

MY DARK
PRINCE

DARK & TWISTED TALES

AMANDA KEEN

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MY DARK PRINCE



Invisible until needed...that's me. But when the city's more powerful man sees me, everything changes.

Forced to live in the shadows, I've been the go-to girl for the thankless tasks no one else wants. My dreams take a backseat, buried under obligations.

But all that changes one fateful night at the Luminary Soirée. Working for my stepmother, who sees me as nothing more than a free maid, I hope to escape the night unnoticed. Yet, fate has other plans.

Drawn into a corridor, I stumble upon him.

Hawk, the city's deadliest and most influential man. With his predatory sapphire eyes and whispers of dominance, he's a storm I didn't see coming.

One chance encounter. One stolen moment. And everything I thought I knew about my life shatters.

Suddenly, I'm not the forgotten girl in the basement. I'm the girl who's caught the eye of the city's monster. And Hawk doesn't forget...

PROLOGUE

SAPPHIRE

*D*rowning in velvet and doused in perfume...

One of my mom's favorite sayings came to mind, something she'd always say when it came to these prestigious functions. The first time I'd heard of the annual Luminary Soirée, it sounded like a fairy tale dream, but nothing prepared me for its elaborate decorations, floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked manicured gardens, glittery gowns, music, and laughter flowing.

Now standing in its midst... it's overwhelming.

The glint of gold is everywhere, gleaming with the soft glow of candles. Candelabras line the hallways and walls, crystal chandeliers overhead, silks draped all around us in blues and purples, ice sculptures, a dance floor, the lights dimmed. People are everywhere in exquisite clothes.

It's too much...

I have to remind myself to breathe because everyone seems like they belong here but me. I'm barely keeping my head above the surface, hoping not to sink.

Tightly clutching the small serving tray in my hand, the cold metal presses into my palm, bringing me back to reality and where I belong.

A red-haired young woman, maybe in her early twenties, strolls toward me with a tight grin. She helps herself to the prosciutto-wrapped sliced figs. Her garnet and gold necklace catches the light, a piece that can easily alone pay off my

family's debts twice over. I hold back the heavy sigh pressing on my chest.

She looks like a princess who deserves to be here—unlike me.

I lift my free hand to the necklace gifted to me by my mom, my fingers brushing her final gift. Clasp the golden, heart-shaped locket fills me with a storm of emotions. It feels like the weight of every tear I've cried since her passing. Every secret we shared, every laugh, every single embrace—as though she captured it in this tiny pendant.

For a fleeting moment, I can almost feel the gentle stroke of her fingers through my hair. The ache of her absence stings just as strongly years later.

Swallowing past the thickness in my throat, I wander amid the party in my black waitress dress, offering polite nods and fake smiles. A hand suddenly lands heavily on my backside. My heart catapults against my ribcage, and I turn sharply to a pot-bellied man with thinning silver hair standing behind me, smirking.

I blink, my response stolen by shock, especially seeing he can easily pass as my grandfather. He leans in, and I pull back instinctively.

“When you stare at me like that, darling, it's an invitation.”

Something comes over me, anger rising through me at his forwardness. My gaze remains unwavering as my response comes rushing out.

“An invitation to serve hors d'oeuvres, sir, not to disrespect me.” Heat climbs up over my cheeks. Just because I've been forced to work at the Soirée doesn't mean I'm here to be mistreated. My stepmother claimed all that glory when she forced me into this job.

Drawing in a steady breath, I retreat as the man mumbles something about me being feisty, but I block him out after that.

Moving through the crowd, I lose myself in the job, admiring the flowing gowns, the men in tailored suits who are focused on the perfect woman to drink with, dance with, and

take into the dark corridors of the grand mansion that might as well be a palace. Its sheer size is spectacular, owned by the richest, most powerful man in the country.

Hawk Kline.

Yet no one has seen the man tonight... at his own soirée. Well, at least I assume, as I haven't yet seen what he looks like, but I hear you'll never forget the first moment you meet him. In truth, I don't care if he shows his face, as long as the night passes quickly.

Across the ballroom, I spot my stepmother enjoying the event as a guest. Her invitation came at a price—my labor.

She's in a tight dress with a low V-neckline, red lips stretched into an exaggerated smile as she flirts with elites. Her two spoiled Pomeranians are on leashes. Wonder how much she had to pay to get them into the party? Probably money we didn't have to spend, but it's all about appearances for her. Like the time she told me, *Why just exist when you should be the portrait everyone yearns to frame?*

When her gaze sweeps to mine, I lower mine and slip back into the sea of glitter and opulence. I made a promise for my family's sake, for my dad, to wear this uniform and play this role, at least for tonight.

If my father is somewhere far away, trying to secure deals that might pull us out of our family financial crisis, the least I can do is work during one of the biggest nights of the year for the man we owe money to.

One day, I'll attend such an event as a guest, wrapped in a glittery gown.

A shadow falls over me, and I turn with a smile, lifting my silver platter to a hungry guest. But the burly man in my path just leers at me.

“What's a beauty like you serving drinks and not out on the dance floor?” His slurred words are thick with alcohol.

I roll my eyes internally. Wonderful... drunk and deluded.

“The view’s better from here, sir. More entertaining,” I say with a sugary sweet voice, trying to sidestep him. I don’t have time for this. My tray’s heavy, and there are plenty of snobs remaining to be served.

For the next hour, I work the room, pushing through the crowd, feeling more and more as if I’m trapped in a fishbowl. When another man ogles me, pushing past others to reach me, I notice the glint in his eyes isn’t for the morsels on my platter.

I twist and go in the opposite direction, my heart racing as I navigate the masses to cross the room. I’m desperate for some alone time and to find the bathroom. Setting the platter on a nearby table, I slip into a dim corridor. The wall is cool against my back as I take in short, sharp breaths. Today, I turned nineteen, and who could have guessed I’d spend my day trying to evade creepy men?

My hand wraps around my pendant, and a rush of memories flood me. I bite my lower lip to hold back the tears. If my mom was still alive, she would never force me to work here.

Just a few more hours. I can get through this.

I hurry down the corridor away from the party, the sounds of the ballroom dimming behind me. I’m sure this is the direction for the restrooms. Maybe it’s around another turn, and I’ll find them. Several turns later and I feel like I’m going in circles.

Please don’t be lost in the maze-like mansion. I’ll never hear the end of it from my stepmother.

A murmur of voices snatches my attention from somewhere nearby, a woman’s cry, frantic and high-pitched, as though she might be on the verge of tears.

I stiffen, reminded of the sleazy men at the party, and I can’t help it. I hurry toward the sound in case she needs help. Ahead, I spy a door ajar and tip-toe closer, then peer inside the bedroom. It’s dimly lit, an amber light glowing over the polished wooden bed, the furniture, and the plush rugs. As I press closer for a better look, the room comes more into view.

The image in front of me leaves me startled.

A beautiful brunette, completely naked—well, aside from her red stilettos—is bent over a table, her ass high, her legs spread, and everything is on display, even how glistening wet her inner thighs are.

Standing several feet behind her is a man who I can only see from his side, but his profile is enough to tell me he's the most striking person I've ever laid eyes on. Wearing suit pants, the lean muscles are clear beneath the fabric. He's rolling up the sleeves of his white button-up shirt as he takes in the view of what the woman is offering him.

Short of breath, I'm unable to look away. Even the grandeur of the furniture and towering display shelves seem to shrink away in his presence.

Am I really watching this?

Evidently, the shock isn't enough to make my feet move.

I'm no virgin, but I can count on one hand how many times I slept with my ex, and none of the times included something so captivating and sexy that has me clenching my thighs from the growing tingles between my legs.

The man steps closer to the woman, his hand falling to her parted thighs. She gasps, arching at his touch, and already my panties are drenched. He has that domineering look to his posture, and I should be repelled by it. Instead, part of me wonders what it would be like to be in that woman's position with a man like that in control.

This is madness... have I lost my mind to watch this?

His free hand slides up her spine and tangles in her locks, curling them around his fist as he tugs her head back enough to gain a moan out of her.

"Is this why you entered my room?" he asks in a deep, smooth voice, yet as chilling as a winter's breeze wrapping around me.

"I-I made a mistake," she whispers, then moans loudly when he pushes a finger into her.

The dim light catches the hard angles of his face, emphasizing the beauty and danger he carries.

“It’s time for a little reminder of what happens when you break the rules,” he drawls, and the temperature in the corridor seems to soar because I’m burning up.

Everything about this gorgeous man screams sinful. Dark. Sensual.

I hold my breath as the intimacy of this moment sends shivers of desire licking down my spine. Even as I attempt to push away the arousal I feel, I’m still standing there, watching them, caught like a deer in headlights.

It’s clear he’s the kind of man who knows how to drive a woman to madness, and just watching him has me close to moaning myself.

I know the truth of why I burn with wanton desires. I want to pretend it’s me that such a man would take an interest in, so he’d stare at me the way he does at the beautiful woman in red stilettos.

He leans forward over her, his hand working overtime. She moans, rocking against him.

“You like that, don’t you, doll?” His tone is slick, with his threat simmering.

The moment feels so primal, so enticing.

He releases her from his grip and takes a few steps back.

“Get on your hands and knees in front of me,” he commands.

The woman pulls herself up, her hair messy, shock on her expression, but she moves with the elegance of a cat, not batting an eye before following his order. She nods, though the swirl of concern and anticipation isn’t lost on her face.

He unbuckles his belt and unzips his pants. From my angle, I can’t see him, but I can only assume he’s huge, considering how big her eyes grow.

“Open up, doll,” he groans. “Take me like I know you can.”

She crawls closer to him, and I watch her kneeling before him, struggling to fully accommodate him. In complete shock and curiosity, a part of me wishes I could catch a glimpse of his size.

He hisses, and the sound leaves me shuddering down to my core. He makes the kind of noise that melts me, and if he touched me right now, I’d come undone.

“That’s it, you can take more, doll.”

She makes a moaning sound in response and starts bobbing her head up and down.

I’m completely wet. I don’t remember the last time I’ve been so turned on. I shouldn’t be witnessing this, but I’m frozen to the spot, hypnotized by the couple. My body hums with unrelenting pleasure.

The wall takes my weight as I tremble with desire, and the notion of touching myself and releasing the ache plays on my mind.

As soon as that idea forms, I scold myself as reality settles into where I am. I’m here as a helping hand for my stepmother, who is out there, most likely searching for me.

Suddenly, that thought has fear pulsing through me. I retreat a bit too abruptly. My shoulder hits the door, and it claps shut behind me.

Shit.

Panic swallows me, and before I can make sense of it, I’m running in the opposite direction, having no clue where I’m going. Dread curls in my stomach. I press into the shadows quickly and keep glancing over my shoulders, but no one’s following me.

I can’t stop picturing the handsome man with that beautiful woman. The scene burns in my mind, arousal thrumming inside me.

I keep rushing through corridors that stretch on for what feels like forever.

When I find the distant flow of the ballroom farther ahead, a wave of relief washes through me.

Tucking stray hairs off my face and behind my ears, I take a long inhale to steady my racing breaths. I slow my walk to the party, not needing to draw attention.

A firm grip wraps around my wrist, pulling me backward, and a gasp spills past my lips, my heart launching into my throat. The force of being spun around has the world spinning. When my vision clears and I catch myself from falling over, I'm face-to-face with *him*.

The striking man who minutes earlier had his cock inside a naked woman's mouth. The man who ignited me without so much as looking at me.

Now... Oh my God.

Shadows gather under those stunning green eyes that hold on to me.

I'm frozen in place. I tell myself to move, to escape, but those tingles return to my body. If I clench my thighs, I'll moan from the climax that clings to my insides.

What's wrong with me?

It feels like the very air is being drawn toward him, leaving me starved for oxygen.

"How was the show? Did you wish it was you?" His voice is as dark as the shadows surrounding us. "How about you come back, and I'll put on a real show for you?" There's sarcasm in his words, and when he leans in, I lose my ability to draw in a breath. "You'd be a good girl for me if I asked, wouldn't you?"

He almost purrs the words, *good girl*, and something about the way he says them has me trembling with need.

His hand trails up my arm, leaving me covered in goosebumps. His touch curls across the front of my throat, his pressure clear of who's in control.

An explosion of desire courses through me, and as much as I try, I can't hold back my moan.

His fingers are on my chin now, tilting my head to stare up at him. The chiseled line of his jawline, his cheekbones, and every rugged feature make him unforgettable. The intensity of his gaze is so fierce that for those few moments, the world fades, and only the two of us exist.

My heart's pounding, and I can't find my response.

"Or would you prefer if I touched you now, beautiful girl? I can smell your arousal." Suddenly, his other hand skims at the hem of my dress across my thigh.

I shudder, my body weakening.

He never breaks his stare, and in that second of clarity, I know if I don't leave his side, I'll end up in his room, under his command. I hate that the idea excites me.

As his fingers crawl up my inner thigh and a hoarse groan rolls over his throat, every inch of me begins to panic.

I'm suddenly wrenching myself out of his hold, my pulse thundering in my ears. There's a pinch along the side of my neck, but I don't stop, as I desperately need to get away from him as fast as possible.

His laughter fills my ears.

Suddenly, I really hate him.

I should have known better than to spy on *him*, of all people... the city's richest and most influential figure.

It has to be him.

All those whispered stories about unforgettable first meets with Hawk Kline being an experience you'll never forget... they aren't lies. The heaviness of that truth threatens to crush my lungs.

I burst into the vibrant party, then spin back around to search the dark corridors, but he's gone. Instinctively, my hand flies to my neck, feeling for the familiar touch of my mom's pendant.

Nothing.

My heart drops.

I gasp, ice flooding me.

Frantically, I pat my dress, hoping it simply fell off, but deep down inside, that sick realization begins to roll through me...

I've lost the last piece of my mom I have left.

CHAPTER ONE

SAPPHIRE

“Sapphire!” my stepmother’s sharp voice pierces the silent morning all the way down to the tiny basement I sleep in. “Upstairs, now!”

With heavy eyes, I groggily drag myself up from the old mattress, the springs groaning in protest. Just as I sit up, a mouse scurries across the room, disappearing into a crack in the wall. He’s a regular, and as long as he stays on his side of the room, we’re at peace. The dampness of the room clings to me as I yawn to wake up.

“Sapphire. Don’t make me call you again.”

My chest tightens, and with a long exhale, I push myself to my feet and quickly get changed into my leggings and loose t-shirt folded on the bedside table. The clothes are a bit wrinkled, but it doesn’t matter, seeing as I have no time to shower first.

I drag myself upstairs, wondering what crisis has happened now.

As I step into the hallway, there are stacks of unopened boxes that line the corridor, and the front door is wide open. Light and the spring breeze swish into the house.

Before I can process what’s going on, two burly men step out from the living room, each carrying an end of our expensive mahogany couch. My stepmother trails behind them, her cheeks flushed, eyes swollen with tears.

“Please,” she pleads. “The couch has been in the family for years. This has to be some mistake. We were promised another week to settle our payment.”

She chases after them outside into the front yard. A hollow feeling squeezes my insides as if someone’s stealing my past—the only thing I hold on to most days to stop me from losing my mind.

A stab of panic pierces through me at the debt collectors in our home. They’re taking our furniture, and the thought of it all being ripped away is too much to bear. The memories I’ve shared on the couch with my mom, the laughs with my father when our lives weren’t sinking.

“Isn’t there something we can do?” I ask in a raspy voice. “Just a few more days to pay back the debt.” I sound like my stepmother as dread climbs over me that we’ll end up on the street.

The short, stocky man meets my gaze, eyes cold. “The notice was sent two weeks ago. You were given plenty of notice. And if the rest of the payment isn’t received by tomorrow, then everything else goes.”

My insides turn to ice.

I step forward, desperation clenching in my stomach, my attention on the third man who steps into our home, his attention on the ornate bookshelf. *God, not my books.*

Moving past the man, I’m out in the front yard in the morning sun, staring at the movers shoving our table into the back of their truck, being knocked about and getting scratched.

The third guy emerges from our home without the bookshelf, which is a small relief, but he turns to my stepmother.

“We’ll be back tomorrow. We’re taking these items now for collateral. If we don’t get the full payment by then, we’ll clear the rest out.” Then he jumps into the truck with the other two, and they drive down the street.

My stomach hurts, and I feel sick at how deep in debt we are, at how things have gotten so bad so quickly.

Taking a deep inhale, I rub the goosebumps out of my arm and meet my stepmother's stare as she makes her way back up the pebbled driveway.

"Why are they here?" I ask. "I worked at the Luminary Soirée last night to help pay off some of our debt." Just mentioning the name has me almost smelling Hawk's masculine cologne, his intense glare on my mind.

My stepmother's expression immediately flashes dangerously on me, dragging me out of my thoughts. Her mascara is smeared into panda eyes from her tears.

"Well, evidently, it wasn't enough, now was it?" she sneers, marching indoors, and I trudge in after her. "You probably didn't do a good enough job."

That earlier ache in my gut deepens as I think about my encounter with Hawk last night. Of course, he'd find out who I was. This must be his punishment for me spying on him.

Fuck, what do I do?

Shutting the door behind me, my hands are shaking. I'm twisting my fingers over one another, my mind on fire with dread, with guilt.

"Well, don't just stand there," my stepmother snaps. "Go mop the guest room now that the furniture's gone. Do something. You've always been such a disappointment. Maybe if you'd been better at something, your father wouldn't have to travel so much to make more money. Maybe we wouldn't be in this mess."

I frown at her, anger bubbling in my chest while tears roll down my cheeks. She always blames me for everything. Like the missing crystal glasses that vanished from the kitchen last week. Or the platinum silver jewelry box that once belonged to my mom.

Right then, the sharp yapping of her two dogs interrupts us. They race into the hallway, their paws click-clacking on the floorboards, snapping at my heels.

"Come, my darlings, Mommy will feed you." She then shoots me a scathing glance. "I'll be heading into town shortly."

Maybe I can salvage this mess. Ensure my best dress is ironed and ready. And set my hair curlers out.” Her heels tap the wooden panels as she vanishes into the kitchen.

I clench my fists, biting back the scream in my lungs. Fighting won’t help. It always ends with me doing more work and being blamed. Plus, she twists my words to Father when he returns, making it seem like I don’t accept her into the family.

Slumping against the door, I decide I’ll try to give my father a call on his phone once she leaves for town. She hates me contacting him and butts in on the conversation.

Hope clings to my ribs that if he returns soon, he’ll help us find a way out of this disaster.

A sudden shake snaps me from my sleep.

My eyes flip open, and through the dim night, I can make out my stepmother bending over me, shaking me. Her face is contorted in irritation and urgency, and panic starts to curl under my rib cage because she never comes down to the basement unless there’s an emergency.

“Wake up,” she whispers, her voice cold. “Get your things, now!”

My heart’s on fire as dread sets in, and my mind’s firing in every direction.

Are we being evicted early? Are the men here to take more of our stuff?

Scrambling out of bed, I blink back the tears, unsure where to turn.

“What’s going on?” I murmur.

“No questions.” She seizes my arm firmly, stopping me from starting to run in circles in panic. “Just move and calm the heck down.”

Rushing around, I grab a bag and stuff the essentials inside. I feel numb, unsure how I’m even moving when my head is frozen on us losing our home.

Somehow, I manage to change out of my pajamas and into some semblance of clothes. I don’t even know what I’ve put on. I rush upstairs, the bag in my hand, my adrenaline in overdrive.

Memories of my call to my dad surface, how we spoke for a few seconds before he had to get onto another flight. Then he was gone.

Now, I stare at my stepmother, hoping for answers, but she’s charging ahead of me, not saying much.

I squeeze the straps of my duffle bag as I emerge into the hallway. It’s still night, just past midnight, according to the clock. The darkness is broken by the light spilling through the open front door from the strange car parked in the driveway.

Standing in the doorway is an older, thin man in a black suit who towers over my stepmother and me. His hands are clasped, and his gaze finds me.

I’m trembling. “W-Who’s he?”

My stepmother is facing me, blocking him from my view, and a horrible sensation creeps through me.

“Sapphire,” she begins. “I had to make a very difficult decision today. If I hadn’t, we’d all be on the streets, including your father.”

My head spins. “What are you talking about?”

Exhaling loudly, she continues, “The debt... it’s spiraled out of control. We have no more options.” Her expression hardens. “But I struck a deal. A deal with Hawk Kline.”

A chill twists around my spine, and I swallow hard.

Hawk Kline.

The man from the party. Fuck! After last night, he's the last person I ever want to see again.

"What kind of deal?" I demand, gripping the straps of my bag until my knuckles are white.

She leans in. "He needs an assistant at his mansion, and he's agreed to have you work for him. In exchange, he'll clear all our debts. Finally," she sneers. "Finally, you've found your purpose and a way to contribute to this family."

Anger simmers inside me. What exactly does an assistant help a man like Hawk Kline? Maid, sex slave, both?

"How could you decide this without even asking me?" My attention darts to the man in the doorway and back. "And why now, in the middle of the night? Why the urgency?" Does my father even know about this? If I can buy myself some more time, I can call him on the home phone. Someone like me isn't permitted to own a cell phone, according to my stepmother.

She roughly snatches my arm, tugging me toward the stranger.

"This is Mr. Cadell. He's here to take you to your new position."

"No!" I wrench my arm free, taking a step back. "Tell me what's really going on. I need to speak with my dad."

Her face tightens, and she looks ready to implode.

"Your father is under tremendous stress," she hisses the words through her clenched teeth. "How can you be so selfish? Can you even fathom the relief he'll feel coming home without the weight of our debts? All you have to do is work with Hawk and live in his mansion for a year."

"A year?" I choke out the words as panic rises in my chest. "I-I can't just leave everything behind to work for a man I barely know. A man who intimidates me."

"The deal is done, Sapphire." Her arm is suddenly on my arm, fingernails digging into flesh. "You're going."

Mr. Cadell steps forward, and there's softness in his eyes as though he may sympathize with me.

“I’m afraid your stepmother, despite her unrefined delivery, is correct.” He reaches out and takes my bag out of my grasp. “If you don’t accompany me tonight, we will be left with no choice but to claim the house and its contents as our own. You and your family will be required to leave immediately.”

I can barely breathe as my skin crawls with dread. I feel the walls of the house closing in around me, suffocating me.

My stepmother is watching me with wild desperation, hoping I’ll carry all the debt—a situation she largely contributed to since marrying my father.

My throat thickens with emotions. I’m cornered because I won’t let my father lose everything. I can’t do that to him.

“It won’t last forever, Miss. Just a year,” Mr. Cadell explains, but his words don’t soften the fear inhaling me.

A year is a lifetime.

The man’s already left the house and sets my bag in the trunk of the black sedan, then opens the back door for me.

My breaths are coming fast, and I can’t even look at my stepmother as I won’t let her see me crying.

Before I move, she says, “Go on then, darling. Off you go.”

The fake sweetness in her voice sickens me. There’s so much I want to say, but I’m choking on my emotions, unable to think straight. Words fail me. Instead, I silently make my way down to the car. I take a deep breath, trying to stop shaking.

All I can think about is my father and how desperately I need to speak with him, how I can’t be away from him... not after losing my mom.

Once I’m in the car, we reverse down the driveway. I glance back, staring at the only home I’ve known, feeling like I’ve left behind a large piece of myself.

CHAPTER TWO

SAPPHIRE

The black car rolls to a stop in front of the towering mansion from last night's Luminary Soirée. Only now, so late in the night, the place came with no clamor of guests, no chatter, and no decorations with lights.

Everything plunges into darkness except for a handful of dim lights here and there. When I climb out of the car and into the cold embrace of the breeze, the sheer magnitude of the place truly hits me.

"This way," Mr. Cadell says, carrying my bag and stepping up to the large, double front doors. The lofty, arched windows are darkened by drawn heavy curtains.

I feel tiny standing on the front steps, and a sense of seclusion comes over me. We're miles away from any civilization, no neighbors in sight. Suddenly, the late hour of the night is a blanket, tightly wrapping around me, squeezing me. I can't breathe and stumble back toward the car.

"I-I can't do this," I murmur, mostly to myself. "We're all alone out here."

The driver glances my way with a warm smile. "It's a lot to take in, but you'll get used to it. Just remember what's at stake. Sometimes, we all have to do what we don't like for the greater good."

I blink at him, unsure how to take his wisdom, though I'm wondering what he's sacrificed and lost.

“Mr. Kline likes his privacy,” he continues. “Let’s get you inside.”

He opens the front door, and I draw in a deep breath, knowing I don’t really have a choice. Returning means we lose the house. Swallowing my dread, I nod and move toward the mansion. The gravel crunching under my shoes is the only sound breaking the silence around us.

Before I know it, we’re inside the lavish entryway with rich, dark walls and a majestic staircase with gold handrails and steps carpeted with lush red carpet. Chandeliers hang overhead, and tall vases in the corners burst with flowers. I’m just in awe of the place as I was last night when I rushed through the estate as I worked.

I feel like an intruder in a palace.

Last night, I arrived for the party at the back of the place. This is like stepping into another world. One that’s lonely as there’s not a soul in sight.

“Come on,” the driver signals, leading me up the staircase. Heading down a long corridor, he stops outside a door.

“Guess this is me, then?” I say nervously.

“Try to rest,” he answers quietly. “Tomorrow, you’ll get to know the place and start your duties.”

Duties? I hate the way he says that word, especially when I have no clue what exactly they entail.

He pushes open the door for me, and my mouth might have dropped open. If, as an assistant, this is my room, then Hawk must be sleeping in a room made of gold.

“Good night.” The driver closes the door and leaves me.

I quickly check the door handle—it isn’t locked.

Then I turn back to the king-sized, four-poster bed that dominates the room with a plush white duvet and several pillows. Dark wooden furniture fills the rest of the room—a dresser, a nightstand, bedside tables, and lamps. Then there’s a door to which I hope is the bathroom.

The walls are adorned with subtle artwork of leaves fluttering on the breeze... blues and greens. It's beautiful, but I remind myself that even the most beautiful serpent can be deadly, and I can't let my surroundings cloud my judgment.

Crossing the room, I peer out the window to where the moonlight reveals a maze-like garden behind a row of lofty pines.

Overwhelmed, my eyes still hurting from all my crying, I gravitate to the bed. Toeing off my shoes, I slide under the blankets in my clothes. The soft embrace of the luxurious sheets and the mattress beneath me is heavenly. I moan into its warmth. I've never felt such comfort. I curl up, loving the clean smell that comes from freshly laundered bedsheets.

As sleep starts to draw me under, my thoughts sweep to Hawk.

Why in the world did he agree to have me work for him? Especially after I caught him with that woman last night, then he pinned me against the wall. Questions dance in my mind until I drift to sleep.

The house is quiet, like everyone's playing hide and seek, but no one's coming out of their hiding spots. Mommy's room has been locked for days, and Daddy won't let me go in. He keeps saying that she's not feeling good, but I want to see for myself.

I miss her.

Every day after school this week, I crouch down by her door with my teddy bear, hoping if she hears me singing, maybe she'll open the door and smile. But it never happens. It only opens when the doctors come and go. I don't like them because they never smile.

"Daddy?" I sniffle, jumping to my feet when he approaches. "Can I see Mommy now?"

“Sweetie,” he begins, his voice crackly. He looks tired, and there’s darkness under his eyes. “Mommy’s... she’s very sick. It’s not good to see her like this right now.”

I hug my teddy tighter, blinking the tears away. Then he’s gone into her room, and I settle down outside the door on my cushion.

“Sweetie, wake up,” Daddy suddenly whispers, stroking my cheek.

My eyes flip open to his teary ones. I must have fallen asleep.

“I’m not going to sleep in my bed. I’m not leaving her side.”

He picks me up. “Let’s go see Mommy.” His voice is shaking, and it scares me to hear him this way.

The room is dark except for a small light by Mommy’s bed.

She looks different, so pale and thin, not like before.

My chest squeezes because I know something is really wrong.

“Mommy,” I cry, wriggling to be put down, then I hurry to her side as her face lights up a little.

“Sapphire,” she whispers, then breaks into a cough.

I reach out for her, my teddy falling to the floor. Mommy puts something cold in my palm. It’s her special necklace, the one with the tiny heart.

“This is for you,” she whispers, sounding tired from just speaking. “Whenever you miss me, hold it close. Remember, I love you, okay? Be a brave girl for me.”

My fingers curl around the necklace, and I nod, tears making everything blurry.

“I love you, Mommy.”

She smiles, but it’s weak.

Then it’s quiet again. Her eyes are closed, and she just lays there.

I'm shaking, numb all over, convinced I will break open and never come together again. Her necklace feels so heavy in my hand.

Suddenly, Daddy's picking me up and crying against me, and I know she's gone.

Mommy's gone. She's left me. I start crying, not sure I'll ever stop.

I wake to complete silence, as if someone has hit the mute button on the world. It's something I'm not used to, mostly because I'd get up most mornings to my stepmother yelling my name, then barking orders.

So, this feels strange. I'm not sure if that's a good thing. Sitting up, I stretch my back, having slept incredibly. Well, aside from the dream, which I haven't had in too long. Maybe it's a sign that being back at the mansion, I can use the morning to hunt down my mom's lost necklace. Not to mention, track down a phone to call my dad.

No time like the present. I shuffle out of bed and into the bathroom for a shower. For a change, I take my time in the hot water. Once I have a towel wrapped around me and one in my hair, I go back to the bedroom. Rummaging through my duffle bag for clothes, I pull out my favorite old jeans and a faded V-neck tee. It's comfortable and makes me feel... well, like me.

As I'm just about to change, there's a sudden knock at the door. Before I can even call out to wait, the door swings open, revealing a young woman, maybe in her late twenties, with a cascade of red locks. Her arms are full of clothes, and she offers me a tight smile.

"Sorry for barging in, but these are so heavy, and I'm already so behind schedule," she says as she starts to sort out the clothes into the wardrobe. "I'm Claire, by the way."

“Sapphire,” I answer, though I’m confused by the intrusion. “Whose clothes are those?”

She giggles in response. “Yours, of course, silly. If you’re going to live in Hawk’s world, you have to look the part. Especially when dealing with his business and associates at events.”

Her words catch me off guard. They’re giving me clothes to wear? I don’t know how to feel about that. I glance down at the jeans and top I’ve laid out on the bed, already feeling I don’t belong in this *world*, so why would Hawk agree to me being here?

Claire tuts as she studies my selection. “Don’t get me wrong, I love what you have there, but maybe try something like this.”

I face her, where she’s holding a simple yet elegant navy blue dress. It’s a simple straight dress with nothing fancy, just short sleeves and a round neckline. It’s not something I’ve ever worn before.

“Look, no pressure, but you might feel more comfortable fitting in, at least for the first few days until you settle in.”

“Thanks.” I nod, taking the dress from her. “It’s not normally something I wear, and this is all very new to me. I’m not even sure if things will work out here.”

She brushes red curls off her face and returns to fixing my new clothes in the wardrobe.

“You’ll be surprised how easily you’ll adapt when you have to. If you’re here, it’s because Mr. Kline made it so, and he never makes mistakes.”

I half-laugh. “Well, he might discover I’m his first. I have no idea what I’m supposed to even do here.” Maybe I shouldn’t have said that out loud, but it also feels good to share it with someone.

“You’ll do just fine, you’ll see. Just do as Hawk asks, and you’ll have no problems.”

And if I don't... Those words linger in my mind, but I don't get to ask before she excuses herself and rushes back out of my room.

“Oh, breakfast is being served down in the dining room on the first floor,” she throws over her shoulder.

Slipping into the dress, I glance at my reflection in the bathroom mirror at the soft fabric. The perfect design hugs my curves and tells me this is an expensive dress... yet it just doesn't feel right. It's as though I'm staring at a stranger, and it's not me.

The longer I stare at myself, the more I know I can't do it.

Quickly, I return to the wardrobe, the gowns and satin blouses, the range of fancy accessories. Nestled among them, I spot a couple of simple button-up shirts, and I grab the white one. Putting it on over the dress, I roll up the sleeves a little, then tie the bottom front of the shirt across my stomach. I immediately feel a bit more like me but still managing a casual, smart appearance.

I step into black ballet flats and head to the door.

Time to find that necklace. I doubt Hawk will want me to start work at seven in the morning.

Hurrying along corridors and hallways, I pass a few people who all seem to work here, and each only nods or smiles at me. When I track down the ballroom, I find it mostly empty. Gone are the tables, decorations, and the crowd. What's left is the shiny, polished floor. I exhale loudly. If I dropped anything in this room, it would have been swept up by the cleaners.

Regardless, I begin a fast sweep of the room when a glint from a corner has me rushing over, only to find it's a glittery piece of decoration. My heart deflates.

My thoughts meander to Hawk and that perhaps I dropped it near our encounter. I take the same corridor I did last night but have no luck retracing my steps. I stumble upon an office I haven't seen before, its door wide open. Inside is an office with an expensive leather couch, a mahogany desk, and a line of bookshelves behind it.

What catches my attention is the black phone on the desk.

Hope surges in my gut, and I run into the room and pick up the phone, already dialing my dad's number.

Anticipation bubbles in my chest at hearing his voice just as the voicemail kicks in.

“Hey, Dad, it's me, Sapphire. I... well, I've been made to work for Hawk Kline for a year to cover our debt.” My voice breaks. “I mean, it's good that you don't have to travel anymore, but...” I swallow hard. “Did you know my stepmother was planning this? I don't really want to be here...” I'm struggling to stop the tears from cramming up in my eyes. “I miss you and just want to see you. Please come and see me.” I hang up, and my insides tighten, my throat thickening like I'm about to burst out crying.

But just as I wipe my eyes, someone's clearing their throat behind me.

Panic spikes through me.

And I whip around, meeting the gaze of a familiar face that has my blood turning to ice.

Oh, fuck!

CHAPTER THREE

HAWK

From the doorway of my office, I watch her—the girl paying for her family’s debt, who’s mine until then—and I’m fucking captivated.

She’s curled forward, facing away from me, gripping my phone tightly to her ear as she speaks into it in hushed, tearful words. Blonde hair falls in loose waves down her back, and my gaze traces the curve of the dress over that tight ass and her long legs, crossed at the ankles.

“I don’t really want to be here...” She breathes heavily, trying to hold back her emotions by the looks of it.

The vulnerability in her voice tugs at something in my chest, just as it had the other night at my party, but what I feel isn’t sympathy. I’m a fucking ruthless bastard with a black hole for a heart. I’m just not wired that way, but with her, it’s like an echo sounding inside of me... like maybe it isn’t so bare in there after all.

Of course, she doesn’t want to be here, but just knowing that I caught her watching me with another woman tightens my chest that she didn’t hesitate to enjoy the show.

I sensed her presence the moment she turned up, but I let her think she was unseen to uncover what she’d do, and like a good girl, she got turned on. I saw it in her dilated pupils, in the way she clenched her thighs when I found her in the hallway afterward.

The thought has my cock stirring again.

Call it selfish or obsessive, but after the party, I had to see her again and understand exactly why she awakened something in me I considered long dead.

Be careful what you wish for, my mother used to always say. Growing up, I asked for everything under the sun, and her words now taunt me that bringing Sapphire to my mansion for the next year might be a distraction I'll regret.

She hangs up the phone, and the heaviness of the silence presses down on me. She's lost in her own world of confusion and worry.

I clear my throat.

She snaps around, finally noticing me, those gorgeous sky-blue eyes widening with shock.

She's incredible, more captivating than I remember, as the bright sunlight drenching the room from the windows lights up her features. Loose hair frames a round face, an expression of someone lost, and the speckle of faint freckles dancing over her small nose adds to her beauty.

Her cheeks flush instantly, her mouth parted as if she's going to say something, but only a gasp escapes her full lips. Her breaths rush, and her breasts push against the fabric of her dress and shirt. Every inch of me is curious to explore more.

"I didn't expect to find you here," I begin as I push off the doorframe, strolling into my office. Each step is calculated, my gaze aware of exactly where she stands.

She tracks my movements, and there's trepidation in her expression. She hasn't run out of the room like many have done, which I admire, and I appreciate her resolve.

"I-I didn't know it was your office. I'm sorry, and I'll pay for the call." Her voice wavers, but she holds my attention.

Pausing by the window, I stare at the landscape stretching outward, letting the silence extend for a few long heartbeats.

"No need," I answer, sweeping my attention over to her, taking in her determined stance. Yet the fear on her face tells

me she's a person who's faced a lot of adversity without the chance to escape it, forced to endure it.

"Mr. Kline, I'm Sapphire," she says, then hesitates but steadies her expression and continues. "We didn't get a chance to officially meet."

"Welcome, Sapphire," I answer smoothly. "And please, address me as Hawk. I have enough formalities in this place to choke the life out of me. You'll be working closely with me over the next year."

She nods, but she's nibbling on the corner of her lower lip like she's dying to ask me a question.

I cross the room to the middle of the room, then drop down onto the leather sofa. Leaning back, I cross my leg over the other.

She doesn't move.

"Ask," I prompt her, arching an eyebrow. "I know you're dying to know."

She hesitates. "Wh-What will I be doing here? My stepmother didn't exactly say anything."

To be fair, I didn't tell the woman a single thing. She started batting her eyes at me and flirting as a means to help pay her debt, but when I rejected her advances, she offered her stepdaughter as collateral. I jumped at the chance, and now, my mind dances with all kinds of images of what I'd like to do with a beauty like her.

"Is there something specific you had your heart set on?"

"Well," she answers, giving a small shrug. "I'm not too sure what a man like you does on a daily basis, but..." Her breaths quicken, and she offers me a weak smile. "I just have to know if you're going to punish me for being in your room?"

I chuckle, remembering the words from the night of the event when I told the woman, whose name I barely remember, that I'd punish her for entering my room. But my life has always been that way—women sneaking into my room, trying

to gain my attention. I've fucked them, which is exactly what they want, but only for one night and never more.

"What I saw last night..." Sapphire is flushing furiously, pushing her fingers over one another in a nervous twitch.

"It was a private time of indulgence. Are you curious to learn more? To experience such a moment? Is that why you ask?"

"I didn't mean to intrude," she gasps. "I was lost, then I...I shouldn't have spied. But just so you know, I have no interest in you beyond doing my duty for my family, so what happened that night I will put behind me."

I can't hold back the smile.

She's studying me with those piercing eyes that see too much. Few dare to look me in the eye, yet she does. I adore her tenacity and the challenge she presents.

"Is that all?" I ask.

She fixes me with another of her serious stares, and there's no doubt in my mind that she has fought for everything in her life. I've looked into her family and understand the heartache and trouble they are in and how Sapphire here is simply a pawn in their issues. The stepmother threw her at me to cover her debts. The woman even had the audacity to ask me for additional funds for giving me Sapphire for a year. I said I'd think about it, but I've dealt with sharks like her my entire life and know how to handle them.

"You still haven't answered my question," Sapphire says. "About my role here?"

"You will find out soon enough." I push to my feet and slip my hands into the pockets of my dress pants. "For today, get accustomed to your new home and the rest of the team. Now, if that's all, I have endless work to complete."

She gives me a look. Something tells me she doesn't buy the excuse for a second, but the longer I stare at her, the harder it is to resist the urge to play with my brand-new toy. I'm not ready to break her so quickly.

“Of course,” she finally answers, then she hurries out of my office, my gaze tracing her ass. I can’t stop thinking of her breathy shock when I cornered her in the hallway the night of the soirée—her parted, pretty lips, fluttering eyelashes, and the way she stared at me so innocently. That temptation has taunted me since that night.

I’m not a fucking fool to know what I really want from her... what I always want from gorgeous women, except there’s something more to her that intrigues me.

Until I work out how to get her out of my head, I’m not ready to ruin her.

Moments later, Luke, my second in command, strolls into my office, staring over his shoulder at something behind him... something I suspect is Sapphire.

His laughter fills the room.

“I can’t believe you did it. You went and brought her to work here.” His gaze drifts to me, then back to the doorway. Standing inches shorter than me, he’s built and spends hours every morning down at the gym when he’s not working for me or finding a new girl to entertain. “Why not just spend a few days with her, fuck her out of your system like you do with all of them, then move on? Why the hell promise her a whole year?”

Releasing a controlled exhale, I shift my attention to the windows, then move to my desk and sink into the leather chair behind it. The heavy oak feels solid beneath my fingers, grounding me.

“She’s here,” I state with precision. “And it’s none of your damn business why. But while we’re on the subject, keep your eyes and hands to yourself. She’s my responsibility.”

I’ve seen Luke with women, always preying on them after they spent time with me, knowing they’re easy for him. The guy could have any woman he wants, but he’s lazy and wants everything handed to him.

There’s more to why I brought Sapphire into my home than curiosity and attraction. Something about the way her

stepmother so easily sold her reminded me too much of how my father treated me before he passed. He traded me to a competitive company to win a billion-dollar job. I'll never forget the stabbing rejection that still cuts through me, even today. It's the kind of fucking pain that never leaves you, and part of me, maybe stupidly, wanted to save her. I suspected if it wasn't me, her stepmother, Clemency, would offer her to someone else for money.

It brought back memories, hatred, and anger. So, I took her away from her toxic stepmother.

Luke makes his way over to the bar cart while unbuttoning his shirt cuffs. The clink of glass against glass resonates as he pours himself a generous amount of whiskey.

"Bit early for that, isn't it?" I remark.

He tilts his head back and throws back a gulp.

"You sent me to deal with those fuckers, Clarkson, this morning, so no, it's not too early," he grumbles and turns to me. "You know how much I despise them. They're vultures, just waiting for any opportunity to screw us over."

My jaw clenches. "And they won't get the chance. You're one of my best at negotiations. Close the deal with them today. Take everything they have and get them to sign the agreement. Once we have that, we're done with them."

"That's the fucking plan. You're taking the next set of assholes."

I bark out a laugh. "You got it."

Luke and I have been buddies for as long as I can remember, his past as dark as mine. We bounce well off each other, both as fierce and ruthless when it comes to business. Whether it's grand hotels, ancient mansions, or struggling businesses, I purchase, renovate, and sell at a massive profit. It's not just a job but a challenge of how low we can get the biggest job and how high we can sell. Especially when we buy from those drowning in debt... the adrenaline rush to snatch it up is addicting.

Yet, as my thoughts drift back to Sapphire, a tingling sensation snakes up my spine. Excitement? Doubt? Guilt? Whatever the sensation is, it makes me question my decisions...which I never do. I never involve my personal life in business, yet this time...

The sudden clank of Luke setting the empty glass down with finality rips me out of my thoughts. He glances my way as he strolls toward my desk.

“You’re prepared for tomorrow night, right?” he asks, his tone serious despite his casual stance. “You got it all under control?”

I fix him with a deadpan stare.

A sly smile slips across his mouth.

“Ah, I forgot who I was talking to... the king of games. But tell me you’ve got your date clued up on the role, so she doesn’t say the wrong thing and fuck it up.”

There’s a pause as his words float in my mind. I made the decision yesterday, and I didn’t change my mind.

Luke’s brows pinch together, and realization dawns on his face.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me? Please tell me you haven’t lost your mind. You’re taking the new girl, Sapphire, aren’t you?”

“I think she’d be perfect.” I lean into my seat, my hands on the armrests. “She’s fresh and innocent, not like the usual parade I’ve taken to such events.”

His eyes widen. “Fuck man, this isn’t like any normal event. You have to convince them you’re engaged to the girl! And I’m pretty sure this girl hates you for buying her. Plus, she knows nothing about our business.”

“That’s the point,” I counter calmly. “She doesn’t need to, and her ignorance is an advantage. Trust me, I’ve got this.”

“I have no doubt, but sometimes, your decisions freak me the fuck out. Maybe I should attend, just in case.”

Laughing, I shake my head. “Stay with your latest flame this weekend. This needs to be credible, and you attending with us as a third wheel will scream red flags.”

He flops down on the chair in front of my desk and huffs, blowing the long lock of dark hair hanging over an eye.

“I’m beginning to think my weekend trip’s a mistake. You know me, I tire easily, and she’s... she’s too good.”

Rolling my eyes, I say, “Then, for a change, don’t act like an ass. See where it takes you.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Who the fuck are you? What did you do to the real Hawk?”

I chuckle.

“Anyway, I better get changed. Just don’t let this new girl get into your head and fuck things up.”

I nod. “She’s just another deal. Nothing more.”

As he leaves my office, my thoughts swirl back to Sapphire and the confidence that the night will go without a hitch, like they always do. Sapphire will just have to play her part... it can’t be that hard.

CHAPTER FOUR

SAPPHIRE

“Miss, hurry, you need to get ready!” a sudden voice pauses my lap across the indoor pool, the gentle water splashing against my face. I discovered this room this afternoon and decided to work off some of my nerves, but maybe I’ve been mistaken to assume I can use the pool.

I glance up to find the maid, Claire, at the edge of the swimming pool, hands waving for me to get out, her face flush.

“Ready for what?” I ask, squinting and making my way toward her, my stomach turning that I’ve done something wrong.

“Mr. Kline has requested you be prepared for a business dinner tonight. You have two hours before you leave.”

“Two hours? That’s plenty of time.” I blink, processing the information. I haven’t seen Hawk since yesterday morning in his office, but suddenly, I’m going to a business dinner tonight?

I climb up the stairs, water rolling down my body and the bikini I found in my wardrobe, before grabbing the towel Claire hands me.

“Two hours is not enough time to get you prepared and looking perfect.” She’s fake laughing at me, and I see the strain on her cute, round face. “He informed us at the last minute, but thankfully, he’s arranged for a dress for you.”

I follow her brisk steps as we head upstairs to my room. My mind's racing, my nerves starting to twitch.

“So, this dinner, what's it about? Is there anything I should know?”

She cuts me a side glance briefly, slightly sympathetic.

“Mr. Kline has a busy schedule, and he sometimes forgets to tell his own team what's going on, but we still have to be ready on time. But you should be fine. All I know is the function is being held in the city, and only you and Mr. Kline will represent Kline Enterprises.”

My heart beats faster, louder in my ears. Just us two? I've been enjoying the solitary exploration of the mansion since yesterday, using the chance to catch my breath and not feel like a complete stranger. But aside from our first two encounters, which were both awkward, how was I meant to spend an entire night with him over dinner? Let alone at some business meeting. I suppose I could take with me a notepad and make notes for him, if that's what he needs.

Claire pushes open the door to my room to reveal a crisp, brand-new garment bag draped over the bed, which itself looks expensive, let alone what the dress inside is like. The price tag peeking out displays the Armani logo. I almost trip over my own feet. Never have I worn brand-new clothes, let alone something so extravagant. Before I can go and investigate, Claire ushers me into the bathroom.

“Shower and fast.”

Feeling the urgency and not wanting to disappoint her, I soon re-emerge with a towel wrapped around me since all my clothes are in the bedroom. Now, instead of just greeting Claire, there's a small army of women in my room, all with eyes on me. I struggle to breathe.

“Wh-What's going on?” My feet are rooted to the lush rug, and I can't move.

“It's okay,” Claire insists, coming over to me and dragging me by an arm to sit on a chair at the end of the bed. “We have

to start on your hair since that will take the longest, then makeup.”

The weight of the speed with which everything is happening is too much for me, too overwhelming. I’m panicking on the inside about tonight, and all this pampering is completely out of my comfort zone.

Someone hands me a glass of water, and I gulp it down feverishly.

The flurry of activity around me is like a whirlwind. Hairdryers, hairpins, brushes, and sprays come and go, while having my hair pulled, tugged, and set is a strange sensation. It feels like hours have passed, then they begin with makeup.

“We need to hurry up.” Claire is nearby, watching closely, pacing. “Time’s almost up.”

Then things get really wild, and I’m not giving it any thought but just coming out the other end.

Finally, everyone backs away, and someone brings in a full-body mirror.

The reflection of the girl in a chair, wrapped in a towel, is unrecognizable. Blonde hair tumbles in loose curls gracefully to my chest. My eyes stand out with the smoky eyeshadow and long lashes. My lips are bright red, and somehow, I look stunning.

Claire steps in front of me, shock on her face. “You are absolutely gorgeous,” she murmurs. “It’s like you’ve been hiding this dazzling gem beneath the surface all this time. He’s going to be utterly floored when he sees you.”

She’s talking about Hawk, but it shouldn’t matter what he thinks, seeing as it’s only a business dinner. Except the butterflies in my stomach flutter at the possibility of his reaction as well.

“Isn’t all of this a bit... much for just dinner?”

One of the stylists laughs, her eyes gleaming. “Sweetie, it’s not just the outside that shines. All of you is shining, which is

what you want when you accompany Mr. Kline. You are so beautiful.”

My cheeks blush at her words. No one’s ever said anything like that to me. My stepmother would constantly tell me I was still in that ugly growing-up stage, and when my dad told me I was beautiful, I took that as him needing to say that as my father. So, hearing this from strangers is surprising and a bit confusing.

“Okay, we need to get moving because we literally have ten minutes before she has to be downstairs,” Claire announces.

Suddenly, the air thickens, and I’m being rushed over to the bed where two girls are taking out the dress. The material shimmers a shade of champagne pink, and I’m reminded of a gown worn by a movie star but certainly not intended for someone like me.

When it’s lifted in front of me, someone snips off the tag, and I can immediately tell the back is daringly open while the front would drape down over my breasts and connect to the neckpiece. They are already lifting the dress and tugging it down over my head and over my body. Just then, someone pulls my towel off, which falls away, and I yelp. It’s quickly replaced by the dress that cascades to my feet.

Cool to the touch, the fabric is like silk.

Once the zipper is secured in place, the neckline plunges dramatically almost down to my solar plexus, revealing a bit too much cleavage. The dress fits like it’s made for me. Cinched at my waist, there’s a slit that travels up my left leg.

I catch a glimpse of myself, and time stands still. I can’t believe how I look in the gown, as though I actually have a slim waist and an hourglass figure, which I’ve never seen before like this. Mostly because there were no full-body mirrors back home, and I always wore baggy pants and T-shirts.

The women helping me gasp, and I’m blushing because I’m not sure what to do with so much attention. This isn’t

me...

“It’s perfection,” someone murmurs as a stylist slips matching strappy heels onto my feet. They elevate me, and I’m wobbling a bit before Claire grabs my arm.

“Just walk slowly, and you’ll be fine.”

I’m hurried out of the room, then down the grand staircase. Every step is calculated, and I’m determined not to tumble. Before I can catch a breath, I’m pushed through the mansion’s ornate front doors.

The cool evening air brushes against my bare skin as I lay eyes on the shiny black sports car parked in front of the mansion. It looks extraordinary, but it doesn’t hold a candle to Hawk standing next to it.

I’m completely breathless.

He’s wearing a tailored tuxedo, which embraces his powerful body, those broad shoulders and his chest. Energy radiates off him, and he gives off an aura much like James Bond—sleek, alluring, and dangerous. His dark hair is parted and combed back, those striking cheekbones and green eyes captivating me.

My knees wobble at the sight. How can someone I barely know, someone I should be wary of, have my stomach bursting with butterflies? My heart flutters wildly as he strolls toward me.

His fingers curl over mine, his touch like fire spreading through me, and he leaves me burning up. His gaze travels up and down my body, and I catch the hint of surprise in his gaze.

“You are... spectacular,” he breathes, then clears his throat.

My cheeks heat, and I bat my eyelashes in a mock innocence.

“Well, if the other guests tonight are as impressed as you are, you might have to fend them all off.” I’m not sure where my brazen bravery came from, but he isn’t scowling, only grinning.

“You’d be surprised what I’ll do to keep you safe. Now, are you ready to go?”

I’m taken aback by his words as he walks me down the front three steps and around to the passenger’s door, which he opens.

“Ready as I’ll ever be.”

His laughter is like a caress across my skin. Once I’m seated, he shuts the door and gets into the driver’s seat, then turns to me. He stares at me for a long moment.

Under his gaze, I feel uncertain about the way I look.

“Is everything okay?”

“Honestly, Sapphire, I’ve seen many beauties in my time, but never someone as intoxicating as you.”

My face is on fire, and my knees are bouncing out of pure nerves.

He laughs, and before I know it, we’re driving down the long driveway.

When I shift in my seat as I drag my seatbelt on, I realize something horrible. The thought sends me into a mini panic, and I twist to glance away from Hawk so he won’t see my mortified expression.

Oh God. How could I be that stupid?

How could I forget to put on any underwear?

CHAPTER FIVE

HAWK

The city lights streak in the distance as I grip the steering wheel of my Bugatti, needing my mind focused on the task at hand—convincing Drake to sell one of his businesses to me. The stakes are high, yet my mind's consumed by the beauty beside me. She's radiant, her presence distracting me from driving. All I want to do is stare at her, take in and memorize every inch of her.

Fuck. That's the last thing I should be thinking about.

Tonight's charity auction is a smokescreen for the power players to flaunt their wealth, impress Drake, and gain his approval. The fucker loves nothing more than being sucked up to. It's nothing new to me. Most of my clients are egotistical bastards.

The relationship with him has been in the making for years. He was a close business partner with my father when he was alive. I suspect the old-fashioned stipulation of needing to be engaged or married to close the deal is a relic from a bygone era, something my father agreed to should I take over the business. Traditions die hard in this industry. As much as I play by my own rules, sometimes even I have to bend.

If Drake wasn't the richest man in Europe, I wouldn't waste my time, but he's critical to keep on my side. Once this deal is done, hopefully, this week, then whether I split up with my fake fiancée will be less of an issue. For now, I need to purchase his business of luxury yachts. I have dozens of clients salivating at getting their hands on them, willing to pay millions.

Sapphire fidgets in the passenger's seat, drawing my attention as she adjusts the slit of her dress. There's a vulnerability about her that makes me want to shield her from the sharks we're about to swim with. I hear Luke's voice in my head about going soft around Sapphire.

"Hey, are you alright?" I ask, watching her stare out the side window.

She glances over, her gaze briefly meeting mine. Her eyes are wild, scared.

"I'm just not used to this... dresses, events, any of it. But I know it's my job now, and I'll do my best not to let you down."

Taking a deep breath, I decide to rip off the band-aid.

"There's something you should know. At tonight's auction event, you're not just my guest."

Her brow furrows as she twists in her seat to face me.

"What does that mean?"

"For this deal to go through, I need to be engaged. It's a ridiculous tradition, but one I can't sidestep, so for tonight, I will need you to play the part of my fiancée."

Her eyes widen, confusion behind them. "Sorry, come again?" She stumbles over her words.

Pausing to collect my thoughts and give her time to accept what I'm telling her, I eventually say, "It's just for tonight. It should be simple."

"Simple?" She blinks, her hands curled up in her lap. "Being engaged to someone I don't really know in front of a room of strangers? That's not my definition of simple."

"I know this is a lot, but I promise I'll be the one answering all the questions." I give her a lopsided grin, trying to lighten the mood and not have her take it so seriously. "My plan is not to spend too long at the event. I'll bid on a few pieces of jewelry to show my support, then we'll leave. Most importantly, show him I'm engaged, so our meeting later this week to close the deal should go smoothly."

She's not saying anything at first, then slumps back into her seat.

"Okay, well, I mean, this whole night is me pretending to be someone I'm not already, so how hard is it to fake a relationship, too, right?"

"That's a good girl."

She narrows her gaze on me at those words, her breath picking up. Really, she shouldn't look at me that way if she wants to keep her dress on when she's around me.

"Okay, I guess I've got this," she concedes. "But if we're going to sell this, I need to know our story. Where did we meet?"

I glance at her momentarily, impressed by her assertiveness.

"A party. I saw you from across the room, and I was immediately mesmerized. I couldn't get you out of my thoughts, and I knew I had to have you."

"And then?" She raises an eyebrow.

"I came to your place and asked you out on a date, and you couldn't resist me."

She bursts out laughing. "You're so sure of yourself. What if I said no?"

"Fine. You turned me down the first time, but I'm not a man who takes rejection easily, so the next day, I ordered enough roses to fill your bedroom and turned up again, asking for another date, this time asking you where you wanted to go. We went on a nature walk."

"What?" she huffs. "No way. You make me sound so boring. I would take you skydiving."

"On our first date?"

"Yep," she says, then hums to herself as if satisfied with her answer.

Fuck, she's adorable.

“You see,” she begins. “I want to see what sort of person you are. Someone brave or just someone who talks about being brave.”

“How did I do?” I smirk her way as we pull up in the traffic.

“Well, you blitzed it and even did a somersault jumping out of the plane.”

“Yes, now you know me.” I chuckle at her smirk.

“And...” she muses, her lips pinching to one side as she ponders her next question. “What’s your favorite meal? Color? Do you have any pets?”

I’m in awe of how well she’s handling this situation, putting things together and not freaking out. One date I took to a movie premier years ago, and she just had to keep her mouth shut, but she couldn’t even manage that.

“Teriyaki Beef, black, and no pets,” I answer.

“Parents?”

My smile fades, but I push back the emotions that want to roll forward.

“If anyone asks, just steer them clear. No need to comment.”

She tilts her head, studying me, and the questions reflect in her eyes, but she doesn’t push, which I appreciate.

“Your turn,” I say, shifting the conversation back to her.

“Alright.” Her face beams. “Favorite food? Mac and cheese. My dad would sometimes bring it home from this steakhouse near our place. They made the best mac and cheese.” She sighs, staring out at the traffic in front of us momentarily before continuing. “Color is purple. And pets, well, I had a mouse that used to share my room. Does that count?”

I can’t help but smile. “A mouse as a pet?”

She shrugs, grinning shyly. “More like an uninvited roommate, but we had an understanding.”

Part of me is thinking back to her stepmother and how easily she sold her off, and I hate the notion of her sharing a room where mice lived. Where exactly did that bitch have Sapphire staying? Yet I smile for Sapphire.

Then I say, “I have something for you.”

“You do?”

I hit the indicator and pull off on the side of the road, then pull out the small black box in my pocket and present it to Sapphire.

“If we’re going to play the perfect couple, then you need an engagement ring.” I flip open the lid, and her eyes widen. Her mouth gapes open, making a gorgeous little sound.

“Oh that is beautiful.”

“It’s a sapphire, and I thought this stone was most suitable for you. It also comes with diamonds on the sides.”

“Wow, if this was the real thing and someone was proposing to me with this ring, I might be crying right now.” Her smile is huge, and I enjoy seeing the excitement in her eyes.

I collect the ring and take her hand, then slide it on her finger. “I never thought I’d be doing this in a car,” I joke, the strange sensation stirring something in my chest because this feels more intimate than it should.

Her breath hitches, and when I look up, she’s grinning wildly.

“It’s just temporary to sell our story,” I explain.

“Yes, of course.” Yet she hasn’t taken her eyes off her new jewelry.

“This looks incredible for a fake.” She’s inspecting it closely.

“There’s nothing fake about that.”

Her head jolts up, eyes huge again. “Wait, this is real sapphire and diamonds. How much did it cost?”

“Just shy of a hundred-grand.”

She makes a squeaking sound and pushes her hand out toward me. “Take it off. I can’t wear it because I’ll freak out the whole night that I’ll lose it. And why did you buy such an expensive ring, or is it a family heirloom?”

I take her tender fingers in my hand and place them back down on her lap. “I ordered it yesterday, and you will wear it because a fake ring will be spotted a mile away.”

She’s blinking at me, and ends up being quiet for the rest of the trip. I want to reassure her she won’t lose it and if she does, it’s not the end of the world, but I suspect anything I say won’t change her mind. I do enjoy her reaction though, telling me so much about her.

As I bring the car to a stop outside the grand venue, the mass of people cordoned off by ropes come into view.

“Oh God,” Sapphire gasps. “Why are all those people there?”

“It’s mostly the media. No one important.”

“Media?” she squeaks once more.

No sooner do I put the car in park that a valet approaches, smoothly opening the door.

“Mr. Kline,” he greets with a nod of respect. “Welcome. Allow me to take care of your vehicle.”

I climb out and hand him the keys, then make my way quickly around the front of the car. I find Sapphire dazed by the relentless flash of cameras.

“Stay close,” I murmur, collecting her hand in mine and drawing her against me. She sticks to my side as we move past the blinding flashes.

Indoors, we’re quickly guided down a hall toward the ballroom. We pass through the doors into the main event, embraced by the hum of an orchestra. Shimmering chandeliers throw a faint light over the expansive area.

Laughter and chatter fill the air, and while attention is turning in our direction, my name on their lips, my attention is finding Drake before he gets drunk and won't remember a damn thing.

I hold Sapphire tight to my side, and it feels like half the room has paused to see who the girl on my arm is. Her wide gaze sweeps the room, and she's studying the stage set up with the jewelry on display to be auctioned.

"You doing okay?" I lean down to ask, catching a whiff of her floral scent, which cuts through the overpowering smells and scent of rich food in the air.

She nods. "Why does it feel like everyone's staring at me? Or am I being paranoid? God, it's so hot in here." She's shaking against me.

Tightening my grip around her, I draw her to swivel around and face me, our bodies pressed together. It's close to impossible to ignore the soft cushion of her breasts, the way her body trembles against mine. I grab her chin with one hand, lifting her head as I lower mine to hers until our lips are inches apart.

Her breath catches, her gaze fixed on my mouth, waiting for my kiss. I see it in her expression, and I'm dying to taste her, to lick her, to devour her.

"I am the city's bachelor and have been for years, so everyone wants to know which girl finally got me to settle down."

She swallows hard. "Then we'll give them a show," she whispers.

I don't move away. I'm convinced I can't, not when I want to lean in closer, so desperate that I'm half tempted to put on a show for all the onlookers.

"Hawk," a loud male voice calls to me, and I drag myself from Sapphire.

Drake's making his way over to me with his entourage of several females and two guards. He's in his tux, white hair wild, and fingers glinting with his golden rings.

I grizzle on the inside that he disrupted such a perfect moment, but maybe it's good to get introductions out of the way.

“Drake,” I state and reach a hand out to shake his outstretched one. “Meet Sapphire, my fiancée.”

The man's thick eyebrows shoot up, and he chuckles with genuine surprise. He's a tall and imposing figure.

“Hawk,” he states, his European accent thick but refined, the corners of his mouth curling into a practiced grin. “I've heard the whispers, but seeing is believing. And who is this enigmatic doll who managed to ensnare Hawk Kline?”

Turning his attention on Sapphire, he approaches her, leaning down to press a kiss to both of her cheeks. His proximity is too fucking close for my liking, but I put on a tight smile.

“You're a dazzling thing, aren't you,” he muses, his gaze sweeping over her unapologetically. “Where have you been hiding? I haven't seen you before, and I remember all the pretty faces.”

I'm still holding onto her hand, not releasing her, when she lifts her chin.

“It's nice to meet you. I guess I don't typically frequent these circles.”

“Oh?” Drake studies her carefully, his curiosity obviously piqued. “And what do you do?”

“I'm a photographer,” she says without missing a beat.

“Ah,” Drake muses, glancing up at me with a nod, then back at Sapphire. “Of people, I assume?”

She shakes her head, her curls catching the light of the chandeliers. I've noticed we've amassed a small crowd around us, trying to listen in to spread the rumors of my engagement.

“Nature,” she answers. “It's so much more agreeable.”

Drake laughs, holding a thick hand to his chest.

“Oh, I like her. She’s different from your usual taste, Hawk. This might be exactly what you’ve needed.” He claps a hand on my shoulder, firmer than necessary. “Now, shall we discuss some things?”

As he draws me aside, my fingers unlock from Sapphire, and I whip my attention over my shoulder to where she’s with the three women from Drake’s side, circling her like vultures.

I catch her slightly panicked gaze, but I give her a reassuring smile, knowing she can handle herself.

CHAPTER SIX

SAPPHIRE

I'm drowning in a sea of jewels, satin, and high-pitched laughter.

The women by Drake's side seconds ago are now ushering me across the ballroom to a corner where lush, white lounges are arranged randomly. Guests are everywhere, chatting in animated conversations, drinking, and all pristine in appearance. Even sipping from their bubbly flutes doesn't leave their lipstick smudged.

"Over there," the red-haired woman with curls points out, holding onto my arm. "Let's go there, and we can talk easier."

"Okay," I manage, my throat dry with anxiety, my gaze sweeping in every direction at the opulent party.

As we sit on one of the couches, a waiter is already approaching, tray in hand, offering us an array of drinks.

"Champagne for us, darling," the brunette with short, pixie-style hair calls out to the waiter, who quickly retreats toward the bar.

Settling down, I subtly adjust my dress, desperately trying not to flash anyone. I frantically search the room for Hawk, but he's disappeared. My heart rate is spiking, and I need to calm the hell down.

"So, Sapphire... I love your name, by the way," the red-haired woman says with a playful smile, toying with the strand of pearls around her neck. "You're Hawk Kline's fiancée. That's quite the title."

Besides her, a tall blonde with a model-like posture leans in a dramatic pose. “Is that the engagement ring?” She points at the sapphire and diamonds on my finger, eyes bulging.

I glance down at the sparkling jewel, my shock that I’m wearing something so expensive still fresh on my mind. It’s heavy on my fingers, like a constant reminder it’s there.

Extending my hand hesitantly, I allow the women to take a closer look.

The brunette lets out a soft whistle. “It’s exquisite and huge!”

I nibble on the inside of my cheek, unsure how to respond. The ring is dazzling, and I adore it, but I remind myself that it’s not mine.

“Every girl in the city has tried to capture Hawk’s attention, and we’ve all failed,” the red-haired continues.

My fingers toy with the ring to keep busy.

The brunette says, “You must be a whizz in bed.”

I stiffen. I’ve never had this kind of conversation with anyone... I don’t exactly have close friends, either, so it’s taking me a moment to process what she’s saying.

Her third friend, in a gorgeous black strapless dress, sits on a pouf in front of me.

I’m flushing, unsure how to respond, let alone with how quickly the conversation has derailed. I giggle in response, trying my best to imitate them.

“Oh, I’m not one to share our private moments.” I’m so grateful when the waiter returns with our drinks. I greedily grab a glass and start sipping as the women start talking about their times with Hawk. My ears are burning at the details of him tying them up and spanking them. As much as I don’t want to be there, I can’t stop listening.

“He’s always been known for having a wild sex drive, so I’m curious, Sapphire, if he’s calmed down or...”

I keep sipping on my champagne, my heart thundering in my chest, when I finally catch sight of Hawk. Hell, about time.

“You know how it is, ladies. Once a stallion in bed, always a stallion.” I cringe at my comment, but they’re nodding, so I push myself up to my feet. “I better go, Hawk’s calling me.” He’s not, but I don’t care. I slide out past them, rushing away, when someone steps right in my view, a young couple wearing a matching gold suit and a dress. It’s a bit much, but they’re pulling it off.

I do a fake wave to Hawk, who has his back to me in the distance.

“I’m coming.” I smile at the couple and sidestep them, keeping my head low, but I feel their stares and hear everyone’s words as I pass them.

“Did you see her dress? It has to cost at least a hundred thousand. More than she’s ever seen in her life, I’m sure.”

“I feel sorry for her. She looks so lost.”

“How did she even trap him?”

I push quickly through the crowds, their words ringing in my ears, every inch of me shaking. My face is on fire, and I hate this place so much.

“What’s so special about her, anyway?”

“She must have a golden pussy!”

I almost trip over my feet on that last comment. What the fuck is wrong with these people? Their comments sting.

As I approach Hawk, he must sense my arrival because he pivots, instantly wrapping an arm around my waist and draws me flush against him. Before I say a word, his lips are on mine in a swift, possessive kiss, then he pulls back.

“Missed you,” he says.

He’s back into his conversation, holding me close while I’m trembling, my lips still buzzing from his mouth on mine.

Be cool.

Except those butterflies have returned. God, he just kissed me.

I can't recall how long we've been standing there talking, but it feels like an eternity when I finally excuse myself to find the bathroom. I'm pointed in the direction of the door we came through and rush in that direction.

With each step away from the party, the lighter my tension grows. Out in the hallway, I draw in a shuddering breath. How in the world does anyone endure an evening like this and come out with their sanity intact?

Spotting the sign for the restroom, I make a beeline for the ladies' room and hurry inside. It's eerily quiet with no one else, and I appreciate the peace.

Finished and hands washed, I wrench open the door only to find a barrel of a man I don't recognize standing there, blocking my way out.

"Hello!" he drawls.

From the crisp lines of his tuxedo, I can only assume he might have followed me from the party, and panic is choking me as reality kicks in. He steps in instantly, nudging me deeper into the restroom.

"Hey, don't even think about it," I say, alarmed, my voice high-pitched. "Get out of here now."

But he's shutting the door behind him, locking it with a final click.

Terror flares over me, and my mind's racing with a way out, with something I can use as a weapon.

A smirk tugs at his thin mouth, his leer raking over me, and my skin crawls.

"Everyone's talking about the girl who captured Hawk Kline," he drawls, the timbre of his voice sending shivers down my spine. "So, I thought I'd do a solid for the girls and find out for myself why. Shall we?"

"Leave me alone, or you'll be sorry."

“What? You’ll go cry to Hawk? Good luck with that. since he doesn’t even know I exist. I’m just one of many people he ignores. Now, let’s get this started.” He reaches down and grabs his cock over his pants.

Bile rises in my throat, and I’m going to be sick. I retreat and feel the icy touch of the ceramic tiles against my back as I hit the wall. Nearby are the partitions of the toilet stalls, and desperation has me swiftly throwing myself toward one to lock myself inside, to buy myself time until I work out how the hell I’m going to escape.

But before I can get inside the stall, his thick hand snatches my wrist and yanks me backward with a force that sends a jolt of pain up my arm. I’m stumbling around but trip and fall to my knees.

“Ah, that’s good. Stay down there.”

Another wave of terror washes over me as I scurry away and start screaming at the top of my lungs.

An explosive sound comes from the door, which suddenly bursts open, coming right off its hinges. The heavy thing slams right into the fucker groping his cock seconds earlier, shoving him with a tremendous crash to the floor. I’m scrambling madly out of the way at the same moment.

I spin around, getting to my feet as he’s pinned down beneath the door. Gasping for air and trembling, my brain barely registers the silhouette of the enraged Hawk, eyes blazing and wild with fury in the doorway.

“Out. Now!” he commands in a growly voice.

I don’t need to be told twice, and I’m racing out of there, my pulse thundering in my ears.

As I escape into the hallway, as the harrowing sounds of flesh meeting flesh, of pained cries and grunts, intensify.

I’m trying not to break down and freak out at what just happened.

I pause by the wall, shuddering and hugging myself to stop from shaking so hard. Unable to think or move, I stand there,

listening to the punishment Hawk's delivering until it falls quiet.

Silence.

Taking a deep breath, I push off the wall and turn toward the bathroom at the end of the hallway, which is easily twenty feet away. I don't know what to expect from Hawk.

Minutes later, he emerges from the room, his white shirt somehow unblemished, wiping his clean hands on a paper towel. His gaze is on mine as he tosses it into the trash and is at my side in seconds.

"I've got you, Sapphire. Hold on to me." His hands are running down my arm, then across my sides as if searching for an injury. "Did he hurt you?"

I'm shaking my head, grasping on to him. He's my anchor, shivers coating me.

"The guy didn't get a chance to, but he scared the hell out of me."

He's cupping my cheek, leaning in close. "I shouldn't have let you go alone. Fuck, I should have known better. These guests are animals and will rip anyone new apart."

"You're not wrong there. They're assholes, and the things they were saying about me are horrible."

He's stroking my jawline, staring so intently into my eyes, that I feel like the entire world has fallen away.

"Ignore them," he coos. "We got the effect we wanted, and you were incredible."

"So, does that mean we can leave?" Hope clings to my words.

"Almost," he says, his thumb stroking my chin, and I'm enjoying his touch more than I should. "They are setting up tables and chairs for the auctions. I'll bid on the first few jewelry pieces, then we're out."

I stare into his eyes, breathless, unsure if I'm scared of what just happened or completely losing my head to Hawk.

“You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” he whispers, covering me with goosebumps.

“You don’t need to say that to make me feel better. I’m—”

“Don’t question me,” he says firmly.

Being this close to him is impossible to resist, and a crazy thought comes to my mind.

I lean forward and gently kiss him, running my tongue over the seam of his lips. His hold on me tightens, his body pressing up against me.

Then he suddenly breaks away, his brows pinched, and dread consumes me because I’m such a fucking idiot.

“Shit, I-I’m so sorry,” I murmur. “I just thought. God, I want to die.” I pull away from him, my face burning up, and I need to go and hide. What the hell’s wrong with me?

“Sapphire,” he states as he grabs my arm and has me up against the wall in seconds, his mouth on mine, and we’re kissing like the end of the world is lingering over our heads.

I writhe against him, my chest rising and falling faster, and an explosion of excitement bursts through me.

Of course, kissing my boss, the man who bought me, is wrong. Yet I can’t stop running my hands up and around his neck, drawing him closer, tilting my head up to better reach him. His mouth is wickedly dangerous as he kisses fiercely and possessively, as if he’s imprinting himself onto me, and I’ll never be able to kiss anyone else ever again.

His tongue sweeps into my mouth, exploring, and I love the way he tastes like honey, like primal sex. My toes curl in my heels, and my rational brain is screaming for me to back off, but I have zero control or discipline. I’ve tangled tongues with Hawk Kline, and I can’t spare a moment thinking of not kissing him.

Finally, he breaks away, and I moan for more.

“Don’t even doubt that I don’t want you.”

Oh my God. Did he say he’s interested in me?

I shrug, my mouth opening with words that refuse to come out.

He laughs and collects my hand. “Let’s head back there before I eat you up.”

My knees shake at the thought. The bad thing about not wearing underwear is how easily my arousal drenches my inner thighs. Hell, that’s the last thing I should be doing at this party.

Okay, pull it damn together and focus.

As we reenter, I’m still floating on the high that I kissed him. Yes, I’m freaking out that I shouldn’t have, but no one has ever made me feel like I’m floating like he just had. And that was after he did God knows what to the man in the bathroom. I prefer not to find out, in all honesty.

In the ballroom, the ambiance is less hostile than previously, with most focused on the auction stage at one end of the room. I breathe easier.

Hawk takes us to a flurry of round tables with high, golden stools gathered near the stage where others are congregating. Without warning, his strong hands find my waist, and he effortlessly lifts me onto one of the stools. I gasp, feeling the fabric of my dress lift across my thighs and the split giving way, sliding open. I’m suddenly painfully aware of the stares on us and that I’m going to flash everyone in the room.

My hands scramble to grasp the sides of the dress and pull them together as best as I can, seeing the dress has ridden up so high. If I do nothing, I will be baring it all.

Heart racing, I’m trying not to freak out, but I feel stiff on the seat while Hawk is chatting to someone next to him. I wriggle to get off the stool, but I’m making the split worse, and... fuck.

“Hawk,” I whisper, leaning against his side, and he turns to me. “I can’t sit here like this. Can you help me down so I don’t flash everyone?”

Curious, he peers down at me, holding together the split across my thighs. His eyebrows bunch up in confusion while

my cheeks are flushing.

“I-I...”

He leans in. “What’s the problem?”

With my mouth at his ear, I whisper my most embarrassing moment to Hawk Kline.

“I’m not wearing any underwear.”

Suddenly, he stiffens. “You said he didn’t touch you in the bathroom?” he growls.

“Keep your voice down,” I whisper, and I’m ready to crawl under a rock and die. “I-I forgot to put them on at the mansion.”

His gaze widens, and something primal and starved comes over him, and he suddenly his lips beneath my ear, his breath so hot that I’m going to melt.

“Are you telling me you came to this party with me wearing nothing under your dress?”

I nod.

“Fuck me!”

Suddenly, he’s in front of me, arms on my waist, and he manages to get me down by blocking me from exposing myself. Then he grasps my hand tightly, and we’re marching out of the auction like the place is on fire.

“We’re getting the fuck out of here.”

What the hell now? Is he mad at me?

CHAPTER SEVEN

HAWK

I should have stayed at the auction, should have participated. It's the reason I attended in the first place.

Nope. My thoughts are locked on the knowledge that somehow Sapphire forgot to put on panties under a dress that is so revealing, she might as well be walking around naked. Fuck. When she whispered those words in my ear, two things happened simultaneously.

One, my cock hardened so fast, the room spun with me.

Two, something came over me so savage that I had to get her out of there. The notion of any of those assholes being that close to Sapphire when a simple slip revealed everything had me growling with fury.

Fuck, I shouldn't care, yet I'm acting like she's mine.

"Hey, is everything okay?" she asks, rushing alongside me as I hurry her to my car that's being brought to me by valet.

"Yep," I quip. The moment my Bugatti arrives, I open the door, then lift her into my arms and place her in the passenger seat.

In seconds, I'm in the driver's seat, my sight on those captivating legs. Only inches higher, she's not covered. I'm fucking hungry to see all of her. After that kiss in the hallway, all I can smell is her sexy scent that's driving me wild.

I've never wanted someone as much as I crave her. The captivating sight of her trying to cover herself where her skirt

had actually split farther up her milky white legs is consuming me. And I'm a fucking wolf, barely holding back.

Does she even understand what she's doing to me?

I'm driving, needing my attention on something else. When I glance over to her, she's blushing.

"You did nothing wrong," I finally break the silence.

"Then why are you acting all weird?"

She's sitting at an angle where the low plunge of her neckline folds in a way that reveals the side of her breast. Hell, she's going to murder me tonight.

"Because I shouldn't have kissed you. Now, all I'm thinking about is that you're not wearing anything under your dress."

She's grinning, seeming to enjoy seeing me suffer.

"Well, it was a complete accident of being rushed out of the mansion and flustered."

"I can officially say I have never forgotten to put my boxers on when I had to go out anywhere."

She doesn't hesitate to sit there, watching her, her gaze burning into me. The energy coming off her is of raw sexuality. It's lingering in the air between us, simmering, tempting...

"Well, you'll just have to take my word for it," she purrs, and I cut her a hard stare.

"You're doing a great job of getting yourself in real trouble tonight." My pulse is thundering, and she's drawing her knees up to her chest, doing everything to tempt me.

Truth is, I can't go on a second longer because my pants are strangling my cock. Tonight, Sapphire has decided to come out to show me her flirtatious side, but she has no clue who she's playing with.

"Show me," I say, suddenly veering off the road and down side streets with no buildings, only open land and woods from

the national park that leads toward my home. Parking, I remove my seat belt, then turn in my seat.

The blue glow from my dashboard lights up her face, revealing her nibbling on her lower lip.

“What do you mean?” She fakes innocence.

“Don’t play games. You know what I want.”

She just stares at me, and the danger of the fire I’m playing with tears through me. I promised myself I wouldn’t go there with Sapphire, and on our first day working together, I’ve already kissed her, and now I’m asking for more. So much more...

Her hand slides up her legs to her knees in slow motion, pretending to be getting comfortable, but I inhale her tempting scent that fills the car.

I’m fucking hard, so tight and ready. This hunger for her intensifies, burning deep in me the longer we remain silent.

Her scent, her beauty, and her seduction consume me.

She lowers her legs.

“What are you doing?” I growl.

“I-I can’t do what you’re asking.”

I reach over, my hand on her thigh.

“You can and you will.”

She inhales deeply, and I lick my lips, so lost in desire that I might shatter.

She’s watching me, her gaze lowering to where my hand touches her leg, my fingers slowly stroking her skin.

“Will you show me?” I ask again.

Red climbs over her cheeks, and she lifts her knees once more, her feet on the edge of the seat.

I clench my jaw.

My heart’s in my throat. *Thumping. Thumping. Thumping.*

Slowly, she widens her knees, pulling her dress aside to reveal herself to me.

I swallow hard, my attention inhaling the view of her perfect cunt with a strip of blonde hair above the crease, her lips glistening as are her inner thighs.

My pulse thunders at the sight, my cock pulsing to the point of excruciating pain.

“You’re such a good girl,” I encourage, barely able to breathe. “You have no idea what you do to me, how much I want to make sure I give you what you need.”

My hand’s on her knee, the other one on my cock over my pants.

“Touch yourself for me,” I urge, a shudder racing down my back and right to my cock. “Spread yourself. Show me how turned on you are.” Focusing on steadying myself, I keep my gaze on her.

“Like this?” she asks, running her middle finger down her slick crease before pulling it open for me, showing me how swollen her adorable little clit is.

It’s the hottest thing I’ve ever seen. She stares at me while her finger pushes between her lips.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful. Can I?” I let out a groan, my cock throbbing. Sparks shoot through me, and I’m salivating at how badly I need her.

She’s gasping for air. “Please,” she breathes, her nipples pushing hard against her fabric.

I trail my hand from her knee to her inner thigh until I reach her fire.

“Lean back for me, angle your hips toward me.”

She obeys without hesitation.

Sliding the tips of my fingers across the silkiness of her sweet lips, her hips rock at my touch, a moan in her throat.

“How long has it been since a man touched you like this?” I ask, telling myself if I touch her a little, I’ll get the hold she

has over me out of my system. But fuck, she feels like heaven. Then I push a finger deep into her.

She lets out a small, delicious cry, holding my stare.

“I’ve never had anyone touch me like this. It’s been just sex, and that’s it.”

My cock’s aching release from his prison, and I’ve never wanted to fuck someone so badly as I do now. Except what I’m hearing is that Sapphire may have never experienced an orgasm.

I pump into her a few times, and she’s soaking wet. I push a second finger into her tight hole, wanting her to come all over my car, my hand, me.

“Sweet Jesus, yes!” she groans.

She’s writhing in the car, and all I can think about is leaning over to take her into my mouth, to show her how good I can make her feel. I’m barely holding on to myself, but coming this far, there’s no fucking way I’m pulling back.

She trembles under me, and when I draw my fingers out, they’re dripping wet.

“I love how ready you are for me,” I say, then press my thumb to her clit, rubbing her.

She moans louder, her legs spreading, and I know she’s mine. I won’t pass up on this opportunity.

“Get out of the car.”

Her eyes are huge, round disks. I’ll never tire of her shocked reactions.

I’m outside in the cool breeze in the dark street with nothing much around. In the distance is the main road, with only the occasional car zipping past.

Sapphire joins me, looking uncertain and glancing over her shoulder at the traffic.

I move to her side, where she has her back to the car, and I cup her face. Then I kiss her, wanting to steal the fear from her gaze, to put her at ease. She kisses like an angel, and I want to

eat her up. Tracing my mouth to her ear, I whisper, “I’m going to tongue fuck your pussy now, and you’re going to come all over my face. Feel free to scream out. No one will hear you out here.”

Her mouth falls open. “Wait, what if—”

I steal her words with a kiss.

“Just enjoy it.”

Crouching down in front of her, I bunch up the fabric of her dress and shove it up to her waist. Her smell is fucking intoxicating, and I take a deep inhale, taking my fill of her. Then I push her legs apart with my other hand and push my face between her thighs.

Tongue first, I slide it between her folds, loving her sweetness. I have no time or patience to go slowly. Not when I’m close to bursting myself. I take her clit into my mouth, sucking on her, flicking her.

She’s crying out already, her body thrashing, hands in my hair.

I love hearing her lose control as her pussy trembles against my mouth. Holding her open, I lick her length, and she rocks faster. She’s close. I can sense it in how engorged her clit is.

Just as I feel her slipping off the edge, I slide my tongue into her hole. She completely loses herself at that stage, her orgasm crashing through her as she unleashes a gorgeous scream.

She’s convulsing, and I love her riding my face while I lick up everything she offers. I don’t hold back and never stop because I want her first orgasm to be fucking mind-blowing.

She cries out, shaking against me, and the satisfaction of her reaching the ultimate climax is everything.

When she finally settles down, slumped against the car, I release her with a final lick and sit back on my heels, glancing up. The sheen of perspiration on her brow glistens in the moonlight.

There's something dangerous in the way my heart thumps louder in my chest for her, but I push that away.

"How was that?" I ask.

She starts laughing, unable to stop smiling.

"You have no idea how incredible that feels and also ticklish. I can't believe I've never done that before. Thank you. But I'll be honest, I don't know how I should feel about you being with my boss and all that,"—she shrugs—"but I loved every second."

Warmth consumes me as I climb to my feet, my balls blue at this stage. I've never had to deal with this before. Women fell at my feet, and gave me what I wanted.

Sapphire's hand is on the tent in my pants, her fingers squeezing my cock with just enough pressure to make me hiss.

"You keep going that way, and I'll be bending you over my car."

She blinks at me, pauses, and I see the wheels spinning behind her eyes. I push her hand away from her.

"But not tonight." It fucking kills me to say that because I want to fuck her desperately. It hurts me to hell and back to hold out, but I lower her dress and open the door for her.

"Let's go home."

She settles in the passenger seat, and I close the door behind her. As I make my way around the rear of the car to the driver's door, I take a brief moment to pause, letting the cool night air fill my lungs. I also adjust my painfully, throbbing cock.

And something unfamiliar churns in my gut.

I've given her a magical moment—her first orgasm, something she'll never forget. That should be enough, shouldn't it?

Yet doubt creeps in.

Why is it suddenly so hard to convince myself that leaving her alone will be easy?

CHAPTER EIGHT

SAPPHIRE

*D*arkness inhales me.

I wake with a sharp intake of breath, my dreams still clinging to my mind as I frantically glance around the night-filled bedroom. Moonlight pours in through the window, and my mind's rushing to remember how I ended up here. Twisting around, I find a figure fast asleep alongside me—Hawk.

My stomach goes ice cold. Did I end up sleeping with him? Why can't I remember? I wrack my brains about last night. The party, the tension, the attack in the bathroom. Then the most incredible orgasm with him going down on me, which is an entire mind-mess to unpack right there. I remember feeling so relaxed in the car afterward that I closed my eyes for a quick rest.

Did I fall asleep, and Hawk brought me to his bed? I pull back the silken sheets and find I'm completely naked. Shit! He undressed me. Please tell me he didn't do more...

I glance over at him, glaring, but he's breathing heavily, sleeping on his back, long lost to his dreams. The sheet's down to his waist, and my gaze trails down his muscular torso, his abs, and the thin line of hair vanishing under the blanket.

Trying not to overthink the situation or let panic stick in my mind, I silently start shifting out of bed. I ease my legs over the edge of the bed and press my feet onto the plush rug. My heart's pounding in my chest.

Desperate, my gaze darts around the dim room for my dress, but it's nowhere in sight. What I do spot is Hawk's clothes from the previous night, so I snatch up the white shirt and pull it on to avoid strolling through the mansion butt naked.

The instant the fabric falls over my head, his scent envelopes me.

An intoxicating blend of musk and cologne.

It surrounds me.

It vividly awakens memories from last night—us kissing in the hallway, him asking to see my pussy, and me crazily showing him. What is wrong with me?

Burning up with embarrassment, I edge toward the door, slip outside, and pull it shut behind me without so much as a sound. The hallway outside stretches silently before me, urging me to run upstairs to my room.

With the house quiet and not a soul around, I move forward quickly in the dim lights that steal the darkness. Leaving behind the corridor, I turn and find myself going right past the pool room, then I rush forward because I know that at the end of this hall is the foyer leading to the grand staircase.

Spending a day exploring has helped me navigate this maze of a place. The shirt catches in my swinging hand at my side, and I glance down to realize that I'm still wearing the engagement ring.

Hawk never took it off, despite me falling asleep in the car and him stripping me. I draw my hand closer to inspect the spectacular stone. Most likely, the money he spent on this is barely spare change for a man like him. Yet it is beautiful. If a man gave me such a ring for real, I'd most likely faint. It's more than the debts we owe him.

Just when I think I've reached the foyer, a creak sounds from behind, shattering the silence. My pulse quickens, a coldness spreading through my veins. Before I can react, a strong grip catches my wrist, wrenching me back around.

There stands Hawk, completely naked. Even in the shadowy corridor, his intense gaze burrows into me.

“I’m rather disappointed, Sapphire,” he says, hauling me against him firmly, our bodies clashing. “I’m insulted you didn’t invite me on your trip through the mansion.” His voice is raspy, and my nerves are taut.

“I-I just wanted to get to my room.”

“Running away from me, Sapphire?” That intense stare narrows down on me, his grasp strong.

“And what about you?” I ask, chin high, using all the bravado I can find. “You undressed me last night before putting me in your bed?”

“And?” He raises an eyebrow.

“And... did you... we do anything else?” My skin’s on fire.

His brows pinch together. “Are you asking me if I fucked you while you were sleeping?”

I blink at him, my voice jammed in my throat.

“I’m into a lot of kinky shit, but somnophilia isn’t one of them. I want you wide awake to enjoy every moment, to scream, to beg me for more.”

Gasping for air, it’s suddenly scorching hot in the hallway.

His bulge between us twitches and nudges into my stomach.

He chuckles, his voice echoing through the house.

“I’m a man who takes what he wants, and I’ve been so very patient with you. Now, seeing you in my shirt is completely ruining me. I fucking love how you look in it, and I can’t hold back anymore.”

I’m breathless, an inferno swallowing me. When the back of his knuckles brush over my nipples, I bite back a moan. Shudders come over me, and heat bursts between my legs. The air between us is combustible. Hawk heaves for breath, and as

if he can't stand it a second longer, he has me up against the wall in seconds, his mouth on mine.

He kisses me like a man starved, as though he's in a rush to take me, as if he might lose me.

His mouth is on my neck, where he licks me and sucks.

I whimper, lost under the spell of this powerful man who won't leave my side, who saved me from being raped at the party. Yet part of him scares me...

And I know, deep down inside, I'd run to him in a heartbeat. He's my dark prince.

I start to move my hand down between us, my fingers curling around his heavy cock. The skin is like silk wrapped around steel.

He hisses as I palm him, moving back and forth.

With his mouth on my earlobe, he whispers, "Are you ready to be fucked?"

Oh...

I moan my response, pushing myself against him. I have zero control when it comes to Hawk. He's pushing all my buttons, making me putty in his hands.

He slides his hands to the neckline of his shirt that I wear and rips it apart, buttons flying in every direction, exposing my breasts.

I gasp as he takes all of me in with his smirk. Then, with his hands on my waist, I'm off my feet in seconds.

"Wrap your legs around me, sweetheart."

As I do, his hand falls between my thighs, and his fingers stroke my clit. He teases me, and I'm moaning until he pushes the tip of his cock into me. I pause, my eyes widening as I feel how much bigger he is than my last boyfriend.

"Just relax," he whispers with that husky voice. "Let me in."

Pinned to the wall, he pushes into me, spreading me. Pleasure thrums through me, driving me wild.

“God, you’re so tight, so wet for me.”

“M-Maybe you’re too big. Is that a thing?”

He half-laughs, half-grunts.

Desire ripples down my spine as he moves in and out of me, working his way deeper with each thrust. I tense at the stretch but cry out for more.

“Hawk.” I grip his arms, riding him, feeling tight and full.

Groaning, he pumps into me, fucking me, and hell, I’m bouncing on his cock. His fingers dig into my hips as he drives into me hard.

“I knew you could take me.” He breathes fast and heavy, his jaw tight as he works into me. “Now come for me, drench my cock with that tight little cunt.”

Our bodies are moving in unison, perspiration rushing down my nape. We’re moving quickly, and the songs in my voice cry out as an orgasm climbs through me, hitting its crescendo.

It hits fast and savagely in a wild wave of pleasure.

My cries fill the corridor, most likely the whole mansion, while Hawk never relents. I keep taking him, my heart booming in my chest.

Suddenly, he pauses, deeply embedded in me, while I’m coming so hard that I can’t see straight.

“Fuck, babe, squeeze me, that’s it,” he hisses. Before I even come down from the heavens, he’s walking us back to his room, me still riding him.

“I haven’t even started with you. We need to go back to my room where all my toys are.”

“Should I be scared?”

He laughs. “Maybe.”

I roll over, half asleep, expecting the comfort and warmth of Hawk's body beside me, but the sheets are cold under my fingers, and the space is empty. My eyes snap open to the night cloaking the room, embraced by an unusual stillness.

This is the third night these past two weeks that he's vanished during the night.

Two weeks of relentless sex in every way possible, countless orgasms, then the mystery of disappearing some nights.

Rubbing sleep from my eyes, I sit up and find only silence. The glow from the digital clock on the bedside table reads just after midnight. My fingers unconsciously graze the engagement ring still on my finger.

Two weeks later, we're still pretending to be engaged. Drake hasn't sold part of his business, and Hawk insists it's because he doesn't believe we're truly together, so we're continuing the ruse. Something I'm quite enjoying. Who wouldn't like to have attention from a man like Hawk?

Except things are heating up because we share a room now, and there isn't a night that doesn't pass that we don't fuck each other's brains out. I don't even know who I am anymore or how quickly these couple of weeks have passed.

But Hawk is gone again, and even knowing he returns hours later still has worry coiling in the pit of my stomach. I remind myself we aren't really together. I'm absolutely loving every second of it and scared that I'm going to lose it. When I'm with him, it's as if I can't breathe, that I need him like I do oxygen.

Of course, that terrifies me because this is Hawk Kline I'm dealing with, the killer of women's hearts.

Not giving it more thought, I swing my legs out of bed and get up. Grabbing the first clothes I find, a pair of jeans and a

tee, I pull them on quickly, then lace up the tennis shoes. Each of my steps echoes in the hallway as I make my way toward the kitchen, thinking he's getting a late-night snack or drink, when I notice the back door slightly ajar. A sliver of moonlight peeks through.

Nerves spike through me, my heart going cold.

I move hesitantly to the door, pausing for a moment to catch my breath. Then I peer out, scanning the backyard grounds.

He's in the distance, walking purposefully toward the gardens.

"What's he doing in the gardens in the dead of night?" I murmur under my breath. Pushing doubts aside, I step into the night and follow him, determined to find out what's going on.

Unsure of what I'll find, I follow him and can't deny the beauty of the night. The garden under the moon's blue haze, the small lights amid the flowers switching on every time Hawk walks past them. The garden's filled with dahlias in every color under the sun. They are beautiful and well-maintained.

And yet, my skin is crawling.

As I near the garden's entrance, Hawk's voice from up ahead reaches my ears.

"Why are you out at this time?"

Stepping past the gate, I hurry behind him.

"Why are you?"

He chuckles, a deep sound that eases some of my tension.

"I can't sleep."

I catch up to him, inhaling the blooming scent of dahlias that fill the garden beds. Our steps are synchronized as we wander deeper, and more lights blink awake at our arrival.

"Is everything okay?" I ask. "Are you worried about Drake?"

He gives a shake of his head, his gaze fixed on the path ahead.

“I’ve always struggled with insomnia, and most nights, I lie in bed, staring at the ceiling, and eventually drift off. But sometimes, the restlessness is so overpowering that it feels as though the night pulses in my skull. I have to get up and do something. Walking usually helps.”

“Sounds tough,” I say, imagining the endless night of enduring no sleep. I can barely walk straight if I don’t get a solid night’s rest.

He shrugs. “I’ve learned to live with it.”

“You know, a hot bath and soothing cup of tea before bed might help. I’ll even wash your hair.”

His grin is addictive, and every time he smiles at me, I feel myself falling that bit more for him. I shouldn’t, I know this, but everything about him is irresistible.

“So, what you’re saying is that you’ll scrub my body, then let me go to bed without jumping my bones?”

I eye him. “Says you, Mr. Horny, who won’t let me come into bed until I’m naked.”

He shrugs. “Those are universal rules. I don’t control them.”

I nudge him. I like this side of Hawk. When he’s subdued, and it’s just the two of us, he’s almost dorky, and I adore that about him.

We keep strolling through the enormous gardens when he says, “My past has always stayed with me, no matter what I do.”

“Isn’t the past what shapes us?”

“Yeah, but there’s good and bad history that can ruin a person.”

His words linger in the silence between us.

“My father wasn’t exactly what one would call a loving man,” he explains, breaking the quiet. “He was a fucking

bastard who used to beat my mom and me. To the point that he once sold me to an opposing company to ensure he won the deal. That man treated me as slave labor, and I couldn't do fuck all, as it was in a contract. And if I left, I knew he'd take it out on my mother. So, I sucked it up for two long, fucking years. I was only thirteen at the time."

"Oh, shit." Reaching over, I take his hand in mine, our fingers interlacing. "How did you get out?"

"My father died from cancer, and my mother used lawyers and money to get me home, suing the company for child slavery. It got real fucking messy, but she won in the end and shut down their entire business."

"I love her already," I whisper.

The corner of his mouth lifts into a grin. "You would have gotten along well with her. This was her garden, and I have kept it maintained for her ever since she passed away a few years ago."

"I'm sorry you suffered like that." An ache stabs me in the chest at the tragedy in his family. "I guess... I-I know a little about how it feels to be sold off by family." Unintentional bitterness seeps into my voice. "I really hate my stepmother for doing that to me, for trying to wedge herself between me and my dad."

He guides me to a stone bench by my hand, and we sit together, him straddling the seat to face me.

"I want you to understand the reason I accepted the offer from your stepmother to take you under my care," he begins, a hand on my cheek, and I blink up at him, curious. "The way she spoke of you, it just... it didn't fit with the girl I met at the Luminary Soirée. I hated how casually she was willing to use you, igniting my own triggers. So, I took the deal for your sake to get you out of there and offer you an escape from her grasp."

His words swirl in my mind while my chest constricts, and my eyes prick. No one has ever looked out for me the way he

has, not even my dad, who tells me he loves me, yet he lets my stepmother walk all over me.

Hawk's care overwhelms me.

"I'm sorry, Sapphire." He reaches out, catching a tear that spills down my cheek and over my chin. "Sorry that I couldn't take it all away, so you don't suffer."

Shaking my head, I sniffle and whisper, "It's not that. I'm just starting to understand that being here is the best thing for me. She was always going to suppress me."

Hawk draws me closer, embracing me, and in that serene midnight moment, I realize how much I've let myself fall for Hawk. The things he says and does show me affection and comfort, but I'm no fool and know this is a temporary arrangement. And that part guts me.

When I do return home, I'll have to face my stepmother and find a way to break free from her. I'll get a job and eventually move out.

And Hawk... The idea of having to leave him after only a couple of weeks together already causes a sharp pain, so what will it be like in a year's time?

I feel his fingers intertwined with mine again, and I squeeze his hand. Burying my head into his shoulder, I hide the tears that want to fall from the heartache I'm sure will come.

CHAPTER NINE

HAWK

I lean against the mahogany desk in my office, whisky in hand, eyeing Luke, who's lounging comfortably on one of the leather chairs. The rain outside pelts against the window, thunder cracking in the distance with lightning across the afternoon sky.

"You going to that party downtown tonight?" Luke asks. "You and Sapphire?"

I take another sip of my drink, pausing for a moment, my thoughts on Sapphire and how I planned to take her out to dinner tonight. Just the two of us.

"Still deciding."

Luke leans forward, his brow pinching. "You sure this ruse you got going on with her will work? Not for Drake, but for you? I've seen you with other women, Hawk, but buddy, not like this. You used to be... different, you know? After taking over the business, you became ruthless, savage. And now, with her, it's like I'm seeing a ghost from our past, and I think it suits you." He shrugs. "At first, I was against the idea of her staying here, but I changed my mind. She'll fit in well."

My gaze drifts to the window, memories of the past plaguing me. Since losing my mom, I took over Kline Enterprises and threw myself into work. It had been the only way to deal with losing her, with coping with what my prick of a father did to me.

For so long, I felt lost. Not feeling like me, but who I wanted others to see. But Sapphire brings something out of

me, a part of me I forgot.

“She’s something else, that’s for sure,” I admit. Luke’s the only person I confided in about my fake engagement to Sapphire to win over our deal, but no one else in the mansion knows, and they constantly congratulate me, telling me she’s good for me. I smile but on the inside, I feel like an idiot for lying to them.

I hate that I’ve let myself become someone too similar to my father in this business.

“Don’t overthink it, man,” Luke adds. “You’re tense, and I know she means a lot to you.”

“And yet, I don’t want to commit to anything.” I exhale the words, a heaviness pressing down on my chest like something feels off.

“No one said you had to. You got a year with her, right? Then see where it takes you.” He takes a sip from his own glass. “Just don’t fucking screw it up by thinking too much. Get out of your damn head. I know how you get.”

Finishing my whisky, I set the glass down, ready to change the topic because the mushy stuff isn’t me. And like Luke said, I have time to sort out my shit.

“Any word on Drake?” I ask.

“Honestly?” Luke sighs. “Feels like the bastard’s playing games with us. Stringing us along so we keep sucking up to him. I get fucked up vibes from him that he’s not gonna sell to anyone. He’s got two sons lined up in his business, so it never sat right with me that he’d sell.”

I clench my jaw, hating to admit Luke’s right or that Drake’s used us as fucking puppets.

“Anyway, there’s a new potential job over in Denmark. I might need to fly over there next weekend to inspect potential new warehouses and factories.”

“If I wasn’t headed to Alaska for my friend’s wedding, I’d join you.” He leans back in his chair. “Always wanted to go there.”

“It’s not a fun meeting. We’re meeting with clients far from any civilization and running back-to-back tours of their facilities and meetings. And if I was taking anyone, it would have been Sapphire.”

“Ouch, that burns. You’re replacing me so quickly.”

I chuckle. “So, things are going well with your girl, then?”

“I’m meeting her parents at the wedding.” He’s grinning like he’s won the lottery. “So, yeah, you could say things are getting serious.”

“Growing up suits you,” I tease, knowing he turns thirty this year, and he’s always said he’d be settled down.

Luke’s on his feet and strolls out of the office, throwing over his shoulder, “Well, I gotta go make a few calls, then head home to get ready for the party.”

Alone with my memories of two nights ago, with me going for a walk into the garden, sits on my mind. With Sapphire following me and baring my soul to her. Revealing the truth about my father had been unexpected. Only one other person knows about it, and he’s just left the room. And now Sapphire... and there’s something comforting in the knowledge.

Trying to ground myself, I pull open my laptop and click on the first document. Every word blurs together, and nothing makes sense. I’ve read the first line ten times, and I still don’t know what it’s saying. Not when all I can think about is her...

Rising from my desk, I leave my room behind, needing to find Sapphire and discover what she’s doing. After asking a few of the workers in the mansion, I’m directed to the kitchen.

What I find is chaos. A section of the grand, industrial kitchen looks like a war zone of flour. And right in the middle of it stands Sapphire with flour in her hair, across her nose, and somehow even on the ceiling.

Her mouth opens in shock at spotting me, and she holds up a hand defensively.

“Oh, no, you can’t be here. Get out!” she orders playfully. “I’m creating a surprise for you.”

“Really?” I arch an eyebrow for effect. “Now, I’m really curious.”

“My favorite poppy seed cake and... homemade mac and cheese,” she says sheepishly. “Though nothing is shaping up as I’d hoped.”

A laugh escapes me. I’m shocked no one tried to stop her from destroying the kitchen. But she’s utterly adorable in this mess.

“Well, I can’t pass up the chance to try your dishes,” I explain, rolling up the sleeves of my shirt. “Need some assistance?” I step onto the battlefield, unsure where to begin.

Her eyes sparkle. “You have no idea how much I would love that.”

“I have an idea.” I pull out my mobile phone from my back pocket. “How about we focus on the cake, and some delicious mac and cheese will be delivered to us in about forty-five minutes?”

Her gaze widens. “Shut up! Please tell me you’re ordering it from Papa’s Pasta.”

I grin, making a selection from their online delivery site, selecting the mac and cheese in every flavor they have. “I don’t think you’d forgive me if I ordered it from anywhere else.”

She squeaks and does a mini dance that has me laughing just as she knocks over an open pack of flour. Suddenly, I can see we may never make that cake, but I’m going to love trying.

I’m at her side in seconds and sweep her to sit up on the table, so she’s at eye level with me, and we’re kissing before she can protest. I decide then that this is exactly what I need to distract myself from my work.

CHAPTER TEN

SAPPHIRE

*I*t's been four weeks since I moved in with Hawk Kline, and today, he flew off to Denmark. He told me he'd be gone for close to a week, but I already miss him. His home feels empty, and I don't know what to do with myself.

Sitting on the balcony overlooking the vast landscape around me, daydreaming about what it would be like to live here all the time, is a start. Could such a life ever truly be mine?

A familiar voice disrupts my thoughts, and I twist my head to glance over my shoulder.

My father, joined by Claire and a guard, is walking onto the balcony.

I'm on my feet, my heart leaping, and I burst into tears. A tidal wave of emotions slams into me as I run over to him.

"Dad!" I choke out, unable to believe it's really him and that he's here.

I crash against him, wrapping my arms around him as he embraces me. Burying my face in his chest, I can't stop crying from a mixture of happiness and how much I've missed him. It's been too long since I've seen him or heard from him.

"I'm so sorry, my little precious girl," he murmurs.

Glancing up, I wipe my tears. "What are you doing here? I've left so many messages for you."

The lines at the corners of his mouth deepen, as does his furrowed brow.

“My messages weren’t getting to me. The trip... it took so much longer than I expected. Then I came back this morning and discovered you were gone and what had happened. I never should have let this happen to you. I’ll never forgive myself.” He chokes up and hugs me tighter, as if afraid he’ll lose me again.

When I finally come up for air to him wiping his tears, I draw in a shaky breath.

“It’s not your fault. It’s hers.” The bitterness in my words surprises even me. For years, I swallowed back the anger and sorrow she caused me, all so I didn’t stir trouble, so the pressure didn’t reach my dad as he worked tirelessly to give us a home and food. He’s all I had left after losing mom...

He sighs deeply, the weariness in his gaze deepening. I hate to see him hurting, but he also needs to understand the truth.

“I’ve always tried to be understanding,” I begin. “But my stepmother has never been kind to me.”

He takes my hand and leads me to a wooden bench on the balcony, and I note Claire and the guard have stepped indoors.

“Sapphire, my dear,” he says with a shaky voice. “She’s also had a difficult life. Lost everything, lived on the streets, and the things she endured were horrific. Deep down, she is a kind soul, but she wears her armor too often. Something I’ve told her she needs to change with you. She really is protective of her family.”

My heart’s beating faster, frustration bubbling up inside me.

“So, you’re okay with her selling me off?”

He hesitates, pausing for a long moment.

“She told me what she did and how hard the decision was for her, but given the fear of losing our homes, she did the best thing she could think of. We were all about to become

homeless, and she couldn't reach me. I think her fear of ending up on the streets again triggered something in her to make a dumb decision."

I try to digest his words, try to find understanding in my heart, but it's difficult. She's only ever given me coldness and sometimes outright hostility.

Holding me closer, he says, "Remember when you were little, and we'd go frog hunting together in the creek behind the house?" Before I can answer, he pulls out a small collection of wooden carved frogs from his pocket. "When I saw them at a market, I knew they were meant for you."

I giggle, remembering all the times I fell into the water, wetting my pants. "I love them and miss those times so much." Wrapping them in my hand, I press them to my chest. "I'm so happy you're back."

He chuckles and kisses my brow. "Me, too. So, how about we go back home for good, then?"

Confusion has me blinking at him. "I have to stay here for a year as per the agreement."

His finger taps the side of his nose as he always used to do when he had a trick up his sleeve.

"Well, during my trip, I landed a massive deal. The bonus was so big that I've paid off our debt to Kline Enterprises. You, my girl, are no longer bound to this place and not required to work for them. You can come home today." He adds with a cheeky smile, "Plus, I've already set up your room upstairs, and all the storage stuff is now in the basement."

I can't help but laugh. "You did that?"

He nods, a pained expression flaring over his face. "I've been so caught up in making sure we keep our home and putting food on the table, I realize I've been neglecting you, and I should have been there for you."

"You have no idea how long I've waited for you to say that." Tears well up in my eyes, and my throat thickens. I hug him, warmth embracing me.

He stands, offering me his hand. “Come on, let’s head home.”

As I get to my feet, a sharp pang hits me in the chest because as much as I’ve craved to go home, now that it’s happened, I’m so confused, so torn.

“I should speak with Hawk first,” I suggest, but even as the words leave my mouth, I know he’s currently flying and unreachable.

“If you like, but you can do that from home.” His hand squeezes mine, then we head inside where Claire’s waiting.

She’s smiling. “You’re leaving us? I will miss you.” She hugs me before I can react.

I have enjoyed staying at the mansion more than I admitted to myself. Now, everything feels like it’s moving too fast.

“I-I need to get my things from my room,” I finally say and pull from my dad, rushing to my bedroom. In all honesty, I need time to be alone for a moment. I’m barely able to draw a breath into my lungs at leaving Hawk. Fresh tears collect in my eyes, stinging with pain at the thought of walking out just like that.

Why’s this so hard? It’s not where I belong.

Catching a glimpse of myself in the mirror, the ring on my finger sparkles, and I lift my hand to stare at it. Hawk’s words echo in my ears, reminding me that this has always been a ruse. I’ve been living in a fantasy in an opulent life.

These experiences.

The expensive clothes.

This ring.

Hawk...

They aren’t truly mine.

With trembling hands, I take off the designer shirt and skirt I’m wearing, then fold and place them on the bed. I collect my jeans and the tee I wore when I arrived at the mansion from the back of the wardrobe and get dressed.

The ring feels like a weight on my hand. I twist it on my finger, feeling every ridge, every detail, as if memorizing it. My mind replays every memory with Hawk. Would my leaving impact his deal with Drake? Would Hawk miss me?

Who am I fooling? I'm a means to an end, and he never once said he wanted me to stay with him longer, that he didn't need the agreement to make me belong to him.

So, what makes me think anything will change when I've lost my reason to be in his home?

Yet the idea of leaving is unbearable. Even if I knew this day would come...

I remove the ring from my finger and place it gently on the bedside table, as though it's the most fragile thing in the world. Taking one last fleeing look in the room, I grab my duffle bag, still packed with my own belongings, and force myself to leave.

Deep down, I know Hawk isn't the kind of man to settle down. It's better I face the truth now than let it shatter me later.

The door creaks slightly, and without turning around, I already know who it is. The familiar heavy floral scent of my stepmother's perfume wafts through the room. Tensing, my heartbeat speeds up.

"Sapphire." Her nasally voice puts me on edge, even if it's softer than usual. In truth, since I returned home five days ago, she's been tame toward me, actually showing me a kindness I'm not expecting. Maybe my dad is right in that she's trying to right her mistakes.

I don't turn toward her right away but keep staring out the window at the creek behind our home and the swaying of the trees from the breeze.

“Lunch is ready,” she continues, the floorboards groaning with her approaching steps. “I wanted to check how you’re doing.”

I turn to face her, searching her expression for any trace of sincerity. It’s difficult to tell because she’s always been so good at disguising her real feelings, and for all I know, she lied to my dad too.

She stands near me, staring out as well.

“I know you haven’t heard from Hawk Kline yet, but perhaps he’s been busy.”

Her words take me off guard because it’s missing her usual malice.

“Yeah, maybe.”

“You were the talk of the town a few weeks ago, and I was surprised to hear you and he were engaged. It happened all so quickly, didn’t it? Sometimes, men can jump into things without giving it a lot of thought.”

I shift uncomfortably, my stepmother’s voice starting to drip with that all-too-familiar tone of condescension.

“It must have been such a whirlwind for you, dear,” she continues. “But Hawk’s world... it’s different from ours. It’s better if you let it go. He’ll probably be relieved you’re no longer a complication for him.”

I bristle at her words, anger burning inside me. “You make it sound like I’m a liability to him.”

She raises an eyebrow as if concerned. “I just mean, you’re from different worlds, and sometimes, those words don’t mesh well together. It’s probably easier this way for both of you.”

A heavy lump forms in my throat, her words cutting deep. “I don’t want to talk about this, especially to you.”

Without another word, she gracefully strides out of the room. The door clicks shut behind her, and I’m left with an explosion of emotions assaulting me.

Tears stream down my face, and as much as I despise her for saying those things, a small voice at the back of my mind whispers that maybe she's right.

Why else hasn't Hawk contacted me?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SAPPHIRE

*K*nock, knock.

I sit upright on the couch, where I've been lounging and bingeing on a crime show with my dad, while my stepmother's in the other room feeding her dogs.

"Someone's at the door," I say, scrambling to my feet.

I cringe at how excited I am as I cling to the ridiculous hope that it's Hawk. But I keep reminding myself to calm down because I'll just be crushed again when it isn't.

Still, I can't stop from running to the front door and swinging it open. In front of me stands a young guy, maybe in his late teens, with the DoorDash logo on his shirt. He's holding several filled bags.

"What's this?" I ask, my chest deflating with disappointment. "We didn't order anything. You must be at the wrong house."

Of course, I got my hopes high for nothing.

The guy glances at his phone, then back at me with certainty. "Delivery is for this address, for Sapphire."

I scratch my head and peek into one of the bags. The delicious aroma of Papa's Pasta meals wafts out, and I instantly recognize my favorite dish—mac and cheese. A million questions squish across my thoughts, but the most pressing one is... could it have been Hawk?

“What’s going on?” Dad asks from behind me, and I hear my stepmother’s footsteps closing in, too.

“Who ordered—” Before I finish my question, my gaze drifts to movement at the front gate, and my breath wedges in my lungs.

There, in black pants and a crumpled shirt, stands Hawk. His gaze, intense and exhausted, fixes solely on me. He’s wearing that sly smirk as if he’s about to get away with anything he sets his mind on. His face is lined with exhaustion, and he looks like he’s been traveling for most of the day. Did he just fly into the country?

My legs are wobbly, and my throat is thickening with the emotions erupting in my chest. To see him at my house after all the silence feels surreal, too good to be true, and I still don’t believe he’s not here for something else.

The delivery guy hands the bags to my dad, then wanders down the front yard and gives Hawk a nod as he passes him.

I don’t know what to say, but I’m frozen in place as he pushes open the gate and saunters toward me. Everything else around me pales in significance. It’s almost overwhelming, and my heart is struggling in my chest, my eyes pricking, but I won’t cry. The rush of emotions is disorientating.

Part of me wants to leap into his arms.

He skips up the final steps, and his grin is addictive because I’m suddenly smiling like a fool.

“Hawk...” That’s all I can muster up to say before I choke up.

“I’ve told you before, Sapphire, how it crushes me when you leave. When I returned and you weren’t there, I felt like I was losing my mind.”

I struggle to find words, and tears are spilling. Instead of hugging him, the first thing I do is whack him on the arm.

“How could you leave me hanging like that for five days?”

It doesn’t deter him as he steps up to me, and I’m in his arms in seconds, our faces inches apart.

“It’s my fault,” he murmurs in a voice thick with emotions. “I should’ve made it clear, Sapphire. You’re mine, and I intend to keep you.”

His words ruin me, and tears roll down my cheeks.

“I love that so much, but where were you all this time?” I gasp out.

“The damn trip.” His jaw clenches as his gaze searches mine. “It took longer than I expected. And when I tried to contact you, they told me you were busy. It was killing me not to hear your voice. We’re getting you a phone, so you are never out of reach of me.”

My heart flutters. “Is this real?” I whisper, searching for a hint of mockery on his face, but there’s only genuine admiration for me.

His lips quirk upward. “You can’t imagine how real this is, Sapphire. I thought I had the whole year to slowly win you over, but I’d claimed you in my heart from the moment we met. And I have a bit of making up to do for your panic over the last few days.”

Tears blur my vision, and I nod. “Yes, yes, you do. When you didn’t call me, you shattered me.”

“I know, babe. Coming back to the empty mansion without you felt so fucking wrong. You have no idea how excited I was to see you.” He kisses my tears away.

Casting a glance over my shoulder, to my relief, my dad and stepmother are no longer in the doorway. I appreciate them giving us privacy. Grateful, I twist back around to Hawk, but my heart skips a beat when I watch him lower himself onto one knee.

Shock steals my breath. “Wh-What are you doing?”

His hand finds mine, and our fingers interlace, the warmth of his touch calming me.

“Sapphire,” he begins. “I’ve come to realize there’s a lot about me I want to change, and there’s more in life than wanting to win every deal out there. I lost the deal with Drake,

but I couldn't give a fuck. I've been an absolute fool, telling myself I'd never be like my father, and I ended up just like him. So, I'm going to change things, beginning with fixing up some of my mistakes."

The weight of his words settles heavily on me. "Hawk..."

He places my fingers on his lips and kisses them.

The glint of the sapphire ring in his other hand grabs my eye, the same ring he gave me for our fake engagement.

"You left something at my place," he murmurs, holding the ring between his fingers. "This time, I want you to wear it for real. I love you, Sapphire." He studies me, waiting for my reaction, and I'm shaking hard. "If you'll have me, of course."

Laughter bubbles up inside me, and tears fall freely.

"Oh my God, I do! I love you too."

The cool metal slides onto my trembling finger, and it feels like everything's changed. Unable to hold back my emotions, I throw myself into his arms. We nearly tumble onto the porch, then burst out laughing.

"So, wait," I whisper. "Did you just propose to me for real? Are we really engaged this time?"

"Yes." His wicked grin widens, and I swear I see a glint of tears in his eyes. "You're mine now. But I have something else for you." From his pocket, he produces a delicate gold necklace, a familiar, heart-shaped pendant hanging from it. My heart thunders in my chest, and I can't stop crying.

My mom's necklace.

"I-I thought I lost it." My chest heaves for breath as I reach for it, every inch of me shaking.

"I found it in the corridor where we first met. The chain was broken, but I had it fixed."

Gently lifting my hair, he fastens it around my neck, and it suddenly feels like a missing piece has returned to its rightful place. Like somehow, even after all these years, my mom helped bring us together.

I brush my fingers across the pendant, reminded of my mother and how much she loved me.

“It’s back where it belongs,” he whispers, his lips grazing my ear. He draws me closer in his arms, his lips on mine as he says, “And you belong with me.”

EPILOGUE

SAPPHIRE

6 Months Later

Lights shimmer above us, throwing a faint glow over the long table set up in the backyard of the mansion. Lanterns and flowers decorate the area, bringing the dimming evening to life while laughter and chatter fill the air.

Nestled comfortably across Hawk's lap at the head of the table, I take a moment to soak up the view. Luke is to our left with his girlfriend, telling stories with his animated hands about his experiences after taking on a bigger role at Kline Enterprises. Across from him is Dad, who's chuckling at something one of Hawk's friends said. I love hearing him laughing and enjoying himself. My stepmother sits near him, engrossed in a conversation with a few others.

This is her first time at our place because I insisted on maintaining our boundaries and keeping her negativity away from us. My father understands, and I catch up with him almost weekly.

Staring at my man, Hawk, I whisper, "Can you believe this is our life? Enjoying such a perfect night with family and friends. I love them all."

"But not as much as you love me, right?" He chuckles, his fingers tenderly brushing a stray hair behind my ear. "Never more than that."

Giggling, I playfully nudge him. "Not everything is about you."

“Oh, but it is,” he teases, then curls his arms around me, his lips on my earlobe. “Should we tell them?”

“Tell them what?” I ask, feigning innocence, but I know exactly what he’s hinting at.

“You know that we’re trying.”

When I twist around to face him, he’s grinning mischievously, and I roll my eyes at him.

“You don’t share that during the *trying* phase. That’s an announcement for after we’re successful.”

“I love the trying process.” He nuzzles his face into my neck. “Let’s head inside real quick.”

I laugh at him. “You’re impossible but adorable.”

“Your call. Either a quickie now,” he whispers super quietly. “Or tonight, you won’t be getting any sleep.”

I lean against him. “Is that a promise?”

“Oh, you have no idea what I have planned.” He kisses my ear.

I can’t believe this is my life. A man who can’t get enough of loving me and family and friends to share parties with. Finally, I’m smiling crazily at how happy I am.

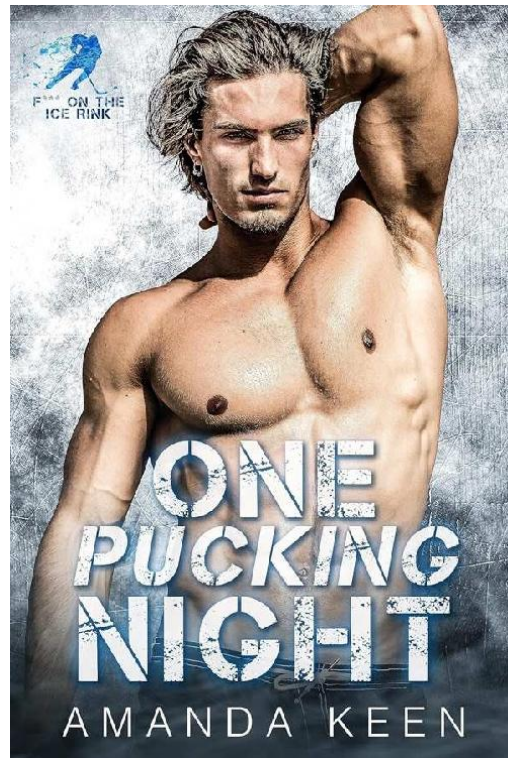
Plus, Hawk’s excitement at starting a family, even if we’re still only engaged, means the world to me. It’s more than I ever dreamed of. The pain of the past has shaped me, but I’m no longer that person who will be pushed around.

My life has somehow become perfect, and I can’t stop smiling.

As long as I hold Hawk’s hand and his love in my heart, I’m living the kind of happily ever after, even fairy tales would envy.

ONE PUCKING NIGHT

STANDALONE STORY



With everything to lose, can I risk trusting the man who once burned me...

I took a new Social Media Manager role with the Toronto Maulers to save the reputation of a top-tier hockey team. It should have also helped my career.

But I couldn't be more wrong.

All I had to do was secure their star player's image, and I'd land a permanent gig.

Simple, right?

Until I discover the man behind the media mess is none other than the one who left my heart in tatters after a single night.

A night of pure sin, of mistakes, of unforgettable promises...

Max Sterling, the team's superstar in the hottest hockey team, known for his quick moves on the ice and quicker moves off it. Now, I have to tame his wild side, when all he did was unleash mine.

The question is, can I trust a man who's known for playing games, or will he break my heart again?

[Click to read One Pucking Night](#)

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Once upon a time...

When you're tucked into bed and looking for a fairy tale, not all of them can be glitter and gold. Sometimes you want them gritty and twisted to fulfill your deep, dark desires. This October, fourteen of your favorite authors are bringing you the Dark and Twisted Tales Series. These stories will follow you into your dreams and show you that the tales you grew up with might have had moments in the sunshine, but were borne from the darkest corners of your mind.

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ABOUT AMANDA KEEN

Amanda is obsessed with telling stories. She writes quick, steamy and dirty romance, with strong men who will do anything for their women. Always with a happily ever after.

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