could beat Sean at his own game because, as soon as we emerged onto the back lawn of the neighbor’s modest cottage, the little blue dot was only a few hundred yards away from us.

Telling myself that I would compensate the property owners for the tire tracks I was ripping into their pristine lawn, I steered the vehicle up the sloping hill until we struck the gravel driveway. The tires spun, flinging rocks in every direction, but we gained traction and sped down the driveway and toward the main road.

The road that bisected the loop Sean was currently making his way through.

Fate was on my side—literally. Gabriella would be spared from the full force of the consequences of my strategy.

I screeched to a halt at the intersection, breathing heavily as I stared at the rapidly approaching blue dot. The sirens remained distant, as did the

helicopters. It would take the police at least another few minutes to locate him—to locate us—but I would buy them the time they needed.

“What are you doing?” Gabriella asked.

“Do you trust me?” I deflected.

“I barely know you.”

I ignored that. “My company has done some work with a few automobile manufacturers in the past. Warehouses and whatnot. Both my vehicle and Sean’s have outstanding crash safety ratings. He’ll hit the driver’s side directly, sparing both of you the brunt of the impact.”

“Elijah, no—”

“I’m guessing he’s had to slow down to about forty miles per hour to make it around that curve,” I continued, pointing to the loop in the road that Sean had taken at the last minute. “The frames of the vehicles will absorb most of the hit and the impact site will crunch in a way that will ensure the passengers are not jostled too much.”

“You’re insane—”

“It’s the only way to stop him.”

“Elijah!”

With an impatient growl I could no longer hold back, I turned to look Gabriella dead in the eyes. She fell silent, gaping at what I was certain was an unsettling intensity in my gaze. Adrenaline coursed through my veins. I had a singular purpose: to ensure that Lucy, with her pure heart and golden aura and beautiful smile, survived this night.

Nothing else mattered.

“Trust me,” I begged her. “You’ll be okay.”

“But, you—”

“You’ll be okay,” I repeated.

One glance at the GPS told me it was time to act. There was no time to hesitate. There was not even a spare second to consider regretting what I was about to do.

As Sean’s vehicle came within a mere ten yards of the hidden intersection where Gabriella and I hid in the dark, I grabbed the steering wheel and slammed my foot onto the gas pedal. The vehicle lurched forward at the last second, careening directly into the path of Sean’s oncoming Escalade. It was a bigger, bulkier vehicle. Lucy would be safe. Gabriella would be fine.

I’d purposefully not said anything about how I might fare in this situation. I didn’t want to think about the risk.

And then, in a split second, there was impact.

A roaring rush of headlights. Gabriella’s piercing scream. A grating, unbearable screech of metal against metal, aluminum and steel crushing against each other. We went flying, the force of Sean’s speed sending us spiraling together down the road as one until our vehicles detached like vicious beasts rearing their heads for the final blow.

Then, physics took over. I was past the point of sensation, but I knew the windshield was shattered. The driver’s side door was crushed into the left side of my body, the window left in jagged smithereens around the edges. My

head pounded dully and I might have felt the subtle trickle of warm blood down the side of my face, but none of that mattered when I watched Sean's car veer off the road and land in the ditch.

It did not move again.

Some primal survival instinct within me was still functioning, because my foot had somehow remembered to move to the brake pedal. It slammed down on top of it, and before we could hit one of the trees looming on the edge of the road, we screeched to a halt on the pavement.

Gabriella was still screaming—or sobbing. I couldn't tell. There was a strange rushing sound inside my head, as if the ocean had been trapped inside. My vision blurred, white stars popping before my eyes. I could barely move, trapped in my seat against the crumpled door.

With a groan, I craned my neck to catch a glimpse of Sean's vehicle. Steam was pouring out of the hood, which had bent up like an accordion. It was tilted on its side in the ditch, the passenger side door facing upward and seemingly unscathed in the dim glow of the faint streetlights.

I swore I noticed a pair of dainty, pale hands clawing out of the open window. Hands that didn't belong to Sean, who was hopefully unconscious.

Or dead. I could live with committing vehicular manslaughter if he was the victim.

“Elijah, oh, my God,” gasped Gabriella.

For some reason, I couldn't turn my head toward her. My neck felt stuck in place. And yet, the pain still did not come. I heard a shuffle of movement.



“Are you okay?” I managed to grunt.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” whispered my car chase companion. “Elijah, your face. Your head. Oh, my God.”

“It’s bad?” I gasped. My chest felt heavy, as if something was pressing down on it from within. It was getting increasingly more difficult to inhale a full breath and I wondered if I had somehow punctured a lung.

So much for that crash safety rating.

“Elijah, stay with me,” Gabriella begged. “Stay with me. Don’t close your eyes, okay?”

But my eyelids were too heavy to keep open. Everything was too heavy. Perhaps I’d misjudged Sean’s speed. Perhaps he’d hit me too hard. Maybe I’d put a little too much faith in modern engineering.

“I—”

I couldn’t speak. It came out as a rasp.

I was vaguely aware of sirens growing louder—more than one. It was a raucous symphony that might come too late for me. If that were the case, I prayed they were also too late to save Sean.

Suddenly, there were more lights. Shouting voices. Slamming doors. The squeal of tires against the pavement. Through my fading vision, I saw a uniformed man lift a slender figure from the passenger side of the vehicle across the road. Her long, blonde hair cascaded down toward the glass-littered asphalt like a golden waterfall.

“No—” I gasped.

Because she wasn't moving. Lucy was motionless in the officer's arms.

"It's okay," Gabriella whispered in my ear, her hands fluttering all over me as if she was trying to stop the blood that I could now feel oozing out of me in several different places. "She's okay, Elijah. Look."

I fought against the impending darkness, squinting my eyes as the angel twisted out of her temporary cradle, fighting to be placed down on her own two feet. The officer let her go, unable to contain her glorious golden light.

Lucy. She was okay. She wasn't even bleeding. Nothing looked broken.

As the scene swarmed with personnel, I focused on one thing only.  
*Her.*

For weeks now, it had only been her. I had a feeling that, with what little time I had left on this earth, it would continue to be only *her* that mattered. I was so stupid. I had wasted so much time. I never should have pretended, should have realized from the moment we first kissed that any battle I was waging against love was one I was doomed to lose.

I should have known better.

Lucy ran toward me. The rushing in my head had become too loud to hear anything, but I could tell she was screaming something.

"Tell—" I breathed, trying to squeeze Gabriella's hand when she took it in both of hers. "Tell her—"

"I know," cried Gabriella. "I know, Elijah. I'll tell her."

*Tell her I love her.*

That's what I meant to say, but I didn't have time to utter it. The crushing darkness poured over me like a bucket of ice water, pulling me under like a riptide.

Just like that, I was gone.

## Epilogue: *Astor*

*Three years later ...*

“Go to sleep, princess,” I whispered to the infant in her cradle. “I know you love to cry and sing, and that you don’t yet know the difference between the two, but you must sleep, little one.”

My daughter’s fussing quieted slightly, as she wriggled in the blanket I’d swaddled her in. From the moment her first heartbeat came to life inside my womb, I knew she’d be a fighter. She’d kicked against the confines of my belly for months before she was finally set free, and even now, little Eloise was incurably stubborn.

Just like her father.

But, if my daughter was fire and fury and wildness incarnate, the son still in my belly was peace and tranquility. He was a stone in the river, calm and quiet inside my womb. Though he still had three more months to grow inside me, I knew that he would bring the balance his older sister needed.

We still hadn’t agreed on a name for the little boy who’d yet to be born. His grandfather suggested we name the baby after him, but I wasn’t keen on having a little boy who had to bear a name like Hamish through preschool and kindergarten and beyond.

In the cradle before me, Eloise started whimpering again. I placed a gentle hand upon her head and hummed quietly.

“Go to sleep, sweet girl. If you sleep, you can dream, and I promise far

more beautiful things will happen in your dreams than in the waking world,” I whispered. “Trust me.”

As if the infant, barely one year old, could understand me, she quieted once more and stared up at me with wide eyes. I smiled softly and continued humming until, little by little, her eyelids grew heavy. Slowly, I rocked her cradle side to side, rubbing circles on my swollen abdomen as I did so.

I hadn’t expected to become a mother so soon, but it was a joy unlike anything I thought possible. I loved my daughter and my unborn son in a way that words couldn’t describe. I loved them so much I thought my heart might explode from the force of it.

Finally, Eloise drifted off to sleep. I waited an extra minute or so to ensure that she was truly asleep, then tiptoed quietly out of the nursery.

I didn’t have to go far—just across the hall until I was in the main bedroom of the place I now called home.

My favorite person smiled at me from the bed, where he was fluffing the pillows on my side.

Elijah.

Three years was a long time, but it was also no time at all. If I didn’t know any better, I would have thought I blinked and all that time had rushed by without announcing itself.

There was a moment, briefly, when I thought this future would never be possible. That moment was the most terrifying of my life. The moment when I watched Elijah, bloodied and broken in the driver’s side of his car, with Gabriella screaming but unharmed beside him, close his eyes and fade into unconsciousness.

I thought he had died.

He thought he was dying, too.

In the end, it turned out that he'd suffered from a severe concussion, a couple of broken ribs, and a shattered arm that took three corrective surgeries to heal properly.

Now, three years later, he was all in one piece again, though he did carry a two-inch scar down the side of his left temple that refused to fade. Often, he questioned if he should ask a fancy dermatologist to remove it, but I insisted that it made him look even sexier.

It was also a reminder of the sacrifice he'd made for me. He saved my life.

How impossible it had felt at the time. All I could do was cry and beg as the EMTs removed Elijah from the vehicle, an officer holding me back and explaining what he'd done for me. Gabriella, too, had agreed to risk her life to save me.

Perhaps that was what we would call our son—Gabe—after my best friend whose intuition was the reason I was alive and well today.

Back then, in the waiting room of the ER, shortly after both Gabriella and I had been deemed unharmed, she'd embraced me and told me what Elijah had said to her before he drifted away.

*“He loves you,” she whispered to me as I sobbed. “He wanted me to tell you that.”*

And later, when I collapsed from relief at the news that he was awake, that his injuries were not nearly as fatal as they first seemed, I approached his

bedside and confirmed the development myself.

*“So, I heard that you love me,” I told him, grinning down at his bruised body. He was confined in a neck brace, a thick bandage wrapped around his head, but he managed to smile at me, nonetheless.*

*Part of me expected him to deny it. I braced myself for it, prepared to be pushed away once and for all.*

*But he didn’t shove me away. Something shifted that night between us.*

*“What if I do? What are you going to do about it?” he challenged me.*

*“I might just love you back,” I replied.*

*Elijah grinned. “You barely know me.”*

*I knew he was recalling an old conversation between us, a time when he had insisted on buying a property he’d barely seen because he was too busy making love to me all over it. I had told him as much, and he’d insisted—with obvious innuendo—that he’d seen enough.*

*“I know enough,” I echoed in that hospital room.*

*He let out a chuckle, then winced at the pain such a movement caused. Unable to stand the sight of him suffering, I rushed forward and doted on him more closely than the nurses themselves.*

*From that point onward, there was no going back.*

*“Is she asleep?” Elijah asked me.*

*“Yes, but it took a while. I think she would have preferred her father sing her to sleep,” I replied with a smirk. “She’s such a daddy’s girl.”*

Elijah grinned proudly. “As she should be.”

I playfully rolled my eyes, crossing the room and crawling into bed beside him. He’d arranged the pillows perfectly, remembering from my first pregnancy exactly how I needed them in order to sleep comfortably at this stage.

I wondered if I would ever get used to the wonder of what it was like to curl up beside Elijah Dean in *our* bed in *our* home. Life had a way of working out in the most wonderfully unexpected ways.

In the end, Hamish and Beatrice were none the wiser about our little lying game. There was no point in telling them the convoluted truth because, by the time another Sunday dinner came around and Elijah was healed enough to attend, we were truly together and in love. There was no more pretending ... though, there hadn’t been much of that the first time around, either.

Hamish Dean had always declared that he wouldn’t name his only son as CEO until he proved he was capable of building a healthy, happily family of his own. Elijah had resented his father for such a thing for years, but he came to realize that it was a test of sorts. Until he broke down his own walls and accepted love into his life, Elijah wasn’t fit to lead the family business.

By the time we were officially engaged, a mere six months after Elijah’s accident, the role of CEO was offered to him.

Much to everyone’s shock, Elijah turned it down.

Instead, he encouraged his father to name someone else in the company as CEO, someone who was unrelated but fully devoted to the business. Hamish agreed, handing over the legacy of Dean Properties to a trusted



individual and then announcing his retirement once and for all.

Elijah accepted a role on the board of the company, giving him the chance to oversee its general operations without having to focus all of his energy on the day-to-day details. According to him, there were more important things for him to pay attention to.

Things like me ... our marriage ... our future children.

I moved out of Gabriella's apartment and into Elijah's place during our engagement. About a year ago, we purchased a townhouse on the Upper East Side not far from his childhood home so that Hamish and Beatrice could be as close as possible to their grandchildren.

I left Empire Realty the day after I left the hospital. I had no interest in working for a company that didn't hold gender equality as one of its primary values.

Once our second little one was born and I finished my maternity leave, I planned to open my own brokerage firm. It wouldn't be as big or fantastically famous as Empire Realty, but it would be enough. I didn't need the entire world. I just wanted my tiny little piece of it.

Elijah settled onto the mattress beside me, propping himself up on his elbow as he massaged my pregnant belly with gentle movements, something that had become a nightly routine for him. He kept hoping that our little boy would kick as he did so, but this second child's little movements were less ferocious than the first. At most, Elijah earned a gentle nudge from our son when he massaged my stomach.

"By the way, your brother called while you were in there with Eloise."

It had been my idea to name our daughter after his late mother. He

cried when I suggested it, holding me so tightly that I thought he might never let me go.

“Really?” I replied. “Just now? It’s nearly midnight.”

“Well, I think it’s more like midday in India right now.”

“Right ... what did he want?”

“He was just confirming that he and Kali are landing on the morning of the twenty-third.”

“Perfect.”

Luke was still in the Peace Corps. Since that night at Method Club all those years ago, he’d gone back to Ghana and met a wonderful woman whom he fell in love with almost instantly. When it was time for them to be stationed somewhere new, they’d decided to go to India together. I’d met her last Christmas and had adored her instantly.

I had a feeling that I would be hearing wedding bells for them sooner rather than later. Even my free-spirited brother couldn’t escape the comforting anchor of love forever.

“I told them I already reserved a suite for them,” Elijah continued.

I snorted. “And how much did they fight you on that?”

“A lot.”

“They’ll survive,” I laughed.

Next week, we would be meeting Luke and Kali, as well as both of my parents, in San Francisco. Lily was graduating from Stanford Law. As it turned out, all of that extra commission I earned when I was fooling around

with Elijah in the beginning wasn't entirely necessary, because she earned a full scholarship to study law at one of the best schools in the world.

I was so proud of her. So proud that I didn't think I could explain it even if someone got on their knees and begged me to. My little sister was the brightest star in our family and she was going to do amazing things for humanity.

The journey to California would be the last plane trip I could take before my pregnancy left me confined to New York, so I wanted to make a big deal out of it. Elijah had taken the lead and reserved a group of suites at one of the best hotels in the city for all of us to enjoy while we celebrated Lily's accomplishment. My parents were happy to accept, learning that being tentative to Elijah's generosity only resulted in him giving even *more*. Luke and Kali, however, were accustomed to a humble lifestyle, and had tried to fight the offer of luxury.

Of course, they lost. They'd get over it. The second Luke saw his niece, he would be distracted from any disgruntlement he felt at being forced to enjoy a fancy hotel experience. He'd only had the chance to meet Eloise once before and had cried almost as much as she did upon holding her for the first time. It was one of my most precious memories.

We'd found peace together, Elijah and I. When he'd risked his life to stop Sean's kidnapping attempt, it was something I would never forget. Something I would never know how to truly repay him for.

What happened that night was proof that the power of love was stronger than anything else, even if we struggled to acknowledge it was love in the first place. Elijah and I had clicked from the moment we laid eyes on each other, and the growing affection between us had refused to lie dormant

for any longer than necessary. It was as if destiny intervened and forced us to boldly declare that we would do anything for each other ... even put our lives on the line.

Elijah's maneuver to cut Sean off with his vehicle resulted in a handful of injuries for the vicious criminal, but nothing fatal. Sean was knocked unconscious upon impact and suffered two broken wrists and a nasty case of whiplash, but he survived. It was a good thing, though both Elijah and Gabriella had been bloodthirsty for what he'd threatened to do to me.

Sean was brought to the hospital, handcuffed to his cot while he recovered, and taken into custody as soon as he was deemed stable. Apparently, the Police Commissioner, who happened to be good friends with Elijah, had contacts in Chicago where the FBI had been building a file on Sean Lloyd for years.

Evidently, he wasn't as smooth and efficient in his criminal activity as he boasted.

It was difficult to recover from that experience. For months, I struggled to feel safe in cars. I felt nervous around strangers, and was easily spooked when I was in public. If it weren't for Elijah and Gabriella and my family, I might have still feared that someone might take me away from those I loved without warning.

But, I would never have to see Sean again. He was charged with attempted kidnapping, reckless endangerment, and, after a thorough investigation of Lloyd Enterprises, several dozen counts of fraud, money laundering, and trafficking of stolen goods. He would spend the rest of his life in federal prison.

That was where a man like him truly belonged. I had no doubt he'd try

to build another empire of his own in there, thinking himself a king among fools, and I sincerely hoped that the other inmates violently knocked him down a few pegs.

I'd had enough excitement for one life. Now, all I wanted was peace and tranquility. I wanted to grow and nurture my family.

I wanted to be happy.

"What are you thinking about?" Elijah asked, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me close.

I smiled and pressed a soft kiss to his lips. "I was thinking about how much I love you."

"I'll never get used to hearing that."

"I'll say it a thousand times a day until you do."

Elijah chuckled. "I love you, Lucy."

"I love you, too."

"I think I can feel the little one moving," he whispered, one hand still on my belly.

I smiled, feeling the sensation of my child lazily switching positions inside the womb. Elijah's eyes lit up with wonder as he felt the baby's tiny arms and legs flail around for a minute before he settled into his new spot.

"What about Gabe?" I asked. "For a name?"

"After Gabriella?" Elijah chuckled.

"Yeah ... do you like it?"

“Gabe ... it’s cute. Eloise and Gabriel. I like the sound of it.”

“Good. It’s settled.”

Elijah reached over to the bedside table and switched off the light, leaving us hovering in warm, safe darkness.

“I bet she’ll be inconsolable when we tell her we’re naming him after her,” Elijah murmured.

“Oh, I don’t doubt it.”

Gabriella still lived in the same apartment that I’d called home for those difficult months where I thought my life had fallen apart. In hindsight, I understood that it was the universe’s way of pushing me away from something that wasn’t good for me and nudging me in the direction of my true path.

How else would I have found Elijah?

Gabriella was still a free spirit, dating casually even as the years went by. She was the kind of woman who wouldn’t settle down until much later in life, the kind of person who didn’t desire children of her own. At least she got to be an aunt to Elijah’s and my kids. I respected that about her. It was part of what I loved so much about my friend. Gabriella didn’t run from love. She simply had so much of it to give that she couldn’t be tied down to one soul.

Dr. Ridley, who had become one of my dearest friends and now went exclusively by Ronnie to everyone, was still seeing patients, but had taken a step back from having a full schedule so she could focus on teaching and other pursuits that she didn’t specify. Elijah had a theory that she led a double life as a dominatrix, which caused Ronnie to laugh so hard she almost cried the first time he said it.

She no longer saw Elijah as a patient, prioritizing their friendship above all else, but Elijah had managed to find another therapist close by. It was important for him to have someone to talk to. Losing his mother had been incredibly difficult for him. It was a pain he would carry for the rest of his life—a pain that I would happily shoulder with him, but could not heal for him.

My own parents had officially retired. Last I heard, they planned on taking a trip with Hamish and Beatrice to the Maldives later this year. Despite the differences between Elijah’s and my parents, they got along extremely well. Yet another happy miracle.

“Goodnight,” I murmured to Elijah.

He kissed me deeply, pulling me closer against him. Across the hall, our daughter slept soundly. Between us, our unborn son waited patiently for the day he was destined to enter this world and greet us.

“Goodnight, Lucy,” Elijah whispered. “Sweet dreams.”

And they would be sweet, those dreams of mine, but not as sweet as life itself had become.

**BOOK 4:** *I have one rule in life: I don't date cocky, pretentious billionaires,*

*no matter how hot they are. Except Noah King - the irresistible, rich*

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## About the Author

I am a contemporary romance author and guilty of being addicted to books, caffeine, wine, bad reality tv and even worse puns.

I'm also a cat mom and usually spend my days biking around my small town or staying in and writing a bit of romance for you to enjoy!

My favorite tropes that I can't seem to put down are second chance romances and enemies to lovers, but I'm always getting caught up in enjoying other tropes (and publish them too!)

I've always got something new planned and going on so please subscribe to my author newsletter for a FREE novella, exclusive content, and behind-the-scenes emails of what I'm doing ❖❖ ❖❖

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